



# Nameless (Broken City 1)

**Author:** *Jessica Sorensen*

**Category:** Fantasy, Young Adult

**Description:** I live in a world where freedom doesn't exist, and life is a battle for survival. Most people aren't even allowed to have names.

But I had a name once. I was Allura until the Wardens captured me.

They told me I was a Nameless. That I was no one, and my sole purpose was to obey them. And, for a while, I believed them.

I spent years living underground in the channels beneath the city, dreaming of being outside again. I never thought it would happen. That I'd die in the darkness of my cell.

But then three guys show up in the channels and my fate suddenly changes.

Blaise, Ryder, and Reece are part of a secret group working to take down the Wardens and help rescue the Nameless. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I might survive.

But the outside world isn't like how I remember. The city has become even more dangerous, especially for the Nameless. To survive, I'll have to learn how to trust the guys and live in a world full of crime where almost everyone is hunting for me.

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 3:30 am*

## Chapter One

### The Cell

I haven't seen the sunlight in years, so long I'm not sure it ever existed to begin with. Maybe I only dreamt of the sunshine, the blue sky, the leafy trees, and the soft wind against my cheeks. Maybe the girl who laughed and smiled never existed, either. It's hard to tell anymore what's real and what's not, where my life began.

I shut my eyes and picture a different world. I can almost feel the warmth of the sun, taste the clean air, hear the lull of a river flowing. The place in my mind has to be real. I was there once, outside, far away from the corruptness and the darkness of this cell. I had a mother and father. At least, I think I did. It's so hard to remember sometimes--a lost life, a different world. But there has to be more. I can feel it. I just wish I knew if the other world was better. I wish I could find the hope to believe a better life is out there, waiting for me to find it.

Opening my eyes, I sit back against the wall and stretch my legs until my toes reach the edge of the iron circle. The small cell I live in consists of dark grey, moonstone walls, a single ceiling light, and a bucket in the corner. The constant dark atmosphere is dreary, and with hardly any ventilation, the muggy air is thick. But my lungs have grown accustomed to the humidity, just like my mind has accepted the consistent quietness. I prefer the silence and loneliness to noise, anyway. Noise usually means someone has paid for my time.

No one has entered my cell for a few days now, and I'm starting to get hungry and thirsty. I stare at the thick, steel door, longing for food and water, even if it means

seeing one of the wardens who own me. I haven't gotten up and walked around for a while. I'm usually allowed out of the circle once a week to stretch my legs. It's been way longer than a week. I think it has, anyway. Keeping track of time is difficult when life always seems to drift slowly.

Restlessness eats me up the longer I sit. I fiddle with the shirt I've been wearing for months. The stained, coarse fabric feels disgusting against my skin, and the frayed hem barely covers the tops of my legs, making my exposed body always chilled. The magnetic current flowing between my cuffs forces my wrists together and restrains my ankles from moving apart.

Water drips from the vent and splatters against my forehead as I rest my head back. A few rays of light peek through the vent and spread across my cheeks. I'm unsure where the light is coming from, but I pretend it's the sun sneaking in.

More hours stream by. Voices float from somewhere, and a small part of me relaxes. Voices are my only tie to reality and help me hang on to the fact that I'm not entirely alone. I'm not certain if that makes me twisted, but it doesn't really matter. Twisted, broken, ruined, veering toward death is who I've become. I don't even remember what I look like; I haven't seen my own reflection since I came here. I imagine my appearance is as distorted as I feel, probably almost inhuman.

"What about this one?" a warden asks from outside my cell, his voice floating through the small viewing area at the top of the door.

I sit up, wondering if they've finally come to feed me.

"How old is she?" someone asks in a low tone.

A shudder ripples through me. If they're asking those kinds of questions, they're not here to give me food and water. A visitor has bought my time.

While I'm never certain what I'll be forced to do, none of the tasks are good. Experiments, violence--I've seen and done a lot. There really is no rule when it comes to this life. If a visitor pays the price for a Nameless, they're allowed to do whatever they want during the time they paid for.

Our time together always ends the same, though. The visitor places their hands against my chest, my body grows hot, and then I black out. I don't know what they do to me or what the visitors are, but like the wardens, I don't think their human, despite their human features.

There was one time after a torturous session with a visitor, when I managed to stay conscious after they put their hands to my chest. What I saw ... It made me sick to my stomach ... how they momentarily transformed into a shadow with no features, no eyes, nothing.

Vomit burns in my throat as I think about what could happen if this visitor purchases me.

"I think she's eighteen," the warden answers. "That's just a guesstimate. I'd have to check her records to know for sure. I know she's pricey, but trust me, this one's worth it."

"Why?" The visitor's voice is deep and male. "What's so special about her?"

"I'm not sure of the specifics," the warden answers. "But from what I've heard, she's practically like drinking pure quercu."

"I've never had pure quercu before."

"It's rare, so most of you haven't. But it's better than just about anything you've ever tasted. You'll feel stronger and the effects last longer."

"How much did you say she is?" Intrigue laces the visitor's tone.

I shove down the vomit pushing up my throat. Please don't buy me. Please don't buy me.

"Five hundred," the warden replies. "Like I said, she's worth the price."

I hold my breath, waiting for the visitor to respond, silently wishing that he won't want me.

"All right, I'll do it," he tells the warden, and I feel a part of me wither and die. "But she better be as good as you say."

"She is," the warden assures him. "Let's go get the transaction done, and then I'll have you fill out the paperwork. Since you're new to our section, it'll take a few days to process your card and identification, so you might want to find some moonstone until then. We have chambers here if you need them."

"Thanks, but I should be fine," the visitor replies. "A friend of mine has a couple that I'm sure he'll let me use."

Panic flares within me, potent and scorching. He bought me. He'll be back. I can't do this again.

Their voices and footsteps fade as they leave. I only have a couple of days before they return. The desire to flee overcomes me, and I crawl forward toward the edge of the iron circle. In the back of my mind, a voice screams that trying to escape is useless. But I can't do it anymore. I can't just sit and wait. It goes against every instinct I possess.

The second I reach the brim of the circle, the magnetic stream surging between my

cuffs catches the iron. My arms are jerked down, and the cuffs link to the circle. The metal digs deep into my flesh, and I whimper, try

ing to slide back. But my legs stretch too far, and the ankle cuffs connect to the iron, too.

I'm bound on the floor, flat on my stomach, with my arms and legs extended out. My skull pounds as the magnetic current pulsates, spreading from the cuffs to my body. My veins vibrate under my skin, like tiny flakes of iron begging to unite with a magnetic current. I only have a few seconds to get my cuffs unattached from the iron before the sensation overwhelms my nerves and I pass out.

Using my hips, I attempt to rotate onto my back, but my body is flipped right back over. Gritting my teeth, I use every ounce of strength to stretch out my arms. Inch by inch, I drag myself backward while arching my back. My skin is pulled tight, like seams on a shirt about to split open. But I keep going, knowing I'm running out of time before I pass out. When I wake up, I'll be even weaker, and when the wardens find out, I'll be punished.

"No, I won't ..." Searing pain tears through my arm, all the way to my fingertips.

I clamp my jaw down, and a bitter, metallic taste fills my mouth. The magnetic current buzzes electrically through my blood and drowns my thoughts. The sensation is too much. I'm going to lose consciousness.

No. I won't give in.

Suddenly, the door of my cell clicks open, and passing out doesn't seem so awful anymore.

"Trying to escape again, huh?"

I cringe, recognizing the voice. While most wardens disregard me, one in particular notices me too much. He told me his name's Lex. I don't know if that's his real name or not. I've never heard any other warden go by a name before.

It's a curse knowing Lex's name, because for some reason, he thinks I owe him. I dread the times he stops by my cell, and it's even worse now that I'm trapped against the iron circle.

I lift up my head, searching for him, but I can't see anything other than a few inches in front of my face.

"Little, helpless Nameless," he says as the door clicks shut. "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." His footsteps get louder. "I'm not supposed to touch you. You're supposed to be for the visitors." He inhales deeply. "But I want to know what the big deal is."

I close my eyes and bite down on my lip until I draw blood. "S-stay away f-from me, or I'll t-tell the other wardens."

He laughs, crouching down beside me. "No, you won't. And even if you did, they wouldn't believe you." He places a cold hand on my back, and every muscle in my body constricts. He stares at me with his liquid silver eyes. The warden's eyes aren't always silver. Sometimes, they look normal when they're calm. Lex isn't calm right now. He's hungry. "No one's ever going to know," he utters under his breath.

I sink my teeth deeper into my lip as I feel a spark shoot up my back. He slides his hand around me and lines his palm with my chest. I scream out as heat ignites, like fire in my veins, hot wax on my skin, scalding metal inside my brain.

"They were right about you," Lex says in awe.

I scream, struggling to hang on to reality, but my eyes roll into the back of my head as darkness overtakes me.

## Chapter Two

### The Unexpected Visitor

When I open my eyes again, I'm lying on the floor, and my cuffs no longer bound to the iron circle. The ceiling light has burned out. Either that or the wardens turned it off to punish me.

As time trickles by, I lie perfectly still. The fire I felt when Lex touched me remains a dull ache inside my chest and is worse than when the visitors touch me. I don't know why or what Lex did to me, but I'm worried the pain will never go away.

Drops of water drip from above and splatter against my head. The darkness seeps into my skin and becomes part of me. I lose track of time and almost forget where I am. The longer I lie there, the more aware I become of the ever growing hunger pains and the dryness in my throat. I'm probably being starved as punishment, but it's been so long since I've eaten. Someone has to come soon, right?



## Page 2

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I'm thirsty. Starving. Weak. Dirt coats my skin and makes me itchy. Exhaustion weighs against my body like a heavy blanket, and all I want to do is go to sleep.

I've been in a similar situation before, but this might be the longest I've gone without eating or drinking anything. My body is shutting down. If I don't get food or water soon, I'll die. Part of me welcomes the idea, wants this to be over and to escape the visitor I'll soon have. I want to escape Lex, the other wardens, and the pain in my chest. All I have to do is surrender to death, push away the last bit of fight I have in me, and allow myself to die.

I know other prisoners have given up before. Wardens walk around here, always talking about getting rid of bodies and cleaning up messes. They tell the stories to each other about it, laughing, as if the prisoners are nothing more than broken, plastic dolls. Maybe that's what we are. Maybe that's what I've become--a doll to sell.

My heavy eyelids shut as I surrender to the fatigue. I need to let go. It's time. No more wardens. No more Lex. No more visitors.

No more pain.

I press my cheek to the floor and will myself to let go. But somehow, I continue to breathe, and my heart beats, refusing to let go. A tiny spark inside my heart flickers.

I need a drink. I need water.

No!

I fight the desire to open my mouth and let the water from the ceiling drip down my throat. I refuse to cave and be the wardens' doll any longer.

As I start to feel the will to live slipping away, though, an uncontrollable need bursts through me. I tip my head back, aim my open mouth at the drizzle coming from the ceiling, and guzzle down as much dirty water as I can. It tastes awful, like grime and filth and mold. I gag several times. If I had food in my stomach, I'd probably puke, but I end up dry heaving, which makes my stomach muscles sore.

Still, the water makes the ache in my throat more bearable, and I continue to drink until I don't feel the need to anymore. Then I settle back on the floor and let my choice sink in. I'm still here, breathing and alive. This isn't over yet.

I don't know how long I lie on the floor, unmoving, but I sit up when I hear someone approaching my cell. It's the first sign of life I've heard since I passed out. I think of the visitor who's going to pay for my time, and I immediately regret drinking the filthy water. Why am I not strong enough to give up and free myself from this place?

I lean forward as I hear a voice from the other side of the door. Deep. Male. Is someone finally coming to feed me? No. Wait. Voices. There's more than one of them coming.

The ceiling light flickers on, and I squint, trying to focus on my surroundings. Part of me hoped I'd be somewhere else, but disappointment washes over me as I see the four moonstone walls of my cell.

I draw my knees against my chest and scoot away from the door. If there's more than one of them, then they aren't down here to feed me. It's probably the visitor who wanted to buy me. Is that how much time has passed? Only a couple of days? It feels like an eternity.

"From everything you told me, I'm eager to get a taste of her." A masculine voice drifts from the other side of the door.

I recognize the voice as the visitor from the other day. His paperwork must have gone through, so for the next few hours, he owns me.

"From what I've heard about her, I should be good for months," he says. "Maybe even years. I just wish I knew why she was so intoxicating."

"I wish I knew, but like I said, I don't know the specifics," the warden replies. "And with the systems crashing, I can't look it up. I don't think it really matters. Humans have always been a little different from one another. My guess is she has purer blood."

"I guess that could be it, but I've never heard of anything like that." The visitor pauses. "Your systems have been crashing?"

"Yeah. A lot lately. We can't figure out why, but my guess is it might be bugs."

"That's never good. Have you tried sending an electromagnetic pulse to kill them off?"

"A couple of times. It doesn't do any good. We might

have to bring in some Chasers to track them down."

"Things are really getting that bad that you're considering using Chasers," the visitor asks.

"Yeah, they are," the warden says as my cell door cracks open. "We've had three systems already destroyed over the last week. If we don't get this fixed fast, the

camera system is going to crash."

A shudder rolls through me at the mention of Chasers. They're horrible creatures made of various metals and are drawn to anything that runs on energy, like the magnetic energy in my cuffs. One bite from a Chaser sends a volt of electricity through a person's body. It's happened to me a couple of times and the agonizing pain lasts for days. Technically, Chasers aren't supposed to come into the cells, but a handful of the little bastards always find a way to sneak in. Even the visitor sounds a bit afraid of them.

I inch back farther as the door opens wider. I want to stay strong, look them in the eyes, not be a coward, but the fear is too much. I cover my arms over my head, rocking back and forth. I can't do this. I can't do this. I can't do this again.

The humming of the door quiets, and I trap my breath in my chest, picturing the sunlight, the whisper of the wind, the tart taste of strawberries ... anything but here.

"She's supposed to be as good as quercu?" Skepticism floods the visitor's tone. "She seems ... I don't know ... kind of weak."

My hands curl into fists. I'm only weak because I'm here. There was a time when I wasn't frail and beaten down. I can feel it inside me, a strength just out of my grasp.

"She's stronger than she looks," the warden says with a hint of annoyance.

Someone stomps into my cell, and I dare a peek but then instantly shrink back.

The warden is standing only inches away from me, and the tip of his boot connects with my ribs. "Stop cowering. You have a visitor."

I wince, my hands balling into fists. If only I were free... If only these cuffs weren't

around me, maybe I could fight back.

He kicks me again when I don't obey him. "Don't make me put a shock collar on you."

I choke, recalling the last time a shock collar was put on me. The heat scalded my skin and nearly melted my insides. Healing took forever and left me drained for way too long.

No. I can't go through that again.

## Page 3

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It takes every ounce of my strength to submit to the warden's demands and sit up straight. It takes even more inner strength not to look away from him.

He's wearing a standard uniform: clunky, steel boots; black pants; and a matching shirt with the underground logo on the hem. His hair is the same color as the moonstone walls, and his skin is so pale it's nearly translucent. His features are human-like, but his liquid silver eyes lack any human emotion.

"He paid for over five hours," he tells me, pointing at the visitor lingering near the door. "You better make sure he leaves a satisfied, fully recharged customer, especially after that little stunt you pulled the other day. I don't know why you think you can get past the iron circle, but the more you try, the higher I'll up the voltage."

I fight back the urge to spring to my feet and strangle him with my bare hands. I attempted that a few times in the past and quickly learned the wardens are a lot stronger than me.

His lips curl into a grin and he marches back to the door. "The timer starts as soon as the door shuts," he says to the visitor. "And don't go easy on her. She can handle anything."

"I won't," he says, his thrilled tone making my stomach knot.

I lower my gaze to the floor as the door clicks shut, expecting him to come at me right away, but several minutes pass in silence.

He must be drawing it out, toying with me.

Finally, after what feels like forever, I hear him walking toward me. I struggle to get air into my lungs, and my body shakes so badly my muscles are locking up. I can't go through this again. My mind can't endure pain. Neither can my body.

"Just hang on for a few minutes longer," he whispers, his voice astonishingly warm. "Then this will all be over."

I dig my fingernails into my palms until the flesh splits open. Over? It'll never be over.

He starts humming as he wanders around. I hear metal scratching metal and wonder what he's doing, but I don't have the courage to look up.

"Why did they make this cell's walls out of moonstone?" he murmurs. "Usually, they're brick or concrete."

Who is he talking to? Is someone else in here?

Usually, I don't have multiple visitors at a time, but when I do ... I shiver at the thought.

Please don't let this be happening.

"Did you get it shut down yet?" the guy utters under his breath.

"I'm working on it," a deeper voice echoes through the cell, sharp and static-charged, as if flowing through a speaker. "Just give me a few seconds."

"You're taking too long," the guy inside my cell says. "If you don't get it shut down now, we're not going to have enough time."

"Don't fucking tell me things I already know," the deep voice growls. "I'm working as fast as I can."

There's some clicking, static, and then a low buzz radiates through the air. I fight the urge to cover my ears, even though the noise drills against my eardrums. When I hear the door glide open, I begin to tremble.

"All right, it's done." The deep voice is louder and clearer, and I realize he's inside my cell now. "We have about ten minutes before the systems come back up." He pauses. "Shit, she looks bad."

"I know," the other agrees. "I heard the warden mention that she tried to get out of the iron circle. I think they might be punishing her by revoking food and water."

They both grow silent, except the sound of their heavy breathing. I hate that I can hear them, hate that they're in my cell. I hate that they're dragging out whatever they're going to do to me.

"Are you sure she'll survive if we try to take her out of the cell?" the one with the deeper voice asks.

"The warden said she's stronger than most, so she should," the other says. "Although, he didn't tell me why she's so strong."

"Maybe from experiments."

"No. I don't think that's going on in this section."

"Always the optimist."

"Always the pessimist."



One of them sighs heavily.

"Fine, let's just get her out of here before the system boots back up."

Their words register belatedly. Get me out of here? They're acting as if they're about to save me from this place. But no, there's no way. They have to be here for a different reason. Maybe they're taking me to the dumping grounds?

No, I'm not dead yet, I want to say, but when my dry lips part, no words come out. Summoning up every ounce of my courage, I peek through my arms. Right in front of me are a pair of clunky boots. A lot of visitors who pass through here wear similar boots, and the sight of them sends a jolt of fear through me.

"It's okay." His voice is soft and cautious.

I don't relax. Some visitors like to play games and make me think everything is okay just so they can watch me relax then break me. Instilling fear gets excited. And I sometimes stupidly trust them, believing maybe there's a drop of goodness in one of them.

The boots shift forward, and suddenly, a guy is crouched down in front of me with his face lowered and his gaze level with mine.

I find his face surprisingly less intimidating than I imagined. Usually, visitors are rougher with evil, threatening eyes that turn silver when they're hungry. His crystal blue eyes don't carry a threat. If anything, he looks sad and something else. It's been a while since I've seen it. Worried?

A strange feeling rises inside of me. Safe? Is that what this feeling is? It's so foreign, but I want to hold on to it, wish I could touch it so I could know for sure that it's real.

"How coherent is she?"

My head jerks up, and my gaze skims the area until I spot the other guy standing near the door. He looks rugged with blond hair shaved on one side, metal barbells ornamenting his eyebrows and lips, and tattoos cover his neck. He's dressed in heavy layers: a leather jacket over a grey hoodie and a black T-shirt underneath. His baggy cargo pants are tucked into his unlaced boots, and his eyes are set on me.

I scramble away until my back slams against the wall.

"Easy there." The one in front of me holds up his hands. He's wearing fingerless gloves, and the pads of his fingers are coated with dirt, the skin raw, rough, very human-like. "We're not here to hurt you. We're here to help."

I glance back and forth between the two of them then recoil, unsure what to believe. I've played this game before, the building of trust and breaking of it. I've just never seen a visitor pull off such a compassionate look before.

The guy in front of me tracks my gaze. "That's Blaise," he tells me. "I know he looks a little rough, but I promise he's not that bad."

I stare at the guy, Blaise, with distrust. He looks rough and angry, like the rest of the visitors.

Blaise carries my gaze for a drop of a second and then shifts his gaze to the other guy. "Can you just undo the cuffs so we can get out of here?"

The guy in front of me nods then turns around and skims me over. "You poor thing." He frowns, shaking his head. "I can't believe they did this to you. It never gets easier to see." When his gaze elevates to mine, his eyes are watery. "I'm Ryder. You can trust me, okay?"

Trust? I don't understand.

Ryder's gaze falls to the cuffs on my wrists as he pats the pockets of his oversized, green jacket. "Fuck. Did you by chance bring a rod?" he calls over his shoulder. "I forgot mine,"

"You always forget everything." Blaise strides toward us, reaching inside the pocket of his leather jacket. When he removes his hand, his fingers are clasped around a cylinder the same shape and size as the wardens' beating sticks.

A whimper escapes my lips. I try to inch farther away, but the wall stops me.

"Blaise," Ryder hisses. "Move more slowly. You're scaring her."

Blaise halts in the middle of the cell, his brows furrowing. "I'm not doing it on purpose."

"I know." Ryder sighs, pushes to his feet, and strides over to Blaise. He takes the cylinder from Blaise's hand then returns his attention to me. "I'm just going to crash the magnetic current, and then we're going to get you out of here." He cautiously crouches down in front of me and

reaches for my ankles.

I stop breathing. I wish I could trust him, but I don't know how. The word... trust... It doesn't mean anything to me. I've heard it before, but it was always right before a visitor placed their hands on my chest. Trust me, they whispered.

## Page 4

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My breathing turns ragged as Ryder inches the narrow object toward the cuffs binding my ankles. He twirls the cylinder around until the cuffs make a soft clank. My ankles are briefly yanked together before forced apart. The cuffs snap apart and fall off, hitting the concrete. My skin underneath is raw, warm blood seeping out.

Confusion sets in. Why are they taking the cuffs off? No one has taken them off in years.

"Now I'm going to take the ones off your wrists." Ryder waits a moment before gently placing a hand on my arm.

I wrench back, the metal cuffs cutting into my skin.

"Sorry." He hastily lifts his hand off me. "I didn't mean to scare you. I'm not sure if you can understand me, but I have to get these cuffs off so we can get you out of here before the wardens figure out we're not really visitors."

He's not really a visitor? Then what is he? I'm not sure, which means I should be scared, and I am, yet when he reaches for me again, I hold perfectly still. My heartbeat is deafeningly loud inside my eardrums as I watch him move.

Instead of placing a hand on my arm again, he sets his fingers on the outside of the cuff. Using the tip of the cylinder, he breaks the magnetic current. The cuffs slip from my wrists and hit the ground with a loud clank.

A strange sensation overcomes me as I stare at my bare arms and ankles. Am I really free? Is this really happening?

"Do you think you can stand up?" Ryder asks me, sitting back on his heels.

I remain unmoving, scarcely breathing, as I wait for something to happen: for him to hit me, tell me to take this pill, drink this, do that, put needles in my arms. Then he'll set his hands on my chest and steal something from inside me. But all he does is patiently wait for me to answer.

"I don't ..." My voice cracks. "I haven't ..." Frustration builds inside me when the right words won't leave my lips. I give up and start to rise to my feet.

My knees knock together as my legs wobble, and I buckle right back down to the floor.

Ryder frowns then glances at Blaise. "Someone's going to have to carry her out." He sweeps his fingers through his blond hair, making the strands go askew. "Are you going to be okay getting us out of here without me being your back up?"

"If we get out of here before the system reboots, I won't need backup. But you can't carry her all the way out." Blaise's gaze flicks to me before settling back on Ryder. "You're the one who has to get scanned. The codes were set up for you."

Ryder stuffs the cylinder into his jacket pocket. "You can hold her while I get scanned."

Blaise grinds his teeth, tossing a reluctant look in my direction.

The corner of Ryder's mouth twitches. "Don't look so afraid, Blaise. She's just a girl."

"I'm not afraid of her." His voice shoots up an octave, and he shakes his head at himself. "Let's just get her out of here before the systems come back on. We'll worry about backup if and when we need it."

Ryder nods before twisting back toward me. "I'm going to carry you out of here. If I don't, there's a good chance the wardens might show up before we get out. I know you're scared, but I promise we won't hurt you."

Fear strangles me as he reaches for me. I start to cower back, but the look in his eyes makes me pause. I don't see any anger inside them, no desire to harm me, just pain and worry. I don't fully understand it, but I manage to stay where I am and let him scoop me up in his arms.

"See? Not so bad." A faint smile touches his lips as he straightens his legs and stands up. "Now we just need to get out of here, and then this'll all be over."

The nearness of him terrifies me as his arms wrap underneath me, causing my body to shake uncontrollably. But how carefully he holds me makes it seem okay to stay put, to trust him in a way I've never trusted anyone before.

Still, I'm terrified. I concentrate on breathing. Breathing, that's easy.

Ryder follows Blaise out of the cell, pressing me against him until my cheek rests against his chest.

Air in. Air out. Air in. Air out. Breathe, Allura. Just breathe.

"Wait, I think there was one more cell down here, wasn't there?" Ryder asks Blaise as we exit the cell.

"We don't have time for another rescue mission. The orders were to get her out. That's it. We need to go now." Blaise sounds agitated. "The systems could turn on at any second, and then this whole place is going to be swarming with wardens."

My muscles convulse, and I clutch the front of Ryder's shirt. If the wardens catch

them, Blaise and Ryder will probably be tortured and killed. I've seen them kill each other over less. And I'll be left to be punished over and over again.

"It'll only take a minute to get into the cell. Just run and check," Ryder pleads. "I won't be able to live with myself if there's a possibility we left one behind."

"Fine," Blaise grumbles then hurries off somewhere.

While we wait for him to return, Ryder rocks me back and forth, humming under his breath. I find the movement comforting enough that I dare lift my head up to peer around.

I haven't stepped foot outside of the cells in forever. I forgot what was out here. I used to imagine a better place on the other side of the steel door. It's not. In fact, it might be worse.

The long hallway is narrow enough that I instantly feel claustrophobic. The walls are made of a darker, smoother stone than moonstone and release a potent stench. The florescent lights are too bright, and the air reeks of rotting death, blood, and filth. The stench is so overwhelming I dry heave.

"Just hang on a few more seconds." Ryder traces his fingers in a circular pattern across my back.

I peek up at his face. He's not looking at me but down the hallway. Stubble covers his chin, and strands of his blond hair hang in his eyes. Every once in a while, he tries to blow them out of the way. The way he moves is so human. Most visitors are robotic, rigid, and stiff. Maybe he's not a visitor.

As if sensing me watching him, his gaze lowers and we lock eyes. His lips part. But before he can say anything, I look away and focus on a faded spot on his grey shirt.

He adjusts me in his arms. "Do you know your name?"

I smash my lips together, unsure how to respond. I was always told I don't have a name, that I'm a Nameless. But I don't want to be a Nameless anymore.

It's been years since I said my name aloud. I'm not even sure where the name in my head came from, or if it's really my name, but it's been in my thoughts for as long as I can remember.

"It's okay," Ryder says in a gentle tone. "You don't have to say anything if you don't want to."

But I want to tell him. Whether it's really my name or not, I want to have a name, want to know I still exist.

"Allura," I whisper. "My name is Allura."

"Allura." A smile graces his lips. "It's a beautiful name."

I breathe in the sound, feel the realness of it. Allura. I exist.

"The other cell was empty," Blaise hollers from up the hallway.

"I wonder if they died." Ryder curses under his breath. "I'm getting so sick of this shit. There's too much death in this world."

"You can have a meltdown when we get back," Blaise says with urgency. "Right now, we need to get out of here before there's more deaths."

"Yeah, I know," Ryder mumbles. "But one day, I swear to God I'm going to find a way to end this. Wardens may think we're weak, but they have a weakness, too."



Everyone does." His chest heaves as he blows out a breath then whirls around and strides down the hallway.

"Which way was it? Left or right?" Ryder asks, quickening his stride.

There's a faint beep, and then Blaise barks, "Left."

I bounce in Ryder's arms as he sharply veers left and picks up his pace to a jog. Afraid he's going to drop me, I grip on more tightly and duck my head against his chest.

"It's okay. It's okay," he keeps saying. "We're almost there."

"Now right," Blaise says. "And then, in just a few steps, we'll make another left."

"Goddammit, it's a maze down here." Ryder's boots scuff against the ground as he dodges right then left.

"I think that's the point," Blaise shouts over another beep. "It makes it harder for intruders and prisoners to get in or out." Beep. Beep. Beep. "Fucking sensors are going off like crazy. The cameras haven't turned on yet, but the systems are close to rebooting." He jogs up beside Ryder. "Once they come on, they're going to be able to track us down within minutes."

"Then we better move faster." Ryder takes off in a mad sprint. "Get out your gun and be ready."

Gun? That's not going to stop a warden.

When I first came to the channels, during one of my few attempted escapes, I tried to hit a warden with a beating stick I stole. When the metal stick connected with the

warden's jaw, the stick snapped in half. The warden laughed at me then beat me until I was bloody and broken.

"Guns ... won't ... hurt"--I suck in a huge inhale--"them."

Ryder offers me a reassuring smile. "We know. But the bullets are made of titanium, and it slows them down." His smile vanishes as his head snaps up. "Shit, I think I hear them."

In sync, Ryder and Blaise both rush forward. My fingers clasp Ryder's shirt as he maneuvers from side to side. Blaise keeps muttering about being lost and that he can smell the "fucking bastard wardens all over everything." I'm not sure what he means. I've never noticed a smell. Maybe I'm used to it.

Ryder tries to reassure me at least ten times that we'll be fine, but I start to wonder if we will find our way out. The wardens warned me, if I ever tried to escape, death would be waiting for me in the channels.

"Wait a minute ... I think I see ... Yep, there's the exit." Ryder slams to a halt in front of an enormous glass box with thousands of blue rays of light shining inside. "Here, hand me the gun and take her while I get scanned then run through when the doors open. I'll have to rescan before I can get out." He leans forward and places me in Blaise's arms. "God, you can run straight into gunfire, but ask you to hold a girl and you look like you're about to piss your pants."

"Shut the hell up," Blaise snaps, his arms rigid as he tries to support my weight without fully touching me.

I jump at the sound of his booming voice and squirm, ready to scramble out of his arms.

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"Sorry," Blaise grumbles, stiffly keeping ahold of me.

Ryder lines his palm up against the glass box, and a red light illuminates. The rays of light change direction, and then one of the walls glides open.

"Stop holding her like that. You're going to drop her," Ryder snaps then steps into the box.

Blaise grits his teeth then eases me against him until my cheek presses against his chest. His muscles are taut, tension flowing from him just like me. His heart is racing just like mine, too. I'm pretty sure we're both holding our breaths, equally afraid of each other.

He's afraid of me. He doesn't want me. I've never seen anything like it before.

Curious, I place an unsteady palm to his chest and feel his heart rate accelerate. His head jerks down in my direction, his eyes wide and crammed with fear. I yank back, and his shocked expression changes to bafflement. He's looking at me differently now, but I can't figure out what the look means.

"Go through now!" Ryder yells as a sequence of beeps fire off and beams flash around us.

"Don't you dare move!" someone shouts.

An icy shiver creeps through me at the familiarity of the voice. Terrified, I crane my neck and shudder at the sight of Lex standing about fifty feet away from us with his

stony eyes trained on me. He has a steel shock collar in one hand and a beating stick in the other.

"Always trying to escape," he says with a smirk.

I clasp Blaise's jacket for dear life. No. No. No! I can't go back! No!

Gripping me, Blaise barrels forward.

"Do I need to remind you of the punishment for stealing a Nameless!" Lex shouts, rage ringing in his tone.

Blaise only speeds up, running at an alarming pace as he charges through the open door of the glass box. When the rays of light hit my skin, searing pain rips through my body. My back arches, and I almost tumble out of his arms. But pain is mild in comparison to what the wardens will do if they catch us, so I suck it up and loop my arms around Blaise's neck. He stiffens from my touch, but his eyes remain straight ahead.

More beeping. More sirens. More flashing lights. Shots fired. Lex continues to shout threats as more wardens start yelling. The air reeks of death and something else I've never smelled before, something metallic and hot.

"I'll find you!" Lex yells. "There's nowhere to hide out there! I'm not letting you go! Not ever!"

A sense of dread crashes down on my chest. What if he does come after me? What will happen if he catches me?

"Just a little bit longer," Blaise mutters then slams into something solid. He stumbles back then runs forward again, throwing his weight forward. "Come on. Come on--"

A blinding light suddenly surrounds us, and cold air rushes across my skin. My skull throbs as I suck in a breath, but my lungs burn in protest.

"Reece, I need you to take her," Blaise pants. "I have to go back in."

"Why?" an unfamiliar voice asks. "What happened to Ryder?"

"Wardens swarmed him," Blaise says. "He's stuck in the scanner."

Blaise shoves me into a stranger's arms. I try to see his face, but the light screams against my pupils. I strive for another breath, but the air nips at my lungs.

"Get her to the closest post and wait for us," Blaise orders. "If we're not there in--"

"Yeah, I know the drill. I'm the one who created it," the stranger cuts him off. "Just get your ass back in there and help Ryder. And don't let them track you out! Make sure they still think you're down there!"

I hear footsteps running away then nothing except the desperate sound of my breathing. I have no idea who has me. I can barely think straight through the fear.

"Relax," the stranger whispers. "You're safe now."

Safe? How can I be safe? We haven't gone very far. Wardens have to be close. And I can't seem to breathe normally. Whatever's in the air out here is smothering me.

"I can't ..." I manage to say before the light dims out, and I fade with it.

## Chapter Three

### A Forgotten Memory

The blindfold wrapped around my eyes is cutting off my circulation and making my head feel like it's stuffed in a glass bowl. The rope around my wrists cuts into my skin, and the way my hands are bound make my arms ache. The scents of dirt, rain, and trees touch my nostrils as the cool air nips my skin.

I don't know where I am or how I got here. All I know is that I'm scared out of my mind. My pulse soars, my skin damp with sweat, and my breaths are coming out in short, uneven beats.

"Are you ready to run?" someone whispers in my ear, their breath disgustingly hot.

Startled, I trip forward and fall flat on my face. Dirt goes up my nose, and I start coughing.

They laugh. "Get up. You don't want to fall down like that during the hunt. You'll end up losing before it even starts."

I roll onto my back and squint, trying to see through the fabric. Spots of sunlight flicker from the sky, and I can make out the shadow of a face hovering over me.

"I said get up," he commands, kicking me in the side. I whimper, and he kicks me repeatedly until I taste blood in my mouth. "Get up! Get up! Get up!"

Unable to stand the pain any longer, I roll onto my back and lean forward, trying to stand. His boot collides with my ribs one more time before I get my feet under me.

"I like that you're afraid. Most can't feel the fear through the drugs," he says. "You're gonna make a good one. Nice and strong. You'll be able to feed a lot of them."

I'm not sure who he is, what he means, or where I was before I got here. It's like, one minute, I just suddenly existed. I don't like the feeling. I want to know why I'm here,

how I got here, and who I am.

"Get ready to run." He moves up behind me.

My senses are overwhelmed with his body heat. I start to recoil, but I end up bumping into him.

He shoves me forward. "I'm about to pull the trigger. If you make it out of the woods before I shoot, then I get to keep you."

Get shot? Get kept? Those are my only two choices?

Part of me wants to lie down and die right now, accept death instead of giving in to being chased. Wouldn't it be better that way?

But when a shot rings through the air, my instincts kick in. I sprint forward, but a couple of steps in, I trip over something. I land on my face, and my head knocks against something hard. Dizziness swims around me as warm liquid trickles down my forehead.

"You're gonna have to do better than that," the man shouts. "I'll give you another chance. Ready. Set. Go!" Another shot rings out.

I spring to my feet and run. Through the blindfold, I can make out the outline of trees. I dodge around them. Left and right. Left. Left. Right. I move around surprisingly well.

Left again then right. For a moment, I think I might be able to outrun the man, but then my shoulder slams against something rough and hard. I catch my balance and keep going, but the impact definitely slows me down. I head forward, hoping I'm going in the right direction.

I hear movement around me, sounds of a ton of people out in the trees. But I don't hear a single voice, just movements: branches snapping and soft thuds.

"I'm getting closer!" the man hollers, although he sounds farther away.

I pick up the pace, my feet hammering against the soft dirt. The thudding matches my heart beat. I'm tired and running out of breath. I'm not sure how long I can keep going, but I fight even though my body wants to surrender. I won't go down without a fight. Maybe, if I run fast enough, I'll be able to get away.

Maybe I can esca--

A jolt of electricity zaps through my body and sends my feet right out from under me. For a split second, I go airborne then land hard on my back. The oxygen is ripped from my lungs as searing pain splinters through my body. I feel like I've been cooked alive, like my blood is boiling.

"Time's up." A shadow casts over me. "Looks like you didn't make it."

"I can't breathe," I gasp, clutching at my throat.

He laughs as he crouches down and yanks the blindfold off me. Light st

ings my eyes, and I squint, desperate to see who's in front of me.

Dark hair, and he has a small box in his one hand and a steel pole in the other. He drops the pole to the ground and roughly presses his fingers to my cheek, his fingernails digging into my flesh. His lips curl as he turns my head from side to side, examining me.



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"I'm going to get a hell of a lot of money for you, darlin'. Do you even know how valuable you are?"

I open my mouth to respond, even though I don't know the answer, but a vibrant zap zings through my body. Then all I can see is darkness.

### Chapter Four

#### The Bleeding Sky

"Come on, breathe," someone begs. "Come on. Come on."

I don't know where I am, but it feels like I'm lying on a cold, solid surface. My head is resting against something soft, and two fingers are pressed to my wrist. I instinctively pull away, but my arm doesn't budge.

"Try giving her mouth to mouth again. It seemed like it was helping." This voice sounds familiar, but it takes me a moment to figure out why.

Ryder, the guy who saved me. He made it out alive.

"It was temporarily helping," the first guy who spoke says. "I can only get her to breathe for a few seconds. Then it's like she gives up."

I will my eyes to open, but my eyelids already feel like they're open. All I can see is light, though. Vibrant light makes my eyeballs ache.

"Do you really blame her after what she's been through?" a deep voice grumbles.

"Shut up, Blaise," Ryder warns. "She deserves to live."

"That's not what I mean." Blaise's tone rises in panic. "I just meant that I ... that she ..."

"Would you two both shut up so I can figure this out?" the guy whose voice I don't recognize orders.

"Sorry," Ryder and Blaise mumble.

"She's weak, and with the burns the lasers put on her ... This is bad." The stranger is so close I can feel the warmth of his breath against my cheeks. "I don't know, though. It's like her body is refusing to give up. She's strong. I just hope it's not too late and there's no permanent damage."

Silence stretches between them. I can hear noises coming at me from every direction: air gusting across my face, the soft puffs of someone breathing, rustles and shifts, and hundreds of other noises pinging at my brain. My senses are on overload, my skin tingles, and my skull feels on the verge of exploding. I inhale sharply, but the oxygen doesn't relieve the ache building inside me.

"I think she's having a panic attack," Blaise mutters. "She's breathing, but I don't think she's getting enough air."

"You know what? I think you're right," the stranger agrees. "We need to get her to calm down."

"Don't look at me," Blaise snaps. "I don't know how to do that."

The rage in his tone sends a wave of fear crashing through me. I claw at the surface beneath me, trying to sit up. The ground beneath me feels damp, and soft yet hard. I breathe in deeply, and the earthy scent of dirt touches my nostrils.

Wait? Am I outside?

"You know more about panic attacks than any of us," Ryder says quietly. "How did you get your sister to calm down?"

"I don't know. Everyone's different." Blaise pauses. "Maybe we should get her in the car. Maybe being outside is too much. Besides, we should probably get going before we're spotted. Ryder and I made it look like we were still in the channels, but the wardens will figure it out eventually and then come looking for us out here."

"Yeah, I know," the stranger agrees. "I wonder how long she's been in there."

"I'm guessing a while." Ryder sounds pained. "Here, I'll carry her. She was more relaxed with me than Blaise."

"Do you blame her?" the stranger asks. "Blaise probably scared the hell out of her."

There's a thwack, and Ryder lets out what I think is a laugh. I'm not quite sure, because it's been ages since I've heard one.

"Just hang on. We're going to help you." Ryder's breath dusts the top of my head as strong arms slip underneath me.

I gasp. Normally, when someone touches me, it's unwelcomed and painful. I don't believe Ryder's going to hurt me, though. At least, I want to believe he won't.

"Easy, Allura," Ryder whispers. "I promised I wouldn't hurt you, and I meant it."

"Why did you just call her Allura?" the guy with the unrecognizable voice asks.

"Because that's her name." Footsteps crunch against the ground as Ryder starts walking somewhere.

"How the hell do you know that?" Blaise asks. "I thought you said they didn't have a file on her."

"They didn't, but when I asked her what her name is, she said Allura." Ryder's muscles flex underneath me.

"She answered you?" Blaise asks incredulously. "She knew her name? Her real name?"

"It seemed like she did," Ryder replies. "I'm not sure where she got it from. If someone randomly gave it to her or maybe she heard someone else say it."

"I'm surprised she knows how to talk," Blaise murmurs. "She looked so confused when you were talking to her in the cell."

"She wasn't confused." Ryder slows to a stop. "She was scared out of her damned mind. She thought we were there to hurt her."

"Of course she did. You were there, posing as a visitor," the stranger says. "I get where Blaise is coming from, though. Most Nameless never learn how to talk. Or if they do, the trauma gets to them and they usually forget. Maybe she hasn't been in the channels for very long. Still, it's weird. I've rescued about ten, and none of them knew how to talk."

"How many survived out of those?" Ryder asks. "I know the numbers are usually low."

"One," the stranger says quietly. "Their survival rate is extremely low, especially if they were born in the cells."

A hush falls between them. I can hear the rustling of fabric and the creaking of hinges, and then I'm being laid down on the softest, smoothest surface that's ever touched my skin. I'm terrified, but I don't dare move. When I hear a loud bang, though, I flip to my side and curl into a ball.

A hand touches my back. "It's okay," Ryder says.

My muscles ravel so tightly I swear my limbs are about to snap off.

"She's breathing better," Blaise says from my other side. "That's a good sign, right?"

"She still doesn't look completely coherent." Ryder's fingers sketch patterns on my back. "Her eyes are open, but it's like she can't focus."

My eyes are open? I flutter my eyelashes, trying to decide for myself. It feels like they're open, so why can't I see?

"Maybe it's too bright," Blaise suggests. "It was fucking dark down there. Maybe her pupils can't adjust."

"Hmmm ..." Ryder's fingers stop moving. "Give me your jacket."

"What're you going to do with it?" Blaise grumbles.

Before Ryder can answer, the intense light reduces to a dark grey. I blink a few times as my vision comes into focus. Shapes form, dull colors, blurry images. It takes my brain a minute to process everything, and again, my senses struggle to take it all in. But slowly, I start to put together my surroundings.

A black surface is right in front of my face. I splay my palm against it. Cold. Smooth. The same surface is also right below me. Leather? A leather seat. I'm on a leather seat. I don't know how I know that. I just do.

I tip my head toward where my feet are and find Ryder holding a leather jacket over our heads like an umbrella.

"Hey," he says. "Is that better?"

I nod, too afraid to say no.

"Good." The corners of his lips turn upward into a smile, even though his eyes carry a hint of sadness.

It hasn't been that long since I've seen someone smile. In fact, a lot of visitors smile. Ryder's smile doesn't make my stomach churn, but instills safety, which only intensifies when he hands me a bottle of water.

I grab the bottle from him, prop up on my elbow, and savagely consume it. By the time I'm finished, water is running down my chin and neck. I still feel so thirsty, but I'm afraid to ask for more.

Ryder hands me an odd-looking, brown square. "Eat this. I know it's not much, but

we'll get you more food when we get to Leviter Station."

I stuff the brown square into my mouth, ignoring the bland taste and sandy texture as I swallow it down.

"How do your lungs feel?" Ryder asks as he takes the empty bottle of water from me and chucks it to the floor. "Can you breathe better now?"

I nod, inhaling and exhaling as I rest my head down on the seat. Now that I'm no longer outside, the dry air feels less harsh and bitter against my lungs.

"We're going to get you out of here." Ryder continues to smile at me. "It might sound and feel kind of weird when Reece starts driving. The car rides like a tank and it can get a little bumpy."

I nod as I hear a rumble, and then the engine roars to life. The vibrations are violent, making my teeth clank together.

Ryder stares down at me with his brows dipped. "Wait, do you know what a car is? I can explain it to you if you need me to."

"I know ..." I clear my throat, lowering my voice to a whisper. "I know what a car is."

His lips part. "How do you--"

"Don't overwhelm her with questions," Blaise cuts him off. "Just let her rest."

I angle my head back, following the sound of his voice. He's sitting beside my feet with his hip pressed against the door, as if he's trying to keep as much distance from me as possible. The jacket Ryder is holding above my head makes it hard to see Blaise's face, so I crane my neck until I get a glimpse of his scruffy chin, his neck, and his arms crossed over his chest. He still looks rough and terrifying, yet now that I'm not inside my cell, I feel less afraid of him.

"Eventually, we're going to have to ask her questions," the stranger, Reece, says from the seat up front. "It's protocol."

"I know the protocol." Blaise glares at Reece. "But you can at least wait until we get back to Leviter Station before you start picking her apart."

Pick me apart? Wait ... Where are they taking me? What are they going to do to me? I thought I was free. Through all of this, I hadn't thought that maybe they were just transferring me somewhere else.

I scramble to get up, knocking the jacket out of Ryder's hand. The light swarms me again, stinging fiercely against my eyes. I blink furiously, trying to get my vision to focus, but it doesn't do an ounce of good.

"Allura, please calm down," Ryder pleads. "I need to get the jacket back over you."

I sit up with my hands out in front of me. "No," I croak. "I won't let you hurt me."



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"We're not going to hurt you," Ryder promises. "Blaise didn't mean it like that. Goddammit, Blaise, what the hell's wrong with you?"

"What the heck did I say?" Blaise growls then pauses. "Oh, shit. I didn't mean it like that."

Someone places their hands on my shoulders. Their fingers are stiff, so I'm guessing it's Blaise. I freeze, puzzled by his reaction. Why is he so afraid of me?

"Allura, I didn't mean it like that." Blaise sounds demanding, yet the anger in his tone doesn't match his words. "No one's going to pick you apart or make you do anything you don't want to. You're safe with us."

I bite down on my lip, unsure whether to believe him. I want to. God, do I want to.

"Please believe me." Desperation floods Blaise's voice. "I'd never hurt you or anyone else. I swear to God I wouldn't."

His words strike a nerve. I didn't think people could make promises like that. I don't know what to do with the discovery, whether I should believe him or not. But with how panicked he sounds, it feels like I should say something, because I don't want him to be scared, too.

I haven't openly spoken to anyone in a long time. There was a girl whose cell was near mine, and sometimes, when no one was listening, we'd talk. But she didn't understand a lot of words, so most of our conversations usually ended in confusion, and then one day she was gone.

Unsure what the right words are to say to Blaise, I lower my hands to my lap and nod.

"Give me my jacket," Blaise says.

"Why?" Ryder asks. "I can do it."

"Just give it to me," Blaise demands, his hands leaving my shoulders.

Moments later, the light dwindles to a dreary gray. Bit by bit, the surroundings take shape again. Blaise is now holding the jacket over my head and is sitting closer to me.

"You're going to be all right." Blaise looks me in the eye, seeming less afraid now. "We won't let anyone hurt you ever again."

While Ryder said something similar earlier, the scary, intense, passionate look in Blaise's expression makes me fully believe him. It makes me feel sorry for anyone who dares to try to do anything to me.

I nod, hoping that will get him to stop looking at me because his stare is almost as overwhelming as the sunlight.

A breath eases from his lips as he slumps back in the seat then says, "Reece, don't take the main road. I've heard wardens upped the detours over the last few weeks."

Curious, I lower my head to get a look at Reece. He's in the driver's seat with his hands on the wheel. I can't see his face, only his profile, his scruffy jawline, and his light brown hair. He looks about the same age as Blaise and Ryder.

I'm not very good at guessing ages, but not too long ago, I heard a visitor tell a warden that his twenty-first birthday was that day. His present was an hour with me. While I blocked out most of that visit, I still remember what he looked like. If I had to

guess, Ryder, Blaise, and Reece are all around twenty or twenty-one.

"The back roads aren't any better," Reece says. "I've heard they put more security on those to stop anyone from smuggling a Forsaken or Nameless."

"What are we going to do if we run into one?" Blaise jerks his chin in my direction. "She doesn't have any papers, and if they see the number on her arm, they're going to know what she is."

My gaze lowers to my arm. Pale skin. Open wounds from where the lasers burned me and the cuffs rubbed at my flesh. Along my inner wrist is a four-digit number branded across my flesh. Five-two-eight-seven. My number. I remember when wardens put it there with hot metal that scalded. The pain was nearly unbearable, and I almost passed out, but I fought to stay conscious and not give them the satisfaction of seeing me in pain.

"I know that," Reece mutters, turning his head to look over his shoulder. "Maybe we could ..." His eyes widen when he notices me staring at him.

Panicking, I quickly divert my gaze to my hands.

"Should, what?" Ryder leans forward and rests his arms on his legs.

Reece sighs. "Hide her when we get close."

"Where would we hide ...?" Ryder trails off, shaking his head. "No way. We can't do that to her. Not after she just got out of the channels."

"I know it's not ideal, but it might be the only way." Reece grips the steering wheel, rotating back around in the seat. "It's either hide her or risk hitting a detour. And then we won't have time to hide her. In the condition she's in, they're automatically going

to assume she's probably a Forsaken or Nameless. We'll never be able to convince them that she's not, especially without fake papers."

"We could always make a stop and clean her up," Ryder suggests, fiddling with a hole in the knee of his pants. "East City Post isn't too far from here."

"And what if the wrong person asks about her? You know not everyone at the posts can be trusted." Blaise cracks his knuckles. "And even if we did clean her up, they'll probably still ask for her papers. She's all skin and bones. We can't cover that up."

I'm struggling to keep up with everything they're saying. Forsaken and posts? Who are these guys? They're definitely not wardens or visitors. I wonder if they're human, but from what the wardens said, most humans have either been captured, like I was, or are in hiding because they're too weak to fight the wardens. Ryder, Blaise, and Reece don't seem weak, though, and they did get me out of the channels. But what else could they be?

I hardly remember anything about the outside world except for glimpses of trees and sunlight. Even in the forgotten memory, I was confused. All I've ever known is my cell, the wardens' orders, and visitors who came and pressed their hands against my chest. That's it. That's all I know about how the world works, but I always believed there was more than that. Maybe these guys can help me understand it better.

"These detours ..." My voice cracks. "There are wardens there?"

Ryder, Reece, and Blaise all look at me, which makes me recoil.

"She talks better than I expected." Ryder rotates in his seat to face me. "Sweetheart, how long were you underground?"

I shrug. "I can't remember. Sorry."

Ryder catches Blaise's gaze. They trade a look before Ryder looks back at me.

"Were you ...? Were you born in the cells?"

I press my quivering lips together and shrug again. "I'm not sure."

Ryder's puzzlement deepens. "How do you not know where you came from?"

"Sometimes, I think I wasn't born underground because I know what the sky and sun are supposed to look like. But the memories never feel real. And I don't really have any memories of a life outside of the underground. Well, except for one, but I couldn't see much, so I'm not positive I was even outside." By the time I'm done talking, my throat is exhausted, strained, my voice barely a whisper.

"How does she know all this?" Blaise leans forward to collect something from off the floor. "What memories are and what sunlight is?" He sits back up with a bottle of water in his hand. "Nameless usually don't know more than a handful of words, if any. And wardens hate when they talk, so they usually break the habit out of them."

"Maybe you should ask her that." Ryder steals the bottle of water from Blaise. "Don't talk around her. Don't treat her like they treated her, like she doesn't exist."

Blaise narrows his eyes at Ryder. "I'm not treating her like that."

"That's exactly what you're doing. You're being an asshole." Ryder's clipped tone shocks me. Up until now, he's been so composed. "If you have a question about what she's saying, ask her. And while we're at it, stop raising your voice. Every time you do it, she shakes." Ryder unscrews the cap off the bottle and hands it to me.

Blaise flicks a glance at me, his eyes blazing with something I don't fully comprehend. "I'm sorry ... I'm not trying to be an asshole."

"It's okay," I whisper, uncomfortable with the apology. I don't think anyone has ever apologized to me before. "I don't know how I know these things. I just know. The wardens knew I could talk, though. They even talked to me sometimes. Well, one of them did, the one that was yelling at us when you ran through the scanner."

"She's right." Ryder stares at me as if I'm a puzzle he's trying to figure out. "The warden talked to her when he took me in her cell."

"But not all the Nameless can talk," I whisper. "Most can't. I've only met one who could, but she wasn't down there for long, and she didn't talk very well."

Blaise assesses me more closely, seeming mystified. I try to ignore the attention, but his stare makes me uneasy. To distract myself, I put the open bottle to my lips and down a few gulps of water.

Blaise finally looks away from me and exchanges an indecipherable look with Ryder. I grow anxious by the silence and focus on how smooth the leather seats feel against my skin. It's been forever since I've felt anything other than the T-shirt on my back, the metal on my wrists and ankles, the floor, cold hands. It's almost surreal, like I'm dreaming and not really here. I want to test the theory, find out if I am awake, but I don't know how. Maybe I can peek out the window, see the outside and sunlight for myself. But I don't want to put my eyes through that pain again.

"What she's saying goes against everything we know about wardens," Blaise finally breaks the silence. "It doesn't make any sense. What if they're changing?"

"We have bigger problems to worry about right now," Reece says, the gears grinding as he shifts. "We're coming up near the crossway. If we don't do something with her quick, we might not get another chance."

"We could always explain what we want her to do," Ryder suggests. "She might

understand."

Reece nods. "Go ahead. It's worth a shot."

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Ryder turns toward me, bringing his leg onto the seat. "Allura, we really need to get you back to the station because you'll be safe there, but when we get closer to where there could be detours, we need to hide you for a while. Reece, Ryder, and I all have fake papers so we should be fine. But you don't and that's going to raise some red flags, which is really bad."

"Okay." I'm not sure what he's implying.

"And the only place we can hide you"--Blaise slants forward and catches my gaze--  
"is in the compartment of the trunk."

My heart pumps faster as I glance back and forth between Blaise and Ryder. "You want me to get into the trunk?"

"A compartment that Blaise built inside the trunk." Ryder's gaze never wavers from mine. "It's not nearly as bad as it sounds."

"You've been in it before?" I ask Ryder, wrapping my arms around myself.

He nods. "A ton of times."

I consider what they're asking me to do--being locked up somewhere again. I don't know if I can do it. And what if this is still some sort of trick? I don't know what to do, who to trust.

"It's our only option." Blaise shoves the sleeves of his black shirt up to his elbows, revealing countless scars on his arms. "These detours are guarded by watchers. If they



find out about you, they'll take you back to the wardens, and you'll either be killed or put underground again. That is, if they don't keep you. If they do keep you, it'll probably be worse."

I massage my aching chest. "These watchers, are they like visitors? Will they put their hands on my chest? Why do they do that? It's always confused me."

Blaise glances at Ryder with a brow arched. "How does she know what sunlight and cars are, but she doesn't understand why wardens have her trapped down in the channels?"

Ryder gives him a stone cold look, and Blaise retaliates with a glower.

"You're talking around her again," Ryder warns, sliding his arm across the back of the seat. "Stop it."

Blaise's jaw ticks. But when he looks at me again, the tension eases.

"How much do you know about the broken city?"

"I don't think I've heard of it before," I whisper.

Blaise fiddles with the metal in his lip, twisting the barbell back and forth. "It doesn't make any sense. If you were ever outside of the channels, you should know about the city and the watchers. It's a part of life." He moves his fingers away from the piercing and lowers his hand to his lap. "Maybe you were never outside."

"Or maybe she lived at one of the burials before she was taken underground," Reece says, steering the car to the right. "They're supposed to be pretty secluded from our world, at least from what I've heard."

Blaise shakes his head. "She's too young for that. Those went into extinction at least twenty years ago."

"Yeah, I'm not convinced they're all gone." Reece gives the wheel a quick spin, veering the car to the right.

I grab Ryder's arm as the car hits a bump and I'm jolted sideways. He places a hand over mine to steady me, and the foreign touch sends an overdose of adrenaline through my veins. The world spins as my vision spots. I inhale through my nose, trying to calm myself down.

"W-what's a burial?" I ask, prying my fingers from Ryder's arm. "Is it like a graveyard?"

"They're safe havens from the city. The watchers never found them, so their corruption never spread there. Supposedly, the old way of life was able to survive the infestation." Blaise rakes his fingers through his hair. "Although, I'm not completely convinced burials ever existed to begin with. I think it was more legend than fact."

I have so many questions buzzing at the tip of my tongue, but before I can ask, Reece puts an end to the conversation.

"Look, we can explain this to her later. Right now, we need to get her into the compartment before we reach the crossway."

Blaise and Ryder look at me, and I shrink back.

"These watchers, if they find me, and they find out I'm Nameless, they'll hurt me, right? Or send me back underground?" I double-check that I understand everything correctly.

Blaise nods with zero hesitation. "Or worse."

I don't have to ask what "or worse" means. I've seen enough worse in my time. If what he's saying is true, I need to be brave and get into the compartment. I'd rather die than ever go back.

"Is it dark in there?" I ask. "In the compartment, I mean."

Blaise nods. "I can give you a flashlight if you want. If the car stops at all, though, you'll have to turn it off."

I pick at a loose thread in the hem of my shirt. "Is it confined?"

Blaise runs his hand over the shaved side of his head. "Kind of."

"It's big enough to hold about two people," Ryder says. "So it won't be too cramped. You might get a little claustrophobic, though, like you were in the tunnels."

"Will I be locked inside it?" I whisper. "Or will I be able to get out if I need to?"

Blaise's expression softens. "We'd never lock you up. The compartment locks from the inside, so you can get out if you need to. And you can lock us out if you need to."

I lower my feet to the floor and tug at the bottom of my shirt, trying to cover myself up. "All right, I'll do it."

Ryder blows out a relieved breath. "Thanks, Allura."

Strands of my hair fall in my eyes as I angle my head to the side. "For what?"

"For trusting us." He smiles, reaching out to brush my hair out of my eyes.

I flinch, but then decide my reaction might not be appropriate considering they're about to help me, so I try to mimic his smile, but it doesn't feel right.

"When we reach Luxington Crossway, pull over," Ryder tells Reece. Then he sticks his hand into a pouch on the seat in front of him. "Where the hell did I put my card?"

He starts rummaging through the front of the car and under the seat, looking for his card--whatever that is. Eventually, he finds it, and I discover that a card is a plastic square about the size of my palm. I'm not sure what's so important about the card, but I don't ask.

Time drifts by as we continue to drive, but it's different than being inside my cell. Whereas every minute seems endless there, the minutes and hours out here zoom by in a blurry race. I feel scared, excited, strange, eager--a thousand different things. I also feel tired, but I'm too amped up on adrenaline to fall asleep.

Eventually, I close my eyes and listen to the guys' voices, at peace with the knowledge I'm not alone. Ryder starts talking to Reece and Blaise about what they're going to do when they make it back to Leviter Station

and how they're going to report the outcome of this mission. From the way they speak of the station, I'm guessing they live there. They seem really enthusiastic to get back.

Listening to them talk to each other, so naturally and at ease, baffles me. I find myself mesmerized by their interaction. Is this what it's like to be normal, to live outside of the cells? Will I ever be like this?

"Fuck. Please tell me you at least got some of their files," Ryder says to Reece, his voice rising.

The unexpected loudness causes my eyes to snap open. I glance over at Ryder just as

he leans forward and shoves a black box with a cracked screen underneath the seat

"I got one file," Reece says.

Ryder frowns. "Only one?"

Reece lifts his shoulders and shrugs. "I was heading into another section when you ran out with Allura. I didn't have enough time."

"Shit, I was hoping you got more." Blaise reclines back in the seat with a huff. "At least tell me the file's useful, and that it wasn't just one of their junk files."

"I haven't looked at it yet." Reece points at something in front of us. "We're getting close to Lexington Crossway. When we stop to put Allura in the compartment, I'll check the file."

I want to ask what files they're talking about, if it's the files the wardens keep on the Nameless, but they're talking so fast it's hard to keep up. Or maybe they're talking at a normal pace and I'm just not used to it.

"Where the hell did I put my card?" Ryder's brows dip as he moves his hand out from under the seat. "Hell yes. Look what I found." He sits back up, holding a pair of ...

I try to seem excited like he is, but I'm lost.

"Is that the card you were looking for?"

A laugh escapes him. Even Blaise cracks a tiny smile.

"No, it's not the card." Ryder unfolds the sides of the object. "These are what we call Allura-eye-protectors."

I have no clue if he's being serious or not.

"Is that what they're really called?" I ask, eyeballing the black and silver object.

Ryder's eyes practically sparkle. "Of course. Would I lie to you?"

"I don't know. I don't really know you." I glance at Blaise, hoping he'll tell me the truth.

Blaise rolls his eyes then snatches the object from Ryder. "They're called sunglasses," he explains to me. "You put them on over your eyes, and it should help with your light sensitivity."

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"Man, ruin my fun," Ryder says, grinning. "Sunglasses is such a lame name. I like mine way better."

Blaise shoves the jacket at Ryder then positions the sunglasses in front of me. "Hold still while I put them on. I don't want to poke you in the eye."

I freeze as he inches the sunglasses toward my face. I half expect my eyeballs to get jabbed, but the sunglasses settle comfortably around my head and over my eyes. The lenses cast a shadow on the surroundings.

Slowly, Ryder removes the jacket from my head. I squint, expecting the pain to return, and it does, but the ache isn't nearly as unbearable.

My eyelashes flutter. "Everything looks ... weird." I wave my hand in front of me.

Ryder studies me with his head cocked to the side. "You're being ridiculously adorable right now."

"Watch it," Blaise warns

Ryder rolls his eyes. "I'm not doing anything."

Blaise scowls at him. "Stop looking at her like that and start worrying about how you're going to smooth talk the watchers if we get stopped and questioned."

The smile vanishes from Ryder's face. "I wasn't ... I mean--"

"All right, you two, that's enough," Reece says, slowing down the car. "You can fight all you want when we get back to the station."

Grumbling something under his breath, Blaise reaches for the door handle and climbs out of the car.

"I'm going to check the area out just to be safe," Reece says then gets out of the car.

Ryder hands me the leather jacket. "Here. Put this on."

I slip my arms through the sleeves and pull the jacket over my shoulders. It's way too big and bulky, but I'm grateful to have something other than a ratty T-shirt.

"Just one sec." Ryder hesitantly extends his hand toward me.

I stiffen, at first not understanding, but then his fingers wrap around the zipper, and he zips up the front of the jacket.

"I don't want you getting cold." He offers me one final smile before hopping out of the car.

Scooting to the edge of the seat, I peer outside, and my jaw nearly smacks the ground. Nothing looks like I imagined it. Sure, there's similarities, yet everything is so different.

The land is dusty and dry, and the air is laced with dirt. The cracked ground spreads for as far as I can see. The treeless land is bare. I angle my head and look up. It's a little harder to see up in that direction, mostly because of the sunlight, but I can make out the startling red hue of the sky, like spilled blood. This doesn't make sense. Why isn't the sky blue like I remember? Are the sunglasses doing something to it?



"Allura." Ryder's voice draws my attention to him.

When I first saw him in the darkness of the cell, I thought his eyes were kind. In the sunlight, the kindness is even more visible.

"I promise, when we get back to Leviter Station, I'll take you up to the viewing area and we can stare at the sky for as long as you want, but right now, we need to get you into the compartment before we're spotted."

I want to ask him questions, ask him why everything looks strange, but I realize that now probably isn't the best time.

I can ask later when we're safe.

He offers me his hand. I almost don't take it, but with how weak my legs feel, I don't think I could stand up by myself, so I place my palm in his. His eyes briefly widen, but he swiftly composes himself and carefully helps me to my feet.

The dirt feels too coarse against my bare feet, the air too dry. I cough, my shoulders heaving.

Ryder looks at me worriedly. "Are you okay?"

I nod, patting my chest. "I'm not used to dry air."

Agony fills his eyes. "Come on. Let's get you safe." Threading his fingers through mine, he guides me around the car.

Walking feels strange. Wobbly. Unsteady. Complicated. I feel so exposed in the shirt and jacket I'm wearing. I keep messing around with the bottom, trying to make the fabric stretch farther.

"When we get to the station, we'll get you new clothes and some shoes," Ryder says when he notices me fidgeting.

I nod, almost smiling at the idea of having something to wear other than a tattered shirt. I'm so lost in the idea that I don't pay attention to the car until we stop at the back. The bizarre looking vehicle has a heavy-coated black exterior; tinted, domed windows; three doors; and overly large wheels with metal rods poking out of the rims. Definitely not how I remember cars, but perhaps I'm not remembering correctly. Maybe Blaise was right, and I really haven't been out here before.

Blaise rounds the back of the car with his hands shoved in his pockets. He takes one look at me and his expression plummets. "Why do you look so worried?"

"I'm not worried." I bite my lip. "I was just thinking about how ... This doesn't look like a car to me."

He tugs off the fingerless gloves he's wearing. "What did you think cars looked like?"

"I don't know ... smaller and less rounded. The wheels look strange, too." I feel stupid as soon as I say it and stare down at my feet.

"Maybe you're thinking of something else. Like, maybe a motorcycle." Ryder hooks a finger under my chin and tips my head up. "It's okay. You don't need to be embarrassed about it. Blaise once thought a sink was a bathtub."

I glance at Blaise, wondering if it's true. Blaise shakes his head, but he doesn't argue. I feel a bit better that he has confused things, too, but wonder why.

Blaise aligns the palm of his hand to a square pad on the back of a car. "Does she know what a trunk is, then?"

"It's the part on the back of the car," I say. "Although, the trunks I remember didn't have square pads on them. They had keyholes."

Blaise stares at me like he's trying to figure me out. I really wish he would so he could tell me what's going on with me.

When the pad glows green, the trunk pops open. Blaise reaches inside, peels back the padded flooring, and opens a compartment door. Inside are a few guns and a sling of bullets.

"We should've put more ventilation in this thing."

The red sky and bright orange sun make the piercings in his face glisten. Without his jacket on, the tattoos winding up his arms are noticeable. But they're not just tattoos. They're names woven into thorns and vines and roses. In the midst is a girl's face. She looks like she's crying, and it makes my chest hurt.

When Blaise notices me staring, he rubs his hand across the tattoo, as if trying to erase the ink. He clears his throat a couple of times before turning back to the trunk. "I thought Reece was going to hook a fan up in here."

"He hasn't gotten around to it yet." Ryder moves up beside Blaise and peers inside the trunk. "We can leave it cracked if we need to."

"We can't do that." Blaise folds his arms across his chest. "If anyone looks in the trunk, they'll know the compartment's there."

"But what if it's too hot in there for her?" Ryder sticks his head inside the trunk and pats the floor with his hand. "I don't want her to be uncomfortable."

"Just being in there is going to make her uncomfortable," Blaise says, "especially if

she's claustrophobic."

I'm about to tell them that I'll be fine, that I can handle muggy air and claustrophobia just as long as it means I don't have to go back to the channels, when Reece comes running up, out of breath, his eyes wild.

"I just spotted a couple of patrol vehicles on the crossway." He points a finger in the direction he just ran from. "We need to get back on the main road before they drive out here and start questioning us."

"Shit." Blaise reaches for me, and I instinctively trip back. His eyes pop wide open, and he freezes, his hand suspended in front of him. "I was just going to help you get in. I wasn't going to--"

The strangest sound echoes through the air, like a reverberating wave. At first, I think Reece went back to the car and started up the engine, but then I realize Reece is still standing beside me, and so are Blaise and Ryder.

The color drains from their faces.

"Fucking shit. They sent a Tracker," Blaise growls, his gaze darting toward the front of the car.

&nb

sp; I don't know what Trackers are, but with how terrified the three guys look, my guess is that they might be deadly.

Chapter Five

Trackers

For a chilling moment, Blaise, Ryder, and Reece are frozen in time. I worry somehow they really are frozen. Perhaps that can happen in this unfamiliar world. But then another boom rattles the earth, and they all jump into action.

Ryder and Reece draw their guns from their holsters while Blaise snags my arm and yanks me toward him. I stumble over my feet and crash into his chest, my cheek smashing against his shoulder. I start to push back, but his arms circle my waist, and he presses our bodies close.

Another boom explodes from somewhere, and dirt bursts through the air. The ground quivers beneath me, and I look down, seeing the cracks in the dirt splitting apart and widening.

I clutch Blaise's arm. "What's happening to the ground?"

He tracks my gaze, and his face turns pale. "Shit!"

"Blaise, get her in there!" Reece shouts. "Now!"

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I turn my head to see what he's so afraid of, and the sight makes my body run cold.

Just a ways from the car is a massive cloud tearing across the land. In the middle of the dirt is a metallic, snake-shaped figure rising toward the sky, arching for a second before diving back down to the ground and crashing through the dirt.

"What is that thing?" I breathe out in horror as the ground shakes.

Blaise tightens his grip on me as he falls backward. I brace myself to slam against the ground, but he twists his body at the last second, and we tumble into the trunk.

Blaise releases me and scrambles to pull the trunk closed as gunshots are fired. Darkness immediately smothers me, and I suddenly picture myself back in the cell, trapped in the darkness.

Blaise lies down close and wraps an arm around me. "It's going to be okay," he whispers. "Just hang on and take deep breaths. If it gets too bad, shut your eyes and pretend you're somewhere else."

"Okay," I whisper through my ragged breaths. "Blaise, what was out there? Is it ...? Is it a watcher?"

"No." Not an ounce of fear is in his tone, yet I can feel the tension flowing off him. "They're Trackers and they're more dangerous than watchers."

"It looked like a ..." I trail off, not wanting to say it out loud, fearing he might think I'm insane.

"Like a giant snake," he says. "Yeah, that's pretty much what Trackers are."

"But it looked ..." I press my hand to my forehead as my skull begins to throb. All this unfamiliarity is too confusing, and my worry suddenly spills out of me. "I don't understand any of this: why the sky looks like it's bleeding, why the land is so desolate and sad, why there's giant, mechanical snakes ripping up the ground. This isn't how I remember the outside ... Maybe you're right. Maybe I've never been out here before. Maybe I just imagined everything." That may have been the longest I've ever talked before, and my throat hurts by the time I'm done.

Blaise's chest crashes against mine as he inhales and exhales violently. "What did you think the world looked like?"

I picture the world I imagined was waiting for me if I ever escaped the cell. "The sky was blue except for at night. At night, it turned black, but there were these things up there that shined ... I can't remember what they were called ... stars, I think ..." An image of glittering purple and silver stars flickers through my mind, and I almost smile. "Sometimes, the sky turned grey, like when it rained, but it was still beautiful, especially when lightning lit up the clouds. And there were trees everywhere and the land was so green and lush. And the air was clear, and it didn't hurt to breathe." I press my hand to the base of my throat and suck in a slow breath, wishing I could feel the air.

"It sounds like a beautiful place."

"Does it exist? Or is this it?"

"I don't know," he says. "I've never heard of anything like that, but I haven't seen the whole world, either."

Tears well in my eyes. What if the world I dream of doesn't exist? What if what's out

there now is all that's out there? What if this world is just the channels and the wardens and violence and emptiness?

"It's not always this bad," Blaise says, as if reading my mind. "I know things are crazy right now, but when we get back to the station, it'll settle down. The broken city isn't any safer, but we have a place that's protected from corruptness. You should feel safe there."

I'm about to ask him what the city is like, what makes it so corrupt, when something slams into the car. I'm jolted so hard my teeth clank together. Pain radiates through my jaw all the way to my brain.

"What was--"

"Allura," something hisses.

"Blaise, what was that?" I whisper, shivering. My skin crawls, like back when the magnetic current between my cuffs caught the iron circle. Little pinpricks creep through my veins, tiny, festering sensations as if bugs are eating me from the inside out. I scratch at my skin, desperate to make the feeling go away.

"Allura ..."

I jerk back as two glowing, red eyes appear in the darkness. "Blaise, what is that!"

"What was wha--" Blaise starts, but the car gets slammed again, this time from right underneath us.

The red eyes dim as the metal ceiling caves in and the padded floor bowls up. The car begins to tip sideways, tossing me with it. I roll into Blaise, landing on top of him.



"Hang on!" Blaise shouts, his hand pressing against my back. "It's going to flip."

I loop my arms around his neck and desperately clutch on to him as the car topples sideways. I hear my name hissed again as we go airborne for a split second then slam to the ground. My body is tossed like a ragdoll, and I land somewhere between the inside of the trunk and the floor. A second later, Blaise rolls into me. Our bodies are pressed so close together that I can barely move.

Blaise moves back when the car is jarred again. The collision sends me flying away from him, and I bounce around, slamming against the sides of the trunk. The car flips wildly, spinning out of control. I'm launched around in every direction, my arms, elbows, head, and knees banging against the inside of the trunk. A few times, I collide with Blaise, and I feel him trying to grab me, but before he can get a decent grip, the car overturns again, and we fly away from each other.

I can feel my skin bruising as my body takes blow after blow. I finally put out my arms, hoping to brace myself, but my hand snags on a sharp piece of metal, kinking my arm. My shoulder lets out a loud pop, and I cry out as searing hot pain spreads all the way to my fingertips.

"Allura!" Blaise yells from somewhere.

I open my mouth to tell him I'm fine, even though I don't think I am, when the car abruptly stops moving. I crash against the side of the trunk and let out a scream as my shoulder wedges between two pieces of dented metal.

