

THEMES OF DIVERSITY IN YA LIT: AN EXCERPT FROM 'INITIAITE'

A thesis submitted to the
Kent State University Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Honors

by

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May, 2017

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Preface

When anybody sets out to write, they have to take on a voice that is not their own, and convince an audience that it is. Every character is somewhat an extension of the writer themselves, but in order to create characters that are compelling, we need to move further than that. Even more so, we want to make characters that resonate with the readers who are experiencing the story we've created. A good plot is endlessly important in a story, but even more so are the people who inhabit that story. Without characters there's no anchor, nothing for a reader to attach themselves to and connect with. You'll find pieces of myself scattered throughout all of my characters in this excerpt—Damon's literary references and dry sense of humor, Taylor's casual speech and tone, even Julianna's chosen aesthetic, based on people I've known in real life. However, the true meaning comes from what the readers themselves find in the characters, not just the words I've placed on the page.

Looking at it from a larger position, we need to be mindful of the types of characters we create as writers. While I'd like to say I started off my story with a beautiful, fully diverse cast with people from all walks of life and backgrounds, sadly the truth is much the opposite. Damon, the protagonist, was the first, and I invented his ability (Knacks, as they're known in the story) before I invented the character himself—I was inspired by pictures of abandoned buildings and ruins I'd seen, and imagined what it would be like to stand in a room and experience the history of it without ever having lived during those periods in the past. When Damon's appearance came to light, he was

fairly standard YA protagonist fare— white, heterosexual, able-bodied. I imagined his personality as a sort of gruff, practical yet sarcastic sort, a bit of a Dean Winchester, if you will. In the final product I kept the personality but made some important changes: Damon became half-Puerto Rican and also pansexual. I had to take a step back with him and ask myself: why was this first draft your initial instinct? When you let the ideas come to you “organically,” why was this the first impression you received?

This is a process I repeated with all the characters once I did it with Damon. Every new character I created thereafter I asked, what are your motivations for making them this way? Are you making conscious choices, or are you letting internal prejudices and bad habits choose for you? Thus, the cast you will see before you opens up. There is exactly one white person, a multitude of characters who are not cisgender, and at least one character with a physical disability. Nobody is straight.

Even further than this, it’s not just about including diversity. It’s about representing that diversity in as accurate a way as you can. I’m white, and I don’t claim to understand the experiences of people of color who’ve suffered at the hands of a system that privileges my race over another’s. I can’t write from the position of somebody who’s grown up with this intrinsic part of their worldview that is so different from mine. Essentially, I can’t write stories *about* the struggle of people of color, or of trans people, or of someone with a physical disability. What I *can* do is write stories that include them and make them visible, and that means an accurate representation

The best example of this I have is Taylor Weeks, one of the characters Damon meets toward the end of the excerpt. Taylor is Wampanoag, a tribe of indigenous American people living in the Massachusetts area, and while I wanted him to be a trans man, I also was aware of the potential complications surrounding the First World people's concept of "two-spirit," which is a gender identity unique to their culture. Furthermore, there's an abundance of badly handled and frankly embarrassing portrayals of First World people in media already, ranging from bumbling to downright racist. Beverly Slapin wrote a piece entitled "How to Write a Historical Young Adult Novel with an Indian Theme (for fun and profit)," in which she satirizes the usual treatment of First World characters in literature, offering "advice" such as "If you don't know something about a particular tribe, just make stuff up" and, most bitingly, "Above all, stand firm in your belief that Native American people are expendable and that you, with your myriad talents and numerous awards, can best tell their stories" (Slapin 37, 38). With every piece of cynical wisdom comes a quote, an excerpt directly from a real-life published piece that easily highlights the wildly inaccurate portrayals of First World people.

After the research I did on the two-spirit identity and with Slapin's warnings echoing in my head, I came to the conclusion I was not comfortable attempting to portray an identity I wasn't fully familiar with, so I changed tacks with Taylor. He became someone with more distant ties to his culture than someone who grew up embedded in them, which is an unfortunately common fate for many types of people

who have been victims of colonialism, having their cultures ruined or nearly wiped out by invading Europeans. This was the position I took with all of my nonwhite characters; I tried to remain aware of what would be appropriate for representing someone's culture and background without making that the only trait that defined them.

Recently, I was asked as to why I put so many trans characters in the novel. My initial response was confusion. Frankly, why wouldn't I? Out of the seven introduced characters in this excerpt alone, there are three trans characters, which is roughly half and that's only the cast involved in this piece. While I understood that, combined with the fictional content of this piece, the question held more of a narrative weight than it did one directed towards only my characters, the phrasing of it triggered thoughts about the presence of trans characters in literature in general. I took it a step further and dug up some research on bisexual characters in literature, as well, knowing that most would not bother to make the distinction between "bisexual" and "pansexual" the way most in the queer community do.

What I found was this: In 2006 Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins compiled a 35 year continuum of queer young adult literature called *The Heart Has Its Reasons*. Spanning from 1969 onwards, they cover nearly 200 books up until the year 2004. Statistically speaking, 63% of the books focused on gay men, with lesbians coming in at 31%. In an extremely striking contrast, both bisexual and trans characters appeared in about 3% of the books each (Greenblatt 99, 101). Pansexual characters were not mentioned at all, which gives a pretty good assumption of how much they would weigh

in. This information does not cover the years onward from the early 2000s, of course, but the trend is clear. Even if content creators had a sudden change of heart concerning the other letters in the LGBTQ acronym, they'd still be outnumbered vastly by the homosexual end of the spectrum. There's a serious gap here that needs to be filled, especially considering that despite all the characters Jenkins and Cart turned up, "secondary GLBTQ characters outnumber primary GLBTQ characters two to one" (Greenblatt 101).

On the subject of bisexual (and pansexual, though as I've already stated, the research to be found focused on this sexuality is so rare as to hardly exist at all) characters, B. J. Epstein wrote an excellent breakdown on bisexual characters in young adult and children's literature entitled "'The Case of the Missing Bisexuals': Bisexuality in Books for Young Readers." While pointing out the many negative stereotypes that surround bisexuality as well as its frequent erasure from literature, Epstein also pointed out the impact that the lack of good representation can have:

"...there are two main types of reading that people do: we might read books to see ourselves reflected (i.e., mirror books) and we might also read books to see other selves (i.e., window books)...literature helps shape children's experiences, intellects, imaginations, feelings, and thoughts...when we are exposed to people through literature, they are no longer 'other.' The window has thus been opened." (Epstein 111)

So, by depriving ourselves of diverse books, we're narrowing our own world views and the world views of those who will come after us and learn from what we have to teach them. This is a concept that applies beyond sexuality; any representation in books is

going to be absorbed by the people who read it, and inadvertently reflected to others, creating a ripple effect across society as a whole. On some level we are going to accept what we see in our media as the truth, and that is a make-or-break situation for some.

This leads into my decision to focus on Young Adult literature as the genre in which to situate this project. Young Adult literature as a whole is a wide and varied genre, encompassing an enormous variety of novels and stories. Its age demographic is teens and those just entering adulthood, roughly an age range from 14-20 at its widest. While it's still one-sided, more and more we're starting to see a shift in the kind of representation in our media. As it's already been established that the media we consume is tied to our perceptions of ourselves and the world around us, in particular we want good representation to reach those about to enter the world as fully fledged adults.

Young Adult literature is primarily consumed by a demographic of people moving through an extremely tumultuous stage of life. Much of what they experience sticks with them, and that includes whether or not they see themselves in the media they enjoy. In labelling my thesis as a piece of Young Adult literature, I'm placing it in primary view of a certain demographic that I want to reach. My thesis shows characters and handles themes that I want those people to read and see reflected from their own lives, or perhaps they'll read about something new, or something they'd never considered. Queer characters, characters of color, disabled characters. People struggling with trying to make ends meet, people who never went to college, people whose parents aren't

there for them and people whose parents want to be there but can't. Expanding perspectives is just as important as representing those that already exist, and both are needed in order to help people be more open-minded about themselves and about others.

The point is this: people from all walks of life, all types of backgrounds, skin color, sexuality, gender, physical and mental ability, exist on this earth. All of those people, all of *us*, are looking for someone to connect to when we pick up a book, or watch a movie, or play a video game. And instead of inclusion there's a sea of male, heterosexual, white faces staring back at us. It's disheartening at best and damaging for self-perception at worst. After all, if you're a bisexual woman, like me, looking for recognizable role models in your content and all you see from the (already slim pickings) of queer characters available are people who "don't like labels" and are often stereotyped as sexually promiscuous and then shamed for that sexuality in the first place. "Bisexuals have been variously characterized as promiscuous, immature, undecided, treacherous, cowardly..." (Epstein 117). The list goes on and it's not reassuring. We as content creators are responsible for being aware of the content we choose to produce and how our every decision affects the narrative and those who consume it. It's not "organic" or "inspiration" and it doesn't just magically appear in a word document or a journal; every word we write is chosen, every act is deliberate. As such, nothing we choose to represent in our content is an accident. We're responsible

and beholden to the story we weave, and for once I'd like to exercise a little awareness of that fact.

Excerpt from *Initiate*: Part One

Chapter One

“C’mon, man, all I did was compliment her!”

“I’m pretty sure you said ‘Hey, bitch, nice tits’, which does not fall under the category of ‘compliment’,” Damon said. The idiot he was currently escorting from the building tried to pull back, further slurred protests on his ugly mouth. Damon squeezed his wrist and gave it a little twist. The man went pale. He followed meekly the rest of the way out of the club. However, as Damon showed him to the door, he heard a muttered, “Fuckin’ faggot.”

Damon stopped dead. He turned around, gave the man a polite smile, and punched him in the jaw with a force that sent him staggering.

“My standards are a little high for the likes of you.” Damon closed the door in his face and reentered the building, shaking out his knuckles. He tried not to wince when he did. The bass hummed like angry machinery in the background, thumping just beyond a comfortable range of hearing. The patrons seemed to love it despite that, as the dance floor was packed wall-to-wall with jerking bodies. It looked like a mass seizure, people throwing themselves without care every which way to the beat of the music.

Damon let his gaze drift over the crowd, not seeing any one face in particular but instead letting possible knots of trouble leap out at him from the crush of sweaty bodies. With the flashing strobe lights, it was hard sometimes to pick things out, but whatever

he missed the other bouncers would sort out. He could pick the softcover bouncers out from the crowd that he recognized, mostly larger people in plainclothes who moved around on the dancefloor like clubgoers. Damon, in a black polo shirt with a small silver crown embroidered on the left of the chest, was a more obvious hardcover bouncer. He and the others in uniform did a lot of standing around and looking menacing at the edges of the crowd, a visual deterrent for those who might want to cause trouble.

Damon worked a slow circuit around the dance floor. The heat generated by the number of gyrating bodies was intense enough to cause beads of sweat to drip down his forehead. Damon wiped them off and pushed a hand through his short dark hair. He was glad he'd decided to cut it. On top of being cooler, it made for less of a purchase for morons to grab on to while Damon kicked them out. Mostly the patrons followed the rules, but hey, if stupid people didn't exist he'd be out of a job. He needed all the work he could get, these days.

Damon was tempted to work through his break again, but bodily handling another human being outside of a building often left him feeling wired, so this time he gave himself the reward and slipped out the back door.

The relative chill of the autumn air in comparison to the stuffy interior of the club was a welcome change, and Damon took a greedy breath of air that didn't smell like sweat and spilled whiskey. If the "fresh" air was tinged with the slight tang of the nearby dumpster, he wasn't going to complain.

Damon fished his half-smoked pack of L&Ms out of his pocket and put a cigarette between his teeth to light it. He took one long inhale, held it, and breathed blue-gray smoke out into the night. He took one more breath, cigarette tucked between his first two fingers, and exhaled again, feeling the tension begin to drain from his limbs. It was around three a.m., full dark, the alleyway in which he sat lit only by the single hazy light fixture over the door. Some light was cast into the alley by the nearby streetlight out on the sidewalk, illuminating the sharp edges of broken glass bottles on the ground and reflecting off a dark puddle near the opening into the street. Damon's eyes caught on one reflected shine in particular, at odds with the rest. It was the metallic gleam of some kind of object on the ground, a few feet from him. It was too rounded to be broken glass, so Damon shuffled a little closer to take a look.

A small silver necklace lay on the ground with the chain broken. On the chain was threaded a green stone wrapped in silver wire. Damon sighed when he saw it. For a moment he hesitated, debating whether to leave the necklace on the ground, but it looked kind of old, and unique enough that someone might come looking for it. Damon dropped the butt of his cigarette on the ground and ground it beneath his boot before he knelt down next to the necklace. Instead of picking it up in his hands he pulled an old bandana out of his pocket and gathered up both the pendant and the broken chain in one hand, careful that none of it touched his bare skin. He straightened up and examined it in his palm.

“Who was hanging out back here with a necklace like this?” Damon murmured to himself. He paused, then heaved a resigned sigh. “Well, only one way to find out.” He reached for the necklace with his free hand. Just as his bare skin was about to touch the pendant, Damon paused, aware at once of a strange silence ringing in his ears. It took him a few seconds to place the issue— the music in the club had been turned off. Damon’s scalp prickled. He pulled a bandana out of his pocket and scooped the necklace into it, tucking them both away before he shoved back through the door into the building.

Inside, the overhead lights had been turned on. The crowd milled in evident confusion and some growing impatience. Damon spotted the source of the commotion on the opposite side of the room from them. There were four of them that Damon could see, two redheads, a short man with curly brown hair buzzed on the sides, and a woman with what appeared to be two-toned hair, black and white blonde, split down the middle of her head. The shorter of the two redheads, hair dyed a rich ruby, was dressed like a soldier, combat boots and an olive military jacket. She addressed the crowd in a sharp voice. Damon felt a spike of panic as he realized what was going on. If he tried to edge back to the door now, maybe they wouldn’t notice him leaving—

There was a shout, and a person broke away from the crowd and made a beeline for the door. The woman in combat boots gave chase. She jumped out in front of the runner, arms wide as if to catch him in a hug. The potential escapee backpedaled, but only for a moment. He turned and faced the crowd, where a few of the other bouncers

had begun to circle to cut off his escape. He fixed them with his gaze and appeared to concentrate, and two of them stumbled and fell to the ground, in convulsions. The third faltered at the sight of his comrades down, which gave the escapee time to dart around him and head back into the crowd. Combat Boots gave chase. She leapt over the downed officers, threw herself and caught the man in a flying tackle. They hit the ground, and the crowd pulled back around them. A panicked murmur rose in volume. Damon knew he should try to keep the patrons calm as they were scattering like spilled marbles, but he was frozen, staring at the two officers on the ground. They had stopped moving.

Combat Boots wrestled with the man on the floor. Damon could hear the grunts of their struggle from where he was standing, the rest of the crowd having fallen silent. They gave the two a wide berth. The woman let out a growl and gave the man a sharp hit to the jaw. He relaxed, stunned, and she managed to slap some handcuffs on him before he could recover. The man stepped forward, a frown of concentration on his face. One of his hands slapped down on the escapee's shoulder, and he jumped like someone had stung him but made no other protests. Damon tried not to let the relief show on his face as he watched Combat Boots pull the now subdued man to his feet and march him toward the door. She didn't spare a glance for the downed officers, but the woman with the split hair was talking into a cellphone, her gaze fixed on the men. The final member of the group, a girl with natural reddish-brown hair, didn't seem to be paying any attention to the proceedings. She was staring around with a slight frown on her face, as

though she had expected to see someone she recognized. She was slim, but tall, and her hair fell to her waist in a smooth curtain that swayed with her movements. She turned sharply, as if she could feel Damon's gaze on her. Their eyes met.

The girl stiffened. Her companion reached out to steady her. Damon felt his receding panic flare up again. What if they had been looking for him after all? Was he about to be taken like the man had been? The girl was pointing now, speaking to her friend, the lines of her body taut. The other girl was looking, too. Damon decided it was time to leave.

He slipped out the back, ignoring the rising commotion behind him. Damon forced himself to walk, stuffing his balled fists into his pockets. If he started running it would only look suspicious. He made it to the door and risked a quick glance behind him. No one had followed, and Damon pushed out into the night. Around the corner was chaos. The officers had parked their vehicles— large, bulky SUVs— in a loose circle around the main entrance to the club. The line that had formed was dissipating, though the milling crowd was buzzing like a kicked beehive. To make matters worse, an ambulance pulled up for the two fallen officers. The bouncers left in the club were trying to keep order, with little avail. Damon felt a stab of guilt. His brief moment of contrition was forgotten, however, as Combat Boots and her male companion exited the building, the prisoner stumbling in front of them. Damon didn't understand why the man wasn't fighting back, with the extraordinary powers he possessed. The short man still had his hand on the prisoner's shoulder. Damon held back a shudder, watching as the man was

loaded into one of the cars in front of the club, the short man sitting next to him.

Combat Boots got in the driver's seat and honked the horn. The other two girls followed soon after.

The skinny girl was scanning the crowd as she walked. Damon shrank back against the brick wall. He was certain he wasn't visible, but the girl seemed to know exactly where he was. She stared hard at the shadows in which he was hiding. Damon's breath caught in his throat. He stayed stock-still, but the girl made no move to follow him. Instead, she gave a small nod, accompanied by a smile tinged with a kind of satisfaction. The two got in the car and they all drove off. The ambulance followed, and with that, the excitement was over. The crowd let out its irritation like air escaping a balloon, and some of them began to form up again, jostling for the spots at the front of the line. Damon knew he should go back inside, keep doing his job like nothing was wrong. He took the opportunity instead to slip away before anyone noticed he was missing.

His apartment was a good twenty minute walk from the club. Damon slipped home as the sun was beginning to touch the deepest blues of the night sky, tainting them with washes of red and gold. He barely remembered to set his alarm once he got inside his apartment. He was too tired to think about how much sleep he would get, or how his boss would react to his skipping out on the rest of his shift. Instead, he flopped into bed and was out before he'd gotten under the covers.

Chapter Two

Damon was tense the first few days after the capture. He apologized profusely to his employer at the club, and it was only due to his otherwise sterling record that his boss was willing to overlook the incident. Damon was careful to keep an eye out, both in the news and in the club, for any signs of a disturbance.

A week passed with no change, and he started to relax, bit by bit. Work progressed as usual, both in the club and at his day job at the garage he lived above. Damon made it to work on time, did both of his jobs to the best of his ability, tried to save his money in the face of rent and bills and all the other little expenses of life. It was business as usual which, of course, was when everything went to hell.

Damon was awake before his shift at the garage, sipping coffee and munching on dry toast since he was out of margarine again. His phone buzzed in his pocket and Damon fished it out one-handed, taking a good slug of his drink before glancing down at the screen.

His email notifications indicated a very impersonal message entitled “Notice– Bill Due Date” from a sender whose name Damon had come to loathe and dread over the past year or so. He clicked on the notification and opened the email before his impulsive instinct to smash the phone under his heel could take hold. His grip tightened as he read the message within.

Damon de la Rosa,

The Silverstein, Silverstein and Ross Law Firm regrets to inform you that, due to your previous late payments, an additional fee must be added to your current bill. The due date is this Friday, August 22nd. The amount for your current balance is enclosed within the contents of this email. We appreciate your patie—

Damon's phone hit the couch with a soft *thud* and clattered to the floor. He didn't spare it a glance to see if it survived his vicious toss, instead sinking into a kitchen chair, knuckles white on his thighs.

He didn't have enough. Without looking, Damon knew the bill would be too much for him to pay on his own, especially not so soon. He'd just paid rent *and* his fridge had broken, resulting in a hefty visit from the repairman to prevent his food from spoiling overnight. He was well and truly broke.

It was the same every time. Damon would get just a hair too close to paying off his loans, get a little too hopeful for more, and the Silverstein Law Firm would send one of their patented debt emails, informing him just how much more he was in the hole. The irony was not lost on him that he also had no money to sue the law firm who was extorting him in the first place. Damon shoved his chair back and stalked through the few rooms in his apartment, ending up in his small bedroom. Listless and with a knot of anxiety rolling in his stomach, he paced back and forth through the rooms a few more times before throwing himself on his mattress with an angered sigh. Damon dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. He turned his head to look for his phone on his dresser, only to remember that he left his phone on the floor in the living room. Instead, his eyes

landed on a green rock laying on the nightstand. It was the pendant from earlier in the week. Damon had stuffed it in his pocket unthinkingly when he'd slipped away from the commotion a week ago, and found it in his pants later when he'd gone to do the laundry. He had deposited it with care on the bedside table and there it had sat until now.

Sighing, Damon sat up and picked the necklace up by the chain. It swung back and forth, glinting in the light. The stone wasn't solid, he realized, looking closer. With the polished sheen Damon was able to see a little bit beneath the surface into the stone itself, like the frozen surface of a lake. The stone had whorls and a branching pattern that reminded him of the roots of trees. It was wrapped several times around with a thin silver wire that also twisted up to form the loop through which the chain of the pendant was secured. Damon flexed his fingers. With a tentative hand, he reached up and grasped the pendant.

Warmth soft skin cold breeze i'm looking for something where is it-

Damon flinched, and the pendant slipped out of his hand and landed on the mattress next to him. He took a deep breath, and then another, letting the thunder of another person's heartbeat fade from his ears.

"Damn." It was always like this. The first rush of sensations was almost overwhelming, like being dunked headfirst into cold water. Still, there was nothing for it. Damon picked the damn necklace up, the least he could do was try to return it. Huffing a sigh, Damon reached out and picked up the pendant with his fingers, as if handling it

gingerly would reduce the amount of sensory input. It never did, of course, but the second time around the flood was more manageable.

Curiosity. A dead-set certainty of place, the knowledge that this was where she needed to be, right now. Shivering in the chilly wind, reaching up to touch the pendant with cold fingers. Sudden understanding, intrigue. A hand gripping the necklace, tugging it, letting it fall—

Damon frowned. “Well, *that* was weird,” he said aloud to the empty room. Who dropped a necklace on purpose? He tried to make some headway and dig deeper into the recollections he could sense, but doing so was like wading into a river with a fast current. He jumped in at a certain point and it was hard to do anything but follow the natural course of events of the necklace’s memories to their end. He replayed the piece he was shown a few more times before giving up and tossing the pendant onto the nightstand with a sigh. “Sorry, whoever you are, I can’t return your necklace to you. Though I guess you must’ve hated this thing, to drop it on purpose.”

Chapter Three

As it happened, Damon was able to return the necklace much sooner than he realized, when he looked down the next morning and saw the redhead staring back at him.

He yelped and backed away from the edge of the fire escape, his morning cigarette still dangling from his fingers. The redhead smiled. She gave a little wave. Damon gaped at her.

"Hello," the girl said.

"Holy shit," Damon breathed. He was halfway back through the window before the girl called up to him.

"I mean you no harm," she said, unperturbed at his attempted escape. "I feel this is unnecessary, as I will be inside your apartment in ten minutes."

Damon froze. "You don't say things like 'I mean you no harm' and then threaten to break in to someone's house in the next sentence," he hissed.

The girl blinked. "I did not say that. You will let me in."

"Why?"

She paused to consider this. "I do not have the answer to that."

Damon paused for another minute. "I'm not letting you in," he said, and shut the window.

He made it about three steps into his living room when there was a knock at the door. Damon froze. He stood stock still, taking shallow breaths as if she would be able to hear him. All was silent.

Then, "You will open this door in thirty seconds."

Damon jumped and swore. The girl said nothing else. Damon turned to walk back into his bedroom. He hesitated at the doorframe. He swiveled to stare at the door, chewing his lip. Finally, with another muttered curse, he strode over and threw the door open.

"Thank you," the girl said, and walked in. Damon gaped at her, shutting the door by reflex before he realized what he was doing.

"Listen, I don't want any trouble, really. I don't even know what you want."

The girl stood in the middle of the room, taking in the bare walls, the single couch Damon had pulled from the dumpster, the lack of TV or even a coffee table in the space. She was dressed simply, in gray leggings and a maroon tunic. Opals wrapped in gold wire dangled from her ears. She had a good few inches on him, and though she was wearing heels, she was still easily at least six feet tall, but skinny, with bony hands and a long nose. Damon could see freckles dusted across her cheeks under her makeup.

Almost absently she said, "I cannot say that your life will not change from this point on, because that would be untrue. I cannot even say that you will like the changes that occur, because you are not particularly friendly toward me in the future and you do not offer this information."

Damon's stomach dropped. "Who are you?"

She turned her gaze on him. Her gray eyes were strange, unfocused, seeing through him rather than taking him in directly. Damon shifted on his feet and held her gaze.

"Marianna Rice," she said at last. "And you are Damon Abaroa."

Damon jerked as though he'd been struck. "How do you know that name? Is this your..."

"My Knack, yes," Marianna responded. "I can see fate."

"You can— so like the future?" That would explain a lot. It did not make Damon feel particularly relaxed, however. He'd never heard of a person who could see the future before, and his own Knack was only geared toward items and their pasts. Damon stiffened again, several things clicking into place at once with this revelation.

"Yes, soon they will come to collect you," Marianna said, as though reading his mind. Her hands reached out, long fingers plucking at invisible air. She made a peculiar picking motion with her hands, as though twining string around her fingers. "You don't appear particularly enthusiastic at the prospect, so I suppose I should offer some consolation." She tilted her head to one side. "There was nothing you could do one way or the other. This was simply your fate."

"Sorry if I'm not exactly comforted by that," Damon snapped. He felt rooted in the spot, staring at this bizarre girl who came in to uproot his life without lifting a finger. "Are they...is it happening now?"

To his enormous relief, Marianna shook her head. "Tomorrow," she said. "We will arrive at five to collect you."

Collect, she said. As if they wouldn't strip him from everything he knew and plant him in some distant facility without a second thought. He'd seen the club bust. *Arrest* was a more appropriate term.

"And what if I'm not here?"

Marianna almost smiled at that. "As to that I cannot say, because you are."

Damon could feel the pieces of his hard-fought life slipping away from him with every word she spoke. In a desperate outburst of emotion he asked, "Then why are you *here?*"

Marianna's fingers paused. Her face smoothed and became entirely blank but for her distant stare, locked on Damon. With a careful hand she pulled something invisible from between the two of them and gave an experimental tug. Damon half-flinched, expecting a physical reaction, but he felt nothing.

"Our fates are intertwined," Marianna said, voice so soft it was hard to hear her. "I am here because I need to be here. No other reason is required." Her hands drifted to her sides, and when she blinked, her face regained some of its dreamy composure, rather than the unnerving blankness of before. Damon folded his arms.

"Fine. If that's all you have to say, then..." he gestured at the door. Marianna nodded.

“It is my time to leave, yes.” She turned to leave, pausing with her hand on the handle. “Ah, one last thing. I appreciate that you will keep my necklace safe for me.” The corners of her mouth twitched up, as if this were an amusing joke. With that she opened the door and was gone.

It took Damon a long time to unroot himself from his spot near the couch. He relocked his door, wandered into his bedroom and sat down to stare at his hands. He felt...blank. All the energy had been drained out of him. He had a shift at the club later that night, and the thought that it was going to be his last, one way or another, just made him want to sink into his mattress and never get up again.

“No one’s even gonna miss me,” Damon murmured. “No friends, no money, busting your ass for over a year and this? This is what it comes to.”

He could try to run, he supposed, but he was slowly beginning to understand Marianna’s certainty, future sight or no. Where would he go? He had no car, and not enough money on hand to buy one. Even if he got on a bus and took it as far as he could go, they were stronger, more widespread. People got taken in all the time who were better off and had better opportunities than he did. It was pointless.

“Fuck you, Horizon,” Damon muttered to the ceiling. With one hand he fished his phone out of his pocket and checked the date. If nothing else, he had one piece of business he would take care of before he was “collected.”

Chapter Four

She looked tired all the time now. Every visit, the shadows under her eyes deepened and she looked a little thinner. Her thick, black hair, highlighted with silver, usually loose around her shoulders, was tied back in a low ponytail. Her face looked gaunt, her cheekbones stark under the skin, her generous mouth pulled tight and thin with strain. Still, she managed a smile for him when he sat at the plastic table, her face lighting up as if his very presence let her forget, for a moment, where they were.

Damon was glad he could do that for her, though he never forgot. He did his best to return her smile. “Mamá, you look well,” he said, in Spanish.

She laughed and answered in kind. “Don’t patronize me, son. I am old and tired. A life sentence does very little for the constitution.”

“Knock that off. Speak English,” a guard ordered.

Damon bit back his retort. His mother, Anabel, smiled and covered his hand for a moment with her own slender fingers. Excessive contact was prohibited with prisoners. “Do not think of them, Damon. They aren’t important right now.”

Damon sighed. “How are you, Mamá? You seem...” he tried to search for the right words.

“I am living, yes. I have purpose now, options to explore. A few friends.” She waved a hand, dismissing it. Damon could see how the beige uniform hung loose on her.

"It is a bad environment for it," she confided, nodding as if this were a solemn secret.

Damon gave her a little smile. She tutted and shook her head.

"Ah, sweetheart. You worry too much, I'm fine! The food is awful. I wish they would let me cook. No one would eat slop again." She leaned back a little and took in his appearance. Her warm brown eyes sharpened, and Damon resisted his deeply-ingrained instinct to flinch.

"Are you eating?" she demanded. Damon held back a sigh.

"Yes, Mamá."

Anabel tutted. "You need to find yourself a good wife. Or husband. You'll starve without someone to feed you."

Damon groaned. "Mamá, please. I can cook."

"Pancakes are not food!"

Damon laughed despite himself. "Don't worry, I don't eat only pancakes," he assured her. He also ate cereal and the occasional peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but she didn't need to know that. His mother speared him with her gaze, searching him as if she knew the truth. She probably did, if Damon was honest with himself. She had that uncanny sixth sense all mothers did about their children.

He tried not to let that thought constrict his heart. These visits were his only chance to be subjected to her fierce brand of care. Life without the possibility of parole meant that this would always be the extent of their interaction, a few meaningless remarks exchanged over a plastic table while a blank-faced guard popping gum watched

their every move. He couldn't even speak her own language to her. Damon's hands tightened into fists. He swallowed hard and let out a slow breath, and his mother's gaze softened, sensing his internal distress. She patted his hand again and hummed a few bars of a favorite song of hers, something slow, from her home in Puerto Rico. Her voice was soothing and a hot knife of grief at the same time, twisting in his stomach.

"Ah, Damon, *mi tesoro*, don't be sad. We're still here, together, right?" She smiled, warming the core of him and wrapping him in her gentle understanding. "I am here for you, always. These are hard times, but they won't always be. You're very strong, I'm so proud of you."

Damon bit his lip. "Mamá—" he choked. His mother's eyes were wet.

"I know, sweetheart, I know." They gripped hands hard over the table, ignoring the glare the guard sent them. Her hands were cold, but strong as they had always been. He could still imagine her nails encrusted with dirt, calloused from long days in the little garden behind the house. The rough spots were still there, hiding in her palms as if in hope they would one day feel sun-warmed earth again. Damon clung to her, his last lifeline, until the sharp warning of the guard forced them apart again. He sniffed hard and scrubbed at his face. His mother let her tears dampen her cheeks. She could still smile, and she gave him one now. They spent the rest of the visiting hours catching up, speaking of his life, his work.

"Why aren't you in school?"

“Mamá, you know that’s ridiculous,” Damon said with a sigh. This was a well-traveled argument.

“Then start a fund. Save up. College is very important, and you’re such a bright boy. You have your father’s genius.”

Damon suppressed the habitual awkwardness he always felt when discussing his biological father. “So you always say, Mamá.”

“I say it because it’s true. You have his eyes, too.” Anabel’s lips curled in a soft smile, a look she often got when they spoke of his father. “It’s a shame he is not here to see you now. I think he would be proud.”

“Maybe he could chip in for once, too,” Damon said. His mother stabbed a finger at him.

“You be respectful!”

“Hard to respect someone I’ve never met!” Damon snapped back. They glared at each other. The guard kept a wary eye on them, drawn by the outburst.

After a tense moment, his mother sighed. Her shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry, Damon. Now is not the time to be fighting.”

“No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped. I know you miss him.”

“Very much,” Anabel whispered. They were silent for a moment.

“Money is a little tight right now, but I guess I can start putting something away after my next paycheck,” Damon said. His mother’s smile alone was worth the twist of guilt in his stomach at the knowledge he would never be able to keep his promise.

“Visiting hours are up.”

Damon nodded to the guard and stood up from the cheap table. Inmates were allowed two extended physical interactions, one at the beginning and end of every visit. His mother’s hair smelled like lavender. He squeezed her tight in his arms, closing his eyes and letting himself be her son again, just for a moment. They let go of each other, and the guard led him to the visiting room door. Damon looked back one last time as he stepped outside. Anabel waved. He raised his hand in farewell, and the metal door clanged shut between them.

Damon held it together all the way out to the parking lot. He tried hard to keep a grip on his emotions, but the strain of the past few days was pushing on him like he was trying to hold up a bus. The girl Marianna, the bills, his own stupid Knack. Damon shook his head hard, digging crescents into his forearms. He could feel the world closing in on him, as inevitable as a car crash.

He took the bus home, staring out the window. When he got back it was around four-thirty. Damon looked around at his apartment, bare walls, lack of furniture, empty of all other life but him, and wished he had something more to miss. He walked to his closet and pulled out an old duffle bag. He put his few belongings in it, unsure of what he would be able to take. He paused when he came to empty the nightstand next to his bed. With an irritated huff he grabbed the stone pendant sitting on it and tossed it in the bottom of the bag. With a stab of bitterness, he hoped it would get crushed on the way.

Damon sat down on the couch to wait, with his single bag at his side. He felt calmer than he had expected, though his palms were slicked with sweat. He gave himself one last opportunity to consider making a run for it before pushing the thought away with a sigh. He was outnumbered, in more ways than one. Better to just go in and see if he could make a case for himself than fight and get nothing for his trouble.

At five on the dot there was a knock on the door. Damon got up to open it without any fanfare. There were three of them waiting for him. One of them was Marianna. The one in the middle spoke first.

“Damon Abaroa?” She was even fiercer up close, her red hair igniting around her head in the afternoon light from the windows. Her combat boots were scuffed like she’d just come from kicking some guy in the head. She was wearing a black cutoff shirt with some kind of rock band on it. Her arms were bare. Damon could see lines and lines of intricate black tattoos winding their way up to her shoulders. She caught his gaze and shot him a feral grin. The expression didn’t reach her eyes, which were accentuated by eyeliner sharp enough to kill a man. Damon felt sweat slide down his back.

On the left was Marianna. She nodded to him, and Damon was beginning to recognize the instinctive urge to scream whenever he saw her. It looked to be only the three of them, but the fact that they were here at all was the absolute worst sign he could imagine. He did his best to collect himself.

“It’s been a while since I’ve gone by that name, but that’s me. What do you need?”

“Don’t play dumb with us,” Combat Boots snorted. Her companion elbowed her in the ribs none too kindly. She offered Damon a much sweeter smile.

“Sorry about Julianna. She’s the stick in this relationship.”

“Oh yeah? And what are you?”

She grinned at him and flipped two-toned hair over her shoulder. “Oh honey, I’m the carrot.”

Damon couldn’t argue with that. She certainly dressed the part, in electric purple pumps and a comfortably low-cut shirt and pencil skirt combo. Her hair really was split down the middle, black on one half and white on the other side, but on closer inspection Damon was relatively certain it was a wig. Still, she cut an equally attractive and intimidating figure, and she knew it. Her red lips curled into a smile as she put a hand out.

“Doctor Alexandria Fey, at your service. But you can call me Alex.” She winked. “We’re representatives of the Horizon Company.” Damon stared at her hand for a moment before reaching out to shake. Almost immediately he felt...different. His initial antagonism faded somewhat, and he almost cracked a smile.

“Alex,” Julianna said. There was a warning note in her voice. Alex hummed.

“Too soon? Or too much?”

“Too much. He’s loopy.”

“Well, let’s get in the door first before I pull the plug.” Alex turned a dazzling smile on Damon, which he returned with ease. “Sweetie, could you let us in? It’s rude to conduct business on a doorstep like this.”

“Oh! Sure thing.” Damon stepped aside and let the three women in. He closed the door behind them and opened his hands. “*Estás en tu casa*, hey?”

“Yeah, sure, whatever. Alex.” Julianna gestured to Damon. Alex rolled her eyes and held her hand out to Damon. He grinned and placed his hand in her own. The moment his skin met hers, the pleasant contentment he’d felt at having these people in his apartment dropped away like ripping off a bandaid. Damon snatched his hand away and backpedaled until he was against the far wall.

“What did you—”

Alex winced a little. “Sorry, sweetie, I went a little hard on you. I usually have to up the dose on people we come to visit, they’re very...hostile.”

“Was that your Knack?”

Alex smiled. “Sure was, darling. You should be all back to normal, now.”

Damon scoffed. “If you think that was gonna make me trust you in *any* way, then—”

“We don’t care if you trust us,” Julianna interrupted. “You’re coming with us one way or another. Lucky for you, you’ve got options.”

Damon didn't respond. Marianna took this moment to step forward. She smoothed her hands down over her sundress. In her white ballet flats and half-tied back hair, all together the three of them had to be the oddest trio he'd ever seen.

"What my companions are trying to say is...we can help you."

"With what?"

"Your debts," Marianna said, as gently as possible. Damon still flinched. "Horizon is a very rich and influential company. I, too, was once in a position where I was unable to take care of myself. Horizon took me in, offered me shelter and a way to live that I previously could not have even considered."

Damon snorted. "Yeah, you sound like a real nice poster girl."

Both Julianna and Alex stiffened, but Marianna opened her hands, palms up. "It is only the truth. Without them I would have died."

Damon shifted a little and folded his arms. "Well, I'm not in danger of dying. Aren't you just going to arrest me now or something?"

"Like we said, you have options," Alex took a turn to step in. "We can help you if you help us."

"With what?"

Alex gestured to the space between the two of them. "With this."

"I'm not a cop."

"Neither are we," Alex said with a laugh. "We're more like...agents, I suppose. Now, you know the law. Unregistered Potentials or Initiates over the age of ten have to

come in. Of course, since the Potential Gene was discovered, it's only been ten years, plenty easy for people to slip through the cracks of a system that wasn't fully prepared yet. You are an example of that." Alex shrugged. "So was our friend at the club a while back. People don't always respond as calmly as you do. Many try to slip us."

"Which is where people like you and Marianna come in," Julianna said. "You're an unregistered Initiate, but your Knack is something we could use in our line of work."

Damon bit back the instinctive urge to deny it— he could see they were past that stage now. Instead he tried for casual dismissal. "If you know what it does, then you know more than me. It's been nothing but a pain to me since I got it."

Marianna spoke again. "You will tell me it allows you to see into the past history of an object when you touch it. At this time you cannot control it, but you will learn. It is how you will be able to return my necklace to me."

Shit. She had him there. Damon sighed. "I still don't see what I get out of this."

"Well, first of all, there's no penalization like what you'd normally find for someone unregistered. That ranges from fines to jail time, depending on the severity." Julianna shrugged. "Also, you'll get help with your bills, which you, uh, seem to need." She paused and gave a meaningful look around the room. Damon tensed, but said nothing. "More than just help, really. We'll pay them off."

Damon opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He had to lean against the wall for fear of his legs giving out.

"All...of it?"

Julianna nodded, like this was a minor detail. “Yeah. Whatever you’ve got, I’m sure we can handle it.”

Damon brought a shaky hand to his mouth. He breathed in, and exhaled slowly. The words almost wouldn’t sink in. *All* his debts? The lawyers, the loan he took out, the bills he was late on...

“You could help your mother,” Mari said. Damon raised his eyes to look at her. There was the faintest twist of sympathy to her lips.

“In return, you work for us. Good pay, better benefits.” Julianna lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Seems simple to me.”

Damon bit his lip. “Do I...do I get any time to think about it?”

“No.” The answer was flat and uncompromising. Damon had suspected as much, but tension still coiled in his gut. A choice that would change his life forever, and they wanted him to make it in the next few minutes.

He stared down at his hands, blinking in some surprise when he found them curled into fists at his side. Damon took a deep breath and relaxed them. In truth, he should probably feel angrier. While most people— himself included— would balk at the idea of working for the very people he’d been trying to avoid for almost three years, Damon knew without a doubt that the second they offered him this choice, he would take it. What made him hesitate was that he knew *they* knew that as well. Despite, even, the knowledge that the other shoe had to drop sometime, Damon squared his shoulders and looked up at the three women.

“Fine. I’m in.

Chapter Five

“Sure you’re not just taking me out to the woods to kill me and dump my body somewhere?”

“Shut up,” was Julianna’s stoic reply.

Damon’s mouth twitched despite himself. He leaned back against the dark leather and watched the forest creep closer and closer to the narrow road until the overhanging boughs of pines were just short of caressing the car. Julianna paid no mind to the woodland sentinels, pressing on the gas and urging the onyx Escalade onward to their destination. It seemed she was a woman with expensive taste, if her choice in vehicles was anything to go by. Alex and Marianna had taken off in a different vehicle from the one they were in, a wasp-yellow Charger with black racing stripes and a price tag that made him want to weep.

Damon hadn’t realized just how secluded this facility was meant to be. A part of him prickled at the idea of being so far from society, and a convenient escape, but at the same time, it made sense to physically separate potentially dangerous individuals from the rest of the city. He thought back to the takedown in the club, the ease with which the Initiate man had reduced his attackers to cringing bodies on the floor. He could see why it was better to keep some of these people away from where they could hurt others.

Damon turned his attention back to Julianna. She was wearing a cutoff shirt despite the chill, and her arms were corded with strength. Her build on the whole was thick with muscle, as though she trained for raw power instead of leanness and speed. The image was only heightened by the tattoos. Getting a closer look at them, Damon was positive they had something to do with her Knack. They twined from her wrists all the way up both of her arms to disappear into her shirt. There were no images, only a kind of script that definitely wasn't English. It was frustrating to look at, as though it were about to resolve itself into words, but their meaning escaped him. Also, while Damon wasn't an expert in tattoos, he was fairly sure they weren't supposed to be ridged and bumpy. It looked a lot like scar tissue. If that were true, what sort of injury would she have had to sustain to get these bizarre scars? And why the tattoos to cover them?

"You can't touch them." Julianna's deadpan comment broke the silence. Damon pulled back, feeling a bit sheepish. He scratched his head.

"Uh, sorry. I was just curious. They don't look like any tattoos I've ever seen before."

"No, they wouldn't."

Damon waited, but she offered no more. He risked a question. "Do they have something to do with your Knack?"

Julianna's eyes slid over to him. "Yes."

"...what is it?"

Julianna stared at him. The mottled hazel of her gaze gave nothing away. After a long moment, she turned back to the road. "Not your problem."

Damon snorted. "You're about as friendly as a cactus, you know?"

The smallest hint of a smirk flickered at the corner of her mouth. "Your compliments would melt any girl's heart."

"Oh, come on. As if you care about men being nice to you."

The smirk widened. "We're here."

It came out from between the trees like a vision; tall, iron gates flanked by impassive stone walls twice the height of a grown man. Despite their antique appearance, both gate and wall were well-kept, and the security cameras mounted in discreet locations around the entrance belied tighter security than the ornate entrance would suggest. The cameras swiveled to watch their approach. Julianna was apparently so well-known she didn't even use the buzzer next to the entryway; she just rolled the window down and leaned out a little, pushing her sunglasses down her nose as she did so. After a moment, the gates rolled open on oiled hinges. The Escalade rolled through, and Damon tried not to let his instinctive trapped feeling get to him as the gates swung shut behind them. The trees backed off here as the road widened and became more well-maintained. Damon began to see flashes of buildings from between the trees. At last, they pulled out of the forest entirely and onto a long driveway, lined with delicate shrubbery. The drive led up and around the back of an incredible mansion. Damon raised his eyebrows.

"I'm a regular Annie, huh?" he murmured, eyeing the antique architecture and what appeared to be at least four floors of windows. The grand building dominated the area so totally that it took him a moment to even notice their surroundings. The road they were on curved around the back of the mansion, and as Julianna followed it Damon took stock of the area. It looked like the main road circled around the whole of the building, and other side roads branched off like the spokes of a wheel. These were clearly newer additions; they passed by two nondescript, two-floor buildings that Julianna pointed out as dorms for any students attending the school that year.

"Most of the resources here go toward research and development, but we still take students every year. Classrooms are in the main building."

"And what's your job? Art teacher?" Damon grinned. Julianna leveled him with an unimpressed stare.

"I'm head of security and training. I bring in new people for the collection work, and I handle the outdoor exercises with the kids when they get a chance to work with their Knacks a little."

"Collection? Really?"

Julianna shrugged. "We only 'collect' those who pose a danger to society. Everyone else, we pay a visit. "

Damon shook his head. "What've I gotten myself into?"

"You got yourself into a job that helps people." Damon looked up, surprised to hear the conviction in Julianna's voice. "We do good work here. These kids would have

nowhere else to go without us. We help them understand themselves, and we keep the rest of the public safe from dangerous people.”

Damon cocked an eyebrow. “That’s probably the longest phrase I’ve heard you string together.”

The mask slammed back down over Julianna’s face, and she gave a grunt. “I’m going to take you to R&D. They’ll get you registered and we can begin to assess your usefulness.”

Damon offered a nod, and they drove the rest of the way in silence. It wasn’t far to go; with the dense pine forest cleared out of this area the roads became much less winding. The grass was neatly trimmed, and a row of dark green hedges lined the white concrete roads. The money they spent on landscaping alone must be exorbitant. In fact, as he watched they passed by a crew of people in khaki uniforms, blowing fallen leaves off the lawns and scraping them into bags to be towed away in little Gator carts.

Unlike the entrance to the place itself, the building they were headed to now was easily seen from a distance. It had none of the classic, elegant feel of the main buildings. This was a construction of glass and steel, shining like a razor blade against the backdrop of forest greens and browns. Julianna parked the Escalade in a little parking lot next to the lab- there was no way it could be anything else, with its modern construction- and they got out.

The inside echoed the sharpness of its exterior; it was all white walls and sleek, economical black furniture. Damon bet the floors were cleaner than most people’s

plates. The receptionist at the desk gave Julianna a nod as she passed by. The big woman didn't even pause, just gave a small dip of the head in acknowledgement and continued on with Damon following in her wake. He figured there were few people in a place like this who wouldn't recognize the six-foot redhead with her tattoos on display like war paint. She was the kind of person you remembered pretty quickly.

With sure strides, Julianna led him past a few glass-sided labs full of people in white coats looking in microscopes and hunched over computers with dark circles under their eyes. The equipment was spotless, strange contraptions Damon couldn't even begin to guess the function of. Everyone looked important, and strode around as if they had an urgent mission to be on somewhere else. After a while Damon stopped trying to understand what was going on and just let the organized chaos wash over him. His only purpose at the moment was to follow behind Julianna anyway, and he thought he was doing a fairly good job. Julianna had an apparent familiarity with the place, and strode straight through the corridors without stopping. At one point, they brushed past a set of doors that Damon could hear music coming from. It sounded an awful lot like some kind of punk band, to his bemusement. He didn't get a chance to stop and ask, however, as Julianna reached a door with a plaque that read "EXAMINATION ROOM" next to it.

"Sit in here and I'll send someone for you," Julianna instructed, opening the door for him. Inside was a standard medical examination room, complete with a table covered in the strange crinkly white paper.

Damon did as he was told and waited until Julianna had shut the door on him before taking a seat on the examination table. The paper crinkled under his weight, and Damon tried to quell the twisting in his gut. It was much too late to back out now.

A few minutes passed, during which Damon fiddled with his phone— no service, not surprising for as far out as they were—and kicked his legs against the counter, feeling very much like a kid again and not enjoying the sensation. Finally, there was a soft knock at the door and a woman stepped in, holding a clipboard. She had a disgruntled furrow in her brow, like she'd been interrupted during something important. She was wearing a lab coat, but underneath it she had on a pair of overalls, the knees stained with dirt. Her boots, mostly clean, still had a few streaks of mud and loam on them, like she'd just come from outdoors. Her hands, at least, were scrubbed clean of dirt, with short, well-trimmed nails. Her silvery hair was pulled back in a low bun, and there was an eyepatch over one eye. Leather, not the plain white surgical ones. She didn't bother to introduce herself.

"I've just got a few routine questions and then I'll draw some blood and send you on your way." She spoke with a gruff, matter-of-fact tone. Damon nodded, eager to get out of there and willing to comply with whatever that meant.

What followed was certainly not "a few" questions, nor were they routine. She wanted to know everything— what was his Knack, when did he Initiate, how did it happen, what kind of skill did he possess with it. Damon answered to the best of his ability— some kind of memory related Knack, focused solely on physical items;

September 22nd, 2011; very little skill at all, it was more like the Knack happened to him than he actively controlled it. As for how he Initiated, Damon flatly refused to answer. Those memories– the blood, the scene in the living room, the speed with which he was packed off and shipped off to a foster home– were not details he was willing to share freely. The doctor gave him a long, stony look before shrugging and moving on to her next inquiry. He was there for about an hour total– the blood drawing took less time than all the questions combined. Once she was done, the doctor took a long look at her clipboard and nodded.

“You’re done. An ID card will be issued to you, keep it on your person, you need it to enter and exit the Estate as well as prove your identity to the authorities if needed.” She opened the door and ushered him out with nothing so much as a thank you. Damon found himself outside the R&D facility somewhat disoriented and more than a little drained by the rigorous grilling. He checked his phone and found that it was a little after seven. The air was cool against his skin.

“You survived, I see.” Julianna’s voice made him jump. Damon swung around to find her leaning against the wall to his right, arms crossed. Had she waited for him? The notion was bizarre, coming from what he knew of her, and Damon wasn’t about to ask for motivation on the decision.

“Friendly staff you’ve got here,” Damon said. “I think she missed the vein on purpose once or twice for that blood sample.”

“Yadira never misses.” Julianna pushed herself off the wall and took a few steps toward him to look him over. “Training should take about a month, depending on your skill level and when I deem you adequate enough to be out on missions. You can stay in one of the dorms until training is complete. There are three meals a day at eight, one and seven, in the main building. Since you are no longer in school, any time that is not allotted to your training is your own. You may wander the grounds as you wish. There are no off-limits areas to you unless otherwise instructed. We’ll begin tomorrow. Clear?”

“Yessir.”

Julianna stared at him. She looked to be evaluating something about him, her hazel eyes sparking in the last of the light. When she turned away, Damon wasn’t sure if he’d passed or not. “Very well. Dismissed.”

Damon resisted the urge to snap a salute. Julianna gave a nod and melted into the oncoming twilight. Damon checked his phone again. If he hurried he could catch dinner, but he didn’t feel hungry. Instead, he walked alone from the lab down the road. It wasn’t far to the dorms, and he would rather walk than ask for a ride. The short garden lights were coming on, providing enough illumination coupled with the evening light for Damon to appreciate his surroundings. Despite his chaotic circumstances, he felt a strange sense of peace. He had chosen a course, and he would follow it through, for good or for ill. He’d been living for so long without direction, going from paycheck to paycheck, his only immediate goal to pay off his debts and keep himself from starving. To be thrust into this new world all of a sudden, his old responsibilities stripped away,

was a heady feeling. There was a lot about the circumstances that weren't ideal, but he knew he'd been in worse places. All he had to do was keep his head above water, no sweat. Damon smiled a little as the lights of the dormitory came into view. He could do this.

Chapter Six

“Good morning, sunshine.”

Damon jerked at the closeness of the voice in his ear. He scrambled back in the darkness, nearly falling off his mattress in disorientation. There was a low laugh, and Julianna flipped the lights on. Damon bit out a groan and threw an arm over his eyes in a vain attempt to shield his vision from the bright intrusion. Julianna ignored his obvious discontent and prodded his ribcage with the toe of a tennis shoe. She was already dressed for the day, in another cutoff tank top and a pair of loose fitting sweats that tightened around the ankle. Her long red hair was tied back in a simple French braid. She wasn't wearing any makeup, but that didn't negate the sharpness of her hazel eyes. She gave him another sharp jab to the side.

“C'mon, sleeping beauty. Time for practice.” Julianna stood back with arms crossed as Damon attempted to get himself into a sitting position. Her lips twitched in amusement at his disorientation, but otherwise she let no emotion slip through. She jerked her thumb over her shoulder and turned to leave. “Be in the hall in five or I'll be back.” She made no mention of what she would do, but Damon had no intentions of finding out. He jumped out of bed and dug through his still-unpacked bag. He decided to follow Julianna's example, grabbing a gray t-shirt and sweatpants. His only pair of sneakers were worn thin and dirty, but he pulled them on and jogged down the stairs to meet Julianna at the door.

The sun had barely touched the sky with hints of gold as Damon stepped outside. He filled his lungs with the damp morning air, still touched with an autumn chill that would be burned away as the sun rose higher in the sky. Mist clung to the grass and blurred the edges of buildings, enveloping the campus in a dreamlike softness. Judging by how empty the grounds were, it was probably around six a.m. or earlier. Damon tried to blink the blariness out of his eyes and dropped into a few stretches at a motion from Julianna. They stretched in silence, Damon testing the limberness of muscles he hadn't given much thought to exercising since he was in high school. Beside him, Julianna was slipping easily in and out of poses that made Damon's muscles twitch in sympathy. Despite the relative strength evident in her build, she apparently kept up on flexibility, too. Julianna flicked an assessing glance at him while folded over her stretched out legs, forehead touching her shins. Damon tried to look like touching his toes wasn't a big deal, when in truth he could feel his tendons burning. Julianna pulled herself up off the ground and nodded at the pathway that curved away into the woods ahead of them.

"Follow me." With that, she took off at a steady jog. Damon took a deep breath and followed, trying to remember the proper form and breathing techniques from distant track practices. They ran in silence, following the slow curve of the paved drive around the back of the large mansion in the center of the grounds. The Estate was set up in such a way that the original building was at the center of a loose circle of other facilities that were added after the property was purchased by Horizon. Directly behind the center mansion was the Research and Development building that Damon had been

taken to the day before. To the right, behind him now, were the dormitories in which students were housed. Although not technically a student himself, Damon had been given a room on the top floor, a mostly empty floor apparently reserved for people in his circumstance. His room had never been used, as the furniture lacked any of the echoes of a lived-in space he had learned to check for in a new area. Often if he was unprepared, unexpected visions became overwhelming. After a few embarrassing instances with doorknobs and sitting on crowded public transport, Damon learned to be cautious. He wore long sleeves and tried not to touch things with his bare skin if he didn't know what it would do to him. It made summers unbearable, but it was better than being shoved into a stranger's private feelings all the time.

Damon had yet to see anyone else in the other rooms, but he assumed he would meet his new neighbors eventually. He hoped Julianna wasn't one of them. He tried imagining her as his next door neighbor, wandering out in a bathrobe in the mornings to collect the mail. He snorted under his breath. Julianna shot him a sharp glance, but said nothing.

The pace they set wasn't too harsh, but after fifteen minutes Damon was sweating despite the chill. Julianna ran with an effortless grace, long strides eating up the paved ground beneath their feet. Damon trailed a little behind her, keeping his breathing measured and his pace even. They had entered the depths of the forest now; the pines grew together overhead, blocking out the watery sunlight and plunging the path into speckled shadow. Damon nearly stumbled as the paved path ended

unexpectedly, moving to a dirt trail that continued on into the woods. Damon squinted down the path and slowed a little. Julianna turned and raised her eyebrows at him, one hand perched on her hip.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing. This is just...creepy as hell? Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. We’re almost there.”

Damon resisted the urge to roll his eyes and took off after Julianna as she sped down the path. She quickly ran out of his view, leaving Damon to run by himself. He realized that the woods was thinning around him, and ahead light was shining through the trees. There was a sense of great space, and when he emerged at last from the darkness of the forest, he realized why. The trees cut off abruptly at the end of the path, stretching off around him on either side to form a wide circle in the middle of the forest. It looked to be at least a football field long, perhaps two. It was hard to tell from where Damon was standing. The space was dominated on either side by two tall curves of white stone that followed the edge of the clearing, stretching beyond the tops of the dark pines. They connected on one side to form a large semicircle with one open edge to let people into the center. Julianna was standing in the middle of the large arena, stretching again. She straightened as he jogged up. She looked completely unruffled, to his irritation. She looked unimpressed at his weak attempts at hiding his fatigue from their run. Damon ignored her and did a few cooldown stretches.

“What is this place?” he asked as he bent over his toes.

“It’s the training ground we use for kids who need to stretch their legs a little. We need a lot of space for those whose Knacks are a little more large scale than some. It’s also become the favorite Friday night place for the unsanctioned sparring matches I’m not supposed to know about.”

“Sparring matches? Kids are fighting each other here? Isn’t that, I don’t know, super fucking dangerous?”

Julianna shrugged. “Maybe, but they seem to be pretty in control of it. I’ve snuck in before to watch, and the older kids take charge and keep things in order. No blood, but the betting is crazy.” Julianna flashed a grin. “Besides, if we tried to shut it down, they’d just move on to something else. This way I can keep an eye on things without actually having to interfere.”

“Huh. Guess so.” Damon cracked his neck and straightened up. “So, what are we doing out here?”

Julianna took a few steps back and settled into a stance, fists up. Her grin took on a razor edge. “Well, basically, I’m gonna beat your ass into the ground and you’re gonna try to defend yourself for as long as you can.”

“Oh, fucking super. When do we—”

Julianna’s first strike would have caught him in the teeth had Damon not stumbled back out of surprise in the last second. She followed it up with a jab to the stomach that he wasn’t entirely able to avoid. While he was off balance, her foot snaked

out and hit him in the knees, taking advantage of his momentum and putting him neatly on his ass in the dirt. Damon wheezed and tried to get his breath back.

“Jesus Christ. I thought you were gonna be bad, but I wasn’t expecting this bad. Aren’t you a bouncer or something?”

Julianna’s face was alight with energy, making her look uncharacteristically joyful. She reached a hand out to help Damon up, which he accepted with bad grace.

“You don’t fight as a bouncer; you shut down fights,” Damon muttered. “And I wasn’t ready.”

“Well, the world isn’t gonna wait for you to get your fists up, kid. C’mon, again.”

Damon was somewhat better prepared this time for the fists that came at him like rocks. Julianna put her strength to good use, delivering jarring strikes and deflecting his meager attempts at an offense with ease. She fought with a focused intensity, her punches and kicks well-placed and accurate. Time and time again Damon found himself on his ass, unable to keep up. He had been in a bar brawl or two during his time as a bouncer, sure, but sidestepping wasted assholes was nothing compared to this level of elite skill. He’d have better luck taking on a SEAL team.

Usually, real fights were quick, dirty affairs that never took more than a few minutes at most and involved a lot of stomping on limbs and punching faces. After a stretch of ten minutes where Damon hadn’t been knocked off his feet once, he realized Julianna was playing with him. She kept just out of reach, forcing him to come after her and formulate an attack. She would dodge his strikes and slip past his guard to deliver a

few of her own, though nothing as fierce as the first few encounters. It felt as though she was testing his stamina, now, feeling him out through a long fight to see what his limits were. Damon felt pretty sure he had reached his after about half an hour of this, though Julianna showed no signs of slowing. There was a slight sheen of sweat on her skin, but she clearly wasn't feeling the effects of the exercise in the way he was.

"Duck!" Julianna shouted, left foot rotating in place as her right leg came swinging at him. Damon hunched instinctively, and Julianna's leg caught him just below the knees. He could hear her laughing as he put his hands out to catch himself. There was a rustle in the grass in front of him, and with no time to get up, Damon threw himself to one side as Julianna's foot came down where his back would have been. He heard her surprised huff of breath, and before he could think about it he grabbed at her ankle and pulled.

What he was expecting was for Julianna to come crashing down on her ass, for once. He didn't get to see whatever happened, though, as the toe of her shoe flipped up and kicked him in the nose. He let go of the ankle to grab at his face with both hands, the pain surprising enough to blank out his vision for a second. He heard Julianna curse under her breath, and a strange scraping noise. When Damon was able to look up, Julianna was upright on her feet, looking down at him with her lips pursed.

"That was almost good," she told him. "Maybe we can work on that later. Your nose is bleeding."

"Ya think?"

Julianna ignored him and helped him to his feet. "This way." She led him toward one end of the stone arena and around the back, where a door was set into the wall, painted white to match the rock. Julianna pulled it open and ushered Damon into the bathroom inside. It was dim in comparison to the brightness of outdoors, and Damon blinked a few times as he maneuvered over to the sinks set into the wall. His nose was, in fact, bleeding, though it appeared to have slowed on the way over. It was swollen and red, but it didn't look broken, which Damon was thankful for. He washed the blood off his hands and grabbed a wet paper towel to dab the dried blood off his face.

"Gonna need to ice that."

"Thanks, Doctor. I figured." Damon rolled his eyes at Julianna in the mirror before stopping. "Hey, your hands are bleeding."

"Hm?" Julianna looked at her palms. "Ah, shit. I forgot."

"You forgot?" Damon repeated as Julianna walked over to a sink and turned it on cold. She stuck her hands under the water and rubbed gently at her hands, turning the water pink. Damon thought he could see some kind of circular mark on her palms. "Hey, did you fall? Did I actually succeed in knocking you over?"

Julianna ignored him in favor of coaxing some soap out of the nearest dispenser. Damon grinned. "Almost makes being kicked in the face worth it."

Julianna smirked. "Sure, whatever you say. Let me see your nose."

Damon backed up a few steps when Julianna turned toward him. "Uh, no thanks, I'm good. Whatever you're going to do, I like my nose where it is."

“Don’t be a baby. I just want to make sure it’s not broken.”

“Babies would also cry if someone twisted their broken nose around.”

“So it is broken? Too bad, guess I’m gonna have to set it, too.”

“No! No, it’s fine. It’s a little swollen but I’m good.”

“Then you shouldn’t have a problem with me double-checking,” Julianna said.

There was no trace of mischievousness in her manner, not that Damon could imagine her that way. She cocked one brow at him and held her hands up. Damon sighed and inched closer, taking the already-warm paper towel off his nose. The skin was hot and tight, and throbbed in time with his pulse. In comparison, Julianna’s hands were cool as they skimmed the edges of his nose. Her hands were gentler than he would have expected in probing his face, though he still felt the sting. His eyes watered again.

“Ow.”

“Shut up.” Julianna pressed her fingers to the bridge of his nose. Damon yelped and pulled away.

“Ow!”

“You’re fine, you wimp.” Julianna shook her head. “The swelling is pretty bad, but I don’t think it’s broken. You’ll know for sure in an hour or so after you’ve had time to ice it.” She sighed. “I was gonna work with you until breakfast, but I’m not interested in another lecture from Yadira on leaving injuries unattended.”

“Uh, who?”

“You'll find out soon enough. Come on, even babies can handle a few laps up and down the steps before we go.”

Damon swallowed a groan and followed obediently as Julianna exited the bathroom and directed him into jogging up and down the set of stairs on one end of the stadium. Damon ignored the burn in his legs and lungs and counted himself grateful he didn't have any more beatings in store from Julianna today. Between the two, he'd pick the stairs every time. To her credit, Julianna didn't stand around watching him run. Instead, she spent her time in between berating him into moving faster by engaging in some complicated form of martial arts down on the grass, flowing and twisting with a speed and grace that let on just how easy she'd been going on Damon. He had a very long way to go, that much was certain. Once Julianna started doing handstands, though, he had to say something.

“Now you're just showing off!” he yelled from his position at the top of the stadium stairs. Julianna had her back to him, legs extended over her head in a perfect line. He saw her pause. Then, with deliberate slowness, Julianna extended one hand out to her side, maintaining her perfect posture for almost a full ten seconds before collapsing into a neat somersault and coming up on her feet, looking completely unruffled by the whole experience. Damon sighed and kept running.

He judged about thirty minutes had passed before Julianna deemed him miserable enough to end their training for the day and head back to the main part of the Estate. She lead him toward the R&D building he'd been in the day before, but instead

of entering the building, she ducked around the back, following a pathway set with large flagstones. This led to a large garden, tucked away in a low-fenced area Damon would never have guessed was hidden behind the more modern construction of glass and steel.

By comparison, the garden looked archaic. The fence was simple wood slats, with a shed on the right-hand side, presumably for gardening tools and fertilizer. The plants themselves were well looked after, set in neat rows and carefully free of any spots or dead leaves. There wasn't a weed in sight. This was all due to the gardener herself, who was crouched a few feet from them with her hands covered in dirt up to her elbows. It didn't seem as though she'd heard their approach. A thick silver braid hung over one shoulder, nearly brushing the ground as she worked. There were a few tools on the ground beside her, as well as a pile of weeds she had already uprooted. Damon couldn't help the pang that hit him, taking in the sight. It was more familiar to him than breathing, the wet scent of dirt in his nose, the way the plants bobbed in the gentle breeze, even the tools laid out to one side, reflecting silver light from the sparkling late summer sun. His mother had grown many different types of plants, mostly vegetables and some fruit, with flowers in the beds in front of their house and marigolds around the edges of the garden to keep the bugs out. He didn't recognize many of these plants with the exceptions of a few herbs like thyme and basil, but the atmosphere was still the same.

To Damon's surprise, Mari was also present in the garden. She sat on a wooden bench to their left, her back to the dense pine forest that began a scant few feet from the garden's perimeter. There was a book in her lap, and she seemed just as unaware of their approach as the gardener did.

"Mari!" Julianna called, stopping short at the garden gate. Mari looked up at the sound of her name, blinking a few times as if emerging from a deep sleep.

"Julianna," she said, voice warm. Then her gaze fell on Damon, and one brow quirked upward. "You are injured."

"Didn't you already know that?"

Mari paused. "That is not how it works," she said after a moment. Damon snorted under his breath, regretting the action when it brought a fresh twinge of pain to his nose.

"Is she...?" Julianna gestured at her ears, presumably in reference to the gardener, who had given no indication of noticing their approach. Mari shook her head.

"One moment." She rose from the bench and set her book down in order to make an exaggerated wave that got the gardener's attention. She followed this with several swift gestures that Damon didn't recognize. The woman set her tools down and straightened, finally looking over her shoulder at her guests. Damon blinked in surprise. It was the doctor who had done his registration physical the day before. Her uncovered right eye, a pale blue, zeroed in on Damon immediately. She turned back to Mari and

made a few more gestures, to which Mari responded in kind before proceeding to a door set in the back of the R&D building, which the garden was tucked up against.

“Was that sign language?” Damon asked Julianna. She nodded.

“Yadira was born deaf. She leaves her hearing aids out while she works sometimes. Keeps people from bothering her all the time.”

Mari emerged again from the research building, carrying something in one hand. Yadira accepted the hearing aids from her with a smile and fitted them in her ears. Hearing restored, she turned with purpose and strode over to the gate.

“Stop injuring the new kids, Julianna,” she said by way of greeting.

“Oh, c’mon, you haven’t even heard what happened yet—”

Yadira pushed the gate open and beckoned to Damon, who stepped forward with some hesitation. Yadira grabbed him by the chin and turned his head from side to side, her single eye trained on his nose. Though the lines on her face were hard with concentration, she was quite gentle, probing along the edge of the swelling with a feather-light touch.

“Unlikely it’s broken,” she announced. “Painful, though. Come inside and you can ice it.”

Damon nodded and followed behind Yadira as she used the back door to enter the research building. Inside was another lab, this one more clearly set up with patients in mind. There were a few examining tables on the right side of the room, and a few labs and a long counter on the left, filled with equipment. Damon thought he could see

through a set of double doors into what looked like an operating room, but he wasn't certain. Yadira pointed at one of the tables, and Damon hopped up, feeling very much like a child at the pediatrician. Yadira bustled into another room while Mari drifted closer, curiosity apparent.

"May I ask what occurred?"

Damon offered a sheepish grin. "Lost a fight with Julianna's foot," he admitted. "It was almost my first win, though."

"Not even close," Julianna deadpanned from a chair at one of the lab tables.

"Oh, come on. I had you! You fell, I saw the cuts on your hands from catching yourself. For a second there, I could've won."

"Too bad you felt the need to get up close and personal with my Pumas. And I didn't fall."

"But, what about the—"

At this point, Yadira returned with an ice pack and a sharp glare directed at Julianna. She passed the ice pack to Damon.

"Put this on your face, twenty minutes on, twenty off. Should reduce the swelling enough so that I can take a second look and confirm it's not broken. You," she said, jabbing a finger at Julianna, "Sit here." The finger stabbed at the examining table across from Damon's. Julianna opened her mouth to protest, but Yadira's mouth settled into a taut line, brooking no arguments. Julianna pursed her lips and sat down on the table with a sigh.

"This is really unnecessary," she informed Yadira's back. The doctor was bent over a drawer, gathering supplies. "It's not that bad, you know it isn't."

"Oh? And what happens if we leave it untreated, hm? Sure, once and you could probably get away with it. But you go out into the field, aggravate that exact wound over and over again every time you use it, with no chance to let it heal or even a disinfectant to keep the bacteria out. Soon you've got an infection, you die in a back alley of sepsis, and then what would I have to tell your father? 'Oh, sorry, sir, it was just a little boo-boo, and I, a licensed medical professional, decided to stop treating some of your only child's wounds because they 'weren't that bad'." Yadira dumped her supplies on the counter and folded her arms, fixing Julianna with a narrowed eye. "Hands," she demanded.

Julianna stared back for another second, the desire to argue clear in her face. Then the tension drained out of her shoulders and she held her hands out, palm up. From where he was sitting Damon could see two perfectly round red wounds in her palms, like something had been pushed through her hands from underneath the skin. They looked worse than simple abrasions from hitting the ground, more like punctures.

The wounds were still weeping red, which Yadira dabbed at with a piece of gauze before spreading a pasty greenish mixture on each hand and wrapping them with more gauze, securing them tightly with a practiced knot. Work completed, she gave Julianna's knee a pat and stepped aside, letting her slide back to the ground. Julianna gave a grudging nod, to which Yadira rolled her good eye and flashed a few hand signs at Mari.

“I do not believe she would appreciate the sentiment,” Mari replied aloud to whatever Yadira had signed. Yadira chuckled and shook her head, cleaning up her supplies.

“No, I think not, but that makes it no less true. Now, get out of here, all of you,” she directed this over her shoulder. “I’ve got rounds to do and you kids wasted all of my garden time. You, rookie,” she added, stabbing a finger at Damon. “I want to see you once that ice pack has melted. If you can’t breathe through your nose or your sinuses feel stuffed up, come to me immediately. Now get!” she closed the door in their faces once they were in the hallway.

Julianna sighed at the door and turned, heading with purpose down the hall. “I’m going to file some reports and check in with Ira and Elias. You,” she said, pointing at Damon, “can expect more ass-kicking tomorrow. Just because I kicked you in the face today doesn’t mean you get to take it easy. Same time tomorrow morning.”

Damon nodded, and Julianna swept around the corner and was gone. He let out a gust of air and leaned against a wall, putting the ice pack to his face. Echoes of pain swept through him, and he gasped at the shock of a hundred twisted ankles and broken noses, the chill not quite blunting the sharp edges of pain. He took deep breaths until the worst of the flood passed, leaving him with a new ache in his nose and a weakness in his limbs like he’d just been sprinting. He muttered a curse under his breath.

“Are you all right?”

Damon jumped, having completely forgotten Mari's presence. She was staring at him with curiosity and that same unnerving distance in her gaze.

"Uh, yeah. Just adjusting to the ice pack. Who's Ira and Elias?" Damon asked, changing the subject. Mari tilted her head.

"The two heads of the Research and Development division here. They are quite..." she paused. "Intense. They perform their jobs admirably, however, so perhaps it is in their favor to act in such a way."

Damon huffed a laugh. "I guess so. That doesn't bother you, though? You're kind of low-key in comparison to everyone else I've met so far."

Mari smiled, a sudden warmth overtaking her face. Damon was surprised by how completely it changed her demeanor. "No, it does not. These people have become much like a family to me; their behaviors are something I have come to accept and appreciate."

Damon blinked. "Fair enough. Uh, hey, are you hungry? Almost breaking your nose really works up an appetite."

Mari had returned to her reserved expression, and she nodded. "I will have to take your word on the matter. Shall I show you the way to the dining hall?"

"After you." Damon inclined his head. Mari set off down the corridor, and Damon fell into step with her. Neither spoke, but Damon couldn't place the silence as awkward or companionable; Mari, for her part, seemed unconcerned by the lack of conversation, making her way through the twists and turns of this wing of the building through the ease of many visits. Damon studied her out of the corner of one eye. She

was well-acquainted with the doctor, that much was certain, though whether it was from illness or merely companionship, he was unable to tell. There was something...off about her appearance, though Damon couldn't quite put a finger on why. She was taller than most girls, with a length to her limbs she seemed to be taking some pains to disguise with her clothing choices, though little could be done about the long, bony fingers she had tucked into the pockets of her jacket. Her hair was always down, too, which allowed Mari to pull some of it forward to frame her face a little differently, or hide it as needed. On top of that, she had a full face of makeup, which wasn't unusual in and of itself, but it seemed more deliberate, somehow, with special care taking to the contouring and the eye shadow. It was all perfect, not a single stroke out of place, which was impressive for the early hour.

He recognized these signs, he knew he did. The answer was niggling at the back of his mind, and all the pieces were laid out before him. The stature, the makeup, the clothing choices, the measured and careful cadence of her speech...

Damon stumbled as the realization nearly bowled him over. Mari stopped and turned to look at him, a small crease between her brows.

"Is there a problem?"

"Uh, no, nope, nothing's wrong. Sorry, I tripped," Damon lied. His face burned, and he hastily put the ice pack back up to his face, though he had just removed it a few minutes ago. Mari blinked at him.

“Very well.” She turned back and continued on their course, leaving Damon to feel a new rush of guilt at having realized the secret she clearly was taking great pains to hide. Well, no big deal, he told himself. Being transgender wasn’t an offensive concept to him, but Damon decided not to mention the issue unless Mari brought it up herself. It wasn’t his business, anyway.

“So, uh, you come here often?” Damon winced the moment the words left his mouth. “To the medical wing, I mean,” he amended.

“Yes. The doctor and I have developed a pleasant relationship over time. I find her garden a comfortable and solitary place to spend my time.” Mari answered without giving notice that she had registered his slip. “The seclusion also guarantees that I will not be disturbed when I meditate.”

“You meditate?”

“Of course. Emotions cloud my perception and the fates of those around me become more difficult to see. Through meditation and focus I am able to attain a state of stillness and contemplation in order to clearly view the futures of those around me.”

“Huh. That makes sense, I guess. At least your Knack sounds useful, unlike mine. Doesn’t have any practical use, so I don’t use it that often. Can’t really control it either.” Damon shrugged, hunching his shoulders a little.

“Speaking of it troubles you,” Mari observed. There was no inflection in her tone, so Damon was unable to tell what she was thinking. He spread his hands out to either side, the half-melted ice pack in one hand dripping on the tiled floor.

“Well, it’s brought me so much good, hasn’t it?” He couldn’t help the bitterness that seeped into his voice like a poison. “I’m constantly invading people’s privacy and reliving pieces of their lives I don’t have permission to know about, I was literally hunted down and brought in like a fugitive because of this thing, and I can’t even use it to—”

Damon cut himself off hard, aware with sudden discomfort that he had just revealed a lot more to this girl than he’d meant to. He forced his voice back into a semblance of casualness. “Anyway. The whole thing is kind of useless for me. I’m only here to get my bills paid.”

Mari stopped short of the door that led outside. Her eyes bored into his face with an intensity that startled him. “Useless?” she echoed, with widened eyes. “Never. Not you, Damon. You have no idea...” she trailed off, focused all of a sudden on her strings again, picking one out of the air and twining it slowly around one finger. “Never,” she repeated. “You will see that soon.”

Damon didn’t know how to respond to that, so he put his shoulder to the door and pushed out into daylight. Mari stepped out after him, a reservation in her demeanor that he took to mean the conversation was over for the time being. Which he was fine with, in truth. Mari’s supposed future sight continued to unnerve him, and her certainty about his usefulness in those last few moments was more of a concern to him than a comfort. Why was she so sure about what he was going to do? He was immensely opposed to the idea that his future might already be written, or worse, that he could do nothing to change whatever path was set out before him. Considering his circumstances,

he was more of a "shit just happens" kind of guy. It was hard to let go of years of conviction in the face of one girl who claimed to see the future.

The rest of the walk was spent in quiet contemplation, Mari leading them toward the main building itself, to which a number of other people were also headed. This early in the morning, it was hard to tell whose job was what, but Damon thought he spotted a few scientists he had seen bustling around in the labs the previous day. The rest, he supposed, could be teachers, or maybe more agents like Julianna. Being eight a.m. and without nourishment, everyone looked a little ruffled and not quite ready to face the day. There was a lot of yawning and squinting at the sun with distaste while waiting to file through the double doors leading into the building. Once inside, Damon blinked a few times and got his first look at the interior of the mansion.

The first thing that caught his attention was the ceiling. They had entered into an atrium that was open to the four floors above them, and the ceiling arched high above them, the architecture a soaring masterpiece of delicate curling patterns and hidden skylights that cast patterned shadows on the patterned marble floors. It was all lit with three enormous chandeliers fitted with hundreds of tiny crystals and small electric candles that fractured through the crystal to cast rainbow shadows on the walls and ceiling. On either side of the room were two enormous staircases that curved in a wide arc up to the first floor, steps set with the same marble and bordered by an intricately designed banister stained a dark mahogany. It looked more like a palace than a school, and it was all Damon could do not to stumble to a halt and stare in awe. He was

distinctly aware of his worn sneakers and sweat pants in the face of such opulence. The ice pack hung by his side, forgotten until he remembered it might drip on the floors. Damon cradled it against his pant leg, allowing the moisture to soak into the cotton.

“It is quite a lot.” Mari had reappeared by his side, staring at the sight as well. Though she had clearly been here before, Damon could see a hint of his own awe reflected in her face. “Most would struggle their entire lives and never reach even a fraction of such fortune.”

Damon thought of his two jobs and his tiny apartment and nodded. “Think he's compensating for something?”

Mari considered his comment. “I do not think so,” she said. “I think he is playing a game with rules the likes of you and I are not privy to.”

“Sure, sure,” Damon agreed easily. “But I still think those big banisters are a metaphor for something.”

To his amusement, something like exasperation flickered across Mari's face before the stillness settled back in, smooth as silk. It was strange, Damon noted, following as Mari led the way deeper into the building. She expressed emotion much in the same way a person skipped rocks across a lake; the rocks caused ripples but they always sank, never revealing the true depths of the water or what was waiting under the surface. He had seen those hints of emotion before, when speaking of subjects that were clearly important to her, but her level of emotional control was so great Damon

had to wonder what prompted the need for it in the first place. He doubted she would be very forthcoming with an answer.

After the opulence of the opening foyer, the decor relaxed a little as they stepped through a pair of double doors in the back and entered the cafeteria proper. The marble floors were replaced with polished oak, and the chandeliers with more common fluorescent bulbs, but the appearance of neatness and a general sense of grandeur was preserved in the high ceilings and the size of the hall they were eating in. Damon followed his nose over to the buffet, which was covered in freshly cooked breakfast foods, some still steaming. Damon grabbed a plate and ignored the weak wave of hunger that usually accompanied well-used objects like it. He heaped a generous serving of bacon onto the plate, followed by scrambled eggs and a waffle, topped the whole thing off with two bagels and stuffed his pocket with butter packets. There was a brief hesitation that felt a little too much like the first day of high school before Damon spotted Mari at a neighboring table, her own plate piled precariously. Her table was completely empty, so he made a beeline for the open seat across from her and sat himself down, mindful of his wobbling bagels.

“So it turns out this is uncomfortably similar to the first day of ninth grade for me, so I hope you don’t mind that I stick around with you until I get my feet under me and start branching out a little.” Damon pulled a butter packet out of his pocket and dumped the whole thing on a bagel, slathering it in a thick layer across the bread. Mari was working her way through her second waffle. For a girl with such a delicate bearing

she was able to put food away with impressive efficiency. She gave a small nod of assent, intent on her food. Damon couldn't fault her interest; it was delicious, freshly made and of a much higher quality than what he himself was used to. No expense was spared at the Estate, it seemed. Damon offered a butter packet to Mari when she picked up her own bagel. A tiny smile crooked the corner of her mouth, and she shook her head, reaching into her own pocket to display a handful of packets similar to his own. Damon gave her a wry grin of understanding.

"Ah, there you are." A smooth, familiar voice spoke from behind him. Damon turned to greet the newcomer, but he faltered as he took in the appearance of the person before him. Dr. Fey was a complete stranger from the woman he had only met a few days ago. Gone was the ostentatious two-toned haircut, replaced instead with a professional bobcut in a natural blonde. She was dressed in a smart black pencil skirt and purple blouse with a matching jacket, the picture of respectability. Damon closed his mouth with a snap and turned back to his plate.

"Hi. You look...different."

"Honey, when we met I was off-duty. After-hours Alex is a very different woman." Fey offered a dazzling smile and took a seat next to Mari, who nodded a greeting. Fey turned her gaze back to Damon and gave a sympathetic wince. "Looks like someone is responding well to the 'boot to the face' treatment Julianna dished out this morning."

"Can't keep a secret around you people, huh?"

"It's a small community."

“Right. Well, Doc, I’m guessing you didn’t come looking for me just to chat?”

“Well, actually, I was, in a sense. I need to do a psych eval on you before you can be cleared for field work.” Alex sat back and studied him. Her appearance may have changed, but her sharp dark eyes were the same. “I’ll need to be certain you can handle the certain...pressures of the job.”

Damon bit back his sarcastic remark. “Well,” he said instead, “Lucky for you I got kicked in the face today, so my schedule’s free.”

“Lucky me indeed.” Alex smiled. “How about right after lunch? My office is on this floor, right down the hall to the left of here. The appointment itself shouldn’t take too long to complete, just a few questions and—”

“I know, don’t worry,” Damon interrupted. “This isn’t my first psychiatrist’s rodeo. As I’m sure you already know, given how much information you had on me when we first met.”

Alex inclined her head. “Fair enough. Well, I will see you then. And I’ll see you at two tomorrow, right?” she added, turning to look at Mari. Mari gave a nod of assent, and Alex smiled, resting her fingers on the other girl’s shoulder for a moment before standing up and getting ready to leave. “All right then, honey, see you later. And don’t be late, you,” she said, looking back at Damon. He smirked at her with his mouth full.

“Don’t worry, I won’t. Not like I want you to have more ammunition to add to that file of mine. I’m sure it’s pretty heavy to start with.”

Alex just shook her head at him and left. Damon swallowed and set about wiping up the scraps on his plate. Mari had finished ahead of him and deposited her plate in the appropriate area, to be whisked away for cleaning. She was as unruffled as usual, and gave no outward indication of her opinion on he and Alex's conversation. Damon was fine with that, as it meant she wasn't going to ask him any awkward questions. Having to explain trauma counselling to people was always uncomfortable.

Damon checked his phone for the time. It was only nine a.m., so he had a lot of space before his appointment with Alex. He pushed down the familiar discomfort at having to sit and have yet another shrink try to crack open his brain like a coconut. This wasn't going to be anything like the first time, he reminded himself. That initial go-round was all about his mother, trying to find evidence to support her defense case more than about his well-being. Dr. Fey, at least, seemed interested in him, and Damon figured he could fake what he needed to keep this job.

He stood up from the table and flashed a smile at Mari. "Thanks for helping me out today. I've gotta unpack, so maybe I'll see you around."

Mari nodded. "Of course."

Damon raised a hand and took his leave, tracing his way back through the impressive entrance hall and out the front of the building. He figured he could kill some time before his appointment by getting his room into order and visiting Yadira again to get the green light on his nose. It felt a lot better with the repeated icing, and Damon figured other than the number it would do on his face, he would heal with no trouble.

Of course, that meant his new daily sessions with Julianna weren't going to be softened for very long. Despite that, Damon felt a spark of excitement. He relished the challenge of learning and improving against Julianna, even if it meant ending up black and blue every other night. He could handle the bruising if he could just wipe that smug smirk off her face even once.

Damon ended up wandering back to his dorm. He stood in the entrance and surveyed his rooms. Unlike a true dormitory, which was usually a single room, this space had a living room of sorts, with the bedroom on the far wall from the front door and a small bathroom to the left. In truth, though it was smaller, the overall quality was higher than the apartment Damon had occupied previously. There were no water stains on the ceiling, the furniture looked brand new, and the water pressure in the shower was fantastic, not to mention he could achieve a water temperature above "lukewarm."

His duffle bag was still sitting on the side of his bed, half unpacked and with his clothes spilling out of it. He'd dug through them hastily this morning, so Damon picked up the strewn articles from the floor and sorted them into drawers in the dresser that occupied the bedroom. The dresser gave hardly a whisper of feedback when he put his hands on it, which was a relief after the sucker punch from the ice pack earlier. Damon didn't have much; just a few pairs of jeans and sweatpants and some old t-shirts, as well as a tough canvas jacket from a Salvation Army store. Surprisingly he did own more than one pair of shoes, though one of said pairs were the ratty tennis shoes he had on his feet at present. Damon kicked these off and pushed them next to his other pair of shoes,

an old, reliable pair of boots that he'd owned for years. All old, his clothes didn't even take up all the drawers in the dresser. Damon shrugged and went back to the bag for the few personal items he'd decided to bring.

It was mostly books, the Vonnegut paperback he'd read a hundred times, the Douglas Adams he kept planning on reading but somehow never got much past the first page. The first *Lord of the Rings* book, not a favorite but a reliable read all the same. Damon stacked these on the floor beside the bed. He pulled the last item out of his bag with care. He'd put it in a little cardboard box stuffed with newspaper to keep it from being damaged while he moved his stuff around. It was nothing fancy on the outside, just a plain wooden box with a simple leaf design etched into the corners. Damon placed this on the little nightstand next to the bed and opened it up. Inside, his mother's few jewelry items glimmered at him. Her wedding band, which had been her grandmother's, her favorite gold necklace with the ruby stone in it, and the earrings. They were simple diamond studs, nothing of particular note. Still, Damon made sure to handle them with delicacy as he took each one out of the box and fastened them in his own ears. He'd worn these earrings many times, and their memories were as familiar to him as his own. The punch of an item's imprints faded with use, but they never disappeared, and Damon always took comfort in feeling his mother's presence wash over him like sea foam, even if it was only an afterimage.

These earrings were full of history. If he stretched, Damon could sense the faint touch of a woman he had never met, presumably his grandmother. When his mother

immigrated to the States from Puerto Rico, she left her family behind, and this imprint was the only impression he had ever known of his extended family. Those were very old impressions, however, and Damon had trouble accessing them. From there, the earrings were gifted to his mother at 16. She wore them almost constantly once she moved to America. Damon smiled as he touched on a memory of the two of them together. He had been young, he was fairly certain, as his mother still felt happy and optimistic, with none of the stress and exhaustion that weighed her down toward the end of the jewelry's recollection. He tended to avoid that part of memory. He had plenty of his own of that day.

Technically his own impressions were also recorded on anything he touched, but Damon didn't like traversing memories he made himself. There was nothing so disheartening as having your own emotions thrown back in your face, and the physical act itself caused a somewhat disorienting echo effect. He wasn't in the habit of frequently buying new clothes, either, so he was fortunate that the repeated handling of items made it easier to control and ignore the impressions left on them. Damon was content to avoid that discomfort, letting the murmur of the earrings drop into the background. He still had a few hours before he needed to meet with Alex, so Damon finished unpacking his few belongings. As he went, he made sure to brush a hand over the important items in the room; doorknobs, handles, chair cushions, light switches. He wanted no surprise feedback attacks, which he'd experienced in the past when he first moved into his old apartment. It was an unpleasant recollection of nearly jumping out of

his skin when placing his hand on the doorknob, only to find a wave of anger that sloshed into him so hard he almost slammed the door. After that, Damon got into the habit of touching every object in a new space if he was going to spend a long time there, so he could be prepared for backlash. Fortunately, it seemed as though this room had never been used by another inhabitant, and Damon breathed a sigh of relief when his inspection was over and went to take a shower.

When Damon emerged, clean and refreshed, he realized his ice pack had long since melted. Following Yadira's instructions, he took another trip down to the medical wing. She reexamined his nose, gave a short nod, and slapped some aspirin in his hand.

"You're fine, get out," she told him, and Damon found himself unceremoniously kicked into the hallway for the second time that day. Having completed his mandatory tasks for the morning, Damon spent the rest of the time familiarizing himself with the Estate's layout. The large mansion acted much like the axel of a wheel, the centerpoint from which all other buildings branched out. Coming at the Estate from its main driveway, which ran north to south, the dorms were on the left. There were two buildings dedicated to this, divided into upperclassman and lower classman dorms, with Damon's rooms in a smaller, separate building a little farther along the wheel. All students who attended the school were required to stay on-campus, but despite that the attendance must not have been very high, seeing as they only had two dorms for the entire student population. Damon wasn't sure if that meant there weren't many

Potentials out there to collect or if the school was restricting its attendance rate intentionally.

The garage was next, sitting at about eleven o'clock on the wheel. The big doors were closed today and Damon didn't have a key, but he peeked in the window and took a minute to marvel at the rows of gleaming vehicles inside. His hands itched to get under the hood of even one of those cars. Maybe he could get into Julianna's good graces— unlikely— and she would grant him the favor. Hell, maybe he could offer his services as an extra mechanic in his off time. It would be a good use of his free time. Damon tucked the notion away for later and continued his rounds.

Directly north of the mansion was the R&D building, which Damon skipped by, having a passing familiarity with the place. The east side of the campus was what was drawing his attention. Aside from the path that led to the training ground in the distance, there were no buildings at all on this side, other than a shed meant to house gardening equipment. Damon started down the path into the woods, only intending to head back to the stadium, maybe explore the surrounding woods a little more to get a feel for the size of the place. The trees crowded in on either side, which made it all the more surprising when Damon noticed a branching off in the path to his left. He hadn't seen it at all on his morning run with Julianna. It looked fairly unused, lacking the layer of fresh gravel and trimmed-away underbrush that the main path possessed. Damon turned onto this path, having to duck around a low-hanging branch in order to do so. The path twisted deeper into the forest, until Damon couldn't see the main path behind

him. He was thinking about turning back and leaving the exploration to another day when he saw a change in the undergrowth. Two green hedges, a good foot taller than he was, stretched to either side of him. In between them was a mossy wooden gate with the lock undone. Damon squinted.

“What kind of Alice in Wonderland shit...” He sighed and stretched a hand out to push the gate open. He stepped in with care, uncertain of what to expect. His breath caught.

It was a garden. Immaculate, bursting with greenery and vibrancy. Fall hadn't fully gotten its chilly fingers on the place, as flowers of all colors and types still thrived there. Spanish bluebells, Valencia Red Rose, lilies, and too many more for Damon to recognize. He wasn't even sure his mother would be able to identify every variety of plant in the garden, as it was full to bursting, just on the side of tamed so that he could walk between the rows and rows of verdant undergrowth. Damon wove between walls of plants taller than his head, unsure of what he was expecting to find the further he went in. It was mazelike in a rambling, unintentional manner that suggested whoever tended to the place didn't care much about whether or not the garden was easily accessible. Damon paused and weighed the heavy bloom of a rose in his hand. It was the palest cream, the petals velvety soft against his hand, and not a single dead leaf or brown spot on the whole plant. The greenery was almost unnatural, he mused, turning a corner and coming across a clearing at last. Though, in a place such as the Estate, unnatural would fit in as the norm for sure.

The clearing was surrounded on all sides by greenery, of course, but someone had taken the time to make sure that this small section of open space was kept cleared of too many wandering plants. A stepping stone path wove through the cropped grass, leading to an iron bench underneath the hanging boughs of a small leafy tree. The branches were drooping with the weight of the round red fruits hanging between green leaves shaped in a rounded oval. The fruits themselves looked familiar, and Damon wandered over to weigh one in his hand, admiring the richness of the color and the size of the fruits. Unbidden, the thought crossed his mind that his mother would adore this garden. Her green thumb would run rampant here, plotting and trimming and weeding with the utmost care, her calloused hands burned a dark, olive brown in the sun as she picked weeds out from between her prized plants, humming a soft melody as she worked. Damon dropped his arm.

“This is not a place that I expect to find visitors.”

Damon whirled around at the unfamiliar voice, embarrassment prickling at his neck. Across the little clearing was a man he had never met before, studying him with a neutral expression. He was wearing a charcoal grey three-piece suit, complete with a silk handkerchief in a vibrant purple. He looked to be in his early forties, just beginning to develop streaks of grey in his dark hair and beard, both of which were trimmed and maintained to perfection. Even from this distance his eyes were sharp, pinning Damon in place from across the clearing. However intense his gaze, it was not accusing, and he only opened his hands to gesture at the tree behind them.

“Take one, if you like.”

“I’m sorry,” Damon began, “I hadn’t meant to trespass—”

The man waved a hand. “The garden is secluded, not private. In fact, I would rather see others making use of the place than avoiding it.” He crossed the clearing and picked one of the heavy fruits from the tree himself. He pressed a thumbnail into the ripe skin and peeled back the layer to reveal the numerous seeds within, each one a small pit inside a fleshy red outer shell. The fruit’s soft innards resembled nothing so much as a lump of bloody teeth, a visual which gave Damon significant pause when one of the gruesome slices was offered to him.

The man chuckled. “It is always a surprise the first time. Don’t worry, pomegranates taste better than they look.” He plucked a few of the seeds from his own half of the pomegranate and put them in his mouth. He spat the seeds on the ground a moment later and gave an encouraging smile. “No need to be shy. Take it, if only to assuage the good host in me.”

Damon reached out and accepted the slice of pomegranate with two fingers. The man flashed him a mouth full of white teeth and sat down on the bench behind them. There was silence for a long moment when Damon placed one of the red seeds in his mouth and chewed with caution. The seed burst in a tangy spray across his tongue, not quite citrus but not any sort of sweeter fruit, either. It was a pleasant in between, a unique flavor that Damon found he wanted to try more of. He popped a few more seeds into his mouth.

“Ha! I knew they would get you, they always do.” The dark-haired man wagged a finger at him. His face was creased in a joyous smile, the successful conversion of a stranger a source of good humor. He leaned back against the bench and fixed Damon with a critical eye. “Who are you, boy?”

Damon bristled a little, but made the effort to keep his tone in check when he replied, “Damon de la Rosa, and I work here. Well, I just started here.” The false name slipped out before he remembered he didn’t have to use it here, but he decided not to correct himself.

“Oh? And what is your job?”

Damon was unable to suppress the minute shift in his posture. “I’m working with Julianna, on her, um, ‘collection squad.’”

The man crossed one leg over the other and made a show of popping a few more pomegranate seeds into his mouth, but there was a sharpness about his gaze that left Damon feeling pinned to the ground. He met the stare with a level one of his own, refusing to give ground to this stranger, whoever he thought he was.

“Do you speak any Spanish, boy?” The question was asked in Spanish.

Damon narrowed his eyes at the diminutive and responded in kind. “Yes, Mr...?”

The man offered a grin and a wave of the hand as response. “My name isn’t important. Who taught you?”

“My mother,” Damon answered after a moment. “She thought it was important that I have a piece of the culture.”

“A wise woman, though we must also be cautious about clinging too close to tradition.” The man nodded, still looking at Damon with that assessing gaze. Damon wasn’t able to get a clear read on him, from the fancy suit to the cheerful demeanor which contrasted with that frank gaze. Who was this man?

His thoughts were interrupted by a soft classical tune. The mystery man pulled his phone out of his pocket and squinted at the screen.

“Good God, look at the time!” He sprang up from his reclined position on the bench. Silencing the alarm, he turned to Damon and offered a hand. “Wonderful to meet you, Damon,” he said in English. “I believe you will do fine work here. If you survive Julianna, that is.” He rolled the syllables of her name across the tongue in the fashion common to a native Spanish speaker, paying special attention to the vowels. He punctuated this statement with a wink. “I hear she’s a terrible taskmaster.”

“She is, sir,” Damon responded without thinking. The man let out a bark of laughter and clapped Damon on the shoulder.

“I have a feeling you’ll do wonderfully, son. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I am about to be fashionably late for my meeting. I’m sure we’ll run into each other again.” He waved a hand in farewell, already fast tracking toward the door. “Oh! And have as many pomegranates as you like. The garden doesn’t have enough visitors, her caretaker won’t mind.”

Damon opened his mouth to respond, but the man disappeared around the corner and was gone. Damon felt his own phone buzz and saw that his own

appointment with Alexandria was only fifteen minutes away. He cursed under his breath and shoved the phone back in his pocket, preparing to jog the distance back to the main portion of the campus, leaving him just enough time to find the office and be reasonably on time, if his pace was good.

Damon looked down at the half-eaten pomegranate in his hand. He turned and tossed it so that it landed at the base of the tree, a conspicuous blemish against the otherwise perfect order of the little courtyard. Still, he had no time to dispose of the thing properly and it was organic anyway, it was probably good fertilizer or something. The strange man appeared to have taken his half of the fruit with him. Damon didn't look forward to seeing him a second time.

Satisfied that he had left the garden in as near a state as he had found it, Damon turned and made his way with haste out of the garden and back onto the main path to the campus grounds. He hoped Alexandria wouldn't chew him out for being "fashionably late" as well.

In the end, Damon made it to the office with about a minute to spare; he spent the extra sixty seconds catching his breath and wishing he'd given himself enough time to change, at least. Some bitter part of his brain passed along the thought that the doctor would likely make note of every aspect of his appearance to put in his file, some sort of negative commentary on the sloppy state of his psyche, or something.

Damon breathed in through his nose and gave himself a hard shake. "Enough," he told himself. No use in getting worked up before he even knew what the rules of the game were. Better to just go in and roll with the punches as they came.

He knocked on the closed wooden door and received a soft "Come in," as a reply. Alexandria was sitting at a dark wood desk, hands folded on top of a manila folder. She gave Damon an encouraging smile, one Damon did not return as he closed the door and sat down in front of the desk in one of the cushy chairs. To either side were bookcases stacked with the usual assortment of hardcover novels with titles embossed in gold, but at least Damon could pick out a number of what looked like legitimate texts on psychology and other sciences of human behavior. It was a step in the right direction, at least. Alexandria didn't have too much else cluttering up her desk, no pictures turned away or scattered paperwork. Nothing he could use to get a read on her, which was intentional, he'd bet.

"Damon." Alexandria gave him a warm smile. "How are we doing this afternoon?"

"Oh, great. Did you know this place has a fucking garden?"

Alexandria raised an eyebrow. "Can't say I've had the pleasure. Do you like gardening?"

"Nah, not really. Being outside is okay, though. Anyway, I'm sure you're just itching to pick apart my little traumatized brain, so no need to keep going with the small talk, right?"

Alex leaned back in her chair. "You're pretty hostile around people like me, huh?"

Her tone held no accusation. Damon slumped in his chair and shrugged.

"If by 'people like you' you mean 'anybody who's approached me under the pretense of 'trying to help' but really they just want something from me' then yeah, I'm not too friendly with people like you." Damon flashed her a grin that was all teeth. "But you've read my file, so you know all about that. Real nice of the police to just hand that one over to you, by the way."

"It's part of your background check, which we do on everyone entering the employ of the Horizon Company," Alexandria replied. "I know you won't believe me when I say this, but I'm not interested in getting something from you. There are no motives in this conversation that would be unpalatable to you. My only interest at this point is to get a read on your current mental state and opinions on your situation. We're going to have another chat just like this at the end of your training, where I will make a final assessment to clear you for active duty. That's all it is."

"Oh, so act sane and well-adjusted and I won't get booted out? Easy peasy, I can do that."

"It's not just about you," Alexandria said, her voice sharpening. She folded her arms and stared him down across the desk. "I have a duty to the people I work with and those that they bring in. If someone can't do their job right because of a personality conflict or some kind of behavioral complex, people can get hurt. And I take that very personally." Alexandria leaned forward and pushed the manila folder out from between

them in a deliberate movement. She spread her open palms on the space where the folder had been. “Yes, I read your file. I read *everybody’s* files if they have them. That’s just common sense. But I don’t care about your past, and I don’t want you to care about the people you’ve encountered in your past that made you feel this way. I want to know about you, in this moment, at this point in your life. Other than that, you won’t have to see me at all.”

Damon chewed his lip. Alexandria’s gaze was frank and open, with none of the assessing and sometimes sneering expressions he had seen on the court psychologists angling for better testimony. He sighed after a second and forced his shoulders to relax.

“All right, Doctor, I’ll try and rein in my commentary for this session if you’re so set on me flexing my conversational skills. Where should we start?”

“Call me Alex. And I don’t care where or what we start with. I’m sure you remember we psychologists don’t like directing others much. I’m not much of a conversationalist myself, you see.” She winked.

Damon sighed. “You can’t throw me any kind of bone here at all, Doc- Alex?”
Damon amended his statement when Alexandria shot him a warning glare.

“Hmm...” Alexandria tapped her lip in thought. “Well, I think starting from the beginning usually helps most people.”

The beginning, ugh. Damon cast around for a suitable place that might be qualified as a “beginning” for him. He was unwilling to dig too deeply into his past in a session that was only supposed to be used to determine whether or not he was fit to do

his *job*, but he supposed it was worth mentioning things about his life that made him seem sane and emotionally stable.

“My mom’s in prison,” he offered. Wait, fuck, that was a horrible beginning. Damon slapped himself mentally, but the words were already out. Something about Alexandria’s presence was...relaxing. Too relaxing. Damon tried to keep his guard up and not let anything else too personal slip. “I mean, it’s been a year or so since she went in, so the shock of it has kind of worn off. It’s not supermax or anything, either, she’s in a place in Boston, it’s got a few programs, art, dog training. I mean, she’s in there for life, but at least her shitty lawyer got her a place that wasn’t complete garbage.” Damon smiled thinly. “Anyway, I visit as often as I can, once a week or so. I took this job because I needed money, though, plain and simple. A few of the people here seem to have some kind of higher morals associated with the whole thing, but I’m only here for cash. But that’s a damn good motivator, for me.”

Alexandria nodded and scribbled something on the notepad in front of her. Damon tried, as usual, not to let it bother him that she was taking notes on his behavior. It was her damn job, or something. After a second Alexandria looked up.

“So you took this job on the spot without really concerning yourself with the details of what it entails. What does this job appear to entail, to you?”

“Ah...” Damon scratched his head. “I’m not really comfortable with the terminology Julianna uses for it. As far as I can tell it’s pretty much the same thing as what you guys did in the club a few days ago? Chasing down Initiates who are

dangerous to the public and bringing them under control or something. Sounds kind of violent, to be honest, but I was a bouncer, I'm not afraid to get into a fight or two if I need to."

Alexandria nodded. "There are other aspects to the job as well," she said. "That was an example of an Initiate who got out of control, but there are also situations that do not involve violence, like the one where we spoke to you in your apartment. You will be required to participate in a variety of situations and interact with a large number of people. Depending upon what your Knack is, you can also make use of it to help locate or track down Potentials and Initiates."

"Ah, yeah. That." In truth, Damon found the thing to be a bit of a hassle. Even now, if he focused, he could feel the echoes of all the other people who had sat in that exact chair and stared across an imposing wooden desk at Alexandria, and most of the impressions were *anxiety/nervousness/stress*, the usual sorts of emotional responses from people who were faced with having to talk about their feelings and mental states in front of an audience. "Yeah, it's pretty useless. I can't fight with it or anything. Mostly I just touch doorknobs and get hit with a truckload of other people's feelings." Fuck, that was too much *again*. Damon frowned and settled back in the chair, using the motion as an excuse to lay his hands on the arms of it. The impressions were clearer the more skin-to-surface contact he used, and as he dug deeper Damon realized something was odd about those initial impressions of the people who'd been in this chair beforehand. Most of them, if not all that he could reach, started out with the usual mix of negative

emotions, but at an abnormally early point in the session they suddenly...relaxed for no reason. Having dealt with encountering the entire spectrum of human emotion at one point or another, Damon was able to recognize the difference between a natural shift in human emotion and something else. This wasn't quite the usual, though. Drugs or alcohol bled through in their own way, placing a haze over the emotions present, as though they had trouble imprinting themselves on the item in question. This didn't feel like that. It felt like someone had simply... flipped a switch. No impressions were given of catching on to the strangeness, but Damon was instantly on guard.

"You did something," he said. He sat up straighter in the chair. "What are you doing to me? You did it to the other people here, too."

Alexandria stared at him for a minute. She seemed unconcerned by having been called out on her manipulation. In fact, a small smile curled the edge of her mouth. She sat back and raised her hands in surrender. "Okay, you got me. I'll stop if it really bothers you. You were on edge, is all."

"I don't appreciate somebody tampering with my fucking emotions," Damon snapped. Already he was feeling less relaxed as his usual tense state of mind snapped back into place. In a weird way he welcomed it. At least he would know what to look for if she tried it again.

Alexandria sighed. "Okay, okay, I won't do it again if it bothers you that much. Nothing's wrong with you, it's just my Knack. I used it on you once before, at your apartment." Damon nodded, remembering the strange, almost loopy calm he'd felt

when letting the women into his home. “I have particularly strong pheromones, I can use them to influence the way people feel about me. That was just a simple tweak, to help you relax and open up. It’s nothing dangerous. Being nervous in the presence of a psychologist is a normal experience for most people, especially if they’re unfamiliar with the process. You, however, are very familiar with the process and have a very guarded attitude about coming here. I was concerned we weren’t going to get anywhere at all.”

“Jesus Christ, you’re all the same.” Damon stood out of his chair and paced back and forth in front of it, arms crossed. “You can’t just leave well enough alone, can you? All you do is meddle and think you know what’s best for me, but you fucking don’t, okay? Christ, I thought for a second—” Damon cut himself off and turned away, rubbing his hands over his face. He cast around for some semblance of control, taking a deep breath and tuning into the calm, comforting murmur of the earrings he was still wearing. This, at least, offered some form of grounding for Damon to get himself under control. When he felt it was safe for him to continue this sham of a conversation, Damon turned around to see Alexandria watching him. Her face was blank of any emotion, but that was a tell in and of itself. He was probably being written off as they spoke, the second he walked out of here, Damon would find his ass back on the street, to go crawling back to Javier and the club. Anxiety tightened like a snake around his stomach. Why was he such a fuckup? Couldn’t he take something good and hold onto it, for two seconds—

“I’m sorry,” Alexandria offered. Her face softened. “That was obtrusive of me, and I see why it would cause you stress. If it makes you feel better, I use my Knack very

mildly. That was more akin to an aromatherapy session in terms of potency. I try to maintain as relaxing and open an environment as I can, and it was unfair of me to have us enter this conversation without telling you what I'm capable of."

Damon stared at her. That...was new. He was more accustomed to an awkward redirection or two to get him back to talking, not a frank and honest apology for her actions. He wasn't entirely convinced that she wasn't using the apology as a way to regain his trust, in order to continue their conversation without hostility, but it was definitely more than what he had received in the past when someone had offended him during a session. From a practical standpoint, he should accept the apology- or pretend to- and keep going, convince her he could still work here. Damon nodded to himself once, and raised his head to meet Alexandria's gaze.

"It's...fine," he made himself say. Not quite an acceptance, but enough that Alexandria relaxed a little. She gestured at the chair and folded her hands together while she waited for Damon to resituate himself.

"So, before all that, you said something about your Knack."

Damon barely suppressed his flinch. "Yeah, I said it's useless. There's nothing I can do with it that will help on...outings." He was *not* calling them "collections."

"I know you've displayed nervousness about showing off your Knack in the past, but, if you're comfortable, perhaps we could discuss why you feel that way?" Alexandria suggested. Damon held in a derisive snort, but only just. Comfortable, his ass. Still, everyone was riding him about this damn thing, and if there was one person he'd be

able to tell who could communicate to others about the thing and actually be listened to, it was likely her. Damon heaved a sigh.

“Fine, since that’s all you people seem to care about. It’s like...” He hesitated.

“Actually, it would be easier if I just showed you. Do you have anything on you of value? Sentimental value, I mean.”

Alexandria raised her eyebrows, but after a moment, she reached into her desk and pulled out a small velvet box. She opened it and turned it so the contents were facing Damon. Inside the box was a large class ring, the kind with engraved edges and a gemstone in the middle. The ring was silver, and had a class year of 1984, too old be Alexandria’s graduating year, who was in her mid-30s at the oldest. The stone in the top was a yellow topaz, cut to reflect the light shining on every surface and spark the gem into burning like a small fire.

“Wait.” Alexandria put her hand over the ring before Damon could reach for it.

“Am I gonna get this back after you’re done?”

“Yeah, it doesn’t hurt it.” Damon waited until Alexandria extracted her hand fully before reaching and pulling the ring from its setting.

The impact was instantaneous. Damon gritted his teeth and closed his eyes against the onslaught of high-key emotions, too many swirled together near the ring’s last use for him to pick anything out individually. He caught a few pieces, something about a father, what felt like betrayal but was wrapped in a deep sense of self-loathing and guilt, and deep resignation when the ring was placed in its box and stuffed in a

drawer to be forgotten. Interesting that this was Alexandria's choice, seeing as the ring was clearly involved in a number of disastrous confrontations. Damon pushed away from the knot at the beginning and looked deeper into the past. Two distinct people had worn this ring, he can see that immediately.

"This was your dad's," Damon said out loud, a frown of concentration creasing his brow. "It was his college ring. He played...football in college. Got there on a scholarship, was really proud of it. Hoped to have a son one day to share that with." Internally Damon winced, as judging by the woman sitting in front of him, that had not been the case.

Then he hit the next memory.

It was a bit fuzzy around the edges, but there was a definite impression of pride and happiness as the ring was handed from father to son. "*Michael, I want you to have this,*" the father's voice was warm. The son, no more than thirteen or fourteen, held the large piece of jewelry in two hands with a sense of reverence that sang like a bell through the aged metal. He looked up at his father and grinned, a wide, cheeky smile that almost bowled Damon over with understanding. That and the mental impression left by the kid is enough to have him fast forward a little, unsure if he wanted his question answered.

But no, there she is, Alexandria, herself in mind but not yet in body, untransitioned voice cracking with puberty as she stood before her father, fists clenched at her sides. The ring swung from a chain around her throat– *too big always too big,*

never gonna fit in those shoes— but she made herself look her father in the eye when she said, “Dad, call me Alexandria.”

Damon ripped himself away from the scene, but not before he caught that stone-weight drop of disappointment and buried guilt at the look in her father’s eyes. His mouth opened to say something, but Damon didn’t want to hear it. He placed the ring back on the table as carefully and quickly as he could, and raised his eyes to meet Alexandria’s. That blank mask was back in place, but this time it was for her own protection, not his.

Damon swallowed. “I’m sorry,” he said at last. “It’s my turn to apologize.”

“What, about the trans thing? That’s not—”

“No.” Damon shook his head. “It’s a huge violation of privacy to learn a person’s birth name without their consent. I tried to pull away from it, but...” he shrugged and put his hands up. “I have almost no control over it. So I’m sorry for that.”

Alexandria stared at him for a long minute. “Well, I guess we’re even, then,” she said, and there was a thread of humor in her tone. Damon mustered a crooked smile.

“Are you any good at football, by the way?”

Alexandria shook her head slowly. “Nah. Not the physical part, at least. I could’ve been a coach, probably. I liked the strategic aspect of the game, not the concussion part.”

Damon gave a slow nod and let the silence hang for another minute or two before speaking again. “So, uh. That’s what it does. Happens on all kinds of stuff, door

knobs, pieces of jewelry, chairs. Got an ice pack from that grumpy doctor today and it felt like I broke my nose a second time when I put the damn thing to my face.”

Alexandria raised an eyebrow. “How far does it go? Can you hear things, see things?”

Damon shook his head. “Hearing things is rare, but I get it sometimes. I’ve never been able to see before, probably because objects don’t have eyes. I get a lot of emotions, though, but they have to be strong ones. That’s why sentimental objects are easy to read, they’re usually only handled when a person is feeling some kind of strong emotion.”

“And common objects? You mentioned doorknobs.”

“Stuff like that? Well...” Damon shrugged. “I think it’s because a large number of people are handling that kind of thing multiple times in one day. This way, it’s never not absorbing information. The buildup on stuff like that is way more intense, usually. It’s like someone dumping a bucket of ice water on your head and turning the lights off at the same time.”

“Have you tried controlling it?”

Damon winces. “Not really. I just try to ignore it, mostly. I spend more time invading people’s privacy than anything else.”

Alexandria nodded. Her mouth was pursed in thought, and she tapped her fingers on the table. “What about people?” she asked.

Damon frowned. "I don't...think so? I don't go around just laying my hands on people that often." Which was a little pathetic to admit, in hindsight, but it was the truth. Other than throwing people out of the club— which was more clothes and hair grabbing than anything else— Damon just...wasn't close to other people. "But no, I don't remember anything like that."

Alexandria was staring into the distance, tapping her finger on her lips. "If you could extend it, learn to control it more..." she murmured, not talking to him. Damon raised an eyebrow.

"Hello? Anybody in there?"

Alexandria blinked. "Oh. Sorry, Damon. That wasn't very professional of me." She folded her hands on the desk in front of her. "I think you're underestimating the scope of what your Knack can do."

Damon must have looked skeptical, because Alexandria paused for another second. "Well, perhaps we can just show you. I'm going to call Julianna when we're done here and we'll hash out the details for an...experiment, let's call it."

"Aw, man, we're not done yet?"

Alexandria shot him a sharp grin. "Can't get away from me that easily."

The rest of the session wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been. Damon figured it was because at some point, they had both passed a barrier that allowed them to view each other on equal ground, instead of as psychologist and client. Damon would never admit it, but he was almost having a good time by the end of the session. They'd

touched on a few more of the relevant topics (“What’s your opinion of this company?” “Great, as long as you pay me” and “How do you feel about unregistered Potentials?” “No comment, since I work for you people now”), but by the end they were just...chatting. Damon knew, of course, in the back of his mind that everything that was being said was going to be used in one way or another to build his psych profile, but he found that for once, he felt confident in the results. Alexandria had stopped asking questions in that pointed, information gathering way, and relaxed into smiling and laughing with Damon, having a real conversation instead of trying to direct the flow of information into something she could make use of. Damon supposed he shouldn’t be so harsh; she was only doing her job, after all. Still, Damon couldn’t shake his natural disinclination toward this particular profession. He’d spent enough time having his head shrunken to have a healthy distaste for the whole process. At least Alexandria had eased it, if only slightly.

Damon and Alexandria were so engrossed in their conversation they almost didn’t hear the knock at the door. Alexandria paused and looked at the clock.

“Ah, shit, I didn’t even see what time it was. Come in!” she called. Damon stood up as the person opened the door. Mari peeked her head around the edge and smiled at Alexandria.

“I’m so sorry, Mari, I had a session with Damon and we got caught up. Come in,” Alexandria said. “Obviously, I think I’ve got enough for the initial report. I’ll come track you down tomorrow when I’ve got the details figured out for that demonstration I was

telling you about. More likely,” Alexandria paused, and that wicked grin made another appearance, “Julianna will already have you in her grasp, and I won’t have to do much searching at all.”

Damon sighed. “And I look forward to that, as always,” he said. He smiled at Mari, who was standing just inside the room, hands clasped in front of her.

“Sorry about taking up your spot.”

Mari gave a slight shake of the head. “You needed it,” she responded. Damon snorted and looked back at Alexandria, who was putting the class ring back in its velvet box and tucking it away in the same drawer it came from.

“I doubt she needed it, though. I have a bit of a reputation when it comes to psychologists.”

Alexandria grinned and shooed him out the door. “Get out of here, you menace.” She gave him a little wave and shut the door in his face. Damon found himself smiling. He pulled his phone out of his pocket in order to check the time. It was just about dinner time, so Damon walked across the hallway and stuffed his face like he would never eat again. He glanced at the door from time to time, wondering if Alexandria and Mari were still in their meeting. Were they going to have enough time to eat? Had they already eaten? He remembered Julianna’s warning about missing meals and glanced at the door again.

Damon shook his head and sighed. He was starting to sound like his mother even in his own head. Still, when he got up to dump his tray, he snagged a few rolls and some

butter packets off the buffet tables and wrapped them in napkins. The door to Alexandria's office was still closed, so Damon left the food at the base of the door and knocked once before booking it around the corner before the door opened.

"Civic duty complete," he said to himself, pushing out the main entrance doors into the autumn night. There was a snap of cold in the air, like frost settling in the bones, and Damon kept up a brisk pace, getting to his building as quickly as he could before the chill had time to get to him. Once inside his room he collapsed into bed. His sleep schedule was usually too out of synch for Damon to get a restful night, but his bodily exhaustion won out and he was out like a light.

Chapter Seven

The days settled into a familiar routine, if not an easy one. Damon got kicked out of bed at some ungodly hour of the morning by Julianna, who never appeared concerned about *breaking into his room* in order to roust him from bed. Then she would beat the living hell out of him for several hours until she was satisfied with his state of black and blue, and send him on his way. Damon got used to soreness in places he hadn't known could be sore, and enough bruises that he looked like he was throwing himself down the stairs at regular intervals. He inhaled food almost endlessly during meals, causing a few raised eyebrows, but mostly looks of sympathy and understanding. Julianna must have a reputation, then. Damon couldn't say he was surprised.

After that first day Alexandria cornered him during lunch and let him know that they were in the middle of designing a "test" for him, and as such they were going to introduce him to a teacher who could help him "strengthen his abilities." Damon couldn't quite ignore the grin on Alexandria's face when she said this, excited and just shy of manic. Didn't anybody have any *normal* hobbies here? Damon sighed and agreed to whatever it was she wanted him to do. It would keep him busy, at least.

Without the pressure of two jobs and struggling to make ends meet, Damon discovered that he had more free time on his hands than he knew what to do with. He wandered around the campus a lot, exploring outside the boundaries and across the huge forest that seemed to make up most of the property. It was...relaxing, in a way he

hadn't felt before. Just him and the woods, birds calling in the distance, squirrels skittering up trees before he could get too close. Once he thought he saw a deer in the distance, but it was gone by the time he reached the spot. On Sunday, his day off, Damon spent the entire day outside, wandering through the trees and climbing over rocks and fallen logs. He stumbled upon a stream that day, flashing in the light and burbling merrily over rocks and mossy stones. Damon followed it downstream as far as he could until it widened and became a streaming river pounding across the landscape. There was a point where the road intersected with it, and a bridge Damon had a vague remembrance of crossing on their way in. He followed the river until dusk, when the light became too dim for him to see his footing. By the time he stumbled back to his room it was full dark and past dinnertime, but despite the pangs in his stomach Damon was grinning. He felt light, painless. Happy, even, which wasn't an emotion he had been able to properly identify in a long time.

Damon reached for the knob on his door only to find something hanging from it. A small plastic bag, filled with a few Styrofoam boxes. When he opened them he found strawberries, grapes, and a banana in one, and another with a few slices of pork roast and a side of mashed potatoes, wafting steam. There was a post-it note attached to the bag, Damon saw, unlooping the plastic handles from the doorknob. In a scripted hand, it read *"A gift, and a kindness returned."* There was no signature. Damon glanced around the empty hall as though the proprietor would show themselves, but he was alone.

“Well, thank you,” he murmured to no one, and pushed his door open. He had a fairly good idea as to who would have left him food, still warm from dinner, especially considering he told no one at all that day where he had been going. Damon smiled to himself and resolved to thank her at the earliest opportunity. The food was delicious, the fruit sweet and the meat and potatoes well-seasoned. Damon ate like a starving man. He was doing a lot of that, lately. Afterwards he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter Eight

"All right, enough for today." Julianna gave him a hand up, which Damon accepted with a stifled groan.

"Just when I think I'm getting better, you pull something like that on me," he complained. He wiped the sweat off his forehead with the collar of his t-shirt. "Who uses *backhand springs* in combat, anyway?"

"People who have enough time to show off since they're opponents are so slow."

"Ah, so you admit it— hey!"

Julianna grinned and tossed a bottle of water at him. Damon caught it and snapped the cap open while he glanced at his phone.

"Hey, we're done early today."

"I'm done early today," Julianna corrected. "You are going to meet somebody after this."

"Should I be worried?"

"Depends. How are you with cars?"

A slow grin spread over Damon's face. "I'm gonna like this."

He did not, in fact, like this as much as he'd hoped, though it had started out promising enough. Damon was pleased to see he was being herded toward the garage at least, with all its beautiful, shiny vehicles. Julianna snorted at his obvious interest, and ushered him in ahead of her.

It was even bigger than he'd hoped, large enough to hold at least thirty cars, possibly more. The front half was dedicated to parked vehicles, each one more shining and beautiful than the last. "Am I dead?" Damon murmured, admiring the gleam of paint on a Corvette as they passed. Julianna was striding ahead of him, toward a door at the back of the long building. Heaving a mournful sigh, Damon picked up his pace to keep up, casting a lingering glance behind him before following Julianna through the door.

The other side of the door was a world Damon was more intimately familiar with. Cars were up on blocks and lifts, and he could hear the sound of a drill coming from underneath the nearest car. The bottom half of a person was visible, likely the cause of the noise. This was proven when, a moment later, the buzzing stopped, to be replaced with hearty swearing in a language Damon wasn't familiar with. He grinned and watched Julianna sigh. She sauntered over to the truck and rapped on the door.

There was a startled exclamation and the owner of the legs rolled out from under the car, drill clutched in one hand like a weapon. They revealed themselves to be a chubby man with medium-brown skin and a spray of freckles across a round, flat nose. He sighed in relief when he saw Julianna, which was possibly the first time Damon had ever seen anybody react to her presence in such a way. Julianna's mouth twisted and she offered a hand to the mechanic, who took it and hauled himself up with a small "oof!" He wiped his free hand on his already grease-streaked jeans.

“Hi there!” A cheerful hand was thrust at him. Damon took it and shook with some bemusement, noting the rough palms and the dirt under the nails, similar to his own. The mechanic flashed a wide, toothy grin at him before looking over at Julianna. “This him?”

“Uh huh.”

“Great. Hey, man, I’m Taylor Weeks. I’m sure Julianna told you about me— actually, I bet she didn’t, just kidding.”

Julianna raised her eyebrows but made no move to defend herself. Damon shrugged.

“Uh, a little? She said something about another teacher.” He squinted. Something about Taylor’s face was familiar, but he couldn’t put his finger on why.

“Yeah!” Taylor brightened up immediately. “Yeah, that’s me. Hold on, let me just— hold this, would you?” he handed the drill to Damon and dropped back to the ground to lie on the wheeled cart. He slipped back under the truck, and there was loud hemming and hawing for a moment before he called, “Can you hand me the 5\8” wrench?”

Damon cast around and found the toolbox at his elbow. He fished out the appropriate wrench from the pile of recently used tools and placed it in the hand that was held out from underneath the truck. The hand disappeared for a minute, and there was the sound of metal creaking and more muttered commentary. The wrench

reappeared and Damon took it without thinking, already well-accustomed to this kind of behavior. He'd been on both sides of it in the past, assistant and distracted mechanic.

Taylor made requests for one or two more items, both of which Damon was able to find with ease and place in the waiting hand. At last, there was a satisfied sigh and Taylor rolled back out from under the truck with a grin, which he pointed at Julianna.

"Thanks, I thought you were bad at this, but--"

Julianna shook her head and pointed at Damon. Taylor blinked and turned curious eyes on him. Damon shrugged.

"I worked in a garage for a year or two before this. I know my way around."

Taylor's grin widened in excitement, and he practically bounced up off the floor to shake Damon's hand.

"Boy, then am I ever glad to meet you! Wait," he pulled himself up short. "What am I doing here?" He waved them over to another nearby project, an SUV that was sitting with the hood open. Taylor looked at him expectantly. There were a number of components sitting on the benches in front of it, and Damon looked them over, hefting the drill in thought.

"Well, I'm not really sure," he said at last. Taylor sagged a little. "Because," he continued, "Nobody puts the 875X in a '14 Ford if they don't want the component to bust within a few months."

"Oh? And what would you put in it?"

Damon grinned. "I've experimented a little in the past, and I think the best is the 574B-8, which, I know most people say is meant for Hondas, but trust me, I've put it in a few Fords now and I've had better results than anything that's come out of the factory."

The wide grin was back on Taylor's face. He slapped Damon's shoulder hard enough that he stumbled a little and took the drill from his hands in order to put it on a side table. "Finally! Somebody who speaks English around here!" he exclaimed. Julianna gave an unimpressed snort.

"I'll leave you to it," she said with a touch of wryness. Damon nodded to her and Taylor gave an absent wave, eyes still full of mechanical schematics.

"Okay, real quick before we get to work, tell me what you think of this baby over here—" He led the way to another project in the works, and Damon was happy to spend a good thirty minutes talking shop and swapping ideas with Taylor. It was the first time since coming here he felt like he'd found a place where his skills were not only useful, but *needed*. Taylor even let him slide under the vehicle that was giving him problems earlier in order to take a second look at it. Taylor pointed out the problem, and together they discussed potential solutions, bouncing ideas back and forth until they settled on something they both agreed on. Together they installed the fix, Damon reprising his role of handing over tools and holding loose pieces in place as Taylor attached them. As much as he was enjoying himself, Damon did find himself a little distracted at times. Taylor was very attractive, grease stained hands running through his bouncy curls as he attempted to explain a problem. His eyes were the brown of earth after a rain, a dark

but warm hue that was almost reddish when they caught the light. Damon would have happily spent the rest of the day elbow deep in car parts with someone like Taylor, but eventually they were pulled out of their intense discussions by the sound of a phone alarm going off somewhere in the garage. Taylor winced and let out a heavy sigh.

“Okay, for real now, I should at least help you out with the thing Julianna asked me to, otherwise it’s both our asses.” He grinned and Damon snorted.

“Does she have everybody here by the balls?”

“Well, yeah. Have you *seen* her?” Taylor shuddered. “Being the head of security *and* the boss’ daughter don’t hurt, either.”

“Wait, what?”

Taylor swung around from where he’d been crouched over, looking for a rag.

“Dude, you didn’t know?”

“No? Whose daughter is she?” Damon had a sinking feeling in his gut.

“Oh, man. She’s Julianna *Nieves*, dude.”

“Oh, shit.” Damon felt a stone drop into his stomach. “What are the chances of being fired for mouthing off to the boss’ daughter?”

Taylor burst into laughter. “Ah, man, your *face*! That was a good laugh,” he said, wiping tears from his eyes. “Nah, I doubt she’ll even tell the boss about you. She’s pretty independent of him, she’s not the ‘daddy’s girl’ type. But still, those are some steel cajones you’ve got there, sassing Julianna. Doesn’t she terrify you?” This last part was

said with a shudder and a glance at the door, as though Julianna might bust in at any moment.

“No? Honestly, she pisses me off sometimes. She’s not bad, but—” Damon shrugged and accepted the cloth Taylor held up with a triumphant cry. “I just wanna wipe that smirk off her face, you know? She clearly thinks she’s better than me.”

“Well dude, I hate to break it to you, but she probably *is*. C’mon, I’ll show you.” Taylor swung the rag over his shoulder and beckoned Damon to follow. They exited the garage through the back door, which opened out into a small open area which ended at the tree line. There were a few odds and ends scattered around, lawn chairs set up around a fire pit, targets pinned to trees at the far end of the space, what looked like a variation of lawn tools and sports gear, strange things Damon wasn’t sure he wanted to know the purpose of. Taylor headed to the targets, pointing out one in particular. It was so perforated in the center bullseye that the paper was gone, revealing deep scars in the trunk underneath.

“See this? *This* is Julianna.”

Damon swallowed. “So what’s her— thing? Nobody will tell me.”

Taylor shrugged. “I think its half courtesy, half fear. Julianna can be...genuinely dangerous, and her Knack has always been a touchy subject for her. If she hasn’t told you, no one will get in the way of that. Just know she’s got the power to back up her attitude.”

Damon pursed his lips. “What was I brought here for, anyway?”

Taylor clapped his hands together. "Right! It's a scavenger hunt."

"A...what?"

"Y'know, like, I hide things in the woods and give you a clue about where to start—"

"I know how it works. Why am I doing it?"

Taylor grinned. He handed the rag to Damon. "This is how we train you," he said.

Damon looked down at the rag in his hands. A slow understanding was starting to form. "So this is what Alexandria meant," he said. "You're the guy who's gonna teach me how to, what, control my power or something?"

"Yes and no." Taylor rocked back on his heels, considering. "We're gonna figure out what your limits are, then stretch 'em. In doing that, you learn what you can do and how you do it, and from there comes greater control." Taylor flashed a smile. "I have a feeling you won't be needing me as much for the control part, though. I'm used to dealing with more dangerous powers."

Damon squinted. "Are you an Initiate?"

Taylor shot him dual finger guns. "You betcha! I'm a Corporal."

"A what?"

"Jesus, they don't teach you anything anymore." Taylor shook his head. "All right, I'll fill you in after the scavenger hunt." He clapped his hands together. "Should be fun! Alex filled me in on everything that you told her, so I set this up to work around that. You have an hour."

“What am I looking for?”

“Well, that’s part of the fun, isn’t it?”

Damon sighed. “I’m sure somebody’s having a good laugh right now, yeah.”

Taylor clapped him on the back. “Aw, c’mon, this is the easy stuff. Oh! And no regular searching. Every move you make has to be from a clue, no aimless looking around. Let’s see, was there anything else...?” Taylor tapped his chin. “Oh! Are you prone to losing yourself or having dangerous outbursts because of your power?”

Damon blinked. “I don’t...think so?”

“Great! Then this’ll be easy for me.” Taylor grinned again. “All right, your hour has started. Good luck!”

“Wait, what do I—” Damon stopped himself and looked at the rag in his hands. “Oh.” He hadn’t felt anything from it in the same way he did when there was an outburst, so he’d assumed there were no imprints on the rag at all. “Great. I have to dig for it.” He slowed his breathing and closed his eyes, focusing on the rag in his hands. There was a whisper of intent at the back of his mind, so he reached for it and held on until it grew and he could feel it more clearly.

Gotta hide this ring, gotta hide this ring, hmm... The imprint was fuzzy, so Damon gritted his teeth and pushed harder against the fading image, not wanting to fail so early in the test. It moved further out of his reach the harder he tried.

“Relax! I can see you popping a vein from over here.”

Damon opened his eyes and glared at Taylor, who had taken a seat in one of the lawn chairs and had produced a beer from somewhere. He popped the cap and toasted Damon.

“You’re trying too hard! Let it flow, it’ll come if you trust it!”

“How the fuck would you know,” Damon grumbled, but after another moment of a worrying lack of feedback from the rag, took a deep breath and tried to relax. He let his shoulders slump and focused on the texture of the rag in his hands, rough and a little stiff in places where the grease was dry. He brushed his thumb over an oil stain, and like a flash the imprint was back in his hands.

Ah, put it...here! Nice weird little tree trunk...

Damon opened his eyes and strode off into the woods. Taylor gave a distant cheer from his chair.

This, at least, he was familiar with. Damon smiled when he stepped into the forest proper. He’d passed by this way before on one of his walks, so the area wasn’t unfamiliar to him. Keeping the memory he had felt firmly in mind, he walked without pause until he saw the tree trunk with a large hole in it, shorter than the others and already dead. He looked into the little hollow and pulled out a pink plastic pool ring.

“Nice.” Damon couldn’t help the small thrill of pleasure at having completed even this tiny task. He’d never given any thought to the *ways* his Knack could be used. In truth he barely used it at all, except for when it was assaulting him at inconvenient times. It wasn’t fire breathing or super strength or mind reading, like some of the

powers he'd heard of people having. In fact it was so passive he'd labelled it an inconvenient waste of time and left it at that.

Now, though, Damon clutched the cheap plastic ring in his hands like it was made of gold. He took another deep breath and tried to focus again, feeling that tickle at the back of his mind grow into—

What should I eat for lunch, do I still have that mac n cheese, what if I heated that up—

Damon pulled back. "Aw, come on." Of course it was a decoy. That was just his luck. He looked between the two useless items in his hands, elation from before crushed under this new twist of difficulty.

"Well, fuck." Damon put the ring down and tried again with the cloth, running into the same memory he'd felt before. It was clearer for the repetition, but no new information revealed itself. Damon picked up the pink ring again and gave *it* another try, but only musing on lunchtime options awaited him.

"Shit!" He tossed the ring hard enough that it bounced off the ugly dead tree. It knocked a few twigs off and sat in the leaf litter, covered in dirt and looking forlorn. Damon sighed and bent to pick it up, brushing his fingers across an upturned root in the process.

Gotcha! Use your surroundings, what a dope, I know I got you...

Damon jerked back in shock, cutting the recollection short. The ring fell from his hand in his scramble to slap his palm on the tree again. This time he skimmed across the

little mocking monologue at the beginning, trying to stop his lips from quirking in amusement even though nobody was there to see it.

Next thing, next thing...yes! Good log, nice stick, perfect...

Damon grinned and sat back on his heels, small trophies forgotten next to him. "Damn, you almost had me. Okay, let's see where that log is..."

Damon found the log with relative ease, and the mossy rock after that, under which was hidden a toy truck that had the next clue in his scavenger hunt. Each time Taylor made the tricks more difficult, laying false trails and using the environment in order to lay the clues down for Damon to follow. He had to hand it to Taylor, Damon would never have expected to be able to make use of his Knack in such a way. He was getting into the rhythm of the game, too, and his digging was easier, smoother, possibly because he knew what he was looking for. Damon reveled in the ease with which he could call these recollections to his fingertips, where before they were just a massive knot of impressions and different people's voices that gave him a headache rather than being of any use. He looked forward to talking with Taylor at the end of his hour to see what other techniques he had to use.

His last clue led him to an actual building in the woods, one he'd never seen before. Damon was pretty deep in the forest now, but he paid no mind to that and approached the place- a little, run-down wooden shed- as the last clue had told him to. He forgot to brace himself when he reached for the doorknob, but Damon had been so immersed in memories and impressions for the last hour that, while the burst of images

that assaulted him was strong, he was able to overcome the flow pretty quickly and sift through to make sure he was in the right place. Taylor used the shed the most, in recent times, but there had definitely been more than one presence here in the past. Damon didn't bother digging too deeply here and just pushed the door open.

He was greeted with darkness, but Damon fished his phone out of his pocket and turned the flashlight on, shining around the inside of the shed. There wasn't much, a few rusty gardening tools in one corner and an old tire in the other. In the center of the room was a plain wooden stool, clean of dirt and with a tablecloth sitting on it. Damon snorted because, really? In comparison to his other challenges- one of which had been wriggling under a stand of prickly brambles to grab a tiny, plastic chess piece from one of those magnetic travel boards one could find in a gas station, this was too easy. Damon hesitated with his hand on the table cloth. There was something under it, but it might be another red herring, he reasoned. To be safe, Damon checked the rusty tools and the tire, but found nothing.

"Weird." With a shrug, Damon picked up the tablecloth to see what was underneath. A beautiful and obviously old carving nestled in a box. It was the shape of a bear, the wood worn smooth and shiny by the touch of many hands. Damon sighed.

"I wish people would stop giving me their antiques." This time he braced himself when he picked up the heirloom in his hands, but the rush of memories wasn't what he was expecting.

Warmth. Happiness. Love. Hands closing around his own, wrapped around the bear in his hands. The sweet scratch of smoke in his throat, and amused laughter that filled him up like too much dinner. Sitting under the stars, holding his hands out to the fire that crackled in front of them while his grandmother told stories in the native tongue of her mother and her mother's mother before her. Her voice was dried leaves and tanned leather, but her wit was as sharp as ever. His mother, humming under her breath and embroidering a gift for his little sister, hands strong and warm, calloused in places. Family. Home.

Damon pulled back a little and found his cheeks were wet. He cursed and scrubbed at his face with one hand. "Damn it, Taylor, you had to pick this one, didn't you?" Damon held the bear carving with a new reverence despite his irritation, and took a few deep breaths to calm himself before diving back in. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, because Taylor's recollections ended after a certain point and another's took his place, presumably his mother. He wasn't sure if memories could be buried on top of one another and out of order, so Damon kept digging, skimming across ancestor after ancestor like brushing his fingers across the surface of a pond, just getting the tips of his fingers wet. This statue was *old*, possibly the oldest item he'd ever handled, and Damon was aware in a distant sense that he was pushing decades back in the past now, but he didn't care to pull back and stop searching. A part of him didn't want to stop, was fascinated by the endless tides of new information, new faces, different stories that all

resonated around and within this carving's history. Damon felt he could go on forever and never find an end.

Someone was talking to him. There was a buzz on the outer edges of Damon's awareness that indicated the speech was from outside the memories contained in the statue, but Damon brushed them off and kept looking, seeing these memories through the eyes of the people who had lived them, felt them, left their fingerprints in time on the carving he held in his hands. Damon was enraptured, touching new memories and drinking them in like clear spring water, diving deeper and deeper and—

There was a sensation not unlike sprinting headfirst into a concrete wall. Damon rebounded off of something mentally, which cut him out of his reverie like slamming a door in his face. Blind and disoriented, Damon reached for the memories in the statue again and found...nothing. The wood was textured by the carvings under his fingers, but he felt no echo of memory.

"Sheesh, that was a close one! I hadn't thought you'd be able to get that stuck, to be honest."

Damon cracked his eyes open from where he was hunched on the floor. The bear was clenched between his fists and his back ached from being bent nearly in two over the thing. Damon relaxed his fingers and let it drop into his lap. He arched his back with a groan and looked up at the inquisitive face of Taylor, who had a firm grip on Damon's shoulder.

“Relax, I’m fine.” Damon rolled his neck and winced at the aches in his body.

“What happened? What did you do?”

Taylor pointed at the bear and curled his fingers. “Hand that over first and I’ll tell you.”

Damon squinted a little at the cautious tone in Taylor’s voice, but he shrugged and placed the statue in Taylor’s waiting palm. When it was safely out of his grasp Taylor released a sigh and his whole posture relaxed from the strained tension he had been holding. Damon gestured with an open palm toward the ceiling.

“Well?”

“Guessing by your reaction that’s never happened to you before.” Taylor placed the bear back into the box it came from, closing the lid on it with care. “What happened,” he said, turning back to Damon, “is that you went too far. What was happening before I got to you?”

“Uh...” Damon tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling. “Well, it started out the same as always, but I couldn’t find any messages from you so I just...kept going.”

“How far?”

“Uh...couple decades, maybe more? The year is never recorded, just the people handling the item.”

“Huh.” Taylor rocked back on his heels. “Well, while you’ve never experienced this before, I can tell you I’ve seen it a lot. People can’t always control themselves, things get out of hand, sometimes they get lost...it’s just something that happens on the

road to mastering your Knack. That's why the new kids get ferried to me." Taylor jabbed a thumb at himself with a grin.

"What did you do? Is it permanent?"

"Nah. I just cancelled your Knack until you could come back to yourself, that's all."

"Is that your Knack, then?" Damon asked. Taylor nodded.

"Sure is. I have a kind of... let's call it a bubble, around me, that's like a blackout of any and all sensory information. If you were to try and take my pulse, you wouldn't feel anything. I don't give off brainwaves or temperature readings or show any signs of being alive at all, even though I am, obviously." Taylor gestured to himself to prove his point. "But I can also extend this field to another person, or an object. I'm working on whole spaces, but it takes a lot of concentration. When I do that, I've pretty much cut you off from being able to use your own Knack. You reach out but it just bounces off the wall I've put between you and the rest of the world."

"Damn." Damon leaned back on his hands as something fell into place. "It was *you* at the club that night," he realized. "You put your hand on that guy's shoulder and stopped his Knack from working."

"Oh, you were there? Yeah, nasty business." Taylor gave an exaggerated shiver. "That guy was able to cause seizures by stopping blood flow in certain parts of the body. Super dangerous, we were lucky nobody got killed."

Damon had to repress a shudder of his own. He hadn't realized the extent of the danger. "Well, thanks, I guess. Why didn't you put anything in the bear at the end? Was it supposed to be a false trail too?"

"Uh, about that..." Taylor spread his hands out, a sheepish grin on his face. "I may have put it there to see if you *could* lose control? I don't run into a lot of Clairvoyants, it's harder to predict how your Knacks will react."

"Wow, thanks a bunch."

"Listen, you were perfectly safe! I've done this tons of times."

Damon shook his head and sighed. "Somehow I'm not surprised." Still, he accepted the hand Taylor offered to help him to his feet. When he was up, Damon jabbed a sharp finger in Taylor's direction. "But don't try that shit on me again without warning."

Taylor held his hands up. "No problem, my dude." He grabbed the box off the stool and held the door open for Damon to step back out into the forest. The shadows were a good amount longer than when he'd entered the shed. Damon blinked.

"What time is it?"

"A little after four? I missed lunch, I'm starving—"

"Wait, you only gave me an hour! We started at what, two? How long was I out?"

Taylor squinted at the leaves under his feet. "Well, let's see, it actually took you more than an hour to reach the shed, but I wanted you to reach the statue, and then I waited a bit outside before going in, so...maybe forty five minutes?"

“Jesus.” Damon looked down at his hands. “It hadn’t felt that long at all.”

“How did it feel?” Taylor kept his gaze turned forward, but Damon could hear the note of interest he couldn’t hide.

“Like...warmth. It was comforting. A lot of people sitting around a fire together, telling stories and sharing food. I didn’t understand the language, but somehow I knew it was about family? It was...welcoming.”

Taylor nodded and smiled. If his eyes were a little wet, Damon wouldn’t say anything about it.

“I’m glad,” Taylor said, quietly. “I...miss them.”

Damon nodded and let the silence fall between them, each lost in their own thoughts on the way back to the garage. Damon turned his experiences today over in his head one more time. He’d never seen his Knack in this light before, as a useful tool instead of a hindrance and a burden, something to be avoided and hidden from others. He still didn’t get how it could be useful outside of maybe helping him find his car keys, but it wasn’t violent and he’d felt as comfortable using the Knack as he’d ever been, so maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

Taylor perked up once they passed through the treeline again. He gave Damon a slap on the back and made a beeline for the back door of the garage.

“Want a beer?” he tossed over his shoulder. Damon blinked.

“I mean, I’m nineteen, but sure?”

“Huh.” Taylor paused with one hand on the doorframe and winced a little.

“Thought you were older than me. I feel a little guilty for checking you out earlier.” He ducked inside with a wink before Damon could recover, his face flushed pink. Taylor reappeared a moment later, two glass bottles in hand. “Well, whatever, you look like you’re no stranger to the finer qualities of a bottle of Corona,” he said, passing one to Damon, who twisted the cap off and took a long gulp of the golden liquid to recover.

“You can’t be much older than me,” he said.

Taylor shrugged. “I’m twenty-one, so no. You just have a look about you. The face of somebody who’s used to taking care of their own shit.”

Damon raised his glass. “Got me there.” They clinked glasses and took another drink from the bottles. Damon made a face.

“Don’t understand why people drink this shit.”

Taylor barked a laugh from where he was pulling up a second lawn chair beside the first. “Because it’s cheap!” he quipped, and gestured to the two seats. “When I can afford to import beer by the keg, straight from Germany, I’ll let you know.”

Damon flopped into the open chair and the two clinked their glasses together, taking a long gulp from the bottle. Taylor settled his hands on his stomach, balancing his beer bottle in between them.

“So, I promised I’d explain everything once you made it through the whole scavenger hunt. I think I owe it to you despite the fact that it took you over the allotted time limit, if only because I may have tricked you a little.” He grinned at Damon’s flat

stare. "All right, all right. So, you know there are Potentials and Initiates, and the Initiate powers are called Knacks. However, everyone's powers are so varied that there needed to be an easier system for sorting everyone's Knacks and dealing with them on a more personalized basis, right? Can't have the mind readers getting the same treatment as the kids who control fire, otherwise nobody benefits and we just have a bunch of half-cocked kids who don't know how to control their Knack. So, the bigshots over in R&D gave us some neat little terms to slot everyone into based on how their Knack operates." Taylor listed them off on his fingers as he talked. "We've got Celials, Cerebrals, Corporals, and Clairvoyants. Depending on what your Knack is, you get an easy label slapped on you so we know, vaguely, what we're gonna be dealing with when we're training you. We have a teacher for each one, for more specialized training."

"What about you?" Damon asked. "I doubt we're in the same group."

"Nah, from what I've seen and been told about you, it looks like you're a Clairvoyant. Better check with the big shots to make sure— though, you should have already done that when you were registered." Taylor squinted at Damon, who shrugged.

"Not really? That one gardener doctor, Yadira, just drew my blood and asked me a million questions. Frankly I kind of avoided all that stuff." It was Damon's turn to look sheepish. Rather than laughing at him, however, Taylor leaned back in his chair with a pensive look, eyes staring into the middle distance.

"Listen. I get it, I really do. You think someone like me enjoys being put under a microscope, when I'm part Wampanoag *and* a trans guy to boot? Nobody likes that kind

of scrutiny, and frankly I don't see the need for it." Taylor sighed and took a swig of his beer. "I'm sure you came here for a reason, right? They offered you something, money, a job, whatever. And you obviously took that deal rather than being dragged in here like a criminal. I did, too." Taylor's mouth tightened. "I've got people I couldn't help in the position I was in before, so I jumped through their hoops and played nice and I'm getting what I want. So I suggest you do the same, if only for that person on the outside you want to help. There's nothing to be done about it for now." Taylor's grip tightened on his bottle, and he trailed off for a minute. Damon looked at his own beer, feeling a churning in his stomach that kept him from drinking it.

"I just...I don't trust this place, not fully. Sure, there are some friendly faces, but I don't really *know* anyone, not even you. The whole thing is so shrouded in mystery from the outside, how am I supposed to know what to expect?"

Taylor nodded. "I will say that most of the people you've met so far are trustworthy. Alex likes to mess with you a little bit, but she cares a lot and she's good at her job. Mari— Marianna, I mean— seems weird but she's harmless, she's very kind and she just wants to help. She's very attached to this place, though, it's done a lot for her."

"Yeah? Like what?"

Taylor shook his head. "Not my place to talk about it, but I know she was in a pretty rough situation before Horizon took her in. Morality doesn't mean a lot to her, you know? She really only sees things in terms of what she knows will happen and what won't, it doesn't matter that the potential exists for terrible things."

"She seems...very dependent on her Knack for that."

"She is. Again, not my place, but I know she's been through a lot."

Damon nodded. "What about Julianna?"

Taylor thought about it, swirling the dregs of his beer in his glass so it caught the late afternoon sunlight. "She's...very loyal to Horizon. She believes what she's doing is the best way to do it. And while I agree that people who hurt others shouldn't be allowed to just rampage through society, I think there should be some...limits, for the people who aren't like that. And the ones we have in place now aren't really enough."

Damon sighed. "I can't say I'm surprised. She's pretty much plugged into the main line of this whole operation. I just can't imagine being..." he gestured at himself and Taylor. "And having these iron-clad opinions on something that directly involves her."

"Well, she's safe, you know? She's never going to be subject to the kind of treatment she might give to other people because she's secured a spot amongst those in power, right? I don't think she gets it, frankly. I think most people don't." Taylor put his empty bottle down next to him. "Do you remember the *X-Men* comics?" he asked, apropos of nothing.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Damon said, frowning. "There were comics and a TV series and stuff, right?"

"Yeah, it started back in the sixties. Superheroes in general are pretty big, but my favorite has always been those guys. *X-Men* started way before the Potential Gene was

discovered in 2005, right, so imagine the shock of all those writers when mutants were suddenly real." Taylor gave a laugh, but there was no humor in it. "I'm surprised they didn't stop writing, to be honest. But the core ideas surrounding a lot of *X-Men* movies and stuff were that mutants were outcasts, society as a whole shunned them. There's a lot of oppression politics in there, the idea that these people were born in a certain way and it's not their fault, of course, but people discriminate against them for it anyway." He raised an eyebrow at Damon. "Sound familiar?"

Damon whistled through his teeth and grimaced. "For more than just the Knack thing, yeah."

Taylor mimed aiming finger guns at Damon. "Bingo. That's true of a lot of us, actually. I don't think it's related to the Knack thing, but who knows. Maybe they should do a study."

"Oh yeah? Who's 'us'?"

Taylor hummed and counted off on his fingers. "Well, I'm gay, and Alex, Mari and I are all trans. I'm not sure what Julianna's got going on but frankly I've never seen her show interest in anything other than her job. Is she aro, is she ace, is she just a workaholic? I'm too scared to ask so I guess we'll never know." He grinned at Damon. "And then there's you."

"Me?"

“Yeah, you. What, you think I don’t notice when someone gives me the once-over?” Taylor waggled his eyebrows. Damon felt his cheeks heat at being caught, but he laughed.

“All right, fine. I’m pansexual. But clearly I have good taste, so how could I resist?”

Now it was Taylor’s turn to look a little flustered. He recovered quickly, however, and his smile was warm. “Flattery will get you everywhere, my friend.” He sobered up a little, returning to his point. “So, like I was saying. The thing is, the X-Men are superheroes, they fight crime and people love them for it. So you’d think that, in general, people would love us too, right? A lot of Initiates are out there using their Knacks to help people, they’re rescuing kids from burning buildings and shielding innocent people from bullets during a shootout, whatever. And yet people want us registered and tagged like livestock, counted up and kept a close watch on. What does that say to you?”

“I...I don’t know. I hadn’t thought about it that way before.”

Taylor rubbed a hand over his head, ruffling his curls into disarray. “To me, it says that people don’t see us as the heroes. The X-Men fought a lot of super-powered monsters, too.”

Synopsis

This portion of the novel focuses on Damon's story, but the overarching idea was that there would be four sections, one dedicated to each of the four main protagonists. The other three are Marianna, Rue, and Liz. The last two characters get introduced in Damon's section of the story, but their tales run parallel alongside Damon and Mari's until they intersect when the four meet. They have to band together to discover the darkness hiding behind the Horizon Company's shining exterior.

Damon and Mari notice an increased amount of incidents in which Initiates lose control of their Knacks, or Potentials Initiating in ways that cause their Knacks to mutate strangely, causing harm to themselves or others. Julianna is tight-lipped about the situation, though it's clear she knows more than she's letting on. The two turn instead to two of their friends running the Research and Development team for Horizon, Elias and Ira. After some prodding, the two scientists let slip that Felix Nieves has been asking them to search through the genealogies and genetic codes of every Initiate they have registered. He's searching for four specific genetic lines, following a theory that the Potential Gene can be traced back to a specific mutation early on in human development. Ira and Elias think they've found a few of these lines, but they can't explain the spike in rogue Initiates. Eventually Damon and Mari meet Liz and Rue, two students who are enrolled in the school at the Estate and have some more information. Students have been disappearing from classes, supposedly for "extra training" of their Knacks. But, when they return, they're different. They look like they've been ill, and

their personalities have changed drastically, becoming closed off and distant, shells of their former selves. Sometimes they don't come back at all.

Damon attempts to demand more answers from Julianna and from Felix, to no avail. The uneasy friendship between them is shattered by Julianna drawing a line between herself and Damon, putting her loyalty to Horizon and her father first.

Frustrated and out of options, the four get some unexpected help from a teacher of Rue and Liz's, an Initiate who was one of the first cases of an unexplained lapse in stability.

He believes he was under the influence of a Cerebral Initiate, and an extremely powerful one at that. He's been quietly following the news and collecting information, digging up old stories and connecting the dots. The information Damon and Mari pass along from Ira and Elias is enough to convince himself of the truth. He explains to them that all Knacks are descended from four specific bloodlines, one for each category of Knack. He calls them Primes, and that, over time, the bloodlines were mixed and thus the apparently random mutations of the Potential Gene occurred. Felix came to him as well, he said, as a historian specializing in folk tales, asking about stories involving people with strange powers, explained only through magic or religion. It was clear he was looking for Primes in the modern day, as well as in the past. The only other piece of information the teacher was able to offer was he suspected that one of the Primes had already been located, possibly more. There was a girl, a Cerebral, who didn't attend classes with the rest of the kids. The teacher had seen her occasionally with the principal— apparently,

she was Kendall's niece, and was specifically tutored on her own. The teacher had never met her in person.

At some point there's a showdown between the students and the school, tensions exploding over the increased number of disappearances. Damon and Mari don't take part, but as they're trying to escape the school Felix and a strange group of students show up. Among them is the girl the teacher mentioned, the Cerebral. She is easily able to take control of their minds and bodies, and essentially forces Mari to come with them, kidnapping her. Rue and Liz show up just as they drive off, leaving Damon watching helplessly.

Damon, Liz and Rue gather their resources and their allies over time, and eventually they're able to find out where Felix has laid low with the rest of the Primes. They mount a rescue mission to save whoever they can. Felix was able to gather three Primes including Mari, who'd been altered in a way that released her Knack beyond anything that was ever possible before, at the cost of her sight. They effectively created a Prime where there wasn't one before. Damon, Liz and Rue show up in an attempt to stop Felix from getting away with this, and instead find out they've fallen into a trap: Damon and Liz are incapacitated and Rue is revealed to be a necessary fifth member to complete Felix's goal: drawing on the power of an ancient being, hidden in the afterlife, that was said to be the culmination of many hundreds of years' worth of Initiates' Knacks. Rue is a Conduit, the only one of his kind, with the ability to speak to the dead. With his power Felix is able to complete the procedure and send himself and the five

Primes into the space where the creature resides. Against their wishes they release it into the world, where it seeks a host to inhabit. The Primes attempt to combat it, to no avail. Felix is collapsed, unconscious or dead, no one is sure.

Then, Julianna steps forward. She offers herself willingly as a vessel to the creature, and it accepts. It attempts to possess her and she fights back, ordering someone to kill her so that the creature will be trapped forever. Damon wrests a gun from Felix's hands and is aimed at Julianna, ready to fire, when Mari's scream distracts him. She had been mostly insensible with the force of her own power overwhelming her, but now she reacts and does something nobody thought possible: she rewrites fate. She takes the end of Julianna's fate line and reties it to her own, thus preventing Julianna from being able to die unless Mari does. On top of that, she's able to change the events of the future in that Julianna can find the strength to subdue the creature and keep it trapped inside her. Everyone lives, and they're able to pick up the pieces of the situation. Felix is carted off to jail, Damon takes over the Estate and reworks its entire purpose: he opens it as it was, a school, but changes its goals: all are free to come and go as they please, both those with Knacks and those without, in search of learning more about the mysterious abilities and where they come from. Mari runs it alongside him. She regains her sight, but her abilities are severely weakened to the point that there is only one fate line left she can see: her own and Julianna's, permanently intertwined. Julianna drops off the face of the earth, unwilling to spend too much time

in society lest she loses control of the creature she's sharing an uneasy headspace with.

Damon makes her promise to visit at least once a year.

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