

The Movement

Are you really awake?

Thesis Project by Lauren Barnes

University of Central Oklahoma

April 2020

The Movement

The Movement

Thesis Title

Lauren Barnes

Author's Name

04/25/2020

Date

Jackson College of Graduate Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma

A THESIS APPROVED FOR

By

Constance Squires

Digitally signed by Constance Squires
DN: cn=Constance Squires, o, ou,
email=constancesquires@mac.com, c=US
Date: 2020.04.27 12:51:39 -05'00'

Committee Chairperson

Laura Bolf-Beliveau

Digitally signed by Laura Bolf-
Beliveau
Date: 2020.04.27 12:59:41 -05'00'

Committee Member



Committee Member

Committee Member

Abstract:

The Movement is a young adult dystopian fantasy novel, 207 pages long with 70,383 words, which takes place one hundred years in the future when a select few can gain access into people's minds as the main character struggles to understand the truth of her society. Relevant creative work in the YA dystopian fantasy genre include: *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *Scythe* by Neal Schusterman, *the Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, and *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline among many others. YA dystopian fantasy novels provide young adults with a deeper examination of the world around them steeped in fantasy settings and themes accessible to them and this novel hopes to add to that conversation. *The Movement* presents a possible future to America's invasive politics and advertisements by creating a world where the fight has moved into the mind and how one could defend themselves. Two of the major creative challenges revolved around the storyline itself: content and length. Completing a novel and creating a storyline with enough happening to keep the reader interested can be difficult. Through extensive scheduling to create a successful writing regimen and letting the story develop naturally, opposed to attempting to plan the entire novel prior to writing it, *the Movement* was completed with future possibilities to continue Maya's story. This novel hopes to add to the YA dystopian fantasy genre by pairing dreams and mental landscapes with consent in a form accessible to young adults during their formative years.

Table of Contents:

<i>Prologue</i>	5
<i>Chapter One: Let's Start from the Beginning, Three Months Ago</i>	7
<i>Chapter Two: I Think I'm Falling Apart</i>	21
<i>Chapter Three: The Crazy Blog</i>	37
<i>Chapter Four: That Time I Hit My Best Friend</i>	41
<i>Chapter Five: Wake Up Call- Life without Callie Sucks</i>	49
<i>Chapter Six: The Defenders</i>	58
<i>Chapter Seven: Stick with Me Here because Kai's Story is Important</i>	70
<i>Chapter Eight: The Enemy of My Enemy is... Conner, Apparently</i>	80
<i>Chapter Nine: Two Months Ago Now- Welcome to My First Journey into the Mind</i>	97
<i>Chapter Ten: The Big Reveal that Didn't Actually Solve any of My Problems</i>	122
<i>Chapter Eleven: The Last Place I Thought I'd Ever be at Night</i>	132
<i>Chapter Twelve: Vegetarianism and Uncle Kevin, an Unexpected Combo</i>	143
<i>Chapter Thirteen: Welcome to the Defenders B-Team</i>	152
<i>Chapter Fourteen: My Secret Double Life that I Guess Wasn't Too Secretive</i>	165
<i>Chapter Fifteen: The Time I Didn't Hit My Best Friend and that's Called Personal Growth</i>	176
<i>Chapter Sixteen: The Movement I Wasn't Ready For</i>	185
<i>Chapter Seventeen: The Missing Piece of the Puzzle</i>	204
□□□□□	
<i>Index</i>	213

It's called the "American Dream" because you have to be asleep to believe it.

—George Carlin

The Divisions as per the New American Government (Established 2042):

The Affinities: This top tier of abilities is a small, elite group who are well-versed in the creation, implementation, and control of dreams for themselves and others, as well as displaying a mastery for projections of a hallucinatory nature for oneself and others on a large scale. Along with the aforementioned abilities, an Affinity could also possess traits that have yet to be discovered and researched because their mental possibilities are limitless.

The Visionaries: The second highest tier of abilities are capable of controlling the dreams of themselves and others. Along with controlling dreams, some advanced Visionaries are able to project hallucinations during a person's waking hours that can appear to be real, but different from the Affinities in that they can only project these hallucinations to one person at a time.

The Daydreamers: Members of society shown to have the lowest amount of abilities. The Daydreamers are capable of controlling their own dreams while some members also possess the ability to project small visions for themselves primarily, possibly for others as well, for short periods of time.

The Constants: The members of society with no known affinities, abilities, or extra capabilities. The Constants should be looked upon as hard workers who continue the traditional values of the United States in today's New America. These members are reminders of our country's past that may require assistance when necessary by others with affinities in a gesture of goodwill.

To My Reader,

It's been 100 years since our first Affinity president, Sarah Abrams, took office and everything changed. The United States of America was gone and replaced by New America, a rebranded country with less state borders but more government interference. Once a group of people capable of, essentially, mind control through dreams and hallucinations were elected to office, the lives of the Constants (or what we're better known as by people with abilities—the Deprived) suffered. Along with the separation of abilities, came new laws and regulations to keep those with powers in line. Most of the time, though, if an offender has enough name recognition or money the rules can be bent a little because even though a lot about New America has changed, some things will always be the same. The Supreme Court was replaced with a group of nine called the Dream Keepers, they all had to be Affinities, and were in charge of

certain areas of the country to ensure the laws of the affinities were upheld as well as deciding what government or business messages could be allowed into our minds.

The laws all concerned the misuse of entering into someone's mind and the protocols that accompany the entry: the person must be consenting and the images displayed must never be portrayed in a negative light, only dreams that contribute to successful sleep of the subject. A big question in the beginning had revolved around how subjective *good* dreams are from person to person. All questions were answered hinging on one major caveat: consent. If the person is willing and agreed to it, would we not know what the subject would prefer? No one ever focused on the obvious follow up question that was always missing: If there's no consent, no care to the *subject*, then what if the images produced aren't considered a dream but a nightmare?

I'm writing this today, in hopes of bringing to light the secrets of our country, to say brother and I were members of a group called the Defenders and, while their motives may have changed over time, I'm determined to stick with our original goal. We've been hiding the fact we know the truth about the affinities that New America has kept from us. In keeping all of my own secrets though, we haven't succeeded— yet. Believe it or not, I really am trying to save us all. It's just not working the way I thought it would, so I need to start this recount of everything that's happened by saying:

To all of those who suffered, or continue to suffer, because our intended actions with the Defenders didn't go as planned— I'm sorry. I really fucked up.

-Maya Davis

**Any names or places mentioned here are 100% real and accurate in the name of honesty—even if it makes me look bad in the process too. Plus, to be honest, most of the people I mention here are assholes and I just wanted you guys to know it too.*

Chapter One: Let's Start from the Beginning, Three Months Ago

“Hey.” My brother walked into my room and sat on my bed. “I figured you’d want me to be the one to tell you.”

“Oh great.” I pushed the hair out of my eyes and glanced in the direction of my computer screen. “What is it? Do I need to hit refresh?” Mason nodded. “I’m too scared to do it. Just tell me. Wait, what time is it, anyway?”

“5:30.” He said. I glanced at the clock beside my bed with a groan. “I know you wanted to be alone, but then the news anchor announced the results.” I looked back towards my computer, the last time stamp reading 5:15 because I couldn’t bring myself to keep hitting refresh. He waited for my eyes to meet his after my finger finally hit the button. “He won, Maya. Storm won.”

My computer screen confirmed. Nicholas Storm, our newest Affinity leader with barely a college degree to show for himself but plenty of ancestral wealth to get him there, was one of the worst people I’d ever read about. He knew nothing about the political events taking place across the world and his only degree is in Affinity Management, which is better translated to: I was born with these affinities so now, eighteen years later, I want my parents to pay for me to party while I pretend to learn more about my hereditary abilities. “Does Dad know yet?”

“He stayed up all night, too, until the final results were announced. He really wanted something to change,” Mason shook his head as his words trailed off. Storm’s opponent, Evans, would have been the first Constant in office in one hundred years, but I knew he’d be overlooked. I had tried to be positive, though, despite our history.

“I figured. He must have been pretty upset,” I whispered. Once I saw the results leaning towards Storm, I went to my room to sulk alone and hope the results would somehow start

going in our favor. I hoped if I didn't see the announcement, then maybe I still lived in a world that didn't elect Storm solely because his father is Nathaniel Storm, owner of the largest affinity prep school in the country with more money than most of the Middle combined. When the affinities were discovered, everyone was confused how the powers came to exist, but they were simply told they had existed all along. Everyone was supposed to believe that without questioning it. Somehow everyone did. It's amazing the things people will ignore when they're wanting to see only the best in people. They've been in charge ever since. We were dumb to think that would change.

The Storm family opened the doors to the North-Eastern Preparatory School for the Affinities around seventy five years ago and they had been flooding us with their dream commercials and affluence ever since. As the name suggests, the only students admitted to the school are the ones born with affinities and enough money which, as the years have gone on, has dwindled primarily to several families who felt like they ran the East and, now because of Nicholas, probably the whole country. Think the definition of "mobsters" from the 1900s and beginning 2000s we've read about, but give them abilities and even bigger houses.

"Yeah, he's not happy. He went to bed right after, so who knows what celebratory messages the Dream Keepers will release while he's asleep. I don't know why he bothered going to bed after this one." Mason ran his hand through his light brown hair. "Anyway, I just wanted to warn you ahead of time."

"Warn me that Dad might be in a bad mood or warn me about the Visionary assholes that will probably be bragging today at the school?" I stood up. There was only an hour left before I had to start getting ready for work and the thought of going to that school after the election results made me want to call in sick for the day.

“Both, definitely both. I know the Visionaries there like to make work miserable for you. I’m sorry that you have to put up with that.”

At the time, Mason worked for a youth outreach program for Constants in the area— we live in Middle, previously a state called Oklahoma before they eliminated the state boundaries and labeled everything either East, Middle, or West. The outreach was established by some of the nicer Visionaries with extra money to blow, but too busy to actually spend their time personally helping our community. It was a great job for Mason though, he got to work with our friends and younger kids that looked up to him like he was their brother too. Two and a half years ago, I was sixteen and started working for the program too. I loved the six months I worked there before I got let go. I met a lot of good people and brought in money for my family at the same time, which helped with the guilt I always carried around watching my dad, and then finally Mason, struggle to provide for us.

“I can’t believe our funding gets cut when people with abilities get to keep their dumb programs.” Mason sat down on the edge of my bed. “I mean, they pay you to be an event coordinator attendant. What does that even mean?” He asked. I turned away from my closet and watched him throw himself back on my bed. “Just a fancy name for you doing the dirty work your boss doesn’t want to do and throw parties. Parties that cost enough to have saved your job and all the others at the center.”

“I know, Mase, but—”

“I guess celebrating the rugby squad’s latest victory is more important though.”

“I don’t think they’re called squads, actually.” I walked closer to Mason, who was still sitting on my bed. He sat up as I got closer. “But hey, listen. It’s not your fault I work for jerks.” As he sat there, looking down at the floor, he looked much older than twenty. I sat beside him

and nudged him with my elbow. “I can handle it, you know. The things they say to me, I mean.” I waited until he looked up at me. “It’s not that easy to hurt my feelings.”

“Yeah.” He said after a moment. “You did make it through all the fights we had just fine. I mean you always lost, but you made it.” He chuckled.

“Someone bounced back fast.” I pushed him and he almost fell off my bed. “Now get out. I’m going to just start getting ready. If I don’t keep moving, I’ll fall asleep and I’m trying to ignore those god awful dream messages,” I laughed.

“Yeah, yeah, okay. I’m on Dad duty then. Maybe if I make some eggs, he’ll be in a better mood.”

“The best way to distract anyone is with food.” I shrugged. Mason walked out of my room and left my door. He never was good at leaving things the way he found them. I walked across my room and shut the door to start getting ready for the day. Still, I was dreading seeing the Visionaries at work; a feeling that never quite faded.



The morning after Storm’s election was surreal. From the outside, there were countless flyers and banners displaying with excitement that Storm had won. Pink, green, orange. None of the banners seemed to have any kind of color scheme and it still bothers me. I scanned in my unfortunate badge in embarrassment. I did my best to never let anyone see my badge because the picture made me cringe. I hadn’t been told on the day I picked up my application that I’d be immediately given the job, have my picture taken, and be expected to start working that afternoon. My long hair was up loosely in a messy bun that hadn’t been brushed, my eyes looked tired and red, and my skin blotchy from stress and waking up late that morning, and my

old shirt had paint stains on it. And in two years, the school never even offered to let me take another picture. Bitches.

“Oh no, no, no. This is *not* going to work. Follow me.” My boss, Ginny Stein, said after one look at me and my new badge photo. I listened to her stilettos click down the hallway in envy. She looked to be around my dad’s age, I never asked though, but she felt much younger than that to me. “I know we caught you off guard today, but if you don’t have many options at home, then you’re welcome to check our lost and found. No one ever comes back for their things, so after a week it’s up for the taking. Girl to girl here— they’ll eat you alive if you dress like that here.” Ginny opened the door to the lost and found and left me to look around. Over the next two years, Ginny would tell me about any cute, new finds and I rushed down to pick out more to “keep up with the trends.” I kept up well enough that most people were utterly shocked by my appearance in my badge photo, thank God.

I shook my head, tossed my badge into my purse, and walked down the long hallway to Ginny’s office. The hallway was full of banners with Storm’s face on it, booths set up with candy, and students passing out stickers that said “Storm 2140” or “The Calm before the Storm.” Clever and probably thought up by the same valedictorian who picked the banners I assumed as one student shoved a button in my face.

“Storm’s president! Here, take a button.” The boy looked gleeful, like he personally knew Nicholas Storm. The boy’s eyes were wide and his smile even bigger, button still in his outstretched hand, until one of his friends walked up to us. Conner Yost, or better known to my diary as the worst person I had ever met. His family was the richest in the Middle and donated money for multiple wings at the school, so he was used to getting his way. I watched Conner grow up from a sixteen year old punk to a full blown asshole over those two years and never

saw one moment of weakness from him. His consistency would be almost impressive if he didn't piss me off so much.

"Parker, does *she* seem like she goes to our school?" Conner put his arm around Parker's shoulder. He looked me up and down. "With those lost and found clothes and her bus pass still warm? I don't think so." He laughed. "Anything you want to say about the election, Maya?" He moved closer to me; so close I could smell his cologne and feel his breath on my face.

"Nothing I would want to say to you, Yost." I was careful to not back away from him so he couldn't take any sign of discomfort as a win.

"Well, I just figured someone like you would have plenty to say. Especially now that we can both vote." Conner circled me, like the true vulture he was. "Do you feel like your voice wasn't heard?" His eyes kept the same empty stare, never leaving my face. "You should, because it wasn't. Majority ruled and apparently no one cares about having a Deprived president."

"Don't call me that." I said. My fists clinched.

"I'll call you whatever I want to call you. In case you still hadn't noticed, look around. I own this school." Conner raised his voice with each sentence. "I can do whatever I want. Who's going to stop me? You?" He looked around to see if anyone was going to defend me. When no one spoke up, he shook his head and turned to walk away from me. "I'll just make sure to see you in your dreams tonight then," He said over his shoulder.

I stood, uncomfortable with all the eyes on me, as he walked away. He was always quick to threaten me with appearances in my dreams and it used to scare me. I would go home and try everything I could to stay awake from drinking a lot of caffeine to making Mason stay up all night with me in case I got tired, but Conner never showed up. Over the past two years, I

learned he just liked the empty threat and not the effort that goes along with the action. A cough brought my mind back into the present. Parker remained in front of me with the button still in his outstretched hand.

“So you probably don’t want the button then?” The kid needed to learn how to read the room.

“Are you kidding?” I turned to walk away in search of refuge inside of Ginny’s office.

I saw the door, always full of posters for upcoming events I had made like my own personal sanctuary in hell, and sighed in relief. I rushed inside and ran straight into Ginny. She was only a couple of years older than me with a rich, umber skin tone and bright brown eyes that lit up with excitement during our hours discussing the next event to keep the students engaged with the school. She had her hair pinned up loosely on top of her head with a pencil.

We had grown very close over those two years— despite her being older, having abilities, and being married while I didn’t have an affinity and was as single as a person could get. She never treated me as anything less than an equal and always welcomed my ideas with the same tenacity she had toward her own. She knew things about me without me being having to tell her out loud, so I always felt connected to her. She asked me a lot of questions in return, the one trait about her I could have lived without, like she was trying to learn every small detail about my life. I didn’t understand why she was interested in me, but I’ll admit I liked the attention.

“Maya, I have an idea: homecoming dance but with a paradise theme. We can have faux cocktails, pass out couture shirts with the large flowers on them. You know the ones I’m talking about? Do those even exist? I’m not sure, but we simply must find out—” She stopped when she saw my face. “Oh Maya, what’s wrong?” She shut the door behind us.

I walked over to my desk in the front corner of the room, put my purse down, and slumped against the edge. She walked closer, all her excitement from moments ago had disappeared, as my eyes filled with tears. I hated when my eyes did that without my permission, but they tended to do that all the time when I worked at that damned school. Annoyed, I wiped them away as Ginny leaned on the edge of my desk beside me.

“I’ll give you three guesses.” I chuckled in a lame attempt to delay any more tears.

“Don’t tell me it was Conner again?” She paused as I nodded. “I don’t understand how that boy has enough time in his day to find you and make you miserable.”

I shrugged my shoulders as I walked around my desk and sat down. I shuffled paperwork around and looked for my notebook to write down her homecoming paradise idea while I still remembered it. As I organized, I felt her watching me. “I promise I’ll be fine. You know I’m used to it.”

“Well of course I know that, Maya, but you seem like something more is bothering you.”

“Conner threatened to be in my dreams tonight. I don’t think he’d do it, but it still freaks me out when he says things like that. I don’t want him inside of my mind, Ginny. It’s bad enough to see him here every day.” I said. She was silent for a few short seconds.

“He said what to you?” She asked.

“It’s not a big deal. I don’t think he’d actually—”

“We need to talk to the dean. It is absolutely unacceptable for one of the students to be talking to you that way. I’ll tell him—”

“Ginny, I’m not one of the students here. The dean doesn’t care. He’ll want to make sure the library keeps being renovated with the Yost’s money and then that’ll just make Conner madder.” I cut her off. I had already tried that before. The first, and only, time I tried talking to

the dean, he promised the matter would be resolved. In reality, that meant he would keep the incident quiet and Conner told all of his friends to make my life miserable. It had been rough the rest of the school year after that and I promised myself I would never be a snitch on the students again.

“Okay, well fine. I won’t talk to the dean, but maybe if you let me into your mind,” Ginny’s voice trailed off as she studied my reaction. “I’m just saying. I’d love to get in there, you know, because I wonder how he’d like that,” Ginny scoffed. I looked at her horrified.

“You know that you can’t do that, right?” I asked. She was silent. “Ginny. Tell me you won’t do that. There are laws for a reason.”

“Okay, okay. Geez, you’re really no fun anymore.” She said. “Besides, technically I’m an adult remember? I wouldn’t dare do such a thing.” Her hand rose to her heart dramatically, in faux revulsion, and then she threw her head back in laughter because if there was one thing Ginny wasn’t, it was consistently mature.



It was night time, incredibly dark, and I was running. Running was my best proven way to escape. Escape from the affinities, the pressure that accompanied living with hardly any money, but mostly to escape from myself. At night, when I’m running, I don’t have time to think about my problems or that I’m a Deprived living in a world where that was never enough. I just ran. One foot in front of the other, breathing in and breathing out. The night air was always full of the things I found myself missing in the daylight hours. The symphony of bugs played their own score of wonderfully harmonious music, the moonlight seemed to shine down on me like a spotlight as I ran, and the shadows danced all around me as I made my way through the night. The drumming of my feet on the pavement created a constant beat as the fog wrapped

around me like a warm blanket. We were all a part of my own musical at night, a musical I wasn't willing to share with anyone else.

As I ran, I focused on my breathing until it worked itself into a rhythm with my nightly production. The only sounds that reached my ears were the customary: bugs, my footsteps, a dog I ran passed, a tree branch breaking, more footsteps picking up in time with my own, the wind shaking the leaves. Wait, other footsteps? My feet stumbled, my nightly musical skipped a beat.

I listened intently and struggled to not break time with my normal pace again. My nighttime symphony had to continue, but who decided to make a guest appearance with me tonight? I saw my corner, 15th and Bryant, up ahead and knew I would need to turn soon. After I turned, whoever was behind me would continue on with their jog. I was sure it was someone else who enjoyed the solitude of midnight runs like I did.

My footsteps remained even, but the steps behind me did not. They continued to grow louder and closer until I could feel the person directly behind me. They had to pass me soon. I shivered as the fog's comforting embrace turned into wet fingers that crawled up my back and around my shoulders, pulling me back. I felt my legs grow heavy as the shadows stopped their dance and pooled around my feet as I tried to drag myself out of their tangled weave. The bugs, silent for the first time as if they were now the audience of this show instead of participants, seemed to disappear.

All I could hear were the footsteps. Echoing all around me and filling my mind with their reverberations. Each step behind me grew so loud I could feel them, one step like a punch in the gut. A slap to the face, a knee to my stomach, a pull harshly on my hair. I was getting assaulted by every step that closed the gap between me and the mystery runner. I tried to glance

behind me, hoping I would see my follower and they would apologize for scaring me, but my head wouldn't move. My steps stuttered as I processed my sudden loss of control, my sudden paralysis. The footsteps still sounded distinct behind me and continued getting louder until I picked up my pace again, desperate to reach the sanctuary of my own street.

My corner was only fifty feet away and I knew I could make it. My lungs burned as I struggled to keep my composure and act unbothered by the invisible runner closing the space between us. I was closing the gap to my street, which raised my hopes, and I sped up once again. My lungs burned and my breath was ragged. I was struggling, but the runner behind me sounded like they were keeping up effortlessly. Thirty feet away and my legs ached from exertion, or possibly my fear was trying to escape from my body. Twenty feet. Ten.

I neared the corner and started to feel safe. My feet rounded the turn and, in the dark, I didn't see the loose gravel on the concrete. My feet slid across the rocks and, for a long second, I felt like I was running in place. I heard a chuckle from behind me as I fell face first downwards. I pulled my face off the ground to see blood pooled around me and felt deep cuts on my hands. I pushed my hands against the ground, groaning in pain, to stand up. I prepared myself to come face to face with my follower, with the person laughing at my fall, the runner whose shoes stood in my blood with ease.

On my knees, about to shift my feet to stand up, I felt a sharp kick to my back and the pain spread across my shoulders as my face found the concrete again. I screamed in pain and heard another voice in the distance that sounded like Mason. I tried to yell out to him for help, but my voice was stuck in my throat. The foot was still on my back and pressed down harder. My vision blurred as my eyes held onto water I refused to let escape. I squirmed beneath the shoe and heard more laughter.

“Let me up,” I whispered. I had meant to yell, to scream loudly. I had meant to seem intimidating, like I wasn’t someone to mess with and the runner had made an obvious mistake. Instead my voice had squeaked out, barely even a whisper, because the foot was positioned to make my breathing difficult. I wiggled more, hoping the rocks settled on the ground could create enough movement from me to throw my attacker off balance. The runner didn’t move in the slightest.

As I struggled, I felt a sharp pull on my arm and my brother’s voice more distinctly. I shifted my eyes to the side, unable to move my head because the runner still had me pinned down, but I couldn’t see my brother anywhere.

“Maya, can you hear me?” Mason’s voice sounded far away, but I could feel his hands on my arms, trying to pull me up, but my body wasn’t moving. I wasn’t in control of myself. It didn’t seem possible that I felt my brother pulling on me and the stranger’s feet digging into my back at the same time. I opened my mouth to ask for Mason’s help, but no sound escaped from me. The runner chuckled darkly. That’s when I realized.

I didn’t feel like I was in control of myself because I wasn’t. This was a dream, but not my dream—it was someone else’s.

“Please.” I whispered again. “I’m not anybody special. You won’t get anything from being in my mind, I promise.” The foot dug deeper into my back, I heard several pops and lost all the feeling of my arms and legs. “Let me go,” My voice cracked and then disappeared.

“Now why would I do that?” The deep voice ran around in my mind, strange and familiar, as the words found their place behind my eyes and blocked my vision. I was paralyzed by the voice and the thought of never returning to my brother and father. My body shook while my brother’s voice swirled around me, so close but just out of reach. “I haven’t even started

with you yet.” He grabbed a handful of my hair and wrenched my head back before throwing it to the ground. The impact left my world dark, tinged with red, as I fell and wondered if I would ever wake up.



“Maya, hey.” I felt Mason’s arms wrap around my shoulders as I opened my eyes. He held me until my eyes opened, tears streaming down my face but my breath was even again. He pulled me back at arm’s length. “It was just a dream. Are you okay?”

I glanced over to my alarm clock. It was three in the morning and I had never been running. I was in my bed, just like I had guessed. I nodded and took a deep breath. My cries for help had woken him up. Yes, I was fine. No I didn’t remember what the dream was, because that made more sense than to tell him someone had entered my mind. I felt fine and was probably going back to sleep. All his questions had simple answers until they didn’t.

“You’ve never had a seizure before. Are you sure you don’t remember your dream?”

“I had a what?” I asked. He shocked me out of the quick answers I was throwing at him.

“When I walked in your room, you were seizing.” Mason said each word slowly. I shivered. “Maybe I should wake up Dad and take you to the hospital. That’s not normal.” He stood up from the edge of my bed, but I grabbed his arm.

“Don’t,” I said too loudly. He looked startled and, since I hadn’t meant to be so loud, I’m sure I did too. “I’m sorry. It’s just— I’m fine. See?” I stood up and spun in a circle. “Perfectly fine. Can we just pretend like this didn’t happen? It’s like what would happen when I was younger, so nothing to worry about.”

“Okay, if you’re sure, we don’t have to tell Dad. But we’re talking about this in the morning, okay?” I nodded my head with no intention of telling him tomorrow. How could I?

What would I even say? *So Mason, someone controlled my dream on accident, which felt more like a nightmare, last night for some reason and almost killed me. I'm fine now though.* No, that sounded crazy. I didn't want him to worry if it was a one-time thing.

Mason left my room, with a final look back to me before closing my door behind him. I was safe. Safe from my attacker physically, but I couldn't help the feeling of dread that crept over me. The feeling that told me as soon as I closed my eyes once again, I wouldn't be so safe anymore.

Chapter Two: I Think I'm Falling Apart

I laid in bed, eyes fixed directly above me, until my alarm clock went off at 6:30. I wasn't able to sleep the rest of the night. I had studied the pattern of the texture on my ceiling for hours until they all resembled little animals and people in my mind. I rolled over to turn off my alarm and looked at the rest of my room. I wasn't sure what an eighteen year old's bedroom should look like, but I knew it wasn't the room I had. My bedspread was an old scratchy olive green blanket my dad bought when my mom was still alive, I had one brown rug made from a bamboo-like material that hurt to walk on, a small desk holding a lamp with a burnt out bulb I never took the time to change, and random posters of bands I liked when I was younger and found at garage sales. Our ceilings still had a popcorn texture to them because there was never enough money at one time to update them. I had a bedroom on a budget.

Everything in our house looked sad and thrown together because nothing matched or looked like it was from this century. I never complained about it though because I think it would have made my dad feel bad. He tried so hard to make us happy with what little we had and I wanted to make things easier for him. My brother Mason, on the other hand, didn't always think I did a good job though. I forced myself to get up and pulled the itchy blanket back up to my pillows, sheets underneath still by the foot of my bed, but I pretended like that meant my bed was made. I had successfully survived one night without sleeping and another nightmare, but I already wasn't sure how long I could keep that up.

I got dressed and made my way down the hall, touching all of the photos of our family that lined the wood paneled walls, which I did every morning. I smiled at the ones of Mason and me when we were younger and lingered on the pictures of my mom when she was pregnant as I ran my fingers across her name, Helena, spelled out in pretty font.

“Morning, loser.” Mason said. I could smell the eggs he was cooking as I walked in. I walked behind him, hit his arm as I passed, and opened the fridge. “Hey,” he said as he tried to keep the spatula in his hand. I pulled out the orange juice before sitting down at the kitchen table.

“You’re making enough of those for me too, right?” I asked as I drank my juice and shivered. As soon as the weather started getting cooler, Mason had the annoying habit of leaving all the windows in the house open. Anytime I complained, he said he just wanted to feel like he was “one with nature.” I always told him he was about to be “one with my foot up his ass” if he didn’t close them. He would laugh, I would scowl, and the windows would stay open. He never was much of a listener.

“If I didn’t, would you just take some of mine?” He turned to look at me as if he didn’t already know my answer and turned back to his eggs. “Exactly. So yes, I’m making enough for you and some for Callie too. She’s still coming over, right?”

Callie Mitchell had been my best friend since we were in middle school and stuck around through all of my weird adolescent phases that test a friendship, despite our constant arguments. Callie was only four months younger than me but, since she was considerably smaller, I felt the constant need to protect her. We knew each other’s every secret, including the crush she had on my brother which was one secret I could have lived without knowing. Some days I thought maybe Mason liked her too, but I never said that out loud in fear that I might be right.

“Yeah, she’s coming over around 7:30. I don’t think she’s coming in, though.” I said with a sigh. I knew I sounded impatient and that’s because I was. The smell of eggs and toast was filling the house and my stomach was growling.

After the food was done, I made myself a plate and sat down again to eat in silence. Well, to eat in silence for as long as Mason ever let it be silent, which was never for long.

“So are you ready to talk about what happened last night?” He asked around a mouthful of the extra eggs he had piled on his plate after hearing Callie wouldn’t be joining us. I was taking a drink from my glass and used that as an excuse to not answer, hoping he would let it go. He kept his eyes on me, monitoring my every move, as I shoveled more food in my mouth. “It must have been pretty intense to have seizures, Maya. I know you probably don’t want to talk about it, but I think we should.”

My nightmare had left me with so much to think about that I was having a hard time listening to Mason. Every time I blinked, I saw the night sky. Heard the footsteps. Felt the gravel under my hands. The experience felt so real it was hard to believe that it had all just been a nightmare. Is that what it felt like to have someone control your dreams? I had never had anyone enter my mind like that before, it was nothing I was used to and wasn’t something I ever wanted to feel accustomed to.

Conner was the most logical suspect. Just the day before, he had threatened that he would see me in my dreams and then my nightmare happened. That couldn’t just be a coincidence and I couldn’t think of anyone else who would want to go inside my mind. He was a rude and spoiled brat, but he seemed like more of a jump out from the bushes and say boo or trip me in the hallway kind of person, not a dream stalker. A knocking on the kitchen table jarred me out of my thoughts.

“Hello,” Mason dragged out the word and waved his hand in front of my face. “Earth to Maya. You good?”

I didn't know how to answer. If I answered honestly, I might seem paranoid. If I lied, he would know. There was also no simple way to describe how I was feeling in a way that wouldn't freak him out. Anytime I was upset, he went into big brother mode. Mason always held such concern for me, like I was his own personal responsibility. I wondered if that role he assigned himself would ever go away or diminish as we grew up, but it hadn't yet.

I couldn't tell him I still felt the runner's eyes on me, watching my every move. Like if I turned around, I would see the man standing there. Eyes locked on my face. Fixed on my eyes, studying everything about them and the way they would probably glance quickly back and forth between him and Mason nervously. I felt self-conscious and not self-conscious enough all at once, like how I didn't notice someone behind me sooner. Was I really that self-involved that I wouldn't notice an attacker until it was too late? Am I one of those girls in horror movies that Callie and I make fun of? I wondered in disgust.

"I'm just tired." I cleared my throat, hoping the noise would distract him from the falsity of my tone. "My dream was fine. I don't even remember much. I was night running," Mason sighed at the mention of my fascination with running at night and I hoped that was enough to distract him from the actual point of our conversation. "And I felt like someone was running behind me. Next thing I know, you were waking me up." I tried to seem nonchalant enough to end the conversation.

"Your obsession with night running is annoying and I wish you wouldn't do it." He seemed satisfied with the conversation. I hadn't noticed I was hunched over and so rigid during our talk. I leaned back in my seat and stretched out my fingers. One of my bad habits I had since I was a child was balling my hands up into fists so tight when I was stressed that my fingers ached and I made crescent shaped indentations on my palms from my nails. Sometimes the

indentations were so deep they would leave bruises, other times they would break the skin. I used to cover the cuts on my hands with bandages so they wouldn't draw attention to me until I realized they caused more questions than just my bare hands with cuts.

We continued to eat in silence until we heard the toilet flush upstairs. Dad was awake, so it must be seven. My dad's morning routine was always infinitely better than an alarm clock. Dad lives on a schedule for everything: his mornings, his work days, his evenings, and—if I was able to know everything he did after we went to sleep—his nights too. I assumed the schedules were a comfort to him, a way for him to feel like he had his life in control. He told me once that my mom was the one who was in charge of their day-to-day activities, so I think he kept the same routine to feel like he still had a connection to her.

My dad, Charlie, worked for the past twenty-five years in a garage, was always a man of few words and needed to keep his hands busy at all times. His conversational tendencies never led people to believe he was shy, but rather that he was capable of conveying more through his actions than his words. He was in his fifties and tall, just like Mason, but seemed to be shrinking as he got older, a fact he would deny any chance he got much to our entertainment. He had green eyes, like my brother and me, but blonde hair that always made his skin appear pale and tired. Despite Dad being slightly reserved, he found his own ways to be involved in our lives in unobtrusive ways.

I had a history with night terrors that I barely remember. Dad would tell me, as soon as I could remember his stories and maybe even before then, I had these terrible night terrors after my mom died and I realized, at a very young age, that my life would never be the same again. My father would finally get me to sleep and then, some hours later, he would be startled awake by my screams. After he woke me up, my face almost blue from crying, he would spend the rest

of the night with me in silence, if I wanted, so I wasn't alone. The only way to calm me down was to show me a picture of my mother while he told me stories. I'm still not sure whether it was the picture or my dad's voice that calmed me more, but I do know that my episodes of night terrors had long lasting effects. More so on him than me, probably because I couldn't remember the reason for the terrors but my dad remembered every scream.

Years after my nightmares stopped, when I was ten and Mason was twelve, our dad started dating someone new. Her name was Sarah; she was pretty and nice enough to me and my brother. Sarah wore pencil skirts and matching cardigans religiously and sickeningly sweet perfume that I would swear to Mason burned my nose hairs off. I used to picture her closet as bursting full of ugly floral patterned sweaters and her soaking in a bathtub of perfume in her free time. One day she even came over and brought us both little toys, mine was a little pink toy car I secretly threw away after she left. I've never liked pink.

Things were going great with Sarah for about two months and then my night terrors started up again. I never could remember what caused the terrors after I woke up, but I was left feeling so empty every time. Dad came running into my room one night, probably scared there was an intruder in there now that I think about it, and found me curled in a ball on my bed in tears. He stayed in my room with me for hours that night, talking and telling me all of the stories I already knew but never grew tired of hearing until I fell asleep. The next morning, I heard my dad on the phone with Sarah apologizing for something. We never saw my dad with her, or any other woman for that matter, again and I couldn't help but think it was my fault. That was the last time I told my dad about my dreams, good or bad.

My dad walked into the kitchen, already dressed for work, and fixed a plate. I was done with my own food, dirty plate still in front of me and sipping on my warm orange juice, but I

stayed at the table to see if Mason would mention my nightmare. Our eyes met and he gave me a small shake of his head. I had a feeling over the past eight years Mason had noticed the connection between my night terrors and Sarah not coming around anymore, which I found out later on that he had, and didn't want our dad to worry any more than necessary.

We sat at the kitchen table, them eating and me playing with the crumbs on my plate, making small talk until our doorbell rang.

"Shit," I scrambled up from the table and threw my plate in the sink, the clanking noise it made echoed through the kitchen as it landed.

"Easy there," my dad chuckled. "And watch your language, Maya Helena." He smiled at the brief reminder of my mom. My dad was constantly reminding us to watch our language, but it was more out of personal preference than an actual command. I had heard my dad cuss only a handful of times in my life and every single time it was a quiet whisper under his breath after stubbing his toe or something just as traumatic.

I laughed and walked out of the kitchen to the front door. I opened the door as Callie was lifting her hand up to knock. Her face scrunched up when she saw me, eyes small and nose crinkled like she had smelled old milk, and she dropped her backpack on my porch.

"Wow. You look like shit. What happened?" Callie's voice echoed through the house and I flinched, thinking my dad would hear her, but luckily he had started talking from the kitchen at the same time.

"Good morning, Callie. There's extra food if you're hungry."

"No, she's fine, Dad. Thanks though! See you later," I called over my shoulder. I grabbed my backpack and hers in one motion before shutting the door behind me.

“So, are we going to talk about whatever is wrong with you or should we just talk again about how I’m forever jealous your dad let you finish high school online instead? Because if you don’t want to talk about what’s wrong, I can complain instead. Senior year is brutal.” Callie paused, waiting to see which I was going to pick but I wasn’t sure yet either. “Okay, how about I complain while we walk to your park? Then we can talk about whatever is going on with you.”

My park. I always went to the same park down the street from my house when I was worried or not feeling good because it was so full of my past. Every swing, the slide, the weird animals I used to rock back and forth on were full of some memory from a time when the world was simple and I didn’t need to finish high school online to start working sooner. When the world was just me going to school and my dad bringing us to the park with a picnic every Saturday morning. Not the world I lived in now, full of questions and baggy eyes from no sleep. This couldn’t be the adulthood I wanted when I was spinning around the merry-go-round years ago.

The first time I can remember my dad talking to us about people who were born with abilities happened right at the same park. I was six and in the first grade, the first year the divisions between the affinities are implemented. The Visionaries and some kids with Affinity parents, which was rare but I did know one, were shipped off to the expensive schools with catered lunches and private tutors. The kids I had played with at recess suddenly weren’t supposed to hang out with us anymore because the Daydreamers had separate everything: classes in rooms with flickering lights, cold lunches, short recess times, and uniforms. We were given uniforms to separate us that consisted of mustard yellow shirts with tan pants. Who looks good in mustard yellow and tan?

I remember on my first day of school, I accidentally walked into a Daydreamers class and a boy I used to be friends with named Eric started making fun of me. “Hey Deprived, what do you think you’re doing in here? You think you can pretend to be special? Don’t bother because we all know the truth.” He spat on me before pushing me to the ground as the entire class crowded around me laughing. He said that his mom told him he was old enough now to pick friends that mattered. So, he did. I apologized and walked out. My eyes never left the ground until I was back in my own classroom and told everyone what had happened. I didn’t say any of it to guilt anyone then or now, except maybe Eric. If you’re reading this Eric, you’re an asshole.

I was still upset after school, so my dad took Mason and me to the park and talked to us about some of the reasons we may lose friends over the years because of the affinities, but the one that I remembered the most was that they were probably scared in some way too. Their lives were changing quickly with new classes about their affinities and parents to impress. The more I listened to him talk about trying to understand how the others felt, I realized how proud I was to have a parent who was only concerned with me being a good person, not a person with abilities. And, just short of somehow having my mom there, I couldn’t have been happier in that moment with my family and my life. That was before Mason and me really started experiencing our lives as Constants, though, and things all changed so fast.

Callie stood on my porch, eyes on me, as she slid her backpack on and waited for me to talk. “Let’s hear some complaints then.” I walked off my front porch in the direction of the park.

“Okay,” Callie took a deep breath. “Not a complaint actually, but I’ve been trying to figure out this program on my computer a guy let me download that’ll do all my homework for me. It’s such a time saver, so with that in mind— are you sure you don’t just want to come back anyway? I know you finished everything online, but you could retake a few classes to keep me

company, right?" She put on her sunglasses with a shrug, already knowing my answer of course. My family needed me to work instead of spending the days in school, but that didn't stop us from missing the days we were both suffering through school together and I was jealous she got to go when I couldn't anymore.

The truth was I had always been more jealous of her than she ever was about my schooling situation. Callie was pretty with her small build and blonde hair, but she had a few differences though that kept her from looking so pretty that she was unapproachable, like her slightly crooked nose from the time in fifth grade when we got in a huge fight and I punched her, which got me suspended and her a broken nose. She had freckles that seemed to cover most of her face during the summers, eyes that were a little too wide and a blue grey color that didn't quite match because one was slightly darker than the other. She also had a small scar near her hairline from the time we were trying to sneak back into her house in ninth grade after going to a party. That night when we were climbing back in through Callie's window, her mother was sitting at her desk in the dark. I crawled through first, saw her mother and screamed which scared Callie and she fell out of her second story window. Her night ended with a trip to the hospital luckily because the stitches gained her enough sympathy from her parents to get her out of trouble. On the other hand, I wasn't as lucky because my dad grounded me for almost two weeks. I guess that's the difference when you still have a mom like Callie does. Her mom always talks her out of trouble.

"Okay, for starters I want to throw up just from you mentioning high school, so I'm definitely not going back. Not even if some program can do all my homework for me this time around."

We walked the rest of the way to the park dissecting Callie's stories to decide who we thought was going to get pregnant next at school. So far I had guessed the last four girls correctly, which was a feat I wasn't sure if I should be proud of or start a donation website in the name of my next guess because the poor girl might need some financial help soon.

There wasn't much Callie loved more than hearing new stories and coming up with crazy answers to what happened and I kept her overly-updated on every detail of my boring life. She was always the first person I called because I knew she would be on my side without any question. The story of my nightmare completely captured her interest within the first minute and I *may* have dragged out the details so she got the full effect when we reached the park. By the time I was finished, she was sitting on the edge of our favorite bench with her feet pulled up, elbows on her knees and holding up her head with her hands, eyes wide. She was silent for a brief second, I assumed to figure out what line of questioning she wanted to go with, before she took over. Callie loved a problem to solve almost as much as new stories.

"You used to have nightmares when you were younger, right?" She asked and I nodded. "Are these the same as the ones you used to have? Maybe you're stressed about something and that's why they're coming back now."

"Night terrors is what we called them and no these feel different," I struggled to explain the reasons I knew these dreams weren't the same. I sighed, stood up, and kicked around a clump of dirt and rocks. "So when I was younger, I would barely remember what happened before I woke up. I would wake up and feel so empty, like there was a hole in my chest or the beginning of an anxiety attack because I didn't think I could breathe." I glanced over at her. She was leaned back, watching me cross back and forth in front of her.

"What did this one feel like then?"

“This one felt like fear, like it was tangible. I could even *see* it, which I know sounds crazy, but I could see the way the wind and shadows shifted as the man was running behind me. It was like everything around me, in my nightmare and my mind, was scared too. Then when I fell and he held me down, I didn’t think I would ever wake up. It felt I had been there before somehow and knew I was going to be stuck there forever this time.” I knew I was rambling, but couldn’t make myself stop so my voice just faded out until I was out of breath.

“You said you think it was Conner?” Callie asked. I shrugged. “Well, do you?” She asked after a long beat.

“I think he would make the most sense, but I would have recognized his voice. This didn’t sound like anyone I’ve ever heard before.” I shook my head.

“Hey, I didn’t think Visionaries were supposed to create nightmares.” Callie said as she jumped up from the bench and rushed to my backpack on the ground a few feet away. I watched as she put my old laptop on the concrete table attached to the bench. I wasn’t sure what she was doing, but I knew she would explain if I stayed quiet long enough. My mind was busy trying to decide if Conner masked his voice in my nightmare to pay attention to what she was doing.

“Are you even listening to me?” Callie’s voice broke through my thoughts. She kicked her legs over the bench to face me again, squeezing her eyes shut and grimacing as her legs scratched against the concrete bench, to give me the look. Everyone knows the look your best friend gives when she realizes, halfway through a story, that her friend wasn’t listening so now she has to start over. Callie had that look mastered and had to use it often with me.

“Sorry, I was thinking about something. What were you saying?” I asked as she grabbed my computer.

“I said,” Callie’s voice was full of mocking irritation. “I didn’t think Visionaries could create nightmares. I mean, right? All we’ve ever been taught is about the dreams they create, but I don’t remember ever hearing about a Visionary or Affinity who creates nightmares. That seems like something we would have talked about, don’t you think?” She was typing keywords into a search engine. Visionaries and nightmares. The screen filled with articles from celebrity news websites, but nothing with any credibility.

“Unless the government doesn’t want anyone to know.” I trailed off as Callie looked up at me. Her mouth opened to speak, but I cut her off. “No, I already know that’s crazy. Why would they hide something like that from us? It wouldn’t make any sense. Plus what could someone possibly gain from doing that? Nothing. I think I’ve just been watching too many conspiracy theory documentaries lately.” I paused, prepared to keep ranting about how false my misguided theory was. I figured that if I kept talking, the feeling in my stomach would go away. The feeling that we may have wandered into an area we didn’t want to be in. My pause lasted only a brief moment before Callie interrupted.

“Would that really be so crazy though, Maya? Its 2140, so I think it’s time we wake up here. There’s been so many times in history where people didn’t know the truth of what was going on, I know you know this. What if this isn’t any different?” I started to shake my head, but she surged on. “No listen, hear me out. Conspiracy theories are a thing because there’s been enough times people were lied to that everyone’s started thinking ‘What if they lie about everything?’ And is that really so crazy? No.” We sat in silence for a minute that seemed to add an exclamation mark to her justifications. Her eyes widened. “Oh my God, we could be the next Sarah Abrams! Minus the running for president shit, but we could uncover the truth behind

affinities again like she did.” She finished with a smile, an idea of fame already deeply implanted in her mind I’m sure.

“I don’t think it’s that simple. If the government, or whoever we’re even talking about here, hasn’t told us about any other affinities, then I’m sure there’s a reason.” I stopped pacing and sat down on the bench. My legs stretched out in front of me, my head leaned back, and my eyes fixed on the ground. “Or even better: If someone doesn’t want us knowing, how are we supposed to figure anything out? I mean, look at the articles that came up when we searched. *A Catalogue of My Nightmares: A Visionary’s Struggles?* Really? That sounds like complete bullshit.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” She slumped away from my computer. She tapped her foot loudly, an annoying habit she’s had since we were younger when she learned how much it bothered me and it seemed to be ingrained in her mannerisms now.

“Oh well.” The uneasy feeling settled into my stomach and caused a distinct apprehension I wanted to avoid. “It’s probably close to 8:30, right? We should leave.” I stood up and grabbed my things off the bench table. I held out Callie’s backpack in her direction to grab, ready to walk away from the conversation as quickly as possible. Callie, on the other hand, remained seated as she checked her watch.

“It’s literally only 8. We’ve got time to—” Callie broke off mid-sentence as a smile flashed across her face. She grabbed her backpack from me and pulled out a flash drive. She held it up with a smug look on her face, like I should understand what it meant.

“We’re risking being late for what? A flash drive with your latest journal entry?” I said, but still I sat back down in defeat. Once Callie was on a roll, there was no stopping her; a confidence in her I always admired as well as found extremely frustrating.

“Rude. No. It has the computer program I told you that guy from school gave me.” She raised her eyebrows, expecting me to connect the dots I’m sure. Per usual, I was confused as hell. How would the program that might help her finish assignments help us? “The program isn’t just to finish assignments for me. It’s actually a portal search engine—”

“So just like our cell phones? Great.” I cut her off.

“No, *not* like our cell phones because it can access parts of the web that our phones can’t. The guy called it the evil web, or something like that. I don’t know because I quit listening to him halfway through his tech talk. Anyway, a lot of stuff that’s illegal or the government doesn’t want people doing is on there, so why couldn’t we use it to find out about the nightmares?”

“I think you mean the dark web.” I said and she waved her hand like she was throwing my correction away. “And if it has so many illegal things on it, should we really be using it? We don’t know anything about it and you even said you didn’t listen to his instructions.” I paused and she only shrugged. “If he gave you the instructions, it’s probably because they’re important, Cal.”

“Who cares about instructions when what we’re looking for doesn’t have any?” She stared at me, waiting for an answer. “We’re using it and you can thank me later.” She plugged the flash drive into my computer and, next thing I knew, we were engaging in illegal internet activity.

Our dark web search turned up a lot of dead ends, like I expected, so when we stumbled along a blog post from last year titled “My Murderous Confession” we both felt invested pretty quickly because we had wanted so badly to find something. After reading the blog, we both sat in silence for what felt like hours. Really though, it was probably only two minutes or so.

“We’re not even sure this is real.” I paused. “I mean we aren’t sure, are we?” I glanced over to Callie, she sat motionless and stared at the last lines we read on the screen.

“You know, you’re probably right. We don’t *actually* know what we’re talking about, so maybe we should just keep looking around some more first.” Callie said as she shut my laptop and put it back in my backpack. I grabbed my backpack, which felt heavier now than before, and we walked the rest of the way to her school in silence. Then I kept walking to work in a daze.

Chapter Three: The Crazy Blog

**I'm putting in the actual blog post I had a copy of because I know some people will still think I made this shit up. You're welcome to read it, and I hope you do, but I guess if you want to stay in the dark about what really happens, you can skip to chapter four...which would be stupid.*

My Murderous Confession

By: XXXVisionary2

Hello, I haven't written in a while and I've received a lot of notifications asking if I'm okay. The truth is: I don't know. A lot has happened over the past two weeks and I've wondered if I should tell you all or not. I decided I should and hope this reaches as many people as possible. Without this information, we are not safe.

I had been feeling, somewhat, stuck in my abilities as of late¹. My mental preparations for dream control, the prep may differ from person to person, consists of drinking hot tea and utilizing my meditation room to enter a correct mindset before I am ready to converge². I start small: My mind wanders the neighborhood, looking for a person with lower levels to no protection of their minds while in their dream state, and I approach if they appear interesting from the outside.

I look for a tear³ in their mind too preoccupied with the dream to be hidden. I, then, decide whether I'd like to view or participate in the dream. If I wish to participate, I search for the dream's core, the essence and heart of the dream, and submerge myself in— typically fairly easy with Deprives and other times by force with a Daydreamer who possesses the mental

¹ Refer to my previous blog post for a lengthier discussion on the connection between your mental state and easier accessibility to your affinity

² To enter into someone's unconsciousness

³ A small opening in someone's mind, differs from subject to subject, to enter their unique subconscious in order to alter their dreams

framework to attempt resisting. The feeling of taking control of a dream is better than any drug on the market or any other stimulate, physical or mental, available on the street⁴. Converging provides a feeling of pure control, power, and emotion you typically can't experience through other avenues due to momentarily possessing your own feelings— and someone else's as well.

The feelings I experience during my meditative states at night led me to try expanding my affinity to include daytime hallucinations. Each time I enter a waking mind, it is easier to locate the almost imperceptible tears of the mind. The waking mind guards itself much better than the sleeping one, but familiarity truly is key. As with everything, though, the excitement fades over time. I've grown tired of the same minds around me. I needed to be challenged, to accomplish things never heard of before. What I discovered, though, was nothing like I had expected.

I ran into an old acquaintance⁵ of mine prior to the night in question. Seeing this person caused a lot of dark thoughts, such as entering into their mind for nefarious reasons. Over the next few days, I thought: Instead of entering someone's mind to create the images we typically do, the images they find positive or arousing, could I create scary ones? Could I frighten awareness into a self-absorbed person?

I waited until night, to be sure entry would be as seamless as possible, and let my mind wander to theirs. The tear was difficult to find, they must have had training over the past years to guard their mind, but in the end they were still no match for me. I found the opening and let myself in. I was incredibly underwhelmed the moment I stepped inside. Despite the training to make entry difficult, the rest of the mind appeared rudimentary and too easily accessible. I

⁴ This statement has been proven through extensive research. My blog "Converging as Feeling" published March 2138

⁵ Translation: An ex. I've written multiple posts about said person. My regular readers will know the nameless person to whom I'm referring

walked to the dream core and took control. I am not proud of the elementary levels of fear I stooped to but, keeping with the honesty genuine writing requires, I'll be candid with you here. I chased them down a dark hall, screamed their name and threats. I could feel their fear building and it filled me with a sense of fulfillment I had never experienced before. It was as if I was breathing in the most pure oxygen you could imagine. My mind felt awake, like I had been in a fog previously but didn't realize it, and I couldn't imagine letting that feeling go. I let the feeling take control and, then, it was too late.

I had caught them and, in my blind ecstasy from their fear, found myself standing over them as I held them halfway out of a window. They were calling out for help, asking me to pull them back in, and telling me they were sorry for the things they had done to me in the past, it was all a mistake and I deserved better than the way I was treated. I received the apology, the self-actualization, I was wanting. I should have felt satisfied and walked away.

The caveat, though, was once I held their life in my hands, I wasn't ready to let go yet.

I started questioning them and, due to the dire situation they found themselves in, I was getting all the answers I wanted. But I still wanted more. There was an even darker still part of me, one that existed despite never admitting it to anyone, the one I haven't dared to even whisper out loud when I'm home alone. That darkest part was in control now and, as they dangled and waited for me to rescue them, I let go⁶. Just like that. I let go and watched my fears, my insecurities, and my past fall away from me with them.

They screamed as they fell and then I didn't hear their screams anymore. I had successfully closed a bad chapter in my life. I had, finally, found the closure I needed.

⁶ This is not an action I endorse or support. I do not recommend this action to anyone reading at home and cannot be held accountable for any attempts similar to mine after this blog is posted

The next morning, I woke up feeling lighter. My dark thoughts were held at bay after exhausting them in my unconscious. I could move on and I felt happier than I had in as long as I could remember.

I was eating breakfast, feeling a bigger appetite than usual for me, and checked for the news stories online, my typical morning routine. I opened my browser and there it was. February 21, 2139's biggest article held the face of my past staring back at me, announcing they had been found dead that morning. They had jumped out of their third story bedroom window.

That was when I realized I had not only successfully created and controlled one of the first known nightmares, I had unknowingly killed someone in real life too.

Chapter Four: That Time I Hit My Best Friend

“Earth to Maya.” Mason’s voice broke through the sludge in my mind. The weeks following our discovery of the blog passed by me in a blur. I couldn’t believe creating nightmares was possible, let alone that it kept happening to me. I was reading more blogs on the dark web secretly, Callie continued asking me endless questions, and Mason was always hovering. “I asked you a question. Did you hear me?”

“I didn’t. I’m sorry.” I shook my head and tried to focus my eyes on Mason. He was only two or three feet away from me on the couch, we were supposed to be watching a movie together as a family, but all I saw when I looked into his eyes was the fog that filled my nightmares- the fog that meant my nighttime attacker was close. “What were you saying?”

That was my life after reading the blog. Mason was everywhere I went at home to see if I had any more seizures and it was taking a toll on me. I had to act like everything was fine because the thought of telling someone about my nightmare again seemed impossible. If he knew what was happening to me, he would tell our dad. Between the two of them, they would never leave my side again. We couldn’t afford that, financially or emotionally. Mason was still talking and I had missed what he said again. Instead of asking him to repeat himself for the third time, I pushed myself off the couch and could feel his eyes on me.

“You know, Mase.” I held my stomach. “I don’t feel good, so I think I’m going to go lay down. I’m sorry to bail on movie night.” He was disappointed and worried, I could tell, but I couldn’t bring myself to stay around him longer. I hated lying to him, but I couldn’t imagine telling him either. Too much would change if I did. My nights were already different. I couldn’t handle it if my days changed too. I walked off to my room without a look back.

Once my bedroom door was shut behind me, I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted to know what it felt like to close my eyes and feel safe again. I wanted help, but I knew that no one could help me. How could they when my own mind was the prison I was trying to escape? I felt like it was my fault this was happening. The blog said the way someone enters your mind is through tears in our subconscious we leave open. I didn't even believe myself when I thought about how I didn't leave them open on purpose, so I didn't know how anyone else would believe me either.

I checked my phone and saw a few texts from Callie. She was always checking in on me, asking if I had anymore strange encounters during my sleep and I told her no every time, whether it was the truth or not. I didn't want her to keep looking at me differently, thinking I was some poor helpless thing this just *happened* to. I was living in a nightmare: one of terror when I closed my eyes and one of isolation I created when I was awake. I texted back to her latest question about coming over to spend the night so she could be there if I needed help while I was asleep, which I was pretty sure was impossible but she was insistent.

I still had her flash drive, she had let me keep it for a little while. I needed it. I needed to know I hadn't made this up, that I wasn't the only one. I kept it hidden in a box under my bed, but only seemed to grow bigger in my mind. I thought hiding it would help, but the less I saw it the more I thought about it. The more I thought about what was on it and who could be monitoring the sites. I wondered about who might know we were looking and I jumped every time I heard police sirens thinking they were after us. But I couldn't give it up.

"You're being paranoid, you know." Callie threw herself on my bed when she got to my house. I twitched, caught off guard by the noise, when my bed springs squeaked under her. She

laid there, on her phone, and didn't seem like she was scared at all. "Who's going to notice if we look around a little more? Try to figure more of this out?"

The look on her face was one of excitement, like she thought we had stumbled onto the best story of our lives. Callie loved to read and I had often wondered whether she thought of our lives as real or just another one of her fantasy novels. That all of us were only characters running around inside of her book, looking for trouble but safe from actual danger.

"You don't think this is monitored, Callie?" My voice was low and flat. The bed springs left my ears ringing and I struggled to hear anything, even my own words. I shook my head and tried to focus on Callie's face, but it was like looking at her through a paper towel roll. Everything felt like it was happening at a distance, like my life was taking place a few feet away from me and I was just watching. I tried to sound like I felt anything other than fear, but all I could focus on anymore was the ringing in my head that kept getting louder until my vision started blurring. The paper towel roll vision I saw Callie through was turning into more of a kaleidoscope. "We can't keep looking up stuff about this. This isn't something to mess around about because—" She cut me off.

"Don't you want us to know what's happening to you?" She sat up and leaned in closer. I noticed she said *us* because I was being hypocritical and she knew it. We both knew I was still using the flash drive, but neither of us acknowledged that out loud. "Aren't you curious at all?"

"I'd rather pretend like it isn't happening." She sighed in frustration. "It's easier that way, Cal." I picked at my fingernails and looked at my bedroom floor. I saw the balls of lint and hair rolled up on my rug. The way my comforter was wrinkled from her throwing herself on my bed and I wanted to fix it. I looked at my sweater from yesterday wrinkled on my floor right beside my laundry basket. I looked anywhere but at her.

My eyes drifted to my bed again, but this time I looked at the small box barely covered by my comforter touching the ground. The flash drive. I had already tried finding things on the flash drive that would tell me how to stop the nightmares, how to break the cycle in my mind, how to figure out who was creating them. I couldn't find any answers though.

The only thing the flash drive revealed to me was I couldn't be the only Constant this was happening to because so many Visionaries, and even one Affinity blog I found, had admitted to discovering they can create nightmares with practice. The other thing the flash drive showed me was that soon after I would read a new blog about nightmares, sometime later that day or the next day, they would disappear. Someone *was* monitoring the nightmare postings, I wasn't being paranoid about it. I started taking notes on everything I read and kept them in the box with the flash drive. Callie didn't know about my newest obsession or my notes. I didn't want to drag her any further into this than I already had.

"You think it'll be easier to pretend this didn't happen?" She asked, a hint of wonder in her voice. I sat silent. "You honestly think that if you act like you don't know about nightmares now that they'll just go away? That they'll just stop happening?" Out of the corner of my eye I saw her stand up, but I refused to answer or look up at her. I didn't feel like anything of this was actually happening. The only thing real to me in that moment was the ringing and the box with the flash drive. "Damn it, Maya. Look at me. Say something. Anything." Callie demanded. My eyes never left the box under my bed. "I'm just worried about you, okay?"

She paced, asking questions, and I sat without moving. What was I thinking? What if it happened again to me? What if this was happening to other people? I didn't know how she was angry when I was the one lying there each night, feeling more alone than I had ever felt in my life, with someone waiting until I fell asleep. I couldn't look at her. If I did, I knew I would start

feeling everything I was trying to suppress and I wasn't ready. My fear was the only thing tethering me to reality and, once that was flooded with my other emotions, I didn't know how to get back to the girl I was before the nightmares.

"If you're too scared, then I promise you can just tell me. When your mom died, you had nightmares. Your dad meets a new girl, nightmares. What about now? What's going on now that you don't think you can tell me?" At the mention of my parents, my eyes finally broke from the box under my bed and met hers.

"Don't talk to me about my parents." The words were the first ones I heard clearly in days. I didn't want to stop talking in case the ringing and sludge crept back in as soon as I stopped. "You act like you know all about my life while both of your parents are home for you to see every day." I stood up and moved closer to her. She always felt guilty she still had her mom, so we usually didn't talk about it, until now. The sludge and ringing had disappeared, but they left room in my mind for other things to move in. The clarity after weeks of stumbling around in a fog was too great a feeling to give up in order to avoid my anger. I was hating her constant questions, which was better than feeling nothing, so I kept pushing.

"Everything is always handed to you. Boys, school, getting to have an actual life because you aren't working full time, and you even got to grow up with your mom. What have you ever had to work for in your life?" I saw her face tense, her eyes get smaller, and her nostrils started moving. Buttons successfully pushed. "Exactly. So don't come in here acting superior like you know what's going on with me. I said these nightmares are different than before and I don't want to know any more or talk about it. What part of any of that is hard for you to understand?"

"Different how?" Callie demanded despite my having just said I didn't want to talk about it. I squeezed my hands into fists and remained silent. "Because you needed medication

for those and these you just need to ‘forget?’” As soon as her words came out, her eyes widened and she took a small step back. She had crossed a line and I think she knew it. The problem with crossing the line of dead mothers and prescription pills was that it wasn’t really a line we could pretend hadn’t happened. I was sweating and my face felt hot. My fingernails dug into my palms because I hoped the pain in my hands could distract me.

“Maya, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it. I—” She reached out to me, like she wanted to hug me. As soon as she touched me though, I felt everything overflow like I was a glass of water filled to the brim and someone had decided to add one last drop anyway. I felt everything in that moment: my fear about what the nightmares meant, my desire to never sleep again, my exhaustion from the nights I sat up trying not to fall asleep, and my anger for having to hide these things from Callie and Mason to protect them. I started to shake and the tears came seconds after. In that moment, I felt how I felt every night when I realized I couldn’t fight sleep off any longer: like something bad happening soon was inevitable. She was so close to me and, with the pain from my fingernails in my palms still fresh, I took my fist and hit her. Just like that. For the second time in my life, I punched my best friend in the face.

Only this time, I didn’t even feel bad about it.



I found myself running at night again, except I didn’t think I was on my nightly run like I did the first time. I know because I quit my actual nightly runs once the thought of them gave me so much anxiety I threw up. I literally threw up on my way out the door one night and Mason saw me. He made me go back to bed and has been keeping irritatingly good tabs on me ever since. No, now I *knew* when I was in a nightmare. I felt and noticed more of the small differences each night, remembering sooner each time that my mind was being manipulated.

Each time I tried to see if I would recognize the voice of the man behind me, if I could get a glimpse of him this time.

The symphony I used to call my own, that I used to look forward to each day, had a different sound to it because the song was no longer my own. I was running and I knew everything that was going to happen: the bugs would fall silent, the air around me would stiffen and start feeling like it was dragging me backwards, my legs would get heavy, and then I would hear the footsteps. I always heard the footsteps.

I kept running and thought about turning around to see my attacker. I turned my head slightly to the left and expected the familiar jerk of my head back to the front, as if someone's hands held my head in place. I was never able to deviate from my follower's plan. This time though, my head turned. I was caught off balance by the sudden freedom over my own body and my feet tangled in themselves. I fell to the ground and my heart jumped. I had broken the nightmare and as I laid on the ground, my eyes facing up towards the night sky, my mind seemed to stutter with the sudden change.

The moon above me flickered, like a lightbulb on the verge of going out. Flickered and then turned a strange orange color to give the night a glow that left the shadows around feeling restless. The shadows, unaccompanied by the music they usually dance to, approached around me hissing. The fog, my newest enemy as of late it seemed, circled me and clouded my vision. The night was silent and I shivered. Everything continued pulsing around me, the night shifting back and forth confused on where it was going. I felt hot and cold, at the same time, and goosebumps raised on my arms. I lifted one of my arms off the ground beside me to look, in wonder, at the bumps. I was moving in slow motion, like the fog was trying to keep me from moving. Keep me from seeing my arm. Maybe the fog wasn't an enemy after all because as I

saw my arm for the first time, my breath rushed out of my body like it was escaping. My arm was covered in large, finger shaped bruises. Deep, almost black bruises. Once I saw my arm, I opened my mouth as it fell back to the ground. I had meant to scream, but nothing came out.

My mind shifted. The moon flickered back to its normal color, the shadows retreated, and the fog lifted slightly. I tried moving, but I couldn't feel my body. I tried my arms again. Nothing. My legs didn't respond. I couldn't turn my head. First, my mind became a traitor and now it seemed like my body had crossed back to the other side too. My arms burned, ached, felt like they were breaking as I was being held down by some invisible force. I wanted to kick and scream. I wanted everything to stop. I wanted to cry for help, but I wasn't somewhere anyone could save me. I was so close but still so far away, locked inside my mind, that I knew I was all alone.

"Why did you close your eyes?" The voice wrapped around me and slipped deeper into my mind like it was trying to suffocate me from the inside out. "You're finally starting to actually challenge me." My eyelids were heavy and, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't open them. They wouldn't listen to me just like the rest of my body. "You're giving up so soon and I was starting to have such high hopes for you. Don't you want to see who we are?" The voice mocked.

"Oh well." I felt a heavy, quick connection to my face that caused my darkness to turn a hot, bright red that faded to an orange, like the moon had been above me earlier, before I sunk back into the dark I knew all too well.

Chapter Five: Wake Up Call- Life without Callie Sucks

The popcorn people on my ceiling were becoming more like friends to me now than my own best friend. Over the past week, I had talked to the little man wearing a top hat shape directly above my bed more than I did to Callie. There were a few texts we had sent back and forth, both of us being passive aggressive, but she continued checking on me to make sure I was okay. I was surprised she had managed to go a week without telling me any drama from school considering how many stories a day she always needed to tell me. I wondered how many she had built up over an entire week because I knew how many I had. Each day she didn't come over before she went to school, I was getting more sad and bored. Not a good combination.

"Listen Kyle." I had started calling the popcorn man with a top hat Kyle about three days into my silent treatment from Callie. It had been a long week. "So I get it: I punched Callie in the face and now she's a little upset. Whatever. I know she was worried about me, but she just wouldn't leave me alone, you know? It made me feel like shit every time she asked me about everything and she didn't realize that. I feel like ignoring my feelings is a metaphorical punch in the face, if you will, so we both have reasons to be mad here." I sighed. My logic was weak and I knew it.

I drank my last sip of coffee an hour earlier and started feeling the familiar warm fingers of sleep trying to pull me under. Falling asleep felt like it would be such a relief, an escape from the world while the body rests, but now I needed to get up and move around before I fell asleep. I looked over at my clock to see the time, yet again, mock me. Four thirty in the morning. I had two hours before I could start getting ready for work.

I pushed myself off the bed and walked to my closet. I pulled the flash drive out of its box carefully and walked to my computer, like I was holding a bomb about to detonate. I

managed not to look up reasons why my nightmare could have changed for five days. I started a search two days after but as soon as the results popped up, I changed my mind and took the entire flash drive out. It hadn't seen the light of day since, the longest I had gone without using the drive since it was left in my room.

"I know I shouldn't be doing this. I should just give the drive back and tell my brother and Callie everything, right?" I glanced up to my ceiling. "You truly are the voice of reason, Kyle." I waited as my computer turned on and pulled up the flash drive's program. "Too bad I don't listen. That's what you were going to say, right? I *never* listen."

The computer loaded and I checked the blogs again for anything I thought was related. The blogger said one time they were in someone's dreams, they experienced issues with who was really in control. They had no real answers for me, though, only more questions than I originally thought of, but they did lead me to realize a person I had overlooked in my research: Ginny. I worked with a Visionary every day at a job that left us plenty of time to talk about things. Why couldn't some of those things be about her history with converging?



Walking into that school every day for work became harder with each nightmare I had. Each time I scanned my low-priority badge when I came in, I felt like I was entering enemy territory. I wondered about everything; their clubs, their classes, their friends. I realized I was never allowed to enter a classroom for any event announcements, Ginny always did them by herself, but I never stopped to wonder why before. I assumed because she was in charge and I was only her assistant, I didn't get to do any of that. Any of the assistants with affinities were allowed everywhere though, those are the perks to priority badges. I felt like the mismatched

banners after Storm's election: misplaced and always in the way. An afterthought that would soon be thrown out.

I never had questions before because I was never personally affected by someone coming into my mind without my consent. The most dream interactions a Constant or Daydreamer receives from an affinity would be done with their permission. If someone required attention, medically or mentally, they make an appointment with a dream institute or someplace with waivers. Someplace dedicated to fixing patients' problems through sleep and dream studies, which I've heard is better than fixing a problem surgically. 'The solution to every problem or injury has already been given to us and it's in our mind' is one of the first slogans I remember from the dream institutes and I guess it won over a lot of people.

On the other hand though, there were still a lot of people opposed to dream alternatives, like my dad. He had a bad experience once, one he never liked talking to us about, that left him bitter against people coming into his mind. He also thought if he needed to sign that many waivers, for complications during and after the studies which sounded worse than the original problem, then he'd rather just live with the injury. I always agreed with him, but now I felt even stronger about it. It would take way more than some waivers and a pretend recovery for me to give someone permission to enter my mind.

I walked, thinking about why someone would willingly give permission for converging, and I felt a sharp crack hit my face. My vision dimmed, everything blurry and faded, and my face was hot. Wet. I brought my hand up to my face, dropping my purse in the process and heard everything spill out of it with a thump. I touched my fingers to my forehead, there was no blood. But still I didn't move, eyes closed and fingers on my head because I hoped the pressure would dull the ache. I opened one eye, less light to add to my new headache.

“Hey asshole, are you going to pick up your shit or just stand there all day?” I closed my one eye again. Maybe if I acted like I hadn’t seen Conner in front of me, he would get bored and leave. “You really are dumber than I thought.” He paused as I finally opened both eyes. In my distraction, I had walked into the door he had been opening. He bent down and reached for my stuff. I jumped at the thought of him touching my things, probably grabbing something important and running off with it. Like my badge so I couldn’t get into work the next day or something.

“Don’t touch any of that. I got it,” I said in a rush and dropped down to beat him to my purse. The quick movement caused my head to hurt even more, like a hand was applying more pressure to my temples.

“Chill. You’re lucky you caught me on a good day.” Conner shook his head. “And that no one else is here yet. I’m too tired to insult you right now. Even though you usually make it so easy.” I struggled with picking up my stuff as fast as I could. He handed me my wallet and dropped his hands away as soon as I had a grip on it.

“Thanks,” I mumbled under my breath. I noticed his eyes looked puffy and his hair unbrushed. He looked like a mess. I opened my mouth to ask him a question when he cut me off.

“Don’t be so pathetic. We’re not friends now just because I almost gave you a concussion and then handed you a wallet, okay? Get over it.” Conner stood up and walked off without even so much as a glance back in my direction. I guess I was supposed to consider our interaction, minus all of the insults, as a present from him or something.

My headache spread as I walked to Ginny’s office and, by the time I reached the door, I felt drained. I was running on no sleep and now probably had a brain injury with my luck. I

opened the office door with strain, my fingers shaking and my arm weak. The door barely opened enough for me to slide through, so I wedged my way in sideways and dropped my bag on my desk. My eyes stayed on my purse, blurring in and out of view, and blinked a few times hoping to see only one purse again. I bent over my desk, holding myself up by my fingertips, when I heard someone clear their throat behind me. I didn't move and heard Ginny's voice soon after.

"Maya, you'll never guess what call I just got," Ginny said as she walked in. She gasped when she saw me, I'm sure I looked like a complete mess. "Well never mind that for now. Maya, are you okay?" I felt her hand on my back and flinched at the touch. I tried to keep my mind from thinking about the last person who touched me and failed. I took a deep breath and turned around to face her, not sure what my face looked like exactly but hoping the bruise on my forehead would be a distraction. "What happened to your face?" She asked shocked and rushed around my desk to pull my chair closer to me. "Sit sit sit. Now tell me everything."

"There's really not much to tell." My voice was weak and quiet. Ginny squinted her eyes, like she could see the falsity in my tone if she looked hard enough. "I ran into a door. No shit, I really did. I'm just tired and wasn't paying attention."

"Will you be okay to stay then or do you want someone to take a look at your head there? It really does look awful." She said. Maybe my head looked worse than I thought. I couldn't ask her questions from home though, so I told her I was fine. It looked worse than it felt, which was a lie, and after a few moments of her eyes studying me, she must have decided she believed me because then she walked over to her desk to pick up some paperwork. We talked about the homecoming dance, an endless circle of a conversation about themes yet again, until I worked up the nerve to start subtly questioning her.

“So you’re an Affinity, right? You can control dreams?” I asked, dragging out the words and interrupted her tangent about punch flavors. Being subtle was never a strong suit of mine. I wanted to slide under my desk and disappear.

“I’m sorry, is that a rhetorical question or what? Are you sure you’re okay?” She looked confused, rightfully so as we sat in the Visionary prep school that’s minimum requirements for a full time position were possessing abilities. I should have planned out my strategy better that morning, but I only had Kyle to run my plan by first and ceiling people aren’t very well versed in interrogation brainstorming. So, I giggled. I giggled like an insane woman and hoped she would chalk my weirdness up to a brain injury.

“Right, yeah of course it was. I just meant.” What did I mean? I wasn’t sure and she could tell. So much for being subtle. “Have you ever converged into a person’s dream before?” Ginny stood still for a second, probably trying to figure out my reason for asking, before she pulled her chair closer to mine and sighed.

“Why are you asking?” She seemed to be preparing for a long conversation, but I wasn’t sure if I should feel like that was good news or not.

“Well, you know my best friend, Callie, right?” She nodded so I continued. “She’s doing a paper on Visionaries and convergence, so I told her I could ask you some questions.” The lie fell out of my mouth so easily I almost wondered if it was true too. So subtlety wasn’t my thing but making stories up on the spot seemed to be.

“I didn’t think you and Callie were talking right now.”

“Oh,” I didn’t expect her to remember my fight with Callie. “We are now.” I finished lamely. She stared at me, her eyes too focused on me. She didn’t believe me. She shook her head.

“Well, whatever your reason, I don’t see the harm in telling you. Maybe it’ll inspire you to try new things.” Before I had a chance to ask her what she meant, she surged into her answer. “So I’ve converged into a dream a few times before, sure. Mainly it was just in school, though, for practice.” She broke off, cleared her throat, and changed the subject. “With my line of work though, there’s not really reason for me to need to converge. Unless you ever want to try it.” She said it as a question, but I was already shaking my head no before she even finished. “I was just offering in case you were curious and then I could bust out the old moves.” She giggled for a brief second until she realized I wasn’t joining her.

“You said with your line of work. Does that matter?” I paused, thoughts about my previous questions gone as I delved into the convergence intricacies. Ginny sat motionless except for her fingers. She was picking at her cuticles and pulling at her painted nails like she saw a problem with them that I couldn’t. I decided to rephrase my question in hopes that the second time would take. “Does what job you have relate to your convergences?”

“Yes and no.” She took a breath and took her focus away from her nails back to me. “Yes, as in a majority of Visionaries and Affinities only use their abilities if its work related. You know, like the sleep study institutes or government jobs or the weird side businesses you see around town only open late at night. There’s other jobs too of course, but anyway. Unless you’re bored and have a friend who wants to give it a try.” She paused again with a slight smile on her face and I shook my head no again. She continued with a chuckle. “Okay, fine. Unless you have a *different* friend that wants to try, we’re not supposed to use powers all willy-nilly.”

“Willy-nilly?” I asked with a forced, short laugh.

“Yes. Willy-nilly, like we can’t just go inside someone’s dreams for no reason or if they don’t know about it. We have laws to follow, you know. Well, *some* of us do anyway,” She said

under her breath before she continued on. “You know, the Dream Keepers will even sometimes interfere with criminal cases that are considered high profile.” Ginny paused and glanced over at me to see my reaction.

“Meaning ones that involve people with abilities that would cause public outrage?”

“Yes, actually.” Ginny’s eyes were wide. “They enter the criminal’s mind and question them there because it’s harder for someone to lie in a dream. They don’t even need permission to do it.” Ginny shrugged and we sat in silence for a couple of minutes. “The Dream Keepers are disappearing, though, which is causing a lot of changes.”

“The Dream Keepers are disappearing?” My fingers felt cold and my head was so hot I wished I could cut off all my hair.

“You really don’t watch the news, do you?” She paused and I started feeling a tight pressure in my head. “Two have gone missing so far and Storm having to replace them, but he isn’t finding people fast enough. That’s actually what my news was about. I got a phone call saying that I’ve been nominated by several anonymous people to be a replacement Dream Keeper. My interview is next week,” Ginny’s rambling trailed off, replaced by a loud ringing. Her mouth was still moving, but I couldn’t hear a word.

My eyes felt like they were on fire. My vision blurred, refocused, and then doubled. My head felt like I was swimming underwater, like the person trying to escape from my mind had given up on leaving and decided to get drunk instead. The sweat was pooling around my hairline, under my arms, in my hands. I shivered, cold despite the sweats. I’ve had those symptoms only a few times in my life and it always ends the same way, but I tried to talk anyway. I ignored my body’s warning sign to me that I needed a trash can and fast. I opened my mouth to say that I wanted to watch the news. I wanted to know what the public thought was

going on now that I knew the truth. Now that I knew what was possible in this world that we've never been taught.

Unfortunately when I opened my mouth words weren't what came out. Ginny jumped up, threw a trash can in my direction, and grabbed air freshener while gagging the entire time. I wiped my mouth on my shirt sleeve and looked up at her from above the trash can. She had moved as far away from me in the small room as possible. I offered a weak smile and she sprayed the air freshener in my direction.

"You seriously have to go home. If you throw up again, I'll throw up too." She plugged her nose and continued to spray the freshener. It was all very unnecessary. I tried explaining to her that I would be fine, that I needed to stay. I had so many more questions for her. "No no no. No excuses. I'll cover for you if anyone asks where you went." We both knew that no one would ask. "Now go home and try to feel better, okay? And please take that trash can with you."

Chapter Six: The Defenders

I ended up at my favorite park again two miles from my house. I didn't remember walking there, but I wasn't surprised. I was lost in thought and sitting on a swing, swinging low with little effort but enough to keep a cool breeze on my face. I still felt hot and sick from my episode in Ginny's office. As more memories from the park surrounded me, a familiar voice broke through my thoughts and my swing stuttered to a stop.

"Hey My." Callie's voice came at me slow. I glanced to the side and saw people all around me that I hadn't noticed as I swung. "I got your text this morning about your nightmares. Can I sit?" She motioned to the empty swing beside me. She looked like hell. Her eye was still swollen from when I hit her. She had a lot of other bruises too, but I knew we had other things to talk about before I could jump to asking her about that.

"It *is* a public park, so I can't really say no." I smiled and motioned for her to sit down. "How did you know to find me here?" I had stopped swinging and sat motionless in my seat as I watched her get higher and higher.

"Mason called. He told me you had been acting weird lately and, that since I hadn't been by, he assumed it was because we had a fight." She slowed to a stop and pointed to her eye with a chuckle. "I don't even care about that anymore though. I know you're not acting so distant just because of us arguing or because you've only had *one* more nightmare like you texted me earlier. That's why I couldn't keep it up anymore, our silent treatment. I know something more is going on and I want to be there for you." Callie paused to reach out and grabbed my hand. "That's the whole reason I was so insistent on you talking to me the other day when you got mad. You need someone and I want it to be me."

“Mason called you?” I asked and she nodded. Of course that traitor called her, but I was relieved he did.

“He also said something about someone with a top hat? Named Kyle?” She asked, eyes wide as she squeezed my hand.

“Don’t even ask about that. I promise you don’t want to know.” I laughed, for the first time in a week. “I’m sorry for hitting you *again*. I know I promised when we were younger that it wouldn’t happen again, but I mean it this time.” I squeezed her hand back and stood up. I waited for her to follow and we walked to a bench that sat off away from the rest of the park. Once we sat down, everything fell out of my mouth at once. Actual words this time. I apologized for not talking to her sooner, but I didn’t want to put her or Mason in danger. I told her my nightmares were still happening, how they changed finally for some reason after I hit her, and that I hadn’t slept in a week. I talked for a long time and Callie sat still, listening without any interruptions, until I was finished and crying. She handed me some tissue from her backpack for my nose.

“I came prepared,” She shrugged as I blew my nose. “Can I tell you something about my week now?” She waited for me to throw away my tissue. “You know the guy who gave me the flash drive you have? Well, his name is Kai and I’ve been hanging out with him and his friends this week. I actually, and don’t be mad please, told him about what all was going on with you.” She rushed the last sentence out in a blur that I only barely caught.

“You what?” I exclaimed louder than I had meant to. She was lucky I had missed her so much this past week or I would have been tempted to walk away and go home.

“Okay, hear me out. You wouldn’t talk to me about the nightmares even though I knew something was seriously wrong. I didn’t tell them any specifics or who I was talking about.

Kai's the one who gave me the flash drive, so I figured maybe he'd know a way to find more information about it." She paused to make sure I wasn't mad.

"You didn't mention my name at all?"

"No, not a word. And Kai knows way more than just how to find more information about the nightmares, Maya. He actually wants to meet you. Him and his friends." Callie looked at me out of the corner of her eyes, not making full eye contact with me. There was no reason for me to wonder why, it was obvious that she realized how crazy this all sounded now that she said it out loud to me.

"I'm supposed to go meet some random guy and his friends who know the most personal details about me and have access to illegal information for *what* reason?" I asked. My eyes stayed on her as she fidgeted. I stared like I thought my unbreakable gaze could pull more information out of her than she was giving.

"Because they can help us, Maya. They know so many things that we don't. I'm training with them too and it's been great. I think you need to go and hear them out." Callie finally met my gaze with a look of determination I admired, despite my exasperation.

"You've been training with them? Is that where your bruises came from?" She nodded her head fast, full of barely contained excitement. "Do you realize this group sounds like a cult, Callie?" I was incredulous and she waved me off.

"It's not though, I promise. Just say that you'll go with me one time to see what Kai has to say and then you don't have to ever go back again." She said. I caught how she said I wouldn't have to go back and not that *we* wouldn't have to go back. She was going to keep meeting with this group no matter what I said, so I figured it was better I went if for no other reason than to be able to identify them as suspects if she went missing.

“Fine.” I relented and Callie cheered in place. “I’ll go one time, but if they ask for a sacrifice or try to be blood brothers or some shit, I’m out. Got it?”

“Okay deal. My blood brothers will request no sacrifice tonight in your presence.” Callie said seriously until my eyes almost popped out of my head. “I’m kidding, Maya! Relax. It’ll be fine. Meet me at the library tonight at 11:30, okay?” Callie patted my hand before letting go.

“I know I’m going to regret this, but I guess it’s better than sleeping huh?”



The time to meet Callie and Kai came faster than I expected and I found myself jogging to the library right at 11:30, instead of being early like I planned. I was out of breath faster than I was used to because I hadn’t been running. Just the thought of being outside after dark was enough to keep me awake an extra hour or two when I got tired at night and now that I was really out there, I felt like I was going to have a repeat of my incident in Ginny’s office.

I pushed myself harder, not stopping to rest despite how out of breath I was, and looked all around me enough times that I’m surprised I didn’t fall. Every small sound grabbed my attention and the wind blowing around me put me on edge. I was waiting for the moon to flicker, the night sky to turn orange, something unusual to happen so I could tell if this was real or not. I rounded the corner near the library and saw Callie standing near the door next to another person with light blonde hair that matched hers, looking as if he could be her long-lost brother. There was never anyone else in my nightmares, so I felt myself relax and my stride slow down to a brisk walk as I closed the distance between us. I finally reached them, still struggling to control my breathing, feeling out of shape and late as Callie introduced us.

“Maya, this is Kai Webber. He’s the guy I was telling you about. The man with the plan.” Callie laughed as Kai smiled, looking uncomfortable, and extended his hand to me. Kai Webber

was not at all what I was expecting. I think I had imagined some dirty guy, dressed in all black, who always found shadows to stand in for some reason. Kai was dressed in loose basketball shorts, a bright blue tank top, and an old pair of tennis shoes, ready for whatever training hell awaited me on the inside.

I grabbed Kai's hand and felt the strength in his grip. The muscles in his arm flexed, like he knew I noticed and wanted to show off. I knew if things didn't go right inside, if this really was some cult trying to trick two dumb girls inside, he would catch me if I tried to run. Especially with my out of shape ass still trying to catch my breath from my short jog over there.

"Hi, I guess I'm the man with the plan. Or I guess more like the boy with the toy, right?" Kai continued shaking my hand up and down. "You know, because of my flash drive and stuff." He trailed off as I looked down at our hands, still shaking. "Oh so this has gone on long enough, right? Anyway, we should head inside I guess. The others are waiting." Kai forced a chuckle as he dropped my hand. He motioned down the alleyway between the library and old movie theater. No one actually went to the movies anymore, there was no need now that a single subscription could put movies directly into your mind, so it had been abandoned for as long as I could remember.

"I'm sorry. I must be confused, lack of oxygen to my brain right now or something. But aren't we going into the library? So why are you pointing to the alley?" My voice raised an octave with each question. The cult vibes were getting stronger. Callie stepped up beside Kai and spoke before he got a chance.

"I said to *meet* us at the library, not that we'd all be *at* the library." Callie corrected me, as if that cleared up all of my questions.

“I feel like you’re focusing on the wrong part of what I just asked.” I said as Callie and Kai walked down the alley ahead of me. “Why we are all meeting in an alley was my main concern. Maybe I should have started with that.” I whispered as I jogged to catch up. I didn’t know why I was whispering, but it felt like the right thing to do in that moment.

“We don’t meet in the alley. That’s just where the door we use is, you know, so it’s out of sight.” Kai shrugged as we reached a door going inside of the abandoned movie theater. He knocked on the door five times: one time, pause, three quick times, pause, and then a final knock. I heard a click of a lock and loud sliding sound that grated against my ears, caused the hair on my arms to raise.

“Wait, how does the first person here get in then?” I asked to no one in particular as we stepped inside the theater. The movie screen was still up, playing music in the background, but the place where all the seats had once been were ripped out and replaced with wood paneling and equipment. There were punching bags, free weights, workout benches, and an area sectioned off by rope to create a square of the room that looked like it had dried blood on the floor. Callie and Kai watched me as I stared. The silence hung in the air until I broke it again.

“Okay, so this is where we train to be what exactly? And where are the others? Callie said this was a whole group type of thing.” I paused as I walked around the room and touched some of the equipment. It all felt gritty, like sweat was layered on and never got fully cleaned off.

“We’re not the whole group, are we? Because you’re going to be in for quite the disappointment if the whole plan hinges on me fighting in a tough situation.”

“No, we have an actual group Maya. They’re just waiting in the other room.” Kai led the way out of the training room into a large, dimly lit main lobby. We walked down the hallway and passed dirty video posters of movies I had never heard of before. The video posters were all

short, little clips covered in a thick layer of dirt and depicted scenes from when the Affinities took office. I could tell all the movies had been made by Visionaries who embraced the change with open arms because the posters had light, cheery colors with some variation of smiling faces as Daydreamers and Constants welcomed strangers into their minds. There was one small poster further down the hall though, hidden from the view of the main lobby, that caught my attention.

Kai was still talking when I walked closer to it and touched the video as I read the title: *Don't Think*. Under the title, in smaller letters I had to squint to read, it said "What do you do when the monster is in your own head?" The video showed a monster with a human body, but a hypnotic swirl for a head, running after a little girl. The girl was screaming as the monster caught up and tripped her. As the girl was on the ground, the monster stepped over her and the hypnotic swirl grew to absorb her face into the black and white pattern before her body went limp. My fingers slid slowly off the poster and fell by my side, heavy and tingling, leaving a clean trail behind on the poster. My eyes were fixed on the girl's body lying still with her head inside the monster's mouth, vividly portrayed in the thin streak left among the dust.

"So, how are you feeling so far?" Callie slowed down to stand beside me. I turned slowly, the girl still running in my mind and I could feel every breath she took as she was trying to escape, and shook my head. Her eyes landed on the poster before she turned and walked away. She pulled at my arm when I didn't follow her. "I know I know, you're not sure yet. But you promised to meet the group before deciding and you haven't met them yet."

"I know I did," I whispered back. I struggled to shuffle my feet after her, lifting them only a few inches from the ground after the sudden heaviness in them that made me feel like I was wading through concrete. "I've seen their blood on the floor, so I feel like we're all one happy family already."

“Perfect. Then welcome to your new family,” She said with a nudge to push me through the door of the next room. I stumbled through the doorway before I managed to pull my feet back under me and steady myself. The new room still had theater chairs installed and three of them were occupied. The three people sat looking at Kai as he stood in the front of the room. He was in the middle of explaining that the person Callie had been talking about— the girl with the nightmares that could help them figure out the information they’ve been needing— was none other than me. As soon as Kai said my name to the group, I thought I heard someone cuss under their breath. But I was sure that was just my imagination.

“Maya, perfect. Come meet the rest of the Defenders.” Kai said with a big smile on his face.

“The Defenders? Seriously?” I felt a sharp finger poke into my back as Callie reminded me again that I promised to give this a shot. “I’m just saying,” I whispered to her behind me. “Defenders of what exactly—” My voice broke off as I rounded to the front of the room to stand beside Kai and look at the others for the first time. They all appeared to be around my age and then— I squeezed my eyes shut before opening them again. I had hoped I was seeing things, but when I opened my eyes again he was still there. I was staring directly at Conner Yost.

“Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” I muttered as he stood up and walked out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him.



We all stood in silence as the noise from the door echoed through the room. I shifted my weight back and forth on my feet, not wanting to look away and seem weak but also wanting to run out through the same door Conner just used, as all the eyes in the room fell on me. I tried to keep my face as expressionless as possible, but I’m not sure how good of a job I was doing. It

felt like the moment lasted forever before Kai coughed and the eyes of the two strangers shifted back to him.

“Well, that was Conner, and I would like to say he’s not always that rude, but I don’t want to lie to you.” Kai ran his hand through his hair before motioning to the girl sitting in front of us. “I guess we’ll just move on to the others for now. Sound good?”

“Okay, I’ll start.” The girl said as she stood up. Her cheeks were a bright red as she talked, but if she was nervous her voice gave no indication of it. “My name’s Amethyst, but I go by Ame.” Ame was quite a bit shorter than me with white blonde hair and more tattoos than I had ever seen on a single person. She had bright colors running up and down her arms and neck in geometrical patterns with animals and women woven throughout. For all the sharp edges on the patterns to accentuate the prominent figures on her arms, her legs seemed to belong to a different person. Where her arms were bright and drastic, her legs were all flowers in pastel colors; the contrast matched her blushing cheeks and strong voice. Her face was the only empty space left on her body, which left her green eyes open to still draw the attention to her face. I didn’t know whether I should be intimidated or impressed by her obvious high pain tolerance, but I found myself just in awe at the creativity she must have to create such intricate details on her body.

“I’m told that I’m supposed to be a Daydreamer because my entire family is,” Her mention of a Daydreamer family pulled my attention away from her body to focus again. “But I never developed my abilities no matter how many classes or therapists my parents sent me to over the years. Eventually, they gave up on me and kicked me out because it was,” Ame’s voice rose an octave as she mimicked her mother’s voice, “‘too embarrassing to have a child without any presented abilities’ so they took me to court and divorced me. Did you know you could

even do that? Divorce your child?" She paused as I stood staring at her. It took me a couple of seconds to realize she wanted a response from me.

"Oh, sorry. No, no I never knew that was possible. I'm so sorr—" I said before she cut me off.

"No, it's fine. You don't have to apologize for them. That was years ago when I was only thirteen, so whatever. I'm over it, you know? That's for a therapy session later on in life I guess," she said with a low chuckle. "So anyway, there I was. Without my family, thinking I was some failed Daydreamer loser with no future when I saw a poster up at the Y for a dream support group. That was literally all the poster said: 'Dream Support Group' and an address. Sure, I was nervous to show up because what if it was a scam and I got killed? But I didn't have anything else left to lose so I showed up anyway and that's where I met Kai. He told me his whole story and why he wanted to form this group, which I'm sure he'll tell you at some point— and I was hooked. Right then and there, I was in. I needed something: a family and encouragement, which I never had growing up, and he gave me that. So, I guess that's my story." Ame nodded her head towards me and sat back down.

"And I'm glad you showed up, Ame." Kai smiled at Ame and she looked down at the ground. "Ame was my first person to show up when I wasn't really sure what to do with my life anymore either. I knew too much to keep quiet or stay by myself, but I wasn't sure anyone would believe me. We'll get to that more in a second though. Xan, how about you go now?"

"Oh yeah, for sure. Okay, so the name's Xan Foster." He held his arms straight out beside him like he was presenting himself as some kind of prize. Xan had black hair and muddy brown eyes, nothing about him really stuck out to me at all. He had the kind of face that's easily overlooked in a crowd until he opens up his mouth to talk, which he hardly ever shuts actually.

Xan, if you happen to be out there reading this...you described yourself just like this once, so don't get whiny on me.

“I've always been a Constant, my whole family too, so my life should have been pretty boring. Until one night, Ame was in my dream. She kept fucking some stuff up, right, like little things. Like it should be a dream about me running late for school, but all my shit was in different places, so I couldn't find anything. She was trying to practice converging and taking control of dreams, but I didn't know that. I just knew I couldn't find my fucking socks in time every single time. So finally one night, I was stressed and tired of being so late in my dreams that I was rushing around...I just stopped. I just stopped, looked up, and said 'This isn't happening again. My shoes are going to be on my bed when I look down and then I won't be late.' And boom man, just like that I looked and there they were.” Xan said with a clap and a big smile on his face. “I pushed back and my mirror, that's what we call our dream selves, took the control away from Ame.”

“I was pushed out of his head and couldn't get back in,” Ame said with a quiet laugh, like it was some old joke between the two of them. “We were shocked because we didn't realize someone could do that, take the control back in their dream and protect their mirrors like that. So I found him the next day and told him everything. About me, about Kai, about how I had been in his head the last few days. I thought he was going to think I was crazy or something but—”

“But I always knew my life wasn't meant to be boring. I was meant to do something more than take over my family's grocery store once I graduated, you know, so I believed her. I believed her and I followed her here to meet Kai and Conner. Then we found Callie and now you. I really think we have a chance now.” Xan finished with a wink before sitting down.

“I found Conner too actually,” Kai looked towards the door Conner rushed out of a few minutes before. “But I’m sure he’ll tell you about that some time when he’s ready. It’s a hell of a story, but not mine to tell.”

“Speaking of your story.” Callie sat down in the chair beside Ame. “When does Maya get to hear that?”

“Right, why did you even make this group and why am I here? What does all of this have to do with me?” I looked over to Ame and Xan, hoping they wouldn’t think I was rude but I still felt like sneaking out whenever no one was looking. I needed to hear something to make me stay.

“Fair enough.” Kai waved his hand out towards the empty seats. Callie patted the seat on the other side of her before turning to face Kai again. “I guess take a seat because this’ll definitely relate to you, so here’s your warning.”

Chapter Seven: Stick with Me Here because Kai's Story is Important

“So, when I was born, my dad was already deep into figuring out convergences and then my family realized fast that I had some abilities as well.” Kai paced back and forth as my eyes followed him.

“So, you're a Daydreamer then?”

“No. My family and I are all Constants.”

“How is that even possible then? You have to be born into a family with—” Callie's elbow connected hard into my side. I shot her a glance that she ignored.

“Kai's talking, so try to listen without interrupting okay?” Callie whispered to me, but her eyes never left Kai's face.

“Yeah, that's the part of my story that everyone is confused about in the beginning. There's a lot you don't know Maya, but I promise I'm getting there.” Kai took a deep breath before continuing with his pacing. I think his constant movements helped to keep him focused. “My dad and my uncle realized when they were younger that they both showed up in each other's dreams a lot, but not like a normal dream when there's people you know in them. Their dreams were shared, like one conscious between them where they could interact at night. They started wondering if this was happening because they knew each other so well and, if it was, they could then try leaving the dream together to go other places.”

As Kai spoke, Xan looked around like he zoned out. Instead of listening or even just watching Kai pace, Xan's eyes were fixed on the ceiling and he was nodding occasionally, his mouth moving like counting ceiling tiles or something. After seeing Xan was preoccupied, I glanced over to Callie. Her eyes, wide and shining like she was seconds away from tearing up, followed Kai as he walked around the room like he was her biggest inspiration. Like he was the

one who cured cancer. Callie sat at the front of the room, back straight, with a smile on her faces like this was the first time she had heard his story.

“So they started practicing,” Kai’s voice floated back into the front of my focus and pulled my eyes back to him, my distraction with the others lasted only a couple of seconds, without missing any of his story. “They were getting to know more people in their neighborhood, and were able to go into other people’s minds over time. They were able to spread their reach further and further until one day they pushed it too far.” Kai stopped talking and looked to Callie who nodded at him to keep going.

“Is this going to start getting weird soon?” I whispered more to myself than anyone else because I already knew Callie’s response before she said anything.

“Maya, you promised you would give this a shot.”

“How could I forget? I’m just getting impatient.” I leaned back further into my seat.

“One night, they tried going into someone’s mind and they had some push back. The person they tried converging into fought back and her mirror consciousness became aggressive with my dad, trying to hit him and push him back through the tear, which is dangerous without following the right steps to disengage from a mind. My uncle ran out in front of him and hit the mirror, meaning to knock her down long enough for them to escape, but they weren’t expecting her to manifest a weapon. She created a gun, just like that. There wasn’t a gun before and then she created one and shot my dad. She killed my dad and then my uncle fell through the tear.”

Kai stopped pacing and walked towards my chair.

“That’s why I need you to fully understand our rules when we converge and our abilities. It’s literally life and death when we’re in there, okay?” Kai sat down beside me and leaned his head down into his hands.

“Anyway,” Kai kept talking, but his head didn’t leave his hands. “After my dad died, my mom didn’t really feel like she was there anymore. You know what I mean? Like, I would talk but she wasn’t ever listening. So I moved in with my uncle and I don’t even think she noticed I was gone. It wasn’t long after that when my uncle realized there was something different about me.”

“Different how?” I was sucked into his story now, and he looked up at me. Anytime someone’s life with a mom didn’t fit my picture of a loving mother, I was interested. What if moms weren’t as great as I always pretended they were? I knew some people had moms that weren’t perfect, but that had to be better than not having one. Right? That’s what I always assumed anyway.

“I started out always seeming to know how my uncle felt without him telling me, which he says he always assumed was because we spent so much time together. You know, you learn how to read the people you’re closest to after a while. I made a game of it: when I woke up, if I could guess his mood right then I got ice cream for breakfast. I started getting ice cream every morning before he switched it up because then I had to guess what he was *thinking* to get ice cream. And I was always right to the point that we ended up switching my prize because I was eating so much ice cream every day I ended up hating it. I still don’t eat ice cream to this day because of it,” Kai glanced over and winked at me.

“My uncle, knowing the real possibilities of converging and powers, started testing me more and more every day. I would go to school, because I still needed a formal education he would always say, but when I got home I would be in ‘Uncle Kev’s School of C&D.’” Kai chuckled at the confused look on my face. “Converging and Dreams. He knows a lot about converging, but isn’t the most creative with names. Long story short. We discovered that with

practice, I could sense anyone's thoughts or emotions that I chose and before long I started converging. And here we are. My uncle still helps out with our group here, but more from the background after we lost another person when I was seven, so I guess around the time you and Callie were born. The disappearance was hard on him and he decided he didn't want to be on the frontlines anymore now that he's older. So, I kept practicing over the years until I got good and then eventually developed the Defenders. Now you're caught up."

"That seems like you majorly summed up the last few years, but okay. I was always told, in school and by everyone I've ever met, that having an affinity is an innate thing, you're born with the abilities being in your blood line and you evolve from there. But you're saying you can learn how to converge and you've managed to teach everyone here too?" I asked.

"Well, so we'll get more in-depth when you start training, but, basically, yeah. Think about it, if people born with a so-called 'affinity bloodline,'" Kai's fingers air quoted and he mimed throwing up. "Or we just call them bloodliners, can learn how to develop and evolve their skills, then doesn't it make sense that other people can develop abilities as well? I mean, what's different about how they teach Daydreamers, Visionaries, and even Affinity kids how to converge and how they teach us? Just the source material. They purposely don't teach us what they're openly giving away to the people with affinities. I mean, ask Ame. She went through the classes as a kid." Kai turned around in his chair to face Ame.

"Yeah, I mean it's all true. In my Daydreamer Elite classes when I was younger, they started teaching me the basics from scratch. None of us in that class started out knowing what we were doing at all and what's crazier is that none of us even realized it. We had been told from such a young age that these were our 'natural abilities' so none of us questioned why we

had to learn how to get them then.” Ame turned to look at me. I nodded hoping to show that I was keeping up, but I was struggling to wrap my mind around it all.

“I’ve never been a quick learner, I’m just not a book-smart kind of person and that’s how they tried to teach us. A bunch of five-year-olds all wanting to run around and play, but instead we were forced to read books about it because you aren’t allowed to go into each other’s minds until you’re at least twelve and you’ve passed the Mental Stamina Capability test. Which I found out years later is where the appointed Dream Keeper of your area, who is just supposed to be questioning and testing your subconscious to see your capabilities, is actually inserting a chip into your brain that gives you the ability to converge. You still have to practice and everything, but the chip is what kick starts everything I guess.” Ame finished, sounding unsure of herself for the first time since I met her, and looked to Kai.

“A chip? Like, they literally put something into your body? Are you kidding?” I asked, looking back and forth between Ame and Kai. Ame opened her mouth, but nothing came out so Kai jumped in.

“Yeah, so we met a Daydreamer junkie one time. He had flunked out of college and decided to just do drugs I guess, I don’t really know how that’s the next logical step for someone with abilities but that’s what he did. He knew me from the gym, so he saw me out one day when he was high and gave me that same flash drive Callie gave you. He told me to look at a certain website and read about how they actually get their powers. He literally called them powers,” Kai laughed in a mocking tone.

“I mean, Daydreamers aren’t super heroes or something. If they were, then they’d be fixing things instead of messing them all up.” Kai shook his head. “It took me a while to find it, but when I looked it up, sure as shit, there it was. The instructions for the Dream Keepers on

insertion. I won't go into all the science stuff I read, because I'm not even sure I fully understand it all, but I guess it all has to do with the amygdala." He paused to see if I looked like I was following and I shrugged my shoulders. What the hell was I supposed to know about amygdalas?

"Long story short, the amygdala is the part of your brain that processes your emotions and survival instincts which is linked to your fear. The converging process is pretty painful, so your brain needs to be able to not register the pain and fear about losing control of your subconscious so you can do it at all. It's a very simplistic way to put it because it's harder than it sounds, but you have to not be afraid of the pain and unknown to converge. Then because of them messing with the kids' brains, they don't even remember afterwards that they didn't have these abilities originally as a child. So the most 'natural process' is actually medically induced and then developed. Some super power, huh?" Kai shrugged his shoulders and pointed back to Ame for her to continue. She pointed to herself and he nodded with a smile.

"I didn't know about the chips when I was little and I'm so glad I was pulled from the classes before they could put anything inside me. I wouldn't want to carry that thing around with me everywhere I went. Even after the MSC test, you still have to pass a series of tests each year to keep advancing. I was too nervous to learn and I started thinking I was a failure, you know what I mean? It took me meeting Kai and learning in a more accepting environment, where I actually got to practice what I was learning, that I finally caught on and figured out what my strengths were." Ame finished and jokingly flexed her arms.

"You seem so okay and nonchalant about the Dream Keepers putting chips into children without anyone, even their parents, knowing." I said.

“Oh, I’m definitely not *okay* with it, Maya. You should have seen my reaction when I first found out. That happened to be a couple of years ago now, so I’ve adjusted to it. I’m desensitized, I guess.”

“I still can’t wrap my mind around it. I never knew about the chips obviously, but I never thought about them teaching people with affinities how to use their powers means they could teach everyo—” I said as Ame spoke again.

“That’s exactly how they’re tricking everyone. We’re so ingrained to think the abilities are hereditary that no one questions if they really are or not.”

“Right and if we never question it, then we never try to learn how to do it either. The power always stays with them.” I said. Everyone around me nodded. So yes, they were still heavy with the cult-y vibes, but I couldn’t help it anymore. I was hooked. The possibility of developing my own affinities was too much to give up and I hadn’t even started my training yet.

“Okay, I’m keeping up but I’m still confused. Does only Kai have special abilities or can you learn that too?”

“And there’s the one thing we haven’t been able to completely figure out yet.” Kai said with a raised finger. “We all happen to each have a special strength we add to the team, which we call our shine. Get it? Our shine because it’s what our mirror selves can do?” Kai chuckled with everyone else. “But we’re not sure if everyone that learns how to converge can do that or if it’s just us. None of us have seen any affinity trainings for the bloodlines, or in Ame’s case she didn’t make it far enough into the program to get any practice. No offense, Ame.” Kai paused.

“Oh none taken. I don’t know jack shit from any of my Daydreamer Elite classes,” Ame said.

“See? So we don’t know anything from the formal training classes and none of us know any other people with abilities we feel comfortable enough asking. It’s not like we can say: ‘Hey, we learned how to converge even though the government says that’s impossible and discovered we have special shines. Do you guys have that too?’ Anyway, that’s all a disclaimer to say: You may have a shine or you may not, but don’t get discouraged if you don’t because you’ll still be able to learn to converge and help us.” Kai nodded to end his sentence.

“So if you can sense people’s thoughts and emotions—”

“Once I get to know them, yes. I only get a dull sense when I’m awake, but it’s heightened when I converge.” Kai nodded.

“What can everyone else do, then?” I looked around the room at everyone.

“Well I can alter my appearance in dreams,” Callie started as she turned to face me. At this point it felt like everyone was facing me and I was in the center of some weird life-altering circle. “Usually your mirror looks just like yourself, that’s why we call them our mirrors, but I can make my mirror look like anyone I want. Girl, boy, animal, object. Whatever I want as long as I’ve seen it at least once before.” She shrugged like it was no big deal.

“I kind of already mentioned mine because I didn’t realize we were building up to that.” Xan paused. “But mine’s taking back control of dreams once we get knocked a little off the rails, which happens more than you would think.”

“Yeah, like he did with me when we first met him.” Ame spoke up. “When you lose control of someone’s dream, everything feels like it’s falling out of focus and it’s really disorientating. With Xan though, it’s like the static noise is instantly gone,” Ame said with a smile as she grabbed Xan’s hand and squeezed before turning back to me. “Anyway, my shine

is noticing any trends or patterns in a person's unconscious so we can remain unnoticed for as long as possible."

"Which are all great shines to have working together because it means we can do pretty much anything together. I think the shines kind of develop off of what you're already good at doing, but we don't know much more than that." Kai shrugged.

"I really hope I have a shine," I said as I clapped. "What's Conner's then?"

"I think we should just leave his story and shine to him, you know? I don't want to step on any toes since it seems like he—" Kai started.

"Like he hates me? Yeah, that's pretty accurate and I can't really say the feeling isn't mutual either."

"Well, we can't afford to have such strong feelings between us because we all need to work together without any problems. So I think, and please don't get too mad at me," Kai paused and held his hands out in surrender. "I'm going to pair you with Conner, then, for your training, if you're in, to work through your issues."

"Well I'm definitely in," I paused to take a deep breath as Callie clapped her hands excitedly. "And I guess if my way to develop abilities hinges on getting along with Conner, then I can manage. I can't promise that he can too, but at least *I'll* try."

"Thank you. Then welcome to the team! We're glad to have you." Kai flung his hands out to his sides in the air like he was presenting the old movie-theater-turned-training-rooms to a big crowd.

"Wait, I didn't even ask what our mission is. Are the Defenders like, trying to rob a bank or what?" I said with a laugh and watched as Kai's smile quickly left his face and everyone looked away from me.

“No, no banks. No heists or money. No potential television shows or corporate jobs. We’re here to learn about converging so we can infiltrate and control the Dream Keepers without them realizing it.” Kai said slowly like I was bound to be overlooking the bigger picture and I was.

“The Dream Keepers? Why do we need to control the Dream Keepers?” I looked around to everyone else in the room for clues, but no one would meet my eyes.

“Because,” Kai spoke up after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence. “We’re going to expose the Affinities and then make President Storm disappear.”

“What the fuck did you just say?”

Chapter Eight: The Enemy of My Enemy is...Conner, Apparently

“Did you just say that we’re going to kill Storm?” I choked out as I stood up, backing my way towards the door.

“Now we didn’t say *kill* because that’s illegal, Maya, of course. I said that we were going to make him disappear, but we have to work on controlling all nine Dream Keepers first which will take a while. Our plan is to—” Kai was saying to my back as I walked to the door. I could feel the familiar hot sweat coming as I shivered. I knew it was only a matter of minutes before I was having a repeat of my accident in Stein’s office that morning.

“Nope,” I waved behind my back as I put more distance between me and the group. Callie started after me, but I stopped and turned abruptly to face her. “I just need a minute, okay? Can I have a minute, please?” My voice got louder with each word until I yelled the word please and then turned back towards the door with my hand over my mouth to keep anything from coming out: mean words or otherwise.

“Okay, we’ll just talk more when you get back.” Kai called after me as I pushed on the door with my arms.

The door was heavier than I remembered, so my body crushed against it and I bounced back. I looked around to the group behind me, hoping that no one saw me run into the door, but everyone’s eyes were still on me. Callie’s eyes being the biggest. I needed to throw up and then shove some Kleenex up my nose quick to stop the bleeding I could smell coming soon from running into the door. I looked away and threw my entire body into the door this time and it finally opened enough for me to slip through.

The hallway was darker and dingier than I remembered. All the fake smiling faces on the video posters closed in on me, their eyes following me as I walked. The happy Constants

portrayed to be excited to let someone converge into them, before we all realized what that really meant for us, before we knew that meant we'd never have another minute to ourselves again. Suddenly the videos all seemed like jokes to me. When I first saw these posters, I knew they were misguided representations, but that was before I learned the truth; before I accidentally signed up to make the fucking president of New America disappear. Even just thirty minutes ago, I thought my biggest problem was trying to figure out who kept converging into my dreams, which to be fair is still pretty serious shit, but now I was considering the pros and cons of possible treason. What a day.

I wandered down the hallway, trying to move past all the posters as fast as I could, and was amazed that the stale, unmoving air actually put me at ease. Nothing had changed in these halls for decades; sure, the theater rooms themselves had been gutted to be used as training rooms and the outside world changed faster than anyone could keep up if they weren't in a position of power, but this hallway looked untouched. The consistency of these halls, the same ugly brown color on the walls and the geometrical patterns on the carpet, comforted me. I wondered if maybe I wasn't just being dramatic about the Defenders and maybe I could be a member of the group that changes the country. I was shifting at a rapid pace from rational and freaked out by the Defenders plan to idealizing the outcomes their plan might have because, to be honest here, I wanted to learn to converge.

My face was cooler from the air hitting my thin layer of sweat all over my body as I walked and the drop in temperature made my nausea fade away. Soon I was just walking with no idea of where I was actually going. I only knew that the lighting started to suck somewhere around theater eleven, but I just kept walking anyway with my fingers dragging lightly against the wall. The feeling of something solid pressing back against my fingertips when I felt like my

feet were barely staying on the floor was nice and before long, I was following the wall with every twist and turn it took me on. I closed my eyes briefly and took in a slow, deep breath of the stagnant air to let its warmth fill me up.

My fingers slid across the weird pattern on the walls, tickling me a little with the uneven surfaces, when my body ran into something. I thought I had reached the end of the hallway when I opened my eyes to see the sign 20 over a theater door in big numbers at the same time as I heard a voice.

“Do you watch where you’re going, like ever? Or are your eyes just always closed?” Conner said. His voice was jarring after the silence.

“Do you ever say anything nice, like ever? Or do you just always default to being a dick?” I moved to the other side of the hallway.

“Wow, that concussion earlier really gave you a sense of humor, huh?” Conner slid his body down the wall and sat on the floor.

“That and the giant lack of sleep I guess,” I sat down on the floor too. “You know, I used to think my nightmares were caused by you but I’m starting to think that’s probably not true now. So I’ll add that to my list of shit to still figure out.”

“You thought I would actually lose sleep over *you*?” Conner leaned his head back against the wall. His eyes focused on something on the ceiling instead of looking at me. I sighed and he rolled his head forward to look at me. “Okay fine, redo answer: No, I’m not the person that’s been chasing your mirror around at night. I need my own sleep and I don’t even like cardio when I’m awake, so my mirror is definitely not doing it either. Better?”

“Well, I could do without the passive aggressiveness there at the end, but yes. That was better. I just don’t know who it could be then.” I trailed off, resting my head against the wall,

and finally saw what Conner had been looking at. The ceiling had paintings scattered across it and the one above our heads depicted when our first Affinity president, Abrams, was elected president a hundred years ago. The artist had made her look like a cartoon figure with dream clouds for eyes that were outlined in red and everyone in the crowd was either asleep or in a trance. We sat in silence, both looking at the painting, until I looked down and spoke again.

“As much as I don’t want to ruin this halfway decent moment between us.” I waited until he looked at me. “Apparently we can’t work as a team if we don’t like each other, so we have to be training partners because, I guess, quality time is all it’s going to take.”

“So somehow more time with you is going to make you less annoying?” Conner said in a high pitched voice on accident, taking away all hints of his typical asshole responses, and I started laughing. He sat still, in silence, for a few seconds before he chuckled a little bit. “Okay okay, I guess we can tell Kai this was our first attempt at bonding. Making fun of me, perfect.”

“You know he’s going to want more than that,” I said as my laughter died down. “Tell me something. Anything at all.”

“I’ll stick to the basics that’ll hopefully count as bonding to Kai so we can skip straight to training.” Conner sat up straighter and held up his hand to hold up fingers as he went down his list. Apparently this was going to be a short summary if only one hand was going to keep track.

“I grew up with my parents for most of my life until my mom died when I was 16,” He held up his first finger. “My dad’s company went Fortune 100 and suddenly he had more money than he could count and more,” Conner put up his second finger and used both of them to make air quotes as he continued talking. “‘Friends in high places’ than he could keep up with, and so more money meant better schools and opportunities, right? So I kept getting moved around a lot

growing up because new schools kept being built and I had to be at the *best* and newest school. Since I moved around so much, I never had any real friends or paid attention to any of classes because I didn't know how long I'd even be there, which sucks now that I can't be much help to the group when I should be our best asset with my abilities." Conner paused as I shifted myself around on the floor.

"Anyway, my dad donated a shit ton of money to the Middle's Visionary Preparatory School so I moved there, even though I'm only a Daydreamer but don't tell my dad I told you, and that's where we met. That's three. Okay, so two more would be: I met Kai because he a guest speaker at one of anger management classes and came up to talk to me afterwards. Lastly," Conner ticked his thumb out and held his hand higher in the air. This was the most he had ever talked to me without an insult.

"My shine is that I'm good at getting information out of the mirror during convergences. Dream Keepers are usually the ones trained to extract information, but for some reason I'm good at pulling things from someone's subconscious. It's fun for me to find the things they don't want anyone else to know. It's such a rush." He wiggled of all his fingers before he let his arm drop back to his side. Of course the thing he seemed the most excited about was manipulating secrets from someone's mind. Maybe Kai was right and the shines are a reflection of what someone is good at when they're awake.

"Wait, so let's start from the top. Your mom died?" I asked without even realizing my words might have come out sounding harsh. I just knew I finally had something in common with Conner Yost and who knew it would have been something as personal as this. "I'm sorry, it's just that my mom passed away, too, when I was younger. What a hell of a way for us to start bonding, huh?"

“I don’t really like talking about it much, but I’m sure you’d find out eventually when you’re in my mind for training. My dad has always been very,” Conner took a deep breath, his words came rushing out with the wind. “Physical, but no one could really help me or my mom because he’s so influential and has powerful friends. No one wanted to be on his bad side.” Conner paused and I looked away from him because I know that sometimes things are easier to say when you’re not looking directly at another person. I did the same thing when I finally told Callie everything earlier in the park. He looked away, too, back to the ceiling.

“One day I guess he got mad at my mom again for who knows what that time, he always seemed to be mad at us for something, and when I got home from school she was just gone. He said they argued and she decided to pack up and leave, but all of her stuff was still there and I knew she never would have left me there. Not all alone with him, she would never. I never saw or heard from my mom again, I was never told but I always just knew what really happened. I was too afraid to say anything though. He killed my mom and I never even reported it. I just got up the next day, hoping I wouldn’t be next, and went to school.” Conner looked down to me again.

“You can’t say anything to anyone or he might do something to us, too.” Conner kneeled down beside me and lowered his voice. “I tried talking to my nanny about it right after it happened and she said she was going to let someone know. Then the next day, I had a new nanny. I don’t know what happened to her, but I know my dad and I know it couldn’t have been anything good. I only told the rest of the Defenders she died and my dad’s an asshole because I don’t want to risk anyone else knowing.”

“But you’re fine with me knowing and possibly disappearing, too, or what?” I whispered back, feeling his fear spread to me.

“No, I’m telling you because you’ll be inside my head soon, any secrets between us could cause problems between our mirrors when we’re in, and for some reason I felt like I could trust you. Also considering you agreed to join, I assumed you understand missing mom drama more than anyone else here,” Conner shrugged.

“My mom isn’t missing. She died. I just told you that.” I said at normal volume, which caused Conner to jump as he fell over to the side to sit down on the floor beside me. His arms wound around his legs as he pulled them closer to his chest.

“You know, the story about Kai’s uncle and your mom. That’s why he wanted Callie to bring you in finally.” Conner’s eyes were wide, eyebrows raised. He honestly thought I knew what he was talking about.

“No, Callie said that she didn’t even tell you guys who I was before I showed up and Kai said his story related to me, but I figured he meant in the general sense. Like ‘the government is fucking us all, so it relates to every single one of us’ kind of thing.” I said in a rush.

“Nope. We all knew who you were from day one, I was just surprised to see you because I didn’t think you’d ever actually show, and Kai’s known about your mom the whole time. He didn’t think he would ever meet you in person, I guess, after your fight with Callie.”

“What do you mean he’s known about my mom the whole time?” I could be mad at Callie for lying to me later, but I needed to know what Kai could possibly know about my mom.

“Your mom isn’t dead, Maya.” Conner said. “She’s just missing and Kai’s uncle is the reason.”



I couldn't hear Conner's next words because they were replaced with a ringing noise and my head felt full of muddy water: heavy and hard to push my way through. I felt lost in my own mind and my eyes wouldn't focus.

"She what?" I whispered, my hands shaking. I looked down at my fingers and blinked hard in an attempt to clear my vision when I felt a slight pressure on one of my hands. The sweat may have been messing with my eyes, but I was pretty sure Conner had grabbed my hand.

"I'm sorry. I know we haven't liked each other in the past, but I never would have told you about your mom like that if I knew you didn't know. Not after what happened to me, I promise." Conner squeezed my hand.

"I can't believe this," I muttered as Conner kept apologizing. I would have been shocked that he had such a soft spot for people with missing moms that he was even apologizing to *me* if I wasn't preoccupied at the moment. "I have to talk to Kai."

I pushed myself off the ground, stumbling as I walked because it felt like someone was squeezing my head between their hands, the edges of my sight turned black and fuzzy, and Conner caught me before I ran into the wall across from us. He pulled my arm over his shoulder and walked in the direction of the meeting room with me hunched to the side, most of my body weight on him. We walked in silence like that until we reached theater six when I finally took my arm off of him and stood up straighter. I couldn't look weak. I needed to seem in control of myself so no one else would see me fall apart. No one takes a girl comfortable with showing her emotions seriously. To the world, that girl is either too emotional or a liability. In reality though, she can set the world on fire without a second thought.

I slammed my arms into the door, opening it this time with little effort, and walked in with my eyes on Kai. I moved towards him so fast my feet felt like they were floating barely

above the floor and he stepped back a little as everyone watched me. The door shut behind me before Conner made it all the way through the door and I could hear him grumble behind me, but I was in the zone, a zone that couldn't be stopped. I was ready to set the world on fire and watch it burn if it somehow helped me find my mom.

“You knew my mom was alive this whole time?” I demanded as I closed the distance between me and Kai. I stopped just short of running into him; my toes only inches away from his. My eyes never left his, waiting for whatever bullshit reason was going to come out of his mouth.

“You told her?” Kai glanced over my shoulder in Conner's direction.

“She deserved to know quicker than you were planning to tell her.”

“Okay, listen.” Kai started as I moved even closer to him. Intimidation has to be taken to the extreme when you're only 5'2. “I was going to tell you, but then you rushed out because you needed to throw up. I almost went after you before I lost the balls to do it, but Callie said we should give you a minute.”

Fair enough. I hadn't really wanted to throw up in front of two people that day, but speaking of Callie.

“Oh, the same Callie that said no one here knew who I was ahead of time. The same Callie that said she would never tell my secret without me being okay with it, but somehow also managed to mention how my mom died? What else did you tell them about? My first boyfriend? My brother you happened to like until you magically met Kai?” I blurted out the last sentence before I even realized it. So much for me bitching at her for not keeping a secret when I just threw two of hers out there at once.

“I have never said that, Maya, and you know it.” Callie jumped out of her chair, looking between me and Kai.

“I know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—” I started.

“No, you shouldn’t have. As long as long things are going great for Maya, then things are perfect. As soon as shit starts going bad though, you try to throw everyone else under the bus with you. But you know what?” Callie paused wanting a response, but when I opened my mouth to speak she cut me off.

“I told him to help you, to save *you*. Not me, you.” Callie emphasized each word before her voice started breaking as she talked. “He told me about the Defenders and I said I wanted to join because I wanted to help you and when he mentioned a woman disappearing around the time we were born, I thought no it couldn’t possibly be Maya’s mom because it’s too crazy that she would disappear in a dream and you’d start having them. But then he told me her name and it was Helena, Maya. So yes, I told him your story and convinced you to come here so we could find your mom.” Callie coughed before the tears started running down her face.

“I just,” Callie said between breaths. Her tears were coming fast and heavy, which always makes me feel uncomfortable but I knew I couldn’t say that in the moment. “Didn’t know what else to do and I know how much,” she stopped to sniffle. “you miss your mom.”

I walked closer to Callie and before I opened my arms fully, she fell into them and cried until she couldn’t talk anymore. I stood there with my arms around her and apologized.

□□□□□

“Promise me that you’ll listen to the whole story before any questions. I know it’s a lot to take in, but I’ll get to everything in time.” Kai stood up, pacing again. He rubbed his hands

together while I sat down in his chair. The seat was still warm and I shivered. Callie rubbed my arms lightly with a reassuring smile.

“It’s going to be okay, Maya.” She said. I shivered again, but not because of a warm seat this time. “I’ve heard this story before too. It’ll make you want to meet your mom even more.” Callie patted my arm and then turned back to face Kai.

“Okay, then I promise. No questions or comments until you’re finished.” I said. Kai nodded. “I can’t make any promises about my facial expressions, though.” I forced a big smile, all my teeth showing, which caused my cheeks to push my eyes closed. I opened them again and looked over to Xan and Ame. They were watching me.

“First thing to explain: How your mom and my uncle Kevin knew each other. My uncle and your dad— what’s his name again?” Kai stopped walking and turned to me. I sat in silence while everyone watched me.

“Charlie. His name is Charlie.”

“Charlie, right. I knew that.” Kai said. “So, like I was saying, Charlie and Kevin worked together. They started hanging out all the time and after a while, my uncle finally knew that he could trust your dad completely, so he mentioned converging to him one day. He mentioned it in front of your mom too, but Charlie said he wasn’t really interested in getting inside people’s minds. He thinks that the mind is a sacred place, one that shouldn’t be entered, occupied, or altered by anyone else. Your mother, on the other hand—”

“Your mom’s a Visionary, Maya,” Callie blurted out and her hand flew up to cover her mouth. “I’m sorry, I was just so excited about that part of the story.”

“My mom’s a what?” I asked. I felt a pull at the back of my mind, small at first and barely noticeable, a question I knew I had but couldn’t quite put the words together. Instead, I asked the only intelligible question I could form. “How did I not know?”

“She didn’t want anyone to know.” Kai answered. “Charlie came back to my uncle to tell him about your mom because she offered to help after my uncle had left their house that night. She offered to teach him to converge and he accepted. She was born into a Visionary family, but she still remembered her powers hadn’t been natural. The Dream Keeper in charge of her Mental Stamina Test must have forgotten to wipe her memory afterwards. So when she got older, she dropped out of her Visionary classes when she met your dad. Typically someone marries someone of their ability level, or higher which is still rare though, but—”

“But your mom fell in love with Charlie and went on the run.” Callie interrupted again. The pulling sensation in my mind was getting stronger, I was racing to put together the pieces of a puzzle my mind wasn’t showing me yet.

“It’s not like she went into hiding or something after, Callie. It’s not illegal to marry down, just frowned upon,” Kai said. He turned away from Callie suddenly as she kept talking. When his eyes landed on me, I watched them widen for an instant before he carefully recomposed his face. His slip lasted for only half a second, but it was enough for the pull in my mind to release and an intense heat started in the back of my head. The heat, which felt like a headache was forming, filled my mind before moving to cover my face and neck. Sweat beaded up around my hairline and I tried to casually wipe a drop away before it made its way into my eye.

“I meant metaphorically, you know. Risking it all for love, what a story. My parents just met at a college party, which is so lame.” Callie slumped back into her chair. Kai, Ame, and Xan laughed at Callie while I sat without moving.

I had woken up that morning believing my life then was all it ever would be as a Constant with my dad and brother. I never had an option for anything different because everything was chosen for me: my schools, my jobs, even my nights sleeping were controlled by a man I had never met. I was so used to feeling out of control and silenced by people with abilities that I had started to believe it’s what I deserved, I believed I was going to work for them forever. Everywhere I went, I was going to be told what to do. Now that I realized I had a choice, I had no clue what I was supposed to do with it. My mom was not only still out there somewhere, but she was a Visionary. I should be considering the doors this information would open for me, doors that I didn’t know existed before. I should have immediately wondered how we were going to find my mom because I had so many questions for her.

Instead, though, my mind was focused on one, single question: If my mom was a Visionary and worked so closely with Kai’s uncle, why did he act like they had figured out converging on their own?

“Are you okay, Maya?” Kai’s voice broke me out of my thoughts. The heat in my mind slipped away and its absence left me feeling empty and cold. His eyes were narrow and his stare so intense I leaned back deeper into my seat, putting a couple more inches distance between us. We sat in silence for a second too long, his eyes never leaving my face, and my mind got fuzzy. My vision blurred a little bit and I felt like my chair was floating off the ground, but I hadn’t moved. I blinked again and everything went back to normal.

“Of course.” No, I wanted to say. “Why are you asking?”

“You just felt,” Kai shrugged and pulled his eyes away from mine. “Different.” Of course, he was reading my emotions. I focused on my breathing, a steady in and out, and felt my heart matching the new rhythm. I pictured myself painting the inner walls of my mind and with each movement of my brush, I covered myself more and more. With each coat of paint, I was disappearing. Disappearing until I thought nothing, felt nothing, and recognized each time Kai tried to read me again. His thoughts were a deep red that I noticed quickly in the blankness of my own mind, but still I painted.

“Like I said,” I looked deeper into his eyes and thought I felt something. He was confident in himself but surprised and, far in the back of his mind, he felt a little threatened. He felt startled, he knew I could feel him. I tried to hang on, to take advantage of him trying to read me for a little longer and use the connection he set up to dig deeper into his mind, but he pushed me out. “I’m fine.”

Everyone’s eyes were shifting back and forth between the two of us, suspicious and confused. I didn’t want to admit to everyone that I was questioning Kai’s story because I wasn’t even sure what I thought was going on. I couldn’t expect any of them to listen to me, a girl they just met less than two hours ago, over someone they had known for years without proof that something was going on. I needed something, more than knowing his thoughts are red and that he felt just like the man from my nightmares when he was reading my emotions, anything that I could grab onto and show them. So I lied.

“It’s just a lot to take in,” I looked down at my feet and hoped I looked troubled instead of the con artist I was trying to be. “I never thought I would see my mom again, so now you’re telling me she might be out there somewhere. I want to know everything about what happened to her, so tell me all you know.” I needed the focus back on him, so I could relax. I couldn’t

paint away my feelings forever. I needed him distracted. Everyone turned away from me and looked back to Kai, the awkwardness between us already forgotten to them in the anticipation to hear the story of my mom. Kai looked at me for a few seconds longer before turning back to face the others and, instantly, he was back to the Kai I first met earlier that evening— warm and inviting.

“I’m sure it is a lot to take in, of course.” Kai exposed his teeth in my direction, it wasn’t quite a smile even though I know that’s what he was attempting. “I’ll just pick up where I left off. Like I was saying before, after some discussion between all three of them, my uncle and your mom started converging while Charlie waited besides them in case anything went wrong while they were in there. Things were going great and they were moving up the chain, you know finding out who the next person they needed to talk to in order to eventually get to the executive branch. They were working on getting to the Dream Keeper for our area because our area has one of the lower ranked Keepers, so easier access because they aren’t as guarded. One day, they got an important lead and needed to converge right then. They didn’t have the time to wait for Charlie because the Dream Keeper was asleep and they needed to move quickly.” He paused.

Kai looked over at me and I nodded my head, I was interested despite feeling like I couldn’t trust him. Over the years, my dad had ran out of new stories about my mom to tell me and I forgot how it felt when I was hearing them, like I was learning something new about myself. I wanted to ignore him and not trust him, but I wanted so desperately to know my mom better. Kai paced again and shot quick glances at me every few seconds, avoiding any more prolonged looks.

“So they went into my uncle’s spare bedroom, you always need a safe space to converge because it leaves your body exposed without your subconscious in it, and found the Dream

Keeper's mirror. When you're first asleep, your mirror is still fairly close to your body in the Dream Realm before it starts moving around. They didn't know, though, that the Keeper was expecting them, waiting for them to get close enough before he made his first move. This was the first Keeper Helena and my uncle had encountered, so they weren't prepared for the level of power they have. Once they were close, the Keeper created an open door to another realm and it sucked your mom in, Maya. My uncle said it all happened so fast, she was there one minute and gone the next. He tried following after her because he promised your dad to keep her safe, but the Keeper shut the door before it disappeared and kicked my uncle out." Kai sat down beside me. I jumped at his sudden closeness, I could still feel his arrogance that was filling so much of his mind earlier. Whatever he was hiding from the others, he knew he was doing it well.

"He thought when he was kicked out of the dream, he would see your mom out there too. But she was comatose and wouldn't respond to anything, not even to your dad when he got there. She was just gone, mentally. Her body was still there, but that was it because her mind was somewhere else." Kai grabbed my hand, but I pulled it away as soon as our palms touched.

"Well if her body is still here, where is it?"

"My uncle moved her, told your dad that she died in the convergence, and he's never told anyone where she is to keep her safe." Kai looked at me and held my gaze again finally, almost daring me to question if anyone else knew where my mom's body was. I remained quiet. "He didn't say anything because he didn't want you guys to become obsessed with finding her, he wanted you guys to have a life because that's what Helena would have wanted. That's why I don't think you should tell your dad or brother about all this either. Its better they don't know until after we've found her. It's easier that way, I think."

“Okay. I won’t tell them,” I knew in that moment my only way to find my mom was to play whatever game he had going on here. Play it and play it well, which meant keeping his secrets for now. “But I need to find her. We have to find her.” I said as I stood up.

“We don’t know if we can, Maya. No one has been able to find her and even if we do, we don’t know how to bring her back. If she’s still alive in the Dream Realm somewhere, she may not be the same. No one knows the effects of being in there for so long.”

“Listen, I get it. You guys may be in this for the long haul to take down Storm and change the world or whatever your plan is,” I side-glanced at Kai but he was looking away from me. “But I’m not. We have different priorities and I’m not afraid to do whatever it takes to find my mom. Find her and then get some answers.” I paused and looked around at each one of them, Kai still avoiding my gaze. Everyone else nodded once as I looked at them until my eyes landed on Conner. He wasn’t looking at me either; instead, his eyes were locked on Kai and his eyebrows were set low on his face. The last person in the world that I expected to even have a decent conversation with was now, possibly, the only person I could win over to my side.

“Okay, now that we’re all on the same page,” I said as I kept looking at Conner. “Let’s find the Dream Keeper that has my mom.”

Chapter Nine: Two Months Ago Now- Welcome to My First Journey into the Mind

“Hey, can I walk you home?” Conner called after me. Seconds after Kai suggested we all get some sleep and head to our rooms, I had bolted. I didn’t even wait for Callie before the door was closing firmly behind me. I needed distance and I knew I could tell her my suspicions in the morning just like I could that night. Kai told me that every night, one person’s mirror is in charge of watching over us and making sure that no one tries to get into us while we’re sleeping. Kai was on duty that night and he promised me he was going to keep watch on me to see if he can catch the man in my nightmares. Everyone thought he was great for offering to protect me, but the thought of him close to my mind again made me feel sick.

It was pretty late by then and I had told my dad earlier that I was spending the night with Callie, he was so happy about our reunion after seeing me mope around for a week that he didn’t ask any questions, so I was assigned a theater to call my make-shift bedroom any night our training sessions went late. The first ten theater rooms were used for any meetings and training with one still having a movie screen and games for down time. After the first ten, everyone had chosen a theater to make their room. Mine was theater sixteen, but I didn’t plan on staying many of those nights, though. The less time I had to spend around Kai the better.

“Maya?” Conner asked. He caught up with my quick pace and fell in line with my steps. We wound our way further down the hallway.

“Which one is yours?” I knew what he was going to ask me, but I was suddenly too nervous to mention my concerns about Kai to him so soon.

“They go in the order we joined the team. So Kai is 11, Ame’s 12, then Xan is 13, which makes me 14, and Callie 15.” He said with a nod. “I’ll walk with you to yours though.” We were silent as we started down the hall. The first ten theaters were all on the same first hallway

and at the end there was a right turn to see the next five theaters all in a row on the inside wall with bathrooms on the outside wall. Mine happened to be at the end of that hall, make a left, and then there were the last five theaters which included mine and the theater I accidentally ran into Conner just a short hour or so before.

“I know you want to find your mom over anything else,” Conner broke the silence and I jumped a little because I wasn’t expecting his voice after the quiet had set in. “I just wanted you to know that I think that’s great and I really hope you find her.”

“Thanks,” I kept looking at him. He kept opening his mouth, but then shaking his head without speaking. “Is there something else you wanted to say, Conner?”

“Yeah, actually. After hearing what you said about your mom, I wanted to tell you something else I haven’t told the others either.” We had finally reached my theater door and Conner turned around to lean his back against the recessed wall near my door and kicked one leg up behind him like a kickstand. He was looking directly at me, hands in his pockets, as I leaned against the other wall. We were hidden from the view on the hallway if anyone was looking and it felt way more intimate than I was expecting.

“Everyone’s interested in working their way up to Storm, figuring out his schedule and secrets so they can get into his mind quickly before he wakes up again. They want to change the country, change the world even. They want their names to be known for uncovering the truth and all I want is to see my dad pay for his crimes.” Conner whispered like someone could overhear him even though no one had rooms nearby, so I leaned in closer.

“Usually when we’re all working together in the Dream Realm, running around trying to do our individual tasks, I try to question people’s mirrors about my dad, too. My focus is always kind of torn between the two missions honestly, theirs and mine. So when you said that you

want your main focus to be on your mom, I was jealous of your honesty and proud of your dedication. I wish I had spoken up when I first got here about what I really wanted because now it feels like it's too late. How do I tell them now that I've been secretly doing other things in the realm than what I've been telling them? I think I'm in too deep now to fess up." Conner stopped talking and looked at me. We stood there like that, leaned back on our own walls with our hands tucked behind our backs and our eyes never leaving each other's.

"I don't think it's ever too late honestly, it only gets harder the longer you wait. Do you want me to help you tell Kai or what do you want?" I let my question hang in the air, not offering up anything else, until he spoke up.

"No, I'm not telling you this to get your help. I got myself into this, so if I want out then I'll figure it out, I promise. I'm telling you this because I know what it's like to want different things than the group, so I want to help. I haven't been able to figure out how to take down my dad alone yet and I know bringing your mom back will be even harder, so I don't want you to think you're doing this alone." Conner walked over to my side of the doorway and stuck out his hand. I looked down at it, outstretched and waiting for me to acknowledge, but I didn't move my hands from behind my back yet.

"You want to help me? We're supposed to hate each other remember? Just this morning you hit me with a door and said something about how just because you picked up a book for me didn't mean we were friends." I looked from his hand up to his face. He flinched and dropped his hand to his side. He had gave me more reason in the last couple of hours to trust him more than I trusted Callie in the moment after her telling a group of strangers— with a leader I was growing not to trust— about my nightmares while Conner was confiding in me over anyone

else. In that moment, though, all I could think about was how angry I had been that morning when he walked away from me.

“I grew up in a family where finding out about our secrets could, literally, mean life or death. Once my nanny disappeared after I told her about my dad, I decided to not let anyone get close to me again. I couldn’t watch that happen to anyone else. Over the years, it was easier for me to be a dick and not have any real friends than to always keep them at a distance.” He shrugged. “And I’m not saying we have to best friends or anything, but I am saying that I know what it’s like to not have your mom anymore. If I had any chance of getting her back, I’d want all the help I could get but I don’t have a chance. You do and I want to help. So what do you say?” Conner held his hand out once again.

“I say okay,” I said as I brought my hand up to his and shook. We kept our hands in each other’s for a second longer. “And thank you. So here’s to not being best friends, but being each other’s best bets to finding what we want.” And just like that, my least favorite person became my biggest ally.



When I walked in my own theater, I saw that it looked a lot like the other rooms I had been in so far. The seats were all ripped with black cement looking slabs replacing the, what I assume to have been, old carpet that was once on the floor. The movie screen was left up with a small table and remote up front by the wall and on the opposite wall was a giant canopy bed. The canopy was made of thin black metal rails with billowy white curtains hanging off of them. The curtains were tucked back on one side so I could get in with small lights woven in between the material and wrapped around the metal bars. The bed sat on top of a big, black rug next to a

dresser. The control room for this theater had the door opened and I could see the inside was renovated to be a closet with a small corner still holding the movie projector.

On top of the bed was a basket with card sticking out of it with my name on it. Beside the basket, there was a pair of pajamas and a set of clothes for me tomorrow and inside the basket were some things to clean my face and shower. The clothes were all my exact size, the snacks and book all things that I liked, and all my beauty products were the same brands I used at home. All of that with the fact that the bedroom looked exactly like how I would want my bedroom at home if I got to choose, all black and natural with as little clutter as possible, led me to believe that Callie had been involved with this planning. She's good.

I changed slowly without paying much attention, my mind focused instead on whether I should tell Conner about my half-formed suspicions surrounding Kai, and realized too late that the buttons on my shirt weren't lined up. I dropped my arms down to my sides and leaned my head back in frustration. I left the shirt mis-buttoned and climbed into the bed. It was even more comfortable than it looked and the blankets were so soft that, despite my efforts not to, I fell asleep within minutes.

I woke up to a knock on my door and Conner's voice from outside. I sat up and scrambled to brush down my hair with my hands. I have the worst bed head when I wake up; I always look like a lion with hair sticking out in every direction with more volume in it than I know what to do with. I didn't really understand why, but I didn't want Conner seeing me like that.

"Hey, I was just wondering if you were ready to start training. It's 12:30." He called from the other side of the door, it sounded like he was laughing at me. I had slept about twelve hours and once I realized that, I could feel it. My head felt heavy, my eyes dry, and my body

ached from laying down for too long. I leaned over to check my phone in case he was wrong, but no. There it was in big numbers on my screen: 12:30 with two texts from Mason and a missed call from my dad. Good thing it was Saturday or else I would have missed work.

“Why did you let me sleep for so long?” I yelled in the direction of the door as I jumped out of bed. I felt a sharp pain in my feet from the quick jump, like hot pins were sticking in the bottom of my feet so I hopped quickly from foot to foot until it faded away. As I hopped around the room, I grabbed my things and clothes for a shower and ran a brush through my hair last second before heading to my door.

“Well you hadn’t really got to sleep in such a long time, so I thought I would leave you alone for a while so you could rest.” Conner said from the other side. I grabbed the long door handle with too much force and dropped a few of my things on the floor in the process, including my underwear. Conner jumped, not expecting me to come out of my room so abruptly and moved backwards to give me space before he saw the things I had dropped.

“Oh here, let me help you.” He bent down to help gather my things, his hands grabbing everything but my underwear. “This feels pretty familiar, huh?” He held everything out as he stood up. He nodded his head in the direction of the other hallway and bathrooms.

I chuckled as I grabbed my underwear and shoved them to the bottom of the pile in my hands. We started walking, my stuff still in his hands. “I feel like I still need sleep.”

“I wanted to let you sleep in to rest, not hibernate.” Conner laughed and I rolled my eyes. “And we *do* have training to do and it’s not exactly a quick process unfortunately.”

“Fine. I’ll get ready quick and meet you in thirty,” I trailed off as I pushed the bathroom door open.

“In theater seven and make it quick.” He said with a wink.

“You’re such a pain in my ass. You’ll see me in twenty minutes then and not a second sooner.” I flipped my hair and walked into the bathroom when I heard his laugh again as the door closed.



I walked into theater seven twenty-three minutes later with a smile on my face. When I opened the door, I saw Conner sitting in a chair in the corner on his phone and smiling at whatever was on his screen. He didn’t even look up when I walked in. My smile faded as I cleared my throat. He looked up finally and locked his phone screen before standing up.

“I’m only a couple of minutes later than I told you,” I said before I realized he never said anything about the time I was gone. I looked down at his phone in his hand and then back up to his face as I saw what he was wearing, which was the same outfit left on my bed that morning: long black pants, white shirt, and black zip-up jacket and a pair of tennis shoes. The only difference was that his shoes were purple while mine were green, my favorite color.

“Oh,” He checked his watch. “I didn’t notice honestly, so it’s no big deal.” He motioned behind me and I turned around, holding in a sigh. Who takes the time to comment on my time frame and then not even pay attention to if I meet it? When I faced the opposite direction, with Conner still behind me, two comfy looking chairs with a table holding a tray between them were before me. On the tray were two small syringes with a yellow liquid inside. My eyes never left the needles as Conner walked closer to the chairs.

“Since we’re not in the Elite training classes, and we can’t take a test where they put tiny chips inside us to do all the hard work, we had to come up with a way to converge on our own. Come on, the needle’s not going to hop up and stick you itself. Move a little closer,” Conner waved his hand at me as I inched closer. I kept moving, one foot barely in front of the other,

until I was finally by his side. “You know how Kai mentioned the converging process is painful, so that’s part of the reason why messing with the amygdala helps?”

“Yeah, I remember. Fucking with the amygdala basically removes pain and fear of loss of control. Remove the fear and you can do anything.” I rushed the explanation with a bored tone and knew I needed to work harder to hide my disdain for Kai. I cleared my throat and forced a smile. “Needles just freak me out, so I’m having a hard time here.”

Lie. I was actually great with needles, my dad joked that it made his life so much easier when I was younger and didn’t cry at the sight of them, but it was all I could think to say. Conner watched my face for longer than I expected, eyes squinted and not looking away. I rolled my shoulders back and met his gaze without saying another word, daring him to question my fake fear. He shook his head, so imperceptible I would have missed it if I hadn’t been staring at him, like he was wiping his disbelief in me away and continued with ease.

“Fucking with the amygdala,” He snorted. “Right, so fucking with it helps but we can’t do that here. So we have to improvise.”

“And by improvise you mean,” I looked pointedly at the syringes again.

“Right, that’s where the needles come in. I know this will sound crazy, but we have to inject ourselves with this liquid to paralyze our amygdalas. Then, while that’s going on mentally, we have to do something to create pain physically as we’re going unconscious, if it all works the first time. Sometimes we have to try a few times before you successfully converge, so don’t get discouraged. We all pick our own pain trigger we know works best for us, since we can’t actually feel the pain once we inject the needle, and use that every time.” Conner was watching me closely as he spoke. I tried to keep my face composed, but I couldn’t. He saw right

through me. “I know it’s crazy. I was nervous my first time too, but once you take this,” he held up one of the needles. “You won’t feel anything after that. Which helps.”

“Yeah, that’s the part I’m the most worried about. I’m supposed to put god knows what that is inside of my body so I don’t feel the pain? Do we even know what that is?”

“Well, not exactly.” He said and I shook my head before he finished talking. “Kai won’t tell us because he said if he did, then none of us would want to take it. Which I know seems like it proves your point, and honestly it probably does, but this is the only way we’ve found to converge and it feels so good when you use it.” Conner said in one breath. I’m sure he could tell that he was losing me fast. Kai was drugging all of the Defenders without them thinking to question him. I needed to study his leadership techniques because more things were working in this group than common sense should allow.

“The only way I would put that mobile disease needle inside of me is if someone slipped it to me while I wasn’t paying attention. I can’t believe this is the only way you guys have thought of,” The disgust was clear in my tone. Kai had to have known other ways after his uncle worked so closely with my mother. I was still deciding on much I could trust Conner with my theories, so I didn’t mention it. “Have you guys ever considered finding some chips they use in the Elite classes and putting those inside of you instead?”

“So your alternative here,” Conner said as I turned away from the table to hide my face. “Is that we cut open someone’s head, take their chip, and then perform brain surgery on ourselves?” His voice moved closer to me.

“Oh my god, no. I meant find a spare one around somewhere. You just jumped straight to brain surgery. There just has to be another way—” I felt a sharp jab into the back of my knee.

My legs buckled and I fell to the ground in a pile, unable to control my limbs. “You asshole, did you really just stick me with that needle?”

“You said— I thought that was a hint.”

“No, you psycho. I still wanted you to ask, first, before you stuck me when I wasn’t paying attention.” I whispered. My body started to feel heavy. I felt heavy while my head felt like it was floating.

“So you wanted me to ask you to surprise you? That doesn’t even make sense.” Conner whispered back. I didn’t know if he was whispering too or if I was just hearing his voice from really far away. There were two of him now. I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

“Listen we don’t have much time now so, don’t hate me for this, but pick: I can either hit you, but I doubt you’d pick that one, or you can squeeze your hand into this needle really hard. I’ll help you since you’re almost out.” Conner’s voice was floating further and further away. I don’t even remember which one I picked before everything went black.



“When you converge, you’ll wake up in a dark room that looks like a tunnel that leads to a single door. Once you envision what you want to be on the side of that door, in this case you’ll just imagine the inside of my mind. Hard to do, I know, but just try. It sounds like some mystical ‘just believe in yourself and it will happen’ bullshit, but I swear it works. There’s a little more to it, but that’s basically it.”

Conner’s explanation of converging, before he introduced the needles to me, sounded simple enough. Once I was inside the tunnel though, I realized there was way more than a *little* more to it. I woke up lying flat on the ground with yellow liquid, the same color as the stuff in

the needle Conner had just poked me with, flowing in through the air vents near the floor. I struggled to open my eyes, my lids felt weighted, as the water touched my back. I thought I was just dreaming, so I laid there and waited to wake up. The water covered my arms and most of my legs, rising at an alarming rate, before I remembered how I got there.

Flashes of Conner squeezing my hand closed into the needle repeatedly until I passed out and then Conner grabbing the other syringe too. I jerked my body upwards, planning to jump up from the ground flooding with water and head to the only door in the room, but I couldn't move. I kept trying, and failing, over and over again until the water was covering my entire body. I tried picturing Conner's mind, me walking into it and seeing him finally, but that wasn't working either. The yellow water moved up my neck to my face and the chemical smell got stronger the closer the water got to my nose. Soon I had to close my eyes, of course my body let me do that but nothing else, and the water inched over to cover my face. I only had a couple of minutes left to make my body move. The weight of the water was getting heavier on my chest and ached with every short breath I attempted until I took a deep breath through my nose to hold it in.

Conner, where are you?

My thoughts echoed and bounced off every wall inside the tunnel-like room. I heard them all around me, tightening around my core until my limbs tingled before going numb. My lungs burned as I struggled to hold my breath. Some of the water slipped under my eyelids no matter how hard I squeezed them shut. I couldn't remember a time I had been more scared— in my nightmares at least I could run faster, but here I couldn't do anything to help myself. I wanted to kick and scream or use my arms to push myself up, but I wasn't sure how much water filled the room. I had a sinking feeling that simply standing up wouldn't help me anymore. I could hear

my heartbeat in my ears, the pressure felt uncomfortable, as I remembered something Kai had told me about converging: you can't be afraid of the pain and unknown to converge.

The thought of Kai while I was sunken on the floor under an enormous weight of water, crushing my bones until I could feel them ache and snap, caused my heart to stutter and then stop. My fear enveloped me, wrapped around me tightly, tried to drown me. The red heat from Kai's mind the evening before felt like he was trying to creep back in. I felt helpless, out of options, so in that moment I did the only thing I had left to do— quit holding on.

I opened my eyes and mouth. I opened them and then let go. I let go of my fear- of Kai, my nightmares, the possibility of never finding my mom, my inability to ever easily open up to anyone- and I saw it all, my jet black fear, leak out of my fingers and toes like ink out of a broken pen before dissolving into the water surrounding me.

With my fear gone, I was able to feel the yellow water all around me and how it slowly ran through my body. As the water reached each part of me, I felt myself lifted off the ground. My head, arms, and then finally my legs until I was completely floating. I looked at my fingertips, they were covered in deep wrinkles from sitting in the water for so long, as hairs tickled my nose. My hair floated wildly around me in strange directions and it felt like the water running through me was bringing bliss to every part of my body, into every vein and artery.

I was stuck in between my consciousness and unconsciousness and it was the most peaceful I had felt in years. In this place of me floating in probably hallucinatory yellow water, I didn't feel the sadness from growing up thinking my mother was dead, I didn't feel the dread of working somewhere I hated, I didn't feel anxious to discover the man from my nightmares. I simply didn't feel anything at all and the numbness was comforting. The moment was all mine, meant for only me, and it was healing me slowly. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and felt

the water sloshing around inside of me. I was trying to prolong the moment, but when I opened my eyes I was standing upright on the ground once again. I could move my body and the yellow water was gone.

My body and clothes were dry, the only proof of my strange and wonderful moment was my wrinkled fingertips and wet hair. I rubbed my fingers together, absentmindedly feeling the soft bumps under my touch, and walked to the door. The doorknob felt hot, but I grabbed it firmly and turned. When the door opened, I saw Conner sitting alone in a small bedroom. When he looked up, he smiled and ran over to me. He pulled me in for a hug and I was stiff in his arms, confused by the sudden touching. He dropped his arms with an apology, still standing close to me, as I stumbled further into the bedroom. I looked behind me to the door and all I saw was a closet full of clothes.

“Why is your hair wet?” Conner asked me.

“What happened to the room I was just in?” Our questions tangled together. We both laughed under our breaths. He was only inches away from me and I could see things about him I had never noticed before. I saw his blue eyes that had light green and orange flecks in them like it was the first time I had ever truly looked at him and I saw his tiny freckles clearly. Seeing his features so close and sharp while he smiled at me made him look more like the boy who was trying to move on from losing his mom than anything else. I kept smiling after our laughter subsided to awkward chuckles as we both acknowledged how close we were to each other.

“Sorry again,” Conner coughed. “I was honestly thinking you weren’t going to make it after a while.”

“How long was I gone?”

“Almost thirty minutes, which honestly I shouldn’t have even waited that long without checking on you but I was so sure you were going to make it. I could *feel* you, just on the outside trying to work your way in so I just waited.” He walked over the bed and sat down. “Where were you? Do you remember?”

“No, I don’t remember.” I lied as I looked around the bedroom. I know it was Conner’s room as a child because I felt his emotions from the room. “I just woke up and I was standing in your closet.”

His emotions visibly came off of every object in the room in colors of light when I focused on them. The colors started off as a soft glow when I first noticed and the longer I stared, the colors became more distinct and clear. As the brightness of the colors increased, I could hear voices and images attached to the emotions. His door was a deep, rich brown color and I saw him run through the door before closing and locking it. He leaned against the doorframe as his body convulsed. It took me a second to realize he was crying and I could feel that the door felt like the only protection he had from his family, the wood made him feel grounded. Everything in his room was full of memories and voices that grew louder and overlapped each other until I felt overwhelmed. I could hear Conner’s voice in the background, trying to get my attention, but I couldn’t tell which voice I was hearing was the Conner physically in the room with me. All the versions of Conner— a small, fragile boy crying because his dad didn’t want him, an older Conner who came home still crying when he was rejected at school to then, finally, the Conner who decided the only way to survive still feeling whole was to be the bully first— were in front of me pulling for my attention.

I closed my eyes and took deep breathes. With each breath, I acknowledged and accepted the pain every Conner in the room felt. I made sure they felt heard, seen, and knew they weren’t

alone. With each Conner, they touched my shoulder lightly with a thank you and faded into the background. Finally, I knew there was only one Conner left—the one standing in front of me. I opened my eyes and looked back to Conner. The colors had all disappeared. He was sitting on his bed once again, his eyes fixed on me.

I walked over to his bed to sit down beside him, but when I touched his bed frame I could still feel the feelings of sadness trying to move their way up my body to my mind. I tried to push them away, to focus on what was happening in front of me, but they never moved completely away. The feelings let go of their hold on me, but they were never far away. I watched them circling around my arms, always close but never touching me, when I heard Conner clear his throat. I looked up at him and saw him still watching me.

“You’re feeling things, seeing my emotions around you, aren’t you?” He whispered as if he was trying to not fully break my transcendent experience with his emotions, but his memories dissipated into the air around us and left only whispers of themselves behind. I looked back to him and held up my arms.

“I promise I didn’t mean to. I just saw some weird colors and next thing I know, I’m feeling sad about you and your dad or seeing you as a kid running around your room.” I was conscious to not touch anything else.

“No, Maya, that’s fine. We’re in my mind, which you managed to make it inside even though I forgot to tell you how, I’m sorry about that by the way,” He paused and forced a big smile at me. “Which was amazing on its own for the first time, but now you’re accessing my emotions too. You made me feel that sadness again and that’s the shine Kai has too, which is crazy.” The mention of Kai’s name made me jump and all the whispers left of Conner’s memories disappeared completely.

“You think this means I have a shine?” I asked. Conner nodded. I wiggled down to the edge of his bed and propped my feet up on his bed frame. I wrapped my arms around my knees before I finally looked back up at him. “Can I tell you something?” He nodded again. “I mean, something you can’t tell anyone else. I’m trusting you here.”

“I let you into my mind, Maya, where you saw all my memories and told you my suspicions about my dad. You know more about me now than anyone else has my whole life. So, I think you can trust me too.” I sat silent for a few extra seconds before my words tumbled out of my mouth in a nervous rush.

“When Kai was talking about my mom last night, I think I went inside his mind too.” I pulled my legs up tighter into my chest and studied Conner’s face as he processed. He sat quiet for longer than I expected him to, so he either didn’t believe me or he was planning his escape route.

“You think you went into Kai’s mind while you were awake on your first day learning about converging?” Great. I knew he wouldn’t believe me, but it was too late to stop now.

“I don’t *think* I did. I know.” The words sat in the air, heavy like I had placed a big burden on him. Which, to be fair, I know I did. I felt awkward, so I continued to talk to fill the silence. “I mean, I wasn’t sure at first until I just saw your emotions. It was just like that with Kai— I felt him, really felt him and his memories, and they weren’t good.”

“What was wrong with them?” Conner’s voice sounded strained, like he was recovering from a week of bronchitis. He wasn’t looking at me, but at his closet door I walked through instead.

“They were hot and red.” I looked away from Conner, finally, and glanced around his room again. His emotions were slowly coming out of hiding the more I opened up to him. The

more I talked— his emotions covered me, wrapped me up warmly, encouraged me to keep talking. “Your emotions, even though a lot of them are sad, are cool colors like the blue of your emotions around me now. They feel safe, like I can trust them. They don’t feel like you’re on fire, like you’re trying to burn the world down.” Conner’s emotions held my hands and nuzzled up to my face when I shivered at the thought of Kai’s mind. Conner moved a little closer to me, still quiet, and finally looked at me again.

“I hear you and I believe you,” He kept a slight distance, but I could feel him too. I knew he meant what he said. “And if we’re going to figure out what’s going on with Kai, then we need to figure out what else you can do first.”

“What do you mean what else? We figured out my shine already. Isn’t that it?” I tilted my head and lowered my legs back to the floor.

“Usually, yeah that would be it,” He stood up with a jump before turning back to face me. He felt a rush of excitement I saw fill the room. “You’ve already done so much more than you should be able to. I mean, getting into Kai’s mind while you’re conscious? That’s not supposed to happen. Even people with abilities have to be asleep to access the dream realm and their shines.” I didn’t move. He was feeling so many things at once and all I felt, personally, was overwhelmed. I felt like I was getting myself into more shit than I could handle.

“If you can do that,” He continued despite my growing anxiety. “Then what if you do have more than one shine?” I shook my head slightly and he knelt down in front of me, silent, into I looked back at him. “If you don’t want to find out, then we don’t have to. We can act like we don’t know. Like you’re not some amazing Visionary or something—”

“I’m definitely not a Visionary—” I said under my breath.

“That’s the thing though— we don’t know if you are or aren’t. My mom had abilities and your dad didn’t. That could have changed you, made you more than you even know. Don’t you want to find out?”

“Do you think it would help me find my mom?” I choked out, barely above a whisper again.

“I don’t see how it could hurt,” Conner trailed his voice off expectantly. He knew what I was going to say before I responded. His emotions bounced off the walls and around us, pulsing with energy.

“Then you have my answer.” My voice was stronger as I stood up. “If it’ll help us find her somehow, then call me the next High fucking Visionary. Elect me President. Whatever it takes.” As I spoke, his memories and colors surrounded me. They were still and listening, they were ready.

“Okay, President Maya,” He smiled. “Let’s do this, then.”

“What’s first?” I asked. Conner clapped his hands and, as soon as the sound reached my ears, we were outside in the sunlight. I shivered at the quick change in temperature as he walked a few steps away from me, his eyes never leaving my face.

“What’s next is you disappear.”



“I’m supposed to *what*?” I asked. “Just close my eyes and hope that if I can’t see you, then you can’t see me either?”

“No, of course not.” Conner said. “You’ll just— Well I’m actually not sure how you do it exactly because it’s not my shine,” I sighed as he hurried to keep talking. “But Ame always said that she just focuses on a pattern and decides how to fit into that pattern. I’m not sure if that

means literally or what, but if you can do it then I'm sure you'll figure it out. It should feel as natural as when you felt my memories. If not, we can just move on."

"Great, so your instruction here is to just figure it out and do it? Have you ever considered teaching professionally?" I muttered under my breath as I started looking around for anything that might stick out.

"I was expecting to spend the first couple of days just trying to get you inside my head so we're going a little off-book here now. Just try it." Conner said and motioned around him with his arms.

I looked around us and struggled to find a pattern, whatever the hell that meant. Even if I did find something, I had no clue how I was going to use that to disappear. Disappearing sounded more like a party trick than an actual thing that could happen. I remembered Ame described her shine as going unnoticed by fading into the background, which is different than disappearing, so I shifted my mind to focus on fading away. I couldn't find a visual pattern, other than being surrounded by grass everywhere I looked but that didn't work, so I closed my eyes and listened. I stood that way, eyes closed and motionless, for a couple of minutes and, surprisingly, Conner was silent the entire time.

After a few minutes, I noticed the sounds in the background happened in a loop: the wind blew, trees rustled, a bird chirped for thirty seconds or so, and then a dog barked twice before it repeated. The whole process lasted about a minute and I had almost missed it. Once I caught on, instead of letting my excitement show like I had cracked the world's most difficult code as opposed to simply figuring out Conner's mind, I tried to put myself into the loop. I felt the wind blowing all around me, I imagined the trees swaying like it was me moving in the breeze, I saw the birds, and I wanted the dog because I pictured him to be really cute. After another minute or

two of me peacefully feeling like I was one with nature or whatever bullshit is usually on park brochures, I realized Conner was talking in the background.

“Maya, hey. I think it worked,” He kept saying over and over until his voice broke my concentration. He blinked wildly a few times like it was the first time he had ever seen me. “You’re back. You have more than one shine, I knew it. I didn’t even feel you inside my head at all.” Conner kept rambling, but I wasn’t focused on his words anymore. I was busy listening to his mind’s pattern again and feeling how his memories were intertwined into everything, how they pulsed and had woven themselves into every element of his mind. The color of his memories were visible in the sky, the trees, and even the wind felt like his vivid excitement from his bedroom a few minutes earlier.

“Let’s try the others too. You’re catching on to the new shines so fast,” Conner was saying when I started listening again. “So when we’re all working together, we perform our shines in a certain order because we found out they work better that way. So it usually goes: Kai, Ame, Xan, me, and then Callie if we’re still struggling before starting over. So we already know you access and change emotions like Kai, then you got down Ame’s patterns pretty quick to go unnoticed. Now we just need to try taking control of my dream, getting information out of me, and then we’ll see if you can change your appearance.”

“It’s normally: Figuring out their emotions, remaining unnoticed, taking control, extracting information, and then changing how I look in case the first steps don’t work so I look like someone they trust now before we start the whole thing over?” I asked and Conner nodded. “Okay, so why not start out trying to go unnoticed instead of that being the second step?”

“Because we want to know their emotional state first before we get any further into their mind. We don’t want to run into anyone else that has red thoughts and become stuck inside their

mind.” The hairs on my arms and legs stood up, with a sharp and uncomfortable pain, at the thought of being stuck in Kai’s mind.

We spent the next couple of hours testing out the other shines to see what I was capable of and, time after time, I could do each one of them. Each time I successfully grasped a new shine, my surprise was palpable. I was never terrible at new things I tried growing up, but I was never particularly good at them either. I was never the top of my class when I was in school, but I wasn’t at the bottom either. I wasn’t the first person picked to be on a team in PE, but at least I wasn’t ever the last. I never won any awards, I was always on the bench for whatever sport I tried that year. I barely missed making the cheerleading squad with Callie. I was always missing being the ‘one’ my entire life and I was perfectly fine with being normal, boring even, because I never expected anything more from myself— it was easier that way.

I moved from mediocrity to passing all the tests Conner kept throwing at me in one afternoon. He had me pick something random I wanted to happen in his dream while he resisted and after a few seconds, I did it. He had me try to change how I looked and after a few minutes, I did it. I even combined some of the shines into one because I made myself look like his fifth grade teacher because I saw her in his memories and he looked like he was going to have a heart attack. We had tried all the shines that afternoon except for his.

He took a deep breath and we both stood there for a little bit before two chairs and a small table appeared in front of us. I took a seat while I watched him walk over to his chair and lower himself into it with a quiet groan.

“You’re 17, how can you possibly be groaning as you sit down already?”

“I’m 18, just like you, so don’t go acting all superior on me now,” He laughed. “I was groaning because we have to test my shine now and who knows what shit you’re going to ask me about now that you have the chance.”

“So you’re assuming I have your shine too?”

“At this point, yes.” He looked out into the distance of his mind, his eyes fixed on something far away I couldn’t see. “All you need to do is imagine yourself as them. Living their memories, keeping their secrets as your own, digging deep into their mind to become them. Which will be easier for you because you have access to all the shines. I usually have to really listen to what everyone else describes from theirs and piece things together. Anyway though,” He looked back to me. “Just try to *be* my secrets, if that makes sense, and then they’ll just slip right out.”

I looked into his eyes, not glancing away or blinking because that’s not a necessary thing to do in the mind, and he never broke my gaze either. I imagined walking up to his eyes and stepping inside, moving past the bad memories and towards the back of his mind to more hidden memories. I pretended like I was wearing his thoughts like a coat I zipped up to the top of my neck and sunk into deeper. Soon I felt like I could ask him anything I wanted and he would answer because I was essentially asking myself now. I couldn’t think of what to ask now that I was there, so I asked the first thing that came to my mind. The question I had been wondering about for years.

“Are the stories about you being a dick to your past girlfriends true?”

“Yes.” Short, sweet, and to the point because I told myself we didn’t want excuses.

“And why is that?” I felt more like a therapist than like I was testing out a new shine.

“Growing up, all I ever saw was how my dad treated my mom and I honestly thought that’s how I was supposed to act.” Conner whispered and I knew he wanted to look away from me, but couldn’t. “Then, my mom sat me down a week or so before she was killed and told me what I’ve grown up around isn’t how it should be, that it wasn’t the way I should be treating people. My mom was the best person I had ever met and having her tell me that I wasn’t acting right made me stop and think like nothing else had before that moment. I realized I just shouldn’t have a girlfriend at all until I worked through my issues and knew how I was supposed to act. Clearly I haven’t figured my shit out yet because I’ve been single for a cool minute.”

“And you honestly think the reason you haven’t gotten a girlfriend in the last few years is because *you* chose to take time for yourself?”

“No, it’s not actually my choice. It’s because I’m still an asshole to people I don’t know and girls hate that.” Conner’s response was automatic and his eyes widened. I giggled to myself and stepped out of his memories. “So you decided to use your shine to get me to admit to myself that I’m a jerk?”

“Well obviously us telling you over and over wasn’t working so,” I shrugged with a smile and sat there, waiting to see how he was going to react to his own confession.

“Can I tell you something now?” His demeanor was serious, my joke having no effect on him. “No shines, no jokes, no bullshit?” I nodded.

“I’ve always felt so distant from everyone else, either because of things I did or because of secrets I was trying to keep the result was always the same. I came home and I was alone. I was alone in a house that terrified me. Then I found this group and learning to converge gave me an outlet for my fear and anger, which helped regulate my emotions. I felt more stable, sure,

but still alone. When I discovered my shine, my ability to go inside the deepest parts of someone's mind and feel their secrets— not just know them and see them, but really *feel* them— I felt like I was closer to somebody else. Even if it was just for a few moments, or even if the person doesn't remember anything when they wake up, for those few moments we were connected. I could connect and feel like I was a part of something bigger, something I would never want to give up.”

“Conner, I never knew that you felt like that—”

“How could you? I never would have told you before all this. I never would have told anyone.”

“I know, but if that's really how you feel,” I lowered my gaze to my hands as I spoke. “Then you don't have to help me find my mom or figure out what's going on with Kai. I don't want you to risk never feeling like you belong again. That's too much for me to ask from you.”

“No, I don't know why I feel so strong about this now— about you now— maybe because you've literally been inside the deepest parts of my mind now, but I want to help you. I've always wanted to something more, but I assumed I could do something great later on in life. The problem with waiting until tomorrow, in the greater sense of the word, is—”

“That tomorrow is never today?” Conner jumped when I finished his sentence. “I can basically read your mind right now, so I can't exactly take credit for guessing what you were about to say.” He nodded his head in agreement.

“Right. So why wait until tomorrow anymore?” Conner shrugged. After a short silence, both of us sitting comfortably with each other, he laughed. “Why do I feel like we got further just now than I ever did with my therapist growing up? We may need to try doing this a couple of times a month just so I can actually start working on myself.”

“We’re going to need more than a few times a month then if we want it to work.”

“You know, I’m glad we’re starting to get along because now that you have all the shins, you could have really fucked my shit up.” Conner said and I nodded.

“At least you know now,” I winked. “We just have to tell the others and watch how Kai reacts.”

“Can’t wait,” Conner said with a roll of his eyes. I stood up to walk away from him before I turned back around, confused.

“Wait, how do we even get out of here?”

Chapter Ten: The Big Reveal that Didn't Actually Solve any of My Problems

Leaving Conner's mind was uneventful compared to my trip trying to get in. Typically when converging, we need someone on the outside to inject us with another syringe to wake us up. Without the second shot, our unconscious wouldn't be able to connect back to our consciousness for us to wake up. Or, according to Conner, it *shouldn't* be able to connect except that he had found a way around it. There were too many instances when Conner went a little rogue to get information about his father and didn't want to get anyone else involved.

"I had to create a trigger, a way to force my conscious and unconscious back together, by altering my memories slightly to include a fictitious object, which is surprisingly easier than it sounds to trick your mind into remembering things a little differently." Conner paced around his room. "I had to create something that's essence *was* the liquid inside the needles. An object that blended in so no one else would notice, but that I could access if necessary." It was genius, really, to make himself believe he already had an escape in his mind that way one would form. I didn't give Conner enough credit, but he had been figuring out ways to get around needing Kai's leadership before I showed up.

"I'll admit, I'm impressed." I watched him as he continued to pace. I looked around for what object I thought was fake, one that looked the same color as the yellow liquid from the needle or something. "So no one else has realized that Kai worked his way into everyone's converging process unnecessarily?"

"Not a single one," Conner shook his head. Once he stopped pacing, his eyes focused on me. "You're trying to find my object, aren't you?" I nodded. "It's my desk. My dad never thought I needed my own desk because it was more *entrepreneurial* of me to outsource my homework to others, but I always wanted one of my own. Now I have one."

I stood up, unsure of what to say, and held out my hand. Despite our comfortability and the safety net we built for ourselves inside his mind, it was time for us to wake up. It was time for us to face Kai in order to save ourselves and the rest of the Defenders. Conner grabbed my hand, squeezed once, and held on tight. He walked over to his desk and tapped on the surface twice before pressing his hand down with all his body weight. I watched the marbled glass warp and meld to fit around his hand before engulfing it completely. His hand seemed to go through the glass, but I couldn't see it on the other side either. He smiled as I witnessed his final secret he held from me, and from everyone else, as he realized he was finally truly connected to someone now. Before I could return his smile, everything went black.



I woke up, safely returned to my own body, and I could still feel the warmth on my hand from where Conner's had been. Conner was in the chair beside me, watching as I sat up with ease. My head felt like it was swimming in the yellow water still. My skin felt hot and I was sweating, but I felt better than I had in weeks. Somehow converging instead of sleeping was a better refresher than actually sleeping. I was fully awake for the first time in a long time, for the first time ever possibly, and I was already considering what to do with the excess energy when the door opened. Kai walked in and looked surprised. He didn't expect us to be awake. I glanced to Conner, hoping for last second encouragement while knowing there was no time left to prepare myself for the drop in good energy I was experiencing.

“You guys are awake.” It wasn't a question.

“Yeah, I set a loud alarm for us on my phone in case no one came to check in on us.”

Conner's voice was flat. Kai didn't look like he bought it, but he didn't question us either.

“You know that’s not a guarantee to work. You risked the safety of yourself and Maya, on her first time converging at that.” Kai stopped. He was waiting for something. I looked over to Conner, he was nodding his head as if in agreement, so I nodded along too when I looked back to Kai. “Don’t do it again. Notify someone, preferably me, next time.” We kept nodding, like the bobble head robots he believed he was forming with us.

“Good. Now report.” Kai demanded. Kai listened to Conner’s relay of events while we were converged diligently, finally remembering the caring leader he was supposed to be. He feigned excitement when necessary and asked endless questions about minor details to an extent I didn’t understand. Conner left out a lot of details— our shared secrets, suspicions, and trigger point— but, still without those things, our story seemed full. Once Conner mentioned my shines, though, all his carefully placed composure went out the window.

“No fucking way? Why her?” Kai’s voice had risen to a higher octave. He coughed. “I mean, no offense of course. I just didn’t know that was possible, especially with no training.”

“Maybe once we find my mom, she’ll have an explanation.” Kai looked at me like I had offered up a way to time travel or something else equally unachievable. “You said that was the plan, right?” Kai’s brief look of surprise didn’t convey that was his plan, but he nodded along with me anyway. “Well she would have more answers than us, right? Since she had Elite Training classes growing up that I’m actually surprised hasn’t helped you and your uncle more over the years.” Kai was silent.

“So, I think we need to make finding Maya’s mom a priority for all of us then.” Conner suggested.

“I think you might be right,” Kai’s voice was strained and he looked up to the ceiling, avoiding eye contact. If he didn’t agree with me, then it might be too obvious he was working

against us, if he truly was, but agreeing with me meant shifting the focus of the Defenders. He was backed into a corner.

“If she’s still out there somewhere, she would have a lot of important information we need after being deep in a Keeper’s mind for so long.” Kai said more to himself than to us, avoiding my question about how my mom’s experience didn’t help them more. Conner and I looked at each other and I knew he recognized Kai’s avoidance as well. Our connection in Conner’s mind was continuing in the conscious realm as well.

“Then it looks like we’re all going to find Maya’s mom sooner rather than later.” Conner said. “We just have to tell the team.”



They walked out of theater seven in the direction of the main meeting room, theater two. The tension between the three of us was palpable and, soon, I fell behind them a considerable distance. The burst of energy I first felt from waking up from convergence had disappeared as soon as I stood up to leave the theater.

“Are you not coming?” Conner asked. He had come back to where I was walking at a slow pace. I could see Kai waiting at the door of the meeting room for us and my fatigue grew more drastic at the sight of him. “I figured you’d be the most excited to tell everyone we need to find your mom.”

“I’m just so tired,” My eyelids were heavy, threatening to slam shut and not open back up, despite my efforts to keep them open. I trusted Conner, and his pure intentions I witnessed inside his mind, to tell the team about my shines and my mom. I knew he’d be better equipped to talk to them than I would be at that moment. After a few more minutes of promises to him

that I'd be fine walking home by myself, as well as more than a few disgruntled looks from Kai waiting at the door, I left.

I made it home and saw Mason as I walked in the door. He was fully dressed with his car keys in one hand and his cellphone in the other. I realized I looked like a sweaty mess in comparison and left my phone back at the theater. He stared at me silently. I knew he was expecting me to say something, but I waited for him to take the lead.

"Oh hello, stranger acting totally nonchalant like I haven't called you five times today." Mason touched my arm like he was making sure I was really there.

"Don't you think that's a little excessive, though?" I walked passed him and looked around to the kitchen and found it empty. I hadn't seen our dad's truck outside, so he must have been working late but I couldn't ever be too sure. I didn't like him knowing if Mason and I were fighting because he got too emotionally involved in solving our problems. I sat down on the couch once I was sure he wasn't there.

"Don't even start with me about excessive. I watched you having seizures and develop bags the size of someone deciding to move cross-country under your eyes because you refuse to sleep anymore. Then you disappear without a trace—"

"Quit acting like this is some murder mystery television show. I was at Callie's, which I did tell you guys about, but you're making me seem like a complete psycho."

"I'm not *making* you seem like a complete psycho because you're doing a pretty great job of that on your own these last few weeks." Mason put his phone and keys down on the small table beside our front door. Our mom put it there for keys and mail and, since our dad never wanted to move anything she picked out, it's stayed there ever since.

“Are you even listening to me?” Mason’s voice kept getting louder. I looked away from the table and back to him. I nodded for him to continue with his father-like rant. “You barely sleep, you hardly eat, you never come out of your room unless it’s to go to work, you didn’t talk to your best friend for a week, you’ve barely spoken to me since I woke you up that night, and you look like you’ve been on hard drugs.” There was a pause. “Have you been on hard drugs, Maya?”

“Is this an intervention or can I go to my room?” I yawned. I came home to sleep, not argue. I didn’t think I would be entering into an interrogation the moment I stepped inside my house. “First you argue I haven’t been doing enough because I just go to work, come home, and stay in my room without talking to anyone and now, somehow, I’ve been doing drugs? Am I making the drugs myself in my room since I never leave or what?” I stood up and walked to my room.

“Okay, so maybe you aren’t doing drugs, but I know something is going on. I just don’t know why you feel like you can’t tell me about it. We used to tell each other everything, Maya.” Mason’s voice cut off in a squeak. My guilt for lying to my brother hit me, but I had already decided to keep him out of everything when I was having my nightmares to keep him safe and from worrying. Now there was so much more going on and I didn’t know where to start telling him. Or if I even wanted to tell him at all. Now I had my nightmares, Kai, and finding our mom to deal with and I didn’t want to put all that stress on him because I didn’t have any answers yet. When I figure even just one of those things out, I’ll tell him everything. I’ll have to tell him at that point, but until then I’m on my own.

“I’m sorry that I haven’t been talking to you, Mase. I really am, okay?” I walked closer and gave him a hug. “I’m only trying to keep you safe and I’ll fix everything, I promise.” I turned around to walk down the hallway away from him.

“What does that even mean, Maya?” Mason called out from behind me. “I’ll always trust you to handle things, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to know what’s going on in your life.” I could hear him cuss under his breath as I shut my bedroom door behind me.

It was cruel to leave him out of this. He deserved to know our mom was out there somewhere, waiting to be saved, and I knew that. I knew he deserved to know, but I kept telling myself I was keeping him safe. His safety was a legitimate concern of mine, but— if I was being honest with myself— there were other reasons I kept everything a secret from him that I would never say out loud. Secretly converging is dangerous for a lot of reasons, physically if we got stuck or lost and mentally if the Dream Keepers found out. Conner told me horror stories of people, who were mentally digging around where they shouldn’t, getting their brains scrambled. I didn’t want that for anybody, especially Mason. He’s too pure, he would risk his life to save mine, and I couldn’t live with knowing he did that. I also didn’t want him to get his hopes up in case we never found Mom. I didn’t want Mason living with that baggage too if it didn’t turn out the way I wanted.

I sighed and threw myself on my bed. The problem was that I still wasn’t being honest with myself because deep down, down in the parts of my heart and soul most people pretend isn’t there but on these pages I’ll admit, I was being selfish. I liked that I was the one who learned how to converge and that I was going to be the one to save our mom. I didn’t want it to be a group effort, I didn’t want Mason’s help yet, I wanted it to be me. I wanted my mom to see me and know I was the one who saved her. I was being a selfish bitch and didn’t want to ask for

more help, that we definitely needed, because I was developing some kind of hero complex that I masked as protecting my brother so well I believed it myself in the beginning.

Mason kept calling out to me on the other side of my door as I kept telling myself I was doing him a favor by keeping him out of danger. If I repeated that enough to myself, that would have to be my only reason for the secrets. The darker, selfish parts of me would go away. Once it faded into the background of my mind that night, my focus shifted to only one thing: my nightmare. For the first time in weeks, I didn't feel afraid to run with my attacker. I felt empowered and confident from the shines I didn't fully understand yet. I was caught in the trap of being young, naïve, and thought one day of experience was enough to outsmart the man inside my mind. In short: I was sorely mistaken.



Next thing I knew it was night time again and I was running, back in my old familiar element. I felt my song circle around me once again, my nighttime symphony, and this time I was going to make sure no one tried taking it away from me. I could feel my emotions in the air, thick enough for me to see. I ran like I wasn't aware I was in a dream when really I was listening to the pattern. I needed to fall into the rhythm before it happened, so I could catch him by surprise.

The bugs went silent just before the air got thick around me. Thick air, which I hadn't realized until after I knew about my shines, were my emotions surrounding me. My dreams were trying to help me, trying to show me sooner that I was capable of more than I knew. I struggled to keep a smile off my face, in case the man could see me, and kept running. I waited for the wind to slow me down, to drag me backwards despite my legs fighting to maintain

control, right before the footsteps. The footsteps I heard even when I was awake, the footsteps that followed me everywhere.

I took a deep breath and felt myself fold into the fabric of my own dream. It was like I was running on the road my subconscious created and then, all of the sudden, I was running into a crease or fold in my mind he couldn't find. I reappeared behind him within a second as we continued to run. Our footsteps in sync, so I could remain unnoticed a few seconds longer. The moon above us flickered again from orange to white, my mind felt alive and full of power.

“What the fuck?” He whispered under his breath. He was tall, more than a foot taller than me, with dark hair. He was dressed in all black, but with yellow tennis shoes. His outfit looked similar to the ones the Defenders used to converge. Was there some kind of assigned outfit for this sort of thing or did everyone associate secret dream missions to black clothes?

The fog moved around us, in between us like it was trying to pick a side: mine or his. The fog circled, passed between our legs, and under our feet making our shoes impossible to see. We might as well have been running through the sky, our feet covered in the clouds, and the intermittent orange glow from the moon wasn't helping my visibility either. I could barely make out his figure in front of me anymore, but I could feel his presence. He was angry, his energy a dark green, but he was also feeling remorse which confused me. As I tried to decipher his feelings, my steps slowed ever so slightly and I fell out of rhythm with his steps for a brief second. The briefest of seconds, but that's all it took.

He stopped running a couple of feet in front of me, like he had run into an invisible wall, and the sharp movement caught me off guard. I tried to slow down, but I couldn't in time and I ran right into him. I jumped back and the fog left my feet to swirl around him like it was embracing him. We stood like that for a minute, still and silent while the moon flickered from

white to orange one final time before going out completely. The dark fell over us and it was the only thing that gave me comfort in that moment. If I tried to run, hopefully I knew my mind better than him and could escape. I had realized how dumb and misplaced my confidence had been. I hadn't been able to balance two of my shins at once under pressure, but I really thought I could battle someone who mastered the 'How to Terrorize Young Girls' class or some shit.

I stepped back again, further away from the man, and took a deep breath. He stood perfectly still, not out of breath at all from our long run, before turning on his toes to face me. He didn't make a single sound. I could feel his hot breath and a faint smell of cologne, but I couldn't see his face.

"So you've finally learned some tricks, haven't you, Constant?" He asked, his voice deep. The pitch of his voice echoed through my mind and, with each reverberation, the dark green light from him flashed. With each brief flash of light, I could see him profile. A crooked nose, blue puffy eyes, a light scar across his forehead. I shivered.

"That's only the half-half of it," I stuttered. "You don't want to see what all I really can do." I whispered out. Not the intimidating start I had imagined, but it was all I could muster up.

"Oh, I have a feeling we've pretty much reached the end of your shins." His dark, quiet laugh surrounded me again. Another flash of green and I saw his hair, stiff and unmoving despite the wind.

"Wait, what did you call them?" The moon flickered back on to a dull white light.

"I've had enough of your games tonight, Maya." He said as the moon gave off just enough light to fully illuminate the man's face. It was finally no longer a secret who had been following me. I was looking at his face, right in front of me, and I had no fucking clue who he was.

Chapter Eleven: The Last Place I Thought I'd Ever be at Night

I sat up in my bed. My shock, and disappointment, from seeing the man's face and not knowing him was enough to pull me out of my mind before he said another word. At least with me awake, he couldn't stay in my mind any longer or find out anything I learned from the Defenders. His face stayed in my mind. I saw him every time I closed my eyes. It was like I had looked at the sun and it burned his image into my mind. I closed my eyes again, thinking that maybe if I saw his face again for a second or two I would remember him from somewhere.

His face was deeply tanned, he looked like leather that had been left outside for too long, with the scar across his forehead that was faded to a light pink color. Maybe I wasn't the only girl he chased. He had shallow wrinkles around his eyes and mouth that moved around in weird angles when he talked. His eyes were a blue color that looked familiar, but I couldn't place from where. The teeth he had left were a dull white, almost yellow in places.

I tried to lay back down, but I couldn't sleep again. I needed to talk to Conner and, hopefully, feel sane again— as close to sanity as I could get anymore at least. I got back up and slipped on my pants over my pajama shorts. I threw some stuff into a backpack, an extra pair of clothes for work Monday morning in case I spent the night. I grabbed my shoes from beside my bedroom door and held them in my hand, knowing the soles would make too much noise as I snuck out. I put my hand on my bedroom door and just as I was about to turn it, I heard the toilet flush from the hallway.

I backed away from my door, trying not to make any noise, as I stepped on a place in my floor that always creaks anyway. I froze and heard the footsteps walking down the hallway freeze too. Their footsteps started back towards me and stopped right outside my door.

“Maya?” Mason whispered. “Maya, are you awake in there?” As he waited for a response from me, I picked my foot up from the loud spot on my floor and moved around it to my window. There was no way I could sneak out without any questions from Mason. I slid my window up enough for me to slide through to throw my shoes and bag out first. I was sitting on my window sill, about to put my legs through and slide out, when I heard Mason again.

“Maya, if you’re awake from another nightmare or something you can tell me. I don’t want you to feel alone.” I could picture him standing on the other side of my door, head leaning on the frame and trying to decide if he should come in or not. I felt bad again for not telling him what was going on, but he wouldn’t know who the man from my nightmare was either so it was still pointless to involve him. I shook my head and, after one final look towards my bedroom door, I jumped out of my window with a small thud. Once my feet were in my shoes and my backpack was on, I was running. I was running at night for the first time in weeks and it felt great. I felt the cold air fill my lungs and there was no fog in sight.



My run to the theater was great. My legs felt like they were on fire, I was sweating enough for it to look like I just took a shower, and I couldn’t catch my breath— but no one had followed me the entire time I was running, so it was an improvement. I was grinning as I walked down the alley to the side door of the theater, but it faded away when I remembered how Kai got in the first time. The knocks on the door and it somehow mysteriously opening. No one had ever told me how this door worked, probably because that wasn’t exactly the most important thing for us to talk about, but it did leave me wondering how to get back in on my own.

I stared at the door for a few seconds trying to remember the knocks Kai used for the lock to slide open. When we walked in the first time, there wasn’t anyone on the other side who

opened the door, so how could the lock have slid open on its own? They converge here, not learn magical door unlocking powers. Or did they? I shook my head. I was being silly. Somehow this damn door opened and I needed to figure it out. I was annoyed at myself for not asking more questions about it in the first place, but I didn't know if I'd be back then.

“Okay,” I whispered to myself. “This is a long shot, but what if I just,” I reached out to touch the doorknob and turned. I turned, pushed, and the door opened. “Are you kidding me?” I looked around to no one in particular as I walked through the door. “It was unlocked this whole time. How annoying.” I muttered under my breath as I walked through the training room.

I opened the door out of the training room and into the hallway, making sure to remain quiet, so I wouldn't wake anyone up. I hadn't really thought about how I would get to Conner once I got here. It seemed weird to just walk into his bedroom in the middle of the night unannounced. Or what if he was in convergence right now to watch over everyone and already knew I was here? I waved into the air as I looked up like some dumb teenager on a store's camera monitor. I wasn't even sure someone could see me, but I didn't want to seem rude if they could. I guess looking like a weirdo seemed like the better option for some reason.

I walked towards the theater rooms and figured I would either see someone or, if I didn't, then I could just spend the rest of the night in my room until everyone was awake. I was coming around the corner to the hallway where everyone's bedrooms were when I heard Callie laughing from the other side of a door. I was excited Callie was awake, so I could tell her everything at least. Maybe she'd even stay awake with me for the rest of the night. I walked up to her door and, right as my hand wrapped around the handle, I heard her laugh again— but it wasn't coming from inside her room. It was coming from theater 11. Kai's room.

I took my hand off the door handle as her laugh got louder, like she was getting closer to his door to leave, I turned back and forth between her room and the hallway again trying to decide where would be the best place to hide. Callie seemed mad when I said she liked Kai out loud, even though obviously I had been right but I didn't have time to gloat in that moment, but she didn't want me to know the truth for some reason. The entry way to the bathrooms across the hallway was recessed enough that I could hide in front of a door without being seen from Kai's room, but I needed to move fast. I ran across the hall and into the dark corner of the bathroom entry right before I heard Callie open Kai's door. From my position, I could hear them but I couldn't see them without blowing my cover.

"I wish I didn't have to leave," Callie whispered in a deep, slow voice. I wanted to throw up, but that *definitely* would have blown my cover. I heard Kai chuckle.

"I don't want you to leave either." Kai said. "But we agreed no one can know about us, remember?"

"I know, I know. It could cause problems in the group." Callie sighed. "I don't know why I couldn't tell Maya about us at least." She suggested. Yeah, why couldn't she tell me at least? I'm good at keeping secrets. Well, usually I'm only good at keeping my own but still.

"No, Maya is the *last* person you can tell. She'll start asking too many questions, remember?" Kai said. I wished I could lean forward, only a couple of inches, to see if I could look into his mind again. I wanted to see, to know for sure, what games he was trying to play with my best friend. "You were the one who mentioned that the first time we talked about this."

Callie suggested not telling me about her and Kai? That didn't make any sense. Callie was silent.

“There’s too much going on here she doesn’t know and doesn’t *need* to know. We agreed on that.” He said.

“You’re right. I guess her knowing about her mom is enough for now.” Callie’s voice trailed off to a whisper. She was barely done talking when Kai spoke again, dismissing her.

“We’ll talk more later.” I heard the squeak of his door starting to close.

“Okay, I love you.” Callie whispered back.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” And with that, I heard Kai’s door shut. A few seconds later, Callie walked to her door and closed it behind her with a finality that matched my disappointment of realizing my best friend wasn’t going to be on my side. I waited a minute before coming out of the bathroom and snuck to the door of theater 14. My problem had escalated to a level only Conner could get me out of and that was scary.



I stood outside of Conner’s door for a few seconds before I opened it and walked in. I should have knocked first, but then Kai or Callie would have heard me and I couldn’t risk that. I walked in and stopped short, not expecting the room I saw in front of me. His bed, pushed up to the wall was a lot like mine, metal canopy frame but with dark curtains hanging from it. The walls were covered in art with bright colors like I had never seen. Some were abstract with random shapes and colors moving around each other in unique patterns and others were of the Defenders in unbelievable landscapes. They were all so life-like and detailed I couldn’t make myself look away.

One had Ame standing on a purple moon while rocks rained down all around her, but never hitting her because she was protected by a small, grey circle. Her tattoos were all perfectly replicated along with a couple of new ones added to her. Her hands were outstretched like she

was trying to establish the pattern to use her shine, with her eyes closed. She had silver tears running down her cheeks and each tear had a different small picture inside of it. All her tears had the same woman in them: she was beautiful with long braids that fell down her back like a waterfall. In each picture of her, with or without Ame near her, she looked sad like their moments together were as few and far between as Ame's tears down her face. Ame's sadness, though, didn't feel like a weakness— not the way Conner portrayed her. Ame felt strong, like she used her pain to create a deep sense of urgency.

Everyone had pictures like this, set in wonderful places with such detail to match their personalities that I found myself imagining how they all found themselves into the situation of their picture. It all had to be real, right? No way Conner was this good of an artist and hadn't told me yet. I was so sure I had learned all his secrets already.

I was study everyone's pictures, all the small details Conner captured, when I saw my own picture on his wall tucked away in a corner. I was surprised to see I had made the wall at all, I had only been there for two days and before that we hated each other. When did he have time to draw one of me too? I walked up to the picture and touched it with one finger lightly. I didn't want to mess it up, but I also wanted to touch it and make sure it was real, that I wasn't imagining things.

I was standing with Conner in a grassy meadow and we were surrounded by countless and perfect flowers of all colors, it looked like a movie poster for an epic journey or something equally as fantastical because I had never seen anything like it before in my everyday life. Conner and I were dressed in our black outfits for converging, so this was when we were inside his mind. I definitely looked like I had spent hours in hair and makeup because I had ever looked like that before in my life. My skin was glowing, literally glowing a pale gold color off

every uncovered area of my skin, and my hair fell around my face in angles it doesn't choose to do on its own. I stood in front of him, only inches away from him, arms were outstretched to place my hands on his shoulders, which must have been when I was becoming him to reach his secrets. What surprised me the most was how he portrayed himself, though: He had a peaceful smile on his face like I had never seen before and his eyes were only on me.

“Do you like it?” Conner asked from behind me. I jumped at the sound of his voice, my fingers leaving the painting, and turned around.

“You scared me.” I looked around at his unmade bed and crazy hair. I was in his room in the middle of the night, not the other way around. “I mean, I probably scared you first, huh? I'm sorry that I'm in here, I needed someone to talk to and then I got distracted by your paintings.” I waited for him to say something, anything at all, about his artwork. He continued to stare at me, so I kept talking to fill the silence.

“I didn't know that you could,” I pointed around to his art. “Do all of this,” I whispered as he kept looking at me.

“Well, jerks need hobbies too.” He reached his hand up to smooth down his hair a little.

“You know I don't think that about you anymore. I just didn't—”

“Oh, you don't think that anymore? I thought I was the only one self-actualizing and making changes here, so that's good to know.” He smirked. I never would have guessed Conner even knew the definition of self-actualization before and then, in that moment, I was standing in his bedroom at night with no secrets between us anymore discussing his art. He walked to stand in front of our picture. “I always feel so invested to the big moments in people's lives I've gotten to experience lately, like when Ame accidentally converged into an astronaut's mind one night. She says seeing space, in person like that instead of a photo in a textbook, changed her

and made her realize what was most important to her. I take those moments and put myself into it, to really feel it. Then I always draw the picture first to get the scene just right and after that's done, I paint it afterwards, you know. It's easier that way, so I don't feel committed to a vibe or feeling I want the picture to put off until I'm done with it completely. I let the colors decide afterwards." He never took his eyes off the picture. I walked up behind him, wanting to see exactly what he was, but I could never pinpoint what part of the picture he was looking seeing in that moment.

"So I drew us in my mind, when you were asking me questions, because that felt," He paused and looked down to the ground. "I don't know. You inside my mind like that felt like a moment, right? Or was that just me? I've never had anyone know me like that before, so it was different for me. You've already known what that feels like, so I'm sure it didn't seem as new to you."

"I've had someone chase after me at night and then knock me unconscious countless times before I wake up alone and scared, either hyperventilating or having seizures. I know that feeling of fear and being out of control, yes, but it's pretty safe to say I've never had a good and peaceful moment like that with someone before either." I touched his shoulder and he turned to face me.

"You weren't exactly having the best time before me, huh?" I shook my head with a smile. He walked over to his bed and sat down on the edge. I stood, waiting by the painting, feeling awkward and not knowing what to do with myself. He patted the space on the bed beside him for me to follow. "Or you can pull out a chair over there. Whatever makes you feel more comfortable?" He offered and I pulled a chair over beside him.

“I thought it was such a nice moment that I wanted to draw it. After our meeting last night when you left, I came in here and I knew I had to draw it. The problem was once I drew the picture, I had no clue what to do with it. Usually I know, somewhere inside of me the colors are waiting to come out, but for this one I didn’t know. I didn’t know until I thought about you. I thought about your eyes and the colors you make people feel like when you’re around, if that makes sense. And then, the colors started flowing out.” I looked back at the painting. The colors were so vibrant and beautiful; greens, blues, yellows, oranges, and even more colors than I could even pick out because they all blended and moved together. It was the most colorful painting in his room.

“I can’t believe our training led you to make this. It’s really good, Conner.” I looked back to him and smiled softly. We sat there, looking at each other and smiling like two people who didn’t have other problems in the world, until I remembered we had other problems in the world.

“Shit, I hate to ruin this good bonding moment, but I *did* come in here for a reason.” I stood up and paced. I think nervous pacing is contagious.

“Oh, you mean you didn’t sneak in here to wake me up and talk about art?” Conner propped his feet up on the side of his bed post, his elbows on his knees and rested his head in his hands. “Okay, then let’s hear it. What’s going on now? I’m ready and waiting to help.”

“Okay, a couple of different things are wrong actually,” I caught him up on everything that happened since I left. I included my argument with Mason, too, even though it didn’t technically count as one of my bigger problems right now, but I was willing to take advice on anything and everything he had to offer in that moment.

“Okay, so to recap,” Conner said after my long story. “One, you got in an argument with your brother because he’s being nice and is concerned about you, but you don’t want his help finding someone who is also his mother too. Two, for some reason, you wanted to have another nightmare so you could stand up to your attacker, even though you’re completely unprepared, and then when you saw him, you had no clue who he was. Then three, you found out Callie and Kai are hooking up, lying to everyone about it, and have information they don’t want us to know. And four, you snuck in here and discovered I’m an overly talented artist who is so cute when he first wakes up and now it’s all you can think about.” He finished with a smile.

“I don’t think I ever said that last one actually—” I tried to hide a smile.

“You didn’t have to, Maya. I can read between the lines,” Conner interrupted. He walked over to me and put his hands on both of my shoulders, so I stopped pacing. “We’re going to take this one step at a time. First things first, don’t be a jerk to your brother anymore. He’s only worried about you and deserves to know about your mom just as much as you did. Fair enough?” He paused and I nodded. I knew he was right, I just needed to hear someone say it out loud. “Okay, next thing. This man from your nightmares.”

“I thought that when I saw him it would all make sense, but it didn’t. I’m only more confused now.”

“The only way to get anywhere with this one is for me to see what he looks like too. How do you feel about me going into your mind?” Conner asked. “You just have to nap and I’ll sneak off to get some of Kai’s medicine to knock me out. We can get this done quick, I’ll be in and out. What do you say?”

“I don’t want to be the only one who knows what he looks like, so okay. Should I go back to my room or—?”

“No, just stay here and I’ll be right back.” Conner walked out of his room. I laid down in his bed, how weird, and was careful not to make any unnecessary movements. I was in Conner Yost’s bed. There’s a sentence I never thought I’d hear myself say.

I didn’t think I was going to be able to sleep, it felt awkward to be in Conner’s bed despite all the progress we had made, but I was asleep before he made it back to his room. I was deep asleep and barely remember him being in my mind, he must have made it quick, and then he was waking me up again. I rolled over and saw him sitting in his chair.

“I saw the man you’re talking about and it actually solves two of your problems. Your night stalker *is* the secret Kai and Callie are keeping from you. It has to be.”

“What do you mean?” I sat up quick and faced him, crisscrossing my legs and putting my hands in my lap. “Do you know who the guy is?”

“Not only do I know him, but you will soon too. He’s coming here in the morning to meet you actually.” Conner leaned forward, his elbows rested on his knees.

“He’s coming to meet me here?” Conner only nodded in response. “Well, then who is it?”

“Your mystery man is Kevin, Kai’s uncle.”

Chapter Twelve: Vegetarianism and Uncle Kevin, an Unexpected Combo

“Uncle fucking Kevin is my nightmare stalker? You’ve got to be kidding me.” I jumped off Conner’s bed and walked to his door. He chased after me, though, and turned me back in the direction of his bed.

“What’s your plan right now?”

“I don’t know, okay? I really don’t, but I feel like I should do something here. Anything at all.” I put my face into my hands and spoke between my fingers, the air from my mouth made my hair in front of my face move around every time I talked. “What am I supposed to do now? I thought our biggest problem was Kai and now apparently his uncle, who taught him everything he knows, is a big old psychopath.”

“I know what it feels like to want to do something, but it not be the right time to act yet. We will do something about Kevin, Maya, I promise.” Conner leaned down to move my hands away from my eyes. “I will help you figure this out, but I think we need to lay low for now and see how everyone acts tomorrow before we make a plan.” He squeezed my hands. “Okay? Maybe Kevin doesn’t even realize you saw him before you woke up or Callie doesn’t know about anything, who knows. We don’t know enough yet, but we will.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. You’re right. We just need to wait it out.” I said and Conner nodded. “Until then, I really need some sleep even though I can’t imagine ever sleeping again now, but I’ll manage.” I sighed and stood up from the bed.

“You can stay in here, you know.” Conner offered. I looked at him as he stood in front of me, he was still and waiting for a response. I didn’t say anything. “I’m not trying to get with you, Maya, or be weird. I just want you to feel safe. You can wake me up anytime you wake up.

I don't want you to feel alone." He said with a soft smile on his face. "I'll even sleep on the floor and give you the bed."

I yawned on accident, which only seemed to further prove Conner's point in his mind even though my exhaustion had never been the question, so I agreed and climbed into his bed for the night. The truth was, I didn't want to be alone and Conner's presence really did feel calming to me. He grabbed a few blankets from his closet and a pillow off his bed to make a pallet on the floor beside the bed.

"Good night, Maya. I hope you can sleep, nightmare free, and know I'm going to do everything I can to help you. I promise." Conner whispered into the dark of his room before he rolled over to sleep. I snuggled deeper into his blankets, which smelt like pine trees and acrylic paint, before I drifted off into sleep.



I slept through the night until Conner woke me up the next morning with a gentle shaking on my arm. I opened my eyes to see him holding my backpack. I wasn't ready to get up, somehow Conner had the most comfortable mattress and I didn't want to get out of bed. I pulled the blankets over my head and groaned.

"I know. I have this problem every morning too, but you've got to get up. Kevin's coming today, remember?" At the mention of Kevin's name, I sat up so fast my head hit my backpack Conner was holding. My quick movement startled him enough that he dropped the backpack on me afterwards too. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting you to do that." Conner picked it back up as I rubbed my forehead.

"I had almost forgotten about Kevin for a second before you said his name." I flipped the blankets off me and touched my feet to the cold ground. "I'm going to shower first and then go

head to head with my biggest enemy so far. No big deal.” I grabbed my backpack from Conner and walked to the door.

“Well if he challenges you to a dramatic contest, at least we know we have that one in the bag.” Conner laughed as I flipped him off.

“Very funny,” I opened Conner’s door into the hallway and ran straight into Callie. I fought off rolling my eyes. Of course she would see me leaving Conner’s room in the morning. When she first saw me, I could tell she hadn’t processed where I was just coming from yet because she said was a simple ‘hey’ and ‘good morning’ before walking to the main meeting room. She turned around abruptly as I was sneaking off into the safety of the bathroom with a giant smile on her face. I could tell she wasn’t going to let this one go. Hypocritical really, considering I had seen her leaving Kai’s room late last night after telling him she loved him, but still big news in her world I suppose.

“Did I just see you just leave Conner’s room?” She walked closer to me and lowered her voice. “As in, you stayed the whole night in Conner’s room after we all thought you left? How scandalous.” Callie held up her hands and tapped her fingers together, like she was an evil villain talking about their master plan.

“No scandal here, thank you.” I shook my head and grabbed the bathroom door handle. “I really did go home. I just came back early this morning to work out a training schedule with Conner.” I shrugged. Callie’s hand stuck out and shut the bathroom door in front of me.

“You came back this morning still in your pajamas then, I see.”

“Believe it or not, Callie, we’re not all hiding some kind of group altering secret in our nightlives.” I moved her hand out of my way and walked into the bathroom. The door shut with a sound of finality.

My shower was quick despite how slow I tried shaving my legs to put off meeting the great Uncle Kevin I had heard so much about and seen more of than I liked. I dried off, got dressed, and rushed out the door while still throwing my hair up into a bun. As soon as the door opened, I saw Conner sitting on the floor across from the bathroom doors.

“Well, I wasn’t going to make you go in alone.” He stood up. We walked down the hallway in silence towards the meeting room. I could smell the breakfast waiting for us and, even though I knew I should be hungry, I wasn’t at all. The smells of pancakes and bacon made me want to throw up instead. We opened the door to the room and there he was. Kevin.

As soon as I saw him, he was facing away from us, Conner put his hand on my arm. I looked over to him and he offered me a smile. He took his hand away, but I could still feel the warmth from his hand like I had the day we left his mind.

“Oh Maya, I’m so glad that you’re here.” I jumped hearing Kai’s clear voice. He sounded different in my memories when Conner and I were talking about him, menacing and threatening, but people are hardly ever that transparent with their true intentions. In reality, Kai’s voice had such a calm undertone to it, he said all the right words to seem like someone who could be trusted, I wasn’t surprised he managed to trick the Defenders into following his cause. If I hadn’t felt his emotions, if I hadn’t briefly glimpsed inside his mind, I think I would have believed him too. The disconnect between knowing the truth and hearing him speak, though, created a real dissonance inside of me to the point of discomfort.

We were closer to Kai, who placed his hand on his uncle’s back to turn him around. “I’d love to introduce you to my uncle Kevin. Kev, this is our newest recruit Maya.”

“Oh yeah, I remember you.” Kevin said in the deep, scratchy voice from my nightmares. He looked the same as in my mind, but this time I could smell him too. He smelled like sweat and dirt, like he spent all his time outside. “You’re Helena’s daughter, right?”

I wanted to speak, but I didn’t know if I could. My hands were hot and wet, which left my fingers feeling swollen. I wiggled my fingers, squeezing them into a fist and then releasing. The tightness of my skin kept me tethered to the ground, in reality, while my mind raced between processing the man in front of me and the man who chased behind me. My mind struggled to mend the two pictures together more than I expected. I tried to speak again, but I knew words wouldn’t be all that came out of me. I felt warm liquid moving up my throat while drops of sweat rolled into my eyes. I blinked, my eyes burned from the sweat, and everything went blurry for a second before refocusing.

I nodded while Kai explained how I came to join the group. I could feel his emotions while he talked. Kai felt exuberant, rejuvenated in his uncle’s presence. I couldn’t get a good read on Kevin, but the look on his face conveyed he felt similarly. They were the perfect definition of an enmeshed family, or would be if people still placed an importance on psychology—which would have benefited Kai and Kevin’s family for sure. Conner leaned over to ask if I was okay. I only nodded in response again. My sweat fell down my forehead at a quicker pace now, streams compared to droplets. My eyes were covered in a thin veil of fog as the moisture from my forehead got stuck in my contacts.

“Maya, are you okay?” Kai’s voice cut through my fog. I blinked again and his face became clear in front of me.

“She’s fine. She’s actually a vegetarian, so all the meat here is making her feel a little sick.” Conner pointed around to the bacon and sausage on all the plates. My eyes pulled away

from Kevin, finally, to look at the food on the tables. All the food I wasn't going to be able to eat.

“Oh, I didn't know you were a vegetarian, Maya.” Kai said. Me either. I wasn't sure if I should thank Conner later or be disappointed I couldn't eat meat anymore around this group. Any reason he came up with was better than my silence, though, so I shrugged and went along with it.

“Yeah, it's pretty new.” I looked to Conner. He just nodded, like he was the Maya Dietary Expert of the group.

My eyes drifted to Kevin again and he was looking directly at me. When our eyes met, I felt the warm liquid inching its way up my throat make it to my mouth finally. I ran out of the room with my hand over my mouth, and Conner close behind, and I thought I heard Kevin laughing behind me but I wasn't sure.



After cleaning myself up, and admittedly another pep talk from Conner, I was ready to go back into the meeting room. Kevin and Kai talked at the front of the room with Callie, but I didn't see Ame or Xan anywhere. All the meat in the room had been removed and realized, with a deep growl from my stomach, I was a little disappointed I missed out on the bacon. I had hoped Conner would sneak some out for me later, but he said I needed to fully submerge myself in my new role. He's such a pain in my ass.

Everyone tried to keep up their small talk as we walked in, but it was awkward for all of us. Kevin kept looking at me, I kept looking to Conner, Conner kept trying to come up with new things to talk about, while Kai kept trying to make excuses to leave. Callie just stood there, not offering anything to the conversation one way or another. Kevin tried bringing me into the

conversation by asking me endless questions about my mother: what I remembered about her, what my dad told us about her growing up, if he had ever mentioned Kevin before, do I ever see my mom in my dreams. Just on and on until I started to wonder if he had rehearsed these before I came out this morning.

As the questions about my family started to slow, he jumped into asking me questions about my nightmares too. All the details I remembered from them, when the last one I had was, when I started noticing someone else was in my mind with me, if I've been able to use any of my shines in them, and if I've been able to see the man chasing me. He was, not so subtly, trying to figure out if I had seen his face before I woke up last night. A few questions into his interrogation, I was angry. Angrier than I was before, which I didn't know was possible. He was in my mind just the night before and then asked me about it in front of everyone like he was innocent. He didn't care about going unnoticed, really, he only wanted to keep making me miserable every chance he got.

"You know, speaking of my nightmares. I actually did just have another one last night." I felt Conner looking at me, probably wanting me to stop talking but I didn't. I talked and my eyes never left Kevin's face. "It's weird how the first night I leave here, when I don't have Kai or someone else looking over me, I had another one, huh? It's almost like the man from my nightmares knew." I saw Kevin twitch. He was fidgeting under my gaze, so I didn't let up or look away. I was like one of those weird, little kids who likes to burn ants under a magnifying glass. I was holding the light up to him and watching him burn.

"I think that's enough of that talk without the rest of the team here, don't you think?" Kai clapped his hands together. Kevin looked away from me and back to Kai, my burning ant was

set free and I was disappointed. “How about me and Callie go round up the others and Conner, you can set up the convergence room? Is that good with everyone?”

“Yeah, that’s perfect. Maya and I will head to theater eight to get it ready and we’ll see you guys there.” Conner and I walked off towards the door when Kai called out from behind us.

“No, setting up the room is really a one-person job, don’t you think?” I felt my heartbeat speed until I thought my chest was going to explode. He was making me stay behind, alone, with Kevin on purpose. “We’ll go get Ame and Xan, you can get the room ready, and Maya and Kev can stay here. They can get to know each other since they have a lot of catching up to do. You’ll get your alone time with Maya later, Conner, I promise.” Kai laughed as he and Callie headed out the door. So, Callie had managed to tell him about me being in Conner’s room already.

“You’re going to be fine,” Conner whispered into my ear as he pulled me in for a hug. He squeezed me one final time and walked out of the room. Just like that, I was left with Kevin. I had never felt the urge to run more in my life, but I wasn’t supposed to know that he was my mystery man. I just had to keep pretending like I had no clue until everyone was back. I could play it cool for ten minutes. It wouldn’t have been that hard, either, if Kevin wasn’t completely crazy.

“So, were you pleased to find out your mom is out there somewhere?” Kevin asked from close behind me. I hated him mentioning my mom. If she knew what he’d been doing to me, she would have hated him too. I know she would have. Instead of yelling and screaming like I wanted, I plastered on a fake smile and turned around to face him again.

“I was so excited once I found out. It was all so unbelievable at first, you know?” I sat down a chair that was sitting off by itself. “I spent my whole life thinking she died and now, all

of the sudden, I'm having nightmares with a strange man *and* my mom is somewhere out there waiting for me. If I knew nay better, then I'd say the two things were connected." I forced a laugh as he sat down in a chair across from me. His dull eyes never left my face and I squirmed under the pressure, my random surge of confidence gone as fast as it had came. I looked away from him and down to the floor. Now I was the stupid ant. Great.

"Speaking of your nightmares, what part of them scares you the most? Knowing the man is chasing after you, watching your every move, and that he always catches you or is it the silence that wraps around you, making you feel completely and totally alone in the world, right before he finally grabs you?" Kevin leaned forward more with each sentence, his eyes lighting up the more he talked about terrorizing me. I felt lost in the feelings from my nightmare until I realized something.

"I never said anything about the silence before he grabs me." I met his eyes and refused to look away.

"What?" He looked back and forth, like he hoped the others would walk in and interrupt us.

"I never told you, or anyone else, about how the silence becomes so thick before you grab me that it's like I can feel it wrapping around me." I repeated. "So, let's cut the shit, Kevin. I know you're the man from my nightmares. I just don't know why, so you're either going to tell me or I'm going to tell everyone else. Got it?" I heard the door opening from across the meeting room. "So, what do you choose?"

"And what exactly makes you think they don't already know?" He whispered back as the others walked in and sat down all around us.

Chapter Thirteen: Welcome to the Defenders B-Team

Everyone filled back in around me, full of small talk when they saw me. Despite everyone talking to me and Conner sitting beside me again, I couldn't make myself look away from Kevin. He continued to stare at me, too, with a smile on his face that mocked me. I couldn't understand what anyone was saying, their voices all melted together in the background like static, and my vision was blurry. I was glad I had already thrown up for the morning or else I might have again. My stomach was more unreliable than my circle of friends, apparently. My ears hurt, so full of loud white noise that I barely heard Kai cleared his throat.

"Now that we know about Maya's shines, like we discussed briefly last night, her mom may play a bigger role than we imagined. We need to set up a team to find her while still remembering our group's biggest mission is taking down President Storm." Kai's voice filled the room. "Sorry, Maya. We still have other priorities, too, to help the whole country."

Conner tapped my leg to get my attention, so I tore my eyes away from Kevin to look at him. He raised his eyebrows and I shrugged.

"We're going to put Maya and Conner in charge of finding her mom, obviously, and then we'll give you," Kai drug out his words like he was trying to make a big decision. "Xan." He shrugged. "The rest of us, we're still on Storm."

Conner protested Kai's decision for its unfairness to not equally devote people to our mission, but I couldn't focus. My mind was stuck on Kevin's words to me. I didn't know whether to believe Kevin or not, but I knew I could trust Conner, at least. I saw his emotions, his energy, when we were converged and I confided in him. I believed him when he told me he would do anything possible to help me the night before. Knowing he was on my side felt like a huge relief but sitting in that room with Kevin watching me was detracting from any stability

Conner made me feel. I was hot, my head hurt, and my heart felt someone was squeezing it in my chest. My breath was out of control, I was audibly struggling to inhale and exhale as quietly as possible. I shook my head to Conner, who was still watching me as I lost control of my breathing, and nodded my head in the direction of the door.

“I think I’m going to excuse myself for a little bit.” I interrupted the group’s discussion, refusing to look up from the floor because I knew if I made eye contact, I would lose my nerve to escape. “I’m so sorry.” I headed straight for the door. I didn’t look back or listen to what anyone said after I got up. I didn’t even notice Conner behind me until I was almost at the door to the alleyway, planning to leave the building.

“Hey, what’s going on? Are you okay?” Conner held the door open as I rushed out.

“You didn’t know Kevin was the man from my nightmares until we figured it out last night, did you?” I turned to face him as the door shut behind us. He was closer than I thought, which caused us to almost run into each other. “I don’t think you did, but I need to make sure. It’ll make me feel a little better to just hear the words—”

“No, of course I didn’t know. I would have told you.” Conner put his hands on my shoulders to stop my pacing. When I finally stopped, took a deep breath, and looked at him he continued talking. “What did he say to you when we left?”

“I threatened him.” He looked at me like I just confessed to a murder. I threw my hands up in the air. “I know it was incredibly stupid and the exact opposite of what we talked about us doing, but he was baiting me Conner. I know he was. He kept asking me so many questions about my nightmares and talked about things he wouldn’t know unless he had been there.”

“Maya, I think—”

“He’s been in my mind. He knows I can’t ignore things like that, that I can’t stay quiet. He knew I would say something and when I did, I threatened him. I told him if he didn’t tell me why he was following me, then I would tell the others. I told him he had to pick: a confession to me or to the entire group. And you know what he said to me?” I didn’t pause for Conner to answer. “He asked what made me think everyone didn’t already know, so that’s why I asked if you knew.”

“Maya, you’ve been inside my mind. You know I wouldn’t lie to you.” Conner walked away from the door and I followed him.

“I know you wouldn’t. I just needed to hear it.” We emerged on the street and the sunlight hurt my eyes. I hadn’t been outside in the sun for a couple of days and my eyes weren’t used to its brightness anymore.

“You know who I think does know though?” Conner looked at me, his hand above his eyes to shield them from the sun before looking away again. “Callie. You punched her in the face, but she still magically finds a person to solve all your problems, despite being mad at you, being at you just like that,” He snapped his fingers. “And then forgives you just in time for you to join this group? I don’t think so.”

“Well, I thought since I had punched her once before,” Conner choked out a cough at my admission. “Yeah, I know. I’m a shitty friend sometimes, I get it. I just thought maybe she got over it quicker this time, either because we’ve been through this before or because she was worried about me. I guess I was wrong, though.” I squinted again in the light, so focused on Conner I didn’t notice anyone walking up to us until it was too late.

“You’re outside, thank god.” Mason sounded relieved until he saw Conner. “And who is this?” Conner introduced himself to Mason and I could tell from his voice that he thought

discovering me with a boy answered all his questions about my absences these past few weeks. I really wished that was the case. As I stared at him, my eyes became watery and spilled over the edges without my permission again. My body was really working against me. My crying must have confused Mason, though, because he slid straight into defending himself.

“Dad never turned the trackers off our phones,” He looked over to Conner. “We used to sneak out a lot and as long as our dad knew we weren’t anywhere dangerous, he would let us be. Anyway, you know he uses the same password for everything, so I logged into it when I heard you sneaking out this morning. I planned to come by in the daylight, but I didn’t expect you to be outside when I showed up so I hadn’t decided on what to say to you yet. I thought I still had a few minutes.”

“What options had you narrowed down to so far?” My voice came out broken and my volume low as I tried to sniff hard enough to clear my nose.

“I was thinking about mentioning when we were younger and you told me about that jerk who was bullying you. What was his name?”

“Eric,” I wiped a tear from my eye before it escaped.

“Right, Eric.” Mason nodded. “You came home from school every day crying but would never tell us what was wrong. Finally, Dad took us to the park to talk about why people were treating us different. Before we left, you pulled me aside and told me everything he had said to you. You cried and, then, do you remember what you said to me?”

“I said talking to you about what happened was the only thing that ever made me feel better.”

“You said telling me was like letting the other half of your heart help you feel like a whole person again. She was such a corny, cute little kid,” Mason looked to Conner with a

smile. “Have things really changed that much between us, Maya? Have things changed so much that you can’t talk to your other half?” I walked to Mason and pulled him into a hug.

“That was pretty good, you know.” I stepped back. “What was your other option?”

“Asking if this was the crack house you’d been running off to lately.”

“Two totally different tones there, I see.” I laughed.

“Yeah, probably best I didn’t go with that one.” Mason bumped my shoulder with his.

“So, what do you say? Are you going to tell me what’s going on and what this guy has to do with it?”

“Maybe we should take this somewhere else. Maya?” Conner nodded to the theater building with its boarded up windows, no one would guess the inside was all redone, and then nodding off to another direction.

“No, he’s right.” I glanced to Mason, so unaware of how his life was about to change.

“We should go somewhere else because I’ve got a lot to tell you.”

“Okay,” Mason turned around to face the direction of our house. “Let’s go back home and start from the beginning.”



“You’ve been working with Kai for the last few days?” Mason asked after a few seconds of silence hung in the air following a long-winded explanation of my life the past few weeks. He had sat throughout the entire story and I was surprised that was his first question.

“That’s the part you’re the most hung up on right now?” I flopped down on our couch and let out a big sigh. “I just told you our mother’s still out there, alive, and you’re thinking about Kai?”

“That’s because I don’t think she’s alive, Maya. I’ve met Kai, and his uncle, before and I wouldn’t trust them.” Mason shrugged and sat back deeper in the recliner.

“You know Kai?” Conner sat up straighter on the couch.

“I do, unfortunately.” Mason rolled his head around, trying to pop his neck. “He used to be here a lot when his uncle hung out with Dad, which Maya probably doesn’t remember because she was so little. From the time she was a baby to around the age of three probably. Anyway, he was always here and always such a little asshole.” Mason whispered the last word. He didn’t like to cuss unless it was the only word to describe something, which wasn’t often. Meanwhile growing up, I dropped the F-bomb like I was getting paid to endorse cuss words as a brand or something.

“I’m sorry, but that’s the only way to describe him.” Mason leaned forward in the recliner.

“Hey, maybe that’s why you guys got along so well.” I whispered to Conner and he ignored me. “Not the time? Okay.” I nodded to Mason to continue.

“Ignoring Maya’s attempt to be funny and moving on, Kai always tried being my friend until I didn’t want to do something he wanted to do. He would get mean so fast with me. Anything from hitting me, pushing me off my bed, or one time he even tried pushing me into the street when a car was coming. We were young, so I told myself he didn’t realize it could kill me when he did it, that he was just angry at the time.” Mason cracked his knuckles and kept looking at his fingers.

“Well, that was around the time Mom talked to me about them. She told me she was helping Kevin on a big project, so that’s why I had to be around Kai so much. She told me Kevin was mean to people the same way Kai was mean to me, she never explained exactly what

she meant by that because I was only a kid too, but it was enough to scare me at the time. She said she was only helping with the project to make sure Kevin didn't get out of control and hurt a lot of people. She didn't help him because she wanted to, Maya. She helped him because she didn't trust him and she told me not to trust them either."

"Mom said all of that?"

"She said sometimes you have to put yourself in the proximity of bad people to keep them from doing anything worse. That, sometimes, you have to sacrifice yourself to save the minds of others."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before?" I asked.

"I was only five or six. I didn't really understand what she was talking about and then after Mom was gone, I never saw Kai or Kevin again. I hadn't even thought about them in years until you just mentioned them." Mason sat back in his chair again. "I would have warned you if I had known he stuck his way back in."

"So, we all agree that Kai and Kevin can't be trusted. We aren't sure about the others, but I'd guess Callie isn't safe either." Conner said. "I'd be willing to bet Xan would be on our side, but I'm nervous to risk telling him. It'll be hard to keep him out of the loop, though, now that he's on our team."

"God, I forgot Kai gave us Xan to help find my mom."

"Xan?" Mason asked. "Who is that?"

"He's harmless enough." I shrugged. "He kind of fades into the background after a while, so I don't know how much help he would really be, but he's better than nothing." We all sat in silence for a few seconds. No one knew what our next move would be, so we waited for

someone else to suggest it. “Wait, sorry this is just now processing, but did you say you don’t think Mom is still alive somewhere?”

“No, not one bit.” Mason answered without hesitation.

“How can you not want to save her, Mase?”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t want to save her. I said I didn’t think she’s anywhere to save, Maya. He was lying to get your help to kill Storm.” Mason stood up and walked closer to me.

“You know he’s bad, but you still can’t believe he’s lying about this too?”

“He didn’t know I would be any help though, we hadn’t discovered all my shines yet, so it doesn’t make sense that he’d lie about Mom.” I backed up the closer he got. He looked to Conner for help.

“Maya, it does make sense though,” Conner added. Of course he agreed with Mason. “I mean, think about it. They’ve known about your mom the whole time, is it really so unbelievable they figured a Visionary having a kid with a Constant may have a different set of abilities than anyone’s heard of before?”

“And Kai is acting like they have no idea how Visionary classes work and what all they can do, but Kevin knew our mom? It’s hard to believe that she wouldn’t have told him anything about her childhood growing up as a Visionary while they were working together. I’m sure he asked questions.”

“I thought that was weird, too, but that doesn’t mean he lied about her being alive.” I interrupted.

“They knew you would have abilities they needed and they were right. As one person, you can do everything they can as five. They need you, not the other way around.” Mason

looked at me, trying not to blink much so he wouldn't break eye contact with me. Like I wasn't already listening to me more than I ever had before in my life.

"We do need them, though, because they know where our mom is, Mason." Mason finally looked away from me. He rubbed his temples while Conner slouched back into the couch again. They were annoyed with me, I could tell, but I didn't care. They may have been having doubts she was out there somewhere, but I wasn't. I wasn't going to give up on her.

"They're lying to you, Maya—" Mason turned back towards me.

"I'm not stupid, Mason. I know they're lying to us about a lot, okay? But you think they're lying about this because they've lied before, but every lie has some truth to it. Why couldn't our mom be the truth in their lie?" I yelled as we heard a car pull up in the driveway. Our dad.

"It can't be the truth in their lie just because you want it to be, Maya." Mason whispered. "Now stop before Dad hears. I don't want him getting his hopes up on this bullshit too."

We all sat down and turned on the television, mindless noise in the background so we wouldn't seem suspicious when our dad walked in, but no one was paying attention. I didn't even hear my dad walk in until he was standing in front of us and introducing himself to Conner. After some small talk, forced on our ends, I told Dad we were going to sit on the back porch since the weather was so nice. Parents love that shit, the younger generation spending time outside and talking about the weather.

We stepped outside and I shivered as the door shut behind us. The temperature had dropped with the sun and we all talked in quiet tones in case someone was close by listening.

"Listen," I said before either of them had a chance to talk. It was obvious they were both on the same side with this argument and I was all alone, which sucked. I thought since I brought

Conner to this, he'd feel obligated to be on my side. Things weren't working out that way, though. "I know it's hard for you guys to believe they know where Mom might be and, even if you guys are right and they are lying, I can't live with wondering if they were right. It would kill me if we found out one day we could have saved her and didn't."

Mason stood silent, looking at our small backyard that held our old and scary looking swing set we abused as children. The swing set was rusted with loose bolts and screws barely holding it together enough that I wouldn't trust it to survive a strong breeze, much less us sitting on it. Conner sat down on our concrete porch step and watched ants run around, the ants who seemed to have such a clear purpose when we didn't anymore. Neither of them said anything.

"Well, with or without your guys' help, I'm going to find Mom. If finding her means working with Kai and Kevin, then I'll work with them. Saving her is more important than what he did to me. I can deal with all that shit later when I have a mom to talk to about it." I grabbed the door to head back inside.

"Wait," Conner said. "I'm not going to make you work with Kai and Kevin by yourself. I said I would help and I meant it. Even though I definitely think they're lying now," Conner looked back to Mason who only nodded his head in agreement. Conner reached out and grabbed my hand. "I didn't promised to help you because I wanted to find someone's mom. I promised I'd help you because I wanted to help *you*." I squeezed Conner's hand and looked to Mason, who was still staring off into the yard.

"Obviously I don't agree," Mason finally said and turned his head to look at me. "But I think I've made that pretty clear. Me disagreeing doesn't mean I won't help you, though, Maya. You're my sister and that means, kind of by default, your problems are mine. I don't want you doing this alone." I hadn't realized how much I really wanted Mason's help, whether he

believed in the mission completely or not, because once I told him the truth I couldn't imagine doing this without him. It was unfair of me to ever try.

“That doesn't mean I want to work with Kai and Kevin, though. They're sleazy, I don't trust them, and one of them was literally going into your mind without permission to terrorize you while the other one lied about it, so fuck them.” Mason cussed at full volume. I smiled because I had never seen him so passionate about anything other than his outreach programs and he definitely never cussed for those. “We need more space from them actually. Let's give our group a name too and something better than *the Defenders*,” Mason mocked.

“That seems like a priority right now?” I rolled my eyes.

“Yes, Maya. We deserve a name.” Mason paused in thought. “How about the Movement?”

“Okay, fine. We are now officially known as the Movement.” I said. Mason's smile on his face was too big for me to be annoyed by the distraction. He wanted to do something important to feel like he played a bigger role in our group after coming in so late. If naming us made him feel included, he could name us a thousand different times if he wanted. “How is the Movement going to do this without Kai and Kevin, though?” I asked.

“I didn't say we were going to do it without them. I just said I didn't want to work *with* them.” Mason looked between me and Conner like we could read his mind, but I think we were both lost. I know I was at least.

“I don't,” I trailed off and shook my head in confusion.

“Kai and Kevin don't think you've told me everything, right?” I nodded. “Right, so they don't know you've told me and figured out the truth behind Kevin working with Mom. They

also probably didn't expect you to become such good friends with Conner because, let's be honest, none of us saw that one coming. No offense, Conner."

"None taken. I was an asshole." Conner shrugged. "But what does this recap have to do with your plan?"

"The recap is to show what we have over them: the element of surprise, as corny as that sounds, and more people than they're going to expect. They think they've alienated you, Maya, by taking away your best friend, telling you not to talk to me, and partnering you with someone they thought you hated. None of it has worked the way they wanted so far. So, let's give them a fight they're not expecting." Conner and I nodded.

"All the information we want from Kai and Kevin is somewhere, right? So how about instead of pretending you're still clueless and alone and working with them, we go straight to the source."

"We?"

"Well, yeah. You didn't really expect me to sit on the sidelines, did you?" I knew his question was rhetorical, so I waited. "No, of course not. If you learned to converge, then I'm going to learn too. I don't have to be great or anything, just enough to help, because you and your shines are our best weapon."

I looked back out to the swing set again. I felt like they looked, barely holding it together but trying to hang on in case someone still needed me. I hadn't originally planned on being the biggest part of a group. I couldn't even get people to vote for me to be class treasurer in school, much less wanting to be class president, I couldn't have handled that pressure. I didn't want to be the person everyone depended on the most to accomplish something and I knew that was

happening now. I had just become the most desired player between both sides in a game I didn't even want to play.

“We have to go inside their minds, Maya, and you're the best person we've got to do it.”

Mason and Conner looked to me like I was holding the magical solution to our problems out in my hands for them to grab. What they didn't consider is I had only successfully converged twice and one of the times I managed to be kicked out of my own mind somehow, which should have been impossible. So, basically, I realized we were fucked, but I don't think they did yet.

Chapter Fourteen: My Secret Double Life that I Guess Wasn't Too Secretive

We weren't the best or most elaborate plan-to-expose-liars-and-also-find-our-mom makers. In fact, I think we were some of the worst. It took of us twice as long as it should have while we were sitting in my room that night talking because we were all working against each other in a way. I wanted to go with any plan that didn't put me in charge or as the person we depended on the most, but they kept insisting it had to be me. Mason wanted to go with whatever plan involved wearing masks because we couldn't "all change our appearances like you can Maya" and he clearly didn't understand how converging worked yet. Then, Conner wanted whatever plan kept everyone together which was literally impossible because, to save time, we all needed to do different things while we were inside.

"This is hopeless," I muttered. I was sitting on my floor, but the worse our plans got the more I slouched back against my bed frame. I was practically underneath my bed at this point. Mason was sitting at my desk table taking notes in case we came up with a good plan, wishful thinking, and Conner was laying down on my bed looking up to the ceiling.

"So which one up here did you call Kyle?" Conner's eyes never left the ceiling and Mason looked up too.

"Look about three inches away from the window and up one inch." Mason said before I could answer. "Maya thinks it looks like an old man in a top hat. He was her imaginary friend growing up." Mason laughed.

"Okay, come on Maya. That's pretty cute." Conner joined in the mockery with Mason.

"I never said it wasn't cute, Conner. I said it was embarrassing because I hoped you would never bring it up again after I told you." I walked over to Mason's list. I picked up the notebook to see what all we had so far. A whole lot of nothing. "How about you guys save the

bonding-over-embarrassing-stories-of-Maya time until after we make a plan to save our mom? How does that sound? Because right now all we have are some pretty shitty ideas,” I turned the notebook around to show Conner what Mason had been working on that entire time: a picture of a barn with a horse outside. “That Mason hasn’t even bothered to write down.”

“You said yourself they were pretty shitty.” Mason shrugged.

“Okay, this new Mason who cusses freely is a little annoying,” I made a face at Mason mocking him. “I know I said that, but I was hoping maybe one idea on here would turn out to be okay at least.”

“Not even one,” Conner threw a pillow over his face. “We’re doomed. Is it too late to switch sides?”

“We need a plan and the quicker, the better honestly. So, here we go. I’m just going to start throwing things out there and see what works. Okay?” I paused until Conner took the pillow off his face and nodded for me to start. I held the notebook back out for Mason to hopefully take real notes on this time. He picked up a pencil and drew a big X through his barn, which, attitude aside, I assumed meant he was ready too.

“Okay, so starting with the most obvious idea we skipped over in the beginning because it was ‘too simple’ and basically the same plan Kai and Kevin are trying to use on us. Why don’t we keep hanging out there like everything’s normal so we can figure out their schedule while training and then, when we’re ready and know they’re both asleep, we just converge. Conner can take one while I take the other and Mason watches over us to make sure no one comes in and messes with us while we’re out.” I said and noticed Mason was about to object. He kept sticking his pencil in the air and waving it around a little bit while shaking his head if I didn’t address his question quick enough. “Yes, Mason?”

“It’s nothing really, just that we ruled out that plan because I don’t like the idea of you being around those losers more than you need to and go into their minds by yourselves. You wouldn’t even have each other in there because we’re both going to different minds. And why am I on the outside in this plan?” Mason chewed on the end of the pencil while he was talking. “Didn’t Conner say he knew a way out without someone needing to pull us out?”

“Conner did say,” I paced around my room. “But Conner also said it was dangerous because a lot of things could go wrong.”

“Conner also said we could make it work, though,” Conner’s voice sounded bored. He probably wasn’t a fan of me talking about him like he wasn’t there. “We just make sure to find my mind in the Dream Realm when we’re ready to leave. We have to take extra precautions if that’s our plan, then, because it can get confusing in the Realm and we all have to make it back at the same time so we don’t get stuck there forever.” I tapped on the notebook so Mason would keep taking notes instead of eating his pencil.

“What I’m hearing is that it’s doable?” Mason nodded as he scribbled down notes.

“I mean, what the hell right? Mason said we needed to go in their minds and this is the most straight forward plan we’ve got that doesn’t involve other people. Let’s do it man.” Conner said.

“The best way to take them by surprise is using their own plan against them, huh?”

Mason drew a big happy face next to our plan.



The next two weeks were the most stressful I had ever experienced and I’ve witnessed my dad trying to French braid my hair before school when I was running late. We spent our days going to school and work, our evenings with the Defenders, and then at night we recapped

everything we did during the day and trained more. Our recaps, sadly, didn't help much because Kai and Kevin didn't get that far by being careless and making stupid mistakes. They knew what they were doing, which was infuriating because we sure as hell didn't.

Things were even harder for me because I was feeling the pressure of being the leader and, between the stress and exhaustion from many sleepless nights spent training, I felt like I wasn't meeting anyone's standards. My training suffered slightly because I found myself struggling to keep up my progress while training Mason as well. He didn't seem to possess all the shines like I did, only two were present so far, but I didn't know if he truly couldn't do them or if I was a bad teacher. My relationship with Callie was strained; we both had so much to say to each other but neither of us could— or we wouldn't because our sides were strictly defined with our different missions, it was hard to tell.

My work relationship with Ginny was different too. I went to work and was so focused on asking her questions about Visionaries and her upbringing, but she was catching on and starting to question me.

"Why are you acting strange lately?" She interrupted me mid-question. I flinched at the sharpness to her voice.

"I'm just curious is all," I tried sounding casual, but my tone fell flat.

"You've never been curious before." She challenged me. I was silent. The moment hung thick in the air, our eyes never leaving each other's, until she cleared her throat. "Look, I'm sorry. Ever since I accepted this region's Dream Keeper position, the training has been taking a toll on me." I nodded, giving no verbal response. Her tone felt forced to me for some reason, like she was actively working to control herself in front of me.

“To keep things from getting messy, though,” Ginny’s voice had no hint of the friendly boss she used to be anymore. When her eyes met mine again, I couldn’t hold her gaze anymore. “Let’s not talk about anything personal. No more questions.” And with that, we quit speaking about anything that wasn’t work related. So much for my insider information I could get to help us.

Our training at night was different than when we trained with the Defenders because there would be no logical way to explain why Conner kept increasing the pressure on me during converging without telling them what we were training for and there was no way to sneak Mason in either. So in the evenings, I trained with the group and held myself back a lot. I tried to stay distracted and make dumb mistakes I knew better than to make so Kai wouldn’t suspect anything. Then at night, with Conner and Mason, I let loose. I tried all the things I wanted to try earlier in the day and I pushed myself to my limits. My night trainings weren’t all bad either, sometimes I felt like I was stretching a muscle and I felt myself getting stronger. Mason was improving, despite my own insecurities, and he was loving every minute of it.

There were even aspects of converging Mason was better at than me, which was frustrating. My main downfall was anytime Conner mentioned my mom, I lost focus. Mason managed to hang on just fine, but it pushed me off balance every time. Losing focus during a convergence meant losing control of my shines and almost falling out of the Dream Realm altogether.

“Maya, what’s going on?” Conner asked one night after all my shines dropped. All he had done was mention my mom’s name, not even ask me a question about her to put extra pressure on me, and I lost the control I had in his dream. Everything I created in his mind

snapped back to its original form with a loud popping noise and I sat myself down on the ground. Mason walked over and sat down beside me.

“I don’t know why this keeps happening. Your guess is as good as mine,” I shrugged.

“Well it’s kind of a problem if on our mission to find and save our mom, you can’t even hear her name, without losing your grip on the dreamscape.” Mason bumped my shoulder, he tried to seem like it wasn’t the biggest problem we could have but I knew it was. How were we supposed to figure out where she was if they had to keep constant watch on me? Sometimes I literally fell apart too because, one time, my limbs started slowly away from each other after Conner started talking about her. That was an interesting one and took a while to figure out how to get me back together. Truly anything is possible in the Dream Realm, which was a lesson I learned quick.

“I know,” I leaned my head over on his shoulder. “Maybe it’ll be one of those things where, somehow in the moment when I’m under pressure, I’ll be able to do it.”

“I think that’s a big maybe to depend on.” Conner spoke up.

“You’re right. I just don’t know what else for us to try. I can’t do it,” I laid back on the ground and looked up into the sky. That’s one of the advantages to converging, I can look at the sun without killing my eyes. It’s really beautiful to see when you don’t have to squint. “You might have to do this on your own, Mase—.”

“That’s not even remotely an option and you know it.” Mason interrupted me.

“We’re doing this together, whether it gets us both killed or not.” Conner stood up and held out his hand for me to grab. “Now it’s almost time for us to wake up. Are you ready?”

“Not even close.” I sighed.



At the theater, I couldn't be frustrated or annoyed. I had to be excited to learn new tricks from Kai. I mean, the annoying excited I normally hate out of people so I know Callie could tell something was off. I was never chipper, I hated chipper. I avoided spending any alone time with Callie because I was worried she would break her silence towards me to address my behavior. I was barely making it on my own, without any push back from the Defenders, so I avoided any extra time with any of them.

Callie and I were around each other more than we had been in years, since when we were going to school together, and I started noticing things about her I hadn't before. She was always bouncing around, literally bouncing, and talked in a higher pitched voice anytime Kai was around like she was trying to sound musical and light. She gave me a headache.

In the process of avoiding Callie, I wasn't consistent in act normal around the others. Of course I watched myself around Kai and Kevin, avoided Callie, and Ame was too focused on training all the time to notice anything else, so that left one person I tended to overlook often. Xan.

Xan watched me more than I anticipated, not in a creepy way but in a "have you ever considered pursuing a career in detective work" kind of a way. Or maybe I was just doing a bad job of acting subtle and causal, either could be a possibility. After training one night, we were all exhausted and I was so sweaty I decided I wasn't training anymore, even with Conner that night, when Xan stopped me outside the door.

"Hey Maya, can I talk to you?" Xan asked. The door shut behind us with a sound I had grown to hate because that alleyway seemed to be where everyone confronted me. I looked at Conner, who looked clueless, before I looked back to Xan. "Conner can stay, too. You guys seem like a package deal now, so yeah that's fine."

“Okay,” I dragged out the word. Last time I was left alone with another member of the Defenders, I threatened Kevin to his face so I was relieved Conner stayed with us. “What’s up then, Xan?”

“What are you guys doing?” Xan asked and then waited. No other explanation or question, so I played dumb.

“I’m heading home and Conner’s walking me.” I looked over to Conner again. He was standing off to the side and behind Xan, out of his eye sight, so he shrugged and I kept talking because that’s what I do when I’m uncomfortable. “We’re pretty tired from training today, so I’m just going home to relax. Maybe watch a movie or maybe not. I might go to sleep, who knows. What about you? What are you doing after this?”

“I didn’t ask what you’re doing after this.” He called me out, just like that, with no shame. “I asked what you’re *doing*, as in I know you guys have something going on the side and I want in.” Xan crossed his arms, waiting for either of us to respond. We both stood in silence. For the first time in a long time, I had no words. “It’s not hard to figure out, guys. Maya’s getting so much better every day that you can’t be only training with us. And if you’re training more outside of our classes, there has to be a reason and I want to know what it is.”

“I just really want to find my mom, Xan, and I—”

“No, if that was the only reason you wouldn’t be avoiding everyone all the time. You never talk to Callie anymore, you avoid Kai as much as possible, and flinch when someone mentions Kevin or he walks in,” Xan listed off. “See? You just did it again.” I didn’t even realize I had reacted to Kevin’s name, so how did Xan notice?

“Listen man,” Conner moved closer to me. “We don’t know what you’re talking about, okay? We’re just as much a part of this team as anyone else.”

“No, you’re not. When is the last time you guys stayed here? Or that Conner showed up on his nights to watch our Dream Realms while we sleep?” Xan waited for an answer like those weren’t rhetorical, but we both stayed silent anyway. “I know it sounds like I’m calling you guys out, but I’m not. I’m saying that whatever you’re doing, I want in. I wasn’t placed on your team for no reason, Maya. I asked to join because I believe reuniting you with your mom *should* be a priority. The Storm mission feels too heavy for me and I wanted to do some good. Don’t you think you could use my help too?”

“You want in?” I asked and Xan nodded. “You don’t even know what being ‘in’ would mean. How do you know you want to be a part of this?” Conner nudged me with his elbow because hinting at us having a “thing” wasn’t part of his plan.

“I know I want in because I can tell you don’t like Kai and Kevin either. I thought I was the only who saw through their bullshit, that’s why I’m never around or talk much. Come here,” Xan walked further down the alleyway in the opposite direction of the street where people could see us or possibly witness our murders, if it came to that. As he walked deeper into the alley, we waited a few feet behind him before we decided to follow. We were either going to die in an alley with Xan or in Kai and Kevin’s mind, so why not be adventurous?

“I want in because I don’t trust them and, I promise, you guys want me in too,” Xan continued once we reached the alley’s dead end, so we were stuck and hoping Xan could be trusted. The theater and library butted up next to another warehouse, leaving the area we were in dark and dirty. It looked like the place underground convergences happened, which better translate to: underground convergences are the new drug deals. I didn’t know, prior to me learning to converge, people will pay for someone to converge into them and simulate getting high, or doing whatever they want, in order to fully incorporate the mind. It’s supposed to be

better than the real thing, or so I've been told, and it happens probably in places just like that alley.

"I know things, like things they don't want anyone to know, because people tend to forget I'm there sometimes. I have this face that's easy to overlook, I guess, until I start to talk." Xan laughed like he forgot for a moment we were in a scary back alley talking about a group takeover attempt. "But I've heard them talk about things and I usually know their plans, so I can help you figure out when to do it."

"When to do what?" Conner asked. I had already decided to trust Xan, but apparently Conner was still on the fence.

"To converge into them. That's what you're wanting to do, right?" Xan looked between us both, confused.

"Yes, it is." I said before Conner could interrupt me. He looked irritated with me. "What? We need all the help we can get." I whispered to him. "So, are you really in or not? This will be your only chance to back out."

"Of course I'm in, I've always been in. You guys just didn't know it yet." Xan held his hand up for a high five, but we both stared at his outstretched hand.

"What does that even mean, Xan?" Conner asked.

"I've been watching them this whole time, too, for you guys," Xan shrugged. "Like I already know the perfect night for us to do it." He walked back up the alley in the direction of the street. Conner looked at me, just as confused as I was, before he followed after Xan.

"Do we get to know what night ahead of time or are you going to surprise us with it that day?"

“It’s tomorrow night. I’m supposed to be the one watching the Realm because it’s their first one night off in a while, so they have to both be sleeping right?”

“So, our perfect night to do this convergence I’m still training for without getting caught is *tomorrow*?” I asked “Why didn’t you tell us sooner then?”

“Because you didn’t ask.” Xan said and then, like clockwork, I threw up again.

Chapter Fifteen: The Time I Didn't Hit My Best Friend and that's Called Personal

Growth

“Hey, I think I’m going to stay back for a minute. I forgot my jacket inside,” I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth. We had all talked about heading to my house together to talk more about our plan, since we needed to act tomorrow night and Mason hadn’t met Xan.

“Okay, we’ll wait out here for you.” Conner said. “Or do you want me to come in with you?” I know he was only concerned for my safety, since I was so uncomfortable around Kevin, but it was inconvenient at the time.

“No, that’s fine. I actually want to clean up a little bit, too.” I wiped some throw up off my face on to my shirt sleeve. “I’m a little gross and you guys don’t need to wait around for that. I’ll be quick and probably catch up with you at some point,” I opened the door into the theater. They agreed and, as they walked off, I reassured them again I would catch up but I lied. I hadn’t even brought a jacket that day and I didn’t plan on catching up. I wanted to talk to Callie finally and I wanted to do it alone.

I walked back into the theater, planning on walking to Callie’s room and talking to her there, but I saw her in the hallway instead. I looked to see if anyone was around, meaning Kai because they didn’t know how to be without each other anymore, but I didn’t see him anywhere nearby. Callie paced and chewed on her fingernails. Her nail biting was a habit I thought she had dropped years ago and I wanted to ask why it was back all of the sudden, but I was afraid to hear her answer. If she could tell me at all, that is.

“Hey Callie,” I called once I knew the door shut behind me. I couldn’t waste any time because I didn’t know how much time I had alone with her. Callie looked up at me and dropped her hand away from her mouth.

“Oh, hey Maya.” I think she was shocked that I was voluntarily speaking to her because I had only talked to her when there was no other choice and typically in very short sentences. It was easier for me to distance myself than to think about my best friend tricking me into joining a group with my stalker. I walked closer to her when it became obvious she wasn’t going to come closer to me. “So, what’s up?” She asked when I got closer.

“I just wanted to talk.” My answer sounded lame and I knew it, but I didn’t know what else to say now that I was talking to her again. “I haven’t been able to talk to you much lately and I wanted to see how you’re doing.”

“Yeah, we haven’t talked much lately and I’m sure that’s somehow my fault?” Callie shook her head.

“No, I didn’t it like that. I—I just meant that,” I stuttered. “I meant I know things are different now, and are only going to keep getting crazier, so I wanted to see how you’ve been, while I can, and if there’s anything you want to tell me.”

“‘While you can?’ Why do you always sound so cryptic lately? We were best friends for years, Maya. I can tell when you’re using your poker face because we used that face together on our friends at school.” Callie turned away. I didn’t know what to say because I was hung up on her saying we *were* best friends. We hadn’t talked much in the last couple of weeks, but how was she going to write me off as her best friend when she was the one playing me because of a new boyfriend?

“Wait,” Callie turned back to face me. “What do you mean things are going to get more crazy here soon?”

“I don’t know,” I muttered. I needed to get better at keeping a damn secret because, so far, I had spilled the beans on basically everything I knew at one point or another. “We barely talk now that you and Kai are dating, so I’m sure it’ll only get worse.”

“Who told you we were dating?”

“Come on, Callie. I’m not stupid.” I said. Callie raised her eyebrows. It was a simple gesture, but it pushed me over the edge. Her attitude towards me, when I only wanted to make sure she was okay, was so confrontational and aggressive. I knew it wasn’t coming from her, it couldn’t have been, but I still felt my face getting hot and my hands balled up into fists.

“Oh, what? Are you going to hit me again? Things never really change with you, Maya.”

“I said I was sorry about that. Let it go.” I stretched out my fingers, forcing myself to take deeper breaths because I couldn’t tell her to let it go and then punch her again. That would be sending the wrong message and I was trying to be the bigger person. “Listen, I only wanted to see if you had anything to tell me before I found out on my own.”

“You just have secret ways of finding stuff out now, huh?” Callie asked.

“Well, you guys have been training to converge, haven’t you? I have every shines, so do your secrets really stand a chance against me?” I was being an arrogant asshole, but she made me mad. I was tired of her acting like she was better than me when, if we wanted to be technical, I had more abilities than her.

“Is that seriously your plan?” Callie clasped her hands together in front of her and pursed her lips together. “To figure out if I’m dating Kai or not? Do you not realize how pathetic that sounds?”

“Who said I’m doing all of this just to find out if you’re dating Kai?” I asked and immediately wanted to disappear. I seriously needed to be left out of the loop of even my own

secrets apparently because I couldn't be trusted for more than five minutes to keep them.

"Hypothetically speaking that is. I just wanted to see if there was anything you wouldn't want me to find out about, maybe something you would rather tell me yourself."

"You want me to tell you something? Okay, how about you've been a shitty friend ever since you *punched* me, which is reason enough to be mad at you. I didn't tell you about me and Kai because I knew you couldn't possibly ever be happy for me because it didn't relate to you." Callie walked off. I cursed under my breath as she called out over her shoulder.

"And whatever you're planning isn't going to work, by the way, because you can't keep a secret to save your life." She waved over her shoulder as she walked down the hallway. She turned into the first room on the hall, Kai's room. Talking to Callie was easily the worst decision I made that day. I would say the worst mistake I had ever made, but let's be honest, we all know that would be a lie. Shit.



As soon as Callie was out sight, I ran back to the door and threw myself into it using all of my body weight. The door flung open, banging the outside wall and bouncing back to almost hit me in the face. I held my arm out to stop it and felt a sharp pain run up and down my arm. The cool air outside surrounded me, rushing all around and made me shiver. I wished I had actually brought a jacket like I told Conner and Xan I did. The door slammed shut behind me and I leaned back against it. The cold touch of the door was enough to shock my body, giving me goosebumps, and I closed my eyes. The cold helped me to focus. I definitely shouldn't have talked to Callie, on my own or with other people around, and I needed to get home fast.

I wanted to run, but I wasn't as fast after I quit running and it's not like I could ask Callie for a ride. I was out of options, so I called the only person who would ask the least amount of

questions: my dad. He was getting off work around the same time and, even though the theater was a little out of the way for him, I knew he'd come get me without a second thought. I waited outside on the curb sitting next to a tree. The thin truck kept little air from blowing against me, but it was better than nothing and gave me something to lean against. I held my arms, my legs pulled up close to my chest, and waited. I looked around, for my dad or for Kai to bust out the doors to attack me after Callie talked to him. I checked my watch and saw it was almost 7:30. My stomach growled and I started thinking about dinner instead of worrying about my safety. I do have my priorities.

I rested my head down on my arms and closed my eyes while I waited. My sense of urgency was declining with my body temperature, I was sure that soon I wouldn't care at all anymore. My dad pulled up a few minutes later and rolled his window down.

"Hey kiddo, are you ready?" He asked me from the car. I'm sure I looked like a mess. Just that day, I had blown my secrets twice and thrown up everything I had eaten within the last day before waiting outside in the cold. I got up and walked to his car, the door handle didn't even feel cold to touch anymore but my fingers hurt when I bent them around the handle. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine Dad." I pulled the seat belt around me and clicked it into place before looking forward to the road, waiting to start driving but the car didn't move. I turned my head to the side to see my dad looking back at me.

"Are you sure? Because I just picked you up on the side of the road outside an abandoned movie theater on the bad side of town." Of course that was going to be the one day my dad asked some questions. Where was the reliability in the world anymore?

“I promise, Dad, I’m okay. Callie and I were walking around,” When I mentioned Callie’s name, my dad raised his eyebrows. I don’t think he realized I still talked to Callie since she didn’t come around anymore. I continued like I didn’t notice his questioning glance. “We were talking and didn’t notice we had gone so far. Then we ended up getting in an argument and I didn’t want to ride back with her, so I called you instead.” I shrugged. I was getting better at lying only to my dad apparently. I’m sure that’s not something I should be bragging about, but it was the only thing I did successfully that day so I’m claiming it.

My dad nodded and kept driving. He didn’t seem surprised to hear Callie and I had reconciled then gotten into another fight all within the same story, that’s how our friendship had been for years. I was constantly mad at Callie for something growing up and then the next day asking my dad if she could spend the night. I think he quit trying to keep up with the status of our friendship years ago and I was thankful for that then. We rode in silence the rest of the car ride until we got home.

I got out as soon as we parked. I slammed the door shut, planning to rush inside, when my dad walked up to me and pulled me in for a hug. My dad wasn’t a hugger, so I stood still for a moment with my arms hanging at my sides until I brought them up and around him. He smelled the same as always, cinnamon with a hint of gasoline, and that made me smile. I couldn’t remember the last time I smiled and meant it, felt happiness from it. I faked smiles during trainings or laughed with Mason and Conner, but it was only thinly masking the large amounts of stress I was feeling. That time, though, as my dad stood in our driveway hugging like me, I could pretend I was still a little girl with none of the problems I had currently.

“You remind me so much of your mother,” My dad cleared his throat. “She always had a way of dealing with anything life handed her with such confidence. No matter what she found

out or did, I always knew she was doing it out of her love for us and I see that same thing in you.” We stood there, neither of us good at talking about our feelings, so my dad’s sudden burst of emotion caught me off guard.

“I love you, Maya.” He pulled out of our hug and held my face in his hands. “No matter what you’re going through, no matter what changes in your life, I’ll support you no matter what.” He kissed my forehead and let go.

“I love you too, Dad.” I said as he patted me on the back and we headed inside.



“Well, we’re fucked,” I walked into my room and sat down on the edge of my bed. “And I’m pretty sure my dad either thinks I’m pregnant or knows we’re up to something.”

“I have so many questions right now.” Xan looked back at Mason and Conner like they had all the answers.

“Why are we fucked and where’s your jacket?” Conner asked as he handed me a plate with a sandwich on it. He shrugged. “I remembered you threw up everything you ate today, so I made us both one. I ate mine while we were waiting on you though.”

“I’m actually hung up on why Dad thinks you’re pregnant?” Mason turned away from my desk and stared at my stomach, his eyes got bigger and bigger by the second.

“Wow, okay. So to recap: There’s no baby, there never was a jacket, and I may or may not have tipped Callie off to our plan.” I took a big bite of my sandwich. It was like ripping off a Band-Aid, right? The quicker the better.

“I still have so many questions,” Xan sighed.

“You lied and stayed behind to talk to Callie, didn’t you?” Mason knew our friendship pattern like it was his own. Fight, get bored without each other, start thinking we can save the

other from whatever issue caused our fight, finally talk, then we're friends again, and repeat. I nodded and Mason swiveled the chair around, so he couldn't see me anymore, and rubbed his forehead.

"Damn it, Maya." Conner stood up. "We specifically talked about not involving anyone else and then minutes after you bring Xan in, without any idea of if we can actually trust him or not, no offense dude."

"No, none taken. I wouldn't know whether to trust me or not either." Xan agreed.
"Except, I mean, you totally can."

"Right, see? So after all that, you immediately talk to Callie about what exactly?" Conner walked over to where I was sitting on the bed and crouched down to be eye level with me. "I just don't get it. Help me to get it." He whispered.

"There wasn't any good reason. I wish I could say it's because I had some master plan in mind but I didn't. I'm worried when we're in Kai's mind that I'm going to find out things about Callie I didn't know and it's going to break my focus or something." I looked only at Conner as I talked. I knew Xan wasn't personally involved in my friendship with Callie and Mason would be on my side no matter what, but I needed Conner to understand why I did it. I needed him to understand and realize I hadn't meant to mess everything up so many times.

"I think my problem during our trainings is I don't know how to handle things I don't have the answers to. You know, like every time you mention my mom, I get so overwhelmed with all the possibilities. I thought if Callie told me her secrets, then I would be prepared."

"Okay, so all we have to do is try to get you over that. We can work on it tonight and hope that's enough before tomorrow." Conner tapped on my knee before standing up.

“Well see, that’s the other thing.” I dragged out the words until Conner turned back to look at me, Xan put his head in his hands, and Mason sighed again. I knew I was stressing them out. “Callie went straight to Kai’s room after we talked and probably told him we might be planning something.”

“So,” Mason dragged out his word too.

“So, that means we need to go tonight. Ready or not.”

“You’re right.” Conner agreed with me. “We are fucked.”

Chapter Sixteen: The Movement I Wasn't Ready For

“Okay, so let’s go over the plan one more time.” Xan said for about the tenth time. After we all realized we needed to move quickly, not even knowing if Kai and Kevin would be asleep yet or if one of them was on watch that night, we started preparing. Luckily, Conner had snuck some more of the yellow liquid and syringes from one of the training rooms a couple of days ago in case we ran out soon, so we had everything we needed except for a cohesive plan.

“We all converge into the Dream Realm near Conner’s unconscious, so we know where to meet back up to leave, and then Maya and I head to find Kai.” Mason sounded bored. To his defense, we had gone over this bare bones plan multiple times. We didn’t have too intricate of plans because there were too many unknown elements that depended upon Kai and Kevin for us to fully plan everything out.

“Right and once we get in there, we have to find them fast. We don’t know how long they’ll be asleep, but we know there’s a fifteen-minute window when they need to nap before their shifts so that’s the only time we have.” Conner looked mainly at Xan because we were all nervous about him messing something up since he was so new to our group. We hadn’t been able to train with him since he decided to join us about five minutes before that. It’s always better to get to know someone’s unconscious before going on a big mission together, but Mason and Xan had barely met before we jumped right in.

“We go to Kevin while you guys go to Kai. Everyone got it?” Conner filled up the syringes while I got my room ready for us to lay down and spread out. I nodded and looked over to Xan. He seemed ready, but really who knew.

“The Movement is on the move.” Mason looked between all of us.

“That’s not going to be our catch phrase, Mason.” I groaned.

“I kind of like it,” Xan nodded to Mason.

“Hey,” Conner snapped his fingers. “Can we all focus, please?”

Conner grabbed the syringes, he was the most experienced so he was giving all the shots before he did himself. We all laid down in our spots and I started sweating. I was starting to change my mind, but it was too late for that. Conner started with Xan who liked to hold his breath until he passed out so his took the most time; Mason hated needles anyway, so that made him pass out with needing anything extra; and then finally me. I had Conner add an extra dose to my syringe so it could hold me in the Realm for longer in case I lose control. We were getting groggy, close to converging into the Dream Realm. We all learned tricks that worked with us and, while my trick wasn't exactly the safest for me, my way was always the quickest.

“See you guys on the other side,” I whispered. I don't know when my voice quit working, but I'm pretty sure I got the whole sentence out first before we all blacked out.



My room between the real world and the Dream Realm, my conscious and unconscious, was never as memorable as my first convergence and it made me miss that experience every time. There was no more floating and no more feeling light and airy, there was just a room with nothing else in it. Sometimes the floor looked wet, like I had just missed my flood of yellow liquid by a few seconds. Every time I woke up in the halfway room, that's what I started calling it because Conner never knew what I was talking about when I mentioned the room, I expected to be underwater or feel amazing. Instead though, I woke up laying on the floor and then walked to the door. That was it. Definitely a letdown after my first time.

When I walked into Conner's room and saw him lying on his bed. My door always went to Conner's room and I don't know why, but he was always waiting for me. I walked out of the

closet and he smiled as he stood up. He walked up to me and gave me a quick hug. He had learned pretty fast I don't like prolonged touching, but he couldn't stop himself from doing it sometimes and, surprisingly, I didn't mind.

"I'm glad you're here before we find the others," Conner stepped away from me. "I wanted to tell you I think this is going to work. I really believe that and," He opened his bedroom door. "I believe in you, Maya. We're going to do great and that's mainly because of you. When you're focused, your shines are unstoppable and I know we're going to get your mom back."

"Thank you," I squeezed his hand before I looked out his bedroom door into the dark. It always looked like a dark void outside his door and when we walked through we came out into the Dream Realm on the other side. "Let's go find Xan and my brother."

We walked through the door and out into the night air. Xan ran up to us, already rambling, because he had been waiting on us for a while. Time moves strangely in the Dream Realm because it's all based on your perception. If someone is more impatient, or thinks something will take a long time, then it will. On the other hand, I try to think of everything as happening one second after the other so time moves quickly for me. Xan was easily one of the most impatient people I know, so I'm sure it felt like forever to him.

"I'm glad you guys are here finally because they're here too, Kai and Kevin. They're asleep just like we thought they would be," Xan talked but I wasn't really listening.

"Have you seen Mason?" I interrupted.

"I'm right here," Mason's voice came from behind me. "I'm here and ready to kick some ass." Conner and Xan responded similarly, but I didn't feel the excitement everyone else had.

I started to sweat as the air became so thick around me it felt like I was moving through mud the closer I tried walking to Mason. Conner seemed fine, as if he didn't notice anything different around us. I heard whispers in my ear, not loud enough for me to know what the voice was saying, but enough that I felt a strong urge to change our plans. The wind picked up around me and pushed me in the opposite direction we had planned for me to go. I bent my knees a little for enough force to hold myself in place. I finally understood the voice enough to make out the one phrase that kept repeating over and over, getting louder each time, until all I heard was the voice yelling at me. Conner, Xan, and Mason were staring at me as I crouched down to the ground, covering my ears and closing my eyes. I was losing it.

"Go find Kevin," The voice swirled around me so fast I couldn't tell what direction it was coming from anymore. The wind tried to blow me down the street in the same direction a big storm cloud was forming not too high off the ground.

"Maya, are you okay?" Conner's voice slipped through the static, weaving its way to my ears. His voice broke the weird trance I was in and, suddenly, the wind stopped pulling at me and the heat lifted up around me. I opened my eyes; the voice was still moving around me but much quieter now. "Can you hear me?"

I nodded and stood up, finally looking over to the others. Xan looked like he had seen a ghost and Mason's eyes never left my face. I smiled at Mason, wanting to be reassuring but I didn't have my energy back enough to give it the right amount of effort. My legs didn't feel like they were going to hold me up for much longer, so I wrapped my arm around Conner and leaned my weight against him. He pulled me in closer and his warmth felt nice.

"He's calling to you, isn't he?" Mason asked and if my face looked anything like Xan's did at that moment, then we both looked shocked by Mason's guess. Learning to converge

together only led us to be closer than we ever had before, he could read like no one else. Of course he guessed correctly because it made perfect sense; they knew we were here and he was calling to me.

“Yeah, he is.” I whispered as I realized what I had to do. “I think we need to switch up our plans,” Conner was already shaking his head no, but I kept going anyway. “I think you guys should go to Kai and we’ll go to Kevin.”

“No, absolutely not.” Conner was still shaking his head. “You shouldn’t have to see him in your dreams again just because he’s harassing you again. He thinks he can overpower you easier since you’re new. He’s trying to bait you, Maya, and it seems like it’s working for some reason.”

“You said you knew we’d beat them because of me, so why don’t you think I can overpower Kevin?” I pulled myself away from him.

“I didn’t say that. I said he *thinks* that, so I don’t want you purposely putting yourself in danger. We know he won’t take it easier on you like Kai probably would.” Conner dropped his arm away from me. “I’m only saying this because you said you didn’t ever want to see him again in your mind. What’s changed?”

“What’s changed is I realized it needs to be me, it *has* to be.” I stood up straighter, my legs feeling strong again. “He’s not going to tell you guys anything about my mom, only me. Plus, I think for me to feel like myself again, like I did before all this mess started, I need to confront him again. On my own terms this time and I need to win.”

“I’ll go with her, too.” Mason added. “So she won’t be alone.”

“You’re even newer than she is, though.” Xan whispered off to the side.

“If it’s something that you feel like you need to do, then let’s make it happen.” Conner looked over to Xan. “She’s going to do it either way, so we might as well go with it.”

“Okay, so what’s the new plan then?” Xan looked to me and I realized I was finally what I wanted to avoid: the leader.

“You guys go to Kai and use your shines together to see what information you can get out of him and we’ll go to Kevin. He doesn’t know the progress I’ve made with my shines and he doesn’t expect Mason at all, so hopefully we can catch him off guard enough to find out where our mom is.” Mason nodded in agreement,

“It’s the only plan we’ve got now, so why not?” Xan shook his head. He didn’t seem excited about the change, but he was willing to follow it at least.

“Well, what do you think?” I asked Conner.

“Let’s do it.” Conner said. “Do you know where to find him?”

“Oh, I think I have a pretty good idea.”



Mason and I walked away from the group in the direction the wind had been blowing. We were alone for the first time in weeks and, while I thought I would be fine with that, I realized I hated it now. The few weeks leading up to our final convergence, we had spent all our time with Conner coaching us in the Dream Realm. Even when I was at work at the school, it was the same place Conner attended so he was there too. Everyone was shocked the first few days when Conner and I were hanging out so much, no one had probably ever seen him genuinely be nice to someone else, let alone to a Constant. Now, we were alone and heading towards Kevin. I was glad I couldn’t throw up in the Dream Realm since my bodily functions were so disconnected from me when I wasn’t awake.

I knew where he would be and, I shouldn't have been surprised, it was right under the giant storm cloud the wind was pulling me towards earlier. Of course the Dream Realm manifested conflicts as giant storms because it was originally created only for others to create dreams, not nightmares, so the Realm thought it was malfunctioning. As we got closer to the storm, and to Kevin, lightning started to strike down all around us. I watched as trees and houses in the realm were stuck and fires flared up everywhere the lightning touched, the smoke from them growing thick enough I had a hard time breathing. The thunder followed the flashes of light soon after and, as I heard the sound, the ground shook. The nightmares and negative energy was literally tearing the Dream Realm apart. The further I walked, and the closer I got to Kevin, the louder the voice became.

“Maya?” I heard Mason's voice somewhere in the distance away from me. “Maya, can you hear me?”

“Mason?” I called out. “Where are you?” The smoke in my face created a white wall between us and I couldn't see more than a foot in front of me. I heard his voice, but I had no clue what direction it was coming from. I wasn't even sure what direction I was going in anymore. I moved in the direction I thought he was in, yelling at him to stay in place, until his voice became so muffled I couldn't make out his words anymore. I was lost.

“Shit,” I whispered. “Shit, shit, shit.” My voice was louder with each word, but the smoke held my words so close to me that they bounced back to me. I knew my voice wasn't reaching Mason anymore.

“Go find Kevin, you're almost there, he's waiting for you,” The voice droned on, over and over, it reminded me of a fork scraping against a plate. I wanted to plug my ears or rip them off, anything to keep the grating scratch from my mind, but I knew it wouldn't work and I didn't

want to give him the satisfaction of knowing it was driving me crazy. I ground my teeth together and shoved my fingernails into the palms of my hands, pulsating them in and out of my skin, and kept walking.

I walked, avoiding anything on fire or the flashes of lightning that shot down from the sky, looking for something. Anything. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, other than possibly my brother but I knew that was unlikely. As I turned a corner onto a new street, I realized where I was: back on my own street. I saw my house at the end of the road, dead center in the street, with the porch light was on. That's where he was, I knew the second I saw my own house. He tricked me into confronting him in my own home. The voice screamed at me.

I paused in the same spot in my driveway my dad had hugged me; it felt like so long ago somehow, but it had only been a few short hours. The couple of minutes I was alone felt like forever, my time perception was altering my timeline. I needed to hurry. My meeting time with the others to leave the Realm was closer than I wanted, I had too much left to do. I hadn't even seen Kevin yet.

I ran the rest of the way and up our porch stairs. The front door stood open and as I stepped through the frame, two things happened: the voice stopped, which left my ears ringing in its absence, and a single light turned on inside the living room. I walked over to the light, confused, when it turned off and another one deeper into the living turned on. He was leading me where he wanted me, so I played along.

I followed the lights until I was outside of my dad's bedroom, the same one he shared with my mom when I was younger. I took a deep breath, determined not to lose my focus again, and turned the door knob. The door creaked open, which it doesn't do when I'm awake, and I saw Kevin sitting on the bed. He looked the same as when I first saw him in my nightmare:

yellow teeth, clothes dirty, hair unbrushed, which to be fair wasn't much different in real life. He opened his mouth to show me all of his teeth in what, I'm sure, he considered a smile but it seemed aggressive and predatory.

"You made it back to me." Kevin's voice hit me, like the sound waves were physical objects he was throwing at me, and it burned. I wanted to back out of my dad's room and run. Run back to Conner's closet and wake up back in my own room, safe from Kevin's voice for a little while longer. My chest tightened like someone had sat on top of me and I couldn't breathe.

"It seems like it." I threw my arms up, straight out, like I was presenting myself to him. "How did you know I was coming?"

"Maya, you know that's a dumb question." Kevin moved closer to me. I backed up and felt my heels hit the wall, the door disappeared behind me. "Callie's been telling us your secrets the whole time. It was surprisingly easy for my nephew to convince her to talk." He moved closer still.

"Why, why would she do that?" I stuttered. I turned my head away from him, since I couldn't move any further away, and closed my eyes. I needed to calm down and I couldn't do that while I was looking at Kevin.

"She's a young girl who wants a boy's love, it's pretty simple really." I didn't hear Kevin's footsteps getting any closer to me. I hoped he was as close as he planned on being. "We did you a favor, really, to help you realize she isn't the person you thought she was." His voice went quiet. I didn't hear any moments for a few seconds.

"I think the words you're looking for are," Kevin's voice came from beside my exposed ear, his breath was hot and smelled as bad as his teeth looked. "Thank you." He slid his fingers down my face until he reached my chin and turned my head towards him. I kept my eyes closed.

“You’re really going to make me work for it, aren’t you?” He let go of my face and I snapped it back to face away from him again.

As he listed reasons why I shouldn’t resist him, I opened my eyes to find anything close I could use against him. The first thing I saw was a picture of my mom that my dad kept on a table beside his bedroom door. He liked her picture being the last thing he saw every morning as he walked out to face a new day. The framed photo was of my parents and each one of them held one of us, my brother was pulling my hair and I was looking at my mom instead of the camera. I turned my head and looked at Kevin, my eyes never left his head as he turned around to face me. When he saw I was looking at him, he shook his head.

“What’s it like knowing I’m the man who killed your mother and you can’t do anything about it?”

“She’s not dead. Kai told us she’s alive,” I pushed off the wall and walked closer to him. I thought about how I wanted the bed to move closer to him and push him off his feet, so he knew I was in control, and the bed moved the second I thought about it. Somehow I managed to take control enough that I could move the objects around us. It wasn’t much, but it was a small start that made me feel invigorated. I was in control of everything around us, I just needed to gain control over him. I needed to slip into his memories and search for my mom. “She’s alive and you moved her. Now tell me where she is.”

“You actually think you’re going to find her, don’t you?” Kevin tried to stand up from the bed. The blankets wrapped around him and held him against the bed. He struggled against it for only a few seconds before he stopped. “Your abilities have gotten better than I realized, but that doesn’t mean you know what’s going on.”

“No, you’re the one who doesn’t seem to know I’m in charge here.” The blankets tightened against him as I walked closer. “Now, I’ll only say this one more time, where is my mother?”

“You think you’re in charge. That’s cute,” Kevin said as the blankets unwrapped from him and slid on the floor before hiding under the bed. He stood up and came within inches of my face, I didn’t back away even though every part of my body screamed for me to. “Do you remember the first time you knew I went into your mind?”

He was trying to bait me again. My mind went back to the times Conner tried throwing off my focus and it worked every time; my shins lose their momentum and my body fails before I fall to the ground, or my limbs float away from my body. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I would stay in control in front of him, I had to.

“It was late and you were so easy for me to converge into, you didn’t have any defenses up. I just walked right in. You were running, vulnerable, and I could hear your heartbeat so loud in your mind. It reminded me how alive you were and made me even more excited to hunt you.” Kevin circled around me like the voices did earlier when he was drawing me to him. “Well here’s some fun news for you: I was watching you long before you ever felt me in your dreams. I was just watching and waiting for the right time.”

I squeezed my eyes shut tighter, my lids full of a kaleidoscope of colors and patterns that felt so warm, and I was shaking. Goosebumps stood up on my arms so much they hurt. One of my hands worked its way up to my stomach and I pressed into myself as hard as I could, the pressure kept me from feeling like I was standing on a moving boat. Kevin ran his fingers along the top of my back and I considered all the possible ways to burn that skin away forever.

“Your mother’s mind used to be my favorite until I saw yours. Yours is so much more vibrant and I can *feel* everything,” He paused to take a deep breath near me, “You smell just like you always do. Your smell and your fear, even now, is so tangible I could never get enough. I promised your mom I would leave you and your brother alone at least, but I just couldn’t follow through once I went inside your mind that first time.”

“You talked to my mom about me?” I opened my eyes and looked straight at the wall as he circled me. I wondered if while he was busy listening to his own voice, I could sneak into his memories. I needed to get him on another rant to distract him. “What did she say about me?”

As he talked, he walked around to look into my eyes. While he looked at me, I envisioned myself stepping through his eyes to the part of his brain that holds his memories like I did to Conner the first day we were training. Unlike Conner’s mind, my walk through Kevin’s was dark and slimy. The walls of his memories were moldy and sticky, I could feel the sludge moving towards me as I walked, trying to cling to me. I couldn’t tell if his memories were trying to escape with me or trying to bring me down so I couldn’t ever leave. As I made my way deeper into his mind, I saw my mom in the background. I reached out to her and watched as she stretched her arms out to me too. I tried to grab her when Kevin’s memory of her came to the front of his mind.



“Please let me go.” My mom cried. She was trapped in a cage in a dark room. Kevin sat across from her in a folding lawn chair watching as she tried escape. She threw her body into the door over and over again, but it never budged.

“I’ve told you this already, Helena,” Kevin snickered. Even his past-self’s laugh was creepy. “You’re never going to make it out of there. Not in time, anyway.” Kevin’s memory

flashed to him pouring rat poison into her food before feeding it to her. “You’ve got a couple of hours tops. So how about you go ahead and tell me which Dream Keeper knows the Supreme Keeper’s schedule?”

My mom was silent. I was used to seeing her smiling and in happy in the pictures my dad had covering our house. When I saw her in Kevin’s memory in the cage, though, I saw another side of her. She was pure power. She closed her eyes and the cage shook. The lock slid open and Kevin ran to push it closed again. He struggled against her power but, because she was so weak from the poison, he slammed it shut before putting another padlock on her cage. Was this in the Dream Realm? Or did my mom have abilities when she was awake like I did?

“If you’re not going to tell me what you found out, then I’ll let you die. I’ll make sure to watch over your kids after you’re gone too.” Kevin stood up to walk away.

“No, wait,” My mom called after him. A smile spread across his face before he turned around to face her. He walked over to her cage, running his fingers along the metal patchwork as he approached her side. He knelt down until he was face to face to my mom, only the thin grate between them. “If you promise to leave them alone, I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

“Let’s hear it then.”

“No, you have to promise me first.”

“You sure are demanding for a person inside a cage,” Kevin stood up and kicked the cage. My mom flinched but didn’t say anything. She stayed silent until Kevin spoke again.

“Fine, as long as you tell me what I want to know.”

“Okay.” Her voice was raspy. She smacked her lips together a few times, like her mouth was dry. She struggled to speak for a few seconds, a couple drops of white foam slid out

between her lips. She wiped her hand across her face. “Only if you promise. I need to hear the words, Kevin. Leave them alone. Say you won’t touch Maya.”

Her words were cut off by jagged coughs that sounded wet, thick and guttural. She kept coughing and, a few deep chest coughs later, the drops of white foam from her mouth turned into a steady stream. The stream flowed between her lips and down her throat before it disappeared under her shirt. Her chest heaved, up and down, and her body shuddered with great force. Her eyes rolled back into head when she wrapped her fingers around the bars so she wouldn’t fall backwards.

“Damn it,” Kevin yelled and kicked the cage again. The force of his kick rattled the cage enough that my mom lost her grip and fell on the floor. She landed on her back, the foam built up in her mouth quickly. She gagged, her convulsing slowing down, before it stopped altogether. Her last words was my name before she took another breath and then was still.

“Are you kidding me?” Kevin slammed against the cage, shaking the whole thing, before pushing himself off it and storming out of the room. He turned the light off on his way out and, just like that, his memory was done too.



I was shocked out of Kevin’s memories seconds after watching my mom die. When I fell out, though, I wasn’t back in my dad’s room like I had been when I first went deeper into Kevin’s mind. I was running. It was night time again and I was running down the street with the familiar fog and color-shifting moon. I tripped over my feet and fell to the ground, sliding across the concrete and feeling every little grind into my hands and tear of my skin. I looked at my blood and squeezed my hands into a fist, causing the blood to pump out faster but it was comforting to be reminded I was still alive.

I felt a heavy weight in the middle of my back that pressed down against me, my breath rushed out and didn't feel like it was coming back anytime soon. The weight on my back wiggled around, back and forth, and then I heard his voice again.

"Did you really think you were in control this whole time?" Kevin's voice was quiet, but still mocking. I coughed, tried to catch my breath, as he kept prodding me. "You thought you were in my mind and forcing yourself into my memories, didn't you?" He pushed his foot further into my back and I noticed all feeling leave my legs like the tide being pulled away from a shore.

"You only thought you were in control in the beginning because," Kevin let his foot up and cool air rushed back into my lungs so fast my chest hurt. "We've actually been inside your mind the whole time. Why did you think I wanted to meet you in your house? In your own parents' bedroom?" He waited for me to respond, but I was still trying to catch my breath. "There's no way I could have created your parents' bedroom in my own mind, I've never been in there."

"How was I able to see your memory of my mom then?" I whispered, my voice was weak. I coughed.

"Because I decided to show you." Kevin's foot wedged under my body and he jerked his foot upwards to roll me over. I was on my back and looking up at him as he stood over me. He shrugged and crouched down over me, close to my face. "She's dead, Maya. You knew that deep down, though, didn't you?" Kevin slapped the side of my legs and stood up. He walked a little distance away before turning back to face me.

"You know what amazes me the most, Maya?" He waited. He was genuinely waiting for me to ask him to continue.

“What?” I wheezed, sitting up on my elbows to look at him better.

“What amazes me the most is how much like your mom you are,” He shook his head.

“Even when she should have given up, she kept trying. It was annoying really, but she just never quit. She honestly thought the Good, capital G, would win in the end.” He cackled as I struggled to stand up. “You’re the same way, you know. You think you guys stand a chance because the Good inherently always wins, but that’s never true. If that was true, we’d live in a better world. And if that was true, then I wouldn’t have watched your mom drown in her own spit and I wouldn’t be watching you struggle to even stand up right now. The world is full of bitter, evil irony and that’ll never change.”

I stood up, only thinking about my mom and her incredible shines manifesting outside of the Realm, my grief and anger mixing together in such an organic and powerful way that I could see my energy all around us. I felt more connected to her, to her abilities, than I ever had before. The violet colors of my emotions circled us, pulled us in closer together. My hair whipped around my face and my feet lifted an inch off the ground. My own energy became my ground, firm and unshakable. I watched him as he talked, hoping he would keep his focus on me while my focus was slightly behind him.

“I knew your mom was working against me from the beginning, but I needed her to figure out a consistent way for me to converge. Her abilities when she was awake were unusual and helped me develop the serum we use now to converge. I used her up until I was finished and then got rid of her.” Kevin’s voice sounded excited, his energy was dancing behind him. “I would have left your family alone, too, afterwards if I hadn’t realized what you could do. I was curious about you, the daughter she fought so hard to protect, so I converged into you and

instantly felt it. You're some strange, hybrid bloodliner who shouldn't exist, Maya. Your mind was full of all this extra energy like I'd never seen before."

"So you thought you'd come in and study me, or what?" Talking to him strained my concentration, I felt it stretch, trying to handle both things at once, and I felt like it was about to snap.

"At first, yes. Then I saw, deep inside your mind where you hadn't ventured to look yet, you had abilities far beyond what your mother could do which I didn't think that was possible. Once I saw that, I only thought to destroy you from the inside out and what better place to start than the mind. I knew you wouldn't trust me, and your father and brother would have recognized me, so I contacted an old friend of your mother's— a woman who hated her for the potential your mother possessed instead of her, who had also remained close to you to keep watch— and we brought you to Kai."

I was trying to create a door. I never tried experimental exits in my training with Conner, but I hoped if I focused enough on creating a doorway to nothing, a door into an endless void, I could trick Kevin into it and never see him again. He would just disappear, cease to exist, like my mom did all those years ago when he killed her— when he killed her and forced my brother and I to grow up without a mother. The door was small at first, only a few inches off the ground, but grew larger the longer he talked and the angrier I became.

"You know, I wouldn't have found you guys again if it wasn't for one that woman telling me where you worked, how easily your best friend could be manipulated, or how much you hated Conner. It was only a matter of time before I used your connections against you, before I brought you to the Defenders." Kevin's words almost drew me out of my focus again.

“Who told you all of that?” My voice wavered. The door, almost five feet tall, shrunk a few inches and shook.

“You honestly didn’t notice?” He laughed at my silence. I turned my focus back on the door, struggling to keep my hold. I needed it to be bigger. “I’ll just leave that one for you to figure out on your own. It’s more fun that way.” The door was, finally, taller than him, and lurked behind him.

“You never stop, do you?” I asked.

“Maybe I would, but there’s still so much you don’t know.” Kevin’s foot shifted back, his body turned in the direction of my door. He couldn’t see it before I pushed him in. He couldn’t know or I would lose control again.

“Like what?” I yelled. He flinched, caught off guard by my tone. I felt his emotions simmering: arrogance and barely contained rage drifted under his surface. I got his attention, though, because there wasn’t much Kevin loved more than games. He rotated back to me and planted his feet.

“Now, where would the fun be in telling you?” Kevin felt so smug I almost choked on the thickness in the air. “I can answer your question with another question, though. Why haven’t you thought to ask me the most important question of all right now?” I was silent.

“The vastness of this world is so interesting, Maya,” Kevin continued. “Because you learn people can always surprise you, but the consistency in life is reassuring because some people never do surprise you. And the humor in life is that most people never will. Can you imagine that? Living an unsurprising and trivial life?” I walked closer to him as he spoke. His emotions never changed, not even a flutter of suspicion. “Well, I’m sure *you* can imagine. You’re still the same Maya you’ve always been. Primarily concerned about yourself.”

“That’s not true,” I whispered as I closed the remaining space between us. I reached my hands out and touched his chest. His red hot energy around me wavered and started to pull away. I only had seconds before his physical body responded as well.

“If that wasn’t true,” Kevin said as I flattened my fingers against his chest. I used my energy around me to push as hard as I could as he said his final words. “Then why didn’t you ask me what I did with your brother?”

Kevin’s eyes widened as his feet lifted off the ground and his body flew backwards. I stretched out my arms to grab him, to hold him long enough to tell me where Mason was, but he slipped through my grasp. As soon as he was out of my sight, the door shut and disappeared. Just like my chances of finding my brother.

Chapter Seventeen: The Missing Piece of the Puzzle

The door disappeared and I stood still, staring into the emptiness. Mason and I lost each other in the smoke, but I was so focused on finding Kevin I didn't realize it wasn't accident. Kevin created the screaming voice, the storm, the fires and smoke— but I didn't think he was the reason we were separated. My energies surrounded me, wiped my face and held me as I fell to the ground. Everything was blue and cold around me. I shivered and watched the street around me crumble to ash. The sound of the falling trees and deteriorating street filled my ears, the pressure built up until I felt uncomfortable, until there was nothing left. I was left alone to sit in the dark, floating in a void in open space.

I don't know how long I sat there, trying to connect to Mason's mirror. Our conscious connection had carried over into the Dream Realm, I knew it had because I felt it every time we trained together. I saw everyone's emotions, vaguely while I was awake in dull colors and vividly in the Realm as the energies surrounded their person, but Mason was different. His energies felt tied to mine, always near each other or intertwined like part of the same larger whole. I felt him still, from somewhere deep in the Realm, as he reached out for me. He was alive out there, at least, for now but I didn't know where. I sat motionless in the dark feeling fragmented, my emotions were disentangling themselves from me and reaching out to search the void for their other half. Time drug by unnoticed as I felt myself match and absorb the void around me. I was empty.

After some time, my mind snapped back like it had been stretched too far. I blinked at the abruptness and looked around finally. In the distance, I saw a familiar house. Conner's house. Once the realization hit me, I remembered I existed outside of the Realm. I remembered I needed to leave, but if I left then I'd be leaving Mason. I knew I couldn't help him if I was also

lost in the void, though, so I stood up. My muscles ached from the sudden movements, but I didn't feel it— not in the way someone usually feels pain. I felt the stiffness like it was in a separate part of my mind, like my pain receptors had retreated far back into my mind with my emotions. I looked at the ground and moved one foot a few inches, it took all the remaining energy I had left as I was pushed to continue forward, and kept going like that until I stood in front of Conner's house. I walked in silence, I wasn't sure if the roaring in my ears blocked out all sounds or if there wasn't any, and my eyes were unfocused.

I stopped, facing the direction of Conner's house, and felt a sharp pressure on my arms. My body shook, back and forth repeatedly, without my permission. Maybe Kevin still got me, like he did to my mom. Maybe the foam was coming soon too. I felt a sharp pain in my arm and the heat radiated into my shoulder.

"Maya," I heard from far away as my shaking grew in intensity. "Can you hear me, Maya?" The heat from my arm spread to the rest of my body. Conner's house faded away from my vision and soon all I saw, and felt, again was the void of the Realm. I welcomed it.



I was lying on the floor in my halfway room. I wasn't supposed to be there. I was supposed to be lost once I was left behind in the Realm, or best case scenario was I would have woken up, but I'd never been in my halfway room when I was waking up. I sat up and looked for the door, but it was nowhere to be found. I ran my fingers across the walls to find a latch I hadn't seen. Nothing. It was a room with no exit. I pounded on the walls with my fists, thinking maybe my conscious body would show signs of my internal struggle. I lost count of the number of times I punched until I saw a red spot appear on the wall in front of me. I dropped my arm to examine it and felt another sharp pain in my knuckles. Blood dripped from my hand to the floor,

a puddle forming around my foot and stained my shoe. I knew I was alive then, but still not sure how to escape. I slid down the wall and stared at my hand. I watched the droplets of blood form before spilling over and running down my arm. I felt no pain, just dull fascination.

As I sat, someone cleared their throat from across the room. I pulled my eyes away from my blood saw a table with a chair in front of me. At the table sat someone I didn't think I'd see again. Kevin. I dropped my head down to my knees.

“What are you doing here?” My voice was flat. I pulled my head back up when he didn't answer and he was gone. The table and chair were there, with the chair pushed back like someone had gotten up, but there was no other proof anyone had been there. I was alone. I walked to the table and found a piece of paper resting there, waiting for me. I unfolded it, it was heavier than normal paper, and looked at the unfamiliar handwriting

Just because something disappeared, doesn't mean it's gone.

“What the fuck?” I felt my first hint at emotion since I lost Mason. My energy filled the halfway room until my vision was blocked and I couldn't see the note in front of me anymore. I was enveloped by a deep, hot red energy that felt all too familiar.



“Maya, can you hear me?” Conner's voice interrupted my darkness. I grabbed onto his words and used them to pull myself up out of the red and, soon, my eyes were open again. Conner stood over me. The lights were bright. I squinted and he turned my bedroom light off. “You're okay now. You're safe,” He kept repeating over and over again until I sat up. I walked to my bed and saw Mason lying there, unconscious still.

“We tried waiting for you, but you were gone for so long.” Conner whispered to me, not wanting to overwhelm me with too many sounds. “We didn’t know if you guys would wake up.”

“I only woke up when he was ready for me too.”

“Who was ready?” Xan asked me. I forgot he was there until I drug my eyes away from Mason’s body.

“Has he done anything?” I answered Xan’s question with my own. “Shown any sign he’s about to wake up too?”

“No, not yet.” I felt their emotions, their fear and anticipation. They wanted to hear he was okay and would wake up soon. I wish I could’ve told them that.

“I lost him,” I whispered. Now that I was awake, my emotions had rushed back inside me. Conner and Xan’s emotions were pushed out to make room for my own, uncontrollable and overwhelming, feelings. My face was hot and I couldn’t breathe out of my suddenly full nose. Tears were only seconds away when Conner put his hand on my arm. I blinked the water from my eyes and looked at him.

“Tell us everything.” So I did. I told them about the voices, the lightening, the smoke. The moment I saw the memory of my mom. The moment I lost Mason and the moment I realized Kevin took him from me intentionally. The moment I pushed him through the door and closed it. I told them everything except about my halfway room. My halfway room, and the note, felt different— more personal. I couldn’t bring myself to say out loud that we had risked our lives and my brother for, possibly, nothing. My mind felt full, like there were too many people inside of me.

“This doesn’t seem like the best time,” Xan spoke after the silence between us all felt too heavy to bear anymore. “But us talking to Kai didn’t go too well either.”

“What do you mean?” I wiped the back of my hand across my face. As I brought my hand down, I looked at my knuckles. No blood. I had a strong headache forming and my eyes ached. I felt a pull at the back of my mind, but I couldn’t figure out the origin of the sensation. I shook my head and turned my focus back to Xan.

“We didn’t find him.”

“How is that possible?” No one answered. “They were *both* supposed to be there. That’s what Xan said.”

“I thought they would be,” Xan said under his breath.

“So, they played us.” I sighed. The pull of my mind was stronger now and images filled my mind of Kevin and Kai going their separate ways, Kevin to the Dream Realm and Kai to his room to wait for another person. “We thought we needed all us to confront both of them, they separated me from Mason, and Kevin almost got me too. We were all distracted so Kai could be free to do whatever he wanted.”

“The question is what was he needing to do?” Conner’s question hung in the air. I opened my mouth to answer when I was interrupted by a knock on my bedroom door. I pushed the images in my mind to the back and walked to my door. My dad’s voice called my name from the other side. I didn’t want him to see Mason, unmoving on my bed, so I opened the door only a few inches. My dad stepped to the side and I saw Callie behind him.

“Hi,” Her voice was soft. “Can I come in?” My dad waited and I nodded to him. He walked away as I opened my door for Callie to step through. “Oh my god, what happened to Mason?” She rushed over to my bed.

“Don’t touch him,” She stopped short of my bed and only looked at him. “Just tell us why you’re here.”

“I know we’re not on good terms right now, but I needed to talk to you. No matter how bad things get between us, I’d never want anything to hurt you.” Callie walked towards me. Conner edged his way between us and she stepped away from me again.

“Please just tell me why you’re here.”

“I was supposed to be gone from the theater for the night, our training was over so I was going home. After I left, I realized I left my phone so I went back and saw Ginny. I didn’t know why she would be there, so I followed her.” The mentioning of Ginny grabbed my full attention. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I sat down as she continued to tell her story.

“She walked in the side door and straight to Kai’s room. I tried listening at the door and they were talking about your mom, Maya. Ginny was talking about your mom like she knew her.” The sharp pull in my mind gave way to a deep, scratchy voice.

I contacted an old friend of your mother’s...a woman who hated her. Kevin’s words drifted around me. The presence of his words didn’t feel heavy or threatening, it felt like the strength of my own energy overpowered his enough to dull him. I felt in complete control for the first time in a while.

“Ginny was the woman Kevin was working with. I thought he was lying because none of my friends are old enough to have known my mom, but I forgot about Ginny.”

How did you forget about Ginny?

“She’s the one who gave Kai the flash drive we used, Maya, not some random homeless guy like he told us. Which, now that I’m thinking about, doesn’t even sound believable anymore. She took advantage of you while you were suffering and used me to do it.” Callie

walked over and knelt in front of me. “I’m sorry I fell for it, Maya. I never should have brought us to him. I really thought he could help and then I got swept up in his plan for President Storm. It all sounded too good to be true.”

Because it was too good to be true, stupid girl. I pushed the voice away, ignored the words, but I knew it was right. It had all been too good to be true, but we all fell for it anyway. All of us except Mason. He was never fooled.

He was never fooled, yet he suffered the most. I closed the voice away, trying to ignore what I knew hearing it meant.

“So, now what then?” Xan asked. “What else did you hear?”

“That’s why I came over here,” Callie stood up. “Ginny said, now that Kevin was out of the way, the only thing left standing between them focusing fully on Storm again was you.”

“Me?” I looked to Conner who looked as shocked as I felt. “Why me?”

“They said your potential as a hybrid bloodliner was a threat. They knew Kevin was focused on you and you could get him out of the picture, so they used you and now that they don’t need you anymore,” Callie trailed off.

“So, our region’s newest Dream Keeper’s main priority is getting rid of me?” I asked. Callie nodded. “What if they thought I didn’t exactly get rid of Kevin?”

“Well, I’m sure that would surprise them at least,” Callie watched me as I shifted around in my desk chair. “But I don’t know if that would be enough to save you from them.”

“Why do you ask, Maya?” Conner interrupted us. He knew what I was going to say already, I could feel his hesitancy.

“When I pushed Kevin through that door, I assumed I got rid of him. But I saw him again in my halfway room and I think he’s inside my mind still.”

I told you something disappearing does not mean it's gone.

“He’s what?” Conner voice was the loudest above the others. Everyone was confused and I don’t blame them. I was too. “Other people can’t exist inside your mind while you’re awake, Maya. That’s not possible.”

Oh, but it is. Things will be so much easier when you and your friends realize your full potential, Maya. We realized long ago, you need to catch up.

“I wish it was that easy,” I muttered. Conner looked at me like I was crazy. “I don’t think things are as simple as we thought they were—”

“Because our lives before this was simple?” Xan quipped.

“I meant about the affinities. Kevin kept calling me a hybrid, hybrids aren’t supposed to exist but here I am. Maybe Affinities and Visionaries marrying Constants isn’t allowed because they know it creates people they can’t control? Ginny needs to get rid of me because I’m not supposed to exist.”

“But you do exist,” Callie said. “So what are we going to do?” Everyone’s eyes were on me, waiting for my plan. Even Kevin’s voice in my mind remained silent. There was a first time for everything.

“We’re going to do what they’re trying to do.” I stood up. “I can’t be the only hybrid out there, suffering from nightmares at the hand of someone else using their abilities to cause harm, and the best way to a national platform to get a message to everyone,” I trailed off.

“Is to get to President Storm before Kai and Ginny do.” Conner finished.

“Exactly.” I looked around the room, surprised by the determination I found in everyone else’s eyes too. “And we have a secret weapon they don’t expect us to have. Kevin.”

What if I refuse to help?

“If you ever want back out, you’ll help.” I answered aloud. Xan’s eyes were wide as he watched me talk to Kevin. “First things first, though,” I addressed the room again. I walked over to Mason’s side and picked up his hand. “We go back to the Realm and find my brother.”

And what about after we find him, Maya? Having a Dream Keeper on your bad side is going to be a bigger complication than you’re anticipating.

“After we find him,” I answered Kevin and looked at my friends in front of me too. “We’re taking the Movement global.”

□□□□□

Index:***Character Descriptions:***

- *Major:*
 - Maya Davis- 18. Good at all skills: Assessing/manipulating emotions in dreams, remaining unnoticed, taking control, extracting info, and altering appearance.
 - Mason Davis- 20. Brother to Maya. Learns to converge, but the extent of his abilities is unknown.
 - Callie Mitchell- 18. Good at altering appearance in dreams.
 - Conner Yost- 18. Good at extracting information from mirror consciousness.
 - Kai Webber- 25. Good at feeling others emotions and manipulating/maintaining new emotions for them.
 - Amethyst Reed (Ame) – 18. Good at noticing trends and patterns in dreams in order to remain unnoticed.
 - Xan Foster – 19. Good at taking control of dreams.
- *Minor:*
 - Charlie Davis- 50s, dad to Maya and Mason.
 - Helena Davis- 50s, mom to Maya and Mason.
 - Ginnifer Stein (Ginny) – 50s. Maya's coworker.

Terminology:

- Constants: A person with no abilities
- Daydreamers: A person with minimal abilities
- Visionaries: A person with a higher level of abilities
- Affinities: A person with the highest level of abilities, always used with an uppercase A.

- Affinity with lowercase a: A general reference to the abilities themselves
- Dream Keepers: Like Supreme Court Justices, but in charge of creating dreams and hallucinations for selected areas of the country.
- Bloodliners: A person born with into an affinity bloodline
- Converging/To Converge: The physical act of entering a dream
- The Tear: The entrance of a dreamer's mind
- Mirror: A person's dream self, their subconscious entity
- Shine: The special strength someone's mirror possesses.
- Dream Realm: The mental web-like realm that connects everyone's unconscious, like a community. The Dream Realm gives people the ability to move from person to person without having to be close to them, but the realm can only be accessed with training and practice.
- Halfway Room: The room that holds the person's mirror during the transition between conscious and unconscious until they can fully enter the Dream Realm safely.
- The Movement: The name, appointed by Mason, to the mission of finding Maya's mother. The Movement starts out as the small group of friends working to find Helena, but soon grows into much more.