I take sharp breaths, breathing through the pain. I can hear Blaise banging around and cursing. Then there's a click, and soft light filters through the trunk.

The sunglasses must have gotten knocked off, but my pupils eventually adjust to the faint light. I take in the sight: the floor now above my head and the ceiling below my

body. The sides are completely crushed, limiting the already restricted space. Thank God, I can't see red eyes anywhere, and the crawling sensation has stopped. Still, claustrophobia strangles me, choking the oxygen from my lungs. I try to picture myself somewhere else, someplace safe and out in the open, but I draw a blank.

Blaise rolls beside me and props up on his arms. He has a flashlight in his hand and a concerned look on his face as he examines me. I do the same to him, wondering how badly he's hurt. Other than a small nick above his lip and a welt beneath his eye, he appears to be okay.

"Does anything hurt?" He sweeps my hair out of my eyes and inspects my face.

"My shoulder ..." I suck in a breath between my teeth. Just breathing hurts.

"I think you dislocated it, but I can't pop it back into place while we're here." He frowns then pushes up on his elbows and glances around. "We need to get out of here in case the Tracker comes back."

My eyes widen. "You think it'll come back?"

His gaze remains fixed on the back of the trunk. "Maybe. Trackers usually don't stop until they eliminate their target, so either it did and someone sent an electromagnetic pulse, or it took off to recharge."

I gulp. That monster could come back? The monster that I'm pretty sure whispered my name?

"Blaise, I think I ..." I stop myself.

He glances at me. "Think what?"

I'm unsure what to tell him. I feel silly for bringing it up, but I can't think of anything else to say. "I think I heard the Tracker whisper my name, and then I saw ... Well, they looked like red eyes."

His forehead furrows. "When the car was being flipped?"

I nod. "But then they disappeared."

Confusion remains on his face. "That's weird ... I mean, not the name thing; Trackers do that sometimes. But the eyes ... I have no clue what that could be. Trackers don't have red eyes. They're strictly mechanical." His gaze skims the trunk, his frown deepening. "We need to get you out of here."

"How would the Tracker know my name?"

"Trackers are usually programmed to know the names of their target. Although, considering you were a Nameless, it seems an odd. Normally, they just use the Nameless's number."

I rub my branded wrist with my fingertips. "So you think it was after me?"

"Maybe, but it could've been after all of us. I'd rather not stick around to find out, though."

"What about Ryder and Reece? Maybe they could help us get out of here?"

"Hmmm ..." is all he says.

Worry sets in. "They're okay, right?"

His lips part, but then he wavers. "Look, Allura, I don't want to feed you a bunch of

bullshit, so I'm just going to be blunt because that's what I do. A Tracker slammed into our car a ton of fucking times, which probably means we're miles away from where we first were. We're way off course, and since we don't have a vehicle, it's going to take longer to get to the station. Blaise and Reece could be anywhere, but I can't risk hauling you around to look for them. It's too dangerous, and it's against protocol. And besides, whatever you saw--those eyes--they had to belong to something, and while I'm really fucking curious what that something is, I'd rather not have you with me when I find out. I need to get you somewhere safe."

"But what if Ryder and Reece are hurt?" I cradle my arm against my chest. Am I afraid? Yes. But I'm also worried. And the worry is outweighing the fear. "Or what if the Tracker comes back and goes after them?"

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"Reece and Ryder know how to take care of themselves. We were trained for these situations, and we have a plan for if we get separated." He pounds his fist against the right side of the trunk. "Now if I could just get us out of this trunk ..."

Even though he said he has a plan, I'm still worried we won't get out of here alive and that Ryder and Reece are somewhere out there hurt. Or what if the Tracker... ate them? I'm not sure what a Tracker does exactly. Or the other thing with the red eyes.

As I plunge into my worried thoughts, Blaise leans forward and squints at a small crevice in the side. He taps his knuckles against it a few times before rolling onto his back and positioning the flashlight between us. Then he bends his knees and bashes the bottom of his clunky boots against the gap. The idea that he could break through metal using just his feet doesn't seem possible, yet the small crevice widens. Sunlight creeps in, and I cover my eyes, listening to Blaise kick and grunt and wondering how he's so strong.

"All right, let's get out of here," he says after he stops kicking.

I remove my hand from my eyes and look at a hole wide enough for us to climb through. "How did you do that?"

He shrugs. "I kicked it."

"I know, but ..."

Without waiting for me to finish, he ducks his head through the hole and hoists himself out. Once he's all the way outside of the trunk, he squats down and reaches

back inside.

"Give me your hand," he instructs. "I'll pull you out."

I put my palm in his, sit up, and keeping my head low, scoot toward the opening.

"Try not to bump your shoulder on anything." His fingers are firm around mine. "I don't want you to jack it up more."

I tuck my shoulder inward, hunker down, and slip my head through the hole. He gives my arm a good tug while I push up on my toes and drag myself out of the trunk. I roll out onto the dirt, the sunlight instantly casting across my face, and throw my arm over my face to protect my eyes.

"Stay here. I'll find the sunglasses," Blaise says, releasing my hand.

It grows quiet as he goes back to the car. A minute later, he crouches down beside me. He fits the sunglasses over my face, and I open my eyes, blinking up at him.

"The lenses are cracked," he explains. "But they should still protect your eyes."

I bob my head up and down then steal a glance at the bleeding sky, testing the strength of the glasses. It's not too terrible. Tolerable, at least.

I look over at the car, now balanced upside down on the roof. The wheels are flattened, the rods on the rims are bent and snapped off, and the exterior is crunched into a ball. I doubt it's drivable, and I wonder how we're going to get to the station.

Blaise stands up and stares down at me with his hands on his hips. "I need to find something to put in your mouth."

"What?" I gasp. "W-why?"

"So you don't bite your tongue when I pop your shoulder back into place," he says quickly. "Sorry, I should've explained that first. You talk and interact so well. It's hard to remember you come from the channels."

I want to ask him where he comes from, but I'm not sure if I should. While he thinks I interact well, I find it complicated. How do I know what the right thing is to say? If I dared talk to a warden like I've been talking to Blaise, Ryder, and Reece, I'd be beaten. But they aren't wardens. At least, I'm pretty sure they aren't.

Blaise glances over at the demolished car. "I don't think there's anything in there we can use, but I'm going to check, anyway." He holds up a finger. "Just stay here, okay?"

I nod. "Where else would I go?"

A ghost of a smile starts to appear on his lips, but the look promptly fades. Then he spins on his heels and ducks back into the trunk.

My gaze wanders to the land. There's a path in the ground where the Tracker tore up the dirt, gaping holes surround the car, and dust still lingers in the air.

A sudden sadness hits me. I don't want to believe this is all there is out here. The guys spoke of a broken city. From what I remember, cities were overpopulated and full of towering steel and glass buildings. There has to be more ... somewhere.

Coddling my shoulder, I rotate on my side and look in the opposite direction. I can't see any sign of anything, including Reece or Ryder, and my worry grows. Could the Tracker have done something to them? I shake my head. No. I won't let those kinds of thoughts enter my mind. If I can hang on to hope for years while living under the

wardens' commands, I can remain hopeful out here.

I start to lie back down when I spot something glimmering amongst the desolateness and disturbingly red sky.

"Can you see it?" Blaise's footsteps crunch against the dirt as he walks up behind me.

I twist back around and shield my eyes with my hand. The sunlight shines against his back and casts a shadow across his face. In his hand, he's carrying an article of clothing, and slung around his shoulders is a sling lined with bullets.

"See that light?" I ask, and he nods. "Yeah, what is it?"

He kneels down beside me, sets the clothing down, and aims a finger at the sparkling in the distance. "That's the broken city."

"It looks so small. I thought cities were supposed to be big."

"It's small because we're so far away. When we get closer, it'll look a hell of a lot bigger. Too big in my opinion."

"You don't like the city? Why? Is it a bad place?"

His lips twitch. "You ask a lot of questions."

"Sorry," I say, feeling stupid.

"You don't need to be sorry. It's not a bad thing." He scratches his head. "It's just surprising."

"Because I'm a Nameless?" I ask, and he nods. "How many have you met? I mean,



how many Nameless have you saved? Is that what you do? Save them? Because I thought I heard Ryder say you were at the channels to save me."

Instead of answering, he studies me closely, sucking on the barbell in his lip.

"I'm sorry if I'm asking so many questions," I say softly. "I'm just so confused."

He releases the barbell from his teeth. "It's okay. There's just so much you don't know, and I'm not sure I'm the best person to explain everything."

"Why?"

"Because I don't sugarcoat shit. That's more Reece and Ryder's thing."

"Sugarcoat?"

"Soften the truth."

"Oh." My mind starts to spin again as I struggle to keep up with everything he's saying. My throat is on fire from all the talking, but now that I've started, I can't seem to stop. Questions press against my lips, begging to be asked. "What if I don't want the truth softened?"

He flexes his fingers at his side. "You just got out of the channels. I'm not sure if now's the best time to tell you just how fucked up our world is."

I force down the lump in my throat. "I might not understand this world, but I lived in the channels, so I know about the bad stuff. I can handle it."

"Yeah, but ..." He shakes his head. "I'll tell you what. Let me pop your shoulder into place, and then I'll explain the rules of surviving out here and in the city. It's probably

better if you know what to expect. That way, you can prepare yourself."

I tell myself he's right, but deep down, I'm afraid. What if I fought to live for all those years just so I could escape and struggle to survive? What if living in this world is just as horrifying as being trapped in the channels?

## Chapter Six

### The Rules of Survival

"The first rule of survival," Blaise says, picking up a piece of clothing beside him, "is to trust no one unless they've earned your trust. However, right now, I'm going to have to ask you to break that rule and trust me."

"You haven't earned my trust yet?" I question because it seems like saving me from the channels should mean I can trust him.

The corners of his lips curve to a slight smile. "No, I haven't even come close yet, but I'm going to try my damn hardest." He wrings the fabric. "I need to put this in your mouth. It's the only thing I could find besides the flashlight, and I think that might crack your teeth if you bite too hard."

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bsp; With how cautious he looks, I wonder if he somehow knows this isn't the first time someone has gagged me. The wardens had these awful muzzles made of thick leather straps and large metal buckles that they used when they caught me trying to talk to another prisoner. I would spend hours, if not days, gagged in my cell, unable to part my lips more than a half an inch.

"You won't tie my hands up, right?" My unsteady voice reveals my nerves.

"I swear to God I won't." A contemplative look crosses his face. Then he slips a hand inside his jacket and draws out a gun. "I'll even let you hold this while I do it. That way, if it turns out that I lied to you, you can shoot me."

He sets the gun in my hand, and I wrap my fingers around the handle, feeling the weight and familiarity. I don't know when, where, or why, but this isn't the first time I've held a gun.

He looks me straight in the eyes. "Are you ready for this?"

I run my index finger along the trigger of the gun. While I don't think he'll lie to me, I like that I have the option of protecting myself. "I think so."

He moves the cloth toward my lips. I bury my nerves and unhinge my jaw. When he stuffs the fabric inside my mouth, I pull a face.

"It tastes funny," I say, my voice muffled.

Again, he almost smiles, but never quite gets there. "It's one of Ryder's shirts."

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I think he's cracking a joke, and I try to smile, but the humor quickly dwindles when his fingers fold around my elbow. The pain in my shoulder amplifies, knocking the breath out of me. Suddenly, I understand why Blaise put the shirt in my mouth because my instinctual reaction is to clamp down my jaw.

"Ready?" he asks, placing his other hand on my shoulder.

I nod, though I don't think I am.

"One ..." he starts. "Two ..."

Without getting to three, he tugs on my arm while pushing down on my shoulder. I hear a pop, and then pain explodes through my arm, shooting all the way up to my brain. Bright spots splotch my vision, and my heart slams against my chest. I scream then bite down hard, nearly tearing through the shirt with my teeth. The gun slips from my fingers as Blaise lets go of my elbow and shoulder.

He cups my face between his hands. "Breathe, Allura, or you're going to pass out."

I inhale sharply through my nose, but the air catches in my throat, and I start to choke. In a panic, I bolt upright, pressing my hand to my chest.

Blaise quickly pulls the shirt out of my mouth, tosses it aside, and then pats my back. I hack until my lungs burn then settle back down on the ground.

"That hurt," I groan, holding my injured arm.

Blaise rises to his feet and scoops up the gun. "You did well, though."

I stare up at him skeptically. "I screamed like a baby."

"Well, at least you didn't shoot me."

"Yeah, I guess there's that."

We stare at each, so close to smiling, but neither making it there.

Blaise clears his throat, coughing into his hand. "I need to put a wrap on your shoulder." He puts the gun back in his holster then extends his hand to me. "Then we need to get moving. We've already been out in the open for way too long. If the Tracker comes back, we can't be out here like this."

I thread my fingers through his and allow him to pull me to my feet. "Blaise, why was the Tracker here? Did someone send it?"

He bends down to retrieve the shirt he used as a gag. "Either the wardens or the watchers."

"Because I escaped the channels?"

"That or it could be after Reece, Ryder, and me because we helped you escape." He unfolds the shirt. "We've helped a handful of Nameless escape before, but the missions usually run more smoothly." He tears a strip of the shirt off. "I should've known this mission was going to be a pain in the ass. It was really hard getting the wardens to take Ryder to your cell. They were hesitant, but I don't know why. Usually, they love showing off their prisoners. But they even dragged out the paperwork process." He lifts his gaze from the shirt, steps toward me, and reaches for my shoulder. "That's why it took us longer." He works quietly as he wraps the shirt

around my arm then ties two torn ends of fabric around my arm, creating a makeshift sling.

I keep my injured arm tucked against my side. "How did you know I was down there?"

"We didn't know you were down there. We just knew there were cells in that area and that one of them was occupied." He steps back from me and tugs on the sling, making sure it's secure. "We used electronic mapping to create an outline of the underground. It's a fucking slow process of walking around and scanning the ground until we find a section of channels. And we usually have to do it at night so we're not spotted. Then we use an image detector ..." He trails off when he catches sight of my wide eyes. "Sorry. That was probably information overload, huh?"

"A little bit," I admit. "But maybe you can teach me what all that stuff means so I won't have to feel so lost."

"It's kind of boring." He reaches for the makeshift sling again and tightens the knot. "But if you still want to learn when get back to Leviter Station, then I'll teach you."

I like the idea of being taught something, of learning and not having to rely on other people so much. I want to be like Blaise, Ryder, and Reece--able to help others. But I don't know if I could ever be brave enough to go down there and face the wardens like Ryder did.

"Blaise?" I ask then hesitate, unsure if he'll take what I ask the wrong way. What if he thinks I'm accusing him of being one of them and gets angry with me? But I have to know. "How did you guys get into the channels? I mean, the wardens knew you were there, and they thought they were selling me to Ryder, but only visitors are allowed to buy time with me, so ..." I leave the unasked question hanging in the air, too afraid to ask it aloud.

He cocks a brow. "You think we're visitors?"

I hesitate then shake my head. "No, not really."

Instead of getting angry like I expect, a hint of amusement dances in his eyes. I haven't seen amusement in forever. It's strange to witness.

"We tricked them," he says simply.

My brows pull together. "Tricked them how?"

He motions for me to follow him as he starts walking away from the car in the direction of the city. I struggle to keep up with his long strides, but I don't want to ask him to slow down, worried the Tracker will show up at any moment.

"That's what we do," he explains. "We're trained to blend in with the watchers, wardens, and visitors."

"But how do you blend in?" I push the sunglasses higher onto the bridge of my nose. "If you're human, the wardens would know."

But are Blaise, Ryder, and Reece even human? They seem human with their scars, rough hands, and compassionate eyes, but then there was the way Blaise kicked through the car and easily bent the metal.

"That's probably a question you should ask Reece. It's a bunch of scientific shit I don't even try to understand. But basically, Ryder gets a shot right before he goes into the channels, and I think the shot reconstructs his DNA so he can get through the scanners undetected." He runs his hand over his head. "As for the paperwork and forms and stuff, it's pretty easy to bug the systems and create fake papers if you know what you're doing. The camera systems are trickier because the wardens know when

those are out. It limits the amount of time we can be in the channels before they notice we're down there."

I start to limp as an ache builds in my thigh and calf muscles. "That's why you guys were in such a hurry to get out."

He gives me a sidelong glance. "Yeah, but we didn't move fast enough. That's why the wardens caught up with us at the scanner."

"That might have been my fault," I say, clumsily hopping over a pile of dirt. My muscles groan in protest, but I continue moving. I have no other choice. "Lex--the warden who was yelling at us--has an issue with me. And he was really angry when I didn't obey him."

He gapes at me. "He told you his name?"

"Yeah. He's the only one who ever did. I don't know why. One day, he just came into my cell and started talking to me and told me his name. He thou

ght I owed him because of it." I exhale audibly. "I'm sorry. I feel like this thing with the Tracker might be my fault. Lex threatened to track me down if I tried to escape. Maybe he sent the Tracker after me."

"Maybe, but I've never heard of a warden sending a Tracker after one escaped prisoner. They probably sent it after all of us because they're pissed off we stole something they thought was theirs." He looks ahead again, squinting against the sunlight. "It's not your fault, Allura. You're the victim in all of this, and you need to remember that."

The way he says it, with so much passion, makes me wonder if perhaps he was a victim once, too. But I don't dare ask.



His gaze unexpectedly drops to my legs. "Why are you limping?"

"It's nothing," I lie, not wanting to seem weak. I spent too much of my life feeling that way.

"It is something." His gaze bores into me. "Did you hurt your leg when the Tracker flipped the car?"

I shake my head, kneading my thigh muscles with my knuckles. "I'm just not used to walking so much. But I can handle it. It's probably good for me, anyway. I sat in that cell for so long I sometimes worried if I'd forget how to walk."

He briefly considers something, and then, without warning, he moves forward, hooks one arm around my back and one behind my knees, and scoops me up into his arms. My eyes snap wide from the abrupt movement, and I almost dive out of his hold. But he holds me tight, refusing to let me down, and the bullets in the sling dig into my ribs.

"I don't want you wearing yourself out," he says. "We still have a ways to go, and if the Tracker shows up, I need you to be able to run."

I stop struggling to get down, realizing he's right.

"So are you ready to hear my rules of survival?" he asks as he starts walking again.

I hook my arms around his neck, hanging on to him. "Are there a lot of them?"

"Only five. But if you ask Reece, he'll probably tell you at least twenty. He always goes overboard with everything."

"Is Reece your boss?"

"No, I don't work for anyone. Never will."

"Oh. It just kind of seemed like he was."

"Reece is just bossy, and if you ask him if he's in charge, he'll probably tell you yes, but it's not true."

"Then what are you guys? I mean, why do you do all of this?" I feel kind dumb for asking since I don't know anything about this station place or what Ryder, Reece, and Blaise do besides rescue Nameless. In the car, they kept mentioning a mission and reporting back to someone, so they have to have a boss, right? Even the wardens do.

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"We do it because we care. It's our choice to be out here. No one is making us." His fingers trail across my back, the movement so small I wonder if he realizes he's doing it.

The brush of his fingers makes my mind a whirlwind of confusion. I'm tense with fear, yet a small part of me welcomes the touching. I don't know which reaction is right, though. Shouldn't I hate being touched like I always have?

"How many of you do it?" I ask. "I mean, how many people are at this station place? Do they all do what you do?"

"We all have different jobs, but the main goal is to save whoever we can. And there's quite a few of us, but not nearly enough." He sighs when he notes my expression, probably because I look lost. "The first thing you need to know is that humans are at the bottom of the food chain, and watchers are at the top. Watchers need humans to survive, but humans are becoming few and far between, so wardens have upped hunting for strays."

I frown, not liking the sound of that. "Strays?"

"Humans wandering alone or in low numbers. They're easy targets and if they're captured, they become a Nameless and are either sent to be a personal prisoner to a watcher or sent down to the channels with the wardens to be sold to the visitors."

A sickening feeling forms in the pit of my stomach. "That's what happened to me?"

"I honestly don't know," he says. "You could've been born there if you were in an

experimental facility or in one of the breeding chambers."

"What are breeding chambers?"

"Since humans are becoming extinct, wardens have started forcing their prisoners to breed. They keep most of them in chambers in the channels, only the cells are hidden deeper in the ground than the feeding chambers."

I swallow down the vomit threatening to come up. "I don't remember any of that going on where I was."

"I'm not surprised." He breaks out into a jog then leaps over a hole.

The landing bounces me around in his arms, and I clutch onto him, interlocking my fingers behind his neck.

"You were the only prisoner down there," he continues. "There was one more there a few days before, but they must have died before we got a chance to save them."

I remember Blaise running back and checking another cell when they were saving me. Did I ever try to talk to the person in the cell? It's hard to know for sure when no one has names, and I never saw faces.

"Is it normal for the wardens to only have one prisoner?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Not in one section. Usually, they have at least twenty or so."

"Oh." Then why was I their only prisoner? "They're used to be more down there, I think. I mean, I heard a lot of crying sometimes, and I ..." I trail off as sadness, pain, and terror overpower me.

"It's okay. We don't have to talk about this right now. I get that it's hard. My whole point in bringing this up is so you'll understand how dangerous it is out here," he says, "which puts us at rule number two: never, ever go anywhere near a watcher unless you've followed the proper protocol. It's really important that you follow the rules. It can be the line between surviving and becoming a prisoner again."

"What's the protocol you have to follow if you get close to one?"

"You don't need to worry about that unless you're sent out on a mission, which you won't be."

"Why not?"

He glances at me curiously. "You want to?"

Do I? Do I want to risk getting captured again after being reminded of everything I went through?

"I want to help."

Puzzlement etches into his features. "Every nameless we've ever saved never leaves the station again. They're usually too scared to, and honestly, they don't have enough skills to survive outside."

"I get that, but ..." I let go of him and gesture at the land. "I'm kind of already out here, aren't I?"

His eyebrows furrow. "You're different from the others. And not just because you can communicate and understand."

"Is that bad?" I ask, returning my hand to the back of his neck.

He shakes his head, his gaze boring into me. Eventually, his staring becomes too much, and I have to look away and focus on the city just to get oxygen into my lungs. Is it normal for people to stare like this? For a stare to leave someone utterly breathless, and not necessarily in a bad way?

God, I'm so confused.

"What about the wardens and visitors?" I ask, sounding breathless. "How do they fit into all of this? Are they the same? I've never quite understood it, but I kind of figured they are since they look similar."

"They are and they aren't," he replies. "They have the same DNA and are pretty much the same species, which a lot of people refer to as The Grim. They all look the same, but watchers are stronger than wardens, and wardens are stronger than visitors, which is why the visitors have to pay for Nameless while watchers have their own."

"So watchers are like the bosses of the ..." I meet his gaze. "What exactly are the Grim? Monsters?"

"No one's really sure. Some say they're devils that fell from the sky. Others say they came from another planet. Some have this crazy theory that they were gods kicked out of heaven."

"But you don't know for sure?" I ask, unable to hide my disappointment. How can that be possible? That no one knows what they are?

He shakes his head. "Forsaken know more about The Grim than anyone because they've held on to the old ways of life the longest. But talking to them isn't an option."

"Why? Who are they?"

"They're humans, but their way of life is... I guess the best way to describe it is savage. If you so much as cross paths with them, you won't live long enough to get a chance to ask questions."

I shiver. "They sound awful."

"They are." He wavers. "But, at the same time, it's how they survive. While some humans can be trusted, some can't, so they decided to trust no one, which is why they live longer than strays or even people who seek refuge in the posts."

I hate the idea of coming across a Forsaken, but at the same time... "So, the only people that know what The Grim are, is the Forsaken? No one else does? Maybe you could capture one and ask them?"

He restrains a smile. "While that sounds like a good idea in theory, the Forsakens' knowledge of The Grim is based more on legends than actual facts. But I do know someone who can explain more about The Grim to you. You can talk to him when we get to Leviter Station and ask him all the questions you want."

I open my mouth to ask him why The Grim need the Nameless. Perhaps he knows what they did to me when they put their hands on my chest. Before I get a chance, though, he slows to a stop.

I glance around, wondering if he saw something. Maybe he spotted Ryder and Reece. But I don't see anything around other than the city, which is still quite a few miles away.

I look back at him. "Why'd we stop?"

"Because we're taking a little break from being out in the open and giving Ryder and Reece a chance to catch up if they're close." He lowers my feet to the ground, waiting

until I get my balance before letting me go. Then he squats down and brushes his hand across the dirt, revealing a rusted, metal handle.

"What is that?" I tug on the bottom of my shirt, stretching the fabric. "Another one of your compartments?"

"It's East City Post. It's not the same as the broken city, mainly because watchers, wardens, and visitors don't know the posts exist. Well, that and the fact that the city posts are ..." He points at the ground.

"They're underground?" Adrenaline whips through my body, and my knees nearly buckle.

"Allura, I'd never let anything happen to you." His voice is gentle, cautious. "You need to trust me, okay?"

I wring my hands in front of me. "But you told me not to trust you. It was one of the rules."

"I know, but I ..." He rubs his hand back and forth across the shaved side of his head. "God, you're too smart for your own good. I didn't really think that rule through very well."

"What if I just decide that you've earned my trust?" I step closer to him, hoping the gesture will symbolize tha

t I do. "You did save me. I think that kind of earns trust, right?"

"I guess so," he mutters, thrumming his fingers against his knee, his gaze bouncing back and forth between me and the handle. "We really do need to go down there until I can be one hundred percent sure the Tracker isn't coming back."



"Can't it find us down there?"

"No. All the walls down there are made of really thick steel, and they're enough that Trackers can't break through them, and their sensors can't see inside."

As far as I can tell, he's telling the truth. Although, I don't know enough about Trackers and their weaknesses to be entirely sure. And I'm confused about something.

I fold my arms around myself. "Blaise ... I know I said I trust you, and I do, but why is it suddenly okay to go to this East City Post place? In the car, I thought you said I couldn't go because you were worried someone would recognize I'm a Nameless."

"That was before the car got totaled. Drastic times call for drastic measures." He reaches for the door handle but then withdraws and glances up at me. "Before we go in, I need to tell you the last three rules." He rises to his feet, standing in front of me with a serious look on his face. "Rule number three: never let your guard down around anyone that you don't trust. If you let your guard down and show your weaknesses, some people might use them against you." He counts down on his fingers. "Rule number four: don't eat or drink anything that you haven't gotten for yourself. If someone hands you something, don't eat or drink it."

"That's a strange rule." Even in the cell, I had to eat and drink water the wardens gave me.

"Trust me, it's safer. I have a whole, long story about what could happen if you don't, but I don't have time to get into it right now. Later, though, I promise." He ticks down on the final finger. "Rule number five"--he wraps his fingers around my wrist--"never, ever show anyone this." His thumb grazes across the number branded on my skin, and I uncontrollably shiver. "That's your tell. If anyone sees it, they'll know you're a Nameless. And trust me; you don't want that happening."

"Why? Will they tell the wardens where I am?" The idea is horrifying. "Wouldn't that mean they'd get captured, too? And everyone else down there?"

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"Out here, you have more to worry about than just the wardens, Allura. You need to understand that some humans are equally as evil as them. To a lot of people, escaped Nameless are weak and vulnerable, which makes them easy targets."

It feels like he's tiptoeing around telling me everything, but I'm too overwhelmed to ask for more details, fearful if I hear any more, I'll be too afraid to go inside.

He lets go of my wrist. "Are you ready for this?"

I don't think I am, but I nod, anyway.

It's either go down there with humans, some who might be untrustworthy, or stay up here and wait for either the Tracker to come back or a warden to find me and drag me back down to the channels. The first choice seems easier to handle. I just hope I'm not making a huge mistake.

### Chapter Seven

#### The East City Post

After I tell Blaise I'm ready to go down there, he bends down and uses the handle as a knocker, tapping it once. Almost immediately, someone on the inside knocks back. Blaise raps the knocker against the door again, this time three times. The person inside mimics the knocks, but adds one more. Blaise does the same then sits back on his heels and waits.

I hear a series of locks being undone, and then the hinges whine as a door is lifted all

the way open, hitting the ground with a thud. Dust flies everywhere, and I start to hack, fanning my hand in front of my face.

When the air clears, a guy with sandy brown hair and freckly skin pops his head out of the hole. His gaze flicks from me to Blaise, and a smile spans across his face.

"Well, well, well, look what the trouble dragged in. I thought I heard a storm blowing through. Should've known it was you."

"Tracker actually," Blaise says. "Blew through here about half an hour ago and tore up a couple of miles of line. Smashed the shit out of my car."

The guy's brows shoot up in surprise. "Really? What was it trackin'?"

Blaise shrugs. "Who knows? It took off west."

"There have been a lot of Trackers around here lately." The guy rests his arms on the dirt. "It's making everyone nervous."

Blaise rubs his hand across his scruffy jawline. "I wonder why. Usually, they stay farther away because of the fault line nearby."

"Zaire's looking into why," the guy says, sneaking a glance at me. "You can ask him about it if you want."

"I might track him down while we're here," Blaise says. "I have to ask him something, anyway."

"Check the bar. He's usually there." The guy glances in my direction again before looking back at Blaise. "So, who's the girl?"

Blaise blinks at me, almost like he forgot I was there. "Oh"--he motions at the guy-- "Allura, this is Maxx." He points at me. "Maxx, meet Allura. She works at Leviter Station. Today was her first mission." He stands up and pats my good shoulder. "She got broken in pretty well. Even got her very first battle scar."

It's shocking how breezily he lies, and it makes me question whether he's lied to me about anything.

Maxx's attention travels to my exposed legs. "She looks pretty banged up."

I squirm from his attention but battle the impulse to hide behind Blaise.

"I know." Blaise gently squeezes my shoulder, giving me the smallest amount of comfort. "I was hoping she could clean up and get a change of clothes while we're here."

"Of course. That's what we're here for, right?" Maxx smiles at me, but unlike Ryder's smile, his makes an icky feeling twist inside my gut.

Grinning, Maxx climbs back down in the hole and waves for us to follow him. I chew on my bottom lip, nervously glancing up at Blaise. He motions for me to go while trying to offer me an encouraging smile. But I still feel unsettled as I step forward.

I don't get very far before Blaise snags my elbow and draws me to him. His lips brush my ear as he whispers, "Maxx is one of those people you have to be careful around."

My nervousness doubles as I nod, and then he lets me go.

I inch forward and peer inside the dark hole. Not too far down is a ladder leading to God knows where. Summoning a deep breath, I plant my butt on the ground and dip my legs into the hole. My feet touch the first bar of the ladder, and I lower myself in

and start to climb down. The process of climbing feels so foreign that I have to move slowly at first. Eventually, I get the hang of it, though, and quicken the pace.

The ladder leads to a room not much bigger than my cell. The confined space makes my lungs long for fresh air, but what really puts me on edge is Maxx, who is leaning against a steel wall with a lazy grin on his face.

"You look worn out," he says. "I have a bed you can rest on if you want to."

I step off the ladder and shrug, unsure what else to say.

"Don't you know how to talk?" he asks with a smirk.

"Y-yes." I cringe at the stammer.

He cocks a brow. "You seem too nervous to be from the station."

I discreetly tug the sleeve of the jacket lower on my wrist, making sure my number is covered. "Well, I am." Thank God my voice comes out even.

"Leave her alone, Maxx. She's had a rough day." Blaise's clipped tone drifts from above us. He appears on the ladder and jumps down beside me, skipping the last few bars. "She doesn't need to be drilled with questions."

"I just asked her a couple," Maxx grumbles. "You don't need to bite my head off."

Blaise dusts his hands off with his eyes trained on Maxx. He doesn't say anything, just stares, but his authoritative look is enough to make Maxx turn away from us.

He approaches a door on the farthest back wall and knocks five times. "Open up."

"Prepare yourself," Blaise whispers in my ear as the wall rolls open. "It's about to get really noisy."

Right as he says it, chatter floats through the open wall. I lean toward Blaise, peer inside, and my lips part in shock.

On the other side is a ma

ssive room with a low, steel ceiling and shiny, steel floors. Wooden tables and chairs fill the front area where people are laughing, chatting, drinking, and eating. Along the back wall are several metal doors. Lanterns are hooked on the steel walls and ceiling to provide adequate lighting, and I wonder if I'll have to keep my sunglasses on down here.

Without saying anything to us, Maxx hurries inside and disappears into the crowd.

"How come most of them seem so ..." I struggle for the right word. "Happy?" I turn to Blaise and find him watching me. I instantly feel self-conscious for reasons that are unknown to me.

"It's the place." He tears his gaze off me. "The people who built the posts built them strong enough to endure pretty much anything the watchers can throw at us."

"But how did they build them without the watchers knowing?"

"They built them before the watchers existed."

"Why?"

He scratches at his brow. "From what I understand, the world was a dangerous place even before the watchers showed up."

I sift through what vague memories I have. "From what I remember, it didn't seem so bad. Well, that is, if I'm actually remembering something or just making it up. We haven't decided that yet, huh?"

"No, but we'll get to the bottom of it. We have a doctor at the station. She can run some tests and stuff." He steps toward the room, but I remain frozen where I am, replaying his words.

Tests? They want to run tests on me?

When Blaise realizes I'm not following him, he stops and looks at me. "I promise you'll be safe in here. Just stay by my side, okay? We can even get you some food and water and a shower."

"What's a shower?"

"It's like a bath; only, water comes out of--never mind. It'll be easier if I just show you." He moves forward again then heaves a heavy sigh when I remain where I am. "I know it seems like a lot, but like I said, just stick by me and you'll be fine."

"It's not that." I fiddle with the zipper of the jacket. "You said ... You said they were going to run tests on me when we get to the station. I don't ... it's just ..." I shut my eyes and listen to my heart thudding. "Visitors used to do that to me. So did the wardens. I don't think I can handle getting poked and prodded by anyone else."



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"These tests won't hurt you." Blaise takes a deep breath. "But, if you really don't want to get them done, then you don't have to."

Swallowing hard, I nod and open my eyes. "I don't think I want to. Not right now, anyway."

He nods understandingly. "With us, you always have a choice. No one will ever force you to do anything." He extends his hand toward me and laces his fingers through mine. "Ready for this?"

"I ... I think so."

He gives my hand a squeeze then carefully pulls off my sunglasses. "How hard is it to see without these?"

I rub my eyes and blink. "It's okay. It stings a little, but it's nowhere near as bad as outside."

"You think you'll be okay? Because it's better if you don't wear them down here. It might draw some attention."

"I can do it."

His lips lift into a ghost of a smile. "Good."

He tucks the sunglasses into the pocket of his hoodie then enters the room, pulling me along with him. The chatter hits my eardrums like a dull scratching of nails against

metal. I want to cover my ears, but I worry that will draw attention to me.

Blaise skims the crowd then steers us right, pushing his way toward a timber counter lining the wall. I curl my shoulders inward as elbows and arms prod me in the side. Even slouched over, I suddenly become aware of how tall I am. I'm not nearly as tall as Blaise, but I am taller than at least half the people in this room.

How did I go so long without realizing I'm tall? What else am I going to discover about myself? Will I finally see what I look like? The idea is exciting yet worries me at the same time, because what if I don't like what I see?

By the time we reach the counter, I'm a nervous mess and worried everyone can tell.

"You're doing fine," Blaise says under his breath.

I clutch his hand as he rests an elbow on top of the counter. When a couple of men walk by, eyeballing me, I inch forward and press myself against Blaise. Calmness settles over me, like how Ryder made me feel safe in the channels, and I step even closer.

Blaise's body goes rigid, and his breath catches in his throat. He doesn't move, thankfully, and I let the comfort sink in, breathing into the back of his jacket. The fabric smells like dirt mixed with something else ... something warm and soothing, yet I can't place the scent.

"Hey, Zaire," Blaise greets an older man with a long, grey beard standing on the other side of the counter. "How's it going?"

Zaire glances up from pouring amber liquid into a cup, and a smile lights up his face. "Well, holy shit! Look who it is. Good God, the last time I saw you, you went running out into a dirt storm like a crazy-ass motherfucker." He sets down the pitcher

and pats Blaise's shoulder. "I've gotta be honest. I didn't think I'd see you after the last time you left. I thought the damn dirt storm would rip ya to shreds."

"The storm wasn't that bad," Blaise says with a simple shrug. "Reece and Ryder were fine, too. It's not that big of a deal. We needed to get back to the station and couldn't wait any longer for the stupid storm to blow over, so we went."

"Yeah, well, I think you're all crazy. Always trying to save the world. What you don't get, is not everyone in the world wants to be saved." He gives Blaise's shoulder a friendly shake, and then his gaze lands on me. "And who's this lovely, little thing?"

I resist the urge to duck behind Blaise. While I don't know Zaire, I'm not getting a troubling vibe from him like I did with Maxx.

Blaise lifts his arm over my head and lowers his hand to the base of my back. "This is Allura." He steers me to his side. "She's new to the station. Today was her first mission."

He takes in the dirt on my skin and clothes and the sling on my arm. "She looks pretty beaten up."

"We ran into a Tracker." Blaise's fingers lightly graze my back. "She did well, though. Most people panic and try to run. She stayed by me and was pretty calm."

I was? I sure didn't feel calm.

"Damn good thing she did." Zaire collects a glass off a shelf behind him. "You know, I've been doing a little research on Trackers." He looks at me. "They're horrible creatures, as I'm sure ya know, and nearly indestructible. The only thing that scares them is an electromagnetic pulse, and that's only a temporary solution. They always return until they eliminate their target."

I nod, like I already know all of this. On the inside, though, my pulse is erratic. Blaise said the Tracker would probably return, but he never mentioned it'd keep searching until the target was eliminated.

"Maxx mentioned there'd been a lot around lately and that you'd been looking into why." Blaise sinks onto a stool in front of the counter then pulls out another for me.

I cautiously sit down, unable to recollect the last time I sat on a stool. Never maybe?

"I have. And I have a couple of theories," Zaire says. "One being that I think the Watchers are looking for something and using the Trackers to try to track it down."

"Like what?" Blaise asks. "Humans? Nameless? Why up the Trackers just for that?"

"I don't think it's a who but a what," Zaire says. "My best guess is an alternate food source, but I'm still looking into the exacts."

"You'll have to let me know what you find out." Blaise rests his arms on the countertop. "If the watchers are shifting habits and looking for another food source, we need to find out. That's always been one of our biggest problems. We're always one step behind everything they do."

"I'll let you know when I find out more. I agree with you, though. We definitely need to stay ahead of them for once." Zaire places glasses in front of Blaise and me then collects a mug from the counter. "Now who wants a drink?"

Blaise hastily places his hand over the top of the glass. "Actually, do you have any bottles of water back there?"

Zaire sets down the mug, grunting in frustration. "Damn you, boy. How many times do we gotta go through this before you realize not everyone is Lucille?"

"I know that," Blaise says, keeping his hand over the glass. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to let my guard down like that ever again. I learned my lesson."

"So, you think I'd drug ya and drag you off to my room, huh?" Zaire asks, seeming amused. "Don't take this the wrong way, but ya ain't my type."

"That's not what I'm saying." Blaise scoffs. "I just don't feel comfortable taking a drink that could have anything in it."

Zaire chuckles, his eyes crinkling around the corners. "So, you can run into a dirt storm, but you can't drink water from a mug. Man, you really let Lucille fuck with your head."

"Who's Lucille?" I find myself asking.

When both their gazes slide to me, I worry maybe I've asked something wrong.

Zaire casts a haughty grin at Blaise before looking back at me. "He hasn't told you the story?"

I shake my head, my curiosity piquing.

Blaise's head bobbles back as he groans. "I haven't told her yet, and I'd rather not."

Zaire rests back against the wall behind him, crossing his arms. "You dating her?"

"What? No." Blaise looks horrified by the idea.

I admit, his rejection stings, even though I have no desire to date anyone. But am I that revolting?

I glance down at the dirt, scars, and wounds covering my body and try to picture a face that matches. I cringe at the mental image, realizing I could very well be hideous. Then again, after everything, does it really matter? At least I'm alive.

"Jesus, boy, ya don't need to sound so upset about it." Zaire flicks a pressing glance in my direction, but Blaise seems perplexed. Zaire shakes his head, straightens his stance, and bends down in front of a red and white cooler behind the counter. "You have the worst people skills."

Confusion gradually vanishes from Blaise's expression. "Fuck, I didn't mean it like that." He yanks his fingers through his hair, tugging at the roots. "I just ..." He turns to me, his knee bumping into mine. "Allura, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"You didn't," I lie. "I didn't even think about it really."

"Still, I'm really sorry. It's just that ...

" He sucks his lip piercing into his mouth, seeming annoyed with himself.

Zaire plops two bottles of water down in front of us. "The best way to say you're sorry is to humiliate yourself, by telling her what happened with Lucille."

If looks could kill, Zaire would be dead where he stands. Clearly, Blaise doesn't want me to know about whatever happened with Lucille, and I want to respect his privacy. It's such a valuable thing.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." I cup my hand around the dewy bottle to open the lid but realize I can't without using both hands.

Blaise sighs, pries the bottle from my hand, and unscrews the cap. "It's fine. It's just a stupid story." He returns the bottle to me and lets me chug down a few gulps before

continuing. "Lucille's just someone who hangs out here a lot."

"She's actually right over there." Zaire points to someone behind us, his eyes glimmering mischievously.

I'm not sure why he seems so entertained by making Blaise uncomfortable. Is it normal to act this way? I feel like such a weirdo that I have absolutely no clue what's funny and what's not.

Still, I tilt my head to discreetly peer over my shoulder. A few people are in the general vicinity of where Zaire is pointing, but I'm almost sure Lucille is the woman glaring in our direction. She looks about Blaise's age, maybe a year or two older, with flowing, black hair; pretty facial features; and intense eyes. She's wearing shorts that cover up less of her legs than my shirt does, and a fitted tank top that forms to her curvy body. I suddenly become extremely aware of how frail and bony my own body is.

I turn back around, draping an arm across my stomach. "She's very pretty."

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"Pretty, but a little ..."--Zaire rotates his finger around the side of his temple and goes cross-eyed--"if you get what I mean."

The urge to laugh tickles at the back of my throat, and I manage to give him a tiny smile.

"Well, would ya look at that?" Zaire beams at me. "She has one of the loveliest smiles I've ever seen."

I run my finger across my lips, trying to feel what it looks like. I glance at Blaise, wondering what he thinks about all of this, only to find him smiling at me, as well.

"Let's make her smile some more." Zaire's grin broadens, and he slaps his hand against the counter. "Finish the story, Blaise."

Blaise's jaw clenches as he scowls at Zaire. "You're not going to let this drop, are you?"

"Nope." Zaire continues to grin. "I love watchin' ya squirm. It's probably one of my favorite things."

Blaise huffs an aggravated breath then twists toward me. "To make a very painful story short, one time while I was down here, Lucille spiked my drink with oblitus, and I lost my mind for a while."

"Did all sorts of crazy shit," Zaire adds amusedly. "Danced on the tables, stripped his clothes off, and then, at the end, he declared his undying love for Lucille."



"You're in love with her?" I ask. If he is, then why did he seem so repulsed by her earlier?

Blaise snorts a sharp laugh. "Fuck no. It was the oblitus talking. It makes you feel all these crazy, completely false emotions toward the person who gave you the drug. And it takes away all of your freewill."

"Oh." I frown. "That's not very nice that she gave it to you, then."

"No, it's not," Blaise agrees, unscrewing the cap off his bottle of water. "But Lucille's an evil--"

Slender fingers wrap around Blaise's shoulder. "An evil, what?" Lucille appears behind us, her voice as cold as steel. "Come on, Blaise; I dare you to finish that sentence."

Blaise visibly cringes. "Lucille, how lovely to see you again." His glacial tone doesn't match his words.

Her lips curl into a venomous smile, like a snake about to strike her prey. "Come to finish what we started?"

Blaise grips the bottle of water, crunching the plastic. "I wouldn't know since I can't remember what happened."

Her fingers trail across Blaise's back as she leans in and puts her lips to his ear. "You keep saying that, but I know it's not true. I know you remember just a little bit, and admit it, you like what you tasted."

"I didn't taste much, thank God," Blaise mutters, wiggling his shoulder to shake off her hand.

"Only because your stupid friends stopped us," Lucille purrs. "And, if I remember correctly, you were pretty upset about it. I've never seen a grown man have such a fit."

"That was the drug talking." Blaise moves away from her and spins around on the stool, folding his arms over his chest. "What do you want? Or did you just come over here to remind me what a bitch you are?"

Her eyes narrow to slits. "You better watch how you talk to me. I'll forgive you once, but it won't happen again."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Blaise brings the bottle of water to his mouth and takes a swig.

"How dare you talk to me like that!" Her face turns red as she rips the bottle from his hand. Drops of water sprinkle all over Blaise's face and the countertop. "You better watch it. This time, you don't have your stupid, little friends to watch your back."

Blaise calmly wipes water off his cheeks with his hand. "Is that all you wanted to say?"

Her fingers curl inward as she strangles the bottle. For a second, I think she's going to throw it at him. But as quickly as she became angry, she squares her shoulders and lifts her chin, composing herself.

"I just wanted to say hi to your new, little friend you brought with you." Her gaze cuts to me.

"Leave her alone," Blaise warns, shifting toward me to block me from Lucille's view, but I can still see her face from over his shoulder.

Her smile goes from venomous to ecstatic. "Why? Who is she? She looks ... I don't know, scared, lost, confused, stupid, like a Nameless or a Forsaken."

Horror lashes through me. Can she tell, or is she just saying that to make Blaise angry? It's hard to tell, but if she can see what I am, then can everyone else?

Blaise glares at her while placing a hand on my knee. "Shut the fuck up before I decide to make you."

When Lucille notices Blaise's hand on my leg, daggers practically launch from her eyes. "Like you'd ever hit a girl. I know you wouldn't. It's not in you, no matter how bad you try to make yourself seem."

"You know what, I wouldn't," Blaise replies calmly. "But I do know some people down here who would."

"You know, everyone around here thinks you're in the right and I'm in the wrong for what I did with the oblitus, but you led me on, Blaise." She jabs a finger against his chest. "You talked to me and helped me out with that thing with my father, and then you blew me off. You can't just be nice to people like that then take it all away."

"I didn't take it away." Blaise shoves her hand away. "I was nice to you as a friend, but you couldn't accept that, and what you did with the oblitus was wrong."

A series of emotions flash across her expression, but she promptly collects herself, smoothing her hands over her hair. "Whatever. One day, it'll come back and bite you in the ass. No one hurts me and gets away with it." She spins on her heels, whipping her hair around in Blaise's face as she stalks away.

Blaise rubs the heel of his hand against his eye. "God, I don't think she's ever going to let this go."

"Probably not," Zaire says, picking up a dishrag from off the counter. "I feel bad for bringing it up now."

Blaise raises his head and glowers at Zaire. "You should feel bad. I don't give a shit if she goes after me, but now Allura's been brought into the drama."

"I have?" I squeak.

Blaise offers me an apologetic look. "I'm sorry for Lucille and the way she acted ... that stuff she said. You know none of it's true, right?"

"Of course she knows it's not true." Zaire winks at me. "She looks like a tough, smart girl, someone who's been through a lot. Listening to Lucille bitch should be a piece a cake."

Even though what he said isn't entirely accurate, his confidence in me makes a smile rise to my lips again.

"Look at that. Another smile." He grins then holds up a finger. "You know what? I think ya deserve something

special." He bends over, disappearing behind the counter. "Something that'll sweeten you up and wash away the bitter taste Lucille always leaves behind." When he stands up, he drops something on the counter in front of me.

I stare at the dark brown object wrapped in clear plastic. "What is it?"

Zaire's eyes practically sparkle. "That, my dear, is a cupcake."

I dig deep into my mind and make the connection. Cupcakes are sweet desserts, I think.

"I don't think I've ever had one." As soon as I say it, I wonder if I shouldn't have. Blaise wanted me to blend in. Is it normal to never have eaten a cupcake before?

"Most people haven't," Zaire says, alleviating my concern. "They're pretty rare these days."

I eagerly tear open the plastic. Zaire and Blaise both watch me as I pick up the cupcake and bring it to my face. It smells amazing, like sugar, chocolate, and cream. I breathe it in, savoring the scent.

Zaire drapes the dishrag over his shoulder. "You better eat it quickly before someone tries to steal it."

He's probably right. I steal one more sniff before I take a bite. The sugary sweet taste bursts against my taste buds as the chocolate and cream fill my mouth.

"Oh, my God, it's so good," I moan. How can something taste this good?

Zaire chuckles then wanders off to help a guy who approaches the counter, asking for a drink.

I look at Blaise with my fingers pressed to my lips. He's studying me with his head titled to the side, a somewhat perplexed, somewhat amused look in his eyes.

"Want a bite?" I offer. While I'm starving, the cupcake seems too good not to share.

"No, thanks. You need to eat it more than I do." He pushes back from the counter and rises to his feet. "Let's go get you set up in one of the bathrooms. Then I'll make you something a little bit better than a cupcake."

I swallow down the bite. "I don't think anything can be better than a cupcake."

He rolls his tongue inside his mouth, as if trying not to laugh. "I meant something healthier." His lips sink into a frown. "They didn't feed you very well down there."

I take another bite. "When they got mad at me, which was kind of a lot, they'd punish me by not feeding me."

"That's what I thought." His shoulders heave as he sighs. "That's going to change. You'll always have something to eat now. I promise."

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I smile then bite into the cupcake again. The tension in his expression eases, and he reaches toward my mouth. I stiffen as he drags his thumb across my bottom lip then pulls his hand back.

"You had frosting on your lip," he explains, putting his thumb to his lips. I watch in fascination as he licks the glob of frosting off and closes his eyes. "God, I forgot how good that is."

I hold the cupcake out. "Are you sure you don't want more?"

Shaking his head, he opens his eyes. "Nope. That's all yours." He moves past me, snagging my elbow and towing me along with him.

I finish the cupcake while he makes a quick stop to tell Zaire he'll be back in a few minutes to discuss what he found out in his Tracker research. Then we shove our way through the crowd and to the back wall with all the doors. He knocks on the door farthest to the right, and within seconds, an older, frail-looking woman with chin-length grey hair answers.

She smiles when she sees Blaise and steps forward to give him a hug.

"Hey, Mable," Blaise says, stiffly patting her back.

I realize something then. It's not just me Blaise seems nervous about touching. It's almost everyone. I wonder why that is.

"Hey, yourself." She moves back but keeps her hand on his arm. "Where have you

been? The last time you left, there was a storm. I think a lot of people thought you were dead."

"Not dead, just busy," he says, shrugging. "The station has been slamming us with missions left and right. No one's had a break in months."

"Well, you need to make sure you rest." She leans against the doorjamb with her arms folded. "I know you boys think saving the world is important, but you also need to take care of yourself."

"We do," he assures her. "We just work hard."

"You work too hard," she scolds him. "You need to take a break sometimes and have some fun."

Blaise shakes his head. "Fun doesn't exist anymore, Mable. You know that."

"Yes, it does, honey. You just don't understand that part of life yet. You will, though, in time." She smiles at him before her attention drifts to me. "And who's this lovely, young lady?"

"Oh, this Allura. She works at Leviter Station, too." He nods his head at her. "Allura, this is Mable, Zaire's wife."

I try to smile and appear calm, but her scrutiny puts me on edge.

She skims me over from head to toe, a frown forming on her lips. "You've been overworking her, Blaise. She's all skin and bones."

I open my mouth to tell her that it's not his fault, but Blaise talks over me.



"I know. We had a rough mission, though," he says breezily. "A Tracker attacked us and threw the car at least a couple of miles. We were in the trunk, and her arm got jacked up. I was hoping you could help her get cleaned up, get her some clothes and a proper sling, while I go make her something to eat."

She arches her brows. "You better make her a feast. I'm serious, Blaise. This girl needs more than just some biscuits and gravy."

Blaise bobs his head up and down. "Yes, ma'am."

I don't know why, but I find it almost amusing that someone as tough as Blaise is letting this tiny, older woman lecture him. It clicks then, what amusement is, as if my brain has pieced together something I forgot about long ago.

"Good. Now go get busy." She snaps her fingers and points at the counter. "And make my husband help you. He needs something else to do other than sit around and serve drinks to people who've had too many already."

Blaise nods then turns to me, seeming hesitant. "You'll be okay?"

"Of course she'll be okay." Mable snags ahold of my hand and hauls me toward her while shooing Blaise away. "Now go make her dinner. The girl looks like she'll barely last a couple more hours without any food."

Blaise still appears reluctant to leave, so I offer him a smile, trying to reassure him I'll be fine. At least, I hope I will.

"I'll be right over there if you need anything," he tells me, hitching his thumb over his shoulder.

I nod, and he backs away. I haven't left his side in hours, and watching him leave

restores the anxiety I felt when Ryder and him showed up at my cell.

"Come on, honey." Mable gently pulls on my arm. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Tearing my gaze off Blaise, I follow her through the doorway.

She closes the door behind us, sealing out the noise and the chatter. "Do you know your size?" she asks me then waves herself off. "Never mind. You're probably a small, if that." She crosses the small room, stops in front of a series of handmade shelves, and begins sifting through stacks of clothes, boots, bags, and boxes.

I turn in a circle, taking in the room: some mattresses; a couple of wooden crates with boxes of ammo on them; blankets and pillows; and a clear, rectangular shaped box in the corner, large enough for a person to stand in. It kind of reminds me of the scanner at the channels, but without the lights.

"I know it's smaller than the showers at the station," Mable says, coming up beside me with a pile of clothes in her hands. "But it gets the job done."

I take the clothes from her then warily eyeball the shower. Blaise said a shower was like a bath but different, yet he never explained the difference.

"Um ..." I cross my fingers I'm not asking a bizarre question. "How do I use it?"

"Here. I'll show you."

She gives me a brief rundown of how to make the water turn off and on by tipping the head and pulling the plastic handle. "It'll be a little cold, but it's better than nothing," she says, more right than she knows. "There's a towel in the stack of clothes and soap, shampoo, and a razor in the shower if you need it. I'll step out for a while then come back and check on you in a bit. You'll want to lock the door when I leave. And I'll

knock three times when I come back so you'll know it's me."

"Okay," I say, noting she seems reluctant to leave me alone, too. Blaise warned me to be careful down here, that not everyone is trustworthy. I wonder just how dangerous this place is.

She finally offers me a kind smile then walks out of the room, I hurry over and flip the latch, locking the door. Then I set down the clothes, untie the sling, and toss it aside. Getting Blaise's jacket off is a bit more complicated, and by the time I get my injured arm out of the sleeve, tears sting my eyes. Next comes the ratty T-shirt. I decide to tear that off my body since the fabric is pretty flimsy.

After I've peeled the clothing from my body, I step inside the shower and pull the handle like Mable showed me. Lukewarm water spurts out of the nozzle and streams across my body. I shut my eyes and tip my head back, allowing the water to river over my hair and face. My skin feels so refreshed I don't ever want to get out, but Mable warned me the water would run out within minutes, so I quickly try to scrub off as much grime as I can.

As I'm trying to figure out how to work the razor without cutting my skin, I hear a loud boom, and the walls begin to shake. I nearly stop breathing. Tracker? Has it found us already?

I glance at the steel walls. I'm safe here, I try to tell myself. Then I hear the faint, haunting whisper I've heard before.

"Allura," it hisses. "Allura, I'm coming for you."

My skin crawls as the hissing turns to a voice, a voice that sounds an awful lot like Lex.

## Chapter Eight

### The Danger that Lurks Everywhere

"Who said that?" I stumble back, covering myself with my arms.

No. There's no way Lex could be here. Or could he? Maybe wardens can get down here. But I don't see anything other than an empty room.

The voice and hissing stop, the only noise coming from the showerhead. I try to convince myself I imagined it, that the fear of being in this room alone is getting to me. I should just focus on enjoying the shower. But as much as I love getting clean, I'm too nervous to be alone and want to go back to Blaise where I feel safe.

I quickly finish shaving, cutting myself at least a dozen times, but the pain is minimal to what I'm used to. Then I shut off the water and step out. I dig through the clothes until I find what I think is the towel and dry myself off. Th

e clothes Mable left me are a long-sleeved black shirt, a pair of cargo pants, socks, and clunky boots, along with a sling. I don't remember the last time I wore so many clothes. Add that to the fact that I can barely move my arm, and it takes me forever to get dressed. I leave Blaise's jacket off, mostly because I'm warm, and I can't tie the laces of the boots, so I leave them undone.

By the time I'm slipping the sling onto my shoulder, someone is knocking on the door. I wait for the second and third knock, but they never come. I tiptoe over to the door and listen. Hushed whispers flow through the other side, male and female, I think.

"Are you sure she went in there?" a guy says.

"Yes, I'm sure," a girl snaps. "I'm never wrong."

"You're wrong a lot," the guy replies. "And if she's in there, why isn't she answering?"

"Probably because she's scared shitless." The girl laughs. "Did you see how terrified she looked? Seriously. No one looks that terrified."

"Unless she's one of them."

"My thoughts exactly."

Another knock and then the doorknob jiggles.

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*Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 3:30 am*

"Hey, we know you're in there," the guy calls out. "We just want to talk to you." The door shakes. "Don't be scared. We're not going to hurt you."

I back away from the door until the backs of my legs bump into a crate. A lantern topples over and crashes to the floor. I hold my breath, hugging my arms around myself.

"Oh, come on," the guy whines. "Don't make this harder than it needs to be."

Someone bangs on the door so hard the lock starts to slip loose. I rush forward and press myself against the door, tightening the lock.

"Allura ..." the voice returns, swarming around me.

My skin vibrates as my heart pounds.

"Allura, where are you?"

"Open the fucking door," the guy growls, banging on it.

I slide to the floor, cover my ears with my hands, and rock back and forth. I can't take this: voices, threats, danger lurking everywhere. I've only been out of the channels for a day, and so much has already happened.

Will I ever feel safe?

Chapter Nine

## The Mirror

The guy and girl knock a few more times before abandoning their plan of getting in. After they leave, the voices hush too. I don't get up, though, until I hear three distinct knocks on the door.

"Allura, it's me," Mable says from the other side. "Open up."

I stumble to my feet and dig deep to find the courage to unlatch the lock.

The door flies open, and Mable hurries inside. "Hey, honey." She shuts the door, and her eyes sweep me over. "The clothes are a little big, but I don't have a smaller size."

"They're fine." I tug the sleeve lower on my arm, making sure the number is concealed properly. "I appreciate you giving them to me."

"That's what the post is for, sweetie. We're here to help anyone who needs it." She pats an upside down crate. "Now, come sit down so I can brush your hair."

At first, I don't move. While I don't want to be rude, I'm eager to find Blaise and tell him about the voices and the guy and the girl. But when Mable snaps her finger and points at the crate with a stern look on her face, I plant my butt down.

"So you guys help people?" I ask, placing my hands in my lap.

"We do ... or we used to." She picks up a brush and begins brushing my hair. "It breaks my heart to say this, but some people have forgotten our purpose for creating the posts. I blame the broken city for a lot of that. People wander out there, searching for something better, and never find it. They forget how much control the watchers have over the city, how broken the laws are. Almost everyone who leaves the posts comes back, but they're changed." She sighs heavy heartedly as she works on getting

a tangle out of my hair. "That's what the broken city does. The corruptness sucks the goodness out of a person and leaves their soul dry. They forget how to be a good person, that stealing and hurting people is wrong. It's not fight or die down here at the post like it is out in the city, but a lot of people think that way, and it taints the place. We become more and more like the Forsaken every day, hurting our own kind over practically nothing. I've talked to Zaire about trying to get some laws in order, but so far, the Committee won't approve the changes."

"Committee?"

"When the posts were built, everyone decided we needed someone in charge, so one family member was elected from each family who helped build the post. The East City Post Committee consists of fifteen people, and they're the people who get the final say on any changes made in our society. Although, they don't do much in the line of change. Most of them just look the other way.

"Every time a member passes away, one of their sons or daughters takes the position. I think that's part of the problem. We need some new blood in the committee, people who are more accepting of change. This place needs to be cleaned up, and we need to weed out the people who bring the violence from up there"--she points the brush at the ceiling--"to down here." She lowers her hand. "I hate to say this, but I think we should stop letting everyone in who bangs on that door."

I think about how Maxx just let Blaise and me inside. If they changed the rules, would we be allowed to come back if we needed to? What would have happened to us today if we hadn't been able to come down here?

"I'm not talking about you or Blaise or Ryder or any of you out at Leviter Station. Honestly, I wish more of you would come here and fewer strays would." She walks around in front of me, angles her head to the side, and puts a finger to her pursed lips. "Interesting."



I self-consciously run my fingers through my hair. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She tosses the brush onto a stack of blankets. "It's just that you remind me of someone ... What did you say your last name is?"

I have no idea how to reply. Thankfully, someone raps on the door and puts an end to the conversation.

I straighten, tensing. What if it's the girl and guy again?

"I'm guessing that's your guys," Mable says, heading for the door. "You should've heard them out there. Is Allura okay? Did she get her sling off okay? Should I go check on her? If I didn't know any better, I'd think they never left you alone before."

I hope it's just Blaise instead of the guy and girl ...

Wait a second? She said guys. I jump to my feet but brace my hand on the crate as blood rushes from my head.

"Wait? You said guys?"

"Ryder and Reece showed up just a little bit ago." She unlocks the latch and opens the door.

Ryder pushes his way into the room and slams the door. He has a fresh cut on his cheek, his jacket is torn on the side, and his cargo pants are covered in dirt, but other than that, he looks unharmed. A heavy weight falls off my shoulders.

"All right, it's been long ..." He blinks when he spots me. "Well, holy shit. Look at you."

Mable lightly smacks him upside the back of the head. "Watch your language, young man. You know my rules. No cursing in front of me."

Ryder winces, rubbing his head. "Sorry. It's just been a while since I've seen Allura cleaned up. She looks"--he struggles for the right words--"good."

I do? I glance down at the clothes I'm wearing, wondering how different I look now that I'm not wearing that gross T-shirt.

"She does look good, but she also looks like a girl who needs to eat." She pulls the door back open and gently shoves Ryder toward the doorway. "Go take her to the tables and make sure she eats until her belly's full."

"On it." Ryder extends his hand to me. "Come on, Allura, before she starts trying to convince me to let her cut my hair."

"You should let me cut your hair," she scolds as I rush forward and take Ryder's hand. "Allura agrees with me, right?"

"No way. She likes my hair, right, Allura?" Ryder juts out his bottom lip. "Tell her you like it."

"Um ..." I eye Ryder's blond hair that almost reaches his shoulders. I'm not sure how to answer her question, whether I should lie or not. I don't want to make anyone mad. "I do kind of like it," I decide to answer truthfully.

r /> Ryder smirks at Mable. "See? She likes it."

Mable softly smacks him upside the head again. "She's just being nice. If she saw it when it was short, she wouldn't say that. You looked much better with shorter hair."

Ryder makes a face, and Mable retaliates by raising her hand. Ryder laughs and skitters out of the way, hauling me with him.

"You better watch that one," Mable calls out. "Make sure he keeps his hands to himself."

Ryder shakes his head. "Don't listen to her, Allura. She just likes to embarrass me."

"She seems nice." I stare down at our interlocked fingers as he steers us toward the tables. "She kind of acts like a ... mother?"

He glances at me, questions flooding his eyes. "You remember what a mother is like?"

"I think so ... someone who gave birth to you and cares for you, right?" I ask, and he nods. "I don't remember mine, though." The realization creates an aching sensation in my chest.

"I don't, either." Ryder stops in front of a vacant table. "Neither does Reece or Blaise. We don't know who our dads are, either. It's something we have in common and was kind of the reason why we became friends." He pulls out a seat for me then plops down in the chair beside mine. "Reece, Blaise, and I were orphans when we were brought to Leviter Station. We were too young to remember what happened to our parents, and we bonded over that during our classes."

I scoot the chair forward, the legs grinding against the steel floor, and cringe when a few people sitting at the nearby tables glance in my direction. "Classes? Like school classes?"

"School?"

"Yeah, where kids go to learn."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about ... I've never heard of a school before."

"Oh." Then why can I picture a brick building filled with rooms where teachers teach and kids sit at desks and learn? I sat in a desk once, I think. "What kind of classes were you talking about, then?"

"Ones given at the station. It's how we were trained for the missions we go on." He twiddles a knob on the lantern in the center of the table. "When we get to the station, I'll show you around and explain what's what."

I nod, imagining what Leviter Station will look like--a towering building with windows and steel trim that shines in the sunlight. Who knows if I'm right, though? I've been wrong about everything else so far. For all I know, the place could look as dangerous and unfamiliar as everything else has so far.

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*Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 3:30 am*

"Ryder, I think I need to tell you something." I keep my voice low. "About what I heard in the shower."

Ryder pulls his hand back from the lantern, looking at me apprehensively. "What happened? Did someone try to hurt you?"

I swiftly shake my head. "It's not like that ... I mean, a guy and a girl were knocking on the door, and trying to convince me to let them in. But when I wouldn't, they left."

Relief washes over his face. "Good. I'm glad you didn't open the door. You can't trust people down here."

"That's what Blaise said."

He peers around the busy room then leans closer to me. "Do you know why they were trying to get in?"

"No, but it kind of sounded like they knew"--I wiggle my wrist--"about this. They said maybe I was one of them."

He dazes off, sketching his fingers along the cut on his cheek. "We need to make sure you're around Blaise, Reece, or me the entire time we're here. Reece was probably right when he said it wasn't a good idea to bring you here. The posts used to be safe, but too many strays started wandering in, and they don't always like following the rules. Some of them are as bad as the wardens."

"How long do you think we'll stay down here?"

"I'm not sure. There was a dirt storm blowing in when Reece and I got here. It's not safe being outside during one. The wind gets so powerful it can literally blow people away. And the air's so thick with dirt it's impossible to breathe. The last thing we should be doing is putting you out in that shit." He traces his finger down the brim of my nose, smiling. "Besides, you look so pretty all cleaned up. I think we should let you stay like this for as long as possible."

I pick at a crack in the table, trying to distract myself from my fluttering heart. "Ryder ... What do I look like?"

"You don't know?" he questions before realization dawns. "The wardens never let you look in a mirror, did they?"

I lift my gaze to him. "No. But I know what one is. I'm not sure why. It's just another thing that I know that I probably shouldn't, right?"

"I'm not sure." He assesses me with his brows knit. "You're full of all sorts of mystery, aren't you?"

"I guess so..." Is that a bad thing?

He tugs a strand of my hair then pushes away from the table. "Come. Let's go find a mirror."

I follow his lead and get to my feet. Intertwining our fingers, he steers me across the room, squeezing past people and heading for the doors. But at the last second he veers right and ventures toward a hallway. As we pass by Mable's door, I'm reminded of the voice I heard.

"Ryder, there's something else I need to tell you." I clasp his hand as we pass by a woman and a man, laughing and playfully shoving each other.

When they walk by us, they give Ryder a nod, which he returns, but they eye me curiously. I glance over my shoulder, expecting someone else to be there, because why would they look at me like that? No one's there, though.

I wait until they're out of earshot before I continue telling Ryder what happened. "There was this voice ... this hissing. I heard it when I was in the shower and then when I got out." When he casts a puzzled glance over his shoulder, I quickly tell him about what happened when Blaise and I were in the trunk.

"Blaise mentioned the Tracker knew your name," Ryder says when I'm finished. "You didn't see the red eyes when you heard the voice in the shower, did you?"

I shake my head. "Do you know what those are?"

"No. And neither does Reece." He stops in front of a pair of thick double doors and faces me. "Which is saying a lot, because Reece knows almost everything."

"Should I be worried?" I ask. "That it knew my name."

"No." He places a hand on each side of my neck and lowers his head so we're eye level. "We promised we wouldn't let anything happen to you, and we won't. Blaise, Reece, and I take our promises very seriously." He winks at me as his thumb skims down the side of my throat. "Especially when it comes to pretty girls."

A strange, confusing, bitter emotion stirs inside me. How many pretty girls have they helped? Am I one of many? Why do I care? It seems so silly.

"I didn't mean it like that. We don't go around rescuing girls all the time and promising them shit." He seems flustered. "Allura, stop looking at me like that. There hasn't been a lot of girls."

"Sorry," I say. "I don't know how I look, though."

"Your nose is all scrunched up." He softly brushes his finger across my nose. "And while it's cute, it's making me feel like I did something bad."

"Oh." I wiggle my nose, trying to erase the look.

He chuckles. "You're going to be a handful. I can tell."

"That doesn't sound like a good thing to be."

His lips quirk as he tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. "Don't worry. I'm just teasing you."

Teasing? Is that why he's smiling at me like that, all cheery and playful, like he's happy to be with me? I shake my head. It doesn't really matter right now. We've gotten off topic, and I need to tell him about the voice I heard.

"Ryder, about the hissing ... It kind of sounded like ... like Lex ... that warden who talked to me in the cell and told me his name."

His smile falters. "That's odd. I've never heard of one mimicking a specific voice. And I don't know how you could've heard the voice that clearly from down here--the walls are too thick. Are you sure it sounded like Lex? Maybe it just sounded similar."

"Yeah, maybe." I still feel unsettled, though. "It did sound a lot like him. And Lex threatened to find me when we were escaping the channels. Maybe he's been tracking me the whole time and knows I'm here. Can wardens do that?"

"They can, but we weren't followed from the channels. We were careful about that. And the last place the Tracker tracked us was miles from here. Besides, a warden



can't get down here without everyone knowing about it. There's only one way into East City Post, and it's through the door we came in. And it doesn't open from the outside. The only way someone gets in is if they're let in."

"But maybe someone did let him in. Everyone keeps saying how there's a lot of bad people down here. What if a bad person let in a warden and didn't tell anyone?"

Ryder drags his thumb across his lip, mulling something over. "Shit. You could be right." Before I can panic, he adds, "I don't want you to worry about this. I'll have Blaise and Reece look around and make sure the location's safe."

I fidget with the hem of my sleeve, feeling restless. "And what do I do while they look around?"

"You stay with me the entire time. Never leave my side, no matter what." He drapes an arm around me and pulls me to his side. "From now on, you and I are attached at the hip."

I nod, more than willing to stay beside him at all times. The last thing I want is to be alone again.

"Now, time to unveil your prettiness." He's all smiles as he opens the double doors.

Instead of walking into the room, he moves back and gestures for me to go in first. I timidly step over the threshold and enter a room smaller than my old cell.

Like the other rooms at East City Post, the metal walls and limited lighting make the atmosphere dull, but not nearly as bad as in the channels.

I take another step and another, inching my way into the room. Then my breath hitches in my throat.

At least a dozen mirrors form a half-circle around the room. Some of the surfaces are cracked or chipped, but my reflection bounces back at me from each one. Big, brown eyes; pale, freckly, scarred skin; mounds of long, wavy brown hair; all of my features carry familiarity. I've seen my reflection before, but a long time ago, when I was much younger. I run my hands over my waist and hips. I didn't have so many curves before, although curves might be a stretch. My body looks nowhere near like Lucille's. Frail, thin, gangly are the first words that pop into my mind as I stare at my slender neck, protruding collarbone, and long limbs.

"You need more meat on your bones, but that's only because you haven't been fed properly." Ryder steps up behind me and captures my gaze in the mirror. "Do you want to know what my favorite part is?"

"

I nod. He has a favorite part?

He inches closer until his chest touches my back. Then he slips a hand around to the front of me and sweeps his knuckles along my cheeks and nose. "Your freckles."

"Really?" I lean forward to examine the tiny dots splattering my cheekbones and nose. I poke my cheeks, my nose, and the dark circles under my eyes. "I think the freckles make me look like I have dirt on my face."

"No way. They're cute. Trust me. And your eyes are big and beautiful, and your nose is adorable." His smile is so genuine I want to believe him. He dips his face toward the top of my head and inhales, smelling my hair. "You smell good, too. Like rain."

I like the idea that I smell like rain and that my freckles, eyes, and nose are cute, but I just can't see all of this myself. I study my reflection harder, trying to see what he does, but I stare for so long my eyes begin to water and my face becomes a hazy

splotch. It's like I'm reliving the forgotten memories again, seeing everything through a blindfold. Then, for a flash of an instant, I swear my eyes glow red.

I jerk back, dabbing the water from my eyes until my vision comes back into focus. I look back at the mirror again and breathe in relief when my eyes look brown again.

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*Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 3:30 am*

"Everything okay?" Ryder asks from behind me.

I unsteadily nod, turning around. I miscalculate the distance between us and nearly bump my head against his nose. I hurriedly step back.

"I think so. It's just a little strange. I know who I am, yet it feels like I don't. That probably sounds strange, doesn't it?"

He shakes his head, strands of his blond hair falling into his eyes. "Not at all. There's been times when I've gone months without looking at myself, and it's always weird to look in a mirror again. I can't even imagine how strange this is for you."

Strange, indeed, especially when my eyes turned red. Maybe I just imagined that, though. Perhaps being out of the channels is simply messing with my head. Then why does everything I'm seeing, feeling, and hearing seem realer than anything ever has in my entire life?

### Chapter Ten

#### Life and Death

I decide not to tell Ryder about how I thought my eyes glowed red. While I think I can trust him, a voice inside my mind begs me to keep quiet. I worry the guys might think I'm crazy. Or worse, what if something is wrong with me and they decide to leave me? I don't want to be left behind.

By the time Ryder and I get back to the table, Blaise and Reece are there, hunched

over in what appears to be an intense conversation. Blaise has a serious, determined look on his face as he tells Reece something. Reece seems calmer, simply listening and nodding occasionally. I start to strain my ears to listen, but then I note the four plates on the table and the most delicious-looking food I've ever seen, and all thoughts leave my mind.

But before I can sit down and dive in, Ryder announces, "We should go find a room to bunk up in and then eat."

Blaise and Reece glance up. The three of them exchange a mysterious look. Then Blaise and Reece rise to their feet before they collect the plates of food and silently make their way across the room.

Reece nods for me to follow them and walks behind me so the four of us are filed in a line. We turn down another long, narrow hallway lined with so many doors I lose count.

"You sure no one's staying in this one?" Ryder asks Blaise as we finally stop in front of a door. "I don't want to fall asleep and then be woken up ten minutes later by some drunken asshole who thinks this is their room."

"I already talked to Mable. She said we were good to stay here for tonight." Blaise unlocks the door then walks inside the room. He sets down the plate he's carrying on a crate then unfolds a blanket and spreads it out on the floor. "Mable did say that she thinks Allura should sleep in another room."

"Hell no. I'm not leaving her anywhere alone." Ryder shucks off his hoodie then removes the sling of bullets strapped across his chest. "Not after some jackass tried to get into the room when she was showering."

Blaise's jaw drops as his gaze darts to me. "What?"

I inch toward Ryder. While I'm not afraid of Blaise, something about his intensity makes me feel like I'm about to dive off a cliff ... willingly.

"It was after I got out of the shower," I say. "A guy and a girl were on the other side of the door, and they kept trying to get in."

When he continues to gape at me, I hurry and tell him what happened, making sure to mention the voice I heard.

"I bet it was Maxx and Lucille," Blaise says, lowering himself onto the blanket.

Reece takes a seat beside him and picks at a roll he collects from a plate. "Why would you think that? There's a ton of people down here, Blaise." He pops a piece of a roll into his mouth. "You can't go around, making accusations without any proof. Remember what happened last time?"

"What happened last time?" I kneel down on the blanket and eye the food, my mouth salivating.

"Blaise nearly got himself executed." Ryder sits beside me and crisscrosses his legs.

"What?" I stare at Blaise in disbelief.

Blaise picks up a fork and takes a bite of potatoes. "It's really not that uncommon, Allura. Out here ... Well, there aren't many laws, but the few that are enforced have pretty severe punishments."

"This place scares me," I admit. "But it's not as bad as the channels."

Ryder scoots a plate in front of me. "Eat up."

I smile gratefully, peel a chunk of the roll off, and stuff it into my mouth. The bread tastes amazingly mouthwatering good.

The three of them trade another look as I shove my mouth full. Then Reece locks his eyes on me, rubbing at a large welt below his eye.

"Allura, we need to talk to you about Lex," Reece says. "I need you to try to remember as many details about him as you can: how he talked, what he looked like, any strange details about him. While I doubt he's down here, we need to be safe. Safe and cautious are always better."

"He had dark hair and pale skin, but most wardens look like that." I swallow down a mouthful of food. "His nose was kind of crooked."

"That's good." Reece nods his head encouragingly. "Anything else? Maybe he smelled different?"

"I never noticed a smell." I press my hand to my chest, remembering the last time Lex was in my room, how he placed his palm over my heart, and the excruciating pain that came afterward. "He touched me here the last time I saw him," I say quietly. "Visitors did that to me all the time, but Lex was the first warden who ever did it."

Reece licks a glob of melted butter off the side of his hand. "It's not completely unheard of for a warden to feed on the prisoners in the channels, but they usually stick to their own, personal prisoners."

Feed? I gasp in shock then start to choke on a mouthful of potatoes.

Ryder pats my back as I cough, food spewing out of my nose and mouth.

Blaise leaps to his feet, digs a bottle of water out of the pocket of his jacket, and

returns to my side. He untwists the cap and hands the bottle to me. "Take a drink."

I grab the bottle and down a few large gulps, gasping for air.

"Good?" Ryder asks when I stop hacking.

I nod, setting the bottle down by my plate. "Sorry, you just startled me when you said wardens feed on their prisoners."

Reece glances at Blaise, his brow arching. "I thought you already told her."

Blaise shakes his head, sits down, and stuffs a bite of potatoes into his mouth. "I was waiting for the right time."

"There's never a right time for these things," Reece says, picking at a roll.

"Yeah, but ..." Blaise fiddles with a stud in his brow. "Normally, we don't have to explain how fucked up a Nameless situation was. They usually can't understand enough."

"Would you stop talking around her?" Ryder warns. "She can hear everything you're saying."

"I know that." Blaise glares at Ryder, but when he looks at me, the harshness in his eyes dissipates. His lips part, but no words come out. He shakes his head and stares at his food, picking through the vegetables.

&n

bsp; Reece sighs, shoving to his feet. He winds around the blanket and drops down beside me, close enough our shoulders touch. Like with Ryder and Blaise, his



presence makes me feel safe, not afraid, so I don't lean away.

"There's some stuff you should know about what the wardens did to you," he starts. "Blaise explained how humans are at the bottom of the food chain, right?" he asks, and I nod. "The thing is ... The reason they're at the bottom of the food chain is because watchers are stronger, and to get more strength and longevity, they steal it from humans."

I force down the mouthful of food. "So, when they put their hands on my chest, they stole strength from me?"

He nods, his eyes never wavering from me. "And not just strength, but"--his gaze flicks from Blaise to Ryder before landing on me again--"they stole some of your life."

"Visitors stole some of my life every time they put their hands on my chest ... and Lex, too?" I trace the square patterns of the quilt below me as I try to process what they're saying. "What did it do to me, exactly?"

Reece's Adams apple bobs as he swallows hard. "Every time a visitor puts their hands on your chest, they're stretching out the span of their life and reducing yours. Depending on how many times they did it to you, they might have reduced your lifespan by years, maybe even a few decades."

I release a shaky breath as the air gets knocked out of me. "S-so, I could die soon?"

"Not necessarily," Ryder says, quickly scooting in front of me. "The wardens were pretty particular about who got to feed on you. That might've limited how many times you were fed on."

"Allura, do you have any idea how many visitors bought your time?" Reece asks with

a cautious edge to his tone.

I shiver, suddenly feeling cold. "I don't know. Maybe a few thousand, if not more. It's hard to remember, because my memories are sometimes hazy. But sometimes, I'd try to keep track just so ..." I shrug. "I don't know."

The color drains from Ryder's face. "A few thousand?"

"Is that bad?" I ask, feeling queasy.

The three of them stare at me like I'm a foreign creature that shouldn't exist.

"The highest number I've heard of is five hundred," Reece says. "And he--"

"That's enough!" Blaise snaps, chucking his fork onto the plate. "She doesn't need to know everything right away. She can have some time to enjoy her freedom."

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"She deserves to know," Reece snaps. "Keeping her in the dark isn't going to make it any easier."

Blaise jumps to his feet and paces the length of the room. "How would you know? You've never been in this kind of situation." He kicks a bucket across the room. "You don't know anything--how hard it is to be told a bunch of shit that could change your life and not necessarily for the better."

"We've all been through stuff." Reece jumps to his feet and blocks Blaise's path. "And you know it's better to hear bad news sooner rather later. If anything, it'll give her some time to prepare."

"For my death." I don't know why I say it. The words just slip out.

They look at me with pity.

"We don't know that for sure," Ryder stresses, carrying my gaze. "You could be different. The wardens, they said you were better than quercu. That has to mean something."

I stare down at the plate. "I don't know what that is."

"It's an herb or a drug, depending on how you want to look at it," Reece explains. "It's really rare, mainly because wardens overused it and it's basically extinct now."

"They destroyed it like they destroy everything else," Blaise grumbles, kicking a crate in frustration.

Reece sighs, shaking his head. "But anyway, any of The Grim prefer to feed off quercu because it's more powerful than feeding off humans. But they don't get to do it often because it's so rare. The fact that they said you were a lot like quercu means you might be stronger than a typical Nameless."

"But why?" I set the fork down and drape an arm across my stomach. "What's different about me?"

"I have no idea." Reece sinks down onto a crate and runs his fingers through his hair. "I've never heard of anything like this before."

"Rae might know something," Ryder says. "She can do a physical on Allura when we get there. Maybe she'll find something different."

"I don't think Allura should have to get a physical done unless she wants to." Like a magnet, Blaise snares my gaze.

I take a shaky breath and tear my attention from him, turning to Reece. "Who's Rae?"

"The doctor at the station." Reece gives my knee a gentle pat. "Don't worry. She's nice. And if anyone can help us, she can."

I cross my arms, curling into myself. I'm afraid of what the doctor will discover about me: that I'm different, that I'm dying. What if my end is right around the corner, and I get there before I ever have a chance to really live?

## Chapter Eleven

### The Docks

After the conversation about my possibly limited lifespan, Reece decides to shift

topics and focus on finding out if Lex is down here. Even though Blaise said no one has a boss, when Reece gives instructions, they all obey. The final plan--Reece and Blaise will go search East City Post and see what they can find out while Ryder stays in the room with me.

"Make sure she gets some rest," Reece warns, putting a gun into his holster.

Reece salutes him, grinning. "Yes, boss."

Reece looks unconvinced. "Just make sure she doesn't leave the room. No going out on little adventures. Now's not the time to flirt."

Ryder rolls his eyes, resting back on his hands. "You're such a buzz kill."

Reece shoots him a stern look as he slips a grey hoodie on, covering up the holster. "I mean it, Ryder. No messing around. This is important, especially if Maxx and Lucille know she's a Nameless."

The mischievous glimmer in Ryder's eyes fades. "All right, I'll behave." He lowers his voice, muttering, "No trust at all."

"Because everything's always a joke to you," Blaise says, lingering by the door.

"Not the important stuff." Ryder stretches out his legs. "Look, I get how important this is, so just get going. If Lex is down here, you need to get him detained ASAP."

Blaise mutters something under his breath then jerks the door open and storms out.

"Be good," Reece warns Ryder before rushing after Blaise, shutting the door behind him.

Ryder immediately springs to his feet and locks up. Then he twists around and leans against the door with a guarded look on his face. "So, now what do we do?"

I shrug through a yawn. "I don't know."

"Aw, sweetheart, you're tired. You should've said something." He crosses the room to the shelves, digs around until he finds a thick blanket and pillow, and then comes up beside me. "Scooch over."

I do what he says and move out of the way. He picks up the empty plates and discards them on the crate before spreading the blanket he collected over the one already on the floor. Then he pulls back the top blanket, lies down on his side, and pats the spot in front of him.

"Come lay down by me."

I warily eye the spot. He wants me to lie down by him? I can't remember a time when I slept in a room with someone else, let alone lay by someone on a blanket.

"You know what, maybe I should lie down somewhere else," he says, pushing up on his elbow.

"No, you're fine." I close the space between us and lower myself down to the floor on my good side. "It's just been ... well, forever since I've lain on a blanket."

"What did you sleep on?" he asks, tucking a pillow under me.

I bask in the feeling of the softness under my head. "The floor mostly. Sometimes, visitors would use me for experiments, and they'd bring in these padded bed things that had wheels. The surface was cold, but it was more comfortable than the floor."

"What kind of experiments did they do?" he asks. He must catch a glimpse of the horror on my face because he promptly adds, "You know what? You don't need to answer me. You've been through enough for one day."

"No, it's okay ... Mostly, they just stuck needles in me and took my blood. Sometimes, they'd monitor my heart. That was never too bad. I mean, the needles hurt, but I got used to it ..." I trail off as a lump wedges in my throat. "There were a couple of times, though, that they ... that they tried to hurt me ... really badly ... and did ..." I inhale sharply through my nose, fighting back the tears.

He props himself up on his elbow and cups my cheek. "It's okay. We don't need to talk about this. I never should've brought it up." When I continue to struggle not to cry, he pulls me against his chest. "Allura, please calm down. I hate seeing you cry."

I grip fistfuls of his shirt, battling back the tears, but a few manage to escape. "I-I'm sorry. I don't know why I can't stop."

"Shhhh ..." He smooths his hand over the back of my head. "There's nothing wrong with crying. It just breaks my heart thinking about what you went through."

I press my cheek to his chest as tears stream down my face and soak his shirt. I want to stop crying, but now that I've started, I can't seem to stop. All the fear, desperation, and hopelessness I bottled up comes pouring out of me in violent, shoulder-heaving waves.

I don't know how long I sob into Ryder's shirt before my eyes finally start to dry. Minutes? Hours? However long, Ryder holds me in his arms the entire time.

"Better?" he asks when I move back.

I sniffle. "A little bit." I dry my cheeks with my hand. "I'm sorry I did that." Now that

I stopped crying, I feel embarrassed for doing it. "I should be stronger."

"Hey," he angles his head down as he tilts my chin up, and our gazes collide. "Crying doesn't make you weak. In fact, it makes you strong. Some people refuse to deal with how they're feeling, and when you bottle shit up like that, it can wear on a person."

I nod like I understand, but the reality is that I don't understand a lot of stuff.

"I just wish I didn't feel so ... overwhelmed."

"It'll get easier. I promise." He grazes his knuckles across my cheek as he deliberates something. "When I first was brought to the station, I felt the same way. I was seven years old, and I spent most of my life living at the docks. Being on land like that, it took a lot of getting used to."

"What are the docks?"

"They're these wooden platforms built on mostly lakes, although I've heard rumors that there's some hidden out on the ocean. They're small and crammed with a lot of people. It's supposed

to be a safe place--watchers don't patrol on water too frequently."

"It seems like there's a lot of different places out here, with a lot of different people. Like strays, and now the docks... Blaise told me about the Forsaken."



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"There is," he nods, agreeing. "And while I'm not exactly sure why, most of the legends say it happened when The Grim showed up. Everyone just sort of scattered and took refuge anywhere they could. Each group and place took on a different way of life to try to survive. Some were more successful than others. From what I heard, burials were the best, most peaceful, and well hidden places, but they don't exist anymore. At least, that's what people say."

"What about the docks?" I ask. "What was it like there?"

"Not great." He sighs with a miserable expression on his face. "The only way off the docks is by boat, and hardly anyone is allowed to leave unless they're older and volunteer to go and collect food. It felt more like a prison than anything."

"Then how'd you get off?"

"One day, I decided I was tired of being trapped, so I jumped into the water and swam until I reached the shore. It took forever, and I almost drowned a couple of times."

"That's really brave," I tell him. "I don't think I could've done it."

"I think you could've," he disagrees. "I saw your eyes the second you decided to let me take those cuffs off you."

"Saw what?"

"Courage. You'd be surprised how many people give up, just bow down and don't try

to fight back. You were ready to fight the second I took those cuffs off you. You knew how much danger you were going to be in, yet you faced it head on. And then the thing with the Tracker." He grins proudly. "You didn't even scream. Most people nearly shit their pants the first time they see a Tracker."

"I wanted to scream," I admit. "I was really scared."

"Being scared isn't bad. It's how you face the fear."

"How did you face the fear when you jumped into the water?"

"It was hard." He rests a hand on my hip. "When I was in the water and the waves were coming in, I thought about giving up. I didn't have a family, so it would've been pretty easy."

"But you didn't."

"No, I didn't. I fought my way to shore and lived there for about three months, surviving on fish and water until a group from the station stumbled across me. To this day, I can't stand the sight of fish."

"I've never eaten fish before." I wiggle around, trying to get comfortable as exhaustion creeps up on me. "Is it gross?"

"After eating it for three months straight, it is." He draws soft, soothing circles on my hip with his fingertip. "But you know what? I think you should try it. You should be able to eat and drink and do whatever you want."

Because I'm dying? I don't say it aloud, because I don't want to dampen his mood. Instead, I ask, "What's Leviter Station look like?"

"I can't wait to show it to you. It's so amazing, Allura." Excitement buzzes off him. "The technology is fucking amazing, and the building has a digital screen around to make it always look vacant. If you go up to the roof, you get a clear view of the night sky. And the people there are nice."

I tuck my hand under my cheek as my eyelids grow heavy. "Nicer than Mable and Zaire?"

He cocks a brow. "You met Zaire?"

I nod, yawning. "He gave me a cupcake. It was really good." I yawn again, my eyelids closing. "Ryder, why do you think ...?" I lose my train of thought as sleepiness overcomes me. I fight the urge to go to sleep, scared that I'll doze off and never wake up.

"Shhh ..." Ryder whispers. "Go to sleep. I won't let anything happen to you."

I swear I feel his lips brush my cheek before I surrender to exhaustion.

## Chapter Twelve

### Dreaming

Luminous silver and purple stars cut the midnight sky like shattered glass. The moon gleams vibrantly in the center, begging to be seen. A lazy breeze nips at my cheeks and sends goose bumps sprouting across my skin. I shiver, but I don't look away from the sky, transfixed by the beauty.

"It's been so long," I whisper with my chin angled up. "I forgot how pretty you looked."

"Talking to the sky again, Allura?"

I startle, whirling around and nearly toppling off the deck. Standing behind me is a guy wearing a dark suit jacket over a vest and tie along with a wool hat. He looks around my age, tall, with an air of confidence about him. He's smiling, but something seems off about him ... or familiar.

He rocks back on his heels, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his trousers. "My ma sent me down here to get you. It's getting late, and it's time for supper."

"Um ..." I start to back away from him.

He rolls his eyes and snags ahold of my hand. "Come on. She'll be upset if we don't make it home soon." He tows me along with him, trotting down the stairs and hurrying down a vacant dirt road lined with gas lamps and two-story, brick buildings.

I try to keep up with him, but I keep tripping over the bottom of the ridiculously long and puffy, grey and black polka dot dress I'm wearing. The high collar makes my neck itchy, and the cinched waist is so tight I can scarcely breathe.

"Where are we going?" I ask, out of breath.

"I already told you," he says from over his shoulder.

"To your house?" I ask, and he nods.

I gather the dress in my free hand and glance around the abandoned street. While this place doesn't resemble the world with the bleeding red sky, the peaceful tranquility carries familiarity.

"Where are we exactly?" And who are you? I want to tack on, but I don't.

He slows down and strolls to the side of me with a spring in his walk. "You're a strange girl, Allura. Sometimes, I don't understand your humor." He smiles warmly at me. "I like you, though."

"I ..." I have no idea how to respond.

How does he know me, yet I can't place him? The answer is on the tip of my tongue, like a nearly forgotten memory just out of grasp.

His brows furrow. "Are you feeling all right tonight? You seem ... a little distant."

I press my hand to my forehead. "I'm fine. I just have a headache."

He lets go of my hand with concern in his eyes. "Can you walk?"

I nod. "I'm fine. I promise." But I'm not fine. I have no idea where I am or who this guy is.

He seems torn as he starts down the road again, gently pulling me along with him. We walk down the street silently, holding hands. He keeps giving me sideways glances and smiles, like the sight of me makes him happy. I want to be happy, too, and enjoy this time-warped place, but I'm too terrified I'll never figure out where I am.

"What time is it?" There isn't a single car or person in sight. Is it that late?

The guy doesn't answer, his hand falling from mine. A disconcerting chill creeps up my spine, and I tear my attention off the buildings then instantly slam to a stop.

He's gone, vanished into thin air.

"Hello," I call out as I turn in a circle.

He has to be close by. Maybe he stepped into one of the stores, although none of them look open. Dammit! I don't even know his name, but he knew mine. It feels like I might know his, though, if I dig deeper into my mind--

A crash comes from behind me, and I nearly trip over my dress as I spin around. In the middle of the street not too far away from me, I can make out the outline of what looks like a person lying in the street. They aren't moving or making any noise. Worried it might be the guy, I rush forward to help him.

"Are you okay?" I ask as I reach him. "I didn't know where ..." I gasp, slapping my hand over my mouth.

His eyes are open, his limbs slack, and blood drips out of an open wound on his throat.

"No. No. No. No." I back away, tears stinging my eyes.

"Such a sad, pathetic race the humans are. How easily they break." A broad figure emerges from an alleyway nestled between two buildings. "I've been looking all over for you." His deep voice slides over me like thick oil.

Every bone in my body begs me to run, so I take off, running down the street.

r /> "You're only making this worse!" the stranger yells. "Just come back and surrender, and this will all be over!"

Sweat beads my skin as I sprint past the buildings and stores, unsure where to go. Every place looks closed and locked up.

"Help!" I shout as I run.

Laughter hits my back. "Allura." His voice sounds alarmingly close. "You can't keep outrunning me."

Footsteps hammer against the dirt as the stranger closes in on me. Between the uncomfortable shoes and the too long dress, gaining speed is impossible.

In a desperate decision, I make a sharp left and sprint up the front stairs of a building. The doorknob easily twists, and I rush inside, slamming the door behind me. I search for a hiding place as I trip farther into the store.

There's a door at the back and a counter along the far left wall that looks like the one Zaire was behind. But I don't think this place is like the post. The building is dated and quiet, like the rest of the world isn't so scary.

But it is! Even here, I'm being chased and hunted.

I stumble around tables and chairs and dash behind the counter. A low shelf runs along the floor, leaving just enough space for a person to slip underneath. I lie flat on my back and scoot underneath the shelf, tucking in as much of my dress as I can.

"I know you came in here," he says as the door creaks opens. "You're only making this hard on yourself."

I smash my lips together and hold perfectly still.

"Allura," he singsongs. "When are you going to give up? You've been running forever. Aren't you tired?"

I don't know what he's talking about, why he thinks I've been running from him for

forever. I don't even know who he is.

"I know you think this is unfair, but you should consider it an honor." His boots appear right in front of my face.

Terror slashes through me as I inch farther under the shelf and cover my mouth with my hand. Somehow, I know, if he finds me, he'll hurt me. Oh, God, please don't let him see me.

"What you are ... Most would kill for the power you have." He walks back and forth in front of the shelf, as if taunting me. "You know I'm going to find you. I've done it before." He stops in front of me again.

I don't move, don't breathe.

"Allura, Allura, the girl who's cursed," he sings. "Just surrender to what you are, and all your pain will go away."



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He turns in a circle before his boots disappear. Moments later, I hear the click of a door shutting softly. Still, I stay underneath the shelf, knowing he wouldn't just leave. He's either waiting on the other side of the counter or just outside.

Soundless minutes tick by while I remain perfectly still. If I can just wait until daybreak, maybe someone will come in here and--

Silver eyes appear in front of me. "Lookie, lookie what I found."

I gasp, scrambling back. He's one of The Grim!

He grabs a fistful of my hair and drags me out from under the shelf. An ear-splitting scream escapes my lips as I swing my arm. My knuckles collide with his face, my fingernails catching his skin and drawing blood.

He yanks hard on my hair, throwing me around and slamming me into the wall. "I'm going to make you suffer for that!"

I bring my fist around again and slam my knuckles across his cheekbone with surprising strength. The sickening sound of cracking bones claws at the air, but I'm not sure if my hand or his cheekbone broke. Considering the strength of The Grim, probably my hand. But when I pull back, my fingers feel remarkably fine.

"By the time I'm finished with you, you'll be begging for mercy," he growls, cradling his face in his hand.

I raise my fist to strike him again. Fear flashes in his eyes, and he thrusts his hand

against my chest. Pain splinters through every bone in my body, my skin feeling ripped apart from the inside out.

"This is just the start of what I'm going to do to you." He laughs darkly. "You'll pay for this forever."

The last thing I hear is a bloodcurdling scream. Then his hand leaves my chest, and I slump to the floor, sinking into the darkness.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Fear

My eyelids fly open, and I open my mouth to scream, but it catches in my throat when I notice the steel walls, the blanket draped over me, and the guy sleeping beside me. I breathe in relief. It was just a dream. The world, the warden, everything was just a vivid, disturbing dream.

I wipe my hand across my sweat-drenched forehead and turn onto my side to face Ryder ... I blink, realizing the guy sleeping next to me is Blaise. Confusion sets in. I know I fell asleep next to Ryder. They must have switched places while I slept.

I watch him sleep for a bit, listening to the sound of his soft breathing. The soothing sound reminds me that I'm no longer alone, that I escaped the channels. I'm safe, and despite how real the horrifying dream felt, it was just a dream and nothing more. I repeat that in my head a hundred times and almost convince myself it's true. Deep down, though, unsettledness stirs inside me, and I can't shake the feeling the dream was trying to tell me something.

Sighing, I wiggle around, trying to get comfortable. I feel strangely wide-awake, like my deprived body and mind finally caught up on sleep after being starved for years. I

feel good. Even my aching shoulder doesn't hurt.

I move my arm around, testing for tenderness. No one ever mentioned how long it had to be in a sling. Maybe this kind of injury heals quickly.

Tossing the blanket off me, I sit up, undo the knot, and slip off the sling. Then I stretch out my arm, raising and lowering it. Amazing. Not a single ounce of pain.

"Allura, what're you doing?" Blaise sits up, rubbing his weary eyes. "You need to keep that on for at least a month."

I massage my shoulder. "It feels fine, though. Maybe I didn't hurt it as badly as you thought."

"No. You jacked it up really badly." He flattens his mussed blond hair with his hand before pressing a few fingers to my shoulder and applying a drop of pressure. "Does that hurt?" When I shake my head, he slides his hand down to my elbow and gradually lifts my arm. "How about that?"

I shake my head again. "It feels normal."

His forehead creases as he lowers my arm. "That's so strange. Usually, a dislocated shoulder takes at least a month to heal. For you, I expected the time to be longer since you're so malnourished."

"Maybe it wasn't dislocated."

"It was definitely dislocated. I popped it back into place."

I think about the dream I had and then how my eyes shone red when I looked in the mirror. "Maybe there's something wrong with me. Maybe that's why the wardens said

I was better than that ... What did you guys call it?"

"Quercu." He seems to choose his next words carefully. "Even if there is something different about you, it's not bad to heal quickly." He balls up the sling and sets it beside a worn backpack. "Especially with what we have to do today."

I frown. "What do we have to do today?"

"Leave." He pushes to his feet and stretches his arms above his head. The grey, thermal shirt he's wearing rides up an inch, revealing his muscular stomach.

My cheeks warm, and I hurry to look away. I don't know where these feelings are stemming from, but I feel uncomfortable, mainly because I have the most insane urge to stare at him.

"The storm ended yesterday," Blaise says through a yawn. "Things are getting intense down here. We probably should've taken off already, but we wanted to let you get as much sleep as possible."

Using both my hands, I get my feet under me and stand up. "How long have I been asleep?"

"You've been in and out of it for almost four days." He collects the backpack off the floor and slings the handle over his shoulder. "You woke up a few times to get a drink and something to eat, but you were pretty out of it."

I comb my fingers through my tangled hair. "I don't remember any of that."

"Yeah, we kind of wondered if maybe you were sleepwalking. Your eyes were open, but you had this glazed look on your face. And a lot of the stuff you were saying didn't make any sense. You kept talking about wardens and stars and some place that

you thought The Grim couldn't go." He adjusts the handle of the backpack higher onto his shoulder. "But you'd never say where the place was."

I frown, confused. I'm fairly certain I talked about wardens and stars because of the dream, but as for a place where wardens can't go ... "I don't know why I said that."

"You were probably dreaming." He bends over to pick up a bottle of water. "We've all dreamed about a Grim-free place before. Too bad it's just a dream, right?" He pauses, as if waiting for me to say something.

What does he think? That I know where such a place is but am not saying anything?

"Isn't that what those burial places were?" I ask.

"Yeah, I guess so." He studies me carefully, like he's trying to read my thoughts.

I fidget under his stare. "I wish they still existed. I can only imagine how wonderful a place like that would be."

"Yeah, me, too." He rips his attention off me to take a long drink then tosses the bottle to me. "Drink up. We have a long walk ahead of us."

I twist the cap off and down a few swallows of water. "How long will it take us?"

"Probably about a week."

"A week? But we can see the city from here."

"We have to take the long way back along a fault line. Trackers won't go near it."

"What about the city? Do they go near it?"

"Not near the station. We send off an electromagnetic pulse every hour or so, so if one heads that way, they can't get very close." He collects another backpack from off the shelf and chucks it at me. "Load this up with a couple of blankets and an extra pair of pants and a shirt. The nights can get really cold out there."

I grab two flannel blankets, a pair of green cargo pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and a jacket, stuffing everything into the bag. "Where are Ryder and Reece--" I turn around and crash into a rock solid chest, almost every part of our bodies touching. Our legs tangle, and we start to trip over each other's feet. Blaise reaches out to stop me from falling, and his hand somehow ends up on my butt.

Blaise shuffles back, elevating his hands in front of him. "Sorry." He clears his throat. "I was just going to take your bag from you. I didn't mean to ... for that to ... to stand that close to you."

"It's okay." My own cheeks heat for unclear reasons. "I'm okay with carrying my bag."

"Okay, but if you get tired, let me know." He turns on his heels, shaking his head at himself. "We should go find Reece and Ryder, let them know you're awake, and we can go."

He strides for the door, and I hurry after him, looping my arms through the straps of the backpack.

"Wait. What about Lex?" I ask as we reach the door. "Did you guys find any sign of him?"

"No." His tone is even, controlled, and his eyes are on the doorknob. "We don't know what you heard, Allura, but we're pretty sure it wasn't Lex."

For some reason, I think he might be lying to me. I don't know why. Maybe so I won't get scared?

He unlocks the door and opens it. "Come on. Let's go --"

An electric zap cracks through the air. Seconds later, Blaise collapses to the floor, convulsing.

I rush to help him, but Maxx steps into the room, flattens his palms to my chest, and shoves me hard. I trip back, losing my balance, and fall to the floor, hitting my head and my tailbone.

"That was way too easy." Lucille strolls into the room, holding a Taser.

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I scramble to my feet, but Maxx shoves me right back down. "You're not going anywhere until you tell us what you are."

I scoot back across the floor until my back bumps into the shelf. "I work at the station."

Lucille rolls her eyes as she tucks the Taser into a leather holster secured around her thigh. "Don't play dumb with us." She nudges Blaise out of the way with the tip of her knee-high boot then ambles across the room toward me. "You're too weak and reek of fear. There's no way you could be from the station."

I raise my chin and look her dead in the eye. "I'm not afraid of you," I lie.

She laughs, flipping her hair off her shoulder. "Is that so?"

I nod, but when she exchanges a malicious glance with Maxx, I gulp. They're about to do something horrible to me. I can sense it from the conniving looks on their faces and through the electrified air.

"Well, that sucks," she tells Maxx, feigning disappointment. "I was hoping for a show."

"Don't worry, babe; you'll get your show." Maxx turns to me, a sly grin creeping across his face. "I'm going to ask you one last time. What are you?"

"I'm from the station," I repeat, although my voice loses confidence.



"All right, we'll play it this way, then." He crouches down and reaches for me.

I smack his hand away and inch to the side, calculating the distance to the door. "D-don't touch me."

Fury flares in his eyes before he lunges at me, his fingers wrapping around my throat.

Suddenly, I'm back in my cell, surrounded by moonstone walls, lying on the floor with a visitor on top of me. I know the image isn't real, only a memory, but fear momentarily makes me immobile. I helplessly lie there, letting Maxx choke me while Lucille yanks up the sleeve of my shirt.

"I knew it," she says, tracing a fingertip over my number. "She's a Nameless."

"Bet those dumbasses stole her from the channels," Maxx says, his fingers digging into my throat. "We can probably get a reward if we turn her into the watchers."

Lucille wavers, staring at me with her arms folded. "You know it's dangerous to do that. They could end up imprisoning us."

"Then we'll escape," he says, putting more pressure on my throat.

"Yeah, I guess." She glances at me. "You shouldn't trust Blaise, honey. He knows better than to bring a Nameless here." She turns around. "Come on, Maxx. Let's get her out of here before he wakes up."

Maxx's gaze cuts through me. "But I want to play with her first."

"Oh, my God. Every time," she gripes. "Whatever. Just hurry up."

A wicked grin curls on Maxx's lips as he leans over me. "It might be better if you

pass out." With his free hand, he undoes the button of my pants.

I try to gasp for air, but he's gripping my throat too tightly. My face is turning warm, my lungs ache for oxygen, and my eyes feel like they're bulging from the sockets. If he doesn't let go of me soon, I'm going to die.

I think about all those years I spent wanting to die but unable to give in. Even in some of the darkest moments of my life, I remained strong.

I'm stronger than this.

With all the strength I have, I bring my leg up and slam my knee between his legs. He grunts, letting go of my throat and hunching over. I seize the opportunity and raise my fist to punch him in the face like I did to the warden in my dream. But he quickly composes himself and strikes me across the face. My ears pop and my head sings, but I blink through the pain, bring my boot up, and kick him in the face. He screams out in rage and tackles me to the floor. My head knocks against a sharp object, and warm blood seeps out, coating the back of my head as the room spins around me.

"You're going to fucking pay for that," he growls in my ear, pinning my arms down against the floor and putting a knee on each side of my hips. Then his mouth comes down on mine. But before our lips connect, he flies off me, soars across the room, and collides with the wall.

Blaise stands above me, his eyes wild and completely out of control. "Are you okay?" he asks.

I bob my head up and down. "I-I think so."

He nods once, his gaze skimming over me. "I'll be right back." He storms across the room to where Maxx is struggling to get to his feet.

"No, please don't," Maxx begs, frantically glancing at Lucille, who's now lying on the floor with her Taser right beside her.

"You worthless piece of shit! How dare you touch her!" Blaise grabs Maxx by the shirt, lifts him up until his feet aren't touching the ground, and bashes his knuckles into Maxx's face.

The impact makes a sickening crack. Blood gushes out of Maxx's nose like an exploding can of paint, his eyes rolling into the back of his head, and his slackened body slumps to the floor.

Blaise steps back, lowering his blood-drenched hand to his side.

My eyes widen at the sheer brutality and force of Blaise's punch. First, he kicks a hole through the trunk, and now, he bashes a guy's face in without breaking a sweat. Just how strong is he?

I stagger to my feet, cupping the back of my head. "Is he ...? Is he dead?"

Blaise blinks at me dazedly, the rage in his eyes fading. "No. His nose is broken, and he probably has a concussion." He looks down at Maxx, his jaw clenching as he balls his hands into fists. "I should probably kill him, though."

It makes me wonder how many people he has killed before. Should I be worried? Half of me is, while the other half of me feels safer because of it. If the world is even half as scary as the channels or what just happened, I'm glad to have Blaise protecting me.

"They wanted to turn me into the watchers." My legs wobble as I step toward him. "They said ... whoa ..." I sway to the side as lightheadedness overcomes me.

Warm arms wrap around me and stop me from falling. "Let's get you to Mable. She's the doctor here. I want to make sure you don't have a concussion." He scoops me up in his arms. "Then let's get the hell out of here before word spreads about you."

I nod, completely agreeing.

After getting a glimpse of what Lucille and Maxx wanted to do to me, I understand way too well that watchers, wardens, and visitors aren't the only ones who pose a threat to the Nameless. That some humans are just as evil.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Secrets

Blaise quickly carries me up the hallway to Mable's room. He kicks the door with his boot, refusing to put me down, even though I tell him I'm okay to walk.

Mable swings open the door. "What on earth are you banging on my door ...?" She trails off, her eyes widening at the sight of me. "What happened to her?"

"Maxx and Lucille happened to her," Blaise grunts, shoving his way inside. "I think she's okay, but I want to make sure she doesn't have a concussion or need stitches. She hit her head pretty hard on the corner of the shelf."

Mable curses, closing the door. "I knew those two were trouble. Ever since they took off to the city, they have all these warped ideas in their heads."

"What kind of warped ideas?" Blaise asks,

carefully setting me down on a crate.

"They think the watchers are handing out bounties for escaped Nameless," she replies, collecting a leather bag from off the shelf. "And maybe they are, but that doesn't mean we need to go turning any of them in. We're human, not watchers or wardens. We need to remain humane to our own kind. That's what the posts are supposed to be about."

Wait ... Does she know I am Nameless?

She must read the uneasiness on my face because she says, "You have that way about you, like you're terrified by everything yet curious. Anyone who's met a Nameless can probably tell you're one of them. But there's not a whole lot of people who have, so you should be okay."

"Not after Maxx and Lucille wake up and tell everyone who will listen to them." He meticulously eyes me over. "I want you to stay here and let Mable check you over. Don't leave this room until I get back." He turns around, but then pauses. "Allura, I'm sorry I let this happen to you."

"It's not your ..." I start, but he strides out of the room before I can finish.

Mable sighs, locks the door, and comes over beside me, carrying the bag. "That boy can be so intense sometimes." She kneels down in front of me. "I'd hate to ever get on his bad side."

I nod, thinking about Maxx and Lucille lying unconscious on the floor. "How long have you known him?"

"Who, Blaise?" she asks, and I nod. "It's been a while. He was barely a teenager when I met him, so probably six or seven years ago. I met Reece and Ryder a few years earlier before Blaise showed up at the Leviter Station. They were always getting into trouble back then. Still do." She rummages around in her bag and pulls out a

flashlight. "Not everyone is cut out for what they do. You have to be willing to risk your life just to save others."

I think about how they risked their lives to save me from the channels. They were willing to die to save one person they had never met before.

"Why do they do it?"

"That's something you'll have to ask them. They don't talk about it a lot. It's a private part of their lives, I guess. Plus, they probably worry the wrong people might overhear them and use the information against them."

I scrub at a dab of blood on my pants. "I guess that makes sense."

She smiles sadly at me. "Not everyone is as bad as Maxx and Lucille, honey. I want you to understand that. But I also want you to realize that you'll probably cross paths with a lot of other people who share their beliefs. You have to be careful, have your guard up all the time." She clicks on the flashlight. "Now turn to the side so I can look at the cut on your head."

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I twist around and rest my hands on my lap. "It actually doesn't hurt that badly anymore."

She shines the light against the back of my head and brushes strands of hair out of the way. "That's odd," she murmurs. "There's blood everywhere, but I can't see a cut." She shuts off the light off and sets it down on the floor. "Are you sure you didn't cut it and just got someone else's blood on your head?"

"No." I delicately touch the back of my head with my fingertips. "Maxx got a bloody nose, but he was clear across the room when that happened."

"Your shoulder's out of the sling, too," she says, not as a question, but as an observation. "Blaise said you dislocated your shoulder."

"He thinks I did," I say, growing nervous over her observations. "But maybe he wasn't right."

She thrums her finger against her lip, considering something. "Would you mind if I ran a simple test. It'll only take me a second. And it won't hurt. I just need to swab your blood."

"I guess so." I chew on my thumbnail. "What are you looking for?"

She takes a cotton swab out of her bag. "It's just a simple test."

Her evasiveness makes anxiety nearly explode from my body. I start to stand up, ready to bolt for the door, but she quickly swipes the swab over the back of my head.

"Just stay put." She puts a hand on my shoulder and guides me back down to the crate. "I'm not going to hurt you."

I swallow hard. I've heard that before, way too much. I debate whether or not to run. Is it worth the risk of being out there by myself? I don't even know what Mable's doing. Maybe she's just doing a normal test.

But when she pulls out a chunk of grey moonstone from the bag and wipes the swab on top of it, I know this isn't a normal test.

"I can't believe it," she whispers as my blood pools in the center of the rock and begins to ripple.

"What is it?" I croak, fearing the answer.

Her gaze fastens on me, her eyes lit up with wonder. "You have Grim blood in you."

"What!" I exclaim, jumping up from the crate. "No, I can't."

She springs to her feet, positioning herself between me and the door. "Honey, calm down. I didn't say you're a Grim, just that you have Grim blood in you."

My gaze dances between her and the door. "How is that even possible? I'm not like them. I know I'm not."

"I know you're not, either, but you definitely have a similar kind of blood running through your veins." She lifts the rock in front of me. "Grim blood reacts this same way to moonstone."

I wonder if that's why my cell walls were moonstone. Did the wardens know I was different?



No! I'm not different! I can't be.

Her brows pull together. "Some of the Forsaken legends talk about Grim hybrids: half human, half Grim, the strongest beings on the planet. But those were only myths created to give humans hope that The Grim could be killed. I never thought they could be true."

"Forsaken legends?" I shuffle back. "Blaise said most people don't know about the Forsaken legends."

She hesitates. "Someone who was born a Forsaken does."

I back away until I bump into a crate. "You're a Forsaken?"

"Used to be. My mother ran away from their society after our leader killed my father over a crime he didn't commit. I was around six or seven but I still remember some of the legends they used to tell to each other." She frowns at the floor, dazing off for a moment. "Stories that used to give me nightmares. Still do sometimes." She shakes her head, looking up at me. "But I remember hybrids being mentioned because the Forsaken used to hunt for them."

"Did they... ever find any of them?"

"Not that I know of, but like I said, I left that society decades ago."

My mind travels back to what I saw in the mirror, the strange dream I had, how Reece said my life should have expired a long time ago yet here I am, completely alive.

"A-are t-there ...?" I swallow hard, trying to steady my voice. "Do you know of any other characteristics these hybrids have?"

She clutches the moonstone against her chest. "I know a few but none are based on facts. That's the problem with legends. While sometimes they hold a hint of truth, it's hard to sort through all of the nonsense."

I feel ill to my stomach. "But you think there's something different about me."

She nods, glancing at the moonstone. "But that's not necessarily a bad thing."

She may not think so, but I just experienced firsthand what can happen when someone is different. Lucille and Maxx were going to hurt me, and that was only because they knew I was a Nameless. Imagine what they'd do to me if they knew I had Grim blood running through my veins.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Mable, open up!" Blaise shouts from the other side of the door.

Mable hastily stuffs the moonstone into the pocket of her pants then tosses me a rag and some water. "Clean the blood out of your hair, okay?" She heads for the door as I douse the rag with water. "I don't think you should tell anyone about this until you find out more. Not even Blaise, Reece, or Ryder. If this information falls into the wrong hands, it could end up badly for you. Humans might try to kill you out of fear of the unknown and God knows what the watchers would do to you. But if it is true, if you are a hybrid, you could finally be the answer to destroying The Grim. You just need to be careful who you trust with the information. The less people that know, the better. That way, if anyone is questioned or tortured, they can't accidentally let it slip out."

The severity of her words weighs heavily on my chest. I stare down at my arms, my veins visible underneath my scarred, pale flesh. "Mable, do you know what The Grim are?"

She shakes her head. "I know they're not human, and that weren't created here in our world. There are a few people who have theories of where they came from and what they are, but those are about as reliable as legends. There's a library in the middle of the city that supposedly contains the history of our world, but the building's so heavily guarded no one has ever made it inside there alive."

My mind races with the overload of information. In a week's time, I've gone from being a prisoner to maybe being some weird, freaky hybrid. How can this be possible? And what about my dreams? Do they have anything to do with it? I want to ask Mable, but a voice inside my head hushes me.

Guard the dreams with your life. They're more valuable than you even know.

Blaise bangs on the door. "Come on, Mable. We need to go."

I focus on reality, quickly wiping the rag across the back of my head, cleaning up as much blood as I can.

"When you get to the station, go talk to Rae and tell her what we found out," Mable says in a rush. "Tell her to test your blood on moonstone. You can trust her, Allura. She's a good doctor, a lot better than me."

I nod, even though I don't like the idea of keeping secrets from Blaise, Ryder, and Reece. After they saved me, it seems wrong. But I'm also scared out of my mind that they'll be afraid of me. Or, like Mable said, they could let the information slip out if they were tortured. I can't risk it. Maybe after I talk to this Rae person, and she gives me more answers, I can tell Ryder, Reece, and Blaise what's going on. But I need to understand what's going on with me first.

Mable unlatches the deadbolt and throws open the door. "My word, you have no patience."

Blaise barges in, nudging Mable out of the way. "Took you long enough to answer." His eyes immediately find me. "Is everything okay?"

"She's fine," Mable answers for me. "She just nicked her head. The cuts so small it doesn't even require stitches."

Blaise relaxes a smidgen as he hands me my backpack. "Good. I don't want to have to worry about her getting an infection while we're out there. She won't make it if she does."

"I'll send a couple of antibiotics with you just in case." Mable gives me a pressing glance as she passes by me. "If she doesn't need them, give them to Rae when you get to the station. I'm sure they could use them." She retrieves a clear, square case from the leather bag and tosses it to Blaise. "Be safe out there, okay? An

d protect this girl with your life."

Blaise tucks the case into the pocket of his leather jacket. "Of course. Thanks for everything, Mable. We owe you."

"Yeah, yeah, you owe me a hundred." She lightly pushes him toward the door. "Now get out of here before anything else happens to her."

Blaise crooks his finger at me, and I hurry from the room and lace my fingers through his.

As we leave the room, I cast one look back at Mable, and she puts her finger to her lips, reminding me to keep the secret to myself. I nod once, silently promising to do just that.

I just hope nothing happens to me on the way to the station that outs the secret for

me.

## Chapter Fifteen

### The Start of a Dangerous Journey

Blaise doesn't say anything as he weaves his way around the tables, heading for the wall that acts as the entrance door to East City Post. He tells me to put a jacket on while we walk, and I silently do so, wondering why.

"Where are we going?" I jog to keep up with his long, even strides, bumping into people and tables.

"We're leaving." He keeps his eyes trained ahead.

I note all the people staring at us, and nervousness bubbles inside me. "Did Maxx and Lucille tell anyone yet?"

"Lucille and Maxx have been taken care of," he says as he pounds on the steel entrance wall.

"Taken care of how?"

"Does it really matter? They can't hurt you anymore."

I want to ask him if he killed them. But I think I already know the answer. And while the idea bothers me, I also feel a sliver of relief. Whether that makes me sick and twisted, I'm not sure.

"Where are Ryder and Reece?" I hitch my finger around the strap of my backpack.

"Waiting for us outside," he replies as the wall rolls open.

An older guy stands on the other side, puffing on a rolled up paper that has smoke funneling out of the end. "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"None of your damn business." Blaise tightens his hold on my hand as he shoves the guy aside then hurries toward the ladder.

He lets me climb up first, which I'm grateful for, especially when someone starts shouting from below.

When I reach the top, Ryder grabs my arm and drags me out into the dusty land.

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Reece immediately slips a pair of sunglasses over my eyes. "Wear those until your eyes get used to the light."

I nod, clearing my throat a few times as my lungs adjust to the harsh, dry air.

Like Blaise and me, both of them are wearing backpacks. On top of a clean pair of cargo pants and a jacket, Ryder has on a knitted cap. Reece is wearing a similar outfit and has the hood of his jacket drawn over his head. I don't understand all the layers. With the sun blaring down on us, won't we get hot?

"You okay?" Ryder asks, inspecting me over from my boots to my head.

I run my fingers through my hair. "Yeah. I just cut my head. Mable said it was fine, though."

"Let me see." He grips my shoulder to turn me around.

I panic, racking my brain for an excuse to tell him when he realizes I don't have a cut. Thankfully, Blaise appears out of the hole and distracts Ryder from his task.

"We need to go. Now." Blaise slams the door shut and starts across the desert, taking long, determined strides.

Reece jogs after him. "What did you do?"

Ryder grabs my hand and hurries off after Blaise and Reece. "Oh, God, here we go." He rolls his eyes.

"What's wrong?" I ask, struggling to keep up.

"Blaise did something crazy, and now we're going to have to listen to Reece lecture him about it for the next hour or so." He reaches over with his free hand and draws the hood of my jacket over my head. "You need to protect your skin from the sun or you'll burn."

I tug down the rolled up sleeves of my shirt to cover up my arms. "What did Blaise do?"

"I think it's better if you don't know that," he says. "While Blaise always has his reasons, it doesn't always make sense to an outsider."

I smash my lips together, deliberating. "Did he ...? Did he kill Maxx and Lucille?"

Ryder gives me a sidelong glance. "I wouldn't necessarily call it killed."

I zip up my jacket. "I don't understand what that means."

"I know." He sighs and slips an arm around my shoulders. "Look, Blaise is a little different, but I don't think it's my right to explain it to you. When he feels like it, I'm sure he'll tell you his story."

Different how? I sneak a peek at Blaise marching across the desert, seeming completely unbothered as Reece chews him out. I think about his strength, his intensity, how he said he should kill Maxx and Lucille, how easily he lies, how it seemed like he was lying to me when he told me they found no sign of Lex.

"I promise you're safe with him," Ryder says. "Blaise is the kind of person who protects the people he cares about, no matter what."

I wonder if that would still be true if he knew I had Grim blood in me.



I hardly have time to dwell upon the thought, though, because seconds later, the four of us all come to a stop.

"Is that the fault line?" I stare down at the seemingly infinite crack splitting down the center of the land.

Blaise nods, inching toward the edge. "Yep. This is it."

I lean over to peer down then instantly regret it. I can't even see the bottom. "And we just, what? Walk around it?"

Blaise shakes his head, shucking off his backpack. "We go in it. There's a trail a couple of hundred feet down that runs all the way to the city. It'll keep us shielded from the watchers."

I press my hand to my racing heart. "But what if we fall?"

"We won't let you fall." Ryder hugs me against his side. "I know it looks dangerous--"

"Because it is," Blaise snaps. "She needs to understand that. One false move and you could fall over the edge. And we're close to Forsaken territory."

Ryder shakes his head then turns to me. "Allura, don't be scared, okay? If you stick with us, you'll be fine."

I glance at the three of them. They've done so much for me; how could I not trust them with this? I just hope that, when I tell them I have Grim blood in me, they'll be as kind and compassionate toward me as they are now.

Until then, I'll have to put my life in their hands and trust them to get me through the dangerous journey safely. Hopefully, if we make it to the station alive, this Rae

person can tell me exactly what I am and why I'm still alive when I shouldn't be.