Return Once More
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For all of the humans who, in ways big and small, have had the desire, drive, imagination, foresight, and intelligence to change the world for the better. And for all of the humans whose suffering, deaths, humiliations, and failure have managed to do the same.

May we all humbly try to make sure none are forgotten, and that no sacrifice has been made in
vain.
“Like the sun and moon, they end but to begin anew; like the four seasons, they pass away to return once more.”

—Sun Tzu
Chapter One

Rome, Italy, Earth Before—44 BCE (Before Common Era)

The portico at the Theatre of Pompey looked exactly as it did in the holo-files back on Genesis. As comforting as that fact was for a girl over twenty-five hundred years out of her element, even the real-time, life-size recordings in the Archives couldn’t prepare us for everything.

They couldn’t steep me in the scent of Rome. We’d been in the streets earlier today, trailing the subject of today’s assignment as he trekked from his home to the theatre in the city’s center for the last time. The ancient city stunk like
humanity. Standing water. Penned animals awaiting sacrifice and the tantalizing, sweet scent of fruit on carts, spicy meats cooking over open flames. The occasional whiff of perfumed body and supple leather underscored the entire melody.

Inside the theatre, lush portico gardens toppled the sweet scents of myriad flowers into the afternoon. They tripped over one another, tangled and heady, as they washed the outer edge of the curia in the scent of spring. The invisible lenses of my standard issue, black-framed glasses separated and identified them—narcissi and crocus, roses and oleander—before I dismissed the information with a practiced flick of
the eye. Most of the time it was nice to have the details so available, but others … the influx of information made it hard to simply soak in the experience.

We were here to observe and record the death of Julius Caesar, an event that shifted Rome from a republic into an empire—a moment that had significant impact on the history of the Western world. The chip in my glasses recorded everything in my field of vision—every moment, every glance, every word—even the ones that had gone unnoticed before the ability to travel through time had been discovered. The ones that had been forgotten, even by the people strolling along the promenade here tonight.
Even by the men plotting murder inside the curia.

Like all influential historical events, the death of Gaius Julius Caesar had been well documented by previous Historians, thus the holo-files. We apprentices cut our teeth on events that had been observed and recorded by at least ten different fully certified Historians, after which we’d spend an unbelievable number of hours reflecting on each of our recordings—how the event affected human history, whether it had been one of the moments we wanted to repeat or one that had put us on the path to the irreversible destruction that launched us into space in 2510 CE. Or, 1 NE.
The New Era. My era.

Once the Elders trusted us not to miss anything, and to be able to properly extrapolate historical impact, they’d turn us more or less loose. That day couldn’t come soon enough.

A few people wandered the gardens, some alone, others with arms linked through elbows. Their flowing garments in solid, bright colors made a pleasant addition to the paths and foliage, to the draped, golden cloths above that lent the space a tented feeling. None of them had a thought in their head about time travel. About the cascade of consequences that stemmed from today’s events, ones that brought us back here from the year 2560.

A tap on my shoulder refocused my
attention. Every muscle in my body went rigid, and I was half-scared an actual Roman senator was about to ask who in the name of Jupiter I was, and half-sure I was about to get busted by our trip overseer for wandering off the path of our assignment. Again.

But it’s just Analeigh. Glasses invisible on her face, long blond waves pinned up and covered by a short, brown wig, wearing a light *tunica* and draped in a wool toga, but Analeigh all the same.

“*Kaia. You’re not supposed to be in here.*” My best friend spoke softly in my mind without her lips so much as twitching.

“Isn’t it beautiful, though?” I replied
aloud in Latin, the language of the plebeians—the commoners—here in Rome.

She made a face at my easy use of the unfamiliar language. Even with the help of the bio tattoos threaded into our brain stems with intricate filament circuitry, she struggled with language. It’s the reason she used a similar tattoo at her throat, woven through her vocal cords, to communicate with me silently even though we rarely used them back home.

Too easy to eavesdrop when every Historian Apprentice has the same enhancements.

“They’re about to start the final sacrifice. It’s on our checklist,” she bumbled quietly in Greek, the easier of
the two local languages, for her.

I didn’t argue, following as she turned from the portico’s doorway and stepped across the walkway to the mostly enclosed curia. The stone structure was constructed in a semicircle, with a half-dozen steps leading up to a smattering of wide, stone seats meant for the senators and their meetings.

We lingered near one of the large, grooved columns, a spot we’d chosen during our pre-trip research; the people in the room were all upper-class senators, most of them friends. There were strangers among their ranks for the first time, since Julius Caesar had recently seen fit to add non-Romans,
nonelite—and even foreigners—to the group, but the risk of being noticed inside remained too high.

We blended out here, where the priests and augers kept trying for favorable omens. There were stragglers from the markets, the curious, servants and apprentices, sons and the people performing the sacrifices and rites. We would be close enough to record the assignment. That was the plan, anyway, but no amount of preparation ever kept my heart rate normal or my eyes from ferreting out the rest of our group from among the crowd, just to check.

Our overseer, Maude Gatling, and the third apprentice on this trip, Sarah Beckwith, stood near a column on the
opposite side of the curia. Maude’s crinkled features lent credence to her hunched-over posture, but Sarah looked a little nauseous—and as odd as Analeigh did with brown hair. They could have come to ancient Rome as blondes, but not if they wanted to go unnoticed, which was our foremost goal. My own chestnut waves blended perfectly with the majority of women’s tresses we glimpsed on the streets, but women at the theatre? There were none.

March in Rome was a cool eighteen degrees Celsius. The woolen garb kept me warm enough, at least down to my calves, even though it itched like crazy. The soft leather shoes had started to chafe blisters on our stroll through the
city, but the bleat of a terrified animal erased my focus on the slight discomfort.

A group of priests slit the throat of a white goat under a makeshift tent while augurs and a few of the senators looked on, desperate for a sign that today’s meeting should take place unhindered. The dying animal stopped struggling in the space of a few breaths, accepting its fate. As much as I wanted to look away as they began rooting through its entrails looking for a sign from their gods, the importance of my assignment held my gaze steady. The glasses could only record what I saw, and as a Historian, that was my job.

Research. Record. Reflect.

A flock of crows, black smudges
against the blue sky, swept in from the left side of the city. The crowd gasped as the bio-tat wired into my brain fed me information about ancient Roman superstition. That the birds were crows bode badly enough for the day’s events, but the fact that they flocked from the left? Worse than bad.

The Latin word for left was *sinistra*. Sinister.

Interesting and sort of relevant, but I pushed the rest of the information away after a quick sift through, anxious to create my own observations. The reflections required *new* information, nothing obvious, and after fifty years, *that* required a sharp eye.

I wish they took us to more positive
events, ones that highlighted the
goodness of people, but those were few
and far between during our
apprenticeship. The time I spent looking
for the joy and beauty was wasted as far
as the Elders were concerned.

It wasn’t part of the assignment here,
no matter how pretty the gardens were,
so I refocused on Gaius Julius Caesar.
The genius military man and visionary,
who tried his best to change Rome for
the better, strode up to confer with the
augurs and priests. His black eyes, set
against weathered skin and patrician
features, revealed a sharp, probing
intelligence. They belonged to a man
who missed nothing, and common sense
insisted that he must have confronted
plots against his life on nights before this one.

But then, he strode across battlefields in foreign lands, stood strong in the face of enemies with drawn weapons. Today, his friends concealed sharpened blades underneath their loose, flowing togas. Or at least, men he believed to be friends.

Even so, the suspicion hung about. Could he have known? Suspected? Believed every last bad omen given to him in the previous days and walked in here tonight anyway?

But, why?

Before I could chase that rabbit down its hole, Brutus—Marcus Junius Brutus—strode up to his friend and placed a hand on his shoulder. They held a terse
conversation in a tone too low to be overheard, which was unfortunate. Historical documents suggested Caesar had, for the second time today, allowed himself to be talked into taking his seat inside the curia and beginning the senatorial session, despite signs that should have discouraged him.

But we’re here because historical documents can’t always be trusted. They were written by people invested in the interpretation of the events of their time where as we, almost three thousand years removed, wanted only to understand the truth and its consequences.

Whatever Brutus said, the two of them turned their backs on the priests
and made their way inside the building. Analeigh tensed at my side, her sweaty palm sliding into mine as we stand witness to what’s about to happen.

Across the *exedra*, the lines of horror on Sarah’s face made her stick out like a sore thumb, at least to me, but no one else seemed to notice. All eyes were on Caesar, and the toga-clad men pressing closer and closer as he climbed the stone steps to his seat of honor.

He was a god among men. A Caesar. The first of his kind, and the men about to murder him only wanted to preserve life the way it had been for centuries. Save the Republic from a man they saw as a power-hungry tyrant without the best interest of their beloved Rome at
heart.

Or so history would have us believe. Now, searching their faces for righteous indignation, I glimpsed apprehension and fear. Anxiety. Hints of manic glee. History has judged them, both immediately and in the intervening decades, and most of it landed them in the asshole camp. I mean, they stabbed their best friend in the back. Even if he needed to die for the good of the Republic, which remained a judgment call, they pretended to be his friends. Not cool.

I cast a glance at Analeigh. “If I ever decide you need to die for, you know, valid reasons I promise to give you the chance to defend yourself.”
It took a split second for her bio-tat to render the translation, and then her eyes bugged out. “Or maybe give me the chance to run away?” she hissed back.

“Sure. Or that.”

Her head whipped back toward the assignment, her jaw tight as though it could ward off the bloody horror we both felt coming. In fact, it didn’t seem possible for a man so adept at warfare that he was more legend than mortal to sit in that chair, unaware of the suffocating tension spilling out of the curia and into the courtyard. It made me think again that something felt off. Too convenient.

A man stepped forward, draped in the same off-white, purple-striped toga as
the rest of the room. A senator of Rome, a nobleman. My brain stem tat spit out the answer into my mind before the question fully formed—*Tillius Cimber*.

My heart climbed into my throat, lungs struggling with oxygen. It was happening.

“You were going to consider my petition to return my brother from exile,” he said, too loudly. The words vibrated on the taut strands of anxiety in the air, bounding off the stone walls and crashing into my ears, easily translated by my tattoo.

It was hard not to wince, but that would shake my face. I’d been distracted enough today, wandering into the portico, and my tendency to be
sidetracked did not endear me to the overseers or our Elders. My family had endured enough disgrace in the past few years without my adding to it by being a space cadet. I was two Level-1 sanctions away from the Elders notifying my parents. After what happened with my brother, they might die from shame.

“I’m still considering it,” Caesar replied, his tone dismissive.

My lungs ached with unspent air. They struggled to call out, to warn him. Policy forbade any interaction, of course, and the brain stem tat did more than provide me with handy dandy information—it insisted I follow contemporary custom. It saved me a ton of studying, but the downside meant
occasionally losing control of my own limbs. It had forced me into an absurd curtsy on more than one occasion, once nearly toppling my giant wig right onto Marie Antoinette’s feet at a ball.

There was no way to change the scene that began to unfold in front of us, anyway. No way to nudge it a different direction without setting off unknown effects that might reach all the way to Genesis in 2560. I squeezed Analeigh’s hand tighter as Caesar shook off Cimber.

He barely took a step before another senator, Casca, stabbed him square in the neck, the blade sinking all the way to the hilt.

The almost comical surprise on his face slid quickly toward resignation as
Brutus attacked him next, his blade strong and true as it sunk into his old friend’s heart. The betrayal in Caesar’s eyes sent a sizzling chill down my spine, but no words passed his lips. He did not single Brutus out as more important than the others, despite the infamous line in Shakespeare’s version of these tragic events.

In fact, though he struggled and fought, Gaius Julius Caesar spoke not one more word as nearly sixty grown men surrounded him with daggers, each intent on taking their part of the blame—or the credit—by plunging their own weapon into flesh.

Sarah’s face turned pale, chalky, as the scene descended into a melee. Men
stabbed each other instead of their target. Their leather shoes slipped in crimson puddles dotting the floor, more than one of them slipped, and Caesar disappeared inside a crowd of thrusting blades. The coppery, slick odor of spilled blood clogged the air, coated my tongue. I swallowed, and it stuck to my throat.

It seemed like it went on forever, but in reality, he bled out in mere minutes. Just a man, after all. Not a god.

With the last bit of his strength Julius Caesar pulled his toga up to hide his face, clinging to the final shred of his dignity as his last breath whispered past his lips. The curia stood silent but for the ragged breaths of the betrayers.
There were onlookers other than the four of us, but no one moved. Not at first.

The dagger clattered from Brutus’s bloody hand, hitting the stone floor. “Sic semper tyrannus,” he muttered, staring down at Caesar’s bloodied body.

\textit{Thus always to tyrants.}

The senators fled, leaving footprints in the pool of sticky blood surrounding their leader, their Caesar. Apparently planning to murder one’s friend was more appealing than the execution. Bunch of lily-livered hacks.

Analeigh tugged on my arm, signaling that I had, once again, missed my cue. “Let’s go.”

Everyone else had run the opposite
direction of the portico, brushing past us into the streets to spread the news to the masses, who loved Caesar. Revered him, craved his leadership. His death would set off a series of events we would spend the next month discussing with various Elders back home.

Right now, we needed to leave Earth Before.

The scent of the blooming roses tried and failed to dislodge the taste of blood from my mouth. We met Sarah and Maude in the empty, quiet amphitheater and picked our way together into the shadows provided by a copse of plane trees. It was the same secluded spot we’d arrived in this morning, just in time to hurry to Caesar’s home and overhear
Brutus goading him into ignoring his wife’s bad dreams—dreams of holding her husband’s broken, bleeding body, if she was to be believed—in favor of joining the senators in the city.

On the way to Pompey’s theatre, a servant handed Caesar a scroll that, according to contemporary sources, informed him of this plot to kill him. He never read it. For the first time since we began studying this event in detail, his fate seemed sad as opposed to simply unnecessary. He would not be the last visionary intent on changing a place for the better to be thwarted by men who had much to gain by leaving the world the way it was.

Maude extended her arm as the
breeze kicked up, tearing at the loose hem of my toga. A metal cuff decorated with a series of dials and lights slid from her elbow to her wrist and she didn’t waste any time pressing a tiny button. Her thin, colorless lips lowered to the invisible microphone. “Return.”

A bluish haze surrounded the four of us, buzzing like a swarm of angry wasps and flickering like the lights in the underground apocalypse bunker we’d observed a few months ago. Four red dots on her cuff turned to green one at a time, and when the last light changed, the final days of republican Rome disappeared.

*
“Home sweet home,” Analeigh drawled as our group of four arrived back in the small air lock we’d departed from several hours previously.

Ever since we’d spent an afternoon observing the antebellum American South, Analeigh had been obsessed with perfecting her accent. The bio-tats would supply one if she asked, but she found exaggerating it more amusing.

I did, too. It never failed to make me giggle. “Yes, although most people wouldn’t call the Academy air lock sweet. It stinks of sweat and feet.”

She shrugged with a smile. Sanchi
was home for all of us, even if Analeigh and I were the only two out of our class of seven born on this planet, and I supposed that made it sweet, in its way. The rest came from nearby planets in Genesis, the solar system adopted by humanity over a generation ago.

Earth Before hadn’t blown up or disappeared or anything so dramatic. The environment had simply reclaimed the majority of land, and as medicine evolved, so did disease. There had been too many people fighting over declining resources, more wars than peace, and a host of other issues that forced those who remained to seek out a new home.

Now, the Historians strove to ensure those things didn’t happen a second time.
The four of us stripped off our dust-covered woolen tunics and togas, placing them in a drawer that extended to receive them, then retracted. Sarah and Analeigh dumped their wigs, too, and the dust in the room made us all cough before the ventilation system kicked on and recycled the oxygen mixture. Everything would be inspected for bacteria and other contagions, and if cleared, returned to the wardrobe closet. Sometimes we had to shower before the air lock let us out, but not often. We allowed a sharp metal protrusion to prick our fingers in quick succession, drawing blood that would also be analyzed for infections or biohazards.

There was nothing to do until the
doors unlocked except stare at one another. Black leggings and hip-length black tank tops made of a lightweight Kevlar blend covered our bodies as we perched on stainless steel benches that always transferred a chill, no matter how many times maintenance promised the air lock temperature was “comfortable.”

“How do you feel you did?” Maude rose and paced the small area, her question mechanical. More habit than anything.

She and her twin sister Minnie weren’t my favorite overseers. They smelled like old clothes and some kind of alcohol, and neither of them paid enough attention to us while we were
observing. They’d been to the same time and place on countless trips, so maybe I shouldn’t be so judgy, especially given that I often struggled to pay attention even the first time.

I stared at the Historian insignia stamped on the ruddy flesh inside Maude’s right wrist, trying to appear as though I wasn’t avoiding her gaze.


The words ran along the outside lines of a triangle and decorated not only the inside of our right wrists, but also the breasts of our Historian uniforms and the cloaks we wore on the colder trips.

When none of us answered, she
turned her attention on me. “Kaia Vespasian. Answer.”

“I feel confident I’ll get into trouble when my chip is uploaded.”

Maude removed her glasses, black rimmed now that we were home, and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Why this time?”

Nerves danced in my stomach. I had to try harder, even though the main events never interested me the most. The ways the major historical episodes affected the loved ones, the children, the enemies, the world around them ... that’s what I loved to decipher. In a few years, once my training was complete, I would be allowed to choose my subjects. But not until then.
“I wanted to see the gardens.”

In truth, the couples had drawn my attention. I couldn’t tell Maude that, though.

“Until you’re certified, you’ll see what we tell you to see. Even after that, I doubt you’ll be able to convince the Elders that studying flowers and trees is a worthy use of our many privileges. As always, work on your focus.”

I nodded, looking down at my toes until I felt her gaze slide to someone else.

“Sarah Beckwith? Analeigh Frank?”

My friends answered automatically, describing details of the assassination we had been instructed to capture that I
had missed. I really did need to pay more attention. Every child in Genesis took aptitude tests that determined our course of study, and they were never wrong. I knew I belonged at the Historian Academy, not in Agriculture, or Genetics, or any other school.

This had become my home, and despite my struggle to do as instructed on occasion, I loved my studies. Loved the purpose and dedication of the Historians, what we stand for, what we can accomplish. I was lucky to be here at all, after what my brother had pulled. Citizens of Genesis were exiled for only the gravest of infractions, and often their families were sentenced along with them. Jonah’s fate should have been all
the encouragement necessary to behave, but a desire to witness those special moments convinced me to break the rules far more often than was wise.

But the more infractions on my record, the less likely I’d be granted the specialty of my choosing after certifications, and that wasn’t part of the plan.

My left arm dangled unadorned but a gleaming metal loop circled Maude’s, drawing my gaze. I dreamed of a transport cuff of my own, aching for the freedom it represented. We’d been largely confined to the Academy since we were ten, nearly seven years now. For all of the times and places I’d visited in the past, in the present I’d
never left Sanchi. Genesis wasn’t huge, but there were seven small planets and several uninhabited moons. The thought of planet bouncing and freedom brought my brother to mind for the second time in as many hours, but I banished the thought of his name and the image of his face with a frown.

*Stay gone, Jonah.*

I’m not sure if the silent, fervent wish is because of my anger with him or because he’d be executed should he show his face here again.

Right then, all I knew for sure is that getting out of this decontamination air lock would be enough freedom for me. It usually took less than twenty minutes for computers to analyze our vitals and
clothes to make sure we didn’t bring back anything undesirable, while the tattoos etched deep into the skin over our brain stems, wrists, and throats uploaded all the bio information they needed.

The hollow feeling in my stomach said it had to be close to dinnertime. “What time is it?”

Analeigh rolled her eyes, and Sarah laughed.

“I know, I know, I always forget my watch. Is it time for dinner?”

“Yes,” Sarah answered, shaking her short, dirty-blond hair in an attempt to lose the wig crease.

“You have a pass tonight for a home visit, right? For your birthday?”
Analeigh asked.

Of course. My birthday.

The reminder that tonight meant dinner with my parents cracked a grin across my face. I missed them more since Jonah had left the Academy, and the thought of seeing them relieved some of the stress over another botched assignment. “Yep.”

“And we’re still going to Stars tomorrow, right? For your friend celebration?” Analeigh’s eyes sparkled with anticipation.

“I can’t believe the Elders gave you two passes for one week. Must be nice to be from an Original family,” Sarah commented, her perfectly formed eyebrows creased together.
My finger smoothed my unruly brows in response. I hadn’t been to the grooming booth in weeks; I just couldn’t find the time to care as often as my friends. I shrugged. “My parents put in a request. It’s not just my grandfather. I think it’s also, you know … Jonah.”

Analeigh’s lips pressed together at the mention of my rogue brother, and Sarah avoided my gaze. Sarah didn’t voice her curiosity, and Analeigh kept silent about her disapproval, both aware that I preferred not to talk about it. We all knew my grandfather’s status in the scientific community curried favors, regardless of Jonah’s decisions. He’d been one of the Original scientists whose work had ensured the survival of
selected families from Earth Before, and he’d founded the Historians besides. If my parents wanted me home for dinner tonight, then I’d be home for dinner tonight.

“Okay, well. We’ll see you for study session, then?” Analeigh asked, quieter now.

“Yes. My pass is only until eight.”

Our lights-out alarm came at ten every night, which gave us a couple of hours for a certification review. We didn’t have to go to sleep then or anything, but none of the electronics worked so most of us did. The observations and the traveling wore us out.

A series of clicks followed by a hiss
of air indicated we’d been declared uncontaminated and allowed back into the Historian Academy. Maude exited first, probably thrilled to not have to listen to us anymore. Analeigh and Sarah raced ahead, chattering about our plans for tomorrow night.

We typically didn’t get passes more than once a month, but birthday celebrations were special, my seventeenth birthday even more so. It meant that tomorrow night I could find out the name of my True Companion—the one person ever born, or who would ever be born, who was made to love me.

I only had to decide if I wanted to know.
Chapter Two

Standing in my mother’s arms an hour later, it struck me how many things had changed since Jonah disappeared. The fact somehow made the familiar more dear. The way my mother smelled—like dirt and fertilizer, perfumed by whatever plant or flower she’d last touched at the Agriculture Academy before coming home—fell around me like a warm blanket. She could make any shriveled seed bloom, which was why she’d been chosen to remain on Sanchi at the Academy instead of posted on Palenque, where the farms operated. The scent pricked my eyes with unexpected tears and I squeezed her waist hard before
letting go.

My dad wasn’t much of a hugger, but the grin under his brown-and-gray moustache betrayed his happiness at having me home. “Hey, bud. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Are you hungry?” Mom grabbed my black cloak from my fingers, a staple on Sanchi, where the temperature never rose above ten degrees Celsius. She folded it primly over an arm. Her ice-blue eyes pleaded with me to be hungry, for the night to be normal even though it couldn’t.

The house felt unsettled, as though Jonah’s absence had somehow shifted the walls and tilted the floors. But it
hadn’t changed the structure—it had changed us.

Both Jonah and I being sorted into the Historian Academy had been a surprise since our parents displayed scientific aptitude—my mother a botanist, Dad a respected genome researcher—but my brother and I shared a love of good-natured discussion on the ever-popular topic of whether humanities’ choices or our genetics had a greater impact on our downfall. Voices had filled our house with laughter and constant debate. It had always been fun, and I’d joined in even before my training began, but now the hallways and bedrooms and kitchen felt deserted. The way things used to be had evaporated, devoured by the shadow of
Jonah’s ghost, and as hard as we faked it, we just weren’t the same family without him.

My brother had been gone three years now, running and hiding in the vastness of space. Surviving by committing unthinkable acts of piracy. It seemed like less time had passed since this place had gone from feeling jovial and warm to holding its breath. Waiting. It reeked of forced happiness.

“I’m starving,” I told my mom, grasping for normal.

The kitchen looked the same, with its cheery yellow curtains edging the sink and windows and dings in the metal cabinets here and there. Mom’s meatloaf smelled familiar—though not as good as
real beef. Sometimes the hardest piece of the past to leave untouched was the food. No animals had been relocated to Genesis for several reasons, so our nutrition was synthetic. Though I knew nothing different, after a few observations it became clear that even the scents in our new worlds paled in comparison.

We gathered at the table and ate, my mother bowing her head and murmuring a quiet prayer while my father and I dug in. My mother had been raised on Persepolis, a tiny, arid planet where most of the religious traditionalists lived. My father was born on Sanchi and hadn’t been raised with any sort of inclination toward faith. Religion wasn’t
popular in Genesis, but also wasn’t prohibited or sanctioned. Those who believed in a higher power followed the same primary, overarching law as the rest of us—no hatred or segregation of any kind.

The Originals had agreed and instituted a zero-tolerance policy for any kind of violence. It was the only true law in our society, and the only infraction punishable by exposure—by death.

Day to day we operated on expectations rather than laws. The System ran more like a corporation than a government, with all of the citizens acting as employees—cogs in the machine. We were rewarded for good performance, demoted and reprimanded
for poor, and had a Sanction Guide that amounted to a basic corporate conduct policy. It had worked for us.

“Where are you traveling next week?” Dad swallowed a mouthful of peas and met my gaze.

Our dark eyes matched—chocolate brown threaded with gold—though he didn’t wear glasses. I didn’t need them outside of recording memories, either, but they were like a familiar friend by now. Most Historians wore them all the time.

“Our next trip is to New York City, 1911.”

I smiled and waited. This was a game Jonah had begun years ago, telling Dad a year and a place and seeing if he could
recall the event. Instead of the competitive glint that typically shone in my father’s eyes, a trembling fear skittered past.

Then it disappeared, gone too quickly for me to ferret out its source. He swallowed another bite of vegetables, tapping his fork against his chin. “Plenty going on in that time and place, but given that you’re still training, I’d have to guess the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire.”

“Right.” I stuffed more food in my mouth and chewed.

His knowledge didn’t surprise me, but the fear in his eyes lodged a trickle of trepidation at the base of my neck.

The Triangle Fire remained a fixture on the apprentice training schedule, but
was kind of a mixed bag. The Historians considered it an important stop because it reminded humanity what could happen when desperate circumstances remained hidden behind walls erected by rich, socially irresponsible men, but the event also birthed labor unions in the United States, which had, after intense reflection, been deemed a detriment to society as a whole.

“When is your first certification exam?” Mom asked, her light gaze holding on to mine.

“We’ve still got a few months, but Analeigh’s already got a study group going. We’ve got a session tonight after I get back.”

“What’s on the first round?”
“Genesis foundation, the Originals, function and location of planets. First and second year stuff. No problem.”

“Well, Analeigh is right. It still can’t hurt to go over it and make sure.”

I managed to avoid rolling my eyes, but it was a struggle. My mother thought Analeigh was the best thing since hover transports. She was my complete opposite in almost every way, and I suspected my mother thought my best friend’s natural caution kept me in line.

After dinner, I helped her clear the dishes from the table and pile them into the sanitizer. It was seven-thirty—time to head back to the Academy. I excused myself to use the toilet, even though I didn’t have to go.
My parents probably knew that I snuck into Jonah’s room every time I came home, which wasn’t all that often—every three months or so—but they never asked why or bothered me about it. Papers covered my brother’s walls, leaving no hint of the sturdy metal behind them, and reflected the glow of the blue moon that hung close to Sanchi. They were pages from actual books, mostly religious and historical texts, that had all been transcribed into the digital library in the Archives. I wasn’t here to read them; I could do that on the comps any time. It was the smell that drew me back—stale sweat, lingering male cleansing powder, and a citrusy scent that reminded me of Jonah more than
anything else, the result of my brother’s strange obsession with oranges. When he had apprenticed as a Historian, he’d lifted them from every site where they existed, no matter how many times the overseers sanctioned him.

Tanis, the farthest planet from Sanchi, grew citrus trees, but the transports never made it all the way here before the fruit started to spoil. The oranges Jonah brought back from his trips to Earth Before exploded in my mouth, dribbled juice down my chin, and gave me a sensation I’d never experienced until my first observation—one of being suspended in a brief, intense moment. Alive.

I sank down on the edge of Jonah’s
neatly made bed with a sigh, running my fingers lightly over the wrinkles in his dark blue quilt. I loved my friends, but they weren’t my brother. They didn’t understand the wrenching loss that still startled me when I remembered I couldn’t talk to him, or the resentment that stemmed from what he’d done to our family. The increased scrutiny applied to me at the Academy just because we shared DNA.

The quiet of Jonah’s space pressed against me, kneading peace into my muscles until a short *beep* shattered the moment. I looked down at my watch, expecting the noise to be the alarm warning me of my approaching pass expiration, but found that, as usual, I’d
forgotten to grab it.

The sound came again, and I listened for a couple of seconds before exploring the stand beside his bed. The metal transferred a chill to my fingertips and I was about to give up when the beeping erupted again, definitely coming from inside the piece of furniture. My fingers hit the bottom of the drawer about two inches down, but the front made it appear at least double that depth. I rapped on the base, receiving a hollow echo that confirmed my suspicions—a false bottom.

It appeared Jonah kept secrets even before abandoning us.

My brother had been a teenage boy, so perhaps I would regret finding what
he saw fit to hide, but if the drawer harbored naughty pictures or lube or something else disgusting, I would deal. Most boys hid that crap under their beds, anyway. If Jonah had gone to the trouble of crafting a false bottom, he must have squirreled away something good. Three broken fingernails later, I’d discovered a prize worth all ten.

Jonah’s travel cuff sat in my lap, its red lights winking at me.

It hadn’t been deactivated—I didn’t even know if they could be remotely disabled—and the cuffs weren’t assigned to specific Historians. They didn’t need to be since the bio-tats tracked our movements. I’d always assumed Jonah had taken his with him.
I ignored my excitement over all the possibilities of owning my own illicit cuff and grabbed the only other thing in the drawer—Jonah’s light blue True Companion card. His name and birthday were stamped across the top: Jonah Samuel Vespasian (October 3, 2538–), and under that, the name of his perfect match:

Rosie Shapiro (February 17th, 1894–March 25, 1911)

Sad. Rose Shapiro had just turned seventeen when she’d died, and given the exact date of her death, I immediately wondered if she’d died in the fire my friends and I would observe in a few days—another horrible event that would be tough to stomach. I tucked the card
into my waistband, thinking that I would research Miss Shapiro before our visit to the Triangle Fire, and slid the heavy metal cuff up my arm until it stayed put above my elbow. I’d thrown a long-sleeved Kevlar on over my tank tonight, but the tight black material didn’t conceal much of anything. I’d have to try to pull my cloak on quickly so that my parents wouldn’t notice.

My mom met me at the end of the hallway, tucking her long blond bangs behind her ear. “Oh, there you are, honey, I was coming to check. Everything all right?”

Her blue eyes softened as she took in my face; we both knew I’d been in Jonah’s room and not in the toilet. I bit
my lip and nodded, surprising us both by wrapping my arms around her back, careful not to let the cuff bang against her. “I miss you guys.”

“We miss you, too.” She squeezed hard for several seconds, then pulled away and pushed my long waves over my shoulders. “Please make an appointment for grooming. Your hair needs a cut, and I can’t believe Analeigh is letting you get away with those eyebrows.”

I snickered. “The pointed looks have turned to subtle hints.”

“Your father hoped you’d be able to stay a little longer, maybe watch the System Reports, but I see your pass only gives you another twenty minutes.”
“Maybe next time.”

Every single evening the reports replayed a significant event that happened on the same day on Earth Before, and the Elders very rarely chose to remind people of the good decisions that were made. Those weren’t what landed us here.

Most Historians didn’t watch the programming, given that our days were spent capturing, studying, rewinding, and studying again some of the most gruesome mistakes of our collective past.

Mom hooked her elbow through mine and led me into the living room, where Dad waited by the door with a box wrapped in bright orange paper. Even
the color—reminiscent of Jonah’s fruit fetish—jammed a lump in my throat. I shrugged into my cloak, grateful it hid the cuff and gave me a moment to recover my wits.

None of us lived at home after our tenth birthdays, when we were slotted into the Academies based on our aptitude tests, so it wasn’t that I wanted to stay. I didn’t belong here. I wanted … I didn’t know what I wanted. My family back, maybe. A familiar place, a safe haven.

Everyone experienced a feeling of wanting to belong at some point, probably, but it plagued Historians more than most. The Elders claimed it was because we didn’t just have to wonder
which of the seven planets might feel most like home, but the entire catalog of human history. We couldn’t live there, of course. In the past. Our travels were regulated, and our bio tattoos had programs implanted that would terminate us if we overstayed a set observation by more than twenty-four hours, as a failsafe in case we’d been seen or interrogated.

The cuffs, which offered free access to the past, were privileges. The people of Genesis trusted the Historians with one of the most potentially hazardous pieces of tech in our new society, and in return, we brought back knowledge that benefited everyone. Some Historians had been forced to give up their cuffs,
relegated to exclusive reflection in the Archives, when they got too attached to a particular time and place.

I peered up at my father. “What’s in the box?”

Dad rolled his eyes and thrust it into my hands. “It’s a present, Kaia. You have to open it.”

“Happy Birthday, sweetie,” Mom added, rubbing my back.

I untied the curly white ribbon and handed it to my mother, then ripped off the paper. She took that, too, and wadded it up so it would fit in the recycling. A necklace nestled inside the white tissue paper. The flat pendant looked like antique silver, with what appeared to be a palm branch stamped
across the front, a laurel wreath on the back.

I looked up at my dad, confused. “What is it?”

“Something that your grandfather collected on a travel. He wasn’t supposed to take it, of course, but seeing that he’s been in his grave for nearly ten years, I doubt he can get sanctioned now.”

I snorted. “You don’t know the Elders all that well, then.”

“You know the Elders decided to trace familial lines back as far as possible prior to evacuating Earth Before, and we managed to go back centuries for most people. Your grandfather took it off our paternal
founder on her deathbed.”

All of the families chosen to resettle Genesis had reverted to the surnames of their paternal founders, the point where a genetic line began, and ours belonged to the Vespasians of Rome.

New place, new name. New beginning, fresh start.

I started to blow off the basic knowledge Dad spouted, then his actual words sank in. “You’re telling me this came from Julia Berenice? Queen Berenice?”

“Yes. The symbols represented the love between her and Titus. Or the relationship between Judea and Rome, to anyone who might have been suspicious,” my mom interjected.
Berenice, our paternal founder, secretly bore children for Titus, an emperor of Rome. They never married and were kept apart the whole of their love affair due to various political intricacies. Titus died young, and until the advent of time travel, Berenice’s history had been lost. It had been a surprise to the geneticists when they’d mapped my grandfather’s genes and traced our family to the Vespasians, since no known male heirs to the family existed.

“I love it,” I told my parents, and it was the truth. I’d never held anything more symbolic of my past, or more symbolic of the future. War and hatred had torn Earth Before apart, but Genesis
had been born of the desire for peace and harmony. We had clawed our way into the wilderness of space after years of destruction, and as a Historian, I had a duty to ensure those moments did not come to pass again. I fingered the metal as my dad fastened it around my neck, prouder than ever to be part of the future.

I kissed my parents good night, thanking them again for the precious gift. Once outside, I slid into the automated hovercar and swiped my wrist tattoo—the bio-tats resembled barcodes from Earth Before in pattern, but instead of black lines, the pale stripes under my skin were golden in color—instructing it to return me to the Academy. A moment later, the thin gold strands flashed
brighter for a split second, delivering a text comm from Analeigh straight into my mind.

You’re going to be late. 2nd Offense. Speed it up.

Her constant worry made me smile, and I spoke a soft response into the tattoo before a flick of my wrist sent it back through the wireless network that connected all Historians.

On my way, Mother.

The manicured pathways and stately brick buildings of Sanchi flew past the windows. The terraform on this planet mimicked an upscale college campus on Earth Before, a deliberate reflection of our industry—academia. Then the hover
transport picked up speed, the bushes and stone and pretentious architecture blurring together until Sanchi looked like anywhere else.
Chapter Three

The Historian Academy, a massive five story redbrick building surrounded by carefully landscaped pathways and shrubbery, was quiet when I arrived. The barren hallways echoed the sounds of my footsteps, making me feel strangely alone, but once the door to my room clicked open the sound of laughter and conversation assured me that was far from the truth.

My friends were sprawled on the couch and crammed into the desk chairs in the common room, personal comps on their laps or within reach, a tiny lake of colored note cards spread in the center of the floor. Analeigh sat beside the
scraps of pink, yellow, blue, and green, mixing them up with both hands. Levi, a sometimes addition to our foursome, waited at Analeigh’s desk, his gaze turned toward the window that stared out onto the quad. Sarah lounged sideways on the sofa, her long legs draped across her boyfriend Oz’s lap. His thick, inky black curls fell toward his eyes, which were a stormy gray color that held an aloofness that kept the rest of us at arm’s length. Oz had always been polite but separate.

Lately he’d seemed even more standoffish, but I’d given up trying to figure him out a long time ago. Not my boyfriend, not my problem.

Seeing the two of them reminded me
of tomorrow night, and my fingers went to the necklace hanging against my chest. Ever since the physicists that had perfected time travel combined their research with that of the geneticists mapping ancestral lines, we’d been able to predict True Companions. One true loves. To most of us, just Trues. On our seventeenth birthday we could find out their names and a few details … if we wanted to know.

Of course, the single most compatible person for each of us that would ever live in the history or future of the universes had only the tiniest probability of living here and now. The chance was so mathematically unlikely that many people never bothered to find out at all.
Of those who did, no one pushed that button expecting to be able to have that person. It was mostly fun.

But somehow, Sarah and Oz had won the impossible lottery. They were the only living Trues in all of Genesis.

Ever since his name had shown up on Sarah’s card earlier this year he’d been hanging around more, but he didn’t seem interested in being friends with the rest of us. He tolerated Analeigh and me since we were friends with Sarah, but it didn’t take a genius to see that the notoriety of their connection killed him. Oz and Sarah were pretty much the most famous people in the System. Except maybe Jonah.

But famous and infamous weren’t
exactly the same thing.

“Oh, good, Kaia, you’re back.” Analeigh finished fussing with the cards and swiped strands of blond waves away from her face. “We need to get started.”

“What’s with the cards?” I asked, plopping down on the floor next to her. The weight of Jonah’s cuff at my elbow made me nervous, but it felt safer to keep it on me. There was no way to stash it with all of them here, anyway.

“Just an idea I had so we can quiz each other. The pinks are establishment questions, blues are Historian questions, yellows are Earth Before, greens are wild.”

“She made us all switch off our brain
stem tats, too,” Levi complained.

”Duh, Levi. If it was on, it would just give you the answers as soon as it heard the question.” Sarah rolled her eyes. “They’ll be off during our certification, too.”

There were five certification exams to pass over the next eighteen months, before we would be considered full Historians. The first one, set for about two months from now, covered simple things—facts that we learned as first and second years. We should all know the answers, but my best friend tended toward overpreparing and Oz had backed her up. I’d gone along to appease Analeigh, Sarah hadn’t wanted to argue with her boyfriend, and I didn’t know
why Levi had decided to come. The other two girls in our class, Peyton and Jess, had opted out.

I felt a little jealous of them in the face of the rather daunting pile of cards.

“Everyone grab one of each color.”

Analeigh picked out hers, and then I snagged three of each and handed two back to Oz and Sarah on the couch. Once Levi was ready, Analeigh started with a pink one.

“Name a science that was discontinued by the establishment team, and give a cause and effect.”

“Who answers?” Oz asked.

“Um, let’s go with the person on my right. So, Sarah.”
“Okay, so ... advanced medicines. Like, ones extending longevity.” She looked to Analeigh for approval, her face breaking into a smile at our roommate’s nod. “It was discontinued in order to head off the kind of overpopulation we had on Earth Before, and an effect is a return to the life expectancy of the mid-twentieth century—seventy-one for women, sixty-six for men.”

I had answered in my head, just to make sure I could, but my mind had gone again to my brother. *Overpopulation concerns* meant I was the only person in this room with a sibling. Maybe that’s part of why they couldn’t understand how I could miss him after everything
he’d done.


Sarah turned over her own pink card, turning toward Oz with a soft smile. “This one is easy. Recite the single law that governs Genesis, as written by the Originals.”

“This is dumb,” Levi interjected. “A five-year-old could answer that.”

“Oh, dry up, Levi. It’s going to be on the certification.” I kind of agreed with him, but it must have taken Analeigh hours to make these silly cards.

Oz cleared his throat, ignoring the conversation as usual, and answered. “Do no harm, for each is equal to the
next, and each offers what they are able.”

“Yes. Beautiful.” Sarah leaned up to kiss his cheek.

“My turn.” Oz looked down at his green card and flicked a glance in my direction. “Name at least four of the seven planets in Genesis. Include at least one purpose for which they were specifically terraformed.”

Ugh. Of course I would get the long answer.

“Sanchi, terraformed for academia. Petra, hydrotechnology and drinking water. Angkor, swampy to support the production of sugarcane and cypress. And Roma, industry and production.”
Oz said nothing, just flipped the card back onto the pile.

I chose a green card, too, and read the question to Levi. “Name four sanctions outlined in the Guide to Penalty Determinations.”

“Too bad that’s not your question, Kaia. I’m sure you have them memorized.” He continued when I ignored the teasing jab. “Exposure, exile to Cryon, mopping duty, delay of certification.”

“Yes.” In truth, I’d only experienced one of those—mopping duty. Just thinking about the others gave me the willies.

“Okay, Analeigh. The aptitude tests determine whether we will pursue
career or labor at age ten. Give the percentages of each path, along with the names of at least six of the Academies.”

“Sixty to forty percent, career to labor. Energy Resources, Environmental Sustainability, Theoretical Science, Genetics, Architecture and Terraforming, and Space Exploration.”

The next hour went on the same way, with easy answers like the year the time travel formula was isolated—2460 CE—the discovery of Genesis by the Original team of scientists in 2463 CE, the decision to terraform and evacuate Earth Before in 2498. The following ten years were spent making decisions regarding facets of society like organized religion, which had been
determined to contain an inherent polarizing ability. They would be avoided as the Originals established our new System.

We didn’t stumble over a single answer, but it was kind of good to go over the information, anyway. Each of our families, settlers of this new world, had been chosen due to a variety of genetic and historical factors. A reminder of our short past made me thankful.

The alarms on our watches beeped five minutes before nine-thirty, signaling the end of our free time. The boys got up and made their way to the door, Oz sneaking in a quick, slightly awkward hug with Sarah before slipping into the
“That was fun,” I commented drily.

“It was helpful,” Analeigh stressed, striding into her room and yanking her blue pajamas out of a drawer.

Sarah and I made eye contact and smiled.

“Tomorrow’s a big day, Kaia.” Sarah yawned. “Have you decided what you’re going to do?”

My seventeenth birthday. True Companion go-time. It had never been a big deal to me, or anyone else for that matter, but Sarah had different feelings about it. For obvious reasons. “I’ll probably find out. Why not?”

“You never know,” she said, cheeks
reddening.

“I guess that’s true.”

But that wasn’t always the case. Sarah and Oz were the anomaly. The exception, not the rule. I wouldn’t be so lucky.

*
Stars in My Pies, a popular restaurant a brief stroll from most of the Academies, was pretty crowded for the middle of the week. Older kids from different apprenticeships filled several tables—pass restrictions expired once we turned eighteen. The insignias on their breasts were hard to distinguish from far away, and I sucked at keeping everyone’s colors straight. It looked like some Mentors and perhaps some kind of Medical Science Academy apprentices joined us for the evening.

I must share my birthday with a few others, because there were at least two tables filled with kids too young to be out without a special pass, plus a red vinyl booth occupied by another group
of Historian apprentices in my class.

I knew Jessica Beaton’s birthday and mine were the same. She’d been born on Petra, an outer planet that contained mostly water, but we’d been at the Academy together for years. We’d never gotten along.

I wondered if she was going to find out the name of her True Companion tonight. In general, I felt more curious than swoony over the whole thing, probably because of the impossibility of it all. Still, it would be interesting.

“Kaia, Analeigh, over here!” Sarah’s happy voice floated over the laughter and mid-twentieth century music floating out of a reconstruction of something called a jukebox. It ran on digital files
like everything else, but the owner, Max, liked the throwback feel of the place. The robot servers even wore roller skates and red gingham aprons.

The metal chairs made screeching noises as they scraped against the black-and-white tiled floor, and Analeigh and I flopped into them. I hadn’t told her about finding Jonah’s cuff even though keeping secrets made me nervous. She knew me well enough to know I was hiding something, so if we’d been alone it would have been nothing but an endless interrogation. Thank goodness Sarah and Oz had been granted passes to celebrate with us. I needed a buffer.

The two of them shared a chocolate milkshake across the table, poring over a
menu even though we ate here every month. We all ordered cheeseburgers—except Oz, who didn’t eat meat, not even the fake, synthetic kind Genesis had to offer.

Once the menus were gone Sarah and Analeigh stared at me while Oz examined his cuticles. Discomfort started in my belly and slowly tightened all of my limbs until my fingernails dug into my palms. Being the center of attention did that to me. “Yes, I’m going to find out, okay? Stop staring like I’ve got a big glob of spinach in my teeth.”

“We could be staring at your unruly eyebrows. Honestly, Kaia,” Analeigh admonished.

“Oh my stars, I will get them done
tomorrow.” My heart wasn’t in the retort, my mind mired in the decision to get me up and moving toward the info pod in the corner.

The True Companion calculations had nothing to do with fanciful notions of fate or destiny, the way people used to believe. Science had simply managed to break down genomes into their most basic, molecular components and isolate ones that lined up seamlessly. Like puzzle pieces.

Before we could predict molecular compatibility, most people were happy with regular love—Chosen Companions. Chosens were far more common than Trues, and couples in Genesis were content. In the end, that would be enough
for me, too, but for tonight, the curiosity was too much to bear. What if my True lived down the street, or on Angkor or Persepolis?

“Well, go do it!” Analeigh’s green eyes shone, her excitement affecting me in spite of my best efforts. Her seventeenth birthday wasn’t for several months, so she was living vicariously tonight.

I grinned and stood up, rubbing my palms together and cackling. Analeigh and Sarah laughed, but when I met Oz’s smoky-gray gaze, his eyes were serious. They peered into mine as though hoping to see something specific, but I had no idea what. He looked away first.

Victory.
I left them and headed for Stars’ information pod, a shoulder-high metal machine that spit out all kinds of information. Jess stood in front of the display screen, shifting her weight from one foot to the other as she waited, hand outstretched, ignoring me. Once we turned eighteen and received transport cuffs like the one Jonah left behind, we wouldn’t have to use the pods to access a database while away from the Academy. They only existed to track information requests of the apprentices.

The machine beeped once, its red lights flashing to green, and a slip of pink cardstock slid into Jess’s hand. The name of her True Companion. “This is stupid,” she mumbled in my direction.
I shrugged. “It’s kind of fun. Like how people used to go to those silly fortune-tellers and pretend they could see into the future.”

“Except now we can actually see into the future.”

“Not really,” I corrected out of habit. “Trues are the only part of the future we can predict. The people are there, but their paths are always changing based on the choices we make now. Too many potential trajectories.”

Despite our ability to time travel, predicting future trajectories with any success remained inexact. People were simply too unpredictable. The existence of free will would never change, so the Originals had chosen instead to focus on
the past as a more viable way to ensure the best possible outcomes for humanity.

“Why are you lecturing me?” Jess tucked her sleek, chin-length black bob behind her ears and glared at me, her brown eyes sharp. She stood shorter than me, like most of the people in Genesis from Asian descent, but that had never affected her intimidation factor.

“I’m not. I’m just saying the cards are for fun. It’s like a game. Don’t be so snotty.”

“Oh, I’m the snotty one? Miss, I’m exempt from the rules because my granddaddy was an Original?”

I ignored her pettiness, mostly because it would piss her off. “What’s your card say?”
She clutched it to her chest. “None of your business.”

Jess stalked back to her table of friends, shredding the pink card on the way and stuffing it into a recycling pit. Her thumb pressed the black button on the front and the contents caught fire and smoldered into ashes. I’d seen the name over her shoulder, anyway. Someone named Gretchen Lillian Morris, 2337-2368.

No life choice, unless it embraced violence or hate, was taboo on Genesis. The Elders seemed to prefer same-sex pairings, actually, because it saved them from a birth. Population control and the two-child recommendation remained a point of silent contention among some,
particularly the traditionalists, but no one could argue that it was a potential threat. Genesis was only so big. I wondered if Jess had suspected her True would be a woman.

I pressed the bio tattoo on my left wrist—the triangular Historian seal decorated my right—into the pod and waited while my personal information displayed across the screen. A laser scanned my wrist and the information pod blinked, then whirred. A moment later it spit out my own little pink card. My conversation with Jess had reminded me this was all silly fun and I glanced at it quickly, no longer filled with anything except idle curiosity.

*Caesarion Caesar (47 BCE–30 BCE)*
To have a True so far removed from the present was also pretty rare. There was a girl, Jess’s friend Peyton, whose True wasn’t scheduled to be born until 6780. We’d spent an afternoon trying to figure out how in the System they’d figured that out, but we still didn’t have a clue. Future Trues were a strange phenomenon, and usually not more than a generation removed since predicting Chosens was impossible.

I read the printed words again—*Caesarion Caesar*—then folded the card and stuffed it into the back pocket of my leggings. My faux burger waited at the table—pepper jack cheese, no tomatoes—and I took a giant bite and smacked obnoxiously while Analeigh
made impatient noises.

“Come on, Kaia. Who is it? Do we know him?”

No one assumed we’d know him, so really she meant did we know of him. And we did.

“Caesarion Caesar.”

Oz’s eyes snapped up at the announcement—his historical interests lay in the ancient world, while mine tended toward revolutionary France. His long fingers squeezed his grilled cheese sandwich so hard a hunk of melty goodness slumped out onto his wrist. “Caesarion. As in, the only son of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra? That’s your True Companion?”
“Aw, that’s kind of sad. His uncle killed him, right?” Analeigh bit her lip and cocked her head to one side, her classic I’m-trying-to-remember pose. Her historical interests were early nineteenth-century America, so the Caesars landed well wide of her comfort zone.

“His adopted brother of sorts,” Oz corrected. “Octavian—Augustus—was actually Julius Caesar’s great-nephew but he was adopted and groomed to be his successor.”

“I guess I missed out on my chance to be a princess, guys. If only I’d been born, um …” I trailed off, attempting fruitlessly to calculate in my head how many years ago Caesarion had died. Or
been killed. I shoved more cheeseburger in my face while Analeigh and Sarah laughed.

“Two-thousand five hundred and ninety years ago. Give or take.” Oz wiped the cheese off his hand with a napkin. He didn’t look up as he took another bite of his sandwich.

“I can totally see you as a princess, Kaia,” Sarah giggled. “Your family is as close to royalty as it gets now.”

“Shut up, Sarah.”

“Yeah, you are totally wrong,” Analeigh protested.

“Thank you, Analeigh. You’re a good friend.”

“She’s wrong because you would
never wear a dress long enough to be a princess.”

I threw a roasted potato at her face but missed. It slid down the blond waves that hung almost to her waist, then plopped onto her shoulder. She gave me a dirty look and flicked it onto the table, grabbing a cloth napkin to dab at the oil left behind in her hair.

After we settled down, Sarah changed the subject, asking Oz where his observation would take him tomorrow.

“Pearl Harbor,” he replied. “I’m looking forward to it, I suppose.”

I hadn’t been to Pearl Harbor, but I’d seen the holo-files. Only Oz would look forward to watching a bunch of people blown to smithereens.
“Yeah, that should be interesting,” I mocked.

Oz grunted his response, missing or ignoring my sarcasm, and Sarah patted his arm. She leaned over to press a kiss to her boyfriend’s freckled cheek, her fingers teasing the black hair at the nape of his neck. “Leave him alone, Kaia. You know Oz will be happy when his traveling days are over and he can hide out in the Archives all day.”

I loved the Archives at the Academy, too, but not as much as being present at the events. It helped me understand, to pick up on the mood of a thing and not simply the actions. But Oz was … shy, maybe? Focused? Snobby? Either way, he wasn’t big on interacting. He
preferred to be alone in the Archives, reflecting on our recordings until his brains slid out of his ears.

“How many rules did you break today, Kaia?” Sarah’s mischievous gaze sparkled. “Should we bust out the Guide when we get back to the room, take bets on your sanction?”

Oz’s serious gaze fell heavy on my face as it burned. Analeigh and Sarah kept giggling, snorting that if Caesar hadn’t been able to hold my attention, who would.

“Seriously, I think she might have missed him altogether,” Sarah gasped.

“Ohhh, and he could have been her father-in-law!” Analeigh hooted. “He doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who
would have approved of a girl like you, Kaia.”

It was weird to think of the man we saw murdered yesterday in a different context. My True mourned him. His father. Something shifted in my gut, an uncomfortable twinge. “Can it, you guys. It’s not even a serious infraction to mess up an observation as an apprentice, and you know it.”

“You would know. I’m sure you have that page dog-eared.”

Most of my Guide to Sanction Determination was in fact dog-eared. It outlined potential infractions, and according to their severity, intent, frequency, and a host of other factors, suggested appropriate sanctions. I liked
Analeigh sighed, sobering as she returned to her typically grave self. “Seriously, Kaia, I don’t understand why you can’t just do what you’re told.”

Oz’s silent, judgy stare started to unnerve me, even though it wasn’t uncommon coming from him. He and Analeigh both followed every rule to the letter, never setting a toe out of line. Maybe they had the right idea. Sometimes, in the present, I convinced myself to be more like them.

The past, though, never failed to make me waver.

The moments we captured, the special ones … people never saw them coming, never understood the impact of
The seconds as they ticked past. The Historians did good work, and being a part of this Academy made me proud. I loved my parents and had watched my brother break their hearts, and I knew that Analeigh was right, that I should follow all the rules, not just the ones that didn’t interfere with my selfish desires.

But I wanted to *live* moments, not just record them.

Max sent over four strawberry cupcakes—he must have pulled my favorite from my bio-tat info—and the flickering candle and off-key rendition of “Happy Birthday” by my friends made me forget about my family and my brother and following the rules, anchoring me here and now.
But as I blew out the pink candle and licked away the creamy frosting, I wondered what he had looked like. Caesarion. What he’d liked to eat, whether he had ever fallen in love, what kind of mother Cleopatra had been ... and I couldn’t help the little seed of sadness that took root in my heart at the realization that he could have died before he could celebrate his own seventeenth birthday.

Before he’d really gotten to live at all.
Chapter Four

The Archives were my favorite place inside the Academy, the spot that, more often than not, really made me feel at home. Long hallways sprouted from the massive main chamber and led to private viewing rooms, utilized by advanced reflectors who preferred seclusion. All of the rooms were typically quiet, even if several Historians were present at once. When we returned from trips, we analyzed and critiqued our recordings in here, individually and in group sessions. Reflection was a huge part of our jobs as Historians because without it, all we had were holo-files—essentially the same as reading history texts on Earth Before, but
probably way more cool.

Anyone could watch history. We trained to interpret and apply.

There were fifteen eight-by-eight table comps surrounded by stools in the main room, where the walls were made of a hazy glass polymer. History, via recordings, twisted across the terrain of Earth Before on every one of them. On one wall, we watched the building of the Great Wall of China. On another, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. A third displayed the prisoners breaking free of the Bastille in Paris, but the images constantly changed. Regardless of what events played at any given time, it reminded me how much life has been lived up to now. The Archives brought
humanity’s previous home alive even here, millions of miles and hundreds of years away.

Colored dots spattered the thick glass floor, each representing a Historian. We were color-coded by year—fifth year was red. Certified Historians were gray and Elders were black. