**Arson and Agony**

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**Abstract**

 There’s comfort in conformity, freedom in rebellion, but these ideas don’t necessarily need to be completely distinct from one another; they can exist simultaneously in the same story, the same person. Consider science-fiction, dystopian, or fantasy genres: there’s a mixture of both conformity and rebellion, but it’s usually set up as a battle of wills. Which one will win? Will characters fall deeper into controlling structures or release themselves from them in a flurry of political activism? This seems to be a big trend.

Although, the aspects of “winning” or “losing” aren’t important in the big picture, are they? It’s subjective, and these gray areas can sometimes consume any traditional, heroic plot. The complicated nature of relationships overshadows the chain of events, a morally distraught dilemma overshadows the dilemma itself, and the words, neither right nor wrong, become the sole remembrance.

That was the focus in “Arson and Agony”: making everything a bit more gray. There remains a war between logic and faith, confinement and freedom, conformity and rebellion. Nobody is necessarily good or bad, right or wrong. Every character is flawed. There is no “correct” way of doing things, and if there is, then it is chosen by the reader’s own sense of morality—which I find an interesting experiment of literature on its own. At the end of the day, there is no right way of reading this—and thus, there wasn’t necessarily a right way of writing it. Truth is broken, and lies are sacred. There is a certain chaos involved.

I enjoy writing in this dystopian/sci-fi genre because *anything* can be changed, while nothing can be changed at all. While the world may seem different, the problems aren’t. We, as readers and writers of this genre, are simultaneously rebelling against the norms of society while conforming to the gritty, raw, underbelly-like experiences of that society. We break and mold at the same time, a never-ending cycle of clay and broken pottery.

Overall, “Arson and Agony” is centered on those small moments of the bigger picture. While I love action and plot as much as the next person, I wanted to focus on the people behind the tropes, on carving out their identities so that they feel real, so that they feel gray. Not much else can be said about it.

Along the way of birthing these characters, a story unfolded.

—Kaylie Chiaverini

Reading List:

1. Cassandra Clare—*City of Bones*
2. Rick Riordan—*The Lightning Thief*
3. Victoria Aveyard—*Red Queen*
4. Tahereh Mafi—*Shatter Me*
5. Suzanne Young—*The Program*
6. Ally Condie—*Matched*
7. Suzanne Collins—*The Hunger Games*
8. Veronica Roth—*Divergent*
9. Never let you go
10. The girl with all the gifts
11. Hannah—Movie

**Prologue**

 **He’d stumbled** into Hell.

 Hundreds of dark, bulky vans had consumed the city: patrol. They were still finding stragglers a week after the crash site was discovered, and things were getting tighter and stricter by the hour. Earlier curfews, more Feds, bloodhounds sent to the fields, sniffing the escapees out, and a big-shot asshole in charge of the whole operation.

 Drew knew he shouldn’t be here, but he hadn’t a clue it’d get *this* bad. The town was rumored to be ransacked by a bunch of thieves, not overtaken by the goddamn government. He hoped that he didn’t come all this way in the middle of fucking nowhere just to get caught now.

 He hid in the alleyway between the church and the building next door. Tonight was a dark one, and rain sprinkled on top of his hood like the twinkling piano notes from his grandmother’s house. The cold bled into his cotton jacket, so he stuffed his hands into the front pocket, chasing the warmth.

 He ducked behind the trash can when a car crawled by. Drew used to be on the swim team as a kid, always practicing how long he could hold his breath. His friends were awed by his ability—nearly four full minutes as a twelve year old—but now, almost eight years later, as Drew sat with his breath in his throat, he wondered if the gang would be as proud. It must’ve barely been a minute—maybe thirty seconds more—and he was left breathless and gasping like a fish on a hook.

Once the yellow lights passed his hiding spot, he looked around. The place was swarmed, and if he didn’t get out of there soon, then he’d get found. Drew knew what happened to people who saw things they shouldn’t have.

 He made a break for the other side of the street. The patrols half-surrounded him, but he blended well into the night, moving like shadows, like he was pulling himself seamlessly through pool water, leaving no ripples. He made it to another building undiscovered, and he looked at the shop sign to see that it was a family grocery store. He figured he’d be able to find some cash here—if not, at the very least, he could snag some food—but the second he maneuvered his way through the stiff door, he heard the sharp cocking of a gun.

 “Hands up,” a voice commanded. Drew didn’t hesitate, raising his hands, palms open, showing he was unarmed. He had a pocketknife in his jeans, but that was useless against the weapon currently aimed at his head. There was some shuffling, and the gravelly voice rumbled again. “Turn ‘round… *Slowly,* boy. I won’t hesitate to shoot your brains out.”

 Drew shrugged, but couldn’t help the small quip that slipped. “I wouldn’t recommend it,” he said lowly. “You shoot that thing, and every soldier on the block will be ransacking this place. I saw them just outside.”

 It was quiet, and Drew finally turned achingly slow. He raised his eyes. The weapon was aimed toward the floor now, so Drew didn’t think he’d be killed any moment soon. *Hopefully*, at least.

 He stood still, surveying the shop curiously. The windows were boarded up haphazardly, like they were thrown together by a kid’s imagination, and the place looked pretty bad altogether. Drew must’ve been late, because it was wiped of everything that once sat on the shelves. Some boxes littered the floor, but most of it didn’t seem useful. To his left, there was a counter—behind it were more hollowed spots—and he was surprised to find a few bullet holes in the wall. It looked like a war zone, or like those zombie games he used to play in tenth grade.

 “What happened here?” he asked slowly, taking a step forward. But when he did, the armed man raised his gun again.

 He was old, but he looked fit, his muscles straining against the dirty shirt he wore. He’d be able to take the recoil.

 “Who are you?” he asked. Drew heard a Southern accent. “I know damn well you ain’t from Heavenly—I’d remember a face like that.”

 Drew frowned; he didn’t question the man’s words, unsure if he was referring to Drew being a stranger, or his darker skin. Either option was completely plausible. He shouldn’t have expected anything less than the racist assholes that’d always look at him funny. Even in the apocalypse, white fuckers stayed the same.

 “I’m Drew,” he replied sincerely, raising his hands, trying to reiterate that he wasn’t a threat. “I didn’t realize there were people here, swear.”

 “That don’t answer what you’re doin’ here now,” the old man muttered. “I suppose it ain’t matter no more. Nobody’s safe here.”

 Drew swallowed, but their silence didn’t last. There was a soft rustle, and Drew peeked behind the old man, seeing pigtails bobbing over the counter. Drew smirked when the girl widened her big eyes, dipping down so she wasn’t seen—but the damage had already been done.

 “Annie, get outta there,” the old man scolded. The girl, Annie, straightened shyly, looking down at her shoes. She was a small thing, with thin arms and a tiny face. Her auburn hair was tied back with two purple ribbons, but he couldn’t tell anything else by her features while she was still avoiding looking at anyone. “You know you’re s’pposed to be in the back with Lorraine and Jane.”

 “Who’s he?” she squeaked, pointing at Drew.

 The old man frowned. “Nobody you need to worry ‘bout, honey,” he spoke shockingly gently.

 “But *Ty*,” the girl whined, finally looking up. She had very blue eyes. “Jane needs more things from the store, things she can’t find here.”

 Ty groaned, running his hand over the few pieces of hair he still had left. If Drew didn’t know any better, he’d swear he saw the hair thinning in real time.

 “What she need?” Ty asked.

Annie sighed, shaking her head. “Medicine,” she whispered. “Jane’s running out, says it won’t be long before… You know…”

 Drew looked at Ty questionably, wanting to make sure. “You got sick folks here?”

 Ty nodded. Seeing that Drew didn’t want to hurt anybody there, he rested the gun on the countertop, leaning tiredly. Ty was stout, much shorter than Drew, but it looked like he was bent over completely by the shit outside, and Drew couldn’t blame him. By the things he saw on the way here, he wouldn’t want to be in Ty’s shoes either, especially if someone was hurt.

 After a moment, Ty straightened up, grumbling as he waddled to the door at the inner-most corner of the shop. Drew watched him curiously, shifting so he could still see him walking toward the door. When little Annie skipped into the room, Ty paused, turning.

 “You comin’ or what?” he asked. Drew blinked, but followed. It wasn’t like he was safe in that front room—being so close to the soldiers—so he’d rather take his chances.

 He quickly took note of his surroundings. The room looked like it’d been an office once, considering the sophisticated-looking desk in the middle of the room. But, that wasn’t the case anymore. The desk was a gurney now, and a woman was mumbling incoherently on top of it.

She looked young, but sick. Her face was yellow and sweaty, and the bright red curls haloing her face only made her skin look worse. Another woman sat beside her, patting a towel on the redhead’s face. There were a few chairs scattered, and one was occupied by a middle-aged man—salt and pepper hair galore—who stood up at Drew’s arrival.

 “Who the hell is this?” he asked Ty.

 “Don’t worry ‘bout him,” Ty muttered. Instead, he went up to the makeshift nurse. “How she doing, Jane?”

 Jane shook her head. Her hair was a dark cloud, and even when she’d blown the pieces away, the dark stayed. “Not good,” she whispered, sending an urgent look toward Ty. “She can’t stay here.”

 Ty sighed, but Drew was distracted by someone pulling his pant leg. He glanced down, and Annie was standing there, her big blue eyes sitting on him curiously. “Lorraine’s been sick for a while now,” she said. “I think those bad people—the ones outside—they did somethin’ to her.”

 Drew tilted his head, examining Lorraine closer. She clawed her stomach tightly, and he saw where blood bled through. The red stain looked old, so the wound shouldn’t have been fresh, but it must’ve got infected. Drew knew Jane was right. Lorraine wouldn’t survive if they stayed any longer.

 Another tug at his clothes. Each time he looked at her, it was as if her eyes got wider and wider—like those caricatures that artists paint near the beach. “Can you help me find my doll? I thought I left her in here, but I can’t remember.”

 “Don’t be talking to him, Annie,” the salt-and-peppered man ordered. Annie’s grip fell away, and she looked at the floor again.

 “Relax, Issac,” Ty said sharply. “We gotta be quiet, remember?”

 Issac clenched his jaw, but after a second, he plopped back down.

 “The hospitals are guarded now,” Ty told Jane softly. “We can’t grab anythin’ else there without risking us all.”

 “We can’t just let her *die* either,” Jane spat. She glared at Ty with fiery determination and revolted disgust. “I don’t think I need to remind you why she’s in this state in the first place, do I?”

 Ty straightened his shoulders, offended. “I’m not tryin’ to be mean, but we gotta be realistic here—”

 “I don’t care what you think,” Jane interrupted harshly. “We either get her the medicine she needs, or we go somewhere we can get her help, but I ain’t leavin’ her.”

 “It won’t be long ‘til we’re caught if we stay here,” Ty replied. “Remember when they first showed up? We barely got outta it unscathed, and I’m not ‘boutta throw all that away for—”

 “For what?” Jane cut him off again, but this time, Ty didn’t bother trying to speak over her. “For someone who’s helped all of us? She’s our *friend*.”

 “Sure,” Ty agreed, nodding solemnly. “But now she’s a *liability*, one we can’t afford.”

 “Are you trying to get out of town?” Drew asked slowly. Issac narrowed his eyes.

 “What’s it to you?” He crossed his arms firmly, like a G.I. Joe action figure. A wry expression crossed Drew’s face.

 “I might know a way out,” he replied, satisfied when Issac’s jaw twitched. “You know, if you’re nice to me and all that.”

 Issac scowled, but Jane was already grabbing Drew’s hands, and he realized that her skin was stained with Lorraine’s blood. He cringed, but knew he couldn’t pull away; Jane was desperate, and as much fun as he was having at Issac’s expense, he knew things were serious.

 “*Please*, if you know a way outta the city, we *gotta* take it,” Jane pleaded.

 “Alright, hold on here,” Ty said, grunting and shifting his weight from foot to foot. “How do we know this is safe?”

 Drew shrugged, letting his hands fall once Jane released him. “We don’t.”

 “Great, so you could be walking us straight into a death trap?” Issac snapped, and Drew shrugged again. He copied Issac’s stance, crossing his arms over his own chest and leveling his gaze with the other man.

 “I’m not the one in rough times,” he reminded, eyes flickering to Lorraine who was still tossing uncomfortably. “Look, it’s risky, but I found a way through most of the guards by going into the hill at the edge of town.”

 “The crash site?” Jane asked, suddenly pale. “That’s suicide! Besides, how would we get Lorraine over without being seen?”

 “I didn’t say we’d climb over the hill,” Drew told her, lips quirked. “I said we’d go through.”

 Ty shook his head. “I’ve lived here all my life. I think I’d know if there were tunnels underneath that there hill.”

 Drew shook his head. “There’s some old tunnels from the mining raids in the fifties.” Recognition dawned in Ty’s filmy eyes.

 “Those are still standing?”

 Issac tilted his head, sending Ty a funny look. “What happened to you knowin’ if there were tunnels or not?”

 “I’m *old*,” Ty pointed out. Annie, who’d been quietly standing in the corner of the room, giggled. “I forget things.”

 Drew sighed. “Look, it’s still there. I promise,” he said, taking a peek out one of the windows. He still heard soldiers, but the sound was distant. The danger wasn’t right outside the door anymore, but in the background, like fog.

 Issac turned his criticizing eyes back to Drew. “And how would *you* know? Is that how *you* got into town?” Drew clenched his jaw. “We’d know if you were from Heavenly.”

 “Fuck Heavenly.” Drew sneered. “They’re calling everyone here *Auras*. They’ve deemed the town official government property.”

 “Great,” Issac groaned, running a hand through his hair. “We’re going to turn into a fucking conspiracy theory.”

 “Issac!” Jane admonished.

 “Swears!” Annie pointed at Issac and Drew accusingly, her wide eyes switching between both. She seemed to be expecting some kind of retribution for such an action, and the little determined face made Drew smile—this time, it was genuine.

 “Sorry, Annie,” Issac apologized meekly, but Annie only frowned more.

 “Do you have a quarter?” she asked, a lilt toward the end of her question, pressing up onto her toes.

 Jane turned to Ty as Issac dug into his pocket and pulled out a coin, dropping it in the waiting, small palm. Drew held his hands up when she looked at him, but thankfully, she was satisfied with just the one.

“Ty, if we have a chance, we *need* to take it,” Jane repeated, already moving. Her eyes flickered to Annie, who was grinning at the shiny coin happily. Drew noticed that one of her teeth toward the front was missing. “Sweetheart, go get your stuff, okay? We’re leaving soon.”

 Annie nodded, walking behind the desks and chairs.But, as Drew listened to Ty and Jane brainstorm ideas to get Lorraine moving, he felt a familiar tug on his pants.

 Drew lifted one corner of his mouth. “Still need help finding that doll?” he whispered. The wide smile he received was answer enough. Momentarily glancing at the others, still bickering, he followed the girl back toward the front of the store.

 It was interesting seeing Annie walk through the store amidst the shadows, as if she were taught how to disappear. She didn’t seem scared, which impressed Drew even as she grabbed his hand when a particularly loud sound echoed down the street.

 Drew waited until she was relaxed again. “How’d you find yourself here?” he asked. He just wanted to make conversation while all the others figured out what they wanted to do. He didn’t want Annie to think about what was happening—even if he was pretty worried himself. Nothing like this had ever really happened outside of TV shows and movies, and now he was stuck in the middle of it with a little girl, an injuried woman, and a group of people who couldn’t get their priorities straight, running around like headless chickens.

 Annie shrugged, avoiding the stuff littered messily on the tiled floor. “Lorraine is my babysitter,” she explained softly. She stepped around the cashier counter, and Drew had tipped his chin to keep an eye on her. “I don’t know where my parents are, but Ty’s a friend, so we came here.”

 Drew tapped one of his fingers against his leg. “Really?” he teased. “He didn’t seem all that friendly when I met him.”

 Annie giggled, and Drew scanned the room, trying to find the doll.

 “Everything’s different now,” she said. He paused at her nostalgic tone, not used to hearing it from such a small voice. “Ty would’ve been friendly to you if you came here earlier.”

 Drew nodded, somewhat regretting having said anything, and fiddled with the things on a table nearby. He wasn’t sure what the doll they were searching for even looked like—Annie hadn’t told him yet—but he didn’t exactly have time to ask either.

 The sounds were sudden and worse, screams erupting from the air like blaring sirens, piercing his ears and making Annie jump at least two feet. She ducked behind the counter, bending low, and Drew faced the front door, tightening his jaw. If he had to guess, the screams were probably just a few doors down, which meant that the Feds must’ve been making another round.

They needed to hide.

 “Hey, Annie?” Drew breathed, peeking over his shoulder. “You got that doll yet?”

 She shook her head, but understood, and quickly set to work, searching through everything quicker, raising boxes with the tips of her fingers and tipping them over on their sides when she didn’t find anything. Ty and Issac came rushing out, but Drew pressed his finger to his lips. More ruckus would only bring more attention, and they *really* didn’t need that if they were trying to make it out of this alive.

 “What the *hell’s* going on?” Issac hissed. Ty walked to where Annie was bent on the ground, shotgun in his hand again.

 “They must’ve ransacked a building a few doors down,” Drew explained, staring at the door with trepidation. “If we’re trying to get out of here, we gotta leave. Now.”

 “Shit,” Issac ran a hand through his hair, then pulled a pistol from his waistband. “Get Annie ready first, and make sure Lorraine and Jane are good to go.”

 Drew looked at him skeptically. “You trust me now?” he asked. Issac just rolled his eyes exasperatedly.

 “Necessary for survival, new guy,” Issac said sharply. Drew would’ve snorted under different circumstances.

Regardless, he listened, grabbing Annie’s attention as he joined her side. She held up a small doll sown with fabric and string. Sending him a flashy smile, she nodded her head. “I’m fit to go now.”

 Drew smiled tightly, jerking his chin to the back room. “Good, but let’s go check on your babysitter, yeah?”

 Annie nodded excitedly and ran ahead. Drew and Ty exchanged a short nod. Issac positioned himself closer to the windows, pressing his ear to the wood and listening carefully. It was like waiting for a gunshot, knowing it’d only come once it was too late.

 Drew entered the back room and Jane’s head shot up. She was rushing, gathering as many things as she could and stuffing them into a backpack. Lorraine looked paler, a painful grimace coating her face.

 “Can she walk at all?” Drew asked. Jane bit her lip, so he had a feeling he wouldn’t like the answer.

 “She *might*, but she’s been in and out for hours,” Jane explained, wiping sweat off her forehead. “Who knows if she’ll collapse in the middle of the street if one of us isn’t holdin’ onto her.”

 Drew eyed her uneasily. “You know that’ll make this a lot harder, right?”

 Jane didn’t respond, but Drew knew she swallowed his words like poison, agonizingly mulling them over. His nerves tap-danced up and down his spine. It felt like the Feds were so close, *too* close.

 Ty stumbled in the doorway, shotgun in hand and eyes wild. “It’s too late,” he wheezed. Drew tensed as he heard the loud banging coming from the front door. Ty swung his face to stare hard into Drew’s eyes, pointing at him accusingly. “*You*, get the girls, and get the hell outta here. And *don’t* open this door.”

 He leaned back and slammed the door shut, and Drew heard something being piled against it. Instead of waiting around, Drew jumped, scanning the room and finding a slim window. “There,” he said, pointing. He didn’t hesitate, grabbing Annie’s small hand and leading her over.

 “We can’t haul Lorraine up there,” Jane denied, desperately searching for another way.

 “You heard Ty. We stick around any longer, and we’re all goners,” he reminded her breathlessly. He pushed a chair against the wall, then whirled to the desk Lorraine was groaning on. He threw the drawers open, looking for something suitable. Luckily, one held a thick tablecloth. He wrapped it around his hand, jumped on the chair, and punched a hole straight through the glass.

 The sound was practically nothing compared to the gunfire that started the second the glass broke. Jane jumped, and Annie glanced to Lorraine, her big eyes filling with tears already. “Jane…” the young girl whined, eyes fixing themselves on the door to the other room. “Where’s Ty and Issac?”

 Jane looked at Annie, then at Lorraine, and then at Drew; her eyes were conflicted, but Drew wasn’t gonna let her get them all caught.

 “Annie, come here,” he said. The gunfire was still going, so Ty and Issac must’ve been giving the soldiers a good fight. “You’ll go up first.”

 The girl clumsily climbed the chair, and Drew helped steady her. The doll in her hand might become a problem, but he didn’t need to tell her that right now, especially when she was clutching it so tightly.

 He double-checked the window so that there were no shards sticking out before lifting her up to the ledge. She threw her doll outside before pulling herself up. Once Drew knew she was alright, he looked back to Jane, eyebrows raised.

 Her face was stern. “I’m not leaving her.” She gestured to Lorraine.

 “What am I supposed to do with Annie?” Drew asked. Somehow, he’d gotten roped into babysitting when all he wanted was to snag a few nice things from the abandoned stores.

 “Her parents are dead,” Jane explained quietly, shaking her head dismally. “We saw them get shot down. Please look after her.”

 “This is *not* my responsibility,” Drew whispered, pointing toward the window. “I don’t know how to take care of a fucking kid!”

 “Then *learn*,” Jane spat. “‘Cause she got no one left.”

 The gunfire stopped and the front door was broken down. Drew heard heavy boots stomping, and since there were no voices other than a few mumbling soldiers, he assumed that Ty and Issac went down fighting.

 Knowing this was his last chance, he groaned, rolling his eyes and wishing he’d never gone into the store at all. He didn’t spare Jane another glance as he rushed to the window and scrambled out of the building.

 Annie looked at him, adjusting her small *Dora The Explorer* backpack. “Where are the others?” she asked quietly. Drew didn’t answer right away, knowing they didn’t have a lot of time.

 “First, we gotta get to those tunnels I was talking about, remember?” he said through clenched teeth, trying to be optimistic.

 Annie nodded slowly. “Okay,” she responded, holding out her hand. He grabbed it, looking up and down the alley and choosing the darker path; light was their biggest enemy right now.

 “Come on,” he ushered her forward. They probably only got a hundred feet before more shots echoed from where they’d just left.

Annie flinched and started crying. Drew tried his hardest to calm her down until they got to a safer place. There wasn’t any time for meltdowns, even if they *were* warranted.

“Hey, Annie, look at me,” he whispered, bending so she didn’t have to crane her neck so far. When her eyes connected with his, he tried smiling. “It’s just you and me now, kid. First rule of being with me: never stop moving, okay? You think you can do that?”

Annie looked at him then, sniffling. Eventually, she nodded, and that was all the encouragement he needed to sneak off again. Annie followed his footsteps as if she could see in the dark, like she was the physical manifestation of his shadow. He almost wondered if what he’d heard over the radios were true, if the people here had developed strange…*abilities*. Was there any truth to it? Could Annie be affected?

But for now, he just kept moving, like he told her.

With an Aura child in his care, he had a feeling they wouldn’t stop moving for a while.

**SIXTEEN YEARS LATER**

**Chapter One**

**Apollo**

 The road was our home, where concrete mimicked carpet. The sky blended and cracked like plaster, shifting with age and pressure as gravity threatened to crash.

 The day was sunny and I begged for rain. This time last year, we’d seen this beautiful storm up in Oregon. Of course, Ma wasn’t happy ‘bout the cold while we were sleeping outside, but my twin sister enjoyed it. She probably stood outside for an hour, soaking up the rain and enjoying the freezing mist as her shoes got soaked. It wasn’t ‘til I convinced her with the last of our chocolate bar that she finally came back inside the tent.

 Now, we weren’t in Oregon anymore, and I knew she missed looking over the top of our hill and peering into the small town below. People walked and conversed and the little shops along the street were pretty and fun—even from a distance. My sister wanted to go down and explore, but Ma had rules ‘bout those sorta things.

 I wasn’t sure where we were exactly, but I knew that we’d looped ‘round the coast again; there was never any direction to where we went, so long as we were able to outmaneuver the ones that wanted us dead. I knew we were heading South, but it’d been a while since we stumbled on a public sign or map.

 I was excited we’d be staying here for the next week. It was secluded, defendable, and best yet: practical. The dusty orange ground peaked here in a small, mountainous region. On one side, there was a forever-horizon, but on the other, there was a narrow underpass that could work as an escape route if we got desperate. It wasn’t much, just a simple maze of red sedimentary rock, but it was tall enough to form caves within, with entrances trickled ‘round the base of the rocks. The landscape was scarce, but the mountain jutted up at just the right angle to give us a hidden alcove. Artemis was the one who’d found it.

 “I hope you’re not daydreaming again,” a voice muttered from behind me. For a moment, I thought Ma had spoken to me, but I saw my sister rolling her eyes. “Last time didn’t end well, remember?”

 “Oh please,” Artemis said, chuckling. She looked over her shoulder to meet those narrowed brown eyes that always put us in our place. “We were *fine*.”

 “We almost got *caught*,” Ma replied gently. Artemis huffed, looking forward again and pouting. “We need to be on our toes.”

 “What about that thing you always say?” Artemis said. She raised an eyebrow, but she still wasn’t looking in my direction. “Smelling the flowers? We hardly have time to *see* them in all this dirt and grime.” She flailed her arm outward, as if the scenery was proof enough.

 “That’s not really what that saying means,” I said. The reminder was not welcomed by my sister, who only crossed her arms and *finally* looked at me with a vivid green glare. “It means that you need to see the positive side of things.”

 “Well, I’m *positive* that we should go look ‘round,” Artemis responded casually. Ma’s smirk fell in the blink of an eye, and I was on my feet instantly.

 “Absolutely not.” I shook my head. “The sun’s gonna set soon, and we still haven’t figured out where we are. We don’t want a repeat of New Orleans.”

 “*That* was because we were too close to the city,” Artemis bit back stubbornly. “*Now*, we’re in the middle of nowhere. Come on, Apollo,” Artemis pressed her palms together, as if she were praying. Then, she gave me one of her loveliest smiles. “I’ll even let you come with me.”

 I rolled my eyes. “I don’t even *want* to go.”

 “Deep down, I bet you do,” Artemis said. She pointed at me, taking leisurely steps in my direction. I shifted, frowning at her while she just smiled wider. “I bet you’re just *itching* to go on an adventure like old times…*before you became a stick in the mud.*”

 “That’s not even—”

 “Tell you what,” Artemis cut me off, bending down to grab her small pack and slipping it over her shoulder. “If I get caught, I *promise* I won’t snitch.”

 “Artemis—”

 “You should be happy, brother,” she said, laughing. “Only a few miles ago, you were begging to be separated from me.” She placed a hand against her forehead dramatically, leaning on the wall of the cave like that one old movie we watched—back when things were normal between us. “*Oh, however will I survive?*”

 She giggled at her own theatrics, then twirled over her left shoulder and disappeared from the cave. I watched her leave, picking my nails. Leave it to my sister to cause a ruckus the *second* we settled. I knew Artemis could get antsy and annoyed with our constant moving, but she’d never seemed so anxious to get out into the open like this. While the mountains offered us shelter, there were still plenty of opportunities for people to see us. I found her childish needs…well, childish. I shouldn’t have been surprised; a few years ago—when I was as blind to Ma’s troubles as my sister—I might’ve joined her willingly. But Ma was struggling to keep us safe under the new laws. She needed help.

 Speaking of Ma, she was already staring at me. I instantly softened. She had a round face, and soft features that comforted me every time I saw her. Her brown eyes, while dark, were stark and vivid, and could both coddle and cut me so easily. Her long, blonde curls complimented her tanned skin, but I knew how easily the curls got tangled—just as they were now. But, despite the dirt on us from our latest excursions, she glowed goldenly.

“You know, you don’t have to stay,” she said, gently gesturing to our temporary home. “We’ve got most of it set up already.”

 I shrugged, walking between our heavy backpacks toward where the tent sat. Earlier, I’d dragged over a log from outside so that we’d have a place to sit, and I didn’t hesitate plopping myself down on it. The tent sat behind me, and we’d cleared a spot for the much-needed fire we were going to start next. Like I said to Artemis, it’d get dark soon, and with the dark always came the cold.

 “I don’t mind,” I said. Leaning forward, I looked at the ground where the fire would be, rubbing my hands together as if I could already feel the flames. “I’d rather help you.”

 I glanced up, ignoring yellow hair hanging in front of my face. Ma gave me a soft, understanding smile. “It’s okay, Apollo,” she soothed. “This path hasn’t given us much trouble yet.”

 “Key word: *yet*,” I repeated, and Ma rolled her pretty eyes. I dug through my backpack to avoid eye contact, trying to find my water bottle hidden amongst my few belongings.

 My sad attempt at distraction brought Ma closer, and the next thing I knew, she was sitting on the log, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Being paranoid is only gonna make you crazy,” she said. “Remember when you were ten, and tried to stay up all night to protect us from the monsters?”

 I chuckled, shaking my head. “Pretty sure I wasted a whole day for us ‘cause I couldn’t keep walking the next day.” I remembered the memory clearly; I probably whined for hours ‘bout anything and everything ‘til Ma managed to find a resting spot where we could go unnoticed. We should’ve walked twenty miles that day, but I’d cut the trip nearly in half.

 “Go,” she encouraged, patting my back. I gave her a look, doubtful, but she just jerked her chin toward the cavern’s outlined entrance. She bumped her shoulder with mine playfully. “Make sure your sister doesn’t do anything stupid.”

 I rolled my eyes, but smiled nonetheless. “Thanks, Ma,” I whispered. I pressed a chaste kiss against her cheek and jogged off, slipping outta the cave with only a small look back, just barely catching her wave.

 Artemis and I knew Ma wasn’t our blood, but she’d raised us since we were babies. For all intents and purposes, she was our mom, and I worried ‘bout her. Now that I was older, I understood the dangers and demons that chased us every second of every day. I didn’t want anything to happen to her while I was stuck chasing my sister.

 Artemis had always been wild, ever since I could remember—she was constantly searching after the next fantasy that she came up with, a new *adventure*. She danced on the wind and went wherever it took her, with no regard to anyone else. Sometimes, I thought it was selfish, and other times, I envied her. She’d always been good at lifting spirits, and it was one of the things that got Ma and me through our dark days. Even is she was a pain in the ass, she had her moments of superb wisdom that kept us going.

 I was the opposite. I wanted to be smart, to figure out the best path. I hated Artemis’s antics when she was putting us at risk without realizing it, and I got frustrated when *she* got frustrated with *me*. We used to get along great as kids, but we’d recently started to drift apart.

 I didn’t like that we weren’t as close now. She didn’t even talk to Ma that much either, and *who knew* what she did when she wandered off at random. She’d become distant, and I didn’t know why. Sure, we could all be unbearable to each other, but I never expected her to be so eager to leave.

 I walked, noticing the harsh ground and how it looked old, rusted. We were somewhere midwest, but the places blended together when we’d been everywhere so many times. Luckily, our experiences with nearly every state gave me an edge, training my body to recognize the atmosphere, to tell the differences. Even though it was getting late, the air was still dry and hot, and the few pathetic trees scattered ‘round told me that this area didn’t get a lot of rain. The dry twigs underneath my feet confirmed it, and I had to assume we were somewhere on the border of Utah and Wyoming.

But, even in the barren setting, it took a second to find her.

 I braced a hand on the side of the mountain, slipping down the small hill. Artemis might’ve been spontaneous, but thankfully, she wasn’t stupid; she wouldn’t spend her free time standing out in the open where everyone could see. She’d choose a secluded spot, one full of surprising beauty; that girl had a knack for finding hidden wonders wherever we went, and it wouldn’t surprise me if she managed to find an entire oasis out in this desert. I stepped around a few bushes toward a dip in the ground, and I almost scoffed at the accuracy of my monologuing.

 My lanky sister was crouched next to a small pool of water—as I looked closer, I could see an imprint of a river bank. This must’ve been where the water came when it *did* rain. The puddle was left over from last season.

 I stuffed my hands into my pockets, looking down. “Can’t you stay still for an hour?” I joked. She twitched her head to the side, listening. “I swear, it’s like you’re always off somewhere else.”

 “You know, you used to go *with* me,” she reminded, meeting my dark eyes with her own. “And not as an excuse to drag me back to camp. We used to be a team, and now I have to voyage for my purpose alone. A life of solidarity, a lone wolf,” Artemis threw her arm out, and I fought the twitch at my lips. “*True* loneliness.”

 “*Please*,” I scoffed, sitting on the ground a foot away from her. She glanced over expectantly, a spark in her forest eyes. “You couldn’t be alone even if you were thrown in a cell for the rest of your life.”

 Artemis frowned, her easygoing expression faltering. “You know that’s not the same,” she said softly. I grimaced.

 “I didn’t mean…” I sighed. As much as I didn’t want to be out here and away from Ma, I’d take any chance to make things right with Artemis. I scooted closer, bumping our shoulders. “You haven’t talked about them much… I almost thought they’d gone completely.”

 Artemis snorted, looking away. Her dark-as-night hair had tangled near her neck, a consequence of the heat, but it also gave her a tired silhouette for me to mull over. “It’s never that easy for people like us,” she mumbled. I frowned, bending my neck to try and catch her gaze. “But recently, they’ve been quiet. I don’t know why.”

 “Maybe they finally got tired of annoying the living,” I said, shrugging, but Artemis shook her head.

 “*Or* they’re getting ready for something else,” she replied. I sighed again.

 “We don’t *know* that—”

 “*Last* time they got this quiet, we almost got separated,” Artemis reminded me, turning sharply.

 I remembered. I remembered seeing the true fear deep in her vivid eyes, remembered the sirens, the threat closing in from all sides. I remembered losing Ma in the crowd, and the two of us were lost. We’d only been eleven.

 Artemis tilted a rock over with the tip of her shoe. “I feel something coming, Apollo,” she murmured, sounding more pessimistic and downcast than she usually did. I knew that if she was acting like this, then it really *was* serious, so I straightened my spine. “And I don’t think we can outrun it this time.”

 I stiffened; Artemis was never wrong when it came to things like these, but I always had a backup plan for every scenario she threw at me. Except this time, she sounded prophetic, more than usual.

 Artemis and I weren’t just skittish ‘cause of paranoia, but ‘cause of the very things that made us run in the first place. All of us—even Ma—were Auras: the “*chosen ones*” affected by the meteorite nearly two decades ago. Everyone near the crash site started manifesting these strange abilities. It was terrifying, and the adults were the first ones that freaked. They were also the first ones that got caught.

 There weren’t many free Auras left, thanks to the law making us official US government property. The borders closed long ago, a useless attempt to keep Auras out of other countries. It never stopped people from slipping through the splintered cracks.

 I didn’t know much else, seeing as news was hard to come by while being on the run. We hadn’t spoken to another Aura in three years—hadn’t even *seen* one in two—and I’d started to think we were almost completely wiped out.

 Artemis’s gift was language; she knew every spoken word, could tell lies apart from truth, and *literally* heard ghosts speaking through her. Some of the normies called Auras witches, and even if it wasn’t true, they’d think they were right if they saw her in action.

 *My* gift was knowing when someone was an Aura. I didn’t think it was *quite* as valuable as some rumored Auras, but it kept us from getting caught off guard from somebody pretending to be someone they weren’t. Luckily, the detection of other Auras wasn’t my only ability. I could also hit any kind of weapon on any kind of mark. It was a nice trick when we were in a bind.

 Ma was an Aura too, and she was good at hiding. It was how we’d been safe so long: she could camouflage us into the surroundings—invisibility. But since Ma was part of the older generation—the ones who’d remembered the crash—she usually got sick using her powers. In the beginning, when my sister and I were little, she lived in a half-permanent sick state, always tryin’ to protect us.

 “Hey,” Artemis said, shaking me outta my stupor, both figuratively and physically. “It’s probably nothing, okay?”

 I nodded, trying to brush off the unease I felt. Instead, it only worsened as we heard a shout close by. Like clockwork, we jumped to our feet, standing back to back and looking ‘cross the area.

 “Apollo,” Artemis whispered. I heard her hint, and withdrew the knife I’d stashed in my belt. If anything, I could give us enough time to run, and I knew very well that I wouldn’t miss.

 There was a painful cry, one that made us stiffen. We looked at each other, and while I wasn’t exactly *thrilled* ‘bout confronting anybody when we’d barely found shelter, I knew we couldn’t have anybody getting the jump on us. Artemis nodded, and we stealthily walked toward the commotion, crouched low.

 Short, agonized moans grew stronger.

 “Shh! Be quiet!” a voice hissed, but the other only groaned. It sounded like they were on the ground just beyond the break in the foliage, so we bent lower, splitting up on either side of the break like it was second nature. I kept my peripheral vision on my sister at all times, and I felt her eyes on me too.

 “I *told* you it was a bad idea,” the injured man muttered. I crept closer and moved a small branch with the tip of my knife, seeing the strangers firsthand.

 The injured man was on the ground—as I suspected—and he looked in bad shape. There was blood seeping out his shirt, which was torn to pieces; through the tears, I saw dirty gauze wrapped ‘round his torso.

 The second man, the one pacing back and forth with his hands in his long, blonde hair, looked better than the first one. He wasn’t injured, just stressed.

 “If we didn’t leave then, we never would’ve seen sunlight again!”

 “Jesus, Mark, and *now* what?” the injured man shouted, a little louder. “We’re in the middle of fucking nowhere, and we have no idea where *here* even is! We escaped one Hell in exchange for another.”

 Mark shook his head frigidly. “If this is about Marianne—”

 “*Don’t*.” The injured man clenched his jaw, making his sunburnt skin ripple in rage. Their animosity suddenly became all-too clear. “You don’t get to say her name.”

 It was *then* that I realized it—these men were Auras. It was unlike suspecting something, but more so knowing it to be true. I could feel the energy ‘round the two, and knew that if they were provoked, they’d prove my theory.

 I met Artemis’s eyes ‘cross the way. She was already looking at me, waiting for my signal. After a silent exchange, we stood up.

 They noticed us instantly, and Mark raised his hand in front of him, trying to block the injured man from our view. “*Woah, woah, woah!*” he exclaimed, stumbling. “Stay back.”

 “We aren’t here to hurt you,” I greeted. “You’re like us.”

 The men blinked, and I took time to really analyze them. It’d been so long since I’d met another Aura, and I had to admit, my curiosity was brewing. I could only imagine how Artemis felt.

 Mark, seeing that we weren’t any trouble, bent down and helped his friend up. The guy winced, swaying for a second before leaning heavily against Mark. I could tell he needed water, or he’d pass out. Judging by the peeled skin and red sunburns, they must’ve been out here a while.

 I raised an eyebrow when I looked closer, noticing that they wore identical pairs of grey slacks and t-shirts. They must’ve been in a facility.

 “Where’d you come from?” I asked.

 Mark scowled, narrowing his eyes. “What’s it to you?”

 I tried stopping my laugh, but Artemis didn’t, giggling softly under her breath. Mark’s intense glare shot to her.

 “If we’re helping you and your friend out, we need to know you ain’t gonna be a problem,” I said, not liking the way he looked at Artemis.

 “I’m Jackson,” the injured man introduced himself. I shifted my gaze to him. “We came from the Des Moines encampment.”

 I raised my eyebrows more. “Color me impressed. Not many get out of that one.”

 “Yeah, well, as you can see,” Jackson lifted his shirt, wincing. “We didn’t get out unscathed.”

 “How do you know each other?” Artemis asked, and there was a tense pause.

 “It’s a long story,” Mark muttered, rolling his eyes.

 Artemis shrugged, unbothered. “Are you gonna kill us if we help you?” she asked, shifting a little when my sharp glare landed on her. “What? It’s what you really want to know anyway.”

 They both shook their heads. “No, we’d never—”

 “We just need some help. We’re not bad people,” Jackson said.

 “They’re telling the truth,” Artemis declared, stepping forward confidently and wrapping Jackson’s other arm ‘round her shoulder. The two of them looked at her funny.

 “You could’ve at least *tried* to keep it subtle,” I scolded. Even if she’d only hinted at it, she basically confessed one of her abilities, which could lead to disaster. But, she only smiled sweetly.

 “Sorry big bro, can’t talk,” she told me. “We gotta get these two over to Ma.”

 I huffed, watching them hobble back to where we left our stuff. I wasn’t sure ‘bout the safety of this scenario, but I was comforted by the fact that Jackson was hurt. They wouldn’t mess with us while they still needed our help.

 I jogged to catch up with them, and then kept jogging so I could get to the cave first. If we were gonna bombard Ma, the least I could do was warn her.

 Ma stood from where she was setting a steel bowl above where our fire would be. She smiled when she saw me. “Hey, you’re back,” she said, but her features shifted, concerned. “Where’s Artemis?”

 “Okay, *don’t* get mad,” I began. She scowled. “But Artemis and I might’ve picked up a few strays.”

 She looked more confused, but it wasn’t a second later that Artemis, Jackson, and Mark appeared in the cave’s makeshift doorway. Ma widened her eyes, rushing forward and helping Jackson get situated on one of the sleeping bags laid out. I frowned when I saw that it was mine.

 “Oh, my!” Ma exclaimed, her gaze shooting to Artemis. “Get me my med bag. Should be in the tent, underneath the blanket.”

 Artemis nodded and left. Ma’s soft hands fluttered over Jackson’s side. Mark was sitting next to him, raising an eyebrow at Ma. “You a nurse?”

 Ma chuckled a little, glancing to Mark ruefully. “Right now hun, I’m the best you got. I’d lay back on any critiques, unless you’d like to take over?”

 Mark shook his head, raising his hands. Artemis took that moment to reappear, handing over the bag in her hands. Quickly, Ma got to work, raising her arms to push her curls outta her face.

 The cave filled with Jackson’s sharp hiss when Ma applied an anti-bacterial wipe to skin, and Artemis scooted closer, perhaps to lessen the tension—or maybe to get a better view. “How long do you think you were out there for?” she asked curiously.

Mark whistled lowly. “I’d say maybe a week? Two? What you think, Jack?” He elbowed the man on his good side, and Jackson snorted.

 “Definitely two,” he said, wincing. It looked like a gunshot wound, but they must’ve taken the bullet out; unfortunately, that hadn’t stopped the infection. “I don’t know how we made it, if I’m being completely honest.”

 Artemis shrugged, flashing a pretty smile. “Maybe you have a guardian angel?” she suggested. Mark rolled his eyes while Jackson laughed. I scowled.

 “Sorry sweetheart, but if we had guardian angels, I don’t think we’d be Auras,” Mark replied bitterly. Artemis deflated a little, looking toward the floor. My scowl deepened.

 “You don’t like being an Aura?” I questioned, trying to keep any malice out of my voice.

 Jackson shrugged. “What can you do?” he pondered. “Everywhere we go, somebody wants to kidnap us, use us, or kill us. End of story. If we were normal, we’d be fine.”

 Artemis scrunched her nose. “I’d hate to be normal,” she commented lightly, and I snickered. She shot me a pointed look, shrugging her shoulders innocently. “What? We can do cool stuff. Plus, we never have to follow the rules. We’re already breaking the law by existing.”

 Mark laughed, and I relaxed now that it was *with* Artemis instead of *at* her. “Yeah, I guess that’s a plus,” he sighed, leaning back so he could lay on the ground. He put his hands to his sandy blonde hair, shaking his head a little and breathing deeply. “It’s crazy how many of us were in Des Moines. I don’t think I’ve ever seen that many Auras in one place.”

 Ma frowned, cleaning the syringe and storing it away carefully. “Not surprising,” she idly added. “Last I heard, they were trying to shut the other facilities down and get us all in one spot.” She started wrapping the wound in clean gauze, and Jackson sent her a grateful nod. “They’re tryin’ to get the younger ones, ain’t they?”

 Mark and Jackson nodded solemnly, but it was Jackson who responded. “There’s still a good portion of adults left, but they want stronger soldiers.” He scoffed then, rolling his eyes. “They got the women pumping out the next generation so that they can get their perfect little army. Doesn’t matter if they’re still kids or not—both the moms and their kids. While we were there, we met a ten year old being trained for it. She was terrified.”

 Ma was quiet, glancing between Artemis and me worriedly. I caught the look in her eyes.

 “Well,” Artemis began, jumping to her feet. “On *that* depressing note, I think I’ll get the fire going.”

 Ma nodded, pointing over to the corner near the entrance. “I got a bit of firewood, but it’s mainly just twigs.”

 “Okay,” Artemis nodded. She carried the twigs already collected toward the center of the cave, where we’d all sleep, huddled ‘round like cavemen. The sticks were flimsy, and wouldn’t keep a fire going long, but it’d be enough for a good night. I watched my sister, but stayed close to our new visitors. I still hadn’t decided if they were harmless or not, and I’d rather take my chances offending them than end up on the wrong side of a scam.

 It seemed that Artemis had a different idea.

 She stood, hands on her hips. “Apollo!” She waved me over. “Come help me.”

 I sent a pointed look to Ma; she, in response, only shrugged, as clueless as I was. But, a second later, she nodded reassuringly, glancing at our visitors. I got the message; she’d look out for us, just like she always did.

 I leisurely walked to the other side of the cave, far enough to where our voices wouldn’t carry over the curved stone walls. When I stopped next to her, she grabbed my shoulder tightly, turning my back so that the others couldn’t see.

 “So?” she urged with an elbow poking my stomach. “What do you think?”

 I grinned. “Did you *seriously* call me over here to gossip?”

 “Hey! Don’t be *mean*,” Artemis pouted playfully, but her smile bled through. “We never meet new people—new *Auras*. Not to mention all that stuff they said ‘bout Des Moines. Things are getting crazier.”

 I frowned, leaning against the wall and facing her. The cave’s stone pressed inside my shoulder blades, balancing out the newly added weight. The news wasn’t something I wanted to hear. She looked at me curiously, but my eyes stayed fixed on the wall when I responded. “I think they’re telling the truth, but we don’t know everything yet,” I paused, rubbing my chin.

 “Like usual, you’re actually right,” Artemis whispered, shifting her eyes toward Mark and Jackson. “I could tell something was off when they were talking—maybe a half-truth somewhere in their story? I wasn’t able to catch much else, and like I said—”

 “It’s been quiet.”

 “I’ll keep my ears open. But Apollo,” Artemis touched my arm. “Remember that bad feeling I mentioned earlier?”

 I nodded, but Artemis didn’t say anything else. She only cringed and then drifted past me.

 I kicked at a rock, thinking pensively. My eyes flickered to Ma, who was finishing up her work on Jackson for the night. I knew we’d start eating soon, and feeding two more people might cause a problem later on. That, added to the superstition Artemis was causing, made me more worried.

We *couldn’t* get caught. If we got caught, we got separated, and who knew if they’d keep Ma alive now that she’s older? The government was looking for kids—if what Jackson and Mark said was true—and Artemis and I’d be prime targets.

We needed to be invisible.

**Chapter Two**

**Artemis**

I returned to the cave with some firewood by the time the stars flashed their pretty colors, like the flash of a camera, or lightning. I smelt the food Ma was cooking, and added a few sticks I found to the fire beneath our best cooking pot. Once I added to the fire, I left the rest by the wall of the cave, the side that curved outward more, like a misshapen egg stuck in a viper’s throat. I sat at the entrance—what would’ve been its mouth—wondering when the teeth would eventually fall and trap us.

I bit my lip, looking ‘round and wondering if there were more Marks and Jacksons out there, mindlessly traveling through the heat and desert. Unlike Mark and Jackson, they might not find this small oasis; they might run into more government officials—Handlers—or ripped away from their newfound freedom and forced into cages again. I wondered if that could’ve been us—me, Apollo, and Ma—out there. I wondered if we would be the ones to survive.

The jury was still out, and I couldn’t predict the verdict while we sat camped on the way to Des Moines. It was far enough away—or at least, that’s what Ma had said this morning. With Mark and Jackson’s arrival, she couldn’t possibly be thinking the same as she did earlier, could she? If these two managed to find us, who else might stumble onto our little hideaway?

I drew in the dirt, carving a creation with small rivets and grooves, as if I were some kinda god taking my time in forming my newest civilization. Sometimes, I wished the sentiment was real, just so that there could be a new world for us. The mumbled talk and cracking fire drifted further away behind me. All I could see was that blur, the one I could never quite describe to anyone else. All I could draw was that distorted outline, the one that constantly sat in my mind.

When I was younger, I never understood my abilities in the same way that Apollo did; for my twin brother, the powers we were given after the meteorite crashed were natural. By the time we were seven, Apollo could sense other Auras with ease, and had started playing with target practice. He became a quick-learner with that too.

I felt left in the dust, because even when I turned ten, I hadn’t been able to navigate my powers—sometimes, I doubted I ever learned how.

The tightrope that existed in the world was one I hesitantly balanced on, constantly swaying to either side for most of my life. I could exist between, but I could exist fully in either one too—which was terrifying as a kid when I could no longer see the real, present world ‘round me. Things would shift outta focus, and I was pulled to the blur, where layered voices collided, and bodies slammed together. There was hardly any room to move, and I felt suffocated. When I was eleven, I had a panic attack ‘cause I’d been stuck on that side for three hours.

Whenever I accidentally tripped over the line, my body dropped; the first few times it happened, Ma and Apollo had been worried sick. They’d almost taken me to a hospital—risks be dammed—before I shot up, gasping. I wouldn’t wake up ‘til I found my way back from the spirits desperately tryin’ to cling onto me, aching to feel just a small piece of life again.

I called it the Gray: a never-ending nothingness that lived just past the bounds of our world.

When I walked the line, I was able to coexist in both worlds. I could react and speak and move inside of my body, while still being able to see and hear the spirits that came through.

I called them spirits ‘cause it’s what Ma told me to call them. As a kid, the word *spirit* was definitely more approachable than ghosts, and it made everything a little less scary. Eventually, it just stuck.

The spirits, as frightening as they could be with their half-dead appearances, were always offering help when we needed it. If I ignored their clawed fingers digging into my shoulders like icicles, or the way creepy-crawlies climbed outta their ears or the open wounds in their decaying bodies, then I could hear their whispering, could hear the warnings. They’d show up in the corner of my eyes, singing words into my ears even as I stayed in this world instead of theirs. I always listened, ‘cause they were always right.

But, like I told Apollo, it was quiet on the other side, and I wasn’t sure what to do ‘bout it. Normally, there’d be a dull in the noise that I had to put up with, but never like this. Instead of the bits and pieces of static I usually got, there was dead silence, and it unnerved me.

I tilted my head, studying the small drawing I made in the sand; it was me, balancing on the little tightrope, praying I wouldn’t fall.

“Artemis,” my brother’s voice cut through. I sighed, wanting to stay there longer.

“Five more minutes,” I called, closing my eyes and lifting my chin to breathe the fresh air.

I could almost *hear* him roll his eyes, and one of our visitors—I didn’t know if it was Mark or Jackson—chuckled lowly.

“Dinner’s ready,” Ma said, bribing me. I could feel my stomach rumble. As much as I loved where I sat, on the edge of where the stone met the dirt, of where safety met cruelty, I couldn’t deny the heavy hunger sitting like a giant in my stomach.

I opened my eyes and took one last look at the stars; they were like a million little kaleidoscopes, like tiny rainbows stuck in a stillness, hiding just like we were.

Eventually, I strolled back to the others. Ma held out a plate, and I saw that we were having beans and rice again tonight. I didn’t mind; food was food, even if it *was* the same thing we ate every night.

The dinner was quiet except for chewing food and cracking fire. We were all huddled ‘round the flames, and Jackson was looking a bit better than before. Our visitors scarfed down their food and chugged the water inside the metal bottles Apollo and I’d filled up in the last town. They looked like those poor animals on the sides of the roads, hit and dying yet desperate to live. They reminded me of the bird I found on one of our trips; I explicitly remembered giving it water, at least, ‘fore Apollo pulled me away.

I could tell that my brother was annoyed we were technically wasting resources. But were we just supposed to starve them instead? Leave them to die?

Deciding that the silence was starting to get stifling—at least, to *me* it was—I sat straighter in my criss-crossed position on the floor. “So,” I began slowly. I watched everyone’s head turn, but I kept my sharp eyes on Mark and Jackson, raising an eyebrow. “We can play truth or dare?”

“Artemis,” Ma warned, but there was an amused undertone in her voice. “You’re incapable of not being cut-throat competitive, and these men have just gotten done with a *very* long trip—”

“I don’t mind,” Mark interrupted, shrugging and setting his now-empty plate to the side.

I clapped my hands, but Apollo was groaning from where he was sat next to Ma. “I’m sure this will go swimmingly,” he muttered.

“With *that* mindset, of course it’ll go bad,” I chastised, smiling widely when I managed to get a laugh outta Ma. Her cheeks were flushed next to the fire, and the light reflected in her yellow curls gave her a halo.

“Alright, who’s asking who what?” Jackson asked, wiping his chin with the back of his hand.

“Mark,” I called, ignoring my brother’s muttered words behind me. “Truth or dare?”

He thought ‘bout it for a second, glancing to Jackson—who offered no help with his silent shrug. “Alright, let’s go with dare.”

I beamed, eyes lighting up excitedly. “I dare you to show us what makes you an Aura.”

“*Artemis*,” Ma snapped, and even Apollo sent me a pointed look. Mark was already waving them away.

“It’s alright,” he assured. He shifted his position so that he was sitting on his knees with his feet tucked underneath him. He held out his palms, cupped together and outstretched, as if he were waiting for something to fall into them.

It was a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it moment, because one second everythin’ was as normal as normal seemed these days, and the next, there was a ball of blinding light inside Mark’s hands. My irises burned inside my head, and even when I saw Ma and Apollo turn away, I couldn’t do the same. I was entranced by the bright oranges, reds, and yellows that interweaved within each other, constantly moving and yet staying in one place just the same, like a living thing. The light curved, a dripping sunset in his grasp, like a can of paint had been spilled, thrown across the room. It shimmered like ripples in water, or a single breath’s translucent cloud slipping from a pair of lips in a freezing cold winter. It was beautiful, and I wanted to memorize the magic forever.

Mark’s hands fell away, breaking the ball and submerging the group into darkness once more. I had to blink a few times to get my eyes readjusted, but when they did, I was on my feet, clapping happily.

“That was *awesome!”* I complimented enthusiastically, and Mark laughed.

“Thanks,” he replied, somewhat bashfully. “But it’s not the greatest tool when you’re stuck in the middle of the desert and not trying to be found.”

“Still,” I gushed. I loved learning new abilities from new Auras, especially since, so far, I’d never heard of one sharing the same trait as another. Each of us were different, unique. “I think it’s wonderful.”

“I agree. I think it’s more interestin’ than some powers *I’ve* heard of,” Ma added distractedly. She was reaching forward to grab the plate Mark had set on the ground. Seeing Jackson had finished too, she held out a hand to him, and he gave it to her with a smile.

“Oh yeah!” Mark replied, bumping his shoulder with Jackson—who winced, still recovering. “We met this one guy who could actually *hear* what colors sounded like.”

Ma widened her eyes. “Really?” she asked. Apollo stood up to grab the plates from her hand, adding them on top of his own. Ma seemed hesitant to let Apollo take care of the dishes, seeing as he did so much for her nowadays, but he didn’t give her time to argue ‘fore turning toward the mouth of the cave. I always finished dinner last, so he didn’t wait for my plate.

Mark nodded—Jackson too. “Yeah, well, he drove himself insane ‘cause of it,” Jackson added pointedly. “He was real strange, always pacing. He ended up stickin’ knives into his ears maybe a few months after we met him?”

Jackson turned to his friend to check, and Mark hummed. “Had to be a year,” he mumbled. Jackson shrugged.

“Either way, the guy was nuts. I guess he couldn’t handle how much things changed after the meteorite. He was older, and this was a while ago, so he didn’t really understand what was happening.” Jackson paused, face falling. “None of us really knew anythin’ back then.”

It went quiet, but I didn’t mind, already jumping at the opportunity to know more. “What about you?” I asked Jackson curiously. “What’s your ability?”

Jackson looked as if he were going to answer, but Mark waved his hands. “Hold on, that’s not how the game works,” he reminded me, and I smiled at his enthusiasm. While I may still have reservations about the two—as did my brother—I enjoyed their presence, if only for the peering glance into new lives, so different than my own.

“Well? Who do you wanna ask?” Ma asked, only half-paying attention. She was busy dragging her backpack closer so she could rifle through it.

Mark leaned back, turning his head and actively surveying each and every one of us. I found the action slightly comical, but he was doing it for a hot minute, and I was gettin’ fidgety.

Jackson impatiently rolled his eyes. “Come on, man,” he groaned.

“Alright,” Mark nodded, puffing up his chest. “Ellis, right?” Ma’s head shot up. “Truth or dare?”

“Hm,” Ma hummed, thinking the question over, but I already knew what she’d pick. Ma always picked the same thing each time we played. “Truth.”

Mark’s lip curved, raising his eyebrows. “No offense, but these two don’t look like they’re yours—”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Apollo butted in, seemingly finished with wiping the dishes off.

Mark held up his hands. “Nothing! I just mean that she looks too young to be a mom, especially when she’s an Aura. I was curious.” He shrugged lightheartedly. When it looked as if Apollo would bite out a nasty response, Ma raised her hand.

“It’s okay, Apollo,” she said gently. Her brown eyes gleamed kindly, even more so with the fire’s reflection dancing within, like a golden statue buried in a sticky syrup—keeping it contained and immortal. “It’s not like it’s a secret y’all are adopted.”

“Adopted?” Jackson repeated. He looked at Apollo and me with renewed interest. “What’s the story?”

She sighed, a nostalgic expression overcoming her face like a daydream.

“I just found ‘em along the way, right after the meteorite hit,” she explained slowly, her hands sitting together in her lap. “They were babies. I didn’t know if anybody was comin’ back for them. I knew they wouldn’t survive long, so I grabbed them and ran.” She paused, a lame expression passing gently over her face like the soft caress of the wind outside. “Kind of boring when you think ‘bout it.”

“There has to be more, right?” Mark asked. His eyes flickered between Ma, Apollo, and me. I shrugged my shoulders—I didn’t really ask much ‘bout how Ma found us, seeing as I didn’t care that she wasn’t our biological mother. In all sense of the word, she was our mom, and that wouldn’t change no matter what new details came to light.

Apollo was different; he’d asked Ma many times, and she’d always told the same story. Eventually, he dropped it, but by the strained way he was pursing his lips, I could tell he was skeptical of telling these strangers parts of our lives that nobody else knew, parts he still didn’t believe.

Ma chuckled quietly, shadows dancing to the music of her laugh. The night was completely on us now, and the cave’s entrance looked like a foreboding mass of darkness. I moved a little closer to the fire; I never really liked the dark.

“There’s not much else to it,” Ma responded. I saw her hands grip her knees.

Mark looked doubtful, but luckily, decided not to push our hospitality. “Alright then,” he mumbled.

“Okay, hm…” Ma tapped her chin with her finger. I smiled widely when she glanced my way, and was happy when Ma rolled her eyes. “Well, since I’m sure we’re *all* wondering, Jackson,” the man tilted his head. “What’s your power? What makes you an Aura?”

Jackson grinned. “Nothing as cool as Mark’s,” he began, and I watched him hold out one hand. “But I can create music outta nothing.”

I heard a faint melody drifting through the air. It swayed and stuttered like real people dancing a clumsy waltz, and I looked back at Ma’s face, noticing how the dancing shadows followed this new music, lapping and lolling back and forth to the symphonies that escaped Jackson’s hand. But, the sweet moment was cut off by my twin’s loud snort.

“*Music?*” Apollo asked, sneering. “That doesn’t seem very helpful.”

“Apollo,” Ma snapped, and the boy ducked his head. I frowned in my brother’s direction, not understanding why he was so uptight. Of course, Mark and Jackson’s untimely arrival wasn’t planned, but what else were we supposed to do? I almost wished I hadn’t told him ‘bout the silence in the Gray; maybe then, he wouldn’t be so paranoid.

“It’s alright.” Jackson waved Ma away. But, I could see a crinkle in his eyes that made it seem like he was genuinely hurt by Apollo’s words, like the ways a dog’s ears fell when being scolded. The sight only made me angrier at Apollo. “It’s really not all that useful unless you’re tryin’ to impress a pretty girl.”

Mark laughed, throwing his arm ‘round Jackson joyously. “Oh, it certainly worked on the guard in Des Moines,” he boasted, clapping his friend on the back.

“Well,” Ma said with a sigh, standing. She brushed her hands over the large shirt and baggy pants she wore, but it did nothing to hide the dirt—the same kinda dirt on my brother and me. “It’s fixin’ to be pretty late. I’m not sure what you two are doing in the morning, but the three of us are heading South, and we’ll be leaving before sunrise.”

Mark and Jackson exchanged a look. “We’ll figure out something,” Jackson replied. He reached forward and held out his open hand. “Thank you, by the way, for everything. We wouldn’t have survived out there much longer if you hadn’t come along.”

Ma took his hand and shook it firmly. “Auras have to look out for each other,” Ma responded. I moved toward her without a sound, leaning my elbow on her shoulder.

“Speaking of which,” I started. Ma looked at me warily. “You haven’t happened to meet an *Anya Jaybird* along your travels, have you?”

Mark and Jackson were both lost. “Never heard of them,” Mark told me, shrugging. “But, we met a lot of people, and we didn’t always get a name to match the face. Why do you ask?”

I was about to answer, but Ma beat me. “Curiosity,” she answered stiffly. I could feel her hand reach down and pinch my wrist behind my back. “Artemis is good at tricks, so sleep with one eye open.”

I scowled, but didn’t say anything else as Ma left the fire pit. I—knowing that nobody else would do it—started rekindling the flames with a long stick near my foot so that it would ward off the chill. Mark and Jackson started to flap and lay out their borrowed blankets. Without another word, they slipped under and seemed to fall asleep instantly.

I wondered if Apollo would be as lucky. My brother was a terrible sleeper, always waking up and thinking there was somethin’ in the shadows. I hoped he wouldn’t wake up in the middle of the night and think Mark and Jackson were bad people, because *that* certainly wouldn’t be fun to explain.

Ma didn’t have any trouble going to bed, but she was a light sleeper, and could wake up with even the slightest shift in the air. It meant a whole lotta trouble whenever I tried sneaking off in the night—but then again, it also came with some benefits too: I’d gotten so used to it that I was quiet as a mouse when I snuck off. She trained me well.

I was a fine sleeper, with only the occasional mishap. I didn’t think tonight would be *that* kinda night, considering that my legs were bone-tired and I was ready for bed—it was easier to stay asleep if I was exhausted.

I dug through my bag, grabbing my clothes and heading toward the tent. Apollo had already changed and tucked himself into his sleeping bag, but Ma was just inside, her hair around her face instead of tied in her signature ponytail.

“Hey,” she stopped me with a hand on my shoulder, “I don’t want you up late tonight, okay?”

I nodded, but couldn’t help myself. “Don’t worry, Ma,” I replied, winking. “I’ll be sleeping like the dead.”

She scowled, but the expression disappeared when I let the tent flap fall, cutting her off. I quickly changed out of my sweaty, dirty clothes, wrinkling my nose at my own smell. I’d need a shower soon, but I didn’t know when we’d be able to. The worst part ‘bout being on the run was the hygiene.

My skin was still dirty, so I grabbed a wipe from Ma’s bag, folding it in half so that the other side would still be useable. I wiped my arms and a bit of my legs, feeling so much cleaner—even if it wasn’t *that* clean.

By the time I’d finished and stepped outta the tent, everyone else was quiet, the dim flickers of the fire the only visible movement.

I tip-toed over to my sleeping bag, setting my clothes and shoes down next to my feet. Lying on the ground wasn’t comfortable, but we’d done worse, so I shifted a few times and closed my eyes.

I hadn’t expected to be *immediately* thrown off balance.

I hadn’t even gotten to enjoy any true sleep before a bone-chilling hand was wrapped ‘round my forearm, jerking me forward. I gasped, looking up into a withered face, skin ripped and flapping in the confines of its own skeleton. I wanted to pull away, but it felt like my feet were glued to the ground, or nailed down, stuck in the dead girl’s grip.

She opened her mouth, and I cringed, seeing bugs and decay on the inside of the deep hole. If I looked close enough, I could see the spinal cord sticking out the back of the raw flesh. I had to look away ‘fore I threw up. Even after seeing them so often, it didn’t get any easier.

Like it usually did, the world that I was once in—the one in the cave with the rest of my sleeping family—vanished, replaced by a thick, impenetrable fog. The cold froze my cells. The hair at the back of my neck rose, as if I was being watched. I whipped my head this way and that, but unlike some of the visits I took to this world, I couldn’t see anybody except for the woman that was still clutching my forearm. I wiggled, tryin’ to tear my limb back, but her iron fingers were unrelenting.

“What do you want?” I asked, forcing myself to stay calm. I’d gotten better at shutting them out—which they hated—so I was practically ready to wake up from this awful nightmare when she finally spoke.

“*Anya*…” she croaked, and I widened my eyes. There was that name again, the same one that was always whispered into my head, the same one that was screamed into my mind every time I got yanked here. It was the same name I’d been hearing for years, and it was the first time a spirit had actually spoken the name to me *directly*.

I widened my eyes, standing straighter and looking deep into the sunken face. “Where?” I whispered, watching her brokenly tilt her head. I pursed my lips, cringing as I tried not to look at how the woman’s neck was basically breaking apart at the seams. “Where is Anya Jaybird? Why do I need to know about them?”

I knew nothing ‘bout Anya Jaybird except for their name. I didn’t know what they looked like, who they were, *where* they were. And, what’d been bothering me since I first heard the name was that I had no idea *why* I needed to know it.

Spirits were incredibly vague, especially when the longer they stayed, the worse they deformed. I’d never seen a spirit so rotted like the one in front of me, and if I had to guess, I suspected that she must’ve been at least a century old.

“*Anya*…” the spirit repeated in its watery voice, shakily pointing toward something in the fog that I couldn’t make out.

I shook my head, trying again to force the spirit’s hand off to no use. It was like trying to bend metal with my curled fingers, and I wondered how such a broken spirit was so strong; usually, if I had a desire to return to my body—like I did now—then I wouldn’t have a problem with it. But now, with this woman attached to my forearm, it was like I was suddenly incapable of using my powers, like I was just that little girl scared of the monsters in her head.

“I don’t understand,” I tried saying, but my voice cracked unsteadily. Her trembling was slowly becoming mine, like her cold grasp of death was being transferred. I could see my breath, just ‘fore it was swallowed by the open mouth still gaping menacingly.

“*Anya*…” the spirit repeated again. I looked toward the fog to try and see what she was pointing at. All I could see was a dim glow in the distance, but it was growing brighter by the second.

I was fixin’ to panic. “Let me go,” I commanded, but it came out strained, broken.

“…*Jaybird*,” the woman was still saying, and the light was growing brighter, illuminating the shadows within the fog. I could see silhouettes, people wandering closer, and I knew that if I didn’t leave now, I’d get bombarded.

I clawed the woman’s hand, pulling desperately at one of the crooked fingers so that I might escape before the light overtook us completely. It was so bright that even Mark’s power back in the cave couldn’t rival it, and I had to close my eyes even while I finally managed to rip the woman’s finger off with a deafening *crack*. The spirit yelled, but when I opened my eyes again, I only saw darkness.

I was panting like an old dog on a hot day, and I brought a hand to my chest only to feel sweat. I still saw the brightness behind my eyelids, and I couldn’t get that spirit’s voice outta my head, reminding me of the same name that I’d heard thousands of times by now.

“*Hey*, you’re alright,” a soft voice spoke. I almost jumped out of my skin when I felt another hand on my arm, placed in almost the exact same spot that the spirit had grabbed.

When I recognized the texture of the skin, I knew it was just my twin, and raised my eyes to meet his in the pitch black surrounding us. The fire must’ve died out, which meant I’d technically been asleep for at least a few hours—though it certainly didn’t feel like it. I could’ve sworn that I’d just laid down.

“Apollo,” I breathed, reaching and blindly grasping his shirt. He placed his hand over mine, rubbing comforting circles into my skin like he tended to do when I was still getting my bearings from another trip into the Gray. But, it wasn’t very comforting this time.

“I’m here,” he told me, barely above a whisper. I heard soft snores coming from where Mark and Jackson were sleeping. Even though I couldn’t see Ma from where we sat, I guessed that Apollo and I were the only ones up this late. “I heard you tossin’ and turnin’ like ten minutes ago, and when I came to check on you, your skin was like ice.” I blinked, trying to focus on his invisible face. “I kinda guessed where you’d gone.”

I let myself chuckle as I pushed the sleeping bag away from my sticky skin, wanting the cool air to calm my body down. Despite what Apollo just said, it felt like I was burning up.

“Apollo,” I whispered. “A spirit said the name.”

Even with the poor lighting of the barely-shining moonlight, I saw his eyes widen. “Really? Did you find out anything new?”

I shook my head, rubbing my temples and brushing away my damp hair with the same motion. “I don’t know,” I muttered, feeling more tired than I had when we all got ready for bed. “I saw a light.”

“But I thought it was all dark over there?” Apollo asked slowly.

“It *is*,” I said. “But this time, it wasn’t. It was like the entire world was on fire.”

Apollo paused, and just when I thought he didn’t have nothing to say, he shifted, tugging my hand. “Do you think the name could have a connection to—”

A loud explosion cut him off. I barely had time to react ‘fore the blast threw me backward and I hit the side of the cave wall. I winced, clutching my rib hastily and checking that I wasn’t bleeding. I wasn’t, but when I looked up, I knew that not everybody was as lucky.

Ma was fully awake now, already on her feet. She helped Apollo up, and I was confused by the light flickering over their faces. It wasn’t nearly morning yet, but then I saw the fires outside. I still wasn’t sure what’d caused the explosion, but I didn’t wanna stick around to find out.

I used the wall to pull myself up, scanning the cave. “Grab what you can! Leave the rest,” Ma was yelling, but my eyes were locked onto where Mark and Jackson used to be.

Jackson had been the closest to the entrance, so he was the first to experience the blast, and it didn’t look good. He was splayed on the ground, unmoving, with a large, jagged line ‘cross his stomach. I saw the twigs and sticks I’d found—the ones I’d set near the wall of the cave—pierced through his chest, and I blanched. There was a lotta blood, and poor Mark was only getting himself dirty tryin’ to help. He didn’t look in the best shape either, with a new cut painting his blonde hair red on one side.

“Come on, Jack,” Mark bit out. Blood seeped through his fingers like a refilling lake, like a blossoming poison-ivy bush, entangling underneath his fingernails. I stumbled, seeing the fog that was common in the Gray begin to settle over the body. I knew it wouldn’t be long now; I also knew there was no saving him.

“Mark—”

“No!” I flinched back, swallowing thickly at Mark’s grief. “We got this far. It can’t end here, alright, it… It just *can’t,* alright?”

“Mark,” I tried again, softer. “I didn’t show you my powers, but trust me when I say that he’s gone now.” My words were pleading, knowing that if the man wasn’t ready by the time Ma and Apollo were, then we’d be leaving him behind. As little as I knew ‘bout him, I didn’t want Mark to be left here, with his friend’s dead body, for however long it took for him to process. He wouldn’t survive it.

Mark cried silently, but Apollo ripped me out of the moment like he usually did. “*Artemis*! Get your damn stuff, and let’s go,” he yelled, slipping two knives into his vest. Clearly, he’d changed, and he knew I’d need to do the same.

“Do we even know what’s out there?” I asked, throwing my hand toward the entrance.

“We know it’s not good, and I’m pretty sure that the explosion came from a military-grade missile. If we’re not outta here in ten minutes, they could shoot another one, but closer,” Ma explained. My face was as white as a spirit, not expecting that answer, but it was *exactly* the type of thing that got me rushin’ toward my backpack, throwing a random pair of dark pants and shirt on over the PJs I was still wearing.

“Are you coming with us or not?” Apollo asked. I rolled my eyes, knowing that he was being cruel to Mark on purpose.

I sloppily tied my hair back before grabbing my sleeping bag, rolling it up as I moved across the cave. Ma was already holding her arm out, and I passed it over, bending to grab another one before we needed to leave. Warmth was always something we could have more of, and it wouldn’t be good to leave any of the blankets behind—but, I’d make an exception for the one that was drenched in Jackson’s blood.

There was another explosion, making the floor rock as small pebbles fell from the ceiling. I tripped, grazing my hands against the ground. I hissed, but Apollo was already hauling me up, glancing at Ma worriedly.

“We gotta get outta here before the entire mountain collapses,” he called. Ma nodded and jumped into line after us, leaving some cooking pots and our only tent behind. It’d take too long to pack up.

Apollo and I both blinked at Mark, who was standing now. Blood still dripped from his hands. “I’ll go with you,” he spoke monotonously, and I wished that things had gone differently. If I ever saw Jackson again as a spirit, I’d ask if it was painful; I hoped it wasn’t.

My twin jerked his chin toward me, and I didn’t hesitate to swing my backpack over my shoulder, grasping Apollo’s hand once I was ready. Ma and Mark went in front.

I’d expected a lot of things, but I’d never expected to see a group of people a few miles out, standing in a single line ‘cross the horizon. It must’ve been closer to morning than night, because I saw the beginning rays of dawn carving out the silhouettes. I squinted my eyes, but widened them a second later. “Watch out!” I cried, ducking low with Apollo.

One of the shadows had raised a hand, and another explosion erupted from above us. I could see the rocks falling, but I reacted much faster, diving outta the way. My heart was pounding, making everything slow and fast at the same time.

They hadn’t been missiles; they were Auras.

“Ma!” Apollo shouted, but she was already running toward us, Mark’s arm draped over her shoulder.

“Go!” she screamed, but Apollo ran toward her, taking over Mark’s other side and moving much faster than she could. “Get to the shadows!”

I nodded, digging into my boot and pulling out a knife just in case; I might’ve not had the perfect aim that Apollo had, but I could hold my own, and we’d need all the help we could get.

Another explosion, but I jumped down a small hill in the cliff, tumbling for a second and rolling to my feet. I looked up, finding Apollo there. I held out my arms.

“Send him down! Hurry!” I instructed, and he dangled Mark for a second before dropping him. He looked like he was concussed. I helped him to his feet, slapping his face very lightly in order to get him to focus. His eyes rolled for a moment. “Hey, you need to run, or you’re gettin’ left behind.”

His gaze flickered to mine, and he nodded even as his eyelids kept fluttering. I didn’t need to say more; the second that Ma and Apollo were beside me, we all broke out into a heavy sprint. Luckily, the mountain range seemed to blend into more caves and crevices within the rocks; unluckily, it would be hard to tell if we were heading toward a dead end or not. I tried my hardest to remain optimistic, but I wasn’t sure how we would outrun other Auras. At least we had Ma’s invisibility on our side, but who knew when they’d see through it?

I’d never expect to actually *meet* the government-funded experiments, especially like this.

All I could think ‘bout was how me and my family had never run into the Untouchables; the group wouldn’t be after us ‘cause there was no reason we’d be on their radar.

So, what the *fuck* had Mark and Jackson done to get an elite assassination squad coming after them?

**Chapter Three**

**Ellis**

Summary:

 Ellis, Mark, Artemis, and Apollo all run for three days before they eventually stop and take stock of what happened back at the cave. Apollo, the whole time, is staring at Mark, suspicious of his role in this whole debacle. Ellis can’t help but agree, wondering why the Untouchables would be after an average Aura like him—one with a power not suitable for combat or intelligence-based operations.

 Apollo confronts him and Mark gets defensive, still reeling from Jackson’s death. Apollo briefly apologizes for the grief, but focuses on the issue at hand, which is that Mark is a stranger and they know nothing about him. Mark confesses that the Untouchables had been after him and Jackson since they left Des Moines. Artemis can tell he isn’t lying. Mark says that he found information the Untouchables don’t want to spread to other Auras: that there is a new official member of the team, someone who can make you go insane with just a touch. He considers her the Untouchables’ secret weapon, and says that they’ll use her to find all of the other Auras. She’s a game-changer.

Eventually, the others try and figure out what to do next. Apollo suggests going to Bianca’s—one of their connections down south. Ellis and Artemis immediately disapprove, saying that Bianca is a snake and would only ever look out for herself. Apollo says they don’t really have a choice, since Bianca has everything that they need to get out of dodge.

Slowly, Ellis starts to agree with Apollo, saying that the Untouchables might not know about Bianca, which gives them an extra edge. However, she’s still unsure, seeing as the Untouchables are great trackers and might catch them before they make it much further.

Some of the day passes by—with a small break in narration—and when Artemis is messing around, the others tell her they need to keep moving. She eventually submits to their boring determination, but when she gets back on track, she gets a vision of the Untouchables coming for them. They aren’t far behind.

Ellis knows they don’t have a lot of time, and she also knows that Artemis and Apollo are who the Untouchables really want. Ellis and Mark are older, and get sick if they use their powers, so they’re useless as soldiers compared to the twins. Ellis is also worried because they don’t have enough resources to keep going without stopping. So, she agrees with Mark when he suggests that they all split up.

The twins are furious, and deny that this is a good plan. Ellis explains that the twins need to take what’s left of their resources and book it to Bianca’s, and that she and Mark will try to distract them by going another way before meeting at Bianca’s later. Considering that the Untouchables still want something from Mark, she thinks that, at the very least, they can split the Untouchables up so that not *all* of them are going after the twins.

Ellis gives Artemis something that she thinks needs to stay with them, and it is a thin, circular object—almost like a compass—inside of a small velvet bag. It’s very heavy, and Artemis is curious about it before the heat of the moment and the realization that they would be separating for the first time hits full force. There’s a heartfelt goodbye, one that Apollo is distant from considering he is still upset about this plan actually happening. They finally let go of one another.

Mark and Ellis leave Artemis and Apollo, planning to make a distraction in the town to get the Untouchables’ attention. Mark causes a ruckus with his light powers, and while the Handlers flood the scene, Mark and Ellis leave to find Mark’s family cabin.

When they get there, the cabin is boarded up, and looks like someone had been there recently. Mark and Ellis go around the back to be careful, and when they manage to get the door open, someone attacks Ellis. Shadows wrap around her and try to pull her inside, but Mark grabs her wrist and manages to pull her back. Just as they are trying to figure out what the hell happened, someone comes up to them and knocks Ellis out.

**Chapter Four**

**Apollo**

It was quiet without Ma.

Artemis would normally jump to fill the silence, speak ‘bout things that Ma didn’t like, share unspoken secrets. She’d babble and I’d listen. But both of us were deathly quiet, and uncertainty hung in the air, making me anxious and—although I’d never admit it—afraid.

 Ma treated our separation as if it were nothing but a vacation from one another. She was so casual and optimistic, claiming that everythin’ would turn out alright. I didn’t understand it; Ma was always the one telling *us* to be careful. She was always telling *us* to stick together, and now she was going back on all of it? All her teachings and reminders, down the drain, and for what? A runaway Aura that stupidly led the Untouchables into our lives?

 I made it obvious I didn’t trust Mark, and yet she ignored me. She thought I was overreacting, but it was just common sense. Mark was a stranger; we hardly knew anything ‘bout him. Even with Artemis reaffirming everything that Mark said, I couldn’t help but feel sick deep down, like when I’d gotten a nasty stomach bug and was bedridden for two days. It only got worse as Ma walked away with Mark, and Artemis and I were on our own.

 We didn’t waste any time, moving fast.

 Our feet pounded against the slightly damp dirt, signaling that a ran had just passed through. I hoped it wouldn’t swing back ‘round, ‘cause it absolutely sucked trying to camp out while it was raining. Even now, I felt the frigidness it left as it climbed into my lungs and curled like a cat in my stomach.

 Without Ma though, we were out in the open, able to be seen by anyone. Artemis stuck close beside me, rubbing her hands together nervously; I could tell she was thinking the same thing I was.

 “We need good cover,” I muttered, looking over my shoulder.

 Artemis nodded, pointing ahead. “I think we passed the Wyoming-Colorado state line a little while ago, so if we keep heading southeast, we might be able to—”

 “Cut through the national park,” I finished for her, ignoring her annoyed look. “But patrols are tight right now, so we have to stay on guard ‘til we find a good place we can defend…*or* run from.”

 Artemis agreed with a firm press of her lips, and we broke out into a sprint again.

 I tightened my backpack strap, making sure it wouldn’t jostle as we dodged low branches and tree roots sticking up from the ground, like some kinda obstacle course. Running was never hard for my sister and me. No words were shared between our ragged breaths, and no exchange was necessary except for a single nod or shake of our head.

 Luckily, we’d taken this route a few times before, so it wasn’t hard to spot familiar landmarks—ones that weren’t as popular as the ones in Vegas or New York. Our landmarks were in the tree that was completely split down the middle from a bolt of lightning, black and rotting; or the one stream that split into a perfect heart; or the strange hill that seemed to cry at night, shifting unsteadily on top of the mines like it was Artemis balancing on that tree branch.

 We passed by the lightning-struck tree almost an hour later, and I knew we were heading in the right direction. I didn’t doubt ourselves, but without Ma, it was discomforting to rely on only *our* knowledge. Even *if* Ma made us memorize the map when we were younger—down to the smallest of small towns—I was still scared ‘bout ruining the good streak we had going.

 The sun was setting even faster from under the trees. I forced myself to stop, and Artemis stuttered to a halt beside me.

 “What are you doing?” she asked. I sighed, glancing at her.

 “We’re gonna run into *actual* wolves like this,” I pointed out, remembering the howls. “We should look ‘round for a… I don’t know, a *cave* or something.”

 Artemis snorted, looking at the mountain we were standing at the foot of. It was barely a shadow against the sky now, and if I held out my hand, I could hardly see the ghostly outline of my fingers.

 “A cave isn’t gonna stop the Untouchables,” Artemis muttered. I heard when she kicked the ground. “I don’t know what Ma was thinking, taking off like that.”

 I shook my head, but knew she couldn’t see me. “I don’t know either, but come on,” I ushered her toward one of the darker corners, deftly slipping the flashlight outta my backpack’s side pocket. “We can’t be out in the open like this when we still don’t know all their tricks.”

 I hit and shook the flashlight when it started flickering, and it—thankfully—returned to its normal beam.

 “Hey,” Artemis said. I turned, momentarily blinding her, and she raised a hand. “Jeez, no need to do *that*.”

 I rolled my eyes. “What?”

 She copied me. “I was just gonna say, what ‘bout up there?” She pointed, and I looked up, seeing a narrow opening in the side of the mountain. I hadn’t seen it before, thanks to the damn tree in front of it. But Artemis was always too good when it came to picking out hiding spots, and this wasn’t any different.

 The way up was a narrow path fit for a mountain goat, but with enough effort, we could jump to the lowest branch on that tree and pull ourselves the rest of the way up.

 I gave my sister an impressed look. She smiled.

 Walking forward, I handed the flashlight to her. “Hold it a little higher—Yeah, right there,” I instructed as I positioned her wrist in the perfect place.

 Just as I was cupping my hands onto the rocks, raising my leg to hook it ‘round a jutting root, my sister interrupted. “Watch out for the bats,” she warned playfully.

 I grunted, putting the weight onto the root. “There ain’t no bats,” I muttered. I could practically hear her pouting.

 “Yes, there are,” Artemis corrected. I huffed as I reached for another, steady grip. “Wyoming actually has a lotta bats—”

 “We’re in Colorado now, dingus,” I said between small gasps. Just another push and I could reach the lowest branch, but I’d need to make sure it wouldn’t snap when I applied pressure. Everything was dry out here this time of year, like brittle bones.

 “We’re basically on the state line, *dingus*,” she shot back. I rolled my eyes, peeking over my shoulder to look at her. She was jutting her hip out, one fist resting on it as the other held the flashlight. I would’ve laughed at the similarities between her and Ma, but I was a bit preoccupied when the light kept slipping away.

 “Hey, here’s a fun idea,” I suggested, jerking my head toward the hideout she’d found. “Why don’t you shine the flashlight where I actually need it?”

 She glowered at me, turning the object in her hands. “Is this good?” she asked sardonically. I squinted at the direct brightness.

 “You know, I’m thinkin’ a little higher,” I replied, annoyed.

 She sighed dramatically, but repositioned the beam toward the tree.

 I climbed slowly, making sure I wouldn’t slip ‘fore I stood. Despite our small spat, Artemis shifted uncomfortably from down below. “Be careful,” she advised. I had to bite back a snarky comment because *of course I was being careful*. What else was I doing? Throwing myself off the cliff?

 I reached for the branch and once I grasped it ‘round my fingers, I pulled a few times, testing the weight. It seemed sturdy, and the wood felt healthy, not prickly and spiked. It shouldn’t snap.

 I was still nervous, so I took a deep breath, mentally preparing to get it over with. Without another thought, I hauled myself up, flinging my body just over the small ledge at the top. A puff of dirt floated up, an I coughed once, waving the cloud away.

 I pressed my hands to the ground, my breath shakily leaving my lungs.

 “You good?” Artemis called.

 “Yeah,” I breathed, already leaning down so that I could extend my arm. “Throw the flashlight up.”

 She took a few steps back, then tossed it into the air. It was perfect, and landed in my hand lightly. I grinned, turning the flashlight ‘round and pointing directly at her. Her hands covered her face as she frowned.

 “It’s not so fun on the other side, is it?” I joked. A laugh escaped as she oh-so-kindly revealed her middle finger.

 I decided not to torture her, and moved the light a little to the right. As I did, I raised my head, peering into the darkness. Since it was a national park, there wasn’t a lot of *anything* to light up the shadows, but I was still weary. It’d be hard to tell *if* and *how* the Untouchables were following us, especially if Ma was gonna purposely try and lead ‘em her way. If she got caught, it wouldn’t be long ‘til someone came searching for the two, young Auras who’d been traveling with her.

 Artemis swung herself up, maneuvering so that she landed swiftly onto her heels. I raised an eyebrow. “Show off,” I said, but she just winked.

 I led the way to the narrow opening, shyly waving the flashlight. Artemis’s warning ‘bout bats was ringing in my ears, and I jumped when she suddenly prodded my side.

 She giggled. “*Jeez*, Apollo.” She had to cover her mouth to stop, and I felt my annoyance grow. It’d been a long day. “You really don’t like bats, huh?”

 “Right now, I really don’t like *you*,” I said, hearing her offended squeak afterwards.

 “You’d say that ‘bout your own *twin sister?”* she said accusingly. I could picture her pressing the back of her hand against her forehead.

 We were right at the opening, but I paused to give her a blank stare. “Artemis, you literally called me the worst person on the *planet* last week,” I reminded. “Because I wouldn’t steal a *flowerpot* with you.”

 She pouted. “It *was* a really cute flowerpot.”

 I scoffed, but we both fell silent once I hesitantly stepped inside the passageway. It was so much darker inside, the dim flashlight looking dismal in comparison—like a full moon behind stormy clouds. I frowned, surveying the area.

 The narrow entrance led into an even more claustrophobic corridor of sorts, closing in on all sides. I nervously squeezed through, having to forcefully push once my backpack got stuck. Artemis snorted, already slipping off hers ‘fore following me.

 On the other side of the make-shift corridor was a small space, barely big enough to fit the two of us laying on the ground. There was another passageway leading further into the mountain, but I didn’t want us to get lost. Besides, it was better to stick close to the exits.

 Unfortunately, the only way *in* was also the only way *out*. It wasn’t ideal—personally, I would’ve preferred to have a second exit in case we were bombarded. But, with the way the hill slid beneath the entrance, it’d be hard *not* to hear anyone climbing up. That’d give a bit of warning.

 Artemis glanced ‘round too. “Not bad,” she commented, bending down to pick up a pebble. “But I’m telling you, there *has* to be bats in here.”

 Before I could stop her, she threw the rock toward the ceiling. Almost immediately, the dark surface erupted into a flapping mass of chaos. I ducked low, covering my head as Artemis yelped. It sounded like they were all ‘round us, and I closed my eyes tightly ‘til the sound faded.

 It was quiet as our wide eyes collided.

 “I fucking *told* you.”

 I chuckled against my wishes, raising the flashlight so I could see her teasing smile as she danced her pointer finger my way.

 “Who was right? Artemis, like *usual*,” she declared proudly, puffing up her chest.

 I shoved the flashlight at her, making her chest deflate as she abruptly caught hold of it. “Alright genius,” I began dryly, taking my backpack off and digging ‘round for the tightly packed blanket. “Let’s just get settled.”

 With how fast we left the last cave, everything inside my bad was packed haphazardly, some things missing. I didn’t realize I’d left my favorite knife behind. It was a shame, really, considering how well it’d held up over the years. Nearly a decade since I got it, and the blade was as sharp as ever.

 Ignoring the small grief, I unpacked my sleeping bag, unrolling it onto the dusty and uneven ground. Artemis did the same, but she abruptly groaned, letting her head fall back as she raised her chin.

 “I left my toothbrush,” she mumbled sadly.

 “We can snag one tomorrow if we make good time.” I was pulling out the only clean clothes that I had, frowning when I realized I’d have to start rewearing the others. *That* was never fun. I stood, moving toward the dark corner and turning away from my sister to change.

 Artemis scoffed, yanking her brush through her hair. “Yeah, I remember you sayin’ the same thing when I lost my Converses.”

 I rolled my eyes, slipping the plain shirt over my head. “This is different. We don’t need you getting an infection or something.”

 “Aw, you *do* care,” Artemis replied, brushing her head’s other side. “But seriously, I loved those shoes, especially after we drew all over ‘em.”

 I smiled, coming to sit on my sleeping bag and grabbing a knife I *hadn’t* lost. Anxious energy thrumming through me, I mindlessly twirled it ‘round my fingers, lying down and staring up at the crystallized ceiling. “Yeah, and you were tryin’ to be all edgy and emo,” I reminded. She laughed loudly.

 “Oh God, yeah!” she managed to say in between the giggles. My smile grew, and I threw the knife, watching as it suddenly twisted mid-air and stabbed the side of the cave. If I wasn’t so nervous ‘bout everything going on, I would’ve done a more creative trick. Grabbing another one, I tilted my head, knowing where to hit the wall so that they’d both fall back down to me. “And the makeup? What was I thinking? Ma almost *skinned me alive* when she found out where I got all of it from. It was totally…”

 I glanced up, confused when she trailed off, and my small smile fell when I saw her frozen in place, eyes wide and unseeing.

 I shifted toward her, flinging the knife without even looking. I heard the clatter of both weapons as they landed on the floor, but I didn’t pay it any mind, bringing her cold body into my arms and rubbing her back softly. She didn’t react to my touch, but she never reacted to anythin’ when she was like this—stuck between worlds. I rocked the both of us back and forth, knowing it usually helped during her “episodes.”

 I whispered small reassurances to her, hoping it wouldn’t be a long one. Sometimes, she’d be stuck like this for hours, but she needed to get some sleep. We both did.

 When she flinched not even a minute later, gasping exaggeratedly, I looked toward her face. There was an intense fear that made my insides crash.

 She was shaking, trembling all over, and I wished I could do more. I wished I could seal her mind, closing the door to anyone and everyone possible. I wished I could sweep away the nightmares, ones filled with monsters and shadows. I wished I could *at least* make them less scary.

 She gripped my hand in hers so tightly that I thought she might break the bone.

 “What did you see?” I asked, afraid of the answer.

 “It didn’t work,” Artemis whispered, her chest rising and falling fast, as if she were hyperventilating. “It didn’t *work*, Apollo.”

 “What didn’t?”

 “The plan,” she answered, swallowing thickly as her doe-eyes met mine. “The plan didn’t work. The Untouchables ain’t goin’ after Mark no more.” She paused, licking her lips. “They’re coming after us.”

 “What?” I replied. “Why?”

 She was already standing. “They must’ve saw us when we separated,” she explained. I stood too, running a hand through my hair as she paced. “Ma said it herself. They want younger Auras, and we’re the prime age. Plus, with that telekinetic on their team, they can track us like cats and mice.”

 “I gotta assume we’re the mice,” I said, feeling frustrated, helpless. “Well, do you know how long ‘til they catch up?”

 She opened her mouth, but we both stumbled as the world swayed under our feet. Bits and pieces of rocks fell on top of us, and we ducked, rushing back to our bags. The entire mountain seemed to creak and groan, like an old house that was ready to collapse.

 The Untouchables were already here.

 Artemis threw what little she had unpacked into her bag, while I focused on swiping my knives off the floor.

 Like before, I despised the cave’s set-up, knowin’ the Untouchables were probably right outside, waiting for us to escape the falling debris. It was déjà vu, and I worried we wouldn’t get out as unscathed as last time.

 “What do we do?” Artemis cried. “We don’t even know what all of ‘em are capable of yet—”

 “Guess we’ll find out,” I replied lamely, not sure what to say when everything was falling apart ‘round us—literally. “We gotta run.”

 “They’ll be able to see us,” Artemis argued.

 “Honestly, Artemis, that’s not *exactly* my biggest worry right now,” I told her, shaking my head. “We just gotta push them back, and when we see an opening, we book it, okay?”

 She nodded, and then things happened fast.

 We exited the cave, flinching when an invisible blast was thrown at the tree in front of us. The roots were ripped out, and the thing was thrown like a rag-doll against another tree. It snapped in half, and the sound was like thunder.

 With the tree outta the way, we could see the three figures standing below; each one was looking straight at us.

 They were standing strategically, forming a half-circle and effectively blocking our escape route. I met Artemis’s eyes, nodding to the right, where a girl—not much older than us—was standing stoically. My message was clear.

 The night had fully descended, and other than the small flashlights strapped to their vests, the Untouchables were enveloped in darkness. Hopefully, the night would give us an edge, but I highly doubted it.

 I tensed when one of them stepped toward us, and instinctively squeezed when Artemis’s hand wrapped ‘round mine. He must’ve been the leader of the small group, if the way he walked was any indication.

 “Nowhere to run,” he taunted. He smirked at us as if he’d found the entire situation entertaining. He extended his arms out to either side of him, tilting his head mockingly. “Why don’t you save us the trouble and come out willingly.”

 I scoffed. “You really expect that to work?”

 His smirk remained. “No, but it’s protocol.”

 “Dane, don’t play around,” the girl that I pointed out chastised, narrowing her eyes. “This has already taken too much time.”

 “Come on, Delilah,” Dane drawled. I memorized the names and faces. “You gotta be curious too. They’re, like, *our* age.”

 “You’re traitors,” Artemis declared boldly, curling her lip. “Working for *them*. Turning your backs on the rest of us.”

 “Oh, and you think that running will do you any good?” Delilah asked. “At least we’re not *delusional*.”

 “You’re worse,” Artemis spat. Delilah’s features darkened.

 “Well, I guess we gotta actually put in work for this one,” Dane sighed in annoyance, rolling his eyes. “So lame.”

 “Dane, shut up.”

 The voice came from the third Untouchable, and I looked toward him, seeing a deeper darkness in his eyes that didn’t nearly compare to the night hanging heavily from above. I suppressed any emotion as he glared at us, but Artemis couldn’t, and she shifted uncomfortably.

 My heart was pounding, and the knives burned in my pocket, aching to be used, wielded by my will. It seemed I’d get my wish, ‘cause Dane sighed, rolling his shoulders.

 “Alright then,” he muttered, and everything burst into action again.

 Artemis and I jumped from the ledge as the one Untouchable who hadn’t been named raised his hand. An explosion hit the spot we’d been standing in, and I identified the power quickly.

 Telekinesis.

He’d been the mastermind behind the explosions at the last cave.

 Artemis and I slid down the dirt; as we did, I slipped my hand into my pocket, quickly throwing the knife toward the telekinetic. My aim was perfect, and the weapon curved mid-air, like a drone. It shot forward like a missile, slicing the side of his face deftly even as he jerked at the sudden attack.

 Dane, noticing the throw, rushed at us just as we regained our footing. We stood at the same level as the Untouchables now, instead of above. Artemis unsheathed her own knife from her boot, gripping it with white knuckles.

 Dane was fast, using his lanky stature to his advantage as he lunged toward me. I raised my hand, trying to block the hit, but it was like I was suddenly made of paper. He landed the punch to my stomach, and oxygen disappeared.

 Luckily, I recovered quickly, ducking under his second swing and throwing my elbow back, connecting with his jaw. He stumbled, and I saw Artemis outta the corner of my eye, battling with Delilah as best as she could. Delilah moved just as fast as my attacker. I tried to spot if she was using a power of her own, but I couldn’t get more than a glimpse at my sister ‘fore Dane was back on me.

 There was another explosion near my feet, and I was thrown off balance, giving Dane the perfect opportunity to shove me to the ground. I landed roughly, blinking dirt from my eyes.

 We were outnumbered, and the Untouchables were just as ruthless and strategic as the rumors said. They worked like a perfectly oiled machine, and I heard Artemis shout my name.

 I was being pummeled, but I managed to grab the last knife in my pocket—the other had been lost to the hazy darkness thanks to the last explosion. I sliced it through the air, catching Dane’s shoulder in a long scar that immediately started bleeding. He cursed, falling backwards and giving me a chance to get my bearings.

 But I couldn’t. The telekinetic was back, and instead of using his power, he followed Dane’s lead, pinning me to the ground. Maybe he *was* using his ability, because I was glued to the ground, a weight heavier than him pressing down on my chest. I struggled, but he barely blinked as he ripped the knife outta my grasp, slashing my palm as he did.

I was unarmed, and my nose must’ve been broken by the way blood burst forth, staining my teeth. I could taste iron.

“Stop,” he calmly said. I incredulously wondered how he was so composed. His eyes were still, focused.

I reeled back and spit in his face. He shouted, letting me go to wipe the saliva away. I pushed myself up, turning toward Artemis and seeing that she had Delilah in a hold, pressing her forearm into the shorter girl’s neck as she stood closely behind. I could see my sister whispering something into her ear, and I felt the dark tension in the air when Artemis raised her hand, pressing her fingertips against Delilah’s forehead. It was one of her best tricks.

Immediately, Delilah started screaming, collapsing to the ground once Artemis released her. At the same moment, I was tackled by Dane again.

Artemis shouted my name again, but I knew she’d be too weak from the move she just pulled to fight any longer.

“Go!” I screamed, waving my arms frantically toward the trees. The shadows danced across her horror-struck face. “Get outta here!”

“Khaos,” Dane bit out, grabbing my wrists and clutching them in his hands. I realized that he was speaking to the telekinetic. “Get the girl.”

I yelled at her again. Tears drenched her face.

“I can’t *leave* you!” she screamed, voice breaking.

Khaos raised his hand. I shook my head, eyes meeting hers. “Artemis, I swear to *God*, just run!”

Her chest heaved with a sob, but thankfully, she listened. Just as Khaos sent a forceful wave toward her, she turned on her heel, running for the hills. I watched her go once the smoke cleared, a sigh of relief leaving my blood-coated lips.

For once, she was actually being smart.

But, I felt an agony worse than any physical pain as she disappeared, not knowing if I’d see her again.

“I’ll get her,” Khaos offered. “Deal with him, then check on Delilah.”

Dane nodded, grunting as he shifted on top of me. I didn’t look at him, my face still turned toward where Artemis had been. I couldn’t do anything but hope she’d make it past Khaos. I couldn’t do anything but hope we’d find each other again.

“Nighty-night,” Dane growled darkly. Before I could see what he was doing, he grabbed my hair in a fist, lifting my head up and slamming it against the ground, *hard*.

Then the world, and Artemis, were gone.

**Chapter Five**

**Artemis**

It felt like my soul was on fire, suffocating on the ashy ground and spluttering weakly as it tried surviving the flames world surrounding it. A million of Apollo’s best knives were carving into me, scraping the organ in my chest as inhumanely as possible.

Leaving Apollo behind was probably the worst moment of my life.

More so than the nightmares—the visions that’d send me into absolute stillness, a living paralysis—or the dangerous days when we ran into Handlers, or the vicious cycle of hiding from people who wanted to hurt us. It was worse than the bloodshed, the betrayal, the hurt. It was worse than all of it, and I wished there was a better word to describe it, but the only one I could find was guilt.

I left him.

The *one* thing we’d always promised was to *never* leave—not like this. We’d fight together, and we’d lose together. We wouldn’t abandon anyone.

And yet, that’s exactly what I did.

The worst part about the worst moment of my life was that he actually *asked* me to do it. He *begged* me.

His bloody face was burned my retinas.

But I couldn’t worry ‘bout him, not when there was still a risk just behind me. I ran, but the tears blurred everything, and I tripped clumsily. Despite knowing that my brother still lived, it felt like I’d never see him again, like this was a first-death. They didn’t release Auras easily, especially at our age. What would happen to him next, I could only guess, but I was certain it wouldn’t be anything good. That thought fueled my guilt, and my chest caved again.

I heard rustling; someone was skillfully following me. I pushed my legs faster, hastily wiping my face as if that would stop the watery trail cutting through the dirt and grime. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that I’d somehow ended up in the Gray again, because this *couldn’t* be real. Apollo *couldn’t* be gone. He couldn’t.

I heard rushing water, and wondered where I was. The night was a blindfold, which made running harder than it already was. As if I’d just gotten a split-second vision—which was impossible while I still ran—I felt my foot get caught on a tree root, sending my body sprawling to the floor like a damn doll. Leaves stuck to my face as I slid ‘cross the muddy ground, and the sounds of water were closer. There must’ve been a stream or river nearby, and right now—with a beam of a flashlight quickly bounding toward me—it was really my only hope.

I was tired; my energy absolutely drained after I transferred some of the voices I heard so often into one of the Untouchables. I couldn’t remember her name, but I remembered her screams, and my own body screamed at me, protesting as I unsteadily climbed to my feet. I had to lean against a nearby tree, pulling my aching body to stand.

Whirling around, I faced the telekinetic—perhaps the most dangerous one of them all. His eyes were narrowed on me, as if he was memorizing everything that I did and filing it away in his mind for later. The disposition unnerved me, and I fell backwards as if he physically struck my face. He watched the movement like he was bored.

He raised his hands. “You can’t fight,” he said, much to my annoyance. I wanted to snap at him, but he was right; even if I could pull the abilities out of my gut by force, they’d be useless, like a fading ember on a cold night. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder smoothly, taking another step. “I know you don’t want to leave your poor brother behind, do you?”

If I could, I would’ve clawed his eyes out, but I could only express plain disgust while I raised my hands too. “Don’t come closer,” I warned, but he didn’t listen.

“You’re exhausted,” he said. “Just come with us.”

“I’d rather die,” I spat.

He clenched his jaw tightly, and I could feel his coldness between us. “Unfortunately,” he began, another step taken, “you’re a bit too valuable.”

I shook my head, turning, but I was pushed to the ground. I yelped, whipping my head back at him. I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was the puppeteer, and I was tangled in his strings. He walked forward, but unlike earlier, I couldn’t do nothing about it. The rocks dug into my back, and I gritted my teeth, wishing the energy I wasted on the girl would come back.

I got desperate when he bent down, grabbing my arms tightly and prepping to haul me up. But—despite his stronger power, he couldn’t hold me completely. I discreetly dug into my pocket, finding the small weapon Apollo’d given to me a few weeks ago. I didn’t think it would be useful at the time, but now, as I felt the sharp, unused blade, I was eternally grateful.

He gripped my shoulders and dragged me up, and with the momentum, my body shot forward. I flashed the knife, not aiming for anything in particular—all I really cared about was that he’d be distracted. Luckily, it worked. He flinched, and even through the dimness, I saw the black cut clearly. He finally let me go, cursing incoherently.

I didn’t waste a moment. I followed the echoes of my brother’s instructions and ran. The clarity returned tenfold when the telekinetic’s flashlight disappeared, and I dived back into the visionless night. I heard the water, like a heartbeat in my ears—perhaps it really *was* my own heartbeat, and I was hallucinating the water. I could already feel the stinging tears at the thought.

But, I stumbled when a small hill dipped underneath me. I rolled amidst the leaves and branches, finally coming to a stop near a cool crescent of stone that ended just a few feet in front of me. The water was in my head, splashing and hitting the sides of my brain as if it were tryin’ to revive me. Too full of adrenaline, not realizing how much the small fall had disoriented me, I grappled forward, peering over the edge.

It was just as I’d thought: there was a river, rapidly biting and clawing the air with icy hands. I gasped, scrambling backward when I saw the sharp rocks jutting out from underneath me, threatening to rip me to shreds before I even reached the eerie, untrusting abyss.

Breathing heavily, I realized I had a choice. Either stay on land, let myself be turned over, ruining Apollo’s hope for me to get away… Or jump.

When it was phrased like that, there really *wasn’t* a choice, was there?

I closed my eyes, wondering if this dreary place would be the last thing I saw. Without Apollo. Without Ma. Without any other chance.

I opened my eyes again.

I saw light flash just as I disappeared over the edge, feeling the claw catch me. I was sucked in, pulled by the current. I tried holding my breath, swimming to the surface.

But I must’ve hit something hard—a rock, or a log, or *something*—‘cause in the next moment, everything vanished.

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Summary of Ending Ch. 5:

Artemis has another vision inside the Gray, and sees Bianca’s cabin while the spirits repeat the name “Anya Jaybird” multiple times. She isn’t sure what they mean. When she wakes up, she’s found by a man, without any of her stuff still with her—including the circular object that Ma had given her. It was all lost in the river. She thinks he’s a Handler, and tries to run, but she’s too weak. When he shows her that he won’t hurt her—explaining that he’s an Aura too—she asks where she is. He tells her that she’s in Nevada, which is the opposite direction of where she needs to go. Artemis, overwhelmed and overtaken by emotion and exhaustion, ends up passing out again—but this time, she welcomes the peace.

**Chapter Six**

**Ellis**

Summary:

Ellis wakes up in Mark’s cabin. She’s interrogated by a man named Drew, who knows about her and her relationship to Artemis and Apollo. He also knows that the Untouchables are after them, but doesn’t realize that they were after Mark first. Drew, as a character, is moody and emotionally flip-floppy. He goes from interrogating her to happily showing her around—mainly because she proved that she wasn’t a threat to them.

Drew shows Ellis the rest of the cabin, which has been transformed into some kind of daycare for the underground trafficking he is doing to get Aura kids out of the country. Ellis realizes this and starts to trust Drew more.

Ellis meets J, who is Drew’s ward of sorts—what stands out is J’s ability: shadow manipulation. They also have incredibly gray eyes. Ellis realizes that J must’ve been the one to attack her.

Mark reveals to Drew and Ellis that the Untouchables are also after him because he knows what they’re planning: making more of them, more assassination squads and restrictions. After Mark explains, Drew gets upset that there doesn’t seem to be many options for them, and storms out of the room. Ellis follows.

**Chapter Seven**

**Apollo**

 I shot forward, like those damn bats that Artemis manifested into existence.

 Like with those dreams of jumping or falling, my body jerked, and I was thrusted outta sleep so hard that I’d swear I nearly broke my damn neck. Where was I? Where was Artemis?

 But, of course, the memories came rushing back like an open floodgate, and I straightened, heart poundin’ like heavy rock music. I was in a sterile room, lacking furniture other than a small twin bed and an armoire. The armoire surprised me, as it was the only color in the room: dark oak, almost a deep red. Against the white walls, it looked kinda like some entry into a brand new world, one ready for some adventurer to brave its intestines. I instinctively cringed away from it.

 I moved, hanging my legs off the bed’s edge. There were no windows, no clocks. I had no idea what time it was, and I felt the anxiety inside growing, festering like an undressed wound. The last thing I remembered was watchin’ my sister run away. I didn’t know if she made it, or if she’d been captured too. My jaw clicked, echoing.

 I stared down at myself, heart spiking when I saw that my own clothes were gone, leaving me dressed in a white t-shirt and slacks that made me feel like I was in a hospital instead of a prison. Despite feeling incredibly violated, I frowned, fiddling with the shirt—it was thick, and scratchy, and my hand’s friction against it was the only sound. The eeriness expanded.

 This certainly ain’t what I’d been expecting. I always assumed that if we got caught by the Untouchables, they’d throw us into a fiery pit, or a torturous lake filled with piranhas or crocodiles. I expected something like the villains in the old spy movies Ma loved, the ones she described so vividly, not this isolation. I wondered if this might’ve been worse.

 I stood, tipping my chin and staring at the ceiling. The corners were bare—no cameras. I frowned. They wouldn’t just leave me here unsupervised; they had to be watching somewhere.

 I lowered my head and my eyes sheepishly flickered toward the armoire. It was so strange—why would I need an armoire? Unless they planned to keep me here longer before being shipped off to a different prison? Was this just a waiting room?

 So many questions and nowhere to go. Unfortunately, I couldn’t ever get rid of the biggest thing Artemis and I shared: curiosity. I felt myself walking closer to the armoire, one step after another. I reached outward, nearly touching the intricate patterns in the panels that depicted a world of gods and monsters in minuscule form.

 But the door—which I hadn’t even noticed since it was so seamlessly sealed within the wall—was thrusted open, and I jumped, tense.

 It was the telekinetic. *Khaos*, if I remembered.

 I narrowed my eyes. He did the same.

 “You’re awake.”

 “Obviously.”

 He stared for a moment, and my eyes shifted to the door, noticing that the outer hall had strange wallpaper. It looked velvet, which made it more jarring, like a pristine necklace inside a bear-infested cage.

 My eyes found his. He hadn’t taken his gaze from me like I had. Now, underneath the bright, florescent lighting, I saw that his skin was tan, a few shades darker than mine. Black hair barely grew from his buzzed head, and one eyebrow was scarred. I saw the kiss of my fist on his right cheek, but I could also see a fresh bruise on the other side too, where a longer scratch had formed. I couldn’t hide my grin.

 Artemis.

 His eyes narrowed at my smile, and he whistled a low whistle. Suddenly, two Handlers—distinguishable by their stiff, navy uniforms—stomped in, heading straight for me. I tensed again, ready to try anything.

 But Khaos read me like a book. “Check your new jewelry,” he commented wryly, and my confusion must’ve been obvious.

 He jerked his chin down, and I followed, finding an ankle monitor blinking at me. I hesitated, and the Handlers took advantage, each grabbing an arm and shoving me forward. I barely caught myself with fumbling feet before they were pushing more, and I had no choice but to follow Khaos as he leisurely turned and walked outta the room, as if this place were nothing more than a school, or a home. I paused, wondering if there was any truth in that.

 The Untouchables were known to be raised by the government, trained by professionals, and known for their cruelty. But I’d never once thought about where they might’ve been raised. Was *this* it? So far, I couldn’t tell, and my bones felt like they might pop.

 The door closed loudly behind us, an echoing thud that was absorbed by the fluffy carpet and thick walls ‘round me. I fidgeted under the Handlers’ grips, but they held firm, and all I could do was stare curiously.

 The hallway was long and curvy. The velvet wallpaper changed colors as the hall turned, from deep red to a shocking green—the same color as Artemis’s eyes. There was a low seat next to a window where the wall rounded, and my eyes magnetically shot toward it, hoping to pry some kinda information from the scenery. All I could see was a tree, blocking the view. If I’d been closer, I might have tried to peek through the branches and find noticeable landmarks, but as it was, I could barely get the one glance before we were movin’ on.

 There was nothing on the walls: no pictures or decorations or anything except the same patterned wallpaper, looking soft to the touch and yet cold all the same. The carpets were nice under my feet, but when we turned down a different hallway—this time, to the left—my nerves grew cold at the contact of the marble floor. This hallway was different, more regal, more like some of the paintings I’d find described in Artemis’s novels. The floor was a checkered black and white, and there was an entire wall of windows on the left-hand side.

 Outside was nothing more than another scene outta my sister’s books, a lake softly rippling from the breeze, the same one that ruffled the trees and asked them to dance. There were no soldiers, no tanks, no fiery pits—just a lake, with the setting sun reflecting off it like a kaleidoscope, separating the hues and shooting them in random directions. I could see the reflection of the rainbow splattered on the chilling floor, where it illuminated like a preserved flower, pressed beneath the pages of a heavy book.

 Chandeliers hung, adding more gracefulness. There was a marble statue in the corner, missing limbs and yet exquisite in its brokenness. I wondered what the point of having a hallway like this was for anyway. It didn’t seem to serve any other purpose than to rub in my face how much more luxurious their lives were.

 The Handlers knew not to speak, but Khaos could, even if it seemed like he didn’t want to. There was a droll in his voice, like he’d said these things over and over again.

 “If you haven’t already guessed, you’ve been arrested and tried as being an Aura,” Khaos explained slowly, as if the words themselves were being fed to him from a machine somewhere. I glared at the back of his head, hoping that he’d hear the nonsense in his own words. Tried for being an Aura? It wasn’t like I could control it, or him. “There was an evaluation done, and it seems that you have more potential than I thought.” The words were sour, which made my lips twitch for a second. “Seeing as you’re the prime age, the Handlers thought it best for you to train with us, see where you land.”

 My lip curled. “I’d rather die.”

 Khaos was emotionless. “I’d rather the same thing, actually.”

 Then he turned, slapping his hands onto the wall. I was lost on his intent before the two sides opened: a door, but it’d been so easily camouflaged in the wallpaper that I wouldn’t have noticed it, like the door in the stark-white room.

 It was a big open space: a common area. There were plushy couches littered here and there, tables with books stacked on top or a chess set configured exactly as it was meant to be. There were no TVs or any other electronics from what I could tell, but I noticed a shelf filled with board games. I frowned, confused.

 Then, the Handlers abruptly shoved me to the floor, and I landed roughly on the colorful rug. It looked a bit childish and young, with an elementary image of a school bus filled with happy children on the spot where I had fallen. I retreated from the horrid sight, hearing slamming doors and turnin’ to see that the Handlers had gone, and nothing signaled their presence except for the resounding click of a lock. I was trapped.

 I faced Khaos again, who was staring at me with a bored expression twisting his features. His hands were cupped together in front of him lazily, and his dark eyes were languid.

 “Ooh, is this the new one?” a girlish voice flitted across the room. My eyes twisted and found a brunette girl, not much older than me, splayed over the armrests of a large, cushioned chair. Her long hair fell over one side, nearly touching the floor, and I was silenced by her beauty. Her skin was pale, almost strikingly so, with Asian-almond eyes dark as night, staring at me, amused. Against my better judgement, considering the absurdity of this situation, I felt myself blush, looking away.

 “Don’t tease him, Addie,” Khaos mused. My sense returning, I brushed myself off and climbed to my feet, feeling the weight of the ankle monitor like it was a bomb that’d go off any moment. I hadn’t relaxed since waking up, and my body was beginning to feel sore from the stretched anxiety.

 The girl, Addie, rolled her thin eyes and went back to what she was doing before, which was evidently filing her nails. I shifted from foot to foot, uncomfortable as my eyes scanned the rest of the room, wondering if anyone else was hiding.

 And they were. From behind one of the large bookshelves popped a head, and then another, but I recognized them this time. The dark silhouettes of Delilah and her brother would never leave my mind as long as I didn’t know the outcome of Artemis’s escape, and I felt my eyes narrowing. Delilah didn’t give me any time of day, skipping—*actually* skipping—past me, her long, braided hair nearly slapping me as she joined Addie and talked quickly ‘bout something I couldn’t catch. Dane was slower, and took his time strolling along the strangely domesticated room, his hand in the pockets of his basketball shorts. In fact, everyone there looked strangely domesticated, with Addie wearing a pretty, long skirt and a loose shirt, Delilah wearing a comfortable pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, and Khaos wearing jeans and a sweater. I felt even more uncomfortable at the realization that *I* was the one who stood out in my generic, hospital-looking clothes.

 Dane stared me up and down, and his gaze felt heavy. His eyes caught something near my eyes, and he nearly smiled. I felt my fingers flex against my pants as he approached lightheartedly, as if we knew each other for years.

 “I gave you a pretty good one, didn’t I?” he said, somewhat to himself as he reached toward me. I flinched, and he paused, staring longer ‘til he dropped his hand. The situation was awkward and uncomfortable, but I finally understood that he was talking ‘bout the bruise I probably donned on my face, a gift of his. For some reason, the tone he used rubbed me the wrong way. I didn’t think it was possible to feel more outta place ‘til Dane sounded almost *apologetic*.

 “He’s been out of it for like two days,” Delilah piped up from next to Addie, her face a bright sight of smiles. “I would hope you gave him a good one or else I’d be concerned.” She gasped suddenly, her smile dropping. “You think it’s brain damage?”

 I wrinkled my nose, and Dane rolled his eyes. “Delilah, you think *everything* is brain damage.”

 “You never know, okay,” she replied, shrugging. I bit my tongue, hard. It was hard imagining the same ditzy girl in front of me as the savage fighter from a few nights ago.

 *A few nights*... I’d no idea what was going on with Artemis, and the few nights passing without any check-ins sent my worries soaring. Khaos looked at me closely.

 “Don’t worry,” he told me. “Your sister isn’t here.”

 I hated feeling grateful, but my shoulders relaxed. *Good*. Artemis was safe, at least for the time being.

 Delilah scowled. “She’s *something*,” she muttered. By the way her eyes clouded over and Dane stared at her worriedly, whatever she must’ve seen during Artemis’s trick couldn’t have been good. I almost felt bad. *Almost*.

 “But so are you,” a new voice joined. It was another girl, her short hair bobbing up and down with curls as she stepped into the light. She had darker skin than Addie, and nearly the same shade as Delilah, but there was a golden hue that highlighted her own version of beauty. She had small features on a small face and a small body, but her steps held a sureness, a power that she took confidence in. It wasn’t the same as with Delilah. No, *this* girl knew exactly what she was capable of and how to get anything she wanted. She exuded danger, and I nearly looked away, but forced myself to keep eye contact as she tilted her head. “Aren’t you?”

 I shrugged. “I guess that’s for you to decide, ain’t it?” I asked, still weirded out. Everyone just seemed so… *normal*. It was unnerving to see the rumors and the expectations stripped away. At the end of the day, they weren’t much different than Artemis and me, just kids.

 The curly-haired girl stopped mid-step, glancing at Khaos knowingly. “I like him.” Khaos rolled his eyes and crossed his arms, while the small girl just turned back to me, smiling. “I’m Ophelia.”

 I nodded, staring at everyone who all stared back with equal uncertainty and awkwardness. What was I supposed to say to the people I’d been afraid of for months now? How was I even supposed to be civil with them? Any time I looked at Dane and Delilah, all I wanted was to tear them apart for hurting Artemis, for separating us. But the ankle monitor’s weight was the only reminder I needed to keep my hands to myself.

 “Well, now that you’ve met everyone,” Khaos muttered. “Let’s move along.”

 “How ‘bout I take over?” Ophelia asked, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow. Khaos didn’t show much emotion, but I could tell he wasn’t happy. Ophelia noticed too. “Come on, it’s not like you wanted to do it anyway.”

 Khaos rolled his eyes again, and I wondered how they didn’t get stuck to the insides of his head. “Fine, whatever,” he muttered. He raised his hands and walked backward toward the other side of the room. “But you know the rules.”

 Now it was Ophelia’s turn to look at him like he was stupid. “*Obviously*,” she snapped. Khaos turned away and left without another word. I watched him go, but that curly head of hair was suddenly right in front of me. I jumped, but managed to cover it up just as Ophelia held out her hand. “Great. Now that he’s gone, I can give you a *proper* tour.”

 I stared at her open hand, furrowing my eyebrows. Ophelia didn’t seem deterred, nodding encouragingly, as if she were trying to communicate with a stray animal, something that couldn’t trust. My hand twitched, deciding whether or not grabbing hers would somehow mean my compliance with these people, or if it was somehow a trap. Were their niceness just a ruse? Was their banter just a ploy?

 “Jesus, just grab her hand, man,” Dane finally blurted out, and Delilah shoved him hard from behind. He muttered annoyances at the action, but I—blushing—decided to grab Ophelia’s hand anyway. She smiled wider, and Dane grinned, ignoring his sister like it was nothing but radio static.

 “Here, I’ll show you the kitchen,” she explained firstly, and we crossed the common room. Walking past the tables, chairs, and bookshelves, we turned down a hallway opposite to the entrance. I tried not to panic at flying further into the lion’s den, further away from escape, but I also knew there was no point in worrying. With each step—with each jostle of the band ‘round my ankle—I was reminded of my helplessness, and my jaw tightened.

 I didn’t want a tour. I didn’t want to grab some pretty girl’s hand. I didn’t want to sit and listen to their opinions. All I wanted was to find Artemis, to find Ma. All I wanted was to go back to my life before. Sure, it hadn’t been as beautiful and stunning as the lives of the Untouchables, but it was *mine*. It was home.

 I had never felt homesick before, and the experience was nauseating.

 “Woah, you’re looking a little pale,” Ophelia’s voice swam. I barely realized that we’d entered a grand room, even grander than the first. She led me over to a counter, releasing me slowly against the marble. “Here, wait one second…”

I blinked, looking ‘round the kitchen. It was big, like the common area, with three different steel-faced fridges stuffed into the walls. There were cabinets and cupboards, a dark auburn painted on them—a color that somewhat reminded me of the armoire from the room I’d woken up in. Somehow, the thought of the strange furniture—which seemed to call out even from here—made me even more dizzy. I rubbed my temple, wincing when I accidentally brushed the pulsating bruise still there.

Ophelia was back, this time holding a glass of water. She pushed the cold cup into my hands. “Drink. We don’t want you feeling faint,” she said, and then her face shifted, amused. “And we don’t want Delilah thinking her diagnosis was right.”

I listened, letting the coolness run a stream down my throat. I was already feeling better, but with the water hitting my insides, I could finally feel that I was starving. A few days. That’s how long it’d been since I last ate.

I wondered if Ophelia could read minds, because she walked ‘round the kitchen, grabbing a plate from inside a cabinet and something from outta the fridge. I still sipped the water, staring at the lightbulbs that hung above. It burned my irises, but it also helped center myself; and it did the trick. I started feeling a lot less like I would pass out. Finishing off the glass, I ducked my head and placed it next to me on the counter. Ophelia stared at me from the corner of her eyes, clearly concerned. It annoyed me.

I wasn’t sure what it was ‘bout Ophelia, but I had some weird suspicion that she could be trusted. Or maybe it was the lacking food that made me suffer from temporary insanity. Either way, I found myself walking closer, from the counter I was leaning against, to the long island in the middle of the room. There were tall, metal stools on one side—the opposite side of where she stood—and I slipped into one, looking at her.

She had to have felt my gaze, but she didn’t stop slowly cutting the brick of cheese. I tilted my head, intrigued by her dexterous, thin slices. Artemis and I had seen cheese before, of course, but never a white one. I was briefly curious.

But still, my thoughts would not rest. “Why are you treating me so nicely?” I asked. She looked up, a few curls bouncing when she did.

She pursed her lips, as if trying not to laugh. “You think *this* is nice?”

I deadpanned, “A lot nicer than what I had in mind.”

She chuckled, but there was a bitter ring to it that resonated like a church bell. “We’re not all evil masterminds, you know?” she joked, shaking her head. “We just do what we’re told. I know that’s not an excuse, but…” She sighed, placing the knife down and pressing both hands onto the pristine counter. “We’re not on duty right now. There’s no reason to be mean.”

I frowned. “Seriously?” I asked, unbelieving.

She laughed again. “Seriously,” she replied, nodding. She stored the remaining cheese into the fridge and then moved to another cabinet nearby, looking for something. I watched her, but I felt my gaze drawn somewhere else.

The knife sat on the counter, and the metal gleamed in the light like an invitation. It was dull—a butter knife at best—but it was more than I had.

Faster than lightning, I snatched it up, crashing into Ophelia and slamming her into the fridge. She gasped, but otherwise, didn’t seem surprised. I pushed the knife against her throat, my forearm pinning her as I seethed.

“You’re lying.”

She only shook her head with minute movements. “I’m not.”

I pressed the knife harder, and she whimpered softly. “Tell me the truth,” I spat lowly. “What do you want with me?”

“Personally?” she began slowly. “Nothing. None of us want anything to do with you. It’s *them*.”

I curled my lip. “Who’s them?”

“The people in charge,” Ophelia replied simply. I cringed at how casual she was about her own forced servitude, like a show-dog not realizing the exploitation of its beauty. Truly tragic.

“Who are the people in charge?” I asked, but didn’t press the knife any further. Strangely enough, she had no issue with giving me answers. In fact, it didn’t seem like the knife was what frightened her, but something else entirely.

She shrugged helplessly. “Nobody knows,” she responded dismally. “They change all the time.”

I opened my mouth to interrogate her more, but she grabbed my wrist tightly, and struck ocean blue into my soul, making me hesitate.

“Apollo,” she said my name, and it dripped honey. “All this will do is make things harder for you.” My hand trembled against her grip, and her eyes watched the shakes. “You’re safe here. The same can’t be said if you get sent somewhere else.”

I was confused again, conflicted too. I couldn’t trust her—she was one of *them*. But at the same time, I had to make friends here, or else I’d never be free. And, her words held truth: I knew what was happening here, but I didn’t know what was happening in the other facilities. Ma once told me it was better to pick the devil you knew than the one you didn’t, and I never understood the saying ‘til this here moment.

She used her leverage on my wrist, lowering my arm and slipping the butter knife from my fingers. It clattered beside her, but she didn’t even blink. Her other hand stayed wrapped ‘round mine, offering comfort, and I was surprised at my own happiness ‘bout receiving it. I couldn’t help it. I had nowhere to go, no way to leave, and no idea what I was supposed to be doing. There weren’t enough answers. There wasn’t enough control.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. I shook my head, wishing that her voice didn’t sound so empathetic, wishing that she would leave me to my frustrations and worries. It’d be easier that way. But no, Ophelia wouldn’t be pushed away, and it was impossible to think ‘bout doing it. Her entire presence demanded attention, even more so when she gently wrapped her arms ‘round my shoulders, pulling me close.

I stiffened, but her action successfully snapped me outta my stillness. I was ripped through space and forced into the moment, feeling her soft skin brush against my uncovered neck shyly, like she was nervous. I didn’t blame her; we were strangers.

But the comfort was there, and I grasped onto it even as I held back. She eventually stepped away, her lips pressed tightly against her teeth like she was beginning to regret ever hugging me. However, she must’ve saw something in my face that told her otherwise, because that easy, lazy smile returned.

“Here, you should eat,” she said, slipping away toward the sliced cheese. She’d been looking for somethin’ a minute ago, and it turned out to be a crackers’ package. She opened the plastic and shuffled some of them onto the plate. My eyes followed her hands, the same hands that had grasped mine so gently. She had pretty, manicured nails.

“You can take it along with us, just while we finish up,” she explained. I nodded, hesitantly taking the plate from her. She smiled wider, and didn’t need any kinda *thank you* before twirling and heading off toward a different direction. I blinked, but followed her shortly, leaving the butter knife behind.

Ophelia talked a lot when she was nervous, if her mumbled babbling ‘bout décor and history was anything to go by. I didn’t pay much attention, munching on the cheese and crackers with slight indifference. But, my eyebrows rose when I tasted the pleasant difference in the cheese. I wondered what type it was, and if they had even *more* types hidden in the fridge. I’d have to check later.

She showed me the different “recreational” rooms. There was the workout room, filled with the nicest and shiniest equipment I’d ever seen. There were certain machines that I’d no clue how they worked, but there was also a track ‘round the room and an area for target practice. The walls weren’t velvet here; instead, they were covered with clean linoleum, and I wondered if it was easier to clean up messes because of it. I shivered at the thought of those clean, white walls painted crimson.

But, we moved on, and then there was the pool room. Half of it was separated into lines, lanes to practice their swimming—that’s what Ophelia told me, at least. I’d never seen anything like it before, and I was even more shocked when Ophelia softly encouraged me to feel the water. It was warm.

I liked the pool room, mainly because one side was clear glass, transferring the outside world inside. I found myself gravitating toward it, seeing that lake again, seeing twilight as the sun sunk deeper and deeper into the horizon’s burning embrace. It was enrapturing, and I hated that I found beauty in a place where I was meant to be the most guarded. I wondered if I’d be able to submerge myself with the blinking anklet I sported. Maybe being electrified would be better than whatever was coming next.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” Ophelia said, staring with equal, yet subdued, awe. She had a content smile playing on her lips while her eyes glazed with a different memory. “I remember the first time I saw it too.”

It *was* gorgeous. It was peaceful; I imagined the scenery as the perfect setting for one of those aesthetic, woodsy movies—the ones Artemis always saw movie posters for but we could never watch.

The thought of her hurt, and I should’ve kept the thought to myself, but my floppy tongue betrayed me. “Artemis would love it.”

Ophelia was quiet. “What’s she like?” she asked slowly. I relaxed a little more.

“Crazy,” I responded. Ophelia laughed abruptly, and I smiled. “But also hypnotized with things like this.” I extended my arm toward the view.

“She’s a dreamer,” Ophelia mused.

“She’s the only person I know who could dream with her eyes open,” I told her, almost laughing at the ironic double meaning. But, I stopped myself, not tryin’ to give more information than they needed. I straightened my spine, turning away just as the day descended into darkness. It was best not to think ‘bout Artemis here.

Ophelia sensed my unease, and we left, seamlessly entering the next space.

It was a music room, filled with instruments and beautiful floors that were empty, available for dancing if anyone enjoyed it. There were easels and canvases in the corner, away from the grand piano’s perfect surface and the orchestra ensemble laid out. It seemed like a joint room, filled with different artistic inspirations. I didn’t realize the Untouchables might have hobbies too. I thought it was all training and no fun, but yet again, I was wrong.

The next room was completely different, and was reminiscent of the armoire room. There were no more ornate designs or pretty fixtures; everything was slick and smooth and crystallized, like the inside of a snow globe without the snow. There were a few desks pressed against the wall, and some beds—though, they looked more like cots—lined up on the other one.

“This is the infirmary,” Ophelia explained. I slowly nodded, wondering what kinds of medicine they had locked away in the cabinets above the desks. There was probably enough in this single room to help thousands of Auras out in the real world, and I felt bitter again.

I didn’t want to spend a second longer there, and Ophelia led us away. She didn’t say a word, but I could see it in those eyes—the same shade as the lake’s reflection just before twilight hit—that she understood.

We passed a long hallway, and Ophelia held out her arm. “These are everyone’s rooms,” she explained. Most of the doors were shut up, but there were a few that were slightly opened. I peeked through the cracks, finding huge rooms decorated expensively, comfortable furnishings and a life which screamed luxury at every corner. Again, I felt that jealousy creep up, but when Ophelia suddenly entered a random room on the left hand side, that jealousy turned into bemusement.

The room was like all the others: beautiful, expensive, somewhat unbelievable. I gazed ‘round curiously, noting that there weren’t any personal items that I could see. It was a blank slate.

“This is your room,” Ophelia said. I widened my eyes, shock surging like lightning had finally burned me back. Ophelia tried holding in her amusement, and instead, poked my arm.

“Wait, really?” I asked. Surely, this was a sick joke. Surely, they would throw me into some kinda closet and lock the door, leaving me to rot. This room, this bright and airy room with a chandelier and beautifully carved side tables couldn’t be mine and mine alone. It was too much. It had to be a bribe.

But, Ophelia just nodded. “Yep, all yours.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What do you want in return?”

She shrugged. “Nothing,” she replied, crossing her arms as she bent her neck, gazing at the high ceilings. “I mean, it’s not like it was being used before anyway. Might as well go to you.”

“Oh, uh…” I stumbled, suddenly lost. I cleared my throat awkwardly. “Thank you.”

Ophelia’s face was bright, her blue eyes like her own personal weapon. I felt their gravity even now, like an extra sweet treat that could turn sour later.

“You’re welcome,” she said, just as awkward. “I’ll leave you to get settled.”

She started leaving, and I hadn’t realized I’d moved with her ‘til I grasped her arm. She stopped, looking at my hand that curled ‘round her. She was confused, but she stayed. I stood there, somewhat dumbfounded, unable to find the words.

Finally, I managed. “Where will you go?” I asked.

A corner of her mouth lifted. “Not far,” she replied reassuringly. I forced myself to let go. She nodded, leaving the room. She closed the door—but not completely, leaving a small sliver, a silent reminder that I wasn’t stuck there. I appreciated the gesture more than she knew.

But, despite the itching fear that some unknown lock would slide into place like a river carving through a mountain, I forced myself to close the door all the way. I needed to take stock without possible eavesdroppers.

I stared at the ceiling, frowning. No visible cameras here either. No signs of surveillance. For all intents and purposes, this place looked like a regular—albeit huge and daunting—home.

I crossed the room in long strides, passing the beautiful furniture ‘til I reached the window’s detailed outline. The edges were gold-trimmed, and it was cold when I pressed my fingertips down. No lock, but no way to open it either.

From this angle, the lake wasn’t visible. I wondered if I was facing the front or the side of the mansion. Regardless, there was nothing discernible except for an endless sea of tall trees, twisting and turning like dark ghosts. But, as I squinted my eyes, I saw movement, lights. *Guards*.

I recoiled and stiffened. Even though they tried every possible way to make this place seem inviting, enticing—like a gourmet meal offered to a dying, car-struck animal—I could smell the death underneath. I saw the trap laid out expertly.

 A break in the watchmen was inevitable, but there were stations, spread out and flanking the mansion. If there was a break, I couldn’t find the damn thing. I looked up, seeing clouds cover the moon, a mummification.

 Turning, I clenched and unclenched my hands, flexed my fingers, twirled my wrists, shook my one leg as if I could shake off the extra weight—but the blinking eye of the ankle monitor wouldn’t let me forget. There was antsy energy inside, and it needed release. I didn’t want to join the others—if I looked at them, I might lose my temper, knowin’ they held all the power and I had none. I couldn’t face them, not while knowin’ they could destroy my life with just a word.

 I had to play this smart. They’d already seen enough of my reactions today; it was time to become steel-faced, cold-hearted. Otherwise, they’d rip me up and spit me out.

 My hands stilled, my shoulders relaxed—I opened my eyes.

**Chapter Eight**

**Artemis**

Summary:

Artemis wakes up and finds herself in a cozy home, and the man from before is waiting at her bedside. He introduces himself as Bobby, but he’s clumsy when trying to deal with Artemis’s emotions and grief, so his wife, Lorraine, takes over.

Lorraine gently helps Artemis come to terms with what happened. She gives her a bath, talks to her about family and faith, and tells her that things will turn out okay. She leaves Artemis some of her sister’s old clothes to get ready for dinner.

During dinner, there’s more talk about faith and God and where their lives fit into that small area between. While they’re eating though, Artemis notices a picture frame nearby. The picture is of Lorraine and her sister: Bianca.

**Chapter Nine**

**Ellis**

Summary:

Ellis follows Drew to tell him that she believes there’s a way for them to get out of the country safely. As they’re talking outside, a shooting happens not too far from the cabin. The kids are evacuated into the basement while Drew and J stay upstairs to keep a lookout on the Handlers. Ellis doesn’t trust that Drew and J won’t trap her and Mark down there, but she goes into the basement anyway.

While down there, Mark does shadow puppets with his light to make some of the kids feel better. Then, they start telling stories, and Ellis becomes more attached when she hears about all of the kids’ struggles and the things they shouldn’t have to go through. They remind her of the twins, and she decides to stay and help them.

Once Drew and J join the others in the basement, Ellis tells Drew about Bianca and her connections. Bianca will be able to get them over the border and into Mexico. It’s also a plus, since Ellis is already on her way there. Drew is still hesitant, but they don’t have any other options, so he agrees. Everyone gets ready to leave, to run.

**Chapter Ten**

**Apollo**

Summary:

A week passes while Apollo is with the Untouchables. He sticks to himself and focuses on getting stronger so that he might eventually escape. While in the gym room, Khaos finds him practicing target practice and riles him up with judgement and snarky critiques. Before a fight could get serious, Khaos tells him to get ready and meet him in the main living room.

Dane, who saw the whole thing, warns Apollo, and says that Khaos is the one who has the least to lose. He says not to underestimate him. Apollo takes Dane’s words to heart, and is suspicious about Khaos as they leave the living quarters.

Khaos explains to Apollo that he has been staying there long enough to be tested, and the results of that test will decide if he should stay. All of the Untouchables had to be tested, so Apollo needed to as well. Apollo doesn’t want to be an Untouchable, but he also doesn’t want to lose. When Khaos starts the test, the only goal is to “remain untouched.”

Apollo manages to pass.

**Chapter Eleven**

**Artemis**

Summary:

Bob and Lorraine completely switch up, and become cruel and defensive when Artemis points out Bianca. They demand to know why Artemis is looking for her, how she even knows about her. Artemis explains, and they start to sympathize as they realize she just wants to find her family. But, Lorraine warns her again and again that Bianca can’t be trusted. Artemis realizes that Lorraine is scared.

Eventually, Bob and Lorraine agree to help Artemis get a map to Bianca’s. They also agree to drive her to the border, but from there, they’ll go their separate ways. Artemis is grateful and the night ends.

While asleep, Artemis experiences another trip into the Gray. It’s empty there, which unnerves her. She’s not sure why she’s there in the first place. Slowly, she hears a buzzing, and it pulls her forward, like a magnetic force. She follows the sound and is led to a small hill. At the bottom of it is a hollowed out rock with a slim, circular object on the inside. It’s the small object that Ma gave to Artemis—the same one that Artemis lost while she got swept up in the river.

The object explodes into light.

The next day, Artemis, Lorraine, and Bob leave for the border. Artemis is nervous, especially when Lorraine and Bob show her two cards that they use to get past the Handlers. Artemis is told to hide, and they show their cards to the border patrol. While hiding, Artemis mentally questions if Lorraine and Bob are really helping her, or if they’re somehow traitors and work for the government—there’s no other way they’d get cards like that.

But, when the car drives faster than before, Artemis gets out of her hiding spot and sees that Bob has been shot, and the Handlers are following behind them. Despite what she was thinking, she now believes that *even if* Lorraine and Bob weren’t criminals or on the run before, they certainly were now.

**Chapter Twelve**

**Ellis**

Summary:

A few days pass in order to get everyone and everything ready to go and leave the cabin. Ellis gets closer to the others; Marks stays suspicious and paranoid.

J doesn’t believe that Ellis can cloak a group this big, but they don’t talk much more about it. This gives Ellis some time to think about J, and all their weird and interesting quirks. They remind her of Artemis. When Drew is ready, he reminds everyone of the plan, and if things go wrong, for them to always keep running.

They all leave the cabin, hearing more gunshots. Ellis camouflages everyone; they stay silent for the next two days. On the third day, the kids have gotten comfortable enough to talk. The journey hasn’t been too bad, just tiring.

Ellis and Drew start up a conversation, and there’s some interesting chemistry starting to bloom. However, just as the two are really enjoying each other’s company, Mark shows up. Drew leaves to give Ellis and Mark some privacy.

Mark is shy when he starts talking, which confuses Ellis. Eventually though, she realizes that he’s trying to tell her something along the lines of professed love and nervous suspicion. It’s obvious he doesn’t like Drew, and whether that’s because of his paranoia or because Drew and Ellis just had a long heart-to-heart isn’t known.

In the middle of this conversation, before Mark could actually say what he wants to say, there’s a whistle—Ellis’s signal that meant she needed to hide everyone. However, due to Mark’s distracting her, they’ve lost the group, and have to run to catch up. They barely make it in time, and Ellis shields everyone just as a patrol walks by. Ellis scolds Mark, who has the decency to look ashamed. It creates distance between them.

However, there’s one Handler—Persia—who is staring right at Ellis, as if she could see her.

Persia points in a different direction, leading the Handlers away so that Ellis and the others could get out unseen. Ellis is confused, but doesn’t have time to think it over before they’re all on the run again.

**Chapter Thirteen**

**Apollo**

 Khaos hated me more than ever.

 After that test, he avoided me, and I smugly assumed it was ‘cause of his embarrassment. He’d lost—even with all his fancy training—to a dirt-rat kid who knew nothing ‘bout technique. I would’ve been pissed too.

 But there was another, more important, reason he was pissed—and it was quite simple. My temporary stay had just turned into an endless vacation; they wanted me to become one of them, to turn into an Untouchable myself.

 Once the test finished, Khaos sulkily led me to a different room, where I answered questions—albeit hesitantly and annoyingly. There was also a contraption near the door, and when Khaos came toward me with it, I almost knocked him straight on his nose. Khaos only smacked my hand away and took the tool to my ankle. Before I knew it, my lovely little gift was gone, still feeling the invisible weight of that blinking monster. I thought it was a weird decision to make, considering I wasn’t loyal to any of ‘em, but I wasn’t gonna complain. There was nobody else in the room besides a lone Handler who wrote my answers down, but I remember noticing that there’d been cameras in that room too. They—whoever was in charge of the entire Aura and Untouchable agenda—had been watching the whole time.

 Eventually, we left and walked back to the Untouchables’ domain. The wall-door opened, and I froze. Everyone was standing ceremoniously, waiting for something. Waiting for me.

 Dane shook his head wryly, grinning and crossing his arms. “Well… I’ll be damned.”

 “You owe me a twenty,” Adelaide purred, and Dane rolled his eyes.

 I almost felt embarrassed under the new scrutiny, that is, ‘til I saw Ophelia. Her kind eyes washed away any tension, and not even Khaos’s rude exit could distract me.

 “I knew you could do it,” she said. I smiled, genuinely. She had a knack for making this place seem better than it was.

 She reached and grabbed my hand tightly. I tensed for completely different reasons this time.

 “Yeah, well, it went by pretty quickly,” I muttered, only half-caring ‘bout what I said. Her skin was more entrancing than conversation.

 “Wait,” Dane said, leaning against the couch. “How long did you last?”

 I shrugged. “Khaos told me it was like twenty seconds.” The reaction was instantaneous.

 Ophelia and Delilah widened their eyes. Adelaide smirked, and Dane whistled lowly.

 “God, I stand corrected,” Delilah mumbled, still awestruck.

 My eyebrows creased. “What’s the big deal?”

 “Nobody’s *ever* beaten Khaos that quickly,” Ophelia said quietly, as if Khaos—who’d disappeared into the kitchen—could still hear. “Not even us.”

 “Really?” I asked. “I felt like it was pretty easy.”

 Dane snorted. “Don’t get cocky now, pretty boy.”

 I smirked. “Aw, you think I’m pretty?”

 Dane avoided my gaze, but Ophelia was tugging my arm, making me forget. “Be serious, Apollo,” she whispered earnestly. A big smile transformed her face like sunshine melting overcast clouds. “We need to celebrate!”

 “What, we throwin’ a rager?” Adelaide asked, way too interested than what I thought was normal. I didn’t altogether know what a ‘rager’ was, but it sounded like some kinda party—surprisingly, after being wrong ‘bout so many other things, I was right about this.

 “We can’t throw a huge one, and it can’t be anytime soon,” Delilah reminded, glancing at me with those big brown eyes. “No offense Apollo, but the rest of us have a mission tomorrow.”

 My interest reared its head. This was the first time they’d be deployed on a mission since I’d been staying there. It was the first time that—if they all went together—I’d be left alone. It’d offer me some silence and space so I could look closer. It also gave me the opportunity to pry, figure out their mission’s specifics. My makeshift plan was comin’ together; I was getting closer and closer, and soon enough, I might ask questions without raising suspicions. Soon enough, I’d be able to get insider information, and hopefully translate it back to Ma and Artemis.

 I tried not to let my eagerness show. “A mission?”

 Ophelia blanched—her brown skin looking less lively than I’d ever seen— just before the hammer hit the rusted nail in my chest.

 Adelaide was casual, picking at her fingernails. “Oh yeah,” she said. “We gotta pick up that girl you were with. Your sister, right?”

 I froze, and this time, my entire nervous system felt cold too. My blood stopped, my stomach plummeted, my heart stuttered alongside my tongue like a damn cat choking on a hairball. I was shocked, but tried keeping it hidden. What I couldn’t control was the anger.

 “You’re goin’ after Artemis?” I asked slowly. Dane looked rightfully guilty. He didn’t glance at me, and neither did Ophelia, who I focused on next. I ripped my arm outta her grasp, feelin’ disgusted. She faltered, looking like she’d say something, but my hairball was out now, and I could speak truly. “Are you *actually* insane?”

 My eyes burned wildly, anger and frustration stomping on my brain like a *freakin conga-line*, partying while I suffered with the noise. Ophelia flinched, and I would’ve felt apologetic if we were talking ‘bout *anyone* other than Artemis. I didn’t care how outta control or crazy I was; all I cared for was figuring out why they still wanted her. They already had me—*permanently*, it seemed—so why did they need her too? Couldn’t they just leave well enough alone? Couldn’t they give us a goddamn break?

 Of course they couldn’t. They were the Untouchables; they hurt and maimed and didn’t care about any consequences. I narrowed my eyes at Ophelia, grabbing her arms harshly. Fear flickered in her face, and I felt glad. She *should* be afraid.

 Dane was there within a second. He hooked his arm ‘round my neck from behind, pulling me away from her. We wrestled for a minute, but he held firm. His hot breath tickled my ear.

 “You’re on thin ice, Apollo,” he warned carefully. “Don’t mess it up now.”

 I growled, ripping myself away with a rough shove, one that made him stumble. I knew he’d *let* me go; I knew he pitied me, and I hated it.

 “Would you do the same?” I asked him quietly, eyes flickering to Delilah. His followed, and his shoulder twitched annoyedly, clearly not thinking it a right comparison. He was offended, and I smiled almost manically. “Would you give your sister up to slaughter?”

 “Nobody is *slaughtering* anyone—” Ophelia began.

 “Not *yet*,” I spat.

 “Apollo,” a strong voice commanded. Khaos stood there, still as a statue, with miles separating us. And yet, even ‘cross the room, I felt his presence’s effect—stifling, suffocating the room with his prideful arrogance. I paused, seeing a certain understanding in him too. Given our short history, it was surprising. “Let’s talk.”

 The others were silent, watching me. I clenched my fists. “Why the hell should I listen to you?”

 He shrugged, as painfully casual as Adelaide—who still sat checking her nails. “You want answers or not?”

 I glowered, feeling more like a little kid than I ever had. They were treatin’ me like one too, which only made me want to pitch a fit. Khaos always cut deep—but he always knew what I truly wanted from this place, from *them*. He knew what my soul deeply craved—those damn answers of his—and he was danglin’ it *so* enticingly...

 Besides, if I stayed, I’d explode. The gravity was somehow stronger, pushin’ down, heavier underneath all their staring.

 And, Ophelia’s fearful look was already sinking further into my memories. I’d no idea why it made me shrink, but I knew I didn’t like the feeling. Attempting to leave that behind, I turned and approached the stoic leader wordlessly.

 He almost smiled, but it must’ve been a trick of the light. We left silently.

 They *couldn’t* take Artemis. I’d do everythin’ and anythin’ to keep it from happening. I loved my sister, and wanted to give her a different future than our runaway life—but she wouldn’t survive this. Firstly, Artemis *hated* being told what to do. It was a miracle that Ma and I got her to do anythin’ under the pretenses of a *big* *adventure*. Secondly, Artemis couldn’t set aside her feelings when she used her gift. She was bound explicitly, entangled in a way that couldn’t be undone. Her entire ability depended on her psyche, and every attack had some kinda effect on her own mind. If she was indoctrinated into the Untouchables, like me, she wouldn’t survive. She’d crumble; she’d break. I *couldn’t* let that happen.

 And thirdly, she was too good for them.

 I, myself, had marveled at Artemis’s tricks. She always had a new one hiding up her sleeve. She was the only person—the only Aura—I’d ever heard of that was capable of *evolving* their gift. Hers had grown, shifted, changed. She was able to do so many different things: from direct attacks, to surveillance, to mind games. She was valuable, too valuable for the Untouchables to get their hands on her. If they did, there was no tellin’ how they might use her to their own devices.

 No, it couldn’t happen. They couldn’t take her. Whether it blew my cover didn’t matter. I’d burn down everythin’—the Untouchables, this *stupid* house, this *God-awful* world—just to make sure she never followed me to this hell. I’d light the flame, knowin’ it’d engulf me too, just so she never felt that heat firsthand.

 “You know,” Khaos began, and I looked sideways at him. “You *really* need to work on that poker face.” He laughed a little. “I mean, truly, I could see every emotion on your face better than if I was a damn mind-reader. I’m sure Adelaide doesn’t even need to use her gift when it comes to reading you.”

 “Why do you care?” I demanded. The revelation of Adelaide’s gift was somethin’ I filed away carefully.

 He raised his eyebrows. “I *don’t*,” he muttered. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t offer you some advice.”

 I snorted lamely. “I don’t want your advice.”

 He turned to me suddenly. “You’ll learn to need it,” he said darkly, that empty look in his eyes returning tenfold. I scowled, almost wishing I’d held my tongue. “Trust me, Apollo… Things here aren’t *exactly* what they might look like from the surface.”

 I rolled my eyes. “I could see *that* from the second I got here.”

 He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t pretend,” he admonished. “Like I said, you’re basically an open book.” His own eyes reflected nothing but blunt boredom. “It’s easy to tell when you’re lying.”

 I paused, and he started walking again. We passed the kitchen and entered the bedroom hallway that now felt familiar.

 “What did you want to talk about?” I asked. I was tryin’ to get to the bottom of his sudden interest.

 His jaw clenched, and if *I* was reading *him* right, I saw embarrassment in his tanned face. It crawled up ‘round his ears, such a stark contrast to his dark hair that’d grown since I’d been here—still buzzed, but longer. He looked uncomfortable.

“There’s some things you should probably know if you’re going to be sticking around,” he told me slowly, like he wasn’t sure if he was saying the right thing.

 I wanted to ask more questions, completely forgetting my anger—which was slowly but surely dissolving. However, my interest grew when we walked into an unfamiliar bedroom. I stared, wondering whose it was, before my eyes slightly widened.

 “Is this—”

 “Don’t be weird,” Khaos muttered. He walked ‘cross the room like he lived there—and it was likely that he *did*.

While there were no personal objects or decorations, there was a certain vibe inside the room that put off the same kinda atmosphere which always hovered ‘round him. The room was too neat, too put-together, like someone was taking extra precautions to appear nonexistent. The cleanliness didn’t invite brightness, and the curtains were drawn tight, the lights turned off. If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve said it felt like an eternal night in there.

I watched Khaos curiously. While my room had an extra door that led to my bathroom, Khaos’s had *two* doors, one on either side of the large bed. He went toward the right, the door opening ‘fore he’d even touched it. I wrinkled my nose, wondering if it was him or some kinda technology.

I followed—and discovered that the door was, in fact, normal, and Khaos was just dramatic.

But my semi-sarcastic quip died in my throat when I saw the semi-large room we entered. It wasn’t as big as the bedroom, but it surpassed my bathroom. It was a small office, a desk in the middle and some cabinets behind it. Again, there was nothing on the walls, no personalized items brandished proudly on the desk. It looked too clean—like what I’d imagine a museum to be. Even when Khaos sat down, he sat in such a way that confirmed my suspicions, like he was afraid of moving anythin’ too far from its rightful spot, like the office wasn’t even his.

I frowned, but said nothing. This room was as dark as his bedroom, at least, ‘til he yanked the lamp string. The yellow bulb casted shadows on both our faces.

Khaos looked at me from under his chopped eyelashes, peering deep, tryin’ to find something. I shifted uncomfortably, not appreciating his lone focus.

“You think you know everything,” Khaos mumbled, but I heard him like he’d shouted. “It’ll be your fatal flaw.”

I scoffed. “That’s rich, coming from *you*.”

Khaos smiled a little, lowering his chin. “You got a point,” he said. Before I could decide between smugness or confusion, he bent down, pulling open a drawer. I couldn’t see from over the dark, wooden desk, so I stepped closer, craning my neck. Files.

I didn’t see anything else as Khaos slammed the drawer closed, and I didn’t think much of it as he dropped the files in between us. I stared at the linoleum folders, then glanced at him, still confused.

He rolled his dark eyes, pushing the pile toward me.

I looked closer, tilting my head to see what was written on the side. I slightly flinched when I recognized the names. I looked back at Khaos, but he only nodded.

Swiping the first folder, I flipped it open. At the top of the page, in big bold letters, was: **OPHELIA D. PEMBR**.

“There’s a reason why we don’t leave,” Khaos said. “And it’s not just because we know we wouldn’t make it far.”

I scanned lower, and my fingers tightened ‘round the thin paper when I read the lists. There were names, all sporting her last name. They were typed next to locations, and after a specific one caught my eye, I realized that they were the names of different facilities ‘cross the country. On the next page, there were even more names, some not even with the same relation as the others. At the bottom of this list stated simply: **SUBJECT COMPLIANT**. I closed the file tightly, swallowing harshly, feeling like I was spying.

“Go on,” Khaos pushed, a pitch-black reflection in his scowling face. “Keep reading.”

I did. I picked up the next one: **DANE S. WASHINGTON**. Like with Ophelia’s file, it stated his abilities, his background, and that damn list of names. At the top of the list was Delilah’s name, and I tightened my jaw. It was like things were sideways, or I was in some kinda dream—maybe a trance like Artemis’s. That would explain how none of this made any sense.

At the bottom of his second page was the same phrase as Ophelia’s. However, next to the big **SUBJECT COMPLIANT** was a tiny asterisks. It sent me even lower, where I could barely decipher the tiny lettering.

*“Subject is compliant, in exchange for the arrival, protection, and training of his sister.”*

I felt a strange kinship after reading the sentence, but there was another part that was disgusted he’d pull his sister into this mess. Wouldn’t it have been better if she wasn’t trapped like this? But, then again, I couldn’t deny how a small, selfish part of me would’ve wanted Artemis here too.

Next was **DELILAH W. WASHINGTON** and **ADELAIDE J. KYLER**, whose files both followed the same format as the others.

I barely glanced at their files when I saw the last one sitting underneath them. I’d expected it to be Khaos’s file, since there was a pattern, but I saw somethin’ different. I didn’t know what it meant, and it was obvious that Khaos was waiting for me to ask.

“What’s the *Lovely Initiative*?”

Khaos smiled bitterly. “The next step.”

I dropped the other files, immediately opening this one and reading. There were more papers here, stapled together, and there was no list. Instead, there were little notes, written in such dense, scientific language that I could barely understand what I was reading. I flipped the pages, and stopped when I saw a picture. It was a photo of a girl, but she looked different. Her skin was extremely pale, her eyes a vivid violet even while they were unfocused. She looked sickly, and I blinked, trying to read what was written underneath.

“Lovely is a girl,” Khaos told me. I looked at him as if saying, *Clearly*. He chuckled. “She was one of the only kids that were *willingly* given up for experimentation, signed off by her parents. Most of what we know about Auras is because of her.”

My stomach curdled. “What the actual fu—”

“Why do you think it’s so easy to find Auras now?” Khaos cut me off, tilting his head a little to the side. I stared at him blankly, waiting, and he scoffed. “It’s because they discovered a traceable element to what we are, a way to pinpoint *exactly* where we’re located due to the radiation we emit.”

I frowned, dropping the file since he’d explain everything anyway. I pressed my hands onto the desk, and Khaos watched me process everything, humor written all over his face. “Radiation? From the meteorite?”

Khaos nodded. “Through tests on the willing Lovely and the not-so-willing Auras rounded up and shoved into jails,” he began, even more bitter than before. It surprised me; this entire time I thought Khaos accepted his position, but he seemed just as angry and outraged as I was. “The scientists discovered that every Aura has a higher amount of uranium and thorium, which can be discovered through the technology they already have.” He looked away now, and I saw his jawline, sharp and clenched underneath the yellow shadow. “They’ve evolved the tech, made it so that it’s easier to use, and with *you*,” he turned his head back to me, and yet still didn’t meet my eyes, “and your ability to sense another Aura, I’m sure they’ll develop more features.”

“What do *I* have to do with this?” I demanded, ruffled.

“Their biggest problem right now is making the technology precise,” Khaos explained slowly, like I was stupid. “If they can somehow harness what you can do and apply it, they could theoretically figure out where every single Aura is.”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t work like that,” I said, and Khaos’s eyebrows rose.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said firmly. “They’ll *make* it work like that. As of now, Lovely is the only one who can trace Auras from a long distance, and now, they have you, who has some form of the same ability on a more personal scale.” He looked almost sorry. “With you, they’ll be able to perfect it, and no Aura will be safe.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked, shaking my head. It felt like he was giving up all his secrets, and I had no idea why. He had nothin’ to gain, and yet—

“Because if you’re *actually* going to be one of us,” he began, leaning forward so that his elbows rested on top of the desk. “You gotta learn the truth. And the truth is that none of us *choose* this. Lovely is technically *property* for Christ’s sake.”

 “These names…” I started, fiddling with the files.

 “Everyone we could possibly have a personal connection with,” Khaos said, nodding. “They track who we’ve ever spoken to, who we interact with the most, anything they could use against us.” He looked at me gravelly, and I could feel the his words’ impact as if there was another meteor, bulging straight through me. “Now that you’ve passed their little test, they want to get their hands on your sister. It’ll make it easier to control you.”

 My mouth went dry, and I raised my head, panicked. “No—”

 “They *will*,” Khaos hissed. “It’s only a matter of time until we find her, and since Lovely seems to have taken a liking to her, it’ll probably be quicker than most.”

 I shook my head. “You lost me.”

 He rolled his eyes again, looking like he was regretting ever telling me this. “Lovely can track Auras from long distance—along with a few other gifts,” he said, and I made a mental note. “She was the one who gave us a heads up on you when we were still tracking Mark Barlow, told us there was someone with a *lot* more radiation than she’s ever felt.”

 “Artemis?” I asked, and Khaos nodded.

 “We wanted her, but we got *you* instead,” he said. “But, they still want her, and if you truly wanted her safe, you’d do what Dane did and make a deal.”

 I shook my head incredulously. “What? And make her an Untouchable?” I asked, my voice rising. Khaos didn’t move, but I knew what his answer would be. “I wouldn’t wish this on her in a million years.”

 “Pick your poison,” Khaos drawled. He grabbed the files and meticulously stacked them in order again. “I’ll be honest, Apollo. I don’t like you.” I snorted. “But, I know how these things work. I know that they’ll break you, and as much as I’d love to see that happen, I don’t think your sister should be subject to that as well.”

 I blinked, my lip curling. “When the hell you start caring ‘bout her?”

 “I don’t,” he said quickly. “But I know her type. And remember, we play the same mind games.” He tapped his temple condescendingly. “I know firsthand how this kind of work affects a power than can’t be altogether tracked and harnessed in the same way as Dane’s or Delilah’s. And besides,” he stood up now, staring at me. “I think her becoming one of us would change everything.”

 He walked ‘round me, and I twisted, my mind still reeling. “How?”

 He looked at me closely, and his stare was so deep, so *prying*, that I felt like he could see everythin’ I was thinking, like he could hear the whirling thoughts that not even *I* could tell apart from one another. His fingers flexed by his side, and he took a small breath.

 “Artemis is exactly what they’re looking for,” Khaos said slowly, making sure every word struck me with the same intensity. “She has everything they want in a soldier. They’ll try to replicate her, and the best way you can protect her from that is to give her a different fate.”

 “As an Untouchable, an assassin?” I asked, and he nodded. “How is that any better?”

 “It is.”

 I scowled.

 “Here,” he said suddenly. “I can show you.”

 “Show me what?”

 “Lovely.”

 I stopped, eyes flashing to his. His face was devoid of the emotion he’d shown before, and only his stiff professional essence exuded now. I was coming to recognize some of his little cues, and I could tell he was tryin’ to help me, tryin’ to give me an out. It was an olive branch I never would’ve predicted—not even Artemis could’ve seen this coming.

 We left his room quickly, passing the others in a tense stand-off. I could feel their interest, their curiosity, but I avoided all their piercing gazes. It felt strange to meet their eyes after what I knew ‘bout them, their stories, what they had to lose.

 When the grand living room’s hidden doors closed, I peered at Khaos closely. “When you showed me those files,” I began, “I noticed one missing.”

 He smirked wickedly. “I still have a few secrets of my own I want to keep,” he mumbled half-heartedly, but there was a certain edge there. It made me think he was lying.

 Unfortunately, I’d no other way to tell if he was telling the truth, so I shrugged it off. Instead of going back to where I’d taken the test, where we’d fought so quickly, we went the opposite direction. There was a small alcove that I hadn’t noticed before, and as I ducked my head to avoid the low ceiling, I saw that there was a single door stuffed into this small cranny. It gave me more claustrophobia than the caves had.

 The door was different too, more ornate, more traditional. A lot of the doors ranged from classical to modern, but this one felt the most ancient. It was made completely out of a heavy-looking wood, sanded down and carved into with an artist’s hand. I couldn’t tell *exactly* what was carved into it, but I *did* notice faces intermingled—halos and horns.

 Khaos didn’t pay the ominous door much mind. He easily approached and pulled a key from his pocket. I saw the golden metal, and how the key looked about as ancient as the door did. Both mysterious objects reminded me of the armoire I’d first seen here. I wondered if there was a connection, because it felt too obvious to be coincidental, like a message that hadn’t been decoded yet.

 Khaos unlocked the door. It creaked loudly, and a cold draft swept through our legs when it opened wider. The darkness inside looked like a hollowed mouth, and the way that Khaos’s eyes beamed only confirmed that my poker face was, in fact, completely transparent.

 “After you,” he mused dryly. I pursed my lips, but steeled myself. If this had anythin’ to do with my decision ‘bout Artemis, then I’d suffer through this. Plus, I couldn’t deny my own undying curiosity, and felt a certain closeness with my sister as I acted on it.

 There was a short set of stairs, and the darkness was lifted. Light streamed, and as I slowly poked my head ‘round the corner, I found a room much like the others. There was a bed, other furniture—but there was also an entire wall of books. The bookshelves were made from the same wood as the main door, and carved with similar designs. I could hardly count all the paperbacks, and I blinked, surprised at the sheer elegance and sophistication.

 There was also the girl there, Lovely. She sat on the bed, cross-legged, a book opened lazily in her lap. Her skin was even paler in person, nearly translucent, so I could see the veins underneath the surface. Her hair was light, and blonde wasn’t the right description. Silver felt right, but white felt most accurate. The color made her violet eyes pop.

 She raised her head, and I saw that her eyes were unfocused. They shifted back and forth, back and forth, over and over, like they had their own heartbeat. Her lips were slightly pink and curved.

 “Hi caterpillar,” she greeted, and I stopped. However, Khaos didn’t, and walked even further so he could bend down and give the petite girl a side-hug.

 “Hello ghost,” he replied, a fond smile pulling at his mouth. I watched the interaction, having absolutely nothing to say, still trying to wrap my mind ‘round the fact that *this* girl—this tiny, weak-looking girl—had the ability to bring people to their knees. The file said she was dangerous, but here, she looked like nothing more than a kid.

 *Just like the others*, an annoying voice reminded me. I pushed it away and focused.

 Her arms and legs were skinny, and I realized that she was hooked up to some kinda machine. It was connected to her inner elbow, and I wasn’t sure what it was supposed to monitor.

 “Who’s your little friend?” she asked, tilting her chin up.

 “Nobody important,” Khaos replied wryly. He lazily walked to a plush chair and collapsed into it. Lovely giggled, and I finally shook myself awake.

 “I’m Apollo,” I greeted. Her head moved again at my voice, and her mannerisms, the way her eyes worked, made me assume that she was blind.

 “Like the god?” she asked, and I blinked.

 “What?”

 Khaos chuckled, lounging even deeper. “Little Lovely likes to read,” he said, glancing at the towering shelves behind me.

 “You know, like the Greek mythology,” she pressed further, but I was still lost. I could only shake my head, and as if she could see it—making me doubt my earlier assumption—she sighed. “Well, that just won’t do.”

 She closed the book with a *snap*, then got up. She looked even smaller than when she’d been sitting, and I had to guess that she was younger than me—I just wasn’t sure by how much.

 As she stood, Khaos rushed over. “Now *Lovely—*”

 “Stop babying me,” she grumbled, swatting his careful hands away.

 “I’m not,” he said humorously. It was a more natural amusement than the taunting he’d dealt me. “But we actually came here for something more important than books.”

 She looked at him, offended. “Oh Khaos! You don’t mean that.”

 He sighed and rolled his eyes. “Apollo here just needs to hear a first-hand experience of what might happen if he doesn’t make an insurance policy.”

 Her face fell, shoulders slumping. “Well…” she sighed. “That’s much more depressing than what I had in mind.”

 I took this time to state my case. “I’m sorry to bother you,” I said uncertainly. “But I don’t really understand how bringing my sister in to train as an Untouchable is better than the alternative.” I glanced at Khaos. “Your…*friend* said you’d be better at explaining.”

 She frowned. “Yes, I am quite familiar with *that* understanding,” she muttered lowly. “And Khaos is right. Artemis won’t be safe unless you can guarantee her a spot on the team.”

 “Why?”

 “Because,” she said like she was describing a color, like she was restating something that should’ve already been known. “They’ll tear her apart, figure out why she’s different than all the rest.” My heart stuttered again, and I could feel a cold sweat down my spine. “Tests, experiments, surgery, you name it. They’ll do it to her.” She shrugged. “I don’t know about you, but I’d say the Untouchables get a much better deal than something like that.”

 “So Apollo,” Khaos said quietly. His dark eyes met mine, and for the first time, they seemed kind. “What’s it going to be? Is your sister better off trapped or tortured?”

**Chapter Fourteen**

**Artemis**

 “What the *fuck!*”

 “Don’t stop driving!”

 “I have no idea what I’m supposed to be—”

 “Just press on the wound! Okay, I’m almost to a spot where I can lose them—*Jesus Christ!*”

 “What did they do to you?”

 “What the hell it look like?”

 “Bob! Eyes on the damn road—”

 “I know! I know!”

 “I thought there was a—”

 “They’re still following!”

 “Don’t *tell* me that, dammit—”

 “What else am I supposed to tell you!”

 “Isn’t there a first-aid kit or something?”

 “Check the bag, *quick*, quick!”

 There was a harsh crash, paired with the dry bushes scraping the truck’s metal siding. I was jostled, and yelped when I collided with the back of Lorraine’s seat. My knee clicked painfully, and I grappled for anything—the door’s handlebar or the ceiling or Lorraine’s chair—but it couldn’t stop the rollercoaster we were now riding.

 Hands shaking, I forced the zipper open, nearly ripping the thing when it got stuck. I dug through the insides, my head whipping to the back window, where I could see three cars following us, sirens blaring and lights flashing. Paling, I doubled my efforts, scraping the back of my hand harshly when I found the small, blue box.

 Bob cried as he thrusted the wheel sideways, tryin’ to lose them. Unfortunately, there weren’t many hiding spots in this flat, desert plain. We couldn’t disappear even if we wanted to.

 I shoved the first-aid kit into Lorraine’s hand. “We need to hit ‘em back,” I said.

 Her face flashed like the red and blue lights following us. “Are you crazy?”

 “How else are we supposed to lose them?”

 Lorraine was fumbling the gauze, shaking like she was one of those bobble-heads. “We can’t—”

 “Do it,” Bob said. Lorraine’s mouth dropped, her face blanching.

 *“Bob!*” she hissed.

 “Artemis is right—we can’t hide from them out here,” he replied. Despite having suggested the idea, my stomach did a somersault anyway. The shaking truck certainly wasn’t helping as Bob abruptly turned the wheel again and got us back on solid pavement.

 “You suggesting we start shootin’?” Lorraine asked, her voice breaking on the last word. The cars were gaining.

 Bob must’ve noticed the same thing I did, ‘cause he turned and stared at me. “Yes.”

 I widened my eyes. “I don’t know how to use—”

 As if my words pulled an invisible trigger, gunshots rang. Bob grabbed the back of Lorraine’s head and forced her down. I ducked too, cupping my hands behind my neck. However, as I did—heart thrumming through fingertips as throaty gasps escaped—I noticed the weapons near my feet. One corner of the fleece blanket had flipped up, revealing the shining metal prettily. I turned, side-eyeing Bob’s face. His eyes were flashing this way and that, the blood leaking out too fast and making his skin look too pale. His skin’s heated tan vanished, and his lips were stark white. We didn’t have time.

 I rubbed my hands on my pants, tryin’ to dry the sweat. Bob was breathing heavily, adrenaline filling the car more than music ever could. But, he managed to spit out the instructions I needed.

 “Artemis,” he gasped, looking at the backseat floor ‘til he had to focus driving again. Gunshots still rang, but they were hitting the car’s sides, close to the road. I paled, realizing they were aiming for the wheels. “Pull the safety off, down—no on the side—” he said. My hands flew and pulled out a relatively smaller gun, hoping that it’d be easier. My eyes crawled over the weapon, noticing the button he’d pointed out and hastily flipping the switch. “Yep, now I need you to hang outta the window.”

 I scoffed, head shooting up only to see that he was completely serious. My hands trembled, sweating profusely and nearly dropping the gun. “Are you insane?”

 “Bob, we can’t—”

 “Just do it!” he exclaimed, almost angry. I whimpered, but shifted, still ducking in case the stray bullets broke the back window. “When you’re out, just aim and shoot. Light ‘em up as much as you can.”

 I frowned, but reached over and pressed the window’s button. The wind immediately whistled, becoming slightly less high-pitched as the glass pane lowered.

 I could hardly breathe, like the window was sucking out all the oxygen too. I was suffocating, but the adrenaline wouldn’t let me rest, burning my body and muscles, both resisting and complying with Bob’s wishes. I shakily wrapped my fingers ‘round the ceiling’s handle, hoping it might give some support. However, realizing the angle I’d need to shoot from, I also realized that I’d be in the direct line of fire.

 I hesitated, and nearly dropped the plan altogether when the car swerved and I fell back into the bench seat. The deafening pops were still following us, and I flinched every time. It was too loud, too outta control. I could hardly think, but Bob did it for me.

 “*Now*, Artemis!” he shouted. I pushed myself back up and slid next to the window again. Tryin’ not to think, relying on my minimal gun knowledge Apollo taught me, I gripped the handlebar and turned, sitting on the ledge. The second my head went outside, I regretted *every* *single* choice that led me here.

 My hair kept flapping ‘round my face, worse when I looked back at the enemy cars and the wind whipped straight through. I gripped the handlebar tight, but I held the gun even tighter, praying the wind wouldn’t rip it outta my hand. I hesitantly aimed; three black, bulky vans *had* to be big enough targets, right?

 I hesitated again; I’d never been the greatest aim. That was Apollo’s realm. I took a small breath, and the sounds ‘round me slowly faded. The world slipped off its axis and I closed my eyes. Instead, all I could hear was Apollo’s words, describing gunfire after we’d heard some a few months ago.

 *“You gotta pull the trigger so it’ll shoot, and apparently there’s a big recoil depending on the type of gun.”*

I didn’t know why I was waiting, especially when I heard Bob shout from behind my muted bubble. But, there was a tingling feeling in my fingers, a burning sensation that I’d never felt before. It was like when I held my hands too close to the fire, and the flames would play with my palms like children did, recklessly. It felt like when I scraped my hand and shaved my fingerprints right off, a sudden and sharp pain that grew worse over time. It was a hot agony that made me wince, and my grip faltered. I nearly dropped it altogether, just to escape that feeling—but Apollo’s voice returned louder than before.

 *“You just hold, point, and shoot. Easy, right?”*

Yeah, *right*.

 My eyes shot open just as I pulled the trigger, feeling the red in my fingers travel up the arm that was holding the gun. There was definitely a recoil—all the way into my shoulder blades—but I ignored it and held the gun tighter as I shot again, and again, and again.

 I was never a great shot, and yet, each one hit a target. The first struck the car closest, breaking the windshield and hitting someone inside; it swerved. The other two cars avoided the crash, and sped faster so they could catch up. The next shot hit someone who was shooting outta an opened window—a reflection of exactly what I was doing. I heard a scream just before the wind silenced it and threw it to the sky, and the man ducked into the car without another bullet fired. The next hit a wheel of the other car, sending it flying down the road. And the last—it disappeared into the same car that the man was shooting from, and I couldn’t tell where it landed, but I knew it was good since the car slowed and swerved too.

 Jaw-dropped and unbelieving, I clumsily slipped back into the truck and whipped ‘round, staring at Lorraine and Bob, as if they’d have an explanation.

 “Whoo! *Damn* girl!” Bob yelled, laughing and jostling Lorraine, who was pressing gauze and wrapping bandages ‘round his shoulder wound. “You never said you knew your way ‘round a gun! That was perfect!” He slapped the truck’s ceiling, yelling again as Lorraine released a bubbly laugh too. The adrenaline was crashing, and the pure relief was euphoric.

 But, I scowled, and glanced down at the small gun. “I don’t,” I muttered, but Bob didn’t hear me. Instead, I was left alone, ruminating over my sudden shooting proficiency. I remembered that burn, even now when it was gone. I rubbed the back of my hand and fingers, wondering where it’d come from and where it now resided, somewhere within—hiding.

 I’d no answers, so I stayed silent, barely listening to their celebration.

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Summary of Ending Ch. 14:

After the chase, Artemis ponders over her ability to pick up and shoot the gun so easily, as if she’d always done it. She thinks about how it felt like someone else was shooting. Lorraine tries to reassure her by saying that even if Artemis doesn’t know what it is or what happened, it helped them survive, and that was all that mattered.

Lorraine and Artemis are waiting by the truck, talking, when a flustered and rushed Bob comes back with the gas container—now full. He says that the Handlers have already gotten their plates, and they need to ditch the truck.

Artemis has an idea to go to the train and use one of the shipping containers as a free ride. The others agree, mainly because the Handlers don’t check shipping containers. There’s too much security to think someone could legitimately sneak on.

They go to the train station, only to see it swarmed with Handlers and guards and everything in between. Bob says that he can get them through, and Lorraine seems to know what he’s going to do. Before she could stop him, Bob runs and gets the attention of the guards. Lorraine tries to go after him, but Artemis stops her and tells her that they can’t waste what Bob has done for them. Lorraine blames Artemis for what happened.

They make it onto the train without Bob and hide in the shipping container. The night ends with Artemis listening to Lorraine’s crying as they get further and further away.

**Chapter Fifteen**

**Ellis**

Summary of Beginning Ch. 15:

Ellis is thinking deeply over Mark’s unspoken feelings for her, and how harsh she’d been afterwards. She wonders how she didn’t catch this before, and knows for a fact she doesn’t feel the same about him. As a result, she’s been avoiding him.

As she’s thinking, Drew starts talking to her, and their chemistry grows. When they both finally notice it, they get shy and back off. But, just as Drew is leaving to find J again, there’s a big explosion. They rush to the scene, only to find a burning corpse in front of the kids. Ellis and Drew assume it to be land mines, and start trying to evacuate everyone.

Ellis can’t find Mark, but she can’t wait for him either, and keeps running with the others. There’s another explosion, and another burning body. Drew glares at Ellis as if she’s done this, and just when he gets ready to lead everyone somewhere else, a gun is pointed at him.

Holding the gun is none other than Bianca.

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 To say that Bianca treated us terribly was an understatement. After briefly surveying the damage her explosives caused, she rounded us up and marched us down the hill, through a thick bayou-ish area. She had no sympathy for the tears that flowed from the kids’ eyes, none for the two corpses we left behind. I could hardly stomach looking at her without wanting to lunge forward and rip her eye sockets out, or light her on fire just so that she might feel the same pain she had so carelessly inflicted on Summer and Nathan.

 Nathan’s twin, Nico, was beside himself, and was restrained during his furious and heart-wrenching outbursts by at least three of Bianca’s emotionless goons. I’d never heard him speak before, but hearing his painful screams, like a part of him had been amputated, was something I wished I could forget. He thrashed in the arms of those that would try to keep his grief maintained, cursing and spitting at them like a wild animal.

 *I* did this—despite Bianca being the one that cruelly laid those bombs, *I* had been the one to convince everyone to come here. It was *me* who promised that the journey would be safe enough, that we wouldn’t lose anybody—and here we were. I nearly collapsed at the addition of Nathan and Summer on my back, feeling like I wanted to slip and fall into some deep, dark hole that I could never crawl out of. Each one of Nico’s bloodcurdling screams was like twisting the knife.

 The others were crying just as badly, but Drew did nothing but stare and walk silently. Somehow, his death-inducing, hateful, angry, vengeful glare was worse than any tear-filled cry could ever be. I felt the chill from where his eyes bore into my back, like he was marking me for a hunt I hadn’t signed up for.

 We walked single-file, with Nico and his posse at the very back. Bianca didn’t seem the least bit disturbed from where she led the group, holding onto the rope that entangled each of our wrists like it was just a dog leash and she was some proud owner.

 “How could you do this?” I whispered, not even looking at her.

 “I was defending my property,” she replied bluntly, shrugging her shoulders as if it were an average day. “It wasn’t like I was expecting to see you again, Collins.”

 “You just killed two kids,” I seethed, and the rope bit into my wrist. “Don’t act like we’re friends.”

 “Oh, but aren’t we?” Bianca asked, tilting her head. “I think you might want to hold onto that label considering you still need something from me.” I clenched my jaw, about to reply angrily when she waved me away like a fly. “Besides, kids don’t exist in this world, do they? Just soldiers.”

 “You can’t seriously believe that,” I hissed. “Are the Feds feeding you more lies again?”

 “Just because they say it for their own agenda doesn’t mean it isn’t true,” Bianca replied like she was answering a question on some unknown test. I felt myself stiffening some more at the absurdity of her words. Somehow, Bianca had become more unhinged than she was before. “Statistically, more children are fighting a war nowadays than ever before. As such, they are automatically considered soldiers—their status as children comes after.”

 “You’re despicable.”

 “I’m *right*,” she said, suddenly turning. Her nose was inches from mine, and I could feel the threat under her skin like it was another fire brewing. “If you don’t start thinking of them the same way as everyone else, then you’ll only let more die.”

 She whirled back ‘round and tugged me forward. I stumbled, and would’ve fallen had it not been for a pair of hands grabbing my arm from behind and righting me. I recognized the touch, and looked with some surprise at Drew, who stood exceedingly close—so close that I could feel his breath fan across my cheek.

 Walking forward before Bianca could make me fall for real this time, I felt the distance between us like it was a thousand miles.

 “You didn’t know,” he said slowly.

 “Of course I didn’t,” I whispered back. “You really think I’d let somethin’ like this happen?”

 I was hurt, but I couldn’t blame him. I was the outsider, the unknown—but I’d thought that, with our conversations, he would’ve had a bit more faith. I guess I shouldn’t have expected it, but the chest pain wouldn’t go away.

 “I didn’t know what to think,” he whispered thickly. By now, Nico’s cries were subdued, and it was quieter than ever before. “I guess your friend isn’t who you thought she was.”

 “She’s *not* my friend.”

 “Well, maybe if you’d mentioned her psychotic tendencies a little earlier—”

 “How the hell was I supposed to know!”

 “*Jesus Christ*, Ellis—”

 “Stop your flirting,” Bianca snapped when our voices rose. “We’re almost there.”

 With cringing and sneering, we submitted—it wasn’t like we could do anything else—and watched as our path opened a little, showcasing an all-too familiar shack.

 It seemed nicer than it had before, with new, stark-white paint on the ceiling, as if that could stop the trees from dropping leaves and twigs on top of it. The shutters looked reinforced, and the yard was cleared—the mechanical mess of cars that it’d looked like the last time I was here just a memory now. That’d been years ago, and I remember leaving with the belief that I’d never see this place again.

 It’d never been more painful to be so wrong.

 Bianca stopped in front of the porch steps and turned, watching as everyone was corralled into a tight circle by the buff guys that looked like they walked straight outta a mafia movie. It was unnerving, and I knew for a fact they hadn’t been part of Bianca’s set-up before.

 “Let’s get to the point,” Bianca said, smiling tightly. She clapped her hands together and brought down her joined fists so they rested on her stomach, swaying her shoulders back and forth casually. “What’s brought you all to my humble abode?”

 “Cut the shit, Bianca,” I muttered.

 A manicured hand fluttered over her offended face. “With an attitude like that, I don’t think I’ll help you at all, Collins.” She grinned wickedly.

 “Where are they?”

 She looked painfully innocent, and I could tell she was starting to get bored. “Who?”

 “The twins.”

 “Hm,” she hummed, tapping her chin. “You might have to be a little more specific. After all, there’s over a hundred thousand in the country—”

 “Artemis and Apollo,” I spat, knowin’ she was playing.

 She smiled. “Ah, right, your little brats,” she mused. “I haven’t seen a wink of them. And why you’d send them *here* is beyond me—”

 “Bianca,” I warned, but she just grinned with all her teeth.

 “*Ellisssss*,” she purred back, like a bobcat getting ready to pounce.

 “We need help getting over the border,” Drew cut in, and Bianca leaned back, studying him. I shot Drew a look, but he ignored me. “That’s why we came here. We thought Artemis and Apollo would meet us.”

 “Well, I hate to break it to you, but this,” she pointed ‘round us, “has been a child-free zone since the last time you bothered me with your little monsters.” She looked at me harshly, and I rolled my eyes. “But,” she said, sighing. “If getting you over the border will get you far away from me, then I guess I could work some magic.”

 Drew blinked, then narrowed his eyes dangerously. “What’s the catch?”

 Bianca snapped her fingers. “I like you.”

 “What do you want, Bianca?” I demanded, swallowing my unease.

 “Hm, maybe I want an apology for your rudeness,” Bianca said.

 I scoffed. “You blatantly murder two of our own and treat it like a joke,” I sneered. “You deserve worse.”

 She rolled her eyes. “I guess that’s fair,” she said. Then, suddenly, a knife was in her hand and she was holding it painstakingly close to my throat. I felt Drew stiffen. Her eyes glinted like sapphire stars, all-encompassing and daunting. “But you forget that I can easily kill more of you, one…by…one,” she whispered lowly, pressing the knife against my throat. I closed my eyes, knowin’ from her look that she’d do it, and her fingers itched against my racing pulse.

 There was abrupt movement, and the shack’s front door burst open, revealing a figure drenched in sweat, and yet holding the handgun like she’d been raised using it. Bianca turned ‘round, the other goons flashed their weapons, but she’d already clicked the safety off, her face as hard as stone.

 “Touch my Ma again, and I’ll rip you apart.”

**Chapter Sixteen**

**Apollo**

Summary of Beginning Ch. 16:

Once Apollo gets back to his room, he can’t stop thinking about what he should do, whether he should make a deal to ensure Artemis’s safety as an asset to the Untouchables, or if he should have faith that she’ll get away from them and never look back. As he’s thinking, Ophelia comes by his room and asks to join him. She helps take his mind off of things.

Curious, Apollo asks her about her story. He tells her that the files don’t do it justice. She explains that her family were immigrants that moved to Heavenly to start a new life, something different than the war they left behind in Iran. But, when the meteorite hit, her parents went crazy, thinking they’d become demons. Her father shot himself and her mother followed soon after. Ophelia was separated from her siblings, and not long after, she was initiated into the Untouchables program.

Apollo and Ophelia have a few more heart-to-heart moments, and eventually, Apollo ends up kissing her—the first time he’s kissed anyone. It’s a sweet moment, but it’s interrupted by Dane, who’d been looking for Ophelia. Dane is immediately pissed, and reminds Ophelia about the rule against forming any relationships with other people on the team—especially before the mission to get Artemis.

Apollo, remembering that was what they’d be doing, immediately regrets kissing Ophelia. He assumes she was just trying to get information about his sister out of him, and his trust in her vanishes. Ophelia is genuinely heartbroken that he’d think that, but she leaves when he asks her to. Two more days pass before he really looks at her again.

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Two days had passed, and now, the Untouchables were leaving.

There was a new silence in the living room. I sat stiffly on a plush couch, watching. It was the silence before battle, the waiting night before the danger came. I knew it well—every time we went somewhere new, this same silence would settle over Ma and Artemis. Strangely, the Untouchables welcomed it, like it was a familiar face.

Dane and Delilah were whispering lowly to each other, two duffle bags by their feet. Dane was staring firmly at his sister, while Delilah only fiddled with her fingerless gloves, brushing her braids outta her face. Her hair was tied into a tight ponytail, and her clothes certainly wouldn’t slow her down. It was tight, only interrupted by the straps that held her weapons. I spotted a gun, a knife, and a strange thing on her back—something I’d never seen, but something that looked expensive. Dane wasn’t much different, wearing a black, long-sleeved shirt. He had some kinda modern sword strapped to his back, copying Delilah’s tech-savvy one, and his knuckles gleamed silver and brass.

Then there was Adelaide, who sat on a heavy chair’s armrest, her legs dangling and swinging back and forth, like the clock ticking above the door. She wore dark, heavy boots, but there was dainty lace peeking out from the top. Instead of the all-black attire the others sported, she wore dark green. I could see the gold necklace at her throat, which was open by her up-do hairstyle and deep neckline. A few stray pieces of her dark hair fell, seamless to her even darker eyes, and when she looked at me, I saw that her entire eyelids were streaked with the same green shade. She grinned, and it was like a wolffish snarl.

Shaking my head, I glanced to Khaos, who stood, waiting a bit impatiently for the doors to open. I saw his leg bouncing, and his crossed arms almost looked comical. But, his dead stare made me pause. I saw that he had no qualms ‘bout completing this mission as efficiently as all the others, regardless of everything he’d shown me. Despite his weird moments of kindness, Khaos wasn’t stupid; he wouldn’t jeopardize the mission for the sake of my feelings.

And then there was Ophelia, who stood holding her own duffle bag. I ignored the way the same stretchy clothing fit her in a way *very* differently than Delilah’s. Her curly hair was tied too, looking more like a bun than a ponytail, and her brown skin blushed when she caught me staring. I ripped my eyes away just as quickly as she did, and didn’t look back, even when an alarm went off on Khaos’s watch and everyone’s chatter fell silent.

Instead, I stared at Khaos, who, after briefly looking at his watch, met my eyes between his eyelashes. I clenched my jaw, but his gaze was resolute and hard. Unlike his name, Khaos was completely calm.

I knew what he meant, but I wouldn’t condone it. Luckily, it didn’t look like he expected me to.

“We all know our mission,” he said, commanding the room. Dane glanced at me, but I refused to look at any of them. “Get the girl. Kill anyone else.”

“Way to be subtle, Khaos,” Adelaide muttered, rolling her eyes. She stood and swiped her black backpack off the floor.

Khaos shook his head and turned. As the door opened, and the Untouchables walked out, I couldn’t help but spare one more glance. She was already staring at me. She wanted to say something, and I nearly wanted her to. But before she could, I stood. I forced myself to look away as I stormed outta the room. I heard her leave, and the following silence was one that I welcomed.

I clutched the marble island tightly, closing my eyes and doing somethin’ I swore I’d never do again. I prayed.

**Chapter Seventeen**

**Artemis**

Life sure had a funny way of turning out.

Not only was Bianca more of a raging bitch, but she was also a psychopath. Lorraine and I saw the carnage on our way here—I felt the whispers crawling up my spine, repeating their names. *SummerNathanSummerNathanSummerNathan*. To say that the scorched corpses were a wake-up call was an understatement. Lorraine threw up, and I nearly did too ‘til the rage came. I knew Ma was close by, and I wasn’t gonna waste all that I’d sacrificed—not when Lorraine’s agony ‘bout Bob was still so fresh.

We’d gone through the back, and Lorraine’s memory of the place and how Bianca guarded it was still kicking. Everything was how she said it’d be, and the stealth I used when we snuck inside and crept up behind ‘em was something I wasn’t used to. Apollo was always the smooth one.

Then again, Apollo was always the one fascinated with guns, and now I found myself stood with one clutched tightly, pointing at Bianca, a fire in my bones.

“Touch my Ma again, and I’ll rip you apart.”

The bitch raised her hands, the knife still dangling from her fingers, but I knew she held it firmer than it seemed. Bianca was always the master of deception, knew how to make you fall under her spell. I couldn’t let that happen here.

Luckily, Bianca wasn’t expecting my travel partner. As her eyes shifted to Lorraine, not even the orange tan could hide her sudden paleness, or the way her eyes widened.

“Lorraine?” she whispered. Her little goons were confused, so I met Ma’s gaze, tilting my head toward the side. She blinked, then bumped her shoulder with the black man’s next to her. I didn’t recognize him, but by the way he easily read Ma’s expression, I assumed she’d picked up a friend.

“Bianca,” Lorraine muttered, standing tall.

“It’s been a while, sis,” Bianca drawled, holding her arms to either side. The knife was held tighter.

“And whose fault is that?” Lorraine snapped, but Bianca only smiled.

“I hope you’re not insinuating what I think you are.”

“Things hit the fan and you snapped pretty quickly,” Lorraine said sharply, stompin’ down the porch steps, hands curled. The guards or goons or *whatever* they were pointed their weapons, but Bianca raised her hand, staring at her sister with an interesting gleam in her eye. I didn’t trust it, and looked at Ma again.

The man next to her moved, mumbling somethin’ to the person on his other side. They didn’t look much older than me, but when I saw their face, my heart stuttered. I was so taken aback that I barely heard Bianca’s response.

“Someone had to take the reins,” she mused offhandedly. “Don’t forget who saved you.”

“You didn’t *save* anyone,” Lorraine spat. “You cursed us all.”

“I did what you couldn’t,” Bianca replied vehemently, pointing her finger cruelly. She was clutching the knife so hard, right ‘round the blade, vividly bright blood dripping between her finger’s crevices.

“You were a monster.”

“At least I was a *merciful* one,” Bianca seethed. Her eyes blazed—an icy fury—and I remembered seeing an echo of that look on Lorraine’s face back at the house. It was the same look Lorraine wore now. “Everyone else, they would’ve thrown you to the wolves. Not to mention Ellis and her little side-show freaks!”

I clicked the gun back. “Careful,” I warned, and Bianca shot me a scathing look.

Lorraine shook her head, scoffing loudly, which turned into disbelieving laughter. “You were nothing less than what they made us out to be.”

“And what was the point of being anything different?” Bianca replied, scowling. “What? Should I have been more like *you*? More docile and hope things would revert to normalcy eventually? And where did that lead you?” She grinned maliciously, and I grimaced at the crazed expression. “Right back to me. Because at least *I* know what it takes to survive.”

Lorraine looked disgusted. “You know this isn’t right,” she said softly. Bianca’s face faltered, and the grinned slipped. But the next second ticked and the look was gone. “You know those kids out there didn’t deserve to die like that, because of *you* and your own paranoia.”

I strengthened my grip ‘round the gun, noticing when the person whose appearance had struck me started to unravel their hands. They were cupped tightly, as if holding something, and I watched for a second—transfixed—as pure darkness fell down, billowing out like smoke. It looked like shadows, and they slithered ‘cross the ground like loyal pets. They held no light, like tiny black holes, stretched and plastered onto the Earth.

I paused, staring at the teenager again. Their skin was deeply tan, frazzled dark hair surrounding their sharp face. When they glanced up, I realized their eyes were a crystal clear gray.

*AnyaJaybirdAnyaJaybirdAnyaJaybird.*

The whispers raged, and I swallowed thickly, trying not to let the distraction keep me from doin’ what needed to be done. But that pestering feeling, the one that had haunted me for years, begging me to find this one person, was stronger than ever. I wanted to jump and ask a million questions, but I didn’t even know who this person was. And besides, with a power like theirs—that felt like nightmares come to life—it might be better to stand and watch. Apollo would probably use this time to study them, so I tried my best to do the same.

The kid with the darkness in their veins whispered under their breath, and the shadows hid among the bushes, circling. “They aren’t *children* anymore. They’re soldiers.” Bianca sneered.

“You know you don’t believe that,” Lorraine whispered.

“I do,” Bianca stood firm, then suddenly brandished the knife. “And for *God’s sake*—What the—”

The shadows burst, wrapping ‘round Bianca’s friends and making them drop their weapons. Meanwhile, a few shot toward Bianca herself, coiling ‘round her body so harshly that she nearly turned blue. Lorraine rushed forward anyway, her hair a blazing trail behind her, and ripped the knife outta Bianca’s motionless hand—one that was candy-caned with darkness.

The man who’d been next to Ma jumped up, his hands expertly untying the rope connected to the other kids. I finally snapped outta it, clicking the safety on and pushing the gun into my jeans. There was lots of noise, chatter from the kids as the man freed them and pointed toward the trees. The single kid who controlled the shadows stayed still, their knees still bent on the grass, looking positively devilish. I shivered, but ran ‘til I finally reached the one I’d missed so much.

I threw my arms ‘round her, and Ma’s reciprocating hug was like a homey fire in a well-built fireplace, a cat on the floor stretching and curling up to enjoy its warmth. I sighed, closing my eyes as I buried my face into her curls. I could feel her chest shaking, and she squeezed me back tightly.

I pulled away just enough to see her face, and Ma ran her hands down the sides of mine, as if she couldn’t believe I was there.

“Oh, Artemis,” she sighed. I couldn’t help the small smile when she allowed a choked laugh to escape her. “You always did have timing.”

I laughed, which only fueled the crying, and Ma pulled me back into the embrace as if she wanted to cocoon me away. I wanted to slip into the abyss just as seamlessly, but I still heard the chaos ‘round us, and knew we wouldn’t have the time.

I painstakingly pulled away. Ma wipe her nose ‘fore her gaze fluttered behind me. “Where’s Apollo?”

And the bubble burst. Reality came down hard, and my heart ached like the straining wood of a guitar, a hollowed destruction. I had no answer, and Ma saw my face like it was glass. I *really* needed to get a better poker face, but when it came to Apollo, there wasn’t a point in tryin’ to practice one. I’d always be translucent.

But seeing Ma’s face fall was like seeing a dam break, and I felt the water rushing. I knew a little of how drowning felt like now, and this was *exactly* it.

“Ma, I—”

“Wait!” I was interrupted by the person breathing shadows. They were looking at the man who’d been helping the children. “We still need her to give us a route.”

The man curled his lip and I realized what they meant. But trusting her word right now was risky, and saw a replica of my thoughts playing out ‘cross the man’s face.

“I’d say we might be better off.”

“*Drew*.”

The man, Drew, rolled his eyes annoyedly. “J, we can’t be trusting some murderous sociopath right now. Not when she still has backup.” He pointed ‘round the struggling goons that were still trapped in J’s power.

*AnyaJaybirdAnyaJaybirdAnyaJaybird.*

J only smiled. “I can certainly fix that. We just need *her*, right?”

Drew blinked, then turned his body so he could rest his hands on his lower back, leaning a little as he groaned. When he turned back ‘round, his face had screwed up distastefully. “Fine. But make sure the kids aren’t around to see it.”

Lorraine, who’d been crying as she talked to Bianca, whirled ‘round, finally registering the others. “Don’t you—” She cut herself off, eyes suddenly widening. I frowned, eyes flickering to the others. Drew looked as confused as I felt, but J looked star-struck.

“Lorraine?” they asked, and Lorraine shook her head, as if she’d seen a ghost.

“Annie?” she breathed, and Drew seemed to realize something. His face blanched, jaw falling open. “How are you—”

“No time,” Drew suddenly said, eyes narrowing on Bianca.

I looked at Ma, who’d stiffened, but Drew was already moving. He started directing the kids closer to the house, and went inside to check that it was clear. Meanwhile, Lorraine was still reeling, and J was avoiding her probing gaze.

Ma grabbed my hand tightly, pulling me along once Drew declared the inside of the cabin safe. I hesitated, glancing at her.

“Who is this guy anyway?” I asked, jerking my chin toward him. He was waving the kids inside exaggeratedly, making some laugh as they ran past.

“He’s a good one,” Ma simply said. I made a face, but trusted her anyway. Besides, I was too exhausted to fight.

But, I stayed glued to the porch, glancing over my shoulder at the person who stood alone in the field. Despite the pure voids that they handled, there was an even blacker darkness in their eyes. I scowled, feeling Ma pull on my wrist.

“Come on, Artemis,” she said, oblivious.

“What are we going to do ‘bout Bianca?” I asked instead. Ma stopped tryin’ to pull me away. Instead, she glared at Bianca just as vehemently—if not more.

“We still need her,” she said annoyedly.

“Doesn’t mean we need her *awake*,” Drew said, approaching us. The rest made it inside, and even if a few were still standing by the door, staring curiously, the others were completely hidden. After a moment, an older one came forward and slammed the door shut, but Drew didn’t flinch.

Instead, he marched down the porch steps and over to one of Bianca’s goons. There, he picked up a longer gun, maybe a rifle by the looks of it, and kept marching. I stiffened, and Ma took a step forward, as if to say something, but she never did. We just watched Lorraine shout at Drew right ‘fore he lifted the barrel up and snapped it against Bianca’s temple.

Her body fell limp. When J’s shadows slithered away, she collapsed. Lorraine looked down at her sister, then at J.

“Can I have my fun now?” J asked—or, more like whined, still not looking at Lorraine.

Drew clenched his jaw and glanced sideways at Ma. “You might wanna get your girl outta here,” he said. Ma wrapped an arm ‘round mine and yanked me away.

Ma opened the door and pushed me inside, but I felt a cold chill on my spine, a shift in the air—one of death or somethin’ more sinister. I swallowed thickly, and barely heard the door shut over the sound of their necks breaking.

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Summary of Ending Ch. 17:

They tie Bianca down to a chair and start an interrogation process, see what she knows. Ellis, Lorraine, J, Drew, Mark, and Artemis are all there.

Bianca won’t talk if Lorraine is there, so she leaves. Once she does, Bianca becomes more relaxed and comfortable—but also more snarky and closed off. Ma and Drew ask Bianca questions, and she either answers sarcastically or gives them little to no information.

Eventually though, Ma gets Bianca to spill what she knows about Apollo, and where he might be. After finding out that he’s become an Untouchable, Ma and Artemis start to freak out.

Drew takes over the conversation and drills her about a safe route to Mexico. Bianca continues to play with him, not promising anything. When they threaten to leave her down there, in the basement, alone, she eventually cracks, and gives them what they want.

Meanwhile, Artemis is standing by the stairs, and is soon joined by J. The whispers keep repeating “Anya Jaybird,” so Artemis eventually has to ask J if they know the name. They do, and confess that it used to be their name—but they haven’t used it since before the meteorite.

J is suspicious of how Artemis knows their name, but when Artemis starts to explain her power more, and how the spirits work, J seems to understand something. They tell Artemis that they have something to show her, and then pulls her upstairs before anyone else notices.

**Chapter Eighteen**

**Ellis**

Summary:

After the makeshift interrogation ends, the others go upstairs too, and Ma notices that Artemis and J are gone. She intends to look for Drew and let him know, but Mark finds her before she can.

He tries to tell her what he’s feeling, and while Ellis doesn’t want to be mean, she also doesn’t have the time or the patience for something like this. She shuts him down, a little harshly at that, and Mark doesn’t seem to take the rejection well. He closes off and leaves to go somewhere else in the house without another glance. She momentarily feels guilty, but brushes it away to figure out where her daughter is.

Ellis eventually finds Drew helping a girl with a scraped knee. The other kids are getting ready for bed, but the absence of Summer and Nathan—plus a few others that were lost on the way to Bianca’s—is felt deeply. They originally had thirty-three of them, and now they have twenty-six.

Ellis tells Drew that Artemis and J have disappeared somewhere. Drew says they’ll look for them, and takes her hand to go upstairs. Ellis is feeling weird and doesn’t like it—especially after what just happened with Mark. She abruptly lets go and an awkward moment passes before they split up to check the bedrooms.

Ellis is the one to find them, the two teenagers huddled in a bedroom and looking like they just got caught doing something they shouldn’t be doing. Almost immediately after being found, J slinks off to find Drew.

Artemis and Ellis catch up over what happened while they were separated. Ellis comforts Artemis after hearing all the horrors of her journey, and Artemis tells Ellis about Lorraine and Bob’s talk of faith. Artemis doesn’t believe in it, and Ellis says she doesn’t need to. She can have faith in other things instead, if she wants to.

Their moment ends, and Ellis goes back downstairs. She accidentally finds Nico by the front door, staring out into the night with the remnants of grief on his face. Ellis asks him how he is, and Nico’s answers are full of cold rage, and how he wants Bianca to die for what she did to his twin brother.

Ellis gets uncomfortable with this line of the conversation, but is soon rescued by Drew, who wants to check on Bianca one more time before they all fall asleep. Bianca promises to give them some more information, but only if one of the little “brats” stays with her. She considers it compensation for having all her guards killed. She needs someone valuable to replace them, so she tells Ellis and Drew to pick one out for her.

They refuse, disgusted, but Nico shows up and volunteers. Bianca doesn’t want him, mainly because she killed his twin and she knows he has revenge planned. Instead, another girl shows up and volunteers too. Ellis remembers seeing her around Nico and Nathan a lot, and figures out what’s going on even as Bianca can’t connect the dots. The girl can bring back the dead, and offers to bring Bianca’s goons back for her.

The deal is made, and Bianca confesses that the Untouchables are coming after Artemis. In a daze, Ellis rushes to find her, but when Artemis is nowhere to be seen, she starts panicking. Soon, Drew is next to her and saying that J’s missing too. Ellis’s world falls apart.

**Chapter Nineteen**

**Artemis**

This was a *really stupid* idea.

Anya Jaybird—or J or Annie or whatever their name was—remained a mystery, and to trust that they’d have my back was probably the dumbest decision I’d ever made. But, desperate times and all that… Plus, I had a good feeling about them. They hadn’t told me a lie yet, so that was something.

But either way, I knew I was pushing my limits. I’d gotten little sleep on the train, and the last meal I ate seemed ages ago. The thought that kept me pushing was that this was all for Apollo. He’d do the same for me, and I couldn’t let him down by leaving him to the Untouchables’ insatiable hunger.

We’d ran the second we understood each other’s gifts. J could manipulate the very matter in the air, corrupting it and bending it to their will. I’m not altogether sure what the science was behind it, but they described it as if they were pulling molecules from the air and bunching them together, forming somethin’ new. They showed me a few tricks, how they could make the shadows a binding, a distraction, a portal. For some reason, J had the bright idea to combine them.

Don’t get me wrong, I knew it was a weird suggestion. Never had I heard ‘bout two people combining their gifts, but weird things were happening a lot recently. So, I gave it my best shot, and the results were astounding.

It had to be why I was ordered to find them. The way that our abilities combined, their darkness seeping into my own, bringing the spirits to life, seeing them in front of me, in the real world—it was like nothin’ I’ve ever seen. J nearly jumped outta their skin when the ghosts appeared, and they looked at me curiously ever since—even after the gray whips of faces and hands dissipated into nothing.

If I could bring the ghosts to life, if J could help in that way, then I had a bigger weapon than I thought. I could surprise the Utncouhables, take them off guard. They wouldn’t expect it, and that was our best shot.

But, I felt like there was more. I felt like J had more potential than just helping my own power, and I was determined to figure it out once all this chaos died down.

Besides the ghosts coming to life, I’d also had the most intense vision I ever experienced. My whole body short-circuited, and I would’ve hit my head pretty damn hard if J hadn’t caught me. I could still feel the crick in my neck from the way it’d bent backwards. I could still feel the spirits clutching my arms, both in the Gray and in real life. I could still see that vision that scared me more than anythin’ else.

I saw the Untouchables coming. I saw what would happen if I stayed at the cabin. I knew I couldn’t tell Ma.

But J saw it too, saw the carnage and suffering. I don’t know how—since nobody had been transported to my so-called visions before—but their shadows created a link. I felt that link even now.

They offered their help, and I gladly accepted it, hoping it wasn’t a mistake.

The Untouchables were cutting through from the north, so I’d need to cut across and lead them astray. That’d hopefully get the cabin and Ma outta the crossfire.

I had to be smart. There was no room for error, or dilly-dallying, or smelling the roses. This was ‘bout survival, ‘bout getting my brother back—and I couldn’t risk failing. But to do that, I needed to play to my advantages. Having J here would help, and they could hopefully deprive the Untouchables of their senses, but I needed a plan—a backup one too. I needed an objective.

Finding their base, where Apollo was located, and then getting the hell outta there was probably the best one I came up with.

Dane and Delilah would be too much for me, being physically enhanced and too strong. J would need to deal with them, and try their best to use stealth to our advantage. Adelaide was different; she was best known for her behind-the-scenes operations. She was a master of manipulation—not much different than Bianca in that sense—but unlike Bianca, Adelaide was much more valuable. She could read our thoughts, so it might be better to take her out first. It’d be best knowin’ our moves wouldn’t be anticipated.

Then there was Ophelia, who could be a wild card depending on our surroundings. Avoiding her ability, the water she’d drown us with, would be tricky.

And that’s not to mention Khaos—the worst of them all. He’d pin us down ‘fore we got two steps in. My mental gymnastics wouldn’t stand a chance against his Olympic medals.

But the spirits had faith, and maybe what Ma said was right. Maybe I just had to have a bit more faith in myself, more in J and Apollo. I had to focus, to use everything I’d learned in the past couple of days.

We suddenly stopped, hiding behind two trees. I panted deeply, head resting against my forearm where I could feel cold sweat. J looked at me, adjusting the backpack they’d snagged on our way out.

“You good?” they asked between gasps. Taking a particularly deep breath, I nodded and straightened up.

“Yeah, let’s keep moving,” I said. J gave me a strange look, but nodded and followed my lead.

Things were starting to look familiar, more and more like the vision I’d had at the cabin. And it wasn’t so much the surrounding trees, or the way they cleared to the right, making room for a small hill. It was the feeling—like a spider crawling up my back while I slept. This felt exactly like what I’d experienced in the vision, and I knew J could feel it too.

“We’re getting close,” they whispered. I nodded, turning my head, hoping I’d catch a good hiding spot.

“There,” I said, pointing toward a curved rock. J nodded and we ran over, ducking into the cramped space. It was so low that we were both bent on our knees and hunched over. But, like Apollo always said, it’s better to be uncomfortable than dead.

“You’re damn lucky I brought this with us,” J muttered. They swung the backpack quietly over their shoulder, and I watched them unbuckle the straps.

I had swiped my own backpack, but there wasn’t much left inside. The guns were emptied out, and all that remained was the half-loaded one in my waistband. The first-aid kit was used up, and the food had been eaten along the way. Luckily, there were a few knives in the side, as well as some more ammo for the gun. It would have to do.

J pulled something out and held it up to me. I squinted, pausing to fish out my flashlight. When I did and flicked it on, I smiled.

There was a sharp snap, and I switched the flashlight off, ducking low beside J, who was already near the ground. The sudden light, and the sudden absence of it, made the dark look more thick, more poignant. I reminded myself that J was next to me, and the shadows were friends now.

The leaves shifted. A chilled breeze blew by. I shivered. There was a dim light, one that I vividly remembered.

“We’re almost there,” a voice called. I recognized Delilah.

There was a silent acknowledgement, and not just with the Untouchables either. J and I shared a look, and we understood each other. That link, where they’d entered my mind, flared in my brain, and I briefly wondered if it would be a permanent thing.

Regardless, *now* was the time to get serious.

J gestured to what still laid in their hand, and I nodded. They held their other hand over the dirt ground, but kept their gaze on the silhouettes getting closer.

I couldn’t tear my eyes away. J’s power was absolutely astonishing, and watching them form a spiraling pit in the ground was entrancing. That feeling grew when I saw the same spiraling pit forming a few feet above the assassination team.

In the next second, J grabbed the pin with their teeth and dropped the grenade down the hole.

It shot out the other end, landing and bouncing near their feet. They all jumped back, and I saw Khaos wave his arms.

“*Look out—*”

The world exploded, light and fury. I buried my head low, avoiding the sweltering heat. But, I knew I’d grown up breathing ash, and today would be no different. I pulled myself outta the deep rock, seeing a blurry J doing the same. We stumbled into battle, but every step cleared my vision a little more. I swiped the gun from my back, feeling that rush of familiarity and confidence when I took aim, feelings that surely didn’t belong to me.

Through the smoke and flames, I saw Dane and Delilah, huddled close. Dane had shielded his sister for the most part, but she still ended up with a nasty burn on her leg.

He stood, but I’d already pulled the trigger, gasping when I did. The shot echoed in my ringing ears, but Delilah’s shriek rang more.

J was half-turned away, and opened their palms wide so the shadows could fall. I looked toward them and saw Adelaide lunging forward, knowing what J would do.

I grabbed Adelaide’s wrist and J waved their fingers, imprisoning the woman just as they had with Bianca’s men. I didn’t let another moment pass. *My* target was Khaos. If anyone would have enough clearance to know where Apollo would be, it was him.

I tucked the hem of my shirt over my nose, breathing through the cloth as I descended further into what looked like Hell. Maybe I should’ve kept my faith strong, but at the moment, all I could think of was finding the telekinetic before he found me.

It seemed that God or luck or karma or *whatever* it was favored me today. I found Khaos first, and he was bent over his knees, catching his breath. Like a bronze statue waiting to be made, he was unthinking.

I sped forward and swung the barrel of the gun toward his temple, like I’d seen a few others do. It did the trick, and Khaos stumbled back, grunting. I kicked my leg out and tripped him; when he landed, he hardly had time to brush the dirt and smoke from his eyes before I was on top of him.

“Sorry ‘bout this,” I whispered, knowin’ it’d hurt. Then, I pressed my hands against his temples, *hard*.

His scream faded, and I was flung through space, seeing constellations and planets and gray swirling abysses that called my name. I reached for them, but was flung back down to Earth so quickly that I almost threw up.

When I swallowed the bile, I looked up and saw the light. I squinted, raising my hand against it just as someone walked by me. I flinched, but they hardly noticed. They just kept walking, thick sandals and loose ponchos.

I tilted my head, walking after the two women and down the hill, straight into the quiet town. There were more dirt roads than paved streets. Only a handful of houses stood, and they were made from red tile and brown plaster. They reminded me of Heavenly, of the pictures Ma showed me.

I’d never been in a vision for quite this long, and the frozen time was unnerving. I knew this was in the past, but I wasn’t sure how far back. Not to mention, time always worked a little differently with this trick.

I walked with the women, hearing their voices travel back to me.

“*Is it a boy or a girl?*”

“*Boy*.”

“*Hm. Halian must be happy.*”

“*I’m sure. But there were complications with Lucita. She’ll be bedridden for at least two months.*”

“*How long was the delivery?*”

“*Forty-five hours. With all this chaos happening, I’m not surprised. It must’ve been the stress.*”

I frowned, listening half-heartedly as I wondered where I was. The brown-red dirt looked like Texas or New Mexico—maybe Arizona? I couldn’t tell, but the dryness had climbed its way into my throat, and I wondered whether these more intense visions could affect me outside of them, make me dehydrated and weak. This was new and unprecedented, and I hoped it wouldn’t bite me in the ass once I got shoved back into the fight.

But the fight was far away as the women reached a small house, and the door opened immediately after they knocked. There was a skinny girl, standing in a colorful dress with a flowing skirt. She couldn’t be older than twelve.

“*Rosa. Is your mama up?*”

“*Yep. She’s feeding Lonan now.*”

The women kept talking as they entered. I just barely managed to slip in too.

The inside was cute and cozy, with yellow wallpaper curling in the corners. The family portraits on the walls depicted five—two parents and three kids. But, there was a shrill crying from further in the house, which signaled that the pictures weren’t entirely up to date.

The women rushed after the noise, and I followed, finding a tiny room with an even tinier woman laying in the bed. She held a fussing baby who was barely visible beneath the layers and layers of blankets that were piled on top of her. The women went to either side of the bed, while the girl stayed near the door, next to me.

“*How is he?*”

“*Is he latching alright?*”

“*Have you gotten any sleep?*”

The woman waved them away laughingly, just as the baby quieted. I moved closer, wanting to see. I didn’t have a lotta experience with babies, but for some reason, this one felt particularly important.

The baby had small tuffs of dark hair. I saw a blue blanket wrapped ‘round him.

“*Lonan is fine, mama*,” the new mother sighed. She adjusted the blanket near his face, smiling brightly. “*He’s perfect*.”

There was a moment of darkness, and then I was in the room again; only this time, it was in flames. I fell back, hearing screams outside as the roof creaked, threatening to collapse. Gasping, I jumped outta the room and ran down the hall, dodging the small toy walker. I threw my body against the front door, but the handle was burning hot. Looking outta the stained glass window, I tried to see what was happening outside, but all I saw was more fire. It felt like I was back in the real world, but somethin’ told me that this was still a memory, that this had already happened.

The room disappeared, and instead I saw a house—a *really big* house. The white-pillar columns in the front looked historic, and the gleaming windows shined. I turned my head, seeing a grand forest full of thick, strong trees. Looking further up, there was a statue, and a memory of a name popped up, echoing and echoing further into my brain.

But then it was gone just as quickly as the first one, and I felt the air leave my lungs in a swift, painful *whoosh*.

Khaos had flipped us over, his hands wrapped ‘round my throat as he pressed me into the ground. I choked, grappling with his fingers, tryin’ to loosen his grip, but it didn’t even look like he could see me. I saw his face, saw the look in his eyes, and knew that whatever I did left an aftereffect.

I knew I didn’t have many options, especially not when Khaos squeezed tighter and all hope for more oxygen was extinguished. He didn’t even notice when a flame-covered branch fell a few feet behind him, igniting the grass like it was firewood. The heat singed my face, and shadows danced ‘cross his. It was not the first time he’d absolutely terrified me.

“Lonan,” I whispered, barely heard. I knew there was shouting, that J was still fighting off the others and wouldn’t last too long on their own—even with the time we’d bought. I needed to get out of this, to *breathe*. I needed to throw him off his game.

And the name did exactly that. He blinked, his grip loosening ever so slightly. “What?”

“*Lonan*,” I repeated, coughing a little. The fire was getting more intense, and the trees were trapping the smoke. It was getting harder to see him. “Lonan. Your name.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but a blaring shot rang, and his torso was flung off my body. I don’t know where he was shot, but I didn’t stick ‘round long enough to find out. I booked it, and tripped and stumbled my way toward where I last saw J.

I collided with a body, and barely recognized it to be them ‘til they shook me by the grip they had ‘round my arms. “Artemis! Did you get it?”

I nodded tiredly, and they didn’t wait. We made a run for it.

I wasn’t sure which way was up or down or left or right, but J held my hand tightly, and patiently pulled me up when my legs would shake or slow us down. Diving into Khaos’s mind, into his memories, had taken all the fight from me. The last time I’d done it was when I did it to Delilah, but it never really got easier. Fighting against someone’s subconsciousness, especially when they knew you weren’t supposed to be there, would always be tiring.

After a long period of running and getting my bearings, we skidded to a stop. My breathing stuttered, and J’s hand moved to my back, rubbing lightly. It reminded me of Apollo, which only made me stand straighter, swallowing thickly. *Focus*.

“Did you shoot Khaos?” I finally asked.

“No, I did,” another voice answered. I tensed and saw Ma brushing a curl outta her face. She took me into her arms, squeezing tightly. “Don’t you ever do something so *idiotic*, so—so *absolutely* reckless—so *dangerous—*”

“Careful, you might run out of synonyms,” Drew said. He holstered his own gun, bringing J into a quick side-hug.

Ma scowled and turned to me. She shook her head, full of disappointment. “What on Earth were you thinking?”

I smiled, tasting ash. “I found Apollo.”

**Chapter Twenty**

**Apollo**

Summary:

Apollo thinks back over the days that he was left alone in the Untouchables’ lair. Considering that he’s now officially part of the program, he gains access to see Lovely a few times. He does so, and they start to bond.

When the Untouchables *do* return, Apollo is shocked to see them all with some nasty injuries. Delilah and Adelaide tell him it was all Artemis, and he realizes that his sister knows where he is and what’s happened to him. He starts to hope for an escape.

Just as he thinks this, the whole building goes on lockdown, and metal sheets fall over the windows and doors. Apollo, knowing this would probably be his only chance, tries to get his stuff and leave. Everything is so chaotic that they don’t see him trying to slip out of the Untouchables’ living quarters. The door opens before he can do it, and Lovely is on the other side, clueless as to what’s going on.

Apollo explains it to her, then tells her that, if she wants to leave and escape what they’ve put her through, then she needs to leave now. Lovely says she can’t, that they’ve put a tracker in her. Apollo suggests that they take it out.

Lovely is mortified, but she eventually agrees, and they run to another portion of the building, where they won’t be found. Apollo uses the first-aid kit and cuts the tracker out, wearing gloves to make sure Lovely’s power doesn’t affect him. They finally manage, and Lovely is strongly holding it together.

When they plan to leave that room and find an exit, they run into Dane. He realizes what the two of them are doing, and snarls at Apollo, saying they won’t make it far. He asks Lovely why she’d choose this when they both know nobody will accept them after all they’ve done. Lovely doesn’t want to leave, heartbroken by Dane’s words, but Apollo makes her go.

Dane attacks. Apollo shoots his leg and runs, hearing Dane yell that he’ll always be running. He slips away to try and find Artemis amongst all this destruction.

**Chapter Twenty-One**

**Artemis**

We’d followed them.

With their defenses down, it was surprisingly easy, which kinda disappointed me. I was expecting a wild fight, an army waiting ‘fore we finally reached the princess’s castle—but there was none of that. It was just a house, and they were just people.

We’d have to get clever though. Drew and Ma didn’t wanna rope anyone else into this mess—not even Mark—so we left almost right after the Untouchables did. It wasn’t ‘til they got further onto their own land that we fell back, seeing Handlers coming to meet them. Their base of operations wasn’t that far from Bianca’s—which disappointed me even more. I wanted to see the grandiose scale of a city, but I suppose hiding incognito would be more their style.

The humidity stuck to my neck and hair like a latex skin, but I sat next to Ma and J, enduring it silently. We watched the Untouchables head inside, watched some of the Handlers spreading out. They yelled ‘bout followers, and I knew we needed to move.

“What’s the plan?” Drew asked. He was bent over us, as if acting like a shield.

“I have one,” J answered. Then, they shared a deep look with Drew. “But you probably won’t like it.”

“Please don’t say—”

“We could set everything on fire?”

“That’s a *terrible* plan.”

“Not really,” Ma mused, her eyes narrowing. Drew’s head whipped toward her. “If we set the forests ablaze, the Handlers will be too busy to guard *all* the entrances. We could get in.”

“I’m sure there’s sensors on every door—it’s not like they’re *that* stupid,” Drew reminded.

The air shifted. I frowned.

“No, they aren’t.”

All four of us flinched and jumped into different attacking stances. J’s shadows formed and shot out toward the person, immobilizing them instantly. Drew raised his gun and Ma pushed me behind her—even as I held my weapon too.

It was a Handler, and I was shocked more when the woman wiggled and pushed herself outta J’s binds. She pushed the strings surrounding her down—like they were loose blankets that she could slip on and off—and J’s mouth fell open.

“How the hell—”

“I figured you might need my help,” the strange woman said. She rose an eyebrow at the guns. “Don’t shoot,” she joked, raising her hands dramatically. “They’ll hear you before your plan even starts.”

“Who the hell—”

“Persia?” Ma gasped. Flickering my eyes between them, I realized that they’d already met.

The woman—Persia—smiled, and I saw a small gap between her front two teeth. “Yep, and *you* must be Ellis,” she said. Then, she held out her hand as if to shake Ma’s. But, when nobody moved, she wiggled her fingers. “I don’t bite, promise.”

“Why are you here?” Drew demanded.

“Yeah, what is a Handler doing talking to Auras,” J added, crossing their arms. “Like we’re actually *people*, at that. Doesn’t it go against your entire coding?”

Persia rolled her eyes, hands on hips. “I *saw* you,” she said instead, glancing at Ma. “Way back. I saw you when nobody else did.” She shrugged. “I figured I might be able to help.”

“Why would you?” J asked.

“And why would we trust you?” Drew added, tightening his hold on the gun.

Despite holding the same weapon, my grip loosened, feeling that she was telling the absolute truth.

Persia’s smile fell. “My uncle is an Aura,” she whispered, eyes flashing. “The only reason I got this dumb job was to try and change things.” Her eyes wandered up to the house, then back to us. “If you guys are planning a coop, I want in.”

“She’s telling the truth,” I said ‘fore the others could ask the ever-reoccurring question. “At least, what she believes to be the truth.”

Persia grimaced. “Gee, thanks.”

“This goes against literally *every* rule in the book,” Drew said. He started pacing between us, and Persia took a step back so he didn’t run her over. But that didn’t mean she was outta his fire, because he pointed patronizingly at her. “*They* are the bad guys, remember? We are not working with her. She’ll just run to her little friends and get us all killed.”

“I wouldn’t—”

“I *don’t* care,” Drew spat.

“She could help,” Ma said quietly, and Drew stiffened.

“Fine,” J huffed, bumping their shoulder with Drew’s, who stood open-mouthed and offended. “Let’s just get this over with, and we’ll never have to see her again.”

“Fine,” Persia repeated. “What do you need me to do? Any distraction or anything?”

“Actually…” I started, letting my eyes trail over the Handlers, stomping ‘round in their boots like toy soldiers. “You can figure out if there’s clearance to get in,” I said, pointing at the doors.

“If there is, then get whatever you need to open them up,” Ma finished, and I nodded. She reached out and patted my shoulder, doing the same to J. “We’ll start the fire.”

“What about me?” Drew asked, practically pouting.

Ma smirked a little, fondness dancing in her eyes. “Since you’re so suspicious, you can stay here and watch Persia—make sure she doesn’t rat us out.”

Persia rolled her eyes, but said nothing. Drew shrugged, agreeing even if he didn’t like it.

“Fine, okay, but here—” Before any of us could react, he pulled something outta his bag and threw it to J. It was a hand-held radio, one I’d seen Bianca use before. “Call if anything goes wrong.”

“Okay,” J replied, stuffing it into their bag’s side-pocket.

Without another word, we split up again.

We melted into the darkness. I saw J still digging through her bag—maybe finding somethin’ to spark the inferno.

As we ran, I couldn’t help thinking ‘bout Apollo. I’d give him the biggest, most all-encompassing hug I’d ever given anyone. I wanted to hear his incessant nagging, or see the way he always glanced behind at Ma, making sure she was still there. Never had the separation felt so cruel than when the only thing separating us was the walls of that house, looking more like steel than brick and insulation.

I could tell Ma was anxious. Her invisibility cloaked us, and I felt its presence like a fog, or a cloud that followed us through the mayhem. When we heard shouting and saw three lights bounding through the thicket, we ducked the other way. We couldn’t be seen, even if we had Ma’s power on our side. We couldn’t take the risk.

When we slid to a stop—on the side of the house instead of out front—my chest was burning. It felt like I’d just climbed outta Hell, only to waltz back into the fire.

Just as the thought crossed my mind, I saw J’s lighter flashing as it sparked a flame. They shut it off and tossed it to me. Thankfully, I caught it, and we bent down as J pulled their bag ‘round. Ma kept looking over her shoulder.

“I got a bottle, but I need a rag,” J mumbled, pullin’ out the bottle in question.

“Where’d you get vodka?” Ma asked—a certain, motherly tone in her voice that nearly made me smile.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I might have a rag,” I whispered.

It wasn’t exactly a rag, but it *was* a cloth shirt. I tugged it out, grabbin’ the knife I’d stuck in my boot. I hastily stabbed the poor, unsuspecting cotton, then handed the tattered remains to J. They frowned, but took it anyway, stuffing the tail into the bottle as much as she could.

“No, *no*—you need to douse the rag first,” Ma hissed. Both J and I looked at her funny, but she only shrugged. “Just do it.”

We finished making the molotov, hearing patrols barely pass us by. We didn’t have much more time.

J held the bottle out. I sparked it.

They chucked it as hard as they could, and we all watched the flames spiral and dance ‘til it shattered. A second later, *real* steel coverings slammed over the window and doors—but the damage had been done. Not even their defense measures could stop the house from going up in roaring flames from the inside out.

“*Move, move!*” Ma yelled. She grabbed me and J and pushed us forward, and we were on the run again.

I ducked and dived and dodged and ran in order to lose sight of Handlers rushin’ the scene. I led us down the slope and back over it, and I thought we’d made it.

But Ma was getting tired, and she stumbled. J was the first to notice.

“Artemis!”

The shout startled me, and I whirled ‘round only to spot a Handler watching us. Our invisibility was gone.

“*There they are!*”

“Shit,” I muttered. J was helping Ma up, and I joined on the other side.

“Artemis, there’s no time,” Ma said slowly, even as flashlights bounced over her face. “I can get away on my own, but you gotta get your brother.”

“No! We just—”

Ma shook her head, suddenly standing tall. Without another word, she darted to the side, and we hastily—and confusedly—followed.

“J’s right!” Ma shouted over her shoulder. The words almost made me trip, but J righted me with a soft look.

“Are you crazy?” I demanded. “Remember the last time we split up? Not the greatest plan, was it?”

Even as the wind breezed through the trees, sparks flying, I still heard her scoff.

“Now is not the time for debating,” she said. Suddenly, she stopped, and I almost ran into her. But, she caught my arms, squeezing so tightly that I thought the bone might fracture. “Apollo is inside,” she whispered. Her eyes were a color of blue that I’d never seen before, an earnest pleading in them that could crumble me. “He’s in there, lost and alone, and he needs *you*. So stop worrying ‘bout me and go *find him*.”

She lightly shoved me, and I stumbled. Looking up, I realized she was gone, and I wasn’t sure if it was ‘cause she left so damn fast or if she was using her gift again, forcing me to make this decision.

The Handlers were preoccupied with the fire, leaving the front unguarded. I found Drew pacing a path in the grass while Persia spoke hurriedly.

When he caught sight of us, Drew threw his arms out exaggeratedly. “Finally! Where the hell have you been?” His eyes scanned ‘round. “Where’s Ellis?”

“Handlers. Ma led them away,” I said, gasping. His eyes widened, but I grabbed his arm. “We don’t have time.” Maybe repeating Ma’s words would help me believe her. I warily looked at Persia while my chest tightened like a lock. This was it—we were so, *so* close. “Did you get any info?”

Persia nodded, shoving a bloodied card into my hand. “Here, it’s for the door.”

I suppressed my grimace, then gave her a genuine smile. “Thank you.”

“This is *crazy*, absolutely *nuts*,” Drew muttered, jogging up the porcelain steps. Persia stayed behind, but I noticed how she didn’t leave.

I pressed the card against the sensor. Like magic, the doors opened.

“Come on, we gotta hurry,” I whispered, pulling him along.

This place was *fancy*. If it were any other house, I’d gape and stand, stock-still like a scarecrow and memorizing every beautiful, intricate detail. Whoever carved the drawings in the columns or the wooden furniture knew what they were doing, and I wished I could sit and read every frozen story.

But this was a home built on blood, which corrupted the image and made me run faster. Eventually, it turned into what I’d imagined the Untouchables’ base to look like: white, smooth walls and clear-tiled floors. The atmosphere turned cold. Even Drew could feel it, shivering as he cocked the gun.

“This place is capital-C creepy,” he said.

“Well, we shouldn’t be here long anyway,” I reassured.

“You’re a pretty good sister, you know,” Drew mused lightly. I stared back blankly, knowin’ this wasn’t the best time. J looked sideways at him, their face copying the expression I probably sported. “Coming all this way, going through all this shit—”

“He’d do the same,” I interrupted.

“Yeah… But you *did* it.”

I scowled, but his words vanished as a deep chill ran ‘cross my spine. It was colder than the hallway, cold like death.

I blinked, barely registering that Drew was still there ‘til he spoke. “Look, *all* I’m saying—”

“*Shh*,” I hissed.

We stood in a small, circular intersection, where four hallways branched off in different directions. I frowned, turning ‘round, tryin’ to hear if someone was coming. My boots scuffed the granite floors. Drew and J breathed steadily. But there was also the slapping of bare feet, coming from just behind me.

Someone burst from the shadows, and I raised my gun, Drew’s flashing too. But, all I saw was a white streak. The room spun and I felt sick. Collapsing, my body started jerking, twitching, seizing—*that* was it. I was having a damn seizure.

My bones, my very tendons stretched and locked and contracted and ripped and it felt like fire was burning my head. The flames outside must’ve spread, must’ve been eating my body whole, starting with my brain. My hair had sparked, my eyes filled with fallen ash. This wasn’t right. I heard shouting, a gunshot, a cry, then nothing.

I stood in some sorta darkness, one that instantly reminded me of J. I blinked; it felt like I was having an out-of-body experience, but my body was nowhere to be found, just this endless dark. I took a step, and the floor rippled. I was sent tumbling down.

Water—I was drowning. Kicking my legs, I searched for a way out, but I was trapped in some sinking ship, couldn’t find where steel ended and free water began. Somethin’ latched on my leg, clawing, pulling. I clenched my eyes, wanting to scream, wanting to flail and find my way back home, but this wasn’t anything I knew.

A contrast: a new light burned from the inside out. I saw black stars.

I was near a river, smelling a daisy, hearing my name.

“Artemis! What did you do?”

I saw the blond curls bouncing my way, almost covering the furious pale face that was concealed underneath. I widened my eyes, jumping to my feet.

“What?”

“What did you do to your brother? To me?” she asked again, getting closer and walking with her arms crossed. “You scared us half to death. You can’t run off like that.”

I scowled. “One day I will,” I muttered, and she blinked slowly.

“You can once you’re grown,” she replied stiffly. “But for now, you’re still mine.”

Her arms engulfed me, and then I was thrown into battle, banging my head against something metal and hollow. I groaned, rubbing the back of it and blinking away salt from my eyes. I realized it was raining—and I *also* realized that I couldn’t stand up. It was like reality, but warped, different, shaded with a new tint that was just close enough. My mind couldn’t tell it apart; I could feel it breaking.

When I tried standing, my leg bent, and there was an agonizing tear. I gritted my teeth and fell again.

“Artemis,” an all-too familiar voice hissed. I glanced up, then paled. There, his face blood-splattered, stood my twin. His blonde hair was black with red darkness, and his blue eyes were two sharp knives, ready to murder. “I don’t wanna ask you again.”

“*I didn’t do it!*” I screamed, the words falling from my mouth ‘fore I could stop them. What was going on? Why was Apollo here? Shadows slithered behind him. “Why don’t you *believe* me?”

His face was cold, unreadable, and so angry that I shivered. Whispers in the back of my head got louder.

*ApolloApolloApolloApollo.*

I saw the clawed hands—reaching, wrapping ‘round me from behind—before I felt them. They were piercing needles, and I screamed—but my voice was drowned out as they pulled me through the thick concrete. Ghostly faces swarmed, their dirty fingernails scratching, pulling my hair, clutching my wrist. The pressure was so unbearable that I wanted to scream. I wanted to fight.

I shoved them off. I slammed one against the wall of the hallway I found myself in. I couldn’t see my new surroundings, only the selfish, snarling, threatening faces of those that’d already died—coming back just to drag me down with them. I couldn’t let them.

I stumbled, grappling for anything on the walls, anything within reach, but it was like everything evaporated just as I touched it. Feeling an annoyance in my boot, I suddenly remembered the knife I always kept there—Apollo’s knife.

I ducked underneath one spirit as it lunged at me, and grabbed another by the shoulders. I could feel the pulse under my fingertips, near the collarbone, but I barely noticed as I lifted my foot, grabbed the knife, and stabbed the spirit in the stomach.

I heard a gutting gasp, and the fog was blown away.

I blinked, feeling the knife, feeling a shoulder underneath my hand, but things were changing, shifting. Like waking up from the Gray, I was disoriented. But this recovery was slow, taking time. I felt the cough against my throat, someone leaning over.

Blinking again, my jaw fell slack. My heart plummeted, or was thrown into some garbage disposal, or left in some molding container to freeze, stuck in a perpetual life of isolated destruction. I couldn’t see straight, even as my head finally cleared.

But this wasn’t a dream anymore. The blood squelched in my hands. There was no more air left, and I was drowning again. After so many times, I thought it might lose its sting, but it was still there, keeping me frozen, keeping me covered in the guilt and the shame and the confusion and the absolute, body-shaking, mind-breaking fear.

In front of me was no spirit, but someone living, someone I knew.

Ma’s blue eyes were wide and surprised and another emotion I couldn’t understand. My hands trembled, and I released the knife, catching her when she started falling.

“Ma? No, no, no, this wasn’t—You weren’t—” I gasped, tears dripping down my lips, the salt a burning poison. Everything was crumpling—this entire glass house was breaking and shattering, the shards sticking out like a graveyard.

“Artemis—” Ma was barely heard as I sobbed, the realization crashing, pulling me further and further and further.

She was getting too heavy, and we dropped. Her legs sprawled as she clutched her chest, nearly hitting her head if I hadn’t caught her. There was more blood, more pain on her face. I could barely look at her, at the way her lip curled, her breath gasping and spluttering. My ears were ringing, refusing to believe this. I shook my head, willing it to be a dream. Any minute now, I’d wake up. I’d open my eyes and Ma would be standing there, checking in, makin’ damn certain that I was alright, that we were on the right path. My eyes were glued shut, praying and praying that this wasn’t true; it was just a lie made up by one of the Untouchables, a new player in the field who could conjure illusions like some kinda witch. This was a rerun of my nightmares, nothing real, nothing painful.

But it wasn’t any of that, and no matter how much I begged and prayed to whatever higher power Lorraine and Bob believed in, they didn’t listen. There was no answer, no guidance, no erasure of the last ten minutes. There was no dream, no Gray, no spirits. It was me. This was all me.

Her head was in my lap, and I shakily brushed away some curls as if that’d suddenly fix everything, as if I could put her back together again. My mouth trembled, forming invisible words, invisible apologies, wanting to say somethin’ but muted like a TV show. Maybe I was still drowning.

The words never came.

“I didn’t mean—This wasn’t—Ma, I can’t—”

“Artemis,” she choked, clutching the knife, where it was still embedded in her stomach. Her eyes, still wide and afraid, found mine as surely as they always did, her gaze still somehow firm even as she bled all over my thighs. “Don’t—You d-didn’t see. It wasn’t you.”

“I can help,” I said, shaking my head. I wanted to ignore her words, ignore the heaviness, ignore how she shoved the responsibility away. It was glued onto me like a second skin, curling ‘round my throat like a rattlesnake. “I can—I can fix this, Ma, I swear—”

“Don’t—” Her words ended in a choked sob as I pulled her up, trying to get her to stand, hoping we could find someone, anyone. Drew had to be ‘round somewhere close. He couldn’t have gone too far, not now, not when everything was fallin’ apart like an abandoned building, only memories holding it all together.

I gripped her shoulders, pulled her up with all my strength as we both cried, as I clenched my teeth and pulled again, hoping she’d have enough strength to walk. But the knife was cutting deeper—I couldn’t take it out or else it’d be over in seconds. She was bleeding more. Her hands were wet and slippery as she grabbed my forearm, nails diggin’ in so she couldn’t lose me, not again.

Her legs weren’t working, she couldn’t lock the knees, and we fell the few inches I’d managed to raise us to. She clenched her eyes painfully, and I bent over her, shaking my head.

“No, no, I can fix this, I can fix—” I said, pressing my hand on top of hers, on top of the wound. She whimpered loudly, body tensed, and I flinched.

I pressed so hard I could feel the edge of the knife scraping between my fingers. I could feel each breath she took, each beat of her heart sending more and more blood down into my hands, cupped ‘round to catch it like some convoluted rainstorm, upside down and flipped and flashing with lightning that took my eyes again. The blurriness was back, her face fading, her eyes nearly indecipherable behind the fog.

I wiped them hastily, not wanting to look away. I couldn’t, not when she still needed help. I looked ‘round, my face dropping, my hands cold and warm all at once. I saw Drew a few feet away, collapsed and seizing on the floor like I must’ve been. I couldn’t see J.

“Help!” I screamed, not caring who I was screaming for. J couldn’t be far. They wouldn’t have left Drew, not like that. They had to be close. “Somebody please help me! Please!”

Even if J couldn’t hear, I just needed someone. Even an Untouchable would be welcomed now, because at least they’d fix Ma before throwing us in jail. At least someone would know what to do; they had nurses here that could heal with their hands right? That’s what we always guessed. Someone like that had to be wandering ‘round, had to hear me and come running. It’d be any second now.

But the seconds came and went too fast and I whipped my head toward Ma’s face again, biting my lip and shaking my head. My whole body was trembling so bad that Ma’s face was shaking too, the tears leaving her eyes falling like lightning bolts.

“I’m sor—I’m sorry,” I gasped. “I’m sorry, Ma. I’msorryI’msorryI’msosorry, *please—*Please, I didn’t mean, I couldn’t—”

Her chest jerked, blood coating her teeth, her eyes glossy. A gut-wrenching sob, one that echoed ‘round us like some kinda horror movie, ripped outta my throat with such ferocity that I felt like I was swallowing razor blades. Was this how she’d felt in that split second? That sharpness that only grew tenfold when she realized who’d done it, when she was staring into the face that had ignored her and run from her and tricked her so many times?

Her fingers pressed my cheek, near the corner of my mouth. She left blood behind, marking me, stamping my crime where everyone would see it.

“Get away from her!”

Someone shoved me hard. I crawled away, brushing the hair outta my face just in time to see who was there.

*Apollo*. Never had I been so terrified to see him. The hope and excitement of our reunion was snuffed, left with only these ashy remains. He was crying, his face a crumpled mess as he knelt beside Ma, trying to stop the bleeding. He was yelling, his voice fading in and outta my head. I couldn’t tell what he was saying, my face paling and the room ceasing to exist once I saw Ma’s chest fall, but never rise.

“No,” I whimpered, wanting to go to her. I could still see the metal glinting at her abdomen—Apollo’s knife.

“What did you do?” Apollo shouted, his hands now covered in the same blood that mine were.

“Apollo, I—” Before I could come up with some lousy, pathetic answer, he gripped my arms like iron, yanking me.

He shook me hard, and I felt my neck crack on the side, within the tendon, promising to cause more pain later. “What did you do?” he repeated, voice cracking. “How did—How *could* you—”

“Apollo, I didn’t know, *I swear—*”

“You didn’t know? You didn’t *know!*” He shook me again. I turned to avoid his onslaught, but Apollo didn’t let me get distracted, and grabbed my jaw so tightly I cried again. He turned my chin, his hands buzzing, his body shaking against mine. Like some kinda tsunami, he was building and building, and I was *afraid of him*.

He slapped me. My body twisted as I yelped, and I barely managed not breaking my wrist. Chest burning, my throat strangled itself as crying and mumbled apologies fell past my lips. He didn’t even look at me as I crawled away.

He just gave me a nasty look. “You killed her,” he said, his voice cracking on the last word. Swallowing, the light in his eyes—the one always reserved for me—flickered and was gone. “I’m gonna *kill* you—”

I screamed, sliding backwards and tryin’ to stand as he lunged for his gun and took aim. I knew he wouldn’t miss.

But shadows stopped him. I couldn’t even feel grateful for J’s rescue, only feeling a deep, dark void, growing wider and wider like a stony chasm, echoing that gutting gasp that would never fade, even if *she* did. All I could feel was that choking sensation, that dry drowning that kept me still. All I could hear were the Earth-shattering cries that forced their way outta my mouth, knowing that I’d lost everything.

I felt J’s hands on my back, felt them pulling me away. But all I saw was Ma—my beautiful Ma who didn’t deserve to be left there—bloody and lifeless—on a tiled ground of a house that wasn’t ours. All I could see was what I’d done, because *I’d* done it.

Drew’s words returned darkly.

*“But you did it.”*

And I did.

“Get the hell outta here! I’ll kill you! I swear to *God* I’ll hunt you down—” Apollo screamed and thrashed, and J moved quickly to avoid another fight. Someone else—a face I barely recognized as Persia’s—helped haul Drew up, and we hurried down the halls. Everythin’ blended together. Everythin’ was gone.

I’d fallen, landing in Hell. None of the angels felt sympathy as I burned.

**Epilogue**

**Khaos**

They couldn’t get the blood out of the grout.

More Handlers were sent for, and the house was cleared for authorized access only—access that I’d been denied. The windows remained steeled shut, and whether that was on purpose or a result from the melting fire molding it to the foundational structure, I didn’t know.

Despite endless scrubbing, bleaching, mopping, the floor where Apollo’s mother died stayed red. There was no cleaning that could pry the blood from in between the cracks, where the memory would always replay. The entire room had darkened with a certain chill, but I repressed it, staring and staring until someone eventually interrupted.

Apollo wasn’t taking it very well. He’d gone in and out of fits of rage and vulnerable grief. It was distressing, watching such a stubborn kid reduced to nothing.

Somehow, I could share that experience.

Out on the battlefield, when Artemis said that name… It was like I was a kid again, bewildered by the memory and how she’d pulled it from the very depths of my mind. I’d been distracted, easily fooled, and so out of it that I didn’t realize they were following us. Part of the entire mess was my fault, and Ellis’s invisible blood stained my hands as a reminder. Like the floor, I couldn’t wash it away.

The others weren’t much better; Dane was in the infirmary, with Delilah visiting everyday—even if he was only scheduled to stay a week. Adelaide only suffered a minor break in her arm, and a dislocation in the elbow. Ophelia, on the other hand, was the worst.

She hadn’t woken up from Artemis’s attack. She stayed asleep. The nurses said it was a coma, and there were no issues they could see, but I felt like something was wrong.

I visited Ophelia often. I never saw Apollo there.

He hadn’t left his room, not since the Handlers pried him off her body. I’d seen the whole thing, how he bent toward her, how he tried to go back… It was shocking to feel how much I cared.

Apollo was annoying and frustrating, but the look on his face… I usually let the broken faces pass, but his was sticking with me.

Maybe a day after the destruction, I had a meeting with the man who created the Untouchables program, created everything about us—including Lovely. She would’ve died without him, and now, he was demanding her return. He needed her to complete his precious research, despite the danger that might come with it. We had no idea where Lovely was—and while I had suspicions, I wouldn’t lead them straight to her, not when they would just stick her under a knife again. No, she needed to stay away.

He didn’t know that, and I wasn’t about to tell him. If I was planning to do what I wanted to do, I couldn’t leave a trail. I had to disappear.

I knew what was coming. I was familiar with the unrelenting rage now festering inside Apollo a bubbling wound drenched in hydrogen peroxide. I’d been burned by it before, and knew that the aftermath would be as gory as the blood in the grout. There’d be no erasing it.

Apollo wanted to go after his sister, get revenge for their mother. I had my own doubts about whether he could go through with it, but the fury made me think he would.

And now, I felt some stupid obligation to *not* let that happen. Artemis showed me something, and it made me think more and more about my history with this place, with this group, with *him*. I wanted to know more than the slim pickings in my file, showing no relations and no connections prior to my initiation. I wanted more than the vague answers I grew up with. I needed more.

She was the only one who could help me. She’d seen what I did; she’d said my true name. There was something important in that, and there was a connection that hadn’t been there before. I had to find her—and I needed to do it before her twin did.

Things were different, but they needed to be this way. The others would understand… Eventually, at least.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

I stood near the window, despite having no view through the metal curtains. I’d been playing with a pen, but now that she was here, I set it down.

“I’m well aware,” I replied, smirking. I turned, seeing Adelaide leaning against the doorframe. I had a duffle hanging from my hand, and her eyes flickered over it.

“You know what that would mean, right?” she asked.

I stayed smirking. “I’m well aware.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t play dumb, Khaos,” she snapped, closing the door swiftly behind her. “Your thoughts are louder than anyone else’s, and *you* know,” she pointed her finger into my chest, “as well as I do, that there isn’t a backup plan once you pick *that* side.” Her face was grim, and those red lips pulled into a serious frown. “You won’t be able to come back.”

“I know,” I whispered, staring at her hand.

“We’ll be on different sides,” she continued. She went to poke me in the chest again with her little manicured finger, but I grabbed her wrist. Her breath hitched, and I set my stern gaze on hers.

“I *know*, Adelaide,” I repeated. She swallowed, and I released her like she was a fly. She might as well be one.

She sniffed, turning her nose up. “Fine then, leave like all the rest,” she muttered. For a moment, I felt real guilt, but she was already leaving—and she’d only slow me down. I couldn’t comfort her, not when my window was quickly closing. After this attack, everything would be reinforced, and it wasn’t settled that the Untouchables would keep doing their base of operations out of this house. Nothing was guaranteed, so this was the best moment.

I just needed to take the first step.

It was always the hardest, right? Standing was easy, maintaining balance was fine, but risking your entire point of view for a fall that would surely leave you scarred was the hardest. And I didn’t know what that life was like. If he were in any kind of better mood, I’d ask Apollo for advice. Snorting to myself, I realized how ridiculous I sounded.

There was no time for any of that. While the Untouchables may have gained a new member in Apollo, they’d be losing me.

Taking that first step made the next one easier. I didn’t look back, and I didn’t feel the pair of burning blue eyes on my back. But, then again, maybe I did.