



Oblivion (Broken City 3)

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Every day my life becomes more in danger. The only way to survive might be to enter the Oblivion and relive my forgotten memories. But my mind may be even more dangerous than reality.

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Chapter 1

Compassbot

Ryder, Reece, Blaise, and I have been hiking on the trail between the cliffs for days now. We take occasional breaks, but our journey has mostly been filled with nonstop walking due to a long list of people and creatures tracking us, like the Forsaken. Although we haven't seen any sign of them since we ran away from their camp a few day ago, Blaise insists we aren't out of the clear yet.

We also have Trackers and the Grim to worry about. The longer I stay in the outside world, the more I realize it may be as dangerous as the channels. But I wouldn't trade my freedom for anything, and I'm grateful Ryder, Reece, and Blaise saved me from being a prisoner.

I just wish I wasn't so scared right now.

My knees knock together, my heart thrashes, and my skin dampens with sweat as I stand on the dusty path beneath the bleeding red sky with the nearly unbearable dry heat that beats down on me. My eyes are fixed on the narrow strip of land nestled between the cliffs and the drop off. My attention isn't on the land, but the strange-looking creature hiding amid the dry dirt, the large rocks, and jagged cliffs.

With shimmering steel skin, glowing purple eyes, stubby legs, and pointy ears, it kind of reminds me of a robotic puppy. While I don't think puppies are mean, this isn't an ordinary puppy, so I don't know how to react.

"Allura, it's okay," Ryder's soothing voice chips away at my fear. "It won't hurt you."

"What is it?" I ask warily. "It's not a tiny Chaser, is it?"

Chasers are horrible creatures made of assorted metals. They are drawn to objects that run off energy. I've been bitten a couple of times by them and the agonizing pain from the electrically-charged bite lasts for days.

"No, it's not a Chaser." Blaise steps up beside me, the corners of his lips lifting into a small, reassuring smile.

When I first met Blaise, I was afraid of him. With his blond hair shaved on one side, the metal barbells ornamenting his eyebrows and lips, and the tattoos on his neck, he looks rough and intimidating. I'm starting to realize my initial assumption of him was wrong. Blaise is the opposite of scary, at least to me. He's done nothing but show me kindness, even when he discovered I might have Grim blood--all the guys have.

"Then, what is it?" I ask, gathering strands of my tangled brown hair out of my face.

He shields his eyes from the sunlight with his hand as he squints at the creature. "A compassbot."

I wait for my mind to catch up and make the connection. It doesn't.

"What's a compassbot?"

Blaise's brows furrow. "You don't know?"

"Sorry, but I don't think I do." I feel silly for not knowing another thing about the red sky world.

Ryder drapes his arm around my shoulder. "You don't need to be sorry for not knowing something."

Like Blaise, he's wearing a jacket with the hood pulled over his head, fingerless gloves, and baggy cargo pants tucked into unlaced boots. Unlike Blaise, Ryder's clothes are stained with a few drops of blood from when a Forsaken stabbed him.

"It's okay if you don't know everything. No one really does," Ryder says, his crystal blue eyes sparkle mischievously. "Blaise just hasn't figured that out yet."

My gaze skates to Blaise. While Ryder may be joking, Blaise tends to take most remarks seriously and sometimes gets mad at Ryder when he jokes around. I've learned over the last couple of weeks that, if Reece isn't around to play mediator, their arguments can get heated. And Reece is currently searching for water, which leaves me to ease over the situation, something I'm not sure I know how to do. Still, I should try.

I part my lips, but before I can get the words out, Blaise scowls at Ryder and snaps, "I don't think I know everything if that's what you're getting at. And I wasn't being rude to her. I just wanted to be sure she didn't know what a compassbot is so I can keep track."

Question marks flood Ryder's eyes. "Keep track of what?"

"The stuff she doesn't know about this world." Blaise flicks a glance at the compassbot that's hopping back and forth between the tumbleweeds. "I'm also keeping track of the stuff she does know but doesn't exist here."

"That's a little out of character for you." Ryder fires an accusing look at Blaise. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Blaise exchanges a look with Ryder before redirecting his attention back to the compassbot, and Ryder looks away from us, frowning at the path.

I've seen the guys do this before when they were making an escape plan, or secretly trying to communicate something. I've often wondered if they have telepathy, but worry I might look stupid if I ask. I wish I knew what kind of secret conversations they're having. I wish I didn't feel so out of the loop. Then again, I don't know why they'd include me in their private conversations. They hardly know anything about me, other than I'm considered a Nameless, barely have any memories of the red sky world, could possibly be a hybrid, and nearly drank the life from a Forsaken to protect Ryder.

"What's wrong?" Blaise asks. "You look upset."

Having no idea what face I'm making, I wiggle my nose to erase it. "I'm not. I promise."

Blaise studies me with his intense eyes. "Then why do you look upset?"

I shrug, not wanting to tell the truth--that I'm feeling sorry for myself because I feel left out. "I don't know. Maybe I'm tired."

Ryder touches my shoulder, steering me around to face him. Lowering his head, he levels his gaze with mine. "She does look upset, doesn't she?" he says to Blaise, keeping his gaze fixed on me. "What's wrong? Is it the compassbot? I promise that thing won't hurt you. They're pretty harmless. A few people at the station even have them as pets. And besides, if they were dangerous, you should know by now that we'd never let anything hurt you."

"I know that. I'm really not upset. I don't know why I look that way, but I'm not."

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear then places his palm on my cheek. His skin is warm and rough, and I find comfort in his touch; a strange, newfound feeling for me. Touching was always something I dreaded during my time as a prisoner, the v

isitors' and wardens' touches always felt deathly cold and unnatural. Honestly, I used to wonder if I loathed being touched in general. However, when Ryder, Reece, and Blaise came along, I realized I only despised being touched by the Grim, which doesn't make much sense since I might be half-Grim.

Shouldn't I be less afraid of them?

I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything.

Ryder leans in to examine me closer.

Uneasy over his scrutiny, I tuck my hands into the sleeves of my leather jacket and shift my weight. A dry breeze picks up and sends a spray of dirt against my exposed legs. When I shiver from the sting, his gaze descends to my torn dress. Long in the back and shorter on the front, it leaves my skin vulnerable to the sunlight and wind.

"How are you doing with that dress?" Ryder stares at my legs for a beat longer before dragging his gaze to mine. "The sunlight isn't burning your skin, is it?"

I shake my head. "Even if it was, it wouldn't matter. The burns would heal quickly."

"So what?" Ryder carries my gaze. "I don't want you in any pain, even if it's brief."

"Really, I'm fine," I reassure him. While the sunlight causes mild discomfort, the pain isn't any worse than what I experienced in the channels.

With a frown, he parts his lips, but Blaise cuts him off.

"The compassbot's heading our way." Blaise's steady, fearless tone should alleviate any of my worry about the compassbot, but he typically sounds unafraid, no matter the circumstances.

My gaze darts to the creature, and I stiffen. The compassbot isn't heading our way; it's looming right in front of us.

Ryder slips an arm around my waist and guides me to his side until our shoulders connect. Blaise's gaze bounces back and forth between me, Ryder, and the compassbot, a pucker forming at his brow as his fingers curl into fists.

"Just relax," Ryder whispers, his mouth close to my ear. "I'd never let something bad come this close to you. And neither would Blaise."

I glance at Blaise, who's glaring at the compassbot.

"Blaise seems mad at it," I whisper to Ryder. "What does a compassbot do, exactly?"

Ryder slants forward to look at Blaise, strands of his blond hair falling across his forehead. "Blaise, you okay over there?"

Blaise doesn't remove his attention from the compassbot, his lips remaining fused and jaw clenched.

Ryder sighs, reaches around me, and pokes Blaise in the arm.

Blaise flinches, his gaze snapping to Ryder. "Watch it," he warns, his expression stone cold. "Or else."

Ryder rolls his eyes. "You say that like something's actually going to happen to me if I poke you again."

Blaise scans the peaks of the cliffs then focuses his death glare back on Ryder.
"Maybe something will."

"What? You'll poke me back?" Ryder teases. "That doesn't bother me. Just you."

"Maybe we should test out that theory." Blaise elevates a clenched fist with his eyes narrowed at Ryder.

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Uneasiness tremors through my muscles. While I don't believe Blaise will hurt Ryder, he looks extremely angry right now.

I scan the area for Reece, knowing, if he shows up, the two of them will more than likely cool down. But he's nowhere in sight, which worries me. He's been gone for a while. I hope nothing happened to him.

My chest tightens. What if something did happen to him? Like the Forsaken captured him?

"No, there's definitely something bothering you," Ryder states, completely unbothered by Blaise's withering glare.

"Nothing's bothering me," Blaise snaps. "Except for you."

"Do you really mean that?" Ryder questions with his arms crossed. "Or are you trying to make a joke? Sometimes it's hard to tell with you."

"You're really trying to piss me off today, aren't you?" Blaise's fists twitch, causing bad memories to pierce through my mind.

My breath gets stuck in my throat, and I instinctively cower back.

Ryder's and Blaise's heads snap in my direction, and then they hastily step away from each other.

"Sweetheart, we're not going to hurt each other," Ryder tells me at the same time

Blaise mutters, "I'm sorry if we scared you."

"We?" Ryder arches his brow at Blaise. "I'm pretty I'm not the one scaring her."

Blaise shoots a harsh look at Ryder, but the rage in his eyes vanishes when he notes me watching him.

"I won't hurt him, Allura. I'm just ..." He huffs an exasperated breath then spins on his heels, storming off down the path in the direction we've been walking in since we escaped the Forsaken.

I watch him, feeling utterly horrible.

"I'm sorry I made him mad." I turn back toward Ryder. "I feel terrible."

"You didn't make him mad," he insists, giving my hand a squeeze. "I did."

"Because you were teasing him?"

He thrums his fingers against the side of his legs, glancing from me to the path. "Not exactly."

I open my mouth to ask him what upset Blaise, but the compassbot lets out an abrupt squeak, its purple eyes shimmering as an arrow on its back energetically sways back and forth.

I jump back, bumping my shoulder into Ryder's chest. "What's it doing?"

Ryder chuckles, wrapping his arms around my waist as his chest lines up with my back. "It's trying to get your attention."

My pulse hammers as the compassbot lets out another squeak then starts spinning in circles.

"Are you sure that's all it's doing?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." Ryder lightly tugs on a strand of my hair. "I think it likes you."

I eye the compassbot warily. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." Ryder playfully tugs on a strand of my hair again. "Which instantly makes me like it."

"Why?"

"Because it's clearly got good taste."

I start to smile, but then my mouth curves downward. Ryder, Reece, and Blaise keep insisting they're okay with the idea that I might have Grim blood, although none of them are fully convinced I do. I don't entirely understand why they aren't afraid of me. Not only are the Grim horrible monsters that feed off the lifespan of humans, they also ruined this world and destroyed their lives.

"You should pet it," Ryder encourages, gently nudging me in the back.

"Like a dog?"

"What's a dog?"

"They're small and furry, and they bark ..." I trail off as his face contorts in confusion. I sigh, frustrated with myself. "Maybe it's another thing Blaise should add to his list."

"Hey, don't get frustrated." Ryder grazes his knuckles across my cheekbone, and my eyelashes flutter in a strangely confusing way. "You've been through a lot. And like I said, it's okay not to know everything."

I take a breath to calm my heart. "I just wish I knew why I keep remembering things that don't exist."

"Maybe they just don't exist here," he says cautiously. "But they do someplace else."

"You mean, like those burial places you guys talk about sometimes?"

"Maybe. Or ..." He bites down on his bottom lip, hesitating. "Please don't take this the wrong way, okay? But maybe, if you are different, then perhaps you came from someplace else, like some believe the Grim did."

I recollect the blue sky that appears so frequently in my memories, the lofty trees, the sparkling stars, and the glowing moon. Then I think of the place I saw when I was near the Deorum.

Maybe Reece is right. Maybe I'm different because I'm not from here.

"You think I'm from where the Grim are from?" I ask quietly.

His eyes widen. "No. That's not what I meant. I just wonder if you're from some place different than our world. That's it. God, please stop looking at me like that, Allura. It's killing me."

"Sorry." I try to wipe my expression clean, still worrying if he could be right.

"It's not a bad thing to be from someplace else. And I'm not one hundred percent sure if I'm right. I'm making a guess based on zero facts." His lips quirk as he sweeps

strands of hair out of my eyes. "Reece would have a shitfit if he heard the basis for my theory."

I s

tart to smile when the compassbot rushes up to me. I stumble backward, not getting very far as it plops down on my boot.

"What's it doing?" I whisper, frozen in terror.

"I think it wants you to pick it up and pet it," Ryder says through a chuckle.

When I make no move to do so, he steps around me, crouches down, and scratches the compassbot behind the ear. The robotic puppy's eyes flash as it lets out a high-pitched yap.

"See? Completely harmless," Ryder says with a smile.

Taking a deep breath, I lean down and tentatively trace my fingers along the top of the compassbot's head. The arrow on its back wags back and forth as the robotic dog releases an excited, squeaky yap.

"It feels warmer than I thought," I say, gently scratching it behind the ears. A memory tiptoes into the back of my mind of me petting a small, spotted puppy. A puppy that belonged to me. One that grew into a dog who tried to protect me

His name was Moondust ...

"No, stay away!" I scream at my dog as two large men drag me away from the small log cabin I've been hiding out in.

Moondust barrels down the dirt road after me, barking at the men with his teeth bared. I want him to save me, but at the same time, I don't want him getting hurt.

The man grasping my right arm jerks me forward as he quickens the pace. "If that damn mutt doesn't shut up, I'm going to shoot him."

I trip, trying to keep up, rocks scraping the soles of my bare feet, as tears stream from my eyes. "Please, don't hurt my dog."

He's the only thing I have left.

"Shut your mouth," the man holding my left arm warns then kicks the back of my leg with the tip of his thick boot.

I wince, but manage to keep the scream trapped in my throat and my feet underneath me.

I glance up at the man on my right, who's wearing a hoodie pulled over his head and smells like pungent smoke. I can't see his face very well, but as far as I can tell, I don't know him. The man on my left, however, his voice carries a drop of familiarity.

I start to lean forward, hoping to get a good look at him, but he turns his head in the opposite direction, toward a tar road weaving through fields of dry grass.

I peer up at the sky, expecting to see blue, but instead I am blinded by an array of neon colors swirling together.

Where am I?

"Would you shut the damn dog up? I can't take it anymore." The man on my right grinds his teeth as Moondust reaches us and nips at his heels.

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The man on my left shakes his head. "If you want the dog to shut up, make him yourself. I don't hurt animals."

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard," the other man sneers, his yellowish fingernails stabbing into my arms. "You'll kill a human, but you won't kill a stupid little dog?"

The man on my right stares down at me with hatred burning in his eyes. "She's not human."

My heart misses a beat. Those eyes ... So blue ... Alarmingly blue ... I know him ... from somewhere ...

"But she's close," the man on my right points out. "Closer than the dog is."

"No, she's not." The other man keeps his gaze on me, a smile pulling at his lips. "Don't let her looks fool you. What lies underneath those pretty, sad eyes is a horrible, murderous monster who needs to be killed repeatedly."

"Allura, did you hear what I said?" Ryder waves his hand in front of my face.

I blink as I'm hauled back to reality, but the pain from the memory--or whatever that was--continues to sear my heart.

A horrible, murderous monster? I'm a murderer?

"No ... What?" I blink again, trying to focus.

"I said, I think the sun's heating up the metal on the compassbot." Ryder peers up at the sky then at me, his brows furrowing. "Are you okay?"

I nod. "I'm fine." Liar. You're not fine. You're a monster. A murderer.

But who did I kill?

"Are you sure?" Ryder asks, studying me with concern. "You seem ... I don't know, distracted."

"I'm just thinking about some stuff." I hate lying to him, but I can't find the courage to tell him the truth.

I'm a killer.

A monster.

Ryder sighs defeatedly. "If you don't want to talk about it, then it's fine. Just know I'm here."

"I'm sorry." I'm not even sure what I'm apologizing for.

"Don't apologize for nothing. Ever. Got it?" He wags a finger at me sternly, but his lips pull into a smile.

I try to mirror his happiness, but fail epically. "Got it."

He frowns. Then his eyes sparkle as he looks at the compassbot. "You know what? I think you should keep it."

"Like take it back to the station with me?" I start to smile when he nods, but then

frown. "Are you sure that's okay? I don't live there, so maybe I shouldn't bring a pet back without permission."

"You have my permission, which is enough. And besides, the station will be your home." He scratches the back of his neck, seeming nervous, which is very out of character for him. He's usually so relaxed and flippant. "At least, if you want it to be."

"I want it to be." I stare down at the compassbot. Its head is lowered and its eyelids are droopy, appearing so at peace, like a harmless robot who deserves a home. But me ... If they knew the truth, about the stuff I see myself do in my memories, dreams--whatever they are--not everyone would welcome me. "I'm not sure everyone will want me to live there after they find out I might be half-Grim."

"We don't know you are for sure," he reminds me. "And even if you are, no one would care."

I stay silent. I know he's trying to make me feel better, but I don't agree with him. Not everyone thinks the same, carries the same opinions, or reacts the same way to situations, so I doubt everyone at the station will be okay with me if it turns out I'm a hybrid. Look at the Forsaken. They loathed hybrids. And for good reason. And everyone from my memories doesn't seem too thrilled with my presence, either.

Ryder bends over to catch my gaze. "Look, I don't believe anyone at the station would care if it turns out you're a hybrid. We don't have to tell anyone if it makes you uncomfortable."

Guilt chokes at me. "Then you'd have to lie to everyone."

"Yeah, so?"

"I don't want you to have to lie to people you care about."

"You say that like I don't care about you." He fixes his finger under my chin, forcing me to look him in the eye. "I do. So does Reece and Blaise. And Blaise doesn't care about anyone, which says a lot about what kind of person you are."

"You hardly know me," I say softly. "For all you know, I could turn out to be as bad as those hybrids who killed all those Forsaken."

His gaze never wavers from mine. "I know you aren't."

"How do you know that for sure?" I don't.

His hand molds my cheek. "You don't have a damn bad bone in your body, whether you believe so or not."

"Not everything I've done is good." Even if I can't remember all the bad, sometimes I can feel it living inside the darkest parts of my mind.

"If you're talking about what happened back in the tent, then you're completely wrong. You were just trying to protect me. You were so brave, and I wish you'd realize that."

His words make me feel warm inside, like melted chocolate. I don't even know how I know what melted chocolate feels like, but that's how I feel right now. And while I know I may be undeserving of the feeling, I can't seem to force it to go away.

"Thanks for saying that," I say so quietly my voice nearly gets carried away by the wind.

"No, thank you."

"For what?"

"For being you."

My lips pull into the tiniest smile, and he grins. But his happiness fades into puzzlement.

I open my mouth to ask him what's wrong when he grazes his thumb across my lip, silencing me. Then his gaze drops to my mouth and his tongue slips out from between his lips, his eyes glazing over. I've seen a guy look at me this way before. A guy who haunts my memories, who whispers promises of loving me, and then later tries to kill me.

Ryder once told me he wanted to kiss me, even going so far as to graze his lips against the corner of my mouth. Then he told me he'd wait until later to kiss me. What if he tries to kiss me right now? Should I stop it? Or just let him?

Should I let him kiss me without him knowing the entire truth about me?

All my worries are cut short as the ground rumbles.

"Do you feel that?" I whisper, my eyes widening.

Ryder nods dazedly with his gaze fastened on my mouth. "I do." Then he leans in.

I don't know what's going on--why he's not panicking that the ground's quaking--when fear courses through my veins.

"What if it's a Tracker?"

Ryder pauses, his lips mere inches from mine. "Huh ...?" His eyes enlarge as the ground gives another violent quake. "Shit." His hand leaves my cheek, and he grasps ahold of my hand as his gaze skims the cliffs around us.

"What is it?" I search the area, fighting back the urge to panic.

"I'm not sure ..." Ryder strengthens his hold on my hand as the dirt beneath our feet begins to splinter apart. "It's not a Tracker. They won't come near the fault." Doubt crosses his face as he peers upward at the cliffs.

I hold my breath, waiting for a giant, metallic snake to burst through the dirt and dive straight at us. It never happens. Instead, a group of metallic vehicles with shiny black exteriors and no trunk or roof, wheel up to the ledge. My mind takes a second to connect the machines to a word I know.

Motorcycles.

Of course, the motorcycles I picture are much smaller and less bulky, but I'm rarely right about what things look like.

A person straddles each motorcycle, their heads shielded by helmets. I can't tell if they're men or women. Then my stomach clenches as another thought occurs to me.

What if they aren't people? What if they're Grim?

"Ryder ... What are they?" My confusion doubles when a smile spreads across his face.

He glances at me, seeming more relaxed than he has since they rescued me from the channels. "That, sweetheart, is our rescue team."

Chapter 2

The Rescue Team

I want to share Ryder's happiness about the rescue team, but apprehension crawls inside of me. The last couple of times I crossed paths with strangers didn't turn out so well for me. Then I remind myself that Ryder, Reece, and Blaise were once strangers to me, too, and that turned out okay. More than okay.

One by one, the riders slip off their helmets. Angling my head up, I squint against the sunlight and make out the silhouettes of two tall, broad men and two women, one short and one tall.

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"Looks like you got yourself into a bit of trouble!" the shorter of the two women shouts to Ryder through a laugh. "Like always!"

Ryder grins, untangles his fingers from mine, and cups his hands around his mouth. "Life's too boring any other way!"

The woman laughs and so does one of the men.

"Where's Reece and Blaise?" the taller woman asks, swinging her long leg off the bike.

"Reece went looking for water," Ryder hollers. "And Blaise had one of his tantrums and ran off."

The taller woman flips her dark hair off her shoulder as she laughs. "What was it over this time?"

Ryder shrugs, but his gaze strays over his shoulder at me. "Who knows? You know how he can get."

"That I do." The taller woman's eyes flick from me to Ryder. Then she slants her head to the side in puzzlement.

"How long do you think they'll be?" one of the men asks Ryder as he hops off his motorcycle. "I'd like to head back to the station before sundown, especially if the Forsaken are hunting you."

"I'm not sure. Reece has been gone for a while, so I'm guessing soon. Blaise ..." He scratches the back of his neck. "Well, we might have to go look for him."

They continue to shout back and forth, planning on how to track Blaise down as quickly as possible. I find myself inching away, feeling out of place, a stranger amongst a group of different species, which might be true.

I make my way all the way to the compassbot before coming to a stop. When the compassbot lets out an enthused yip, I bend over and scoop it up into my arms.

"I can't believe I feared you," I mumble, scratching the back of its ear.

It barks, sticking out its tongue and panting. I wonder if it's thirsty. Then again, it's a robot, so I don't know.

"Do you eat and drink?" I ask aloud, feeling silly for talking to a robot dog.

"It doesn't. But if you keep it, you'll have to recharge it." Blaise materializes from out of nowhere, scaring me half to death.

I press my hand over my racing heart. "How do I recharge it?"

"There are power sources at the station you can plug it into." He scrutinizes the compassbot. "These things can live forever if you take care of them. Out here, though, they usually live for about a month or two before their battery power runs out."

"That's so sad ... How did he even get out here? Or was it born--created out here?"

"It's probably a stray that escaped the city. Most of them are created in factories and sold to Grim and sometimes humans as pets."

My gaze travels to the numbers branded on my wrist. The compassbot and I may be completely different species, but our stories don't sound much different.

"If you want to bring it back to the station, you can," he tells me. "If not, you should put it down before it gets too attached."

"Will it get attached that fast? I've only been holding it for a few minutes."

"Usually, no. But with you ... maybe."

"Why?"

"Because ..." He drags his hand across his forehead and shifts his weight, seeming uneasy. "You're kind of spoiling it."

"Oh." I stop petting the compassbot. "Is that bad?"

A pained look comes across his face, and while I have no idea what is upsetting him, I wonder if it has to do with his past and what he is, both of which are mostly a mystery to me.

"Only if you plan on leaving it behind," he utters, not meeting my gaze.

I instinctively reach for his face to cup his cheek and comfort him, like Ryder so often does to me, but right before my fingers connect with his scruffy jawline, his eyes snap wide and I remember Blaise doesn't like being touched.

"Sorry." I withdraw my hand. "I forgot."

"It's fine." His tone perplexingly carries relief mixed with disappointment. My perplexity only skyrockets when he reaches out and laces his fingers with my free

hand. "So, do you think you'll keep it?"

"Ryder told me I should." I glance down at the compassbot, fast asleep in my arms. "But I'm not sure if I should bring a pet to a place I've never been before and isn't even my home."

"The station will be your home. At least, if you want it to be." His brows dip as the corners of my lips tug upward. "What's so funny?"

"It's nothing." I give a shrug. "Ryder just said almost the exact same thing to me."

"Well, at least he did one thing right today," he grumbles with heavy annoyance.

I shift the compassbot into the crook of my arm. "You're not still mad at him, are you?"

He shakes his head. "I wasn't mad at him. Not really, anyway."

"Then why did you seem upset when you took off?"

The muscle in his jawline spasms as he looks away. "Does it really matter?"

"I think it does ... I don't like it when you're upset."

He arches a brow as he returns his attention to me. "Maybe I should be saying the same thing to you."

My brows pull together. "I'm not upset."

He gives me a doubtful look. "Then why are you hiding back here from Ryder and the rescue team?"

I bite my lip, attempting to hide my apparent transparency. "I don't know. I mean, I'm not really hiding since I'm standing out in the open."

"But you are in a way." His fierce gaze bores into mine. "You're nervous; I can tell."

"I just feel a little out of place. That's all." I stare down at the compassbot. "I think I'll keep it, if that's okay?"

He continues to study me intently. "Okay. Good."

I offer him a small smile, but he doesn't return it.

"Are you going to tell me why you were upset now?" he asks.

Before I can say anything, Ryder strolls up. "Good. You're here. I was just about to go look for you," he tells Blaise then hitches his thumb over his shoulder. "A rescue team showed up while you were gone."

"I know. I heard the engines." Blaise casts a glance toward the top of the cliff then frowns. "Who's here?"

"Phoenix, Jett, Taylor, and Mia," Ryder answers, pulling a face at the mention of Mia. "They said they received the signal we sent out from the Forsaken camp. Crazy, right? I didn't actually think they'd get it, considering how old that equipment is."

"It's a good thing they did. I couldn't find a drop of water anywhere." Reece's breathless voice sails from over my shoulder.

I sigh in relief that he made it back okay, but my relief is short-lived as I twist around and take in the sight of him.

His brown hair is askew, his forehead and cheeks smudged with dirt and a few scratches, he's completely out of breath, and the knees of his cargo pants are torn.

"Shit, what's wrong?" Ryder spins around, scanning the trail behind him. "Is it the Forsaken? Did they catch up with us?"

Reece hunches over as he struggles to catch his breath. "No ..." He gasps for air. "Watchers."

Ryder stiffens, and Blaise's fingers constrict around mine as he lets out a string of curses.

"Watchers? Since when do Watchers come into the fault?" Ryder asks, his eyes huge as his fingers drift toward his empty holster. "Fuck, I forgot Zinnia took our guns."

Reece shakes his head as he stands up straight. "I have no idea, and I don't want to stick around to find out. There are about five of them a mile back, which means we have maybe ten minutes to get up the cliff and take off."

My heart rate skyrockets. Watchers are a mile away? In a place they don't normally go? Why do I get the feeling this has something to do with me?

"So, we're free climbing?" Ryder's gaze flits in my direction.

"We have to." Reece rolls up his sleeves. "We don't have time to set up."

I swallow hard, glancing from the cliffs to the trail then to Ryder. "What's free climbing?"

"Climbing without a rope and harness," Ryder explains with an apologetic look.

My lips form an O. The last time I tried to climb down the cliff, I panicked and got stuck, and Blaise had to rescue me. And that was with

a rope and harness. Maybe going up won't be as bad. Still, I gulp as I take in the height of the serrated, steep cliffs.

"Blaise, take care of Allura." Reece hikes toward the cliff, calling over his shoulder, "Ryder and I will get started. Although, you'll still probably beat us up there."

"Just don't move so quickly you end up falling. I won't be there to catch you this time," Blaise warns, refastening the strap on his fingerless gloves.

"And make sure to be careful," Ryder says, backing away from us.

"I'm always careful," Blaise replies with a shake of his head.

"I know, but you need to be extra careful this time. You have precious cargo." Ryder gives Blaise a pressing look before turning around and jogging after Reece.

"Like I don't know that," Blaise mutters, seemingly to himself. Then he slips off the bag he's wearing, unzips it, and turns toward me. "Here. Put the compassbot in this."

I do as he instructs, and when the robotic dog begins to stir, I run my fingers along the top of its head, which settles it down, and it curls up into a ball.

"Hopefully, it'll stay asleep while we do this," Blaise zips up the bag and hands it to me. "Put this on, and then hop onto my back."

"You're going to carry me up the cliff?" I ask, securing the bag on my back.

He nods, opening and flexing his hands. "I'll make sure to move as fast as possible so

you don't have to worry too much. I promise I won't let anything happen to you."

"That's not what I'm worried about." Okay, maybe a little, but another thing is troubling me. "Will you be okay carrying me?"

He nods again, his jaw set tight. "I'll be as okay as I was last time."

I want to point out that the last time he carried me down the cliff, he was extremely tense, probably because I was touching him. I didn't know he didn't like to be touched at the time.

"Allura, I'll be fine," he insists, as if reading my apprehension. "We need to go now. We don't want to be here when the Watchers show up."

"Okay." I tie the straps of the bags around my waist, then step up behind Blaise.

When he squats down in front of me, I climb onto his back, hitch my legs around his waist, and link my arms loosely around his neck. His breathing quickens as he straightens, and I resist the urge to bury my face into his back. As we near the cliff that seems to stretch for miles toward the sky, resisting the urge becomes impossible.

With my forehead pressed against the back of his head, I summon a breath.

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You'll be fine. You've done this before.

"Just remember to breathe." Blaise lines his fingertips against the rock. "I don't want you passing out."

My hold on him tightens as I visualize my body plummeting to the ground and splattering apart. "Yeah, me, either."

"I still wouldn't drop you." He props his boot onto the nearest lip on the cliff. "But it'd make it a hell of a lot harder to climb up quickly."

I try to imagine him carrying me in one arm while scaling the cliff one handed. It doesn't seem plausible. Then again, Blaise isn't a normal person. He's abnormally strong, can push thoughts into people's minds, and can even enter my mind. So, perhaps he could get me up to the top with only one hand.

Springing onto his toes, he lifts his other foot up while gripping a rock. Then he stretches out one arm while moving his foot upward toward the next lip. He repeats the movement several times, scaling up the side of the cliff. The higher we go, the more the dry wind picks up, and the air becomes warmer, causing my skin to become slightly agitated. I suck it up and hold on tightly, crossing my fingers we're getting close.

Voices start to drift down from above, and I wonder if Reece and Ryder have made it to the top, but I don't dare lean back to look.

"We're almost there," Blaise reassures me, his lean muscles flexing as he heaves us

up to the next short ledge. "Just another minute or so."

"I'm fine." My wobbly voice reveals my lie.

"You know, if you want, when we get back to the station, I might know a way to help cure you of your fear of heights." He lets out a grunt as he loses his balance for a split second. Then he quickly recovers, grasping a small ledge. "That is, if you want me to help you."

I tighten my arms and legs around him. "Reece thinks you should train me to do what you guys do."

"Really?" he asks in shock. "When did he say that?"

"While you were playing the decoy, before we were captured by the Forsaken. Why do you sound so surprised?"

"Because I'd be a shitty teacher, and everyone knows it, including Reece."

"That's not what he said. He said you'd be perfect for the job."

"And what did Ryder have to say about it?" Amusement laced with mild irritation rings in his tone.

"Um ..." I smash my lips together, not wanting to lie, but not wanting to tell him the truth, either. "He didn't really have much to say about it."

"I doubt that. He always has something to say about everything. I'm sure he said I'd suck at being your teacher." He stretches his arm upward. "But that's okay. He's probably right."

"Oh." I fight back a frown. "You don't want to teach me, then?"

He pauses, which wouldn't be so bad, except we're dangling off the side of a cliff.

"You want me to teach you?"

"Only if you want to." I take a shaky breath. "I'd like to learn how to do what you guys do. That is, if they'll let someone like me help."

He still doesn't budge. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Let what you are affect who you are. If you want to train to become one of us, then train. Don't worry about what other people might try to not let you do." He releases an uneven exhale and starts climbing again. "If I listened to what other people said, I probably wouldn't be here."

On this cliff? With Ryder and Reece? Or in this world, alive?

My heart aches at the last thought. My mind has been in that dark place before.

I start to ask, but the words die as a stabbing pain pinches the back of my neck.

"Blaise, I think something stung me." My words echo around me. "Like a bug, or a bee, or something."

"What's a bee?" He sounds so far away, a fading memory. Quiet. So very quiet. "Allura?"

"Hmm ...?" is all I manage to get out. My limbs feel heavy, like a bag of bricks, and I'm too tired to hold them up anymore--hold myself up anymore. I can hardly stand it.

I want to let go. Fall. So badly.

So I do.

Chapter 3

The Mysteriously Familiar Stranger

Flashing lights. Blinding. Music booming. I can barely hear anything. Circles spinning everywhere. Or maybe I'm the one who's spinning ...

"You like this?" a deep voice whispers in my ear as a solid chest presses against my back. "This is called dancing."

"Dancing?" I repeat the foreign word, debating whether I like it. "It doesn't seem so bad ... But I do feel really tired."

"That's not from the dancing," he whispers, his voice ringing with familiarity. "That's from the poison."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. At least, I think they do. My body is too numb to tell for sure.

"Poison is bad," I slur, my eyelashes fluttering against the colorful lights blinking from the ceiling, the floor--everywhere. So bright. I can't see anything. Not even the guy behind me. "Where am I ...?" I murmur, spinning, spinning, spinning. "And who ... are you?"

"Must we go over this again, Allura." His lips brush the tip of my ear, his breath fiery hot. "You've known me for a very long time."

My eyes roll into the back of my head as wooziness overcomes me. "I have?"

He roughly grips my waist. "You have."

My head bobs back and thumps against his chest. "Why can't I remember?"

"Because it's been more than a century since the last time we saw each other." His fingertips dig into my waist as he draws me against him. "And time has never been kind on your memory. The longer you stay away from me--from us--the more you seem to forget until we remind you again."

"Remind me ...? How?"

"We've gone over this, too, but I guess I'll remind you again." He glides his hand up the front of my stomach to my neck, gripping the base of my throat. "By killing you. Don't worry; all horrible, murderous monsters come back from the dead, and then we get to do this whole thing over again."

It clicks, like a lightning bolt slamming into my chest.

"You're the man from the driveway. The one who wouldn't shoot my dog."

His hold on my neck loosens. "You remember that?"

I nod, the light blinding me to the point my eyeballs ache. "I do ... But that's not ... the only place ... I know you from. We've met ... a lot." Not that I can remember when or where; I just know I have.

He grips my neck harder. "Well, then, I guess things are about to change. I just hope you're prepared to run forever, because once they find out, they won't stop until they have you. And they can't have you. Understand? If they do, then everything is ruined.

Lives will be destroyed. Worlds."

"Who can't have me?" I gasp, fighting to get free. I can barely move. I can't control my body. I can't think, breathe--do anything.

He nibbles my earlobe. "The Grim." Then he jerks his hand, snapping my neck.

The lights fade into nothing as I fall toward the ground.

And keep falling ...

And falling ...

Chapter 4

The Kiss of Death

"Wake up." Ryder's worried voice slices through my hazy mind. "Come on, sweetheart; please wake up."

I try to do what he asks, but I can't get my eyelids to lift. It's as if someone has glued them shut. My entire body is weighted with numbness. Even my heart is nothing but a soft lull, barely existing.

Am I dead? After all this time ... Centuries, if the man from my memories is correct. If he is, though ... how can that be right? How could I have lived for that long and barely look eighteen? Then again, the Grim are practically ageless and rarely die.

God, I must really be a hybrid.

A murmur of voices flutter through the air, some recognizable, some not. Every

single one carries a drop of panic.

"She's not waking up." Alarm rings in Ryder's tone. "Reece, why isn't she waking up?"

"I don't know," Reece mutters from close by. "Blaise, what exactly happened to her?"

"I think a Watcher shot her with something ... and then she fell." The slight tremble in Blaise's voice throws me off guard.

He's worried. Blaise is worried

.

Whatever happened to me must have been bad.

I search through my disoriented mind and manage to put together a few pieces of what happened. Climbing up a cliff. Something stinging me in the back of the neck. Numbness spreading throughout my body. Falling toward the ground.

Oh, my God, I fell off the cliff. And now I'm lying here, broken in bits and pieces, only alive because of my ability to heal.

The mental images that come after the revelation aren't very pretty and make me want to yack my guts out. I start to choke, my chest heaving as I struggle to breathe.

"What's happening?" Ryder asks. "Reece, do something. I think she's choking."

"I can get the defibrillator," a woman offers. "It might help."

"No, her heart's still beating," Reece says. "Hold on a second. I have an idea."

Seconds tick by, maybe even minutes. Then, slowly my breathing returns to normal.

"There. She's breathing again," Reece states, sounding breathless.

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"Good, now get her to wake up," a woman with a much lower, harsher voice demands. "We need to get the hell out of here before the Watchers get up the cliffs."

"I'm not sure I can wake her up," Reece tells her. "Not until I know what she was shot with. Give me a minute."

"We don't have a minute," the woman warns. "We have maybe five minutes tops before they reach the peak, and then we all become Nameless. I hate to say this, but we may need to leave her behind."

"Shut up, Mia," Ryder snaps. "We're not leaving her. That's not what we do or what we stand for."

"I know that," she bites back. "But is one Nameless's life worth all of ours?"

"Yes," Blaise responds. "And if you don't agree with me, then you shouldn't be at the station. You should live in the city with every other fucking coward in this world."

"Blaise, I didn't mean--"

"Yeah, you did," he cuts her off sharply. "So just shut the hell up. Your opinion no longer matters here."

The air grows uncomfortably quiet. Then Blaise growls, shattering the silence.

"Goddammit, this is all my fault."

"No, it's not. You stopped her from hitting the bottom. If it wasn't for you, she'd be ..." Ryder releases a loud, stressed breath.

"But I almost didn't catch her in time." Blaise's voice cracks, and he quickly clears his throat. "I told her I'd get her up safely; that nothing would happen to her. I lied."

"What happened was out of your hands," Reece says as I feel fingers trace along the back of my neck. "Jesus."

"What?" Ryder and Blaise ask at the same time.

Reece's fingers shake against the back of my neck. "They shot her with the Kiss of Death."

The Kiss of Death? That doesn't sound good.

Death? Am I dying?

Is that really a bad thing?

"Why the hell would they do that?" one of the men asks. "The Watchers usually capture Nameless, not kill them."

Again, silence overtakes the air. I wonder if Blaise, Ryder, and Reece are debating telling the rest of them what I am.

"They probably didn't know she was Nameless," Reece utters, his fingers returning to my neck. "They probably think she's one of us."

"Why are they even hunting you?" the woman with the deep voice asks. "And in the fault? I mean, I know Watchers get pissed when one of their prisoners is stolen, but

they usually send Trackers after them."

"They did send a Tracker," Ryder explains. "It failed to capture her."

"Oh." The woman pauses. "Still, some of this isn't making sense. Like, why did they go to this great of length to track a single Nameless down?"

"You're not the one we report to, so it doesn't really matter if it makes sense to you or not," Ryder says in annoyance. "Seriously, Mia, what's your problem? I've never seen you question someone else's mission like this."

"Yeah, well, I've never seen the three of you act so protective over a single Nameless," she quips. "You guys are acting reckless and irrational, risking all of our lives for a dying girl."

"I've had enough of this shit," Blaise grumbles. "Move out of my way, Reece."

"Why?" Reece questions with reluctance. "What do you plan to do?"

"I'm going to pick her up, put her on the motorcycle, and get the hell out of here before the damn Watchers make it to the top of the cliffs. Then, when we get back to the station, you can figure out a way to reverse the effects of the poison."

"I'm not sure that's possible, Blaise," Reece says quietly. "The poison is already attacking her body. She's still breathing and everything, but probably not for very long. I don't have a cure for the Kiss of Death. I'd have to create one, and that could take some time--weeks even."

"You'll figure out a way. You always do," Blaise replies matter-of-factly as I feel hands slip under me. "I'm going to need someone to sit behind her and make sure she doesn't fall off."

"I'll do it," Ryder volunteers. "Just make sure to take the bigger bike, or there won't be enough room."

"Blaise ... I don't want to say this, but"--Reece lowers his voice--"even with her rapid healing ability, she might not make it back to the station alive. You know how the Kiss of Death works. It's potent enough to injure a Grim."

"She'll make it," Blaise hisses as I'm lifted into a pair of arms I hope are his.

"Blaise," Reece presses with hesitancy. "You've never been a naive person, and I can't have you turning into one now. I need you to think straight."

"I am. She will make it back to the station." Blaise whispers lowly, "I've seen her heal. She'll make it through this." He starts to move, carrying me with him, tension rippling through his arms and chest.

I will my eyes to open, wanting to reassure him that I'm fine so he can calm down. He's already lost his entire family. I don't want him to suffer through another death.

Come on, please open. Open. Open!

I gasp as my eyelids start to lift. I blink and blink again as the stinging red light reflecting across the sky burns my eyeballs. I don't care about the pain, though. I only care about the fact that I'm awake.

I blink up at Blaise, who's cradling me as he marches across the desert. He doesn't notice I've woken up, determination burning in his eyes as he stares straight ahead. My mouth opens to tell him everything will be okay, that I'm awake, which means I'm going to live, right? But when no sound leaves my lips, my stomach drops. Maybe I'm not as okay as I thought.

"Do you want to drive or sit on the back?" Ryder appears in my line of sight as he jogs up beside Blaise. His skin is ghostly pale, his eyes crammed with worry, and the hood of his jacket has fallen off his head, leaving his blond hair blowing in the wind. "Honestly, you should probably drive. You're better at it than me."

"I was planning on it." Blaise comes to a grinding halt and wheels toward Ryder. "Here, take her for a second while I get the engine started."

Ryder's eyes drift to mine as Blaise transfers me into his arm and a crease forms at his brow. "It's weird how her eyes are open ..." He swallows hard as he rests me against his chest. "It's almost like she's awake and can hear us, but can't move."

"That's probably what's happening," Blaise tells him. "The Kiss of Death paralyzes first, then slowly begins to deteriorate the body until the victim dies."

"How do you know?" Ryder asks, holding me close. "I can barely remember covering the Kiss of Death in class."

"That's because you barely ever pay attention," Blaise shouts over the roaring of an engine. "I knew about it even before the class."

"Why ...? Oh ..." Ryder's lips compress into a firm line. "Your brother."

Blaise pretends not to hear Ryder. "Get on so we can get the hell out of here."

Ryder strides over to the bike, keeping me cradled against his chest. He swings his leg over the seat of the motorcycle, climbing on behind Blaise. Then he moves me around until I'm sitting between the two of them, circling his arms around me. The position feels awkward and leaves me vulnerable to falling off since I can't hold on to anything. The only reassurance

I have is Ryder's arms around me.

"Ready?" Blaise yells as he revs the engine, causing the seat to vibrate and my teeth to clank together.

"Yes. Let's get the hell out of here!" Ryder yells back, constricting his arms around my waist.

Blaise presses on the throttle again, and the tires spin as we take off, kicking up a cloud of dust. My body slumps forward, my face pressing against Blaise's back. The scent of his leather jacket fills my nostrils.

So, I can still smell. That must be a good sign, right? I'm not that close to death yet.

Does it even matter if I die? Per the alleged memory, I've died multiple times, and yet, here I am, completely alive. Kind of.

I attempt to sigh, but the noise is lost in the rumbling engines from the other motorcycles. Internally sighing instead, I stare at the scenery of dirt and tumbleweeds zipping by in a blur. The sky casts its reddish glow, making the land appear stained with blood. The sight sends a chill down my spine. Blood.

I killed someone once.

"I wonder who got stuck riding with Mia?" Ryder hollers to Blaise while leaning over my shoulder.

"Who the hell cares?" Blaise says, giving the engine more power. "I'm just glad it wasn't me."

"I know, right?" Ryder rests his chin on my shoulder and rocks me back and forth

soothingly. "That girl has some serious issues ... saying all that about Allura." He shakes his head. "I've never been a fan of her."

"You and me both." Blaise hunches forward as he speeds up, racing across the flat land that stretches toward the city.

The wind picks up, whipping my hair into my face. The harsh dryness of it stings as I breathe in and out. In and out ... In ... Out. With each breath, breathing becomes more complicated. My heartbeat begins to slow. Thump ... Thump ... Thump ...

I think I really am dying.

It might be for the better.

"Stay with us, okay?" Ryder whispers into my ear, hugging me closer.

I try to do what he asks, but my chest grows heavy, my lungs tightening.

"Allura, please." The plea in his voice nearly rips my heart in two. "We've already lost too much as it is ... Our families ... People from our group ... There used to be seven of us, but the longer we work out here, the smaller our group gets. All the groups from the station have gone down in numbers. But we keep fighting. You want to know why? To save people like you, who deserve to live and be free and ..." He presses a featherlight kiss to the back of my neck. "Just stay with us, okay?"

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I want to do what he asks, but my body isn't in tune with my mind. The numbness is spreading like a virus, my eyelids lower, and my heart gives in to the nothingness taking over my body.

I'm sorry. I really am--

"Tracker!" Blaise suddenly shouts over the howling wind.

A surge of adrenaline pulsates through my body, and my eyes snap open.

In the distance, I spot the metallic snake, heading straight for us.

Chapter 5

The Heart of a Snake

The Tracker slithers up and down through the air toward us, its metallic body glinting against the red light glowing across the sky. Dirt sprays everywhere as the monster cuts through the ground, the land quaking in protest.

"Dammit," Ryder curses, yanking me against him. "Drive faster!"

"I can't," Blaise growls. "The throttle is floored."

"Then make a hard right and drive near the top of the cliffs!" Ryder yells. "Maybe if we're close enough to the fault, it'll keep its distance."

"You want me to drive along the ledge?" Blaise asks, confounded. "Do you know how dangerous that is?"

"Since when do you care about danger?" Ryder grips me as the motorcycle jostles to the side.

In the distance, the dirt splits open from the burst of another hole. Then, curving downward, the Tracker dives back into the dirt, sending the motorcycle swaying against the impact. Blaise manages to get it under control and continues forward.

"Since it involves other people," Blaise mutters so softly I barely hear him.

"Okay. Good point," Ryder says. "But trying to outrun a Tracker might be as dangerous."

Blaise mumbles incoherently under his breath then lets up on the gas a bit. "Hang on!"

Ryder secures his grasp on me to the point that his elbows are pressing into my stomach. "Just hang on. We won't let anything happen to you--"

Blaise makes a sharp veer to the right toward the cliffs, and we nearly topple off. Ryder holds on tightly, keeping us on the seat as Blaise floors the gas, zooming right for the ledge. When he just about reaches the end, he fishtails the back end of the motorcycle around and lines us along with the top of the cliffs. Then he picks up speed again, driving so close that only a few inches separate us from a long, deadly fall.

I want to look away from the seemingly bottomless hole, but since I can't move my head, I'm forced to endure my fear of heights, which might be a good thing. The fear I'm feeling seems to be increasing my heart rate and keeping me alive.

"Are you sure you can't go any faster?" Ryder shouts as the motorcycle bumps against tremors vibrating across the ground. "It's coming up right behind us!"

"I already told you I've got the damn thing throttled to the max!" Blaise shouts. "The city's only about a mile ahead. If we can make it there, we'll be fine."

"We might not make it."

"We'll make it."

"They should really put guns on these things," Ryder grumbles. "I don't know why they don't."

"Nowhere to put--"

The Tracker bursts from the ground at the side of us, sending the motorcycle skidding toward the drop off. Blaise tries to correct our direction as rocks and dirt shower over us, but the back wheel skids out of control.

Cursing, Blaise grips the brakes and the engine squeals in protest as we slam to an uncontrollable stop.

I gasp as the back end starts to slide off the edge, while Blaise floors the gas again and the motorcycle surges forward.

Straight for the Tracker.

"Blaise ..." Ryder warns in panic.

"I've got it," he assures him as he drives straight at the metal snake that is plunging in and out of the ground.

"I'm not sure you do." Ryder delves his fingers into my hips, and his legs press into mine as he holds on to me firmly.

"Yes, I do," Blaise replies confidently as we zoom toward the Tracker.

I hold my breath as I wait for Blaise to turn around. Instead, he keeps driving straight at the snake.

Dirt surrounds us as we get closer, and the motorcycle trembles violently, jostling my body around like a doll. Ryder holds on to me, scooting forward on the seat and pushing me forward so I'm wedged tightly between him and Blaise.

"Okay, everyone, hold on," Blaise orders over a series of loud beeps.

"Don't use the turbochargers," Ryder warns with a nervous edge in his tone. "You'll end up sending us straight into the Tracker."

"Nope, just right through it."

"What? Are you--"

Boom!

An explosion blasts from underneath me as the motorcycle surges forward so rapidly the air gets ripped from my lungs. My ears ring. My heart thrashes. My surroundings go black as we soar right into the belly of the snake. Fragments of metal claw at my skin; showers of sparks rain around me, scalding my skin; and a loud thudding reverberates inside my head.

I lift my gaze, tracking the noise, and shock ripples through me.

An enormous heart beats from above, surrounded by broken tubes and gadgets.

Oh, my God, we're inside the Tracker.

The bitter metallic scent in the air is smothering, and my lungs work extra hard to take short, gasping breaths. Then, as quickly as we entered the snake, we're bursting through the other side and into the dry air and bleeding red sky.

Blaise lets out a deafening breath as he raises his head. Pieces of metal are stuck in his hair and the fabric of his jacket is covered with singed holes. From what I can tell, though, he appears okay.

"Is Allura all right?" Blaise asks as he steers the motorcycle toward the city.

"Yeah, I think so," Ryder says in shock. "I can't believe that just happened. I mean, we've done crazy shit before, but never like that."

"Yeah, we have." Blaise flicks a glance over his shoulder. "Are you sure Allura's okay? Did you look her over?"

Ryder's face appears in my line of sight, his gaze sweeping across my face. "She has a small cut on her forehead, but other than that, she's fine."

I eye him over, too, and note a few blisters forming on his cheek, probably from the sparks that shot through the air. I want to reach up and soothe him, but my arms remain limp at my sides.

"Is she still breathing?" Blaise asks, looking forward again.

Ryder rests his forehead against mine, the heat of his breath warming my face.

"Yeah, she's breathing," he murmurs. "But she's still not moving."

"She'll be fine. We just need to get her to the station," Blaise insists. "Is Reece behind us?"

Ryder's breath puffs against my cheeks as he exhales. Then he leans back and peers behind us. "He's a ways back, but since the Tracker is dead, he should be okay."

They grow quiet after that as we race toward the city. The more the stillness settles amongst us, the quieter my heart becomes. I want to scream at the top of my lungs for someone to scare me again since the adrenaline rush seemed to keep me alive. However, my lips remain numbly fused together, and my eyelids eventually slip shut.

I wait to fall into a memory, but all I see is darkness.

Lots and lots of darkness.

Chapter 6

Borrowed Time

I remain floating in the darkness without a single memory manifesting. The emptiness makes me question if I'm dead. Perhaps the Kiss of Death was my kryptonite, the one thing that could kill me permanently. Maybe the Watchers knew that.

The idea that I could very well be dead unleashes an array of emotions inside of me. On the one hand, for selfish reasons, I don't want my life to be over. One being that I'm not ready to say good-bye to Ryder, Reece, and Blaise. After spending so many years alone in my cell with nothing but torture and madness, it felt good to be around kind, caring people; to have a human connection. Yet, I can't help feeling a drop of

relief that I may no longer exist, knowing the world and everyone in it may be better off without me.

Will they really, though? a familiar voice whispers through the darkness.

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Who's there? I wonder. When no one answers, I try

again. Who are you?

I'm you.

What?

Just relax. Everything is going to be okay.

How do you know that?

Because I'm your future.

Before I can ask questions, the heavy darkness fades into a soft, pale light.

"I think she's coming back," Reece's voice floats through the light and kisses my ears.

"We need to get her hooked up to the Oblivion before she fades again."

"Are you sure it'll work?" Blaise questions over the hammering of footsteps.

"It won't cure her," Reece explains over the rustling of fabric. "While someone is hooked up to the Oblivion, their lifespan is frozen. They don't age. They don't change. They can't die. Not until they're unhooked."

"How long will she have to stay hooked up?" Ryder asks. Even though I can't see him, I'm fairly certain he's carrying me.

"Until I can come up with a cure," Reece replies over loud banging.

"So, she'll just be stuck in her own thoughts and memories until you find a way to save her?" Ryder's chest crashes against my cheek as he exhales a stressed breath.

"All by herself? Living on borrowed time?"

"I know it's not ideal," Reece says. "For now, though, it's the only way I can think of to keep her from dying."

"I just hate the idea of her being all by herself." Ryder lightly traces his fingers across my lower back. "She just got out of the cells, and I feel like we're putting her back in."

"I can go in with her." A drop of uncertainty wavers in Blaise's voice. "Not into the Oblivion, but I can go into her mind."

Ryder stops moving. "When did you learn how to do that?"

"When we were stuck in the Forsaken camp and she was stuck in dreamland," Blaise tells him. "It happened by accident when I was trying to push thoughts into her mind, but I'm positive I can do it again."

"She could be in there for a while," Reece says, the swishing of water rising in the background.

Water? Flowing water? Where are we?

"What's your point?" Blaise snaps.

"I just want you to know how big of a commitment this is." Reece pauses, as if giving Blaise time to back out. "Okay, if you're sure, then take her from Ryder and get into

the water. I'll bring over the plugs and let you hook them up to her."

"Just hang on until Reece finds a cure, okay?" Ryder whispers to me before he shifts me forward in his arms. "You got her?"

Lean, muscular arms slip underneath my lower back and legs. "Yeah, I got her."

"Good." Ryder releases me. "Make sure it stays that way. Don't let her go."

"Are you giving me orders?" Blaise asks, adjusting me around until my cheek presses against warm flesh.

"I might be," Ryder say with a hint of amusement.

Blaise's arms twitch underneath me. "Considering the circumstances, I'll let you off the hook this time. But don't ever do it again."

"Just keep her safe and alive, okay?" Ryder pleads, his humor deflating.

Blaise doesn't answer, but I assume he nods because Ryder doesn't say anything else.

My cheek remains against Blaise's chest as he moves us upward. Then, sucking in a sturdy breath, he lowers us downward again. Moments later, warm water cascades over my body, drenching my clothes and rising to my chin. I start to gasp for air when gentle prickles prod against my skin and the oxygen is ripped from my lungs.

"It's okay," Blaise reassures me, holding me steady in his arms. "The machine is just hooking up to you."

Panic zaps through my veins, and my eyelids fly open. Bright light pierces my vision as my surroundings gradually come into focus.

A metal beamed ceiling arches above me, fluorescent lights glaring from the corners, and large pipes pump crystal blue water into the glass pool that Blaise and I are standing in. That's not the craziest part.

Long, thin metal tubes stretch from the steel walls and attach to my arms, legs, and neck. Never have I seen anything like it, not even when I was at the channels. And while I don't think Reece, Ryder, or Blaise will do anything to hurt me, I instinctively open my mouth to scream. Again, not even a whisper fumbles from my lips.

Blaise smooths my hair out of my face before closing his eyes. "All right, Reece, I'm ready. You can turn it on."

Seconds drag by, and then the water starts to bubble like boiling hot lava. My panic increases as the lights above flash on and off. Water spews from the pipes, showering across my face and neck. I gasp, my anxiety reaching a terrifying level. However, Blaise seems unbothered as he gently presses his fingertips to my temples, water beading his face and hair.

"Everything will be okay," he whispers. "I promise."

I manage to take one final breath before my entire body is submersed in water. I squeeze my eyes shut. My chest stops moving as my heart flatlines. I try to writhe as water fills up my nose. Still, the water continues to bury me.

All I can do is trust that Blaise will carry out his promise.

Chapter 7

The Seemingly Empty World

My eyelids spring open, and I suck in a large breath of air. Not a single noise touches

my eardrums, the soundlessness sending a rush of undiluted terror through my veins.

Bolting upright, my gaze drops to my body, which is no longer drenched in water. Not even the tattered dress I've been wearing for days has a drop on it.

Blinking several times, I take in a blue sky, the grimy brick walls around me, and then the strangely familiar ground I'm sitting on. I run my fingers along the cold, bumpy surface, the name gradually clicking.

"Asphalt." I frown. How do I know that? This wasn't in the red sky planet. It could have been in the Leviter Station, though. Could that be where I am?

I peer around the alleyway crammed with overflowing and toppled garbage cans. No, there's no way this smelly, dirty place could be the station. Maybe this is the Broken City. Then why does the sky appear blue underneath the smog? My blue-skied world, perhaps? Why doesn't it feel like I'm there?

"Allura! Can you hear me?" Blaise's voice carries down the alleyway.

My knees wobble as I battle to get my balance. "Over here ..." My voice cracks as the world spins around me. I brace my hand against the brick wall to keep from falling. "I'm ... here."

"Allura!" he shouts again. "Can you hear me?"

I clear my dry throat and force my voice to come out stronger. "Yes! I'm over here!"

Footsteps grow louder with each passing second. I angle my head to the right and spot a figure jogging toward me. For a second, I worry it might be a stranger. Then I note the blond hair shaved on one side, the metal facial piercings, and the most intense eyes I've ever seen.

Instantly, I relax. "Blaise."

"I thought I'd lost you for a second." He stops when he reaches me, sweeping hair out of his eyes. "Are you all right?"

I nod, trying not to gawk at his bare chest, but my gaze has other ideas and keeps wandering downward.

Muscles cut every inch of him, and his flesh is covered with dark ink that forms intricate lines, patterns, and shadings of faces, unique names, and odd symbols. That artwork is absolutely gorgeous. What really captures my attention is the bronzed metal embedded in his skin over his heart, along his collarbone, and down his ribs. I don't understand what I'm looking at, but one word comes to mind.

Beautiful.

"So, now are you afraid me?" he asks in a hard tone.

My attention drags upward to his cold, hard eyes that would send any normal person running with fear. However, I manage to keep my feet firmly planted in place.

"No. Why would I be afraid of you?"

He stares me down. "You see what I am now. You understand that I'm not really human, right?"

"I kind of already knew that." I curl my fingers inward, fighting the urge to reach out and touch the metal, unsure whether he'd find the move rude. "Is that why you're so strong? Because of the metal on your body?"

The muscles in his jaw spasm. "Partly, but there's more to it than that."

I chew on my thumbnail, gla

ncing from his metal-patched chest to his face. "Can you tell me what else there is? I mean, why are you so strong?"

He grinds his teeth, shame flooding his eyes. "Because I'm a monster. I already told you that."

Without thinking, I place my hand lightly on his arm. "You're not a monster."

He stares down at my hand on his arm, his eyes widening. "How do you know for sure?"

I shrug, lowering my hand from him. "You've saved me countless times. You didn't try to kill me when you found out I may have Grim's blood in me. There are a lot of reasons why you're not a monster, Blaise." Unlike me.

His eyes soften as his gaze unites with mine. "You should give your speech to yourself." Before I can say anything, he slants to the side and peers behind me. "So, what is this place?"

I glance at the end of the alleyway where various sizes of rusted vehicles line the road. "I'm not quite sure."

His gaze travels to the sky. "The sky is blue."

"Yeah, I noticed that, too."

"This is your blue-skied world, then?"

"I don't know." I trace my fingers along neon green, yellow, and pink letters painted

across the brick wall. "The end is coming." "Machines have won." "Look at what you've done." The familiarity of the words sends a shudder through me. "In some ways, it looks similar. In others ..." I glance behind me again. "I don't remember the world being so quiet and still."

"You've been here before." It's not a question. "The Oblivion surfaces memories, not dreams."

Confusion dances in my mind. "This doesn't make any sense. If this is a memory, then why can't I remember being here before?"

"Maybe you need to see more of it." Blaise nods his head, signaling for me to follow him as he strides down the narrow alleyway.

I hustle after him, staying close, the tail of my torn dress dragging across the ground. When we arrive at the end of the alley, he slows to a halt, right before the asphalt changes to concrete. Resting his shoulder against a brick wall, he slants forward and peeks around the corner. Then he steps back, running his hand over the shaved side of his head with his brows dipped.

"What's wrong?" I zip up my jacket as cold air begins to nip at my exposed skin.

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He shakes his head, looking completely befuddled. "It's nothing. It's just ... There are a ton of empty cars and not a single person in sight. It's so crammed, yet it's not."

I step to the side of him and sneak a glance around the corner. Then my jaw nearly smacks against the pavement.

Broken and crooked glass and metal buildings of various sizes crowd the streets and block the sunlight. Rusted cars and trucks form a maze down the road; garbage, glass, and debris litter the torn-up ground; and a tangled mess of vines has overtaken almost everything. One thing is missing from the scene.

"There's nothing alive out there," I mumble, turning back to Blaise.

"Yeah, I noticed that, too." He reclines against the wall with his boot propped against the brick. "They could just be hiding. People do that a lot in the Broken City."

My pulse quickens as I frantically peer around. "Hiding from what?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. I mean, in the Broken City, I know people hide from the Grim. But this place doesn't look the same at all. It's too quiet."

I gulp. "What if this place has something like Trackers around, and that's why everyone's hiding?"

He straightens from the wall and inches toward the end of the alleyway while pushing me back behind him. His spooked behavior instantly puts me on edge and leaves me with a heavy sense of dread.

"Blaise, what happens if you get hurt or die in the Oblivion?" I whisper. When he doesn't respond, I gulp. "You die in real life, too, don't you?"

He doesn't look back at me but nods his head once.

I swallow the lump swelling my throat, wondering if the laws of the machine apply to someone who heals rapidly. Since the Kiss of Death is currently killing me, I question if other things exist that can kill me, too. Maybe I'm not as invincible as I thought.

"We'll be fine," he promises, as if reading my mind.

I pick at my fingernails. "Maybe you should go back, just in case there's something bad here."

"I can't. Not until you wake up." He pushes off the wall and faces the street. "And even if I could, I wouldn't." He signals for me to follow him. "Come on; let's go see what this place is. Just make sure to stay close to me."

I nod, though he can't see me, and remain only a step behind him as we leave the shelter of the alley and enter the desolate streets of what I'm assuming used to be a city.

Fragments of glass and charred metal crunch under our boots as we proceed cautiously up the sidewalk.

When we reach the first car blocking our path, Blaise reaches behind him and threads his fingers through mine. His steady hold brings me a drop of comfort until I peer inside the missing windows of a car.

Sitting in the driver's seat is a woman, her clothes filthy and torn, and her skin covered in dirt and blood.

"She's dead," I whisper in shock.

Blaise moves back to see what I'm looking at, then his fingers spasm. "She died pretty recently."

I press my hand over my aching chest. "How can you tell?"

"Because her body hasn't started rotting yet." His head snaps up, his gaze skimming the cars around us. "The question is: what killed her?"

Sparks of shock zap across my flesh as I whirl around and scan the street. The cars and buildings are too thick to see very far, but I'm overpowered by the strangest sensation we're being watched.

"Blaise ..." I say in a low tone as my gaze darts from the vehicles to the buildings to the rooftops. "I think someone's watching us."

His back goes rigid as he wiggles his hand from mine. Then he moves in front of me, backs me up until I'm pinned between the car and him, and spans his arms out to the side, using his body to shield me. From what?

"You can't remember anything about this place? Nothing at all?" he asks in a low tone, his eyes trained ahead of us.

I shake my head. "Why?"

He reaches back and protectively places a hand on my hip. "Because I want to know what we're up against."

My heart slams against my chest. "You have the feeling that someone is watching us, too?"

He shakes his head. "No, but I can smell it."

I shut my eyes and take a measured breath as images stab at the back of my mind.

Steel skeletons with glowing red eyes wreak havoc through the streets, collapsing roofs, shattering windows. So much blood. On the streets. The cars. The buildings. Me drenched in blood from head to toe. But it's not my blood.

"What does it smell like?" I whisper, opening my eyes.

"Like rust and fear and death ..." He breathes in then out. "Like murder."

Chapter 8

The Orders

He smells murder? Oh, God.

For an insane moment, I fear he's somehow smelling me. Then I take a whiff of the air and the stench of rotting, potent blood floods my nose.

"What do we do?" I whisper, clutching Blaise's arm.

His muscles constrict underneath my hands, and I start to pull away, worried the reaction is from my touch. Then his head whips to the right, and he snags ahold of my hand.

"Run," he says, then hauls me with him as he races off in the direction we came from.

Our boots slap against the ground as we wind between the cars and hop over fallen lampposts.

"Blaise, what did you see?" I ask, struggling to keep up.

Instead of answering, he quickens his pace. So, summoning a restless breath, I dare a glance behind me, and immediately regret my curiosity.

Jumping along the tops of the cars at an alarmingly inhuman pace is a herd of steel figures with glowing red eyes, all locked on me. They dent the roofs with each spring of their feet, the pavement vibrating from the impact, concaving.

I spin back around, my eyes wide. "I've seen those things before."

Blaise dodges around a giant hole in the ground. "So have I."

"Where?" I ask breathlessly.

"Back in the Broken City. They're called Grim's Orders, and they're kind of like the Watchers justice system. They keep order in the streets. And by order, I mean, they kill anything and anyone who does something the Grim thinks is unfit."

I bang my arm on the front bumper of a car and wince. "Why are they here, then?"

He skitters around a motor wedged between two cars and pulls me around to the side of him. "That's a good question." He increases his pace as his gaze zeroes in on a large, silver bus. "We need to hide until I can come up with a plan."

He screeches to a stop in front of the bus's door and kicks it open. Then he ushers me inside, rushes in after me, and locks us in.

"I need to find something to put in front of the door ..." He trails off as he grabs one of the seats, ripping it from the floor and tossing it in front of the door.

I know I've seen his strength, yet my jaw still hangs agape as he repeats the action again with two more seats. Once he seems satisfied the door is barricaded, he snags my hand and tows me down the aisle. I try not to look at the dead bodies in the seats, the blood pooling the floor, or breathe in the stench of decay in the air, but my senses are assault by death.

Death everywhere.

"What do we do now?" I say, out of breath.

Blaise releases my hand as we reach the back door, checks the lock, then turns in a circle, as if searching for some hidden answer in the walls. "I'm not sure yet."

I rack my brain for a plan. I've been here before, in this place, which means I've survived these creatures, right?

No, maybe not. I could've died and came back to life.

"Maybe I should just go out there," I suggest, wiping my damp palms on the side of my jacket. "They were looking at me. I don't know why, but it felt like they wanted me."

He gives me a blank stare. "Yeah, that's not happening."

"Why not?" I grasp the back of a nearby seat as a cluster of Orders collide with a window and the bus rocks from the impact. "I probably won't die."

"Unless you can give me a definite, I'm not going to agree to that. Ever." He scratches the bronze plating on his chest. "And I probably w

on't die, either, so if anyone should go out there, it should be me."

I flinch as more Orders bash against the windows. "You can't go out there. Besides, they want me."

He looks at the Orders banging their heads against the glass, all their eerie red eyes fastened on me. "I could lead them away from you, like I did with the Forsaken."

With my other hand, I grip the back of the seat as the bus tips back and forth like a teeter-totter. "I don't like that idea. You could get hurt."

His gaze melds with mine. "I should be fine. This is what I do--have done for years now."

I hate that he's being self-sacrificing for me, as if my life means more than his, which it doesn't. Plus, this is my memory, my mess. I need to be the one who fixes it.

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I raise my chin defiantly, ignoring my sprinting pulse. "Well, unless you can turn that 'should be' into a 'will be,' then I'm not going to let you go out there." As soon as I say the bold words, worry spills through my veins. That worry only magnifies as rage flickers in his eyes.

"Are you giving me an order?" He takes a deliberate step toward me. "You should know that I don't like to be bossed around. The only person who really gets away with it is Reece."

"Um ..." A bit of fear creeps up, but I hold my ground. "Yes, I'm giving you an order."

His eyes narrow. "And you think I'd just, what? Listen to you?"

Smashing my quivering lips together, I shrug. "Hoping, maybe."

He angles his head to the side, his eyes boring into mine. "I didn't really think you had it in you to be so bossy."

"Me, neither." My fingernails claw into the seat fabric as the bus jerks and red eyes flare wildly through the cracked windows. "Blaise, the windows aren't going to hold up for much longer. I think you should just let me go out there."

He tears his gaze off me and takes a good look around. "You're not going out there."

Tears pool in my eyes at the thought of him dying, all because he didn't want me to come in here alone. "You'll die if I don't."

"Maybe not."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, time in Oblivion runs a little differently than in the real world. While we've only been in here for maybe an hour, we've been in the machine for probably over a week. So maybe, if we hold on for just a little bit longer, we'll be pulled out." His gaze meets mine, and the corners of his mouth tip downward. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm worried." Feeling silly, I lift my hand away from the seat to wipe the tears from my eyes.

The second my fingers leave the fabric, the bus abruptly tilts from the front, sending me falling into Blaise. My chest crashes into his and our legs tangle as he catches me in his arms. He loses his footing, and we slam into the back door so hard that the glass cracks against our weight.

I barely have time to worry before the front of the bus drops back to the ground, and we sail in the opposite direction with suitcases and bodies flying around us. We tumble halfway down the aisle before stopping, my back slamming against the floor. A second later, Blaise lands on top of me, bracing his weight with his arms and softening the collision.

Pushing back on his hands, he inspects my face, neck, and arms. "Are you okay?" he asks through ragged breaths.

"I think so." I eye him over like he did me, searching for wounds. "Are you?"

He bobs his head up and down, swallowing hard. "Always."

I suck in an inhale then free it, the scent of him overwhelming me. He smells so

wonderful, like life. I take another inhale and another, my head drifting upward.

Just one little taste ...

He trembles as I near him, and my hunger pains blaze into a desperate starvation.

Put your lips to his and drink him ... See what he tastes like ...

A frown etches across his face. "Allura?"

"Hmmm ...?" My voice sounds so far away.

"Snap out of it." His sharp voice wrenches me out of my trance.

Realization and shame douses over me like a bucket of ice water to the face. Oh, my God, I was about to taste his life.

"I-I'm sorry," I sputter, pressing my hands to his chest to push him off me.

He bends his elbows, lowering his body back down until my arms are squished between our chests. "Don't be sorry." His chest crashes against my hands with every uneven breath he takes. "I think the stress is making you lose control. Take deep breaths and stay with me, okay?"

Closing my eyes, I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. In. Out. In. Out. Once I feel calmer, I crack my eyes open and find Blaise watching me with fear and something undecipherable in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, wanting to make his fear go away. "You don't have to be afraid of me. The hunger's gone now." Or, well, at least more controllable.

A crease forms between his brows. "I'm not afraid of you."

My hands are resting against his chest, and I can feel his heart thundering underneath the metal plate. "Your heart is racing."

"That's not because I'm afraid." He remains still for a heartbeat longer before quickly pushing off me. After running his hand over his head several times, he offers me his hand yet doesn't make eye contact with me. When I lace my fingers through his, he lifts me to my feet then releases my hand. "They're gone."

"Huh?" My gaze flies to the windows spider-webbed with cracks. Not a single Order is in sight, but the emptiness sends a shiver up my spine. "That's strange. Why would they take off?"

"Maybe something scared them off." Scooting a dead body onto the floor, he kneels on a seat and peers out the window. "What the ...?" He jerks back and shoves me down to the ground, right beside a dead, middle-aged woman with red hair and half her cheek missing. She must have died recently, too, because her blood isn't completely dry yet. "Stay there and pretend you're dead."

"Why? What's going on?" I keep my gaze fixed on him, attempting to pretend I'm not lying less than a foot away from a dead body.

"We're about to get hit hard." He wipes his hand over the dead woman's cheek until his fingers are soaked in blood, and then smears it across my face.

My body twinges in revulsion, but I manage to keep my gag reflex under control by reminding myself of all the gross situations I experienced back at the channels. Like the time I watched a Warden split open a Visitor's chest with his bare hands over an argument about payment. His heart landed by my feet and strangely kept beating for quite some time. What made the situation even more disgustingly appalling is that the

Warden ate the heart afterward.

"Whatever happens, don't move, okay?" Blaise says then takes off toward the front of the bus.

The air grows quiet as I lie perfectly still with the scent of blood, sweat, and spoiled flesh making my eyes water. The longer the eerie silence possess the air, the more worried I grow that perhaps Blaise decided to leave the bus and sacrifice himself.

Panic sets in, and I start to get up to go look for him, when the windows of the bus explode as Orders dive through the openings, landing on the seats and aisle. I fall back to the ground as glass spritz through the air like a heavy rainstorm. The sharp edges tear at my face and legs, and blood oozes out for a second before my healing ability kicks in and new flesh grows over the gashes.

"Where is she?" The robotic voice sounds like it's coming from one seat over.

"She's in here somewhere," another one replies from a little farther away. "I saw her come in."

"You know what she looks like, right?" another one asks.

"Of course I do," the first robot snaps.

Their footsteps clink against the floor as they move around the aisle.

Fearing they'll recognize me when they pass, I angle my head toward the dead woman next to me, latch on to her arm, and drag the body over until my face is hidden underneath her shoulder. Then I trap my breath in my chest and slacken my body.

Click. Click. Click. The footsteps get closer.

"What was that thing she was with?" The mechanical voice is unnervingly close, and it takes every ounce of my strength not to quiv

er.

"A human, perhaps."

"No, it wasn't human." Click. Click. Click. "At least, not completely human."

"You think it was part machine?"

Thump. Crack. Boom.

Blaise part machine? Shock briefly rises inside me, but hastily fizzles. If he is half-machine, it would explain his strength, mind-bending ability, and the metal pieces embedded into his flesh.

I twitch as an object bumps my foot, and then I bite down on my lip to keep from breathing loudly.

What the hell are they doing out there?

"It could be. Although, I haven't seen a Forbidden in centuries."

The word dances in my mind. Forbidden. Forbidden. Forbidden.

No, don't call them that. Call them Greystelies.

I have no idea where the voice comes from or what the word even means, but I hardly

time to make sense of it as an icy, hard object whacks me in the foot.

"Well, if it is, we need to take it to Leader," one of the robots insists.

A metal object brushes my bare leg, causing goose bumps to sprout across my flesh.

"I really wish you'd stop calling him that." Metal smacks into my leg hard, and I battle back a wince.

Squeak. Clink. Thump.

"Why? That's what he is."

"He has a name and has asked you to call him it a thousand times."

"Leader is a better name."

"You're a moron."

"Yeah, well you're a--"

The noise of metal scraping metal scratches through the air, making my brain rattle inside my skull. My eyes roll back as my eardrums explode and blood gushes out of my ears. The pain is unbearable. My stomach clenches, and vomit burns at the back of my throat. I want to cry out in pain, but I'm too afraid to move.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I remain motionless, drowning in vomit-inducing pain with my face underneath the dead woman's shoulder. With no eardrums left, I can't hear anything, leaving me blind and deaf to what's going on.

Every time something brushes against my leg or bumps into my foot, I nearly crawl

out of my skin. Still, I don't move and hardly breathe until the woman's body is thrown off me.

Instinctively, I lift my foot up to fight, but realize mid-kick that Blaise is standing at the end of my seat, wiping sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. When he spots my foot heading toward his knee, he darts his hand out, and his fingers enclose around my ankle. Then his lips begin to move, but the sound of his voice doesn't reach my ears.

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My lips part. "I can't hear you."

He flinches as if I yelled. Then his lips move. "Why?"

I lift my hand and unsteadily point at my ear. "Whatever that metal scraping noise was made my eardrums burst. Don't worry, though; I'll heal."

At least, I hope. I don't say that aloud, though.

A frown forms on his face as he eyes me. Then he extends his hand toward me. I slip my fingers through his, and he easily lifts me to my feet as if I weigh nothing. When his fingers leave mine, he brings his hands to my shoulders and rests his forehead against mine.

Can you hear me? His voice fills my head.

I jump, startled, and he starts to pull back, but I put a hand on his hip and guide him back to me.

Yeah, I can hear you, I think, hoping his ability is a two-way street.

He shuts his eyes. Are you okay?

My ears hurt a little bit, but other than that, I think I'm okay.

Good. I think we should be okay for a while.

Why? Where did the Orders go?

They ran away because of that noise you heard, he explains

What was that noise? I ask.

A noise I learned to make when I was very young. My mom taught it to me after our house was raided by Orders. Told me if I ever needed to send a bunch of them away to make the noise. His breath dusts across my cheeks, tickling my skin, and my fingers on his hips twitch, skimming the strip of flesh right above his pants.

A shiver rolls over me, and not necessarily in a bad way. The strange, new sensation sends warmth over my skin and, not knowing how to react, my body shudders again.

You're shivering. Blaise pulls back to look me in the eye, placing his fingers on my temple. Are you sure you're not hurt?

I nod, my cheeks heating for reasons I can't comprehend. I'm fine.

He studies me with a pucker forming at his brow, and I squirm under his scrutiny, again for reasons I don't understand. Or maybe I sort of do, but I'm just confused.

My thoughts wander to the guy I once thought I loved, who later found out what I was and hunted me. From what I can remember, I shivered this way around him whenever he touched me or looked at me a certain way. I liked the feeling at the time, but loathed it after he crushed my heart.

Heartbreak ... I know that feeling.

Blaise presses his lips together.

My eyes pop wide. Did he just hear that?

We should probably go before the Orders come back, Blaise pushes his voice into my head again. I'm going to move my fingers away from your head. If you need anything, just tap me on the arm, okay?

When I nod, he walks toward the front of the bus. I follow, moving slowly as I cautiously step over the dead bodies and glass all over the floor. With every step, my ears pulsate with pain, but I keep a straight face every time Blaise looks back at me, not wanting to worry him.

When he reaches the door, he picks up the seats and tosses them out the broken windshield. Then he bashes the door open with his foot, hops outside, and motions for me to come down.

I trot down the tilted stairway and stop at his side, grabbing his arm.

Now what? I ask tensely, looking around at the glass on the ground and the upside-down vehicles.

He presses his fingers to the side of my head. Now we try to find a place to lay low until Reece pulls us out of here. We can also look around and see if you can remember anything, but only if we're careful.

When I nod, he moves his fingers away and steps back. He doesn't offer me his hand as he starts up the road in the direction we were before we were attacked by the Orders. I find the move a bit strange, since he's been holding my hand most of the time we've been here. He's probably on overload from all the touching we did while rolling around on the bus's floor.

Telling myself not to look too much into his behavior, I jog to catch up with him.

Then we walk side by side, our guard up, as we zigzag around broken down vehicles and the occasional dead body.

The sky gradually begins to shift from a grimy grey to a pastel orange pink, illuminating the land with a sunset glow. The sight would be breathtaking, except for the corpses lying in the road, in the cars, and on the sidewalks.

I try my best not to look at the dead bodies, but the air reeks of rotting meat left out in the sun for days. The smell makes my eyes water and my soul ache. So much death in this place. So much pain. So much destruction.

Caused by you.

The voice that nudges into my thoughts isn't my own, yet I've heard it many, many times before. Like most things, I can't place from where.

Who are you? I silently whisper.

My only response is soundlessness.

Sighing, I fix my concentration on the collapsed stores and office buildings surrounding us. The feeling that I'm being watched creeps up on me again.

I think we're being watched, I tell Blaise once I hop over a tipped-over shopping cart and lightly touch his arm.

He inches closer to me until his shoulder touches mine. Then he reaches around and places his finger to my temple. I think so, too. Keep an eye out for anything that looks out of the ordinary.

I nod, questioning what is considered extraordinary since everything about this world

feels different.

We continue hiking up the road, on edge, and remaining fairly quiet since I can't hear. A thousand questions burn at the tip of my tongue. I want to ask him where we are heading, how long before the Orders come back, how long does he think we'll be in here.

After what feels like an eternity, my hearing sluggishly returns, starting with the intake of my breath to the thudding of my clunky boots hitting the pavement, then to Blaise singing.

Wait? Blaise is singing?

He has an amazing voice, soft and soothing, and the tragically, sexy and beautiful lyrics make my stomach do weird kickflips. I listen for a while, feeling a tad guilty for eavesdropping, but not enough to declare the regrowth of my eardrums and ruin the moment.

"You can hear again, can't you?" he announces, cutting off the song mid-chorus.

"What? No." Warmth spreads across my cheeks as I realize that in my answer, I've outed my lie.

He glances at me, the light of the sunset glinting against the piercings in his face. "For how long?"

"I don't know ... Only, like, five minutes or so ..." I pull a guilty face. "I'm sorry I didn't say anything. It's just ... your singing made me feel calmer than I have in a while."

He slows down, whirls around, and walks backward in front of me. "You know, if

someone else had spied on me while I was singing, I'd probably put them in a headlock."

I slow down before I run into him. "Are you going to put me in a headlock?"

"You don't sound the slightest bit afraid of the idea," he says with a cock of his brow.

I sigh dramatically. "I thought we already established that I'm not afraid of you, just like you're apparently not afraid of me."

He comes to a stop in front of two large, rusted trucks. "I'm not."

"I'm starting to believe you." I halt in front of him and fiddle with the zipper of my torn jacket. "So maybe you should start believing me when I say I'm not afraid of you."

His muscles flex as he folds his arms, the bronzed metal on his chest a shimmering gold against the fading sunlight. "You still aren't, even after what you heard on the bus?" His eyes are devoid of all emotion, his tone flat, but tension radiates from his body.

"Are you talking about what the Orders said?" I ask, and he nods. "Of course I'm not afraid of you. I don't really care what you are, Blaise, and I'd be a hypocrite if I did."

"You're not worse than me." He sinks down on the hood of a car and stares at a fallen billboard blocking the rustic, beamed entrance to a slender building. "You have no idea of all the stuff I've done ..." His throat muscles work as he swallows hard. "Horrible stuff."

"I could say the same thing to you," I say quietly. "I've seen--and heard--some stuff from my memories that makes me believe I was once an awful person."

His gaze sk

irts to mine, and the pain in his eyes causes my breath to hitch. "Allura ... I've killed people with my bare hands."

I swallow an uneven breath. "I think I have, too. And back on the bus ... when I wanted to ... drink your life ... If I went through with it, I probably would've killed you."

He shakes his head. "No, you wouldn't have."

"You don't know that for sure."

"Yes, I do."

Shame crushes my chest, and I lower my gaze to my feet. "Back when we were in the Forsaken tent ... when I tried to take that guy's life ... I think I once tried to do that when a guy kissed me. I have a feeling I have more memories like that locked away in my head." I glance around the desolate streets. "Maybe while we're in here, they'll come out."

He doesn't utter a word, and his silence makes me extremely nervous.

I start to look at him when he whispers, "I can prove it to you."

Confusion swirls in my mind. "What do you mean?"

An unsteady breath eases from his lips. "I mean, I can prove to you that you won't kill someone, even if you completely and utterly tempted to drink their life."

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My perplexity soars. "How?"

His gaze drops to my lips, and he audibly gulps. "By showing you."

One, two, three seconds tick by before what he's saying clicks.

"You want to kiss me?" My squeaky voice is worse than the scraping metal noise that made me go deaf.

His eyes enlarge as he sputters, "We don't have to, if you don't want to." He stands up. "You know what? Forget I said it. I have no damn clue what I'm thinking." He turns his back on me and starts to walk off mumbling, "Ryder was right; I seriously misread people."

Feeling awful, I rush around in front of him. "That's not what I meant." Tiny, erratic breaths rush from my lips as self-doubt and nervousness surges through me. "It's just ... I'm afraid you might be wrong. And that little bit of fear makes me hesitant to try." I reach out and twine our fingers together. "Unless I know that I definitely won't hurt you, I can't take that risk, even if I want to."

He studies me with suspicion. "Are you sure that's not the only reason? Maybe, deep down, you're afraid of me, and you're just realizing it."

"No, that's not it at all," I admit truthfully. Sure, I'm afraid, but of myself, not him. Besides, kissing is ... well, foreign. While my memories are a jigsaw puzzle with tons of missing pieces, I'm almost positive I've never kissed anyone before. Not fully, not without hunger ending it quickly. "I don't want to hurt you--"

His lips collide with mine, silencing whatever I was going to say, and a thick haze instantly clouds my mind as my eyes close.

Kiss ... I'm kissing someone ... Kissing Blaise.

The kiss is rough, reckless, and we're both a bundle of nerves, unsure where to put our hands or what to do with our mouths. But for an unordinary moment, I feel content, at peace, warmth cascading over my body.

His lips are so soft.

He tastes so good.

I want more ...

A spark ignites in my chest; a powerful flame that craves more fuel.

Taste. Drink. Live forever.

I suck in a breath and grasp his arms, obeying the hunger.

No! Don't! a familiar voice screams through my mind. You can't do this to him or yourself!

My eyes snap open, and I start to pull back, but my lips magnetize toward his again, seeking more.

Peace.

So at peace.

I part his lips with my tongue, and a husky noise escapes the back of his throat as his trembling fingers dig into my waist.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?"

Blaise and I both tense at the same time, and a shiver slithers up my spine. Not the good kind of shiver. It's the foul, sickening, this-is-terribly-bad kind of shiver.

That voice ... I know it.

My heart nearly stops as my mind makes the connection.

The guy who murdered me in my memories.

Chapter 9

The Time Traveler

"Kissing, Allura?" he tsks. "I thought you would've learned your lesson by now."

Blaise and I jerk back at the same time. I start to spin around, but Blaise seizes me by the waist, practically lifts me up, and deposits me on the ground behind him.

"Stay away from her," he snarls with his arms expanded at his sides.

"You act like I'm here to harm her." Amusement dances in the stranger's tone. "Yet, you know nothing about me."

"You're a stranger in a strange world filled with death," Blaise snaps, the veins in his arms bulging. "That's all I need to know."

I stand on my tiptoes and peer over Blaise's shoulder to look at the guy's face, which has been a mystery to me both times we've crossed paths.

He's casually leaning against one of the over-sized trucks with his arms folded across his chest. His black jeans blend in with his black boots, hoodie, and gloves. With the hood drawn over his head and the collar of his jacket pulled over his mouth, I can't see his face, only the shadow of his eyes and nose.

"And how do you know I did it?" I can feel the guy's eyes shift to me. "There you are. I've been waiting for you to show up here again. Although, I figured you'd be alone like you always are. Looks like you learned something new since the last time I killed you."

"Killed?" Blaise bites out the word, stepping forward to charge at the stranger.

"No, don't." I latch onto a belt loop in his jeans and dig my heels into the ground, but Blaise throws his weight forward, and I trip, stumbling after him.

The stranger laughs as we near him. "Relax, Blaise, I'm not going to hurt her right now."

Blaise screeches to an abrupt stop, causing me to plow into him. My cheek smacks against his back, and my palms splay his sides as I steady my balance. Blaise hardly notices the contact, his muscles barely spasm.

"How do you know my name?" he asks. When the guy doesn't answer, his fingers curl into fists at his sides. "Who are you?"

"Why don't you ask Allura?" the stranger taunts. "I bet she's dying to tell you."

I move up next to Blaise with my shoulders squared, but my stomach clenches with

trepidation. "I don't know who you are, either."

He mumbles, "Must we go through this every single time?"

Blaise glances at me with his brows furrowed and mouths, "What's going on?"

I shrug. I want to tell him about how I saw the guy twice in my memories, but I'm unsure if I should say this in front of the stranger.

As if sensing my need for secrecy, Blaise presses two fingers to the corner of my eye, keeping his gaze secured on the stranger.

Okay, what's going on? he asks. Who is this guy?

I'm not sure. I glance at the stranger from the corner of my eye and find him observing us with curiosity. I've seen him in my memories twice. Once he was dragging me to my death, and the other, he ... I bottle down my nerves. He killed me.

Blaise snarls with anger flaring in his eyes.

He knew I'd come back to life, I quickly add. He said he killed me a ton of times, but I always came back ... And that the Grim couldn't get ahold of me. Then lives and worlds would be destroyed.

But they've already gotten ahold of you.

I know ... And maybe that's why your world was destroyed. The thought throat punches me from out of nowhere, and I suck in a startled breath. Oh, my God, I think I ruined your planet.

Blaise hastily shakes his head. No, there's no way. It happened way before you or I

were born.

I steal a glance at the guy, questioning if he can somehow hear our conversation. Go ahead, his body posture teases. Tell him.

I return my focus back on Blaise, guilt clutching my throat. Can I do it? Can I tell him what I heard the guy say in the memory?

Allura, you can tell me anything, Blaise says, reminding me that he can hear every single one of my thoughts. I won't judge you. I'd be a hypocrite if I did.

With my lips smashed together, I suck in a steady breath through my nose. In one of my memories, the guy said he had

n't seen me for over a century, which would make me much older than I look. Maybe old enough to have been around when the Grim ruined your planet.

How can that be possible? Blaise keeps a neutral expression, but I can feel his pulse thundering in his fingertips.

I shrug. Maybe it has something to do with my rapid healing rate. Maybe it makes me age slower, too.

I didn't mean your age. I meant, how can the Grim getting ahold of you ruin our planet, especially since, when they had you, all they did was lock you in a cell and let the occasional visitor feed off you? He shakes his head. No, I'm not buying it. This guy ... He glares at the stranger. He's lying.

"You think so?" the guy questions with a hint of hilarity.

The air electrifies with piercing tension as reality slaps me hard across the face.

He could hear our entire telepathic conversation?

"You're a Forbidden," Blaise states, his hand falling to his side.

"Nope." The stranger straightens and takes a deliberate step toward us. "But I do have some of your abilities."

"How is that possible?" Blaise moves his arm in front of me possessively as the man takes another step closer. "That's close enough."

The guy dares another step before pausing. "So protective of her." His gaze skirts to me. "If you knew her whole story, you might not be."

"Doubtful." Blaise doesn't budge. "Now, are you going to tell us why you're here and how you know us? Or am I going to have to beat it out of you?"

The guy wags his finger at us. "Such violence. I forgot you were like that."

"Tell me how you know me," Blaise says threateningly. "I sure as hell can't remember you."

"Oh, that's because you haven't met me yet," he replies simply. "But one day you will."

Blaise hesitates. "How have we never met, yet you know me?"

"Because I've met you already ..." He tugs his collar down just far enough that we can see the smirk on his face. "In the future."

"If you've met us in the future, then that would make you a ..." Blaise drifts off, struggling for an answer.

"Time traveler." The answer falls off my tongue absentmindedly. I stand taller, moving around Blaise's arm. I inch toward the man, but Blaise latches on to the hem of my jacket, forcing me to stay back. "You're a time traveler, and so am I."

His smile broadens as he shakes his head. "No, you're not, sweetheart. And this is a conversation we've had many, many times before."

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"Don't ever call me that." My icy cold tone startles both the stranger and myself.

"You're different than the last time I saw you." He yanks the collar of his shirt back over his mouth, the fabric muffling his voice. "That is going to make things more complicated."

"What things?" Blaise demands, positioning himself in front of me again. "Answer me or--"

"You'll make me. I know, I know. We've been down this road before, and it never ends well for either of us," the guy sneers, rolling up his sleeves. "All right, time to move on from this little charade. I have the perfect idea."

"If you do anything to her, I'll break every one of your damn fingers," Blaise warns with his fists balled.

The man opens and flexes his fingers. "Oh, I'm not going to do anything to her. Just you."

"Go ahead and try," Blaise retorts. "You won't get very far."

"Blaise," I warn underneath my breath. "Be careful."

While I don't know what this man is capable of, I've felt the strength of his hands around my neck and breathed in his desire to kill.

"Maybe not then, but I've changed a lot since the last time we did this." The stranger

stares at Blaise as he raises his hands to his sides. "It's a shame you don't know this part yet, because it's by far my favorite. Although, not yours."

Wiggling his fingers, the ground begins to alter beneath us, shaking and rupturing apart like cracked glass. The sky follows, cracking and splintering into uneven squares that shift around and reposition, the stars quickly fading in a wave of red, erasing the night--the world. Then buildings begin to crumble, evaporating into a cloud of dust that glides across the ground and obliterates the asphalt and cars. A dust devil funnels around us at a powerful rate, yet somehow we remain in place.

"You're sending us back to the red sky world?" I shout at the stranger over the screeching of the violent wind. "Is that how you're going to kill me this time? Send me back before I'm healed?"

"Healing isn't what you have to worry about." He swishes his hands downward and the wind dies, the changing scenery freezing.

I wipe the dust from my eyes. "Then how are you going to kill me this time?"

He draws down the top of his jacket to reveal his smirk. "I wasn't here for you. Well, not completely. I'll return when the time is right to destroy you before the Grim get ahold of you, like I always do."

With a blink of his eyes, he vanishes into nothingness, leaving me standing in the middle of the desert of the red sky world, confounded, lost, and alarmingly on edge. "Now what do we do?" I ask, twisting around toward Blaise. Where he stood a few moments ago is now vacant.

I spin around, shielding my eyes from the glinting redness of the sky. The flat, bare land allows me to see for miles. And nothing. Absolutely nothing is around me, except for the occasional tumbleweed and shallow hill.

Blaise is gone, and the awareness of what the time traveler meant smacks me in the stomach, nearly bringing me to my knees. The stranger wasn't here for me. He was here for Blaise. Why?

What exactly did he do to him? Send him out of the Oblivion? Send him someplace else?

The worse realization comes next, like a blow to the heart.

Did the traveler kill Blaise?

Is Blaise dead?

Chapter 10

Before the Branding of Flesh

I stand in disbelief for way too long before panic gushes through my veins and pummels straight into my heart. My skin beads with sweat as I reel in a circle, looking left, right, up, down, refusing to accept that Blaise could be dead.

"Blaise!" I call out, my panicked voice reverberating across the deserted acres of sand. "Blaise, are you here?"

A breeze whisks through the air, blowing strands of hair into my face, and flakes of dust spray against parts of my exposed body. But as rapidly as the wind picks up, the air unexpectedly goes still.

I cup my hands around my mouth. "Blaise!" I shout as I head toward a speck of silver glistening in the distance; the Broken City, I'm assuming. "Blaise, please, if you're somewhere close by, answer me."

Deep down, I know my search is useless. If Blaise were nearby, I would see him. But giving up seems like a horrible decision. Besides, I have no place to go. I'm stuck here, alone, until Reece figures out how to bring me back from the brink of death.

Not knowing what else to do, I begin trekking across the desert. The longer I walk, the more the thick soles of my worn boots scuff against the dirt, my footsteps becoming lethargic. The sunlight blasts down, coating my skin with a sticky layer of sweat, and the dust in the air clings to the dampness, making me feel icky.

Hunger and thirst choke at my throat as dehydration and starvation set in. The feeling reminds me of when I was trapped in the channels and the Wardens would revoke my eating and drinking privileges. Still, I continued to survive, even when I didn't taste the wetness of water on my tongue for weeks on end.

I never thought about how odd my ability to live off nothing was until I observed the way Ryder and Reece needed food and water at least once a day. At least, that's how I was, but now ...

I topple over, collapsing onto my knees as hunger pains pinch my stomach. Dryness of the mouth and throat soon follow, magnifying the discomfort in my belly. It doesn't make sense. I've only been in the Oblivion for hours, yet I feel like I'm starving to death and dying of thirst. How is that possible? Then I remember what Blaise told me about how time moves differently in the Oblivion.

Coldness slinks up my back, bringing on chills, as I become painfully aware that I've actually been here for weeks and my real body could be wilting away into skin and bones. I don't know what to do to fix the problem.

The city could hold food and water, but it's forever away. And I'm uncertain eating in here would nourish my real body. Blaise did tell me if I died while I was in the Oblivion, my physical body would die, too, so maybe.

"It could work," I murmur, lifting my heavy head to measure the miles of desert in front of me. "If I could find food and water."

Do you even want to? A voice emerges in my mind. You could just go, you know. Give up and let the world be saved.

Don't listen to him, a voice like my own warns. Your death won't save the world. Only destroy it.

The other voice laughs. Like you know anything. You just don't want to die.

Allura, don't listen to him. He wants you to die.

"Who does?" I ask aloud, my head throbbing. "The time traveler?"

No, the leader ...

"The leader of who?" I wait for an answer, but one never comes. "Is it the same leader the Orders were talking about?"

Again, my only response is the wind.

Sucking in a feeble breath, I shift my weight forward and stagger to my feet. Though my legs gripe in protest as I straighten and trudge forward, I keep moving, one foot in front of the other, determined to make it to the city.

"Well, well, well, lookie what I found," a raspy voice scrapes at my ears.

I reel around so swiftly I just about topple over again, but thankfully I manage to keep my footing.

"W-who are you?" I stammer to the man standing only a handful of feet away from me.

He's dressed in holey pants and a frayed jacket. The hood lowered from his head reveals thinning hair and a gnarly scar running down the front of his face. His teeth are yellow, eyes bloodshot, and his leathery skin is sunburnt. His aged and worn appearance immediately declares he isn't Grim, but the evil smirk on his face and the gun slung over his shoulder makes me wonder if my life is in danger.

His grin expands as his eyes scan up and down my body. "It's not every day I come across a woman out in the middle of the desert, all by her little ol' lonesome." He starts to circle me, and I turn with him, not allowing him to get behind me. He comes to a stop and glowers at me. "You're gonna hold still and let me getta good look at ya."

Shaking my head, I back away from him. "Stay away from me."

His lip curls as I dare another step in the opposite direction. "Fine, we'll do this the hard w

ay." He removes the gun from his shoulder and aims the barrel at me. "Now come here so I can see how much your pretty little body is worth."

"No." Spinning around, I take off in a mad run, but I don't make it very far before the gun fires off.

A metallic scent bites at the air as a fiery pain scorches against the back of my leg. It whips from my leg to my chest to my brain, and my knees give out as my stomach clenches. I crumble to the ground and land flat on my face.

Coughing up a mouthful of dirt, I flip over and glance down at my leg. Blood gushes

out of an open wound and stains the dirt beneath me.

"I tried to warn ya." The man stalks toward me, gun in hand. "You wanderers never listen." He crouches down and taps the end of the gun to the side of my head. "Not too bright in the head, are ya?"

Smashing my palm over the wound, I scoot away from him.

He cackles with laughter. "Man, you're a stubborn one." He straightens his legs, pushing to his feet. "That's okay. I love a challenge." He drapes the gun back over his shoulder and shoots me a crooked grin. "And breaking the challenge out of stubborn people." He ambles toward me, his wicked smile growing as I struggle to get my feet under me.

Every time I get upright, my injured leg gives out, and I end up collapsing repeatedly to the ground.

When he reaches me, he stomps the bottom of his boot against my chest and shoves me back down. "All right, play time is over." He pushes all his weight down, pushing the oxygen from my lungs and pinning me to the dirt. "Now I just need to figure out what to do with ya." He cocks his head to the side as he studies me with greedy eyes. "Keep ya for myself or turn ya over to the Grim and get a hefty reward."

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Refusing to surrender, I reach up and stab my fingernails into his leg until I can feel his skin peeling apart. He cries out in pain, his face contorting in agony as he trips back. Seizing the distraction, I smash my boot into his kneecap and the contact makes a sickening crack. He groans as he buckles over, grasping his knee.

"Ya stupid bitch," he seethes through gritted teeth. "I'm gonna make ya pay for that."

I launch to my feet, but I move too eagerly and tumble right back down. Gritting my teeth, I flip over, put most of my weight on my good leg, then gradually stand up. Once I'm fully standing, I hobble across the desert, leaving a trail of blood behind me.

"Ya ain't going nowhere!" the man shouts over a click.

I throw a glance over my shoulder and cringe as I see him reloading. Quickening to a sloppy jog, I battle the wooziness funneling through my mind and stomach, and run as fast as I can. What really makes me sick is knowing I already lived this scene before, but I can't recall the conclusion--if the guy captures me or not--so I'm left blindly running into the unknown.

The gun goes off again, and a bullet tears through my shoulder. As the wound sputters blood, I drop to the dirt, gasping for air.

I roll over and blink fiercely against the sunlight.

Get up! Get up! Get up!

I try to obey the voice, but my legs and arms remain limply sprawled across the dirt.

"Told ya not to run," the guy wheezes as a shadow casts over me. His face is screwed up in pain, his skin pale, and a glare is etched into his features. He stares at the blood spurting from my shoulder and leg then glances down at his knee. "Goddammit, I think ya broke my kneecap. Do ya know how much of a pain in the ass it's gonna be to get home?" His eyes blast daggers at me. "Guess, I'm gonna just have to leave ya out here to rot in the sun." Maneuvering his leg awkwardly, he plops down beside me and reaches for my face. "Such a shame."

I flinch as his fingertips graze my cheekbone and turn my head away from him. With his other hand, he roughly grabs my chin and forces me to look him dead in the eye. Then he leisurely traces his fingertips down the side of my face to my neck, collarbone, lingering on my shoulder.

"Such a pretty thing." He sketches a trail down my arm to my wrist. "Too bad you're gonna die. I coulda made bank on ya." He lines his fingers with my pulse, and then his thin brows pinch. "Awfully steady for a dying woman." He rotates my branded wrist upward, skimming his thumb along the inside of my wrist, causing a foul chill to coil across my skin. "Pretty little unmarked flesh."

Unmarked?

Angling my head to the side, I catch sight of my wrist. Nothing but a few clusters of freckles mark my skin.

This is before I was captured.

"Ya know what?" His eyes gleam with desire as his fingers roam toward the button of his pants. "I think after I'm done with ya, I'm gonna drag ya to the nearest channel and turn ya in for a reward." He flicks the button undone then drags the zipper down. When he notices my expression, a pleased smile lights up his face. "Yeah, keep looking at me with fear in your pretty little eyes. I think I like it." Keeping his bad

knee locked, he slides his leg around then leans forward and places his hands beside my head, trapping me between his arms. His tongue slips out to wet his blistered lips. Then he lowers his mouth toward mine.

For a wildly, reckless moment, I contemplate allowing his lips to touch mine so I can suck his life dry until nothing is left but a bag of saggy flesh and broken bones.

Do it! Kill him! Make him hurt for what he's about to do to you!

I inhale deeply and crinkle my nose at the pungent taste of the man's life. He may be living, breathing, and moving around, but death has contaminated him. The taste of approaching death tastes bitter on my tongue and floods my lungs with a stench so potent that I dry heave.

"That's it," he purrs. "Shake with fear."

"No." My loud, steady voice startles us both.

He snarls, but then his gaze zips to my shoulder. "What the ...? How the hell did you heal?" He slants closer, getting distracted by the freshly grown skin over the wound.

Scrounging up every ounce of strength I have in me, I lift my other arm, bringing my hand around the back of his head and grabbing the back of his neck. I pierce my nails into his flesh and yank him back, but he whips his arm around, smacks my arm, and grabs a fistful of my hair.

"Nope. You're not gettin' out of this. Not after what I saw." Tugging at my hair, he clumsily stands up.

My head pulsates with excruciating pain as he yanks on my hair again.

"Let go of me!" I shout, kicking and writhing my body.

He laughs and starts walking, dragging me by my hair.

"Help!" I scream at the top of my lungs as I reach up and slap him in the back.

He lets out a grunt but doesn't glance back as he takes longer strides.

I fight for a few more minutes until he begins to whistle a recognizable tune. The same tune Blaise was singing earlier. Wondering if he knows Blaise, I crane my neck to the side to memorize his features. That way, when I reunite with Blaise, I can give an accurate description.

What if you never see him again?

Despair burrows through my mind as I turn back around and watch the red-tinted dirt and sparse, shallow hills stream by me in a lifeless blur. A memory of the first time I experienced this moment tugs at the back of my mind. Bit by bit, I start to piece together the journey I'm about to embark on and have embarked on before.

This is how I ended up in the channels. This man turns me in, and then the Grim kill him.

Knowing I'm returning to that horrid place ... to relive those wretched days of torture and depression ...

No ... I can't do it ... Not again ...

I dig the heels of my boots into the dirt.

I can't do it ...

Fight!

I scream until my lungs are on the verge of combusting, kicking at the ground. I reach my arms above my head, trying to force my hair to rip from my skull. I thrash around, hit the man in the back, kick at the ground--do everything and anything to get free. Nothing works, and all I'm left with is an aching hope that I'll starve to death before we get to the channels.

"Just a bit longer," the guy announces after about an hour goes by. "I'm pretty sure there's an entrance close by ... I just need to find it ... Oh, wait a minute, there it is."
He

accelerates to a jog, and I jostle around, bouncing from side to side. "Hey! I got something for ya! It's real good, too!"

"If you come any closer, I'll have to snap your neck," an all too familiar voice proclaims, causing my capturer to stop dead in his tracks.

Lex?

God, no...

Heavy footsteps storm across the desert, growing closer, closer, closer. Fear chokes me, making breathing complicated.

"What do you have?" Lex asks as his shadow falls over me.

The man rotates around, gripping my hair tight as he gestures at me with his free hand. "Look for yourself."

Lex's face appears in my line of sight; soulless, dark eyes landing on me. His nostrils

flare as he inhales. "Well, isn't this a divine scent. Almost as good as quercu ..." His chest puffs out as he intakes more air. "No ... Maybe even better ..." He tears his eyes off me and looks at the man. "I'll take her from here."

The man grins from ear-to-ear. "Not without my reward, ya won't."

One corner of Lex's mouth spasms. "Of course. And a fine reward it shall be." His mouth opens to a toothy smile, then his hands dart out and he encloses his fingers around the man's neck.

The man's eyes bulge as Lex lifts him off the ground by his neck.

"Help ..." the man gasps as he releases my hair.

The wind is sucked out of my lungs as I fall to the ground and on my back.

"Oh, I'm going to help you." Lex offers him one final grin before kinking his wrist and snapping the man's neck like a twig.

I scramble to my feet as Lex drops the man's lifeless body. I make it three steps before he catches my hair and hauls me against him.

"You're not going anywhere." He snakes his arms around my waist and holds me against him as he presses his nose to the side of my neck. Then he breathes in and lets out a euphoric exhale. "You smell delicious ... If it wasn't for the laws, I'd keep you for myself." He sniffs me again before scooping me up and slinging me over his shoulder.

"Let me go!" I shout, pounding my fists against his back.

He strides forward, unfazed. "Fight all you want, but this is your new home."

I fight harder, punching and screaming. Time is running out, and soon, I'll be a prisoner again.

Please let me die ... Please let me die ... Please let me--

Abruptly, a wave of numbness crashes over me, starting at my toes and swishing all the way up to the top of my head. A feeling of calmness blankets over me, but it gets chipped away by the feeling I'm being watched.

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I tilt my head to the side, and then every single one of my muscles tighten.

Standing out in the distance is a copy of me, wearing the same tattered dress and scuffed leather jacket. And I'm not alone. Blaise is next to me, his fingers laced through mine, a worried look on his face.

What the ...? Ghosts?

They flicker in and out of focus as the gnawing pain in my brain and muscles goes quiet. The world around me paralyzes as my eyelids softly slip shut.

At peace. I feel so at peace.

Guess I really can die ...

Chapter 11

Reviving the Near Dead

"Allura, open your eyes," Ryder's wonderful voice caresses my ears. However, doubt weighs on my mind.

No ... It's not real ... It has to be Lex or another Warden messing with my mind.

"Allura," Ryder pleads. "Please wake up."

I shake my head from side to side. No ... I don't want to ... I don't want to see the

channels again.

"Sweetheart." Rough skin caresses my cheek. "I know it's scary, but I need you to open your eyes so I can know if the cure worked."

Fearing this is a side effect of one of the Warden's injections, my eyes remain lowered. I want to be brave, but I'm not ready to face the truth yet; acknowledge that my freedom is gone and that I'm going to relive my days in that cell. That Ryder, Reece, and Blaise are no more. That this was all a dream I've sunk into to deal with my traumatic reality.

"She's not opening her eyes," Ryder says, sounding severely concerned. "Does that mean it didn't work?"

"Don't jump to conclusions just yet," Reece tells him. "She may be a bit disoriented."

"A bit disoriented?" Ryder questions. "Her eyes aren't even open."

"Give her a minute," Reece says in a calm but firm tone. "She's been under for weeks. It could take her a few hours to come out of it."

Warm air tickles my cheek as Ryder heaves a sigh. "I hope you're right."

"I usually am," Reece reminds him. "Now sit back and give her some time."

The fingers resting on my cheek move away, leaving my skin chilling cold.

Silence engulfs me, the stillness rattling my already fragile nerves. I want to move, open my eyes, see why it feels like someone is watching me. But then I'd have to deal with the consequences of the truth, and I'm growing quite fond of my delusional bubble. Well, at first, anyway.

The more time trickles by, the more unsettled I become. Restlessness stirs inside me, driving me to the brink of insanity until I finally can't take it anymore.

With a preparing breath, I open my eyes and face the outcome I probably deserve, if I'm being entirely honest and unselfish.

A neon yellow light instantly overwhelms my vision, and I wince, my eyeballs feeling as though they're bleeding.

"Shit, sorry. I forgot I had that on."

When the light dims, Reece's face materializes above me. His scruffy jawline hasn't been shaven in at least a week, his brown hair is a chaotic mess, and dark bags reside under his worry-filled eyes.

"Can you hear me?" He aims a tiny flashlight into my eyes. "Her pupils are responsive." Fingers press to the inside of my wrist as he glances at the watch on his wrist. "Her pulse is steady." He leans closer with a crease forming between his brows. "And she seems to be breathing normally."

"Then why isn't she saying anything?" Ryder leans over me. Like Reece, his jawline is covered in scruff, his blond hair is a crazy mess, and he looks sleep-deprived.

"I don't know yet." Reece tosses the flashlight onto a table then rests his hand beside my head. "Maybe you should go get Rae."

Nodding, Ryder spins around to leave.

"Wait," I manage to croak out. "I'm fine."

Reece sits up straighter while Ryder reels back around, relief washing over his

features.

"You can hear us?" Reece asks, reaching toward a square, beeping machine. He pushes a few buttons and the lines on the screen blink. Then he faces me again. "For how long?"

"A while." I rest my hand on the base of my parched throat and look around. I'm lying in a bed, in a room made of dark grey grated walls. A blanket is pulled over me and wires run from my wrists and head to a small machine balanced on top of a stainless steel table. "I could've spoken sooner, but I was afraid you guys weren't real." I'm still slightly doubtful.

This place feels so cold, like the Wardens' experiment rooms. As I take in the warmth and kindness in Ryder and Reece's eyes, though, my skepticism dissipates. Wardens couldn't create such warm emotions. This place ... Them ... It must be real.

"Where am I?" I cough against the scratchiness at the back of my throat.

"I'll get her some water," Ryder says, hurrying off somewhere.

"You're at Leviter Station." Reece sits on the edge of the bed and brushes my hair out of my eyes. "How much do you remember?"

I search my mind for the answer. "Climbing up a cliff ... Falling ... You guys saying that I was shot by the Kiss of Death. Blaise driving through a Tracker ... Passing out ... Waking up in water ... Blaise and I going to a world filled with death ... A stranger showing up ... Blaise disap--" I quickly shoot upright and end up smacking heads with Reece.

He moans, pressing the heel of his hand to his forehead while using his other hand to steady me by my shoulder. "Easy. The medication I used to counteract the effect of

the Kiss of Death has some strange side effects."

"Like what?" I wave my hand around in front of me. I can barely keep track of the speedy movement.

"Like your brain's inability to control how your body moves." Reece captures my hand then slips his fingers through mine. "You might want to take it easy on moving around too much until you regain more control over your body. In fact, you should probably lie back down."

I nod and the whole room bounces. "I can do that ... after I see Blaise." I need to know he's okay, more than I've ever needed anything.

Reece stiffens, his lips parting. "Allura, there's something I need to--"

"Here. Drink this." Ryder returns with a cup.

I reach for it but move too fast and nearly knock it out of his hands.

"Sorry," I sputter, pulling back.

"No apologizing for things that aren't your fault, remember?" Ryder playfully scolds, wagging his finger at me. Then he moves the cup toward my face. "Open up."

I obey, unhinging my jaw, and he moves the straw into my mouth.

"Now, drink."

Feeling a little embarrassed that he's taking care of me, I wrap my lips around the straw. The second the refreshingly cold water spills down my throat, any embarrassment flies away to the sky, never to be found.

Reaching up slowly, I place my hands atop of his and around the cup, slurping down the water savagely.

"She's dehydrated," Ryder comments with concern as I continue to guzzle the water.

"That's understandable." Reece checks the monitor again. "She was in the Oblivion for nearly three weeks."

"Yeah, but usually people drink while they're in there," Ryder says. "Allura, didn't you drink anything?"

I shake my head from side to side, removing my lips from the straw. "We never got a chance."

Ryder moves the cup away from my mouth. "How come?"

I wiggle around until the wires attached to me aren't pulling so tightly, but I move too fast and nearly fall off the bed. When Ryder steadies me, I offer him a grateful smile.

"There was a lot going on in the memory Blaise and I were in," I explain. "First, these Orders showed up ... Wait. Couldn't you guys see what was going on in there? I thought that's what the point of the Oblivion was ... so you guys could see my memories."

"Normally, it is." Reece brings his knee up onto my bedside. "Because of the circumstances of why you were in there, things worked a little differently."

I glance back and forth between the two of them. "You mean because I was dying?"

Reece nods, his throat muscles working hard as he swallows. "We basically had to toss you in there without much prep time, so we

weren't able to monitor much." He pauses, contemplating. "Plus, your brain works a little differently and the machine struggled to completely connect with you."

My shoulders slump, my gaze descending to my hands. "Different how?"

"I don't know yet, but we will figure it out." Reece hitches a finger under my chin and forces me to look at him. The kindness in his expression makes eye contact easier than I thought. "I know you're nervous, but I'd really like to have Rae look at you. She's a lot smarter than me, and she might have a better answer to what's going on."

"You mean, the doctor here?" I ask, fidgeting. "The one Mable told me to see?"

"She told you to see Rae?" Ryder asks, reminding me that he and Reece don't know the entire story of what happened back at the East City Post when Mable tested my blood on moonstone. Only Blaise does, because he could hear through the walls.

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Blaise.

"She did after she tested my blood and found I had traces of Grim in me." I sit up straight and reach to throw the blanket off me. "Blaise actually heard everything she said, so maybe we should talk about this with him."

I start to get up, but Reece sets a hand on my shoulder and gently guides me back down.

"Allura, you can't get up yet. Not until the cure wears out of your system and your movements return to normal."

"Okay ... Then can you ask him to come in here?" My heart squeezes in my chest as the two of them trade one of their cryptic looks. "What's going on? Where's Blaise?" When neither of them respond, I grow a bit frustrated. Not wanting to come off demanding or annoying, I try to remain patient. "While we were in the Oblivion ... something happened to him. Did something happen to him here, too?"

They exchange another secretive look that nudges me toward the brink of insanity. I want to scream at them to tell me. The uncontrolled reaction frightens me, and I wonder where it stems from. From the Grim blood pumping through my veins?

"Something did happen to him," Ryder finally speaks, covering my hand with his. "Something that's never happened before."

"What was it?" I whisper hoarsely, recalling the time traveler's final words to me.

I wasn't here for you. Well, not completely.

What did he do to Blaise?

Ryder glances at Reece then sits down on the edge of the bed and takes both of my hands in his. "He vanished."

"He what?" Stabbing pain bursts through my chest, and the monitors I'm hooked to react with a series of fitful beeps.

"Allura, you have to calm down." Reece grabs one of my hands from Ryder and gives it a tender squeeze. "Your body's already been under so much stress. And even though you heal faster than an average human, it's still going to take at least a few days before you're completely back to normal."

Nodding, I take one breath after another until the beeping evens out. "I'm sorry. I'm trying to stay calm, but it's just that ..." I inhale through my nose and exhale through my mouth as anxiety starts to get the best of me again. "You said he disappeared; where did he go?"

"Well, we were kind of hoping you could help us figure that out," Ryder says, skimming his thumb along the back of my hand. "You were in there with him; did anything happen where he ... I don't know, just went poof."

I nod, guilt scratching at the inside of my flesh. "Yes, it did."

Ryder lifts one of his hands to my face and cups my cheek. "Can you tell us what happened?"

Hot tears bubble in my eyes. "This is all my fault."

"I doubt that," Ryder says, grazing his thumb along my cheekbone.

My eyelashes uncontrollably flutter, but I lean away as shame scalds my skin. How dare I react to his touch like that while Blaise is lost?

"Maybe you should wait to hear the story before you start making assumptions about whose fault this is."

Ryder sighs, yet a playful glimmer sparkles in his eyes. "Fine. I'll wait until you tell me what happened before I convince you this isn't your fault."

A shaky breath fumbles from my lips, and then I tell them what happened while I was in the Oblivion, starting from when we first arrived all the way up until I saw the copies of Blaise and me watching me. The worst part is that, to explain how I vaguely knew the time traveler, I have to divulge the other memories he made an appearance in, which means confessing that I may have killed someone.

"You saw yourself and Blaise watching Lex carry you into the channels?" Scratching his head, Ryder looks at Reece. "Have you heard of anything like that before?"

"No, but ..." Reece rubs his hand across his jaw, dazing off into empty space. "It could be ..." He drifts from the bed without finishing.

"I hate it when he does that," Ryder mutters with a frown.

"Does what?" I ask, uncertainty weighing on my shoulders.

"Walks off mid-sentence," Ryder replies with an exhausted sigh. "It's like he thinks people can read his mind or something."

"I'm sure he'll come back and tell us what he was going to say."

Ryder rips his focus off Reece. "Yeah, after he paces a hole in the floor."

I turn my head and peer back at Reece, who is pacing the back of the room while yanking his fingers through his hair and muttering under his breath. "Does he talk to himself a lot, too?"

"All the time. But so do I."

I recline back against the propped-up pillow. "I do, too."

"Yeah?" The corner of his lips quirk in a lopsided smile. "Then I guess the three of us were made for each other."

"What about Blaise?" I whisper, staring down at my hands.

He chuckles softly. "I think Blaise might be the worst. He probably talks to himself more than he does anyone else." His laughter dissolves as he sketches a path down my jawline with his fingers then angles my chin up, forcing me to carry his gaze. "What happened in the Oblivion isn't your fault, and I have no idea why you would think that." He pauses. "No, actually I do."

Even though I know he's right, his words are hard to hear. "I know ... And I'm so sorry. I really am. I wish my memories weren't so dangerous. If I'd known, I would've begged Blaise not to go in with me."

"No, you wouldn't have, since you were unconscious when you guys went in there. I'm sure, if you'd been awake, you would've begged him not to go with you even without knowing the dangers." He releases a heavyhearted sigh as I stare at him in puzzlement. "I think you misunderstood what I was saying. I didn't mean that I understood why you were blaming yourself because I thought it was your fault. I just know you're the kind of person who would blame themselves."

I shake my head, causing one of the wires to fall off my head. "I don't think that's true."

"Of course you don't." He leans over me to pick up the fallen wire, reattaching it to my temple. "I don't know if this will upset you or not, but I think I'm going to say it, anyway, because it needs to be said." He rests a hand on either side of my shoulders and levels his gaze with mine. "I think, all that time you spent in the cell, getting"--a shaky breath eases from his lips--"abused, might have messed up your self-confidence."

"No, I don't think that's it." Is it?

Pity fills his eyes. "It might take some time, but one day, I'm going to convince you that's true, and that you're better than you think you are."

"Ryder ..." I start, wishing I could believe him and knowing I can't, not when I don't know what I am. "You heard everything I told you, right? About what the time traveler said to me?"

He waves me off dismissively. "I don't really care about that."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I mean, seriously, this guy just shows up out of nowhere and declares he's a time traveler--whatever that is--and that he knows you. And we're, what? Just supposed to believe him?"

"I don't know." I scratch the back of my neck. "He seemed to know things about me. Like how I can't die."

"Actually, you can." He scoots closer and the mattress concaves with his weight. "If

we hadn't put you in the Oblivion, the Kiss of Death would've killed you."

"Oh." My thoughts ravel into a jumble of confusion. "Then why

did I die when I was shot ...? And in the memories when the guy killed me ... he said I always come back to life."

He threads his fingers through mine again, something he's done at least five times since I came back. "Reece isn't sure yet, but I know he's been looking into this."

"I've actually come up with a few theories." Reece moves up beside my bed, his hair sticking up all over the place. "One being that the Kiss of Death was made by the Grim to injure the Grim. But since you're not entirely Grim, it can kill you, just like it would kill one of us."

My lips form an O. "So, the Grim can kill me if they want to?"

"I think so." He sinks down onto the bed. "I don't think they were trying to kill you, though."

"You don't?" Ryder questions with a crook of his brow. "It sure looked like that's what they were trying to do."

Reece shakes his head. "I think, if they would've gotten ahold of her, they would've administered the cure."

"They have a cure, too?" I ask, rubbing my hands up and down my arms as goose bumps sprout across my flesh.

I almost died. I can die. Whether it makes me sick or not, I find a little reassurance in knowing that.

Reece's eyes glint mischievously. "Where do you think I got the instructions for the cure?"

A spurt of dizziness overcomes me as I gape at him. "You stole them from the Grim?"

Reece nods. "There's a place in the city where the Grim keep all of their little files and books about their history. And they keep some stuff on computers. I've never actually been able to hack into that particular system before now, but apparently, with the right motivation ..." He shrugs.

"He means you being on the verge of death," Ryder clarifies as he picks up the cup of water on the table next to my bed and hands it to me. "Now drink up. You look like you're about to pass out."

Offering him a small, grateful smile, I take the cup and down another full glass of cold water. The icy cold temperature causes my body to convulse with shivers.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I return the cup to Ryder. "So, now what do we do? I mean, how do we get Blaise back?"

Ryder and Reece exchange yet another undecipherable look then simultaneously stand up from the bed.

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"You are going to get some rest." Reece draws the blanket up to my chin and tucks me in.

"But what about Blaise?" I move to sit up, but Ryder carefully pushes me back down.

"We'll figure something out." Ryder backs away from my bed and toward a stainless steel door, stuffing his hands into the back pockets of his pants.

"But I want to help," I say, rotating onto my side.

"Then get some rest." Reece walks around the foot of my bed and follows Ryder.
"You won't be able to do much if you're tired."

I trust them--I wholeheartedly do--but watching them head toward that door, about to leave me alone in a room, unleashes an old fear.

"You'll come back, though, right?" I ask, clutching the blanket.

Ryder pauses near the door. "Of course we'll come back. We'd never just leave you."

"And you won't lock me in here?" I whisper, feeling silly for being so afraid, but I can't seem to get rid of the fear as memories of my time in the cell consume me.

I stare at the door for hours, but no one ever comes. Days pass, and still I remain alone. Weeks. Months. A century ...

Ryder shakes his head, sympathy masking his expression. "In fact, we'll keep the

door cracked."

"Thank you," I whisper, pulling the blanket higher.

He smiles. "And when I come back, I'll bring you something that I think will cheer you up. How does that sound?"

I yawn. "Good."

Reece opens the door and motions for Ryder to follow. "Make sure to get some sleep," he says. "We'll be back soon."

I nod, and then they exit the room, leaving the door cracked open. I start to shut my eyes when their voices drift through the crack.

"What do you think about what she told us?" Ryder whispers. "I don't think she'd lie or anything, but I'm not sure what this time traveler thing is she's talking about. The name seems pretty self-explanatory and everything, but is it even real?"

"I've heard of them before," Reece assures him in a hushed tone.

"You have?" Ryder asks in shock.

"Once. While I was observing someone's memories from the Oblivion ... a time traveler was mentioned. Although, when the person came back, they had no recollection of it and couldn't explain to me what it was."

"Who was this person?"

A beat of silence skips by before Reece finally answers quietly, "Blaise."

"Shiiiiit." Ryder drags out the curse word for several seconds. "Well, that can't be a coincidence, can it?"

"It's hard to say for sure. I'm not a big believer of coincidences, but ... it seems a little strange that the only two people I've ever crossed paths with who can outrun death--well, except for the Grim--have heard of this strange time traveler."

"You think Allura and Blaise are connected somehow?" Ryder doesn't sound too thrilled about the idea.

"I don't know." Reece draws out a pause. "They both have missing memories and don't know much about their past, so maybe the answer is hidden in the holes of their memories."

"Why don't you just look into those holes, then?"

"Easier said than done."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, sometimes accessing erased or repressed memories can be dangerous. Plus, Blaise isn't even here to try."

"We're going to bring him back, right?" Ryder asks uneasily. "We're not just going to keep him lost."

"Of course not," Reece says. "But getting him back is going to be difficult."

"So, you know where he is?"

"I have an idea. I'm going to need at least a few days to figure out how we're going to

get to him."

After that, their voices fade away, and I'm left alone with the beeping of the monitor to fill up the silence, their words echoing in my mind.

They think they can save Blaise?

They think Blaise and I are connected?

Does that make me a Forbidden?

I lift the blanket and peek at my body. I'm wearing a black tank top and grey shorts that give me a view of the smooth, pale flesh of my legs and arms. I glance down the front of my shirt to double-check, not knowing whether to be relieved or not that not an ounce of bronzed metal is on my body.

At least, if there was, I'd know what I am.

Lowering my shirt back down, I rest my head back against the pillow. Sleeping seems impossible, yet one second I'm looking up at the ceiling, and the next, darkness pulls me under.

Chapter 12

The Un-Stranger

The throbbing of soft piano music vibrates against my eardrums as I blink my eyes open. Then my jaw virtually slaps the hardwood floor.

I'm no longer lying in bed at Leviter Station, but standing in an unfamiliar room lined with shelves containing bottles of moonshine.

Where the heck am I?

I move forward to get a better look around. Copper chandeliers hang from wooden beams, a swinging door frames the far back wall, and chains secured to gadgets and levers run perpendicular from the ceiling to the floor. To my right, a polished bronze counter borders the edge of the room, along with a row of barstools where a few men sit. Most of them are wearing leather vests, button shirts, trousers, and lace-up boots, but the one at the end has topped off the look with a long leather trench coat.

"To freedom." A man with coppery red hair and ghostly white skin raises his glass.

"To freedom," all the other men, except the one sitting at the end, murmur then lift their glasses in sync. Then they tip their heads back, guzzle down the shots, and set the empty glasses down.

"So, now what do we do?" a younger man with chin-length black hair asks, resting his arms on the counter.

"We wait until the time is right, and then we make our next move." The man with reddish hair stands up, leans over the counter, and snatches up a full bottle of whiskey from off the shelf.

A pudgy man slants forward, adjusting his glasses higher on the crooked brim of his nose. "You think just waiting will work?"

The coppery-haired man nods, unscrewing the cap off the bottle. "If we want to eliminate the Grim, we need to be patient. If we strike too soon, we'll all end up dead."

The man sitting at the end of the bar who didn't participate in the toasts laughs hollowly. "You think you can eliminate the Grim? Just how stupid are you?"

His back is turned to me so I can't see his face, but the striking familiarity of his voice has me inching forward to get a better look at him.

The redhead narrows his eyes at him. "Why do you always have to be so negative?"

"I'm not being negative." He collects the shot glass, brings the brim to his lips, and downs the whiskey in one gulp. Then, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he begins to turn around in the barstool. "I'm being realistic. Sure, you might have scared off a handful of Grim, but killing them is an entirely different ..." He trails off when he spots me.

My lips part in shock. "Blaise," I whisper then run across the bar toward him. I don't care why he's here, how, or how I found him. I just care that he's alive. "You're okay."

His brows scrunch together. "Who are you? And how do you know my name?"

The rest of the men wheel around and spring to their feet, their hands wandering for their holsters strapped around their waists and shoulders.

I skid to a startled stop as four guns are aimed at me and look helplessly at Blaise. "It's me. Allora ... The girl you rescued from the ..." I bite down on my tongue as the redheaded man cocks his gun and steps forward.

"We haven't rescued any girls for a very long time. Wish we could, but the Grim have upped their security lately." The hardwood floor creaks as he cautiously approaches me with the barrel pointed at me. "We know you're lying." He stops as the end of his gun touches the center of my chest. Then he tips his head to the side. "The question is: Why?"

"I ..." I throw a desperate glance in Blaise's direction, hoping he'll come out of

whatever forgetful trance he's obviously entered.

He only slants back, resting his elbows on the countertop, staring me down like a hawk.

The man in front of me slides the gun up to my chin, and the cold metal bites into my skin as he turns my head back toward him. "Answer the damn question. Why are you lying?"

My breath leaves my lips in a gasp. "I'm not lying ... I don't ..." I want to look back at Blaise, but I fear the guy in front of me might shoot me if I do. "I'm not lying ... I'm just confused. And lost." My eyes start to water, but I fight back the tears, not wanting to crumble in front of strangers.

"Fredrick, would you back the hell off?" The younger guy with black hair steps forward, lowering his gun. His alarmingly silver eyes are tinted with kindness. "You're scaring the poor girl half to death."

"How do we know that for sure?" Fredrick doesn't take his eyes off me. "She could be lying. Remember Eva? Besides, she knows Blaise's name. How is that?" He shakes his head, putting more pressure on my chin with the barrel of his gun. "Look at her eyes. She has secrets in there."

The younger man who spoke up on my behalf sticks his gun back into the holster. "Everyone has secrets, Fredrick. You should know that better than anyone."

Fredrick shoots him a lethal look from over his shoulder. "Zander, no one asked for your opinion."

"Well, I always offer it," Zander quips with a devious grin.

As they continue to argue, I clasp on to the opportunity to send Blaise a pleading glance. The instant my eyes fall on his, I realize a few minor details I somehow missed during my celebration of first seeing him. One, his head isn't shaved on one side. Two, he has no facial piercings. And three, that intense look that's usually in his eyes when he looks at me isn't present.

"Blaise!" Fredrick shouts, causing my muscles to spasm. "Get over here for a second."

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With his eyes glued on mine, Blaise rises to his feet and ambles across the bar. When he nears us, he stuffs his hand inside the front of his open trench coat and withdraws a gun. He doesn't aim it at me, just simply holds it. But the fact that he would consider using it on me wounds my soul.

This isn't my Blaise, yet he looks exactly like him.

"What do you want?" he asks Fredrick as he stops just short of us.

"I want to know if you recognize this girl," Fredrick answers, using the end of the barrel to shove my face in Blaise's direction.

Blaise scrutinizes me with a neutral expression. "I don't think so."

"Are you sure?" Zander chimes in. "Perhaps she's from your old home."

Blaise notes my bare feet, grey shorts, and black tank top, then shakes his head. "No, I definitely don't think so."

"Well, then I guess it's settled." A smile spans across Fredrick's face. "Take her to the dungeons."

Dungeons?

It takes me a moment to connect the word with an image, and when I do, any ounce of calmness inside me evaporates.

"No, please don't." I shake my head, backing away from him. "I can't--"

Fredrick snatches ahold of my arm and wrenches me back toward him. "No one asked for your opinion." With a rough jerk, he flings me toward a set of swinging doors. "Now get your ass back there before I change my mind and decide to just shoot you."

My bare feet scuff against the floor as I stumble toward Blaise. He dodges out of the way before I bump into him and lets me fall to the floor where I land on my hands and knees, the wood scraping my bare skin. Tears fill my eyes as humiliation douses over me.

This isn't the first time I've been treated like this. These men ... They're no better than the Grim.

Fredrick nudges me in the side with the toe of his boot. "Get up."

Sucking in an exhale, I push to my feet and sweep my hair out of my face. Then I limp toward the doors.

"I'll take her there," Zander offers.

Fredrick pokes me in the back with the gun, and I stiffen. "I can handle her."

"Yeah, but ..." Zander pauses. "Don't you have that meeting to get to?"

Fredrick wavers, coming to a stop. "I do, but--"

"But nothing," Zander cuts him off eagerly. "You can't miss it. You're in charge of it, for crying out loud."

Silence stretches between the men, making my gasping breaths embarrassingly

evident.

Then the heels of his boots click against the floor as Fredrick walks around in front of me. "If you try to escape, I'll shoot you dead. Understand?"

Gulping, I nod.

His mouth twitches as he momentarily stares at me, then he spins on his heels and strides for a door at the front of the bar. "Zander, take her to the dungeon. Everyone else, come with me."

Two of the men follow, but Blaise remains at my side. When Fredrick notices, he motions at Blaise with annoyance.

"Hurry up," he demands. "We're going to be late."

Blaise hesitates, looking from me to Zander then back to me. "Actually, I think I'm going to stay."

"This isn't a job that requires two people," Fredrick snaps impatiently. "Now, one of you, come on."

"It might take two people," Zander says, checking the bullets in his gun. "You never know with strangers, Fredrick. Remember how tricky and strong Eva was?"

Fredrick slams his palm against the doorframe. "Eva wasn't human. That wasn't my fault."

Zander studies me with his silver eyes that match stars in the midnight sky. "Maybe she's not, either. You can't always tell for sure."

Huffing a frustrated breath, Fredrick shoves the door open. "Fine. Do whatever the hell you want. But don't come whining to me to give you a recap of the meeting." With that, he storms out the doors and into a dirt street blanketed by nightfall.

"Good God, this whole leadership thing is going to his head," Zander mumbles once Fredrick is long gone.

"Tell me about it," Blaise says, slipping his gun into his holster. "The other day, he tried to make me clean his house. Said it was part of my job, like I'm a goddamn maid or something."

Zander chuckles. "I bet you had a few choice words to say about that."

An arrogant smile expands across Blaise's face. "Don't I always?"

Watching Blaise smile so casually is very strange. If he didn't go by the name Blaise, I'd speculate that perhaps he was a twin or a doppelganger. That is, if the latter exists. I'm not sure since I don't understand how I know the word.

"That you do." Zander chews on his bottom lip as he retrieves a silver pocket watch from his vest pocket and checks the time. "So, what're we going to do with this one?"

Blaise's gaze flits to me, and he measures me up. "I'm not sure yet."

Zander stuffs the pocket watch back in his pocket. "You think we should let her go?"

"Normally, I'd say yes, but ..." Blaise examines me closely, thrumming his fingers on the sides of his legs. "But she knows my name."

Zander faces me with his arms crossed. "That is a little strange."

The two of them stare at me, as if trying to unravel the secrets hidden in my brain.

"What did you say your name was?" Zander finally asks.

I swallow, mostly to rehydrate my throat that's gone painfully dry. "Allura."

Zander gives Blaise a curious look. "Are you sure the name doesn't ring a bell?"

Blaise briefly contemplates the answer before shaking his head. "I don't think so. I don't know ... I've met a lot of people during my travels. Maybe we crossed paths during one?" He leaves the question hanging out there for me to answer.

I want to tell him the truth, but I fear the real answer will result in me being locked up.

"Yes, that's where we met," I lie, starting to sweat.

He taps his foot restlessly against the floor. "And where exactly did we cross paths?"

I have no clue how to answer that question since I'm unsure where we are. Still, I should give him something.

"Um ..." I nervously rub my hand across my damp forehead.

Zander and Blaise suddenly go bugged-eyed.

"Well, this is a strange surprise," Zander says, reaching for my arm. "She's a Nameless."

I trip back as his fingers graze my wrist. While I'm fine with Ryder, Reece, and Blaise touching me, I don't par

ticularly care for anyone else to.

"Sorry." Zander raises his hands in front of him in a surrender pose. "I wasn't going to hurt you. I just wanted to look at your number."

Blaise once told me to never let anyone know I'm a Nameless, that people would take advantage of me. I may not know where the hell I am or who this Blaise is in front of me, but that doesn't mean I'm going to risk going against the rules of surviving.

I cover my hand over the number on my wrist. "It's not a Nameless number. Just a tattoo."

Blaise steps forward and pries my fingers off my wrist to examine the ink branded into my skin. "No, this is a Nameless number." His gaze rises to me and wonderment overflows from his eyes. "You escaped from the channels?"

I fuse my lips together and attempt to wiggle my arm free from his grasp, but he holds on securely.

"We're not going to hurt you," Blaise tells me. "I just want--need--to know if you escaped the channels."

I wrap my free arm around myself and whisper, "Why?"

Blaise exchanges a glance with Zander that reminds me a lot of all the mysterious looks that go on between Blaise, Ryder, and Reece.

"Go ahead and tell her," Zander encourages, folding his arms. The sleeve of his shirt rides up, revealing a wrist made of metal, rounded gadgets, and a few springs. "She'll probably be more likely to tell you."

"Only if she's a good person." Blaise eyes me warily. "Are you?"

The question, while simple enough, throws me for a sharp and abrupt turn. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" he questions with his brows elevated. "Have you ever hurt anyone?"

I bob my head up and down, shame building in my chest. "I have."

"And what were the circumstances?" Blaise steps toward me until the tips of his boots kiss my toes. "Did you hurt someone for fun or to protect?"

"To protect." I'm not so certain I'm being entirely truthful.

Blaise dips his head toward mine and the scent of leather, dirt, and cologne engulfs my nostrils. "Tell me, Allura, if you're a Nameless, then how is it possible that you can speak so well?"

I shrug. "I don't know."

His brow meticulously arches. "You don't know?"

I shake my head, discreetly breathing his scent in. He may not act like the Blaise I know, but he smells like him. "I can't really remember my past very well."

Compassion flicks across his face. "Neither can I. At least, not all of it." He moves back, taking his lovely scent with him and erasing any emotion from his face. "My sister has been trapped in the channels for a while ... We've raided a few, but there's still so many we haven't located. So, if you're really from one, I need you to tell me so that I can attempt to track it down and look for her."

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Blaise's sister is in the channels? I thought Blaise's sister was dead?

A troubled sensation washes over me as a few pieces of the puzzle connect.

This place isn't some weird place Blaise is trapped in. This is from his past. How did I get here? And from the present, because that's the only way the number on my wrist could exist.

Am I accessing Blaise's memories somehow?

"Are you or aren't you going to help us?" Blaise presses with urgency.

I don't know what to do, what the correct answer is, what exactly happened in this memory. So, I'm left making my own choice.

"I'm from the channels," I admit. "But I'm not quite sure where the location is."

Hope flashes in his eyes. "If I showed you a map, would you recognize it?"

"I'm not very good with maps," I say, fidgeting with the hem of my shirt. "But I can try if you want me to."

Blaise nods then turns to Zander. "Think you can sneak us into the library?"

Zander rolls his eyes. "Do you even have to ask?"

Blaise practically bounces with excitement. "Then let's go before the meeting gets out

and Fredrick comes looking for us."

Zander walks to the back of the room, pushes open the swinging doors, and lifts his chin, signaling for me to follow.

I free an anxious breath before trailing behind him with Blaise at my heels. When I reach the door, Zander steps to the side and gestures for me to go in. I hesitantly cross the threshold and step into a slender hallway lined with rusted doors, all of which are shut and deadbolted from the outside.

I gulp, worried what could possibly be locked in there. Monsters? Something evil? Or is this place like the channels and locks up the innocent?

Feeble cries and pleas drift through the small, square windows of each door as I proceed down the hallway with Blaise and Zander by my sides. The dirt ground is chilled against my bare feet, and the arctic temperature sends me into a fit of shivers.

"They're Fredrick's prisoners," Zander announces when he notices me glancing at the doors. "For the most part, Blaise and I try to free the people he captures, but there are some people who deserve to be locked up."

"Like criminals?" Water drips from the ceiling and splatters across my forehead. I reach up to wipe them away, but Blaise beats me to the punch.

"You know, you do seem sort of familiar," he states as he drags his thumb up the center of my forehead, wiping the water away.

"That's because I wasn't lying about us knowing each other." I stare at him, mesmerized by how easily he touched me.

He seems to suddenly notice this, too, and hastily jerks back. "I'm sorry ... I usually

don't do that kind of stuff."

"Touch people's foreheads?" I ask as water drips between my eyes.

Blaise faces forward with his jaw set tight. "Touch people in general."

"Oh." What I would give to tell him that eventually he'll get better with that, at least enough to kiss me. That declaration would probably freak him out.

"You still haven't told me where you met me," he says without making eye contact.

"We crossed paths in the fault once," I say since I know Blaise has been there before.

"Really?" He gives me a dubious look. "You've been in the fault?"

I tug at the bottom of my shirt, feeling self-conscious. "Why is that so hard to believe?"

"You just seem ... I don't know"--he runs his hand over the top of his head--"fragile."

"I'm not as fragile as I look," I admit softly.

He nods, as if understanding. "I fully believe it."

Shock courses through me. "You do?"

He nods. "If you escaped the channels, you have to be strong."

"Well, I had help."

"From who?"

"Um ..." I scratch the corner of my eye. "From these guys."

He stops in front of a red door at the end of the hallway, his forehead furrowing.

"Where were these guys from?"

I don't know if I should tell him. According to what I was told by Ryder, Blaise has lived at Leviter Station since he was younger. So, if this is a memory, he'll know about the station and who Ryder and Reece are.

"I don't know," I lie, stopping beside Blaise. "Some guys just showed up at my cell one day and helped me escape."

"And then just left you?" Blaise asks as Zander unlocks the deadbolt of the red door.

The crying and screaming and pleas grow louder.

"Help me!"

"Don't leave me!"

"Free me!"

"I don't want to die!"

"Please, miss, I have a family!"

Memories of being locked up in my cell attack me at every angle. I want to throw my hands over my ears, block the voices out. No, what I want to do is help every single one of them. If only I knew why they were locked up.

What is this place?

"Um, sort of." I hate the untrue words that keep leaving my tongue, but I don't know what else to do. Explain to him what's going on. Hope he doesn't pull his gun out on me again. Or worse, lock me up behind one of these doors.

"Well, that's awful." The gadgets on Zander's wrist begin to rotate as he grabs the door handle. Then his wrist kinks as he drags the door open, the gadgets rotating every step of the way.

I start to question if perhaps, like Blaise, Zander is a Forbidden, too; if the metal on his wrist is actually his wrist, and the gadgets and springs allow him to move.

"Never seen a Forbidden before, have you?" Zander remarks when he notes the direction of my gaze.

"No, I have once." I chew on my thumbnail, looking between Blaise and Zander. "I've just never seen a wrist move that way before."

Grinning, Zander elevates his arm, drags his sleeve down, and begins bending his wrist back and forth. The gadgets spin and the springs squeak with every robotic movement.

"It's better than a real wrist." He grins proudly then glances at Blaise. "Although, this one over here will probably disagree with me. He thinks the metal structure is more of a flaw than a gift."

"That's because it is." Blaise steps toward the door, his expression hardening.

"That's a matter of opinion." Zander rolls his sleeve down, lowers his arm to his side, and turns toward me. "I'm going to let you in on a little secret about us Forbidden."

"Okay." I glance at Blaise, who's wandering away from us, then back at Zander.

"What is it?"

"It's a lovely secret," he teases, as if purposefully being vague.

I fight back a smile, unsure whether the reaction is appropriate. "Are you going to tell me?"

"I don't know." He thrums his finger against his bottom lip. "It might be better to just let you guess."

"I'm not very good at guessing," I admit. "It could take forever, and then Blaise will probably get upset."

Zander smiles cleverly, pointing a finger at me. "You're observant."

No, I just know Blaise better than you think. "Yeah, I guess."

"No guessing," he jokingly scolds. "You are, and you should be proud of that."

I feel like the biggest liar ever. "Are you going to tell me your secret?"

His smile illuminates his face. "All right, but only because you begged."

"I did?"

"Well, technically you didn't, but I'm going to pretend you did."

A smile breaks through. I don't even know where it stems from, other than Zander's smile feels contagious. In a way, he kind of reminds me of Ryder.

Glancing from left to right, Zander leans in until his face is only inches from mine.

"My secret is how to win the heart of a Forbidden."

I part my lips to ask him why I need to know that, but he raises his hand, shushing me.

"Now, I know what you're thinking. Why on earth would I ever want to win the heart of what some see as an abomination? But let me tell you, us Forbiddens aren't as awful as some like to believe."

"I don't think you're awful," I tell him. "Not at all."

"And that's why I'm telling you this secret," he says with a grin. "Because I have a feeling that one day you're going to own the heart of a Forbidden."

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"Okay ..." This conversation suddenly feels strangely familiar.

"Are you ready?" he asks.

I nod. "Yeah, I think so."

He rubs his hands together. "Okay, so there are a couple of things you must do to really get a Forbidden to fall for you. Because, let's face it, our steel hearts are quite cold." He winks at me. "No pun intended."

I smile, but confusion fogs my mind.

"So, the first thing is to let them rescue you. Perhaps once or twice, because we love playing the hero. Although, some of us might not admit that." He casts a fleeting look over his shoulder at Blaise, who's glaring at us with impatience, then returns his focus back to me. "And the second is to never be afraid of them. I know we might seem really scary, especially when we have our scary faces on, but deep down, we're just as afraid as you."

"I don't think you're scary," I say, wiping off a water droplet rolling down my cheek.

Zander gives a subtle nod in Blaise's direction. "What about that one over there?"

I bite back a smile, remembering the first time I met Blaise. For a split second, he frightened me, but then I realized he was as scared of me as I was of him, and then I just became fascinated. "No, not at all."

He chuckles. "Well, you might be the first."

"Oh, my God, will you get in here?" Blaise interrupts with a shake of his head. "I'd like to get this taken care of before Fredrick returns and our cover is blown."

Cover is blown? Blaise is working undercover?

Zander holds up his hand at Blaise, his gaze fixed on me. "And third is to not call us Forbiddens."

"But you call yourself Forbiddens?" I point out, feeling lost.

"Yes, but we're all hypocrites," he says amusedly. "We like to shame ourselves, but secretly, we wish for people to see us as much more than an abomination."

I nod, sort of understanding where he's coming from. "So, what should I call you?"

His eyes light up like firecrackers. "Greystelies."

Chapter 13

Poppy's Wonderful Poison

My eyes are huge as I stare at Zander in shock. "I should call them what?"

"Greystelie," he says a little slower. "I know the word is a little weird, but I assure you that we like it better than Forbidden. Greystelie is our word, while Forbidden was created by the Grim to show us that man and machine aren't supposed to combine into one form."

"Oh." I try to carry a neutral tone, but my perplexity shows.

"You don't like the word?" he asks, starting to frown.

I shake my head. "No ... That's not it." I sigh. "I just think I've heard it before." In my head, while I was in the Oblivion, right when the Orders first spoke of the Forbidden. I didn't know what the word meant at the time, but ... How do I know the word?

"Really?" Surprise flashes across Zander's face. "That's strange."

"Why?"

"Because the word is rarely spoken."

"I'm not even sure where I heard it from ... I might be getting it confused with something else."

"Like Heystelie?" he jokes then sighs. "Sorry. I'm terrible at jokes."

"Yes, you are." Blaise steps through the doorway, snags the back of Zander's vest, and tows him backward. "And you're great at procrastinating."

"Yeah, yeah, if I had a trinket for every time you said that, I'd be an entire robot." Zander wiggles out of Blaise's grasp and offers me an apologetic smile. "We'll continue this conversation later, after we get Blaise's panties out of a bunch."

Blaise rolls his eyes as Zander grins and wanders through the doorway. I start to follow, but Blaise sidesteps and blocks my path.

"Wait a second ..." His eyes roam across my neck, shoulders, arms, waist, legs, and then return to my face, his gaze flittering from my eyes to my lips to my eyes.

I instinctively bring my fingers to my mouth as images of Blaise and I standing in the

street with our lips pressed together tickle the back of my mind. The kiss was brief, but I wonder how long it would've lasted if the time traveler hadn't interrupted us. Minutes? Hours? Or would I have lost control of my hunger and devoured Blaise to death ...?

A thought registers out of nowhere. Can I even kill Blaise that way? Isn't that why he dared to kiss me?

"That's funny ... I thought I ..." Blaise forcefully blinks his gaze off my lips, and then he hastily clears his throat. "Zander, come here for a second."

Zander pokes his head out of the doorway. "What's up?"

Blaise moves back and gestures at me, without saying anything.

"Yeah, I know. She's lovely, right?" Zander tosses me a wink and a smile then looks back at Blaise. "Maybe we could take her back with us after we're all done here?"

Blaise curtly shakes his head. "We can't take her to the station."

"Why not?" Zander asks. "That's what the station's partly for--to take people in who need a home."

"And how do we know she even needs a home?" Blaise gives me a hard stare, as if trying to scare me into confirming.

"Um, I already have a home." Which technically is the truth. That is, if I ever get out of this place.

"Now look what you've done." Zander scowls at Blaise. "You scared her so badly she's lying."

"Is that true?" Blaise asks, his withering stare making me squirrely. "Are you lying?"

I shake my head, trying to appear more confident this time. "No, I'm not."

"Well, I'll be damned," Zander says with a goofy grin on his face. "She's not afraid of you."

Blaise seems torn on what to say next. "Well, she should be."

"Well, she's not." Zander steps forward with his arm extended toward me. "Now come on, let's go to the library so you can show Blaise where the channels are and steal a little bit more of his heart."

Blaise's jaw ticks as he shakes his head. "We can't go into the library." He shoots a pressing look at me. "Not with her dressed like that. They'll immediately know something's up."

Zander takes in my outfit then nods. "You're completely right." He snags ahold of my hand.

My instinct is to pull away, but before I get the chance, he's yanking me through the doorway and into a room made of all dirt except for the logs bordering the corners and roof.

At the back of the room is a long, dirt tunnel that stretches to the unknown. Zander steers me toward it.

"Where are you going?" Blaise hisses as he rushes after us.

"To see Poppy," Zander says, staring straight ahead as he marches down the tunnel lit with torches.

Blaise's footsteps thunder against the ground as he catches up. "You think you can trust Poppy with this?"

"Of course." Zander shakes his head as he takes longer strides. "You never trust anyone."

"And for a good reason," Blaise mumbles from behind me.

I want to reach back and take his hand like I used to do, but even when Blaise knew me, he always tensed whenever our fingers entangled. This untrusting Blaise ... Well, I'm fairly positive he might break my hand if I touched him.

We sink into silence as Zander leads us through the tunnel and into a room on the other side. Like the room we entered the tunnel through, this place is made of all dirt and log beams. Instead of being empty and plain, though, sheer curtains are strung about, glittering beads dangling from the ceiling, and tons of shirts, pants, dresses, and shorts hang from metal rods sticking out of the walls.

When Zander releases my hand, I turn in a circle and look around. "Is this a closet?"

"What's a closet?" Zander and Blaise ask in unison.

I think of Blaise's list of words I know that he doesn't, but that probably doesn't apply here.

"It's a tiny room attached to a bigger bedroom," I try to explain. "Where people keep clothes and shoes and stuff."

"This is definitely a closet, then," Zander says, tracing his finger along the clothes as he wanders around. "I've never heard of the word before, though."

"I come from a strange place," I

say absentmindedly.

"Oh, yeah?" Zander faces me, his hand drifting to his side. "From where?"

His question hits me hard. Where am I from? I really don't know. Somewhere? Everywhere? Anywhere?

I struggle for an answer, a lie to give him, but my brain has shut down. Luckily, a tall, slender woman sweeps into the room and distracts everyone. Not just with her presence, but her appearance.

Her chin-length blue hair is as bright as the sky, her teal eyes are lined heavily with maroon, and her glittery maroon lips match her bunched-up silky skirt. Her thigh-high, lace-up leather boots go in sync with her corset; black metal cuffs decorate her wrists and neck; and her skin sparkles everywhere.

Pretty is the first word that pops into my mind. This woman is very pretty.

"Zander, darling, how are you?" She greets Zander with a kiss on each cheek.

Zander blushes sheepishly. "I'm great, Poppy. Just great. How are you?"

"Just lovely." She strokes his cheek with the back of her hand, and Zander practically purrs, leaning into her touch. "You know, out of all my clients, you're my favorite."

"I bet you say that to all of them," Zander retorts, a flush still creeping across his cheeks.

Poppy smiles sweetly but the look vanishes as she turns to Blaise. "Blaise, how are

you?"

"Fine," Blaise bites out. "Or I will be if you keep your distance."

I glance from a tense Poppy to a stiff Blaise, curious to know what's going on.

"She poisons people's minds with her Witches Potion," Blaise explains to me tightly, as if reading my confusion. "Zander's a fan of the high. Me, not so much. That doesn't really matter to her."

"I didn't realize you wouldn't like it," Poppy replies, sticking her nose in the air. "I've never had any complaints before."

"That's because everyone's always too doped up to speak for themselves." Blaise sidesteps toward me and crosses his arms over his chest. "You will not use that shit on her, got it?"

Poppy's eyes flitter from me to Blaise. "I never thought I'd see the day when you possessed such protectiveness."

Blaise's brows bunch together. "I'm not."

"If you say so." She turns toward me, rolling her eyes, but then plasters on a smile. "So, my dear, who are you?"

"I'm Allura," I reply tentatively, the entire situation making me nervous.

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"Allura," she muses. "That's very pretty and very fitting."

I smile nervously. "Thanks."

She beams. "You're very welcome." Then she sticks out her hand. "May I?"

Blaise smacks her hand away. "I said no."

Poppy juts out her bottom lip. "I was just going to shake her hand."

"Sure you were." Sarcasm oozes from Blaise's tone.

"I'll shake your hand," Zander says in a daze. "If you'll allow me."

Poppy deliberates then offers him her hand. "But this is the last time for tonight."

Nodding, Zander wraps his fingers around hers, and then brings her knuckles to his nose. As he breathes in deeply, his eyes gloss over and he lets out a husky moan. "So ... wonderful ..."

Poppy smiles then wiggles her hand free from her grip. "Now, boys, what else can I do for you?"

"We need to put her in something more inconspicuous," Zander explains drunkenly, slumping against the wall.

Poppy inspects me with her hands clasped together. "Just how inconspicuous are you

looking for?"

"Enough that we can get her in and out of the library without anyone questioning us," Blaise explains, hovering at my side.

"The library, huh?" She dithers, bobbing her head to the side. "I'd ask why, but you probably won't tell me."

"No, we won't," Blaise says firmly. "So don't even ask."

"Fine, I won't," Poppy replies, shooting him a dirty look. "But you will pay me for the clothes."

"Fine by me." Blaise reaches into his jacket pocket, retrieves a large, round copper object, and flicks it at Poppy.

She catches the object, tucks it down the front of her corset, and then claps her hands together. "Well, then, shall we get started?" Without waiting for anyone to respond, she begins sifting through the seemingly endless amount of clothes. "Nope. Nope. Definitely nope." She twists around to assess me with her hand propped on her hip. "You know what? I think I have a better idea." She crosses the room and disappears into the tunnel.

Blaise blows out an exasperated sigh. "Man, she can really drive me crazy."

"That's because you don't know how to have fun ..." Zander murmurs, sinking to the floor with his eyelids halfway lowered.

Blaise shakes his head. "You do realize you're addicted, right?"

Zander clumsily lifts his finger, nearly poking himself in the eye. "Not quite."

"It'll ruin you one day," Blaise assures him. "Robot or not, your brain can only handle so much poison."

"Well, at least I'll have fun up until I'm ruined," he slurs, his head bobbing to the side as he passes out.

"Is he all right?" I ask, turning toward Blaise.

Blaise gives a half-shrug as he begins ambling around the room with his thinking face on.

Sensing he's troubled, I ask, "Are you all right?"

"Always." He makes a small path around the room, staring at the floor with his fist pressed to his chin. "I'm just thinking about what my next move is."

"After what?"

"After you show me where the channels are."

I feel terribly guilty over knowing that Blaise's sister isn't where I was. At least, not when they rescued me. Then again, there were other people in the cells around me at one point. Like the girl I talked to sometimes who barely comprehended words but brought me comfort in listening.

"You think your sister will be there?" I ask, reclining against the wall behind me.

He lifts his shoulders, shrugging. "I'm not sure, but I have to check. I have to check everywhere until I find her."

"You're a good brother, then?" I wonder if I had any siblings. If I did, I can't recall

their names or what they looked like.

"No, I'm not."

"It seems like you are--trying to rescue your sister no matter what."

"Yeah, well, it's my fault she needs rescuing." He steps beside me, removes his fist from his chin, and props his palm against the dirt wall. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Pressing my lips together, I shake my head.

He sinks down beside me, reclines against the wall, and stretches his legs out. "Well, trust me when I say that, as an older brother, you're supposed to protect your younger brothers and sisters, no matter the costs. And if something happens to them, it becomes your burden and guilt to bear."

I draw my knees to my chest. "That doesn't sound very fair. I mean, what if what happened to them was completely out of your hands?"

"It's still my burden and guilt to bear." He stares straight ahead. "Until I save her."

"Then you'll forgive yourself?"

"If she's okay."

"And what if she isn't?"

His gaze welds with mine as he looks at me and, for the briefest moment, I swear I see a trace of the Blaise I know.

"Then I'll let my guilt drown me," he says, the passion in his voice branding my soul.

I open my mouth to convince him he's wrong when Poppy whisks back into the room, carrying a small stack of clothes and a pair of heeled boots.

"This will look absolutely amazing on you." She sets the pile of clothes down on a chair in the corner of the room then turns toward Blaise and shoos him toward the door.

"You need to leave while she gets dressed." She waits for Blaise to rise to his feet then walks over to Zander and pokes the tip of her boot against his hip. "Wake up, darling. You need to leave."

Zander's eyelids lift, and he blinks profusely up at Poppy. "We're done already?"

"No, we need to step out." Blaise strides across the room, grabs Zander's arm, and helps him to his feet. "And apparently get you some fresh air so you can wake the fuck up. I can't have you all doped up while we do this."

Zander staggers to the side, bumping into the wall. "Why? Are you afraid something will go wrong?"

"Who knows? But I never exclude the possibility." Sighing heavily, Blaise drapes Zander's arm over his shoulder and guides him toward the tunnel. "I'm stepping out for exactly five minutes, and then I'm coming back in," he calls over his shoulder to Poppy. "And she better be completely coherent." He exits the room with Zander stumbling to keep up.

Poppy glares at the door. "He's a bossy one, isn't he?"

"Not always." I grow fidgety, too aware I'm alone in a room with a stranger. "You

just have to get to know him, and then he warms up."

She glances at me with suspicious. "How do you know him?"

Realizing my mistake, I tense. "I just met him today."

"Then it's awfully early to be making speculations about his personality, don't you think?"

"I guess so."

"Hmmm ..." She traces her finger along her lips, studying me. "Where did you come from before you showed up here?"

I discreetly twist my arm so my wrist is pointing behind me. "From around."

She watches me too closely. "From around where, exactly?"

"Blaise told me not to tell you," I say, crossing my fingers she won't know I'm lying.

She grinds her teeth as she shakes her head. "Typical Blaise." She spins back around and picks up the clothes. "All I did was give him a little break from his moodiness, and how does he repay me?" She shoves the clothes at me. "By treating me like shit."

I take the clothes from her, unsure what to say. I completely understand Blaise getting upset with her for poisoning him, but I fear she'll try to poison me if I say so.

My silence makes her laugh.

"You're thinking I deserve his treatment, right? That helping people relax somehow makes me a bad person?" Her boots kick up dirt as she inches closer to me. "I guess I

might as well do it then, if you're going to judge me." She dips her mouth toward my ear while skimming her finger up my arm. "I could eat you up, you know that?" She nicks her teeth along my earlobe. "Maybe I will one day."

I feel like I should be running for the hills, or at least flipping out, but a sedated calmness glistens over me.

"Maybe you will," I murmur, every muscle in my body unwinding.

When she leans back, she's smiling. "Not so ba

d, is it?"

My head bobs from side to side. "No, it really, really isn't. It's actually wonderful. Like I'm in faerie land."

She laughs softly. "Well, I don't know what faerie land is, but it sounds awfully lovely."

I let out a contented sigh. "I don't either, but it sounds amazing."

Grinning, she leans forward and kisses me on the lips. A spark ignites inside my chest, and I almost pull her back, kiss her hard and fiercely until nothing is left inside her. But she moves away quicker than I move my arm to grab her.

"I'm going to go entertain Zander while you get dressed," she tells me, dabbing her lips with her fingertips.

"Wait ... Come back ..." I reach for her, but she's already gone.

Sighing, I set down the clothes she gave me and peel off my tank top and shorts.

Then I grab the first article of clothing on the top of the stack: a leather corset embroidered with various shades of gold, deep browns, and silver chain. It takes a lot of sucking in and holding my breath to get the binding top on, but I manage. Then I slip into the sheer black skirt that flows at the back and bunches at the front. Next comes fishnet tights and a choker. The look is topped off by black boots that lace up all the way to my upper thighs.

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From somewhere in the back of my mind, I feel like I should be uncomfortable with the get-up, but I'm not.

Spinning around in a circle, I watch the dress poof out around me. Then I spread my arms to the side and spin and spin and spin, watching the glittery beads shimmering in the inadequate lighting.

"Allura, are you about ...?" Blaise trails off, stopping in the doorway, his eyes practically bulging out of his head.

I stop spinning and wave at him. "Hi."

"Hi." His gaze dances all over me, scorching hot, leaving my skin tingly. "You look ..."

"Like a faerie?"

"A what?"

I hold up my finger. "A fictional character that has wings and sprinkles glitter everywhere." I giggle. "I don't even know how I know that."

His breathing grows raspy. "I don't know ..."

The skirt rustles as I move toward him. "Do you think I look pretty?"

His gaze crashes with mine, and he gulps. "I don't know ..."

I pout. "That's a no."

He shakes his head. "No, it's not."

"I wonder if the old Blaise would've thought I was pretty."

"The old Blaise?"

I shrug. "He was very brooding. Maybe more than you."

"What are you ...?" His jaw clamps down. "She poisoned you, didn't she?"

"I'm not sure." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "She did bite my earlobe, and I felt really giddy. Then she kissed me, and I wanted to kiss her back until she couldn't breathe ... Does that make me weird?"

"I don't know." He looks extremely uncomfortable. "Maybe not, if you're attracted to women."

I consider what he said. "I don't think I am since I find you very sexy and handsome."

"Okay." He cuts the conversation off with a sharp clap. "It's time to go to the library."

I reach out so he can grab my hand, because I think at one point he used to hold it all the time. "To go to the library?"

"Yeah." He stares down at my hand. "What are you doing?"

I wiggle my fingers. "Waiting for you to hold my hand."

"I don't hold hands."

"Yes, you do."

"Allura ..." His tone is tolerant.

"Blaise ..." I mimic.

"Dammit, Poppy," he grumbles, then grabs my hand.

The instant our fingers touch, his stiff muscles loosen a smidgeon.

"Not so bad, right?" I ask, swinging our arms between us.

"Maybe not." He looks genuinely perplexed. "Why do I feel like I've done this before?"

I wink at him. "Maybe you have."

"No ... I don't think so ... Well ... Maybe." He stares at me. "Are you sure we only met briefly?"

I want to tell him no, that I lied, that we know each other well enough that he risked getting killed to kiss me, and I probably would've, too, if Zander didn't come barreling through the doorway in a panic.

He pants for air, hunching over. "We need to go. Now."

Blaise grasps my hand tighter. "What's wrong?"

"Fredrick's coming," he gasps out, bracing his hands on his knees. "And I think our cover is blown."

Blaise releases a sequence of curses. "Fuck. How did he find out?"

"I think Poppy told him." He stands upright, pressing his hand to his chest. "To get back at you."

"Dammit, I knew one day she'd out us." Blaise lets out a frustrated scream then kicks the wall hard. "Why did she have to do it now?"

Zander wipes sweat from his brow with his arm. "It will take Fredrick some time to gather the mob, so we might be able to make it to the library still. We just need to hurry."

Nodding, Blaise runs out of the room, pulling me along with him. Zander hurries after us, working hard to catch his breath as we weave through the tunnels. The torches flicker off as we pass by them, leaving a trail of darkness nipping at our heels. The air is quiet, still, cold, and sends goose bumps sprouting all over my arms.

"What happens if Fredrick captures you?" I struggle to breathe evenly as I race to keep up with Blaise.

The red door comes into view, and Blaise increases to a sprint, almost yanking my feet right out from under me.

"Then we're going to be the ones locked behind those doors," he says with his eyes fixed ahead.

"Forever?" I gasp as I stumble over my own feet.

Blaise tightens his hold on my hand and stops me from falling completely. Then he slams on the brakes as we reach the door.

"No, just until he kills us." Zander zips past us to open the door.

"Kill us?" I whisper as Zander drags open the door with a grunt.

The cries of the prisoners hit me all at once, lifting me further out of the daze Poppy put me in.

I don't want to be behind those doors.

I want to go back to Leviter Station where I will be safe. But I don't know how, and I don't want to leave Blaise behind. Therefore, all I can do is hold on to him tightly and hope this version of him will get us out of here safely.

If this is the past, then I'm guessing we will. Unless somehow the past can be altered.

Instead of going back toward the bar, Blaise and Zander lead me down a secret tunnel hidden behind one of the rusty doors. The ceiling is so low that the three of us have to duck our heads, and without torches to light the way, we constantly bump into each other.

"I feel like I've done this before," I whisper as water sprinkles from the ceiling and soaks the top of my head.

"Maybe you've been here before," Blaise suggests as he continues moving down the tunnel while still gripping my hand.

"Maybe ..." Images blaze vividly inside my mind of tunnels, bookshelves, a map, half-machines chasing me, and a guy in a hoodie watching it all happen ...

"Dammit, I thought you weren't going to figure it out this time."

A hand slaps across my mouth, and my fingers slip from Blaise's as I'm dragged back into the darkness.

Chapter 14

Did You Think I'd Make This Easy for You?

"Easy." Lips nibble my ear. "I'm not going to kill you just yet."

My body shudders at the eerily familiar tone.

The time traveler.

I open my mouth to let out a scream, but he smashes his hand against my mouth.

I writhe my body and kick my legs, but his arm secured around my waist never wavers.

"Scream all you want," he whispers, dragging me farther and farther away from Blaise and Zander. "They've already forgotten you."

Letting my body go limp, I attempt to get him to drop me, but he continues moving, hauling me backward down the tunnel until we emerge inside the cell at the end. Soft moonlight filters through the barred window and into the room, casting shadows all over the walls. At least, I think they're shadows until the shadows begin to move, dancing around on the bronze

d walls.

"Scary, aren't they?" The time traveler releases me and shoves me forward with enough force that I crash into the wall.

My cheek and forehead smack against the metal and stars spot my vision ... Or maybe they're just in the sky outside ... The sky ...

Peering through the bars, I spot a full moon and thousands of countless twinkling stars in the black sky.

"This sky ... It doesn't belong to the red sky world ..." The bars sing to dust in front of me and float down the rocky ledge I'm standing on. "What's happening?"

"What's happening is that I'm reminding you of what I can do." The time traveler steps up beside me, pulling his hoodie higher over his head to shield his face. "Don't forget, Allura, you may erase everything, but I control everything--create--which is so much more."

I turn sideways to face him, the breeze rising from the cliffs gusting my hair into my face. "Who are you?"

He stares ahead at the cliffs and stars stretching before us. "I already told you, I'm a time traveler."

"No, I know you." I curl my fingers inward and slowly start to reach for him to draw down his hood. "And well. That's why you purposefully keep your face hidden."

"Perhaps you're right, but it doesn't really matter, because you'll never know." He snaps his head in my direction, and his hand follows, seizing my arm. "Did you really think I'd make this easy for you?"

I wrench my arm back, but his fingernails pierce into my flesh. "Make what easy on me?"

"Bringing Blaise back." He faces me full-on and tugs on my arm until I stumble into

him. "He's going to stay where I put him and live the worst moments of his life over and over again until he goes mad."

"No." I flatten my palms against his chest and push back. "I'm going to save him."

"Save him?" He leans forward, laughing in my face. "And how are you going to do that when you can't even save yourself?"

"I'll find a way. I always do." The words leave my lips under no control of my own, and a long forgotten memory surfaces. "I've said that before."

"Yes, you have." The time traveler blows out a frustrated exhale. "I guess it's time to reset."

"Reset--"

He seizes both my wrists before I can finish. With one swift tug, he whips me around and lines my back to his chest. Then he slips his arm around my waist and rests his other hand at the base of my throat as he turns us toward the edge of the cliff.

"Do you remember this part?" he whispers in my ear with a hint of remorse.

"You kill me." My hollow voice doesn't even sound like it belongs to me.

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"So, you do remember?"

"Sort of." Not really. The truth is, my body feels possessed, as if I'm a puppet someone is controlling.

"And do you remember why?"

"No."

He positions his mouth beside my ear. "Because you erase everything--time, people, memories. It's what you are, Allura."

My knees begin to tremble as memories pinprick my brain. "A time eraser?"

"A time manipulator," he whispers. "Which makes you very dangerous if you fall into the wrong hands."

"You mean the Grim?"

"I mean everything like the Grim."

My head pulsates as more memories attack me. "But the Grim already had me. And technically, I am part of them."

"Is that what you think?" He laughs, his fingertips stabbing into my throat, choking me. "Despite what a lot of people believe, the Grim aren't very bright. Well, at least not when compared to you and me. When you were brought to the channels that day,

that stupid moron didn't even know what he had. They locked you away, knowing you were different. They fed off you while trying to tap into your brain to see what you really are. But since you couldn't remember, they couldn't figure it out. Now they know. And like they've always done before, they're going to chase you and chase you and chase you, ruining everything in their path. Planets, colonies, families--everything until they lose you again and this whole painful process repeats itself."

"Why do they want me?" I gasp out, gripping his arm as he lifts me upward until my feet no longer touch the ground.

"Because you're basically the end of the world." He presses a soft kiss to my ear. "Don't worry; in just a few seconds, you'll forget everything."

"No!" I scream as the wind kicks up, funneling dirt and leaves around us.

I can't forget everything. I can't forget Blaise, Ryder, and Reece. I can't forget the pain. What I am. Who I need to save.

The scream dissolves in my throat as he snaps my neck and drops me to the ground, to forget everything good that ever happened to me.

Chapter 15

I Think I Know Him

My eyes snap open, and I sit up, gasping for air. The monitor beside me sputters a series of wild beeps, the screen lighting up with diagonal lines. I toss the blankets off, looking down at my black tank top and grey shorts, then at the numbers stained into the flesh along the inside of my wrists.

My gaze moves to the cracked open door before I turn and lower my feet to the cold,

grated floor. My legs teeter as I rise to my feet, pad across the room, and stick my head out into a hallway lit up by fluorescent square lights. When I spot no one around, I open the door wider and slip outside.

The clean, white linoleum floor is cool against my bare feet as I make my way past shut door after shut door. I don't know where I'm heading, but I pause when I arrive at a window.

I press my nose to the glass and peer inside a room with padded white walls and flooring. Slumped against the far back wall is a guy, probably a few years older than me, with chin-length black hair and strikingly silver eyes.

"I know you," I whisper, splaying my fingers against the glass.

The man's head snaps up, and his eyes find mine. Then he gets to his feet, crosses the room, and lines his palm with mine.

"Zander," I whisper, familiarity dancing on my tongue.

He smiles, and I smile back. Then his smile shifts to a snarl, and he begins bashing his head against the glass. I trip back as blood drips from his hairline and dots the glass.

"What happened to you?" I whisper in horror.

"Allura? What are you doing out here?"

I turn, and my heart flutters at the sight of a blond-haired guy striding toward me with a robotic dog in his arms and a look of concern on his face.

"Ryder. Ryder. Ryder," I chant his name repeatedly until it clicks, overwhelming me,

and my knees buckle.

Ryder rushes down the hallway then kneels in front of me. "Sweetheart, you shouldn't be walking around yet." He reaches for my arm and helps me up as he stands. He examines me thoroughly before releasing my arm. "Why are you out here?"

"I don't know ... I can't remember ..." I whisper, glancing at Zander still banging his head against the glass. "What's wrong with him?"

"He got addicted to Witches Potion while working a mission with Blaise." Sadness creeps into his tone. "He used to be part of our team, but the poison drove him mad, and now ... well ..." He gestures at the window now covered in blood.

Witches Potion. Poison.

I remember, I remember, I remember ...

"Oh, my God, I remember!" I cry out, slumping against the wall.

Ryder tucks the compassbot under his arm and grabs my elbow to steady me. "Remember what?"

I press my hand to my racing heart. "Everything."

Chapter 16

The Plan

After telling Ryder what I remember, he immediately leaves to find Reece.

A few hours later, I'm sitting on a bed in a small room with Ryder and Reece, and the

compassbot in my lap. At first, I was confused how the robotic dog survived the fall, but Ryder explained that, as I fell, I clung to the bag for dear life, so when Blaise caught me, the compassbot was saved, too.

I'm glad. While I only had the pet for a few minutes, I'd hate to think he died because of me.

"There isn't anything on the computer that says anything about time traveling or time manipulation." Reece has been camped out in a chair behind a desk, half-distracted with a glowing screen illuminating from seemingly nowhere, which he explained to me was a computer.

I lie down on the bed on my side and prop up my head on my elbow. "You don't believe me?"

Reece taps the screen with a pencil, causing the pictures and letters to change. "No, I definitely believe you. I just wish I knew a way to get more information about what it is and why the hell the Grim want you so badly."

"The time traveler said it was because I was the end of the world," I mutter with my head tipped down.

"That's a very open statement," Reece says. "Maybe we'll get some answers after I find out more about time traveling and time manipulation. Until then, we need to keep you here at the station where you'll be safe."

I bob my head up and down. "What I don't understand, though, is why he wants Blaise?"

"Yeah, that doesn't make very much sense, either," Ryder agrees, restlessly drumming his fingers against his knee.

"I did see him mention a time traveler in one of his memories," Reece reminds us. "He has to be connected to them in some way. And Blaise's past is a mystery, like Allura's."

I absorb his words as I pet the top of the compassbot's head, lulling it into a state of sleep. "I really wish I could remember more, but honestly, I'm not even sure why I can remember what I do ... I mean, according to the time traveler, I was supposed to forget everything. But I remember everything that happened from the days before you guys rescued me from the cell all the way up until now."

Ryder bends forward on the bed and rests his arms on his legs. "I'd really like to find out who this time traveler guy is so I can kick his ass."

"First we need to get Blaise out of those memories," Reece says, skim reading the words on the screen.

"How can we do that when he doesn't even know he's stuck in there?" I wonder, resting my chin on my fist.

"You'll convince him," Reece assures me, tapping the screen again with the end of the pen.

I point stupidly at myself. "I will?"

Reece nods, chewing on the end of the pen. "Do you want to know how I know?"

I sit up, tucking my legs under me. "Yes, definitely."

Ryder raises his hand. "Me, too, because I really don't see the solution to this problem."

"I'm not exactly sure how we're going to do it yet." Reece swivels in the chair with his hands overlapped on his lap. "But I know that Allura makes it to Blaise and gets him out of there."

"How?" Ryder and I ask at the same time.

Reece slants forward and crosses his arms on top of the desk

. "Remember how you said you saw a copy of yourself and Blaise while you were in the Oblivion?" Reece asks, and I nod. "Well, that only happens when a memory of being in the Oblivion crosses over with another one."

"So, she's been in the Oblivion twice," Ryder states, nodding. "I think I see where you're going with this."

I scoot to the edge of the bed and plant my feet on the grated floor. "I'm a little confused," I admit. "Because I thought I've only been in the Oblivion once."

"You have." Reece taps a small black box and boots down the computer screen. "Since you saw the ghost of yourself, it means you go back in again."

"But Blaise was there." I straighten as I realize something. "Which means I get to him."

Reece nods, then rubs his hand across his forehead. "There's just a few things I can't figure out. Like, how you're supposed to find him when that time traveler said he was stuck in his own memories. And the only way to access those memories through the Oblivion is to have experienced them."

"I experienced one of them in my sleep," I point out. "Maybe I can do it again."

"Or maybe you can access the file you downloaded Blaise's memories to," Ryder suggests, resting back on his hands.

Reece springs from his chair, aiming the pen at him. "Ryder, you're a genius."

Ryder snorts a laugh. "Okay."

Reece paces in front of the desk, twirling a pen between his fingers. "The only problem is, I'm going to have to build something that can transfer the memories into Allura's brain."

Ryder pulls a face. "That sounds disgusting."

I nod in agreement. "If it'll help Blaise, I'll do it."

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Reece stops trying to wear a hole in the floor and tosses the pen onto the desk. "It might take me a few days, but I think I should be able to build something."

"And then what?" Ryder asks. "Allura just goes into the Oblivion, all by herself, to face God knows what, while we just sit here and hope she doesn't get lost? Or killed?" Shaking his head, he pushes to his feet. "You need to come up with something that can get me in there, too."

"Fuck, you're right." Reece yanks his fingers through his hair, tugging at the roots. "I hadn't thought about that."

"I'll be fine," I try to assure them. "Especially since almost nothing can kill me."

Reece ignores me as he hurries for the door. "I'll figure out something, either a way for one of us to go in with her, or a way to make sure she's protected at all times. In the meantime, have Rae do a thorough examination to make sure Allura is completely healthy. Then take her down to the training room." The doors glide open, and then he disappears into the hallway.

I turn toward Ryder. "You really think this is going to work?"

He nods and smiles, but the movement is forced. "Of course." Then he stands up and twines our fingers together. "Now come on. Let me show you around your new home."

I grow nervous as he leads me out the door, not just because I can't remember the last time I had a place to call home, but because I fear I'll fail at finding Blaise.

But I'll do everything in my power to find him, no matter what it takes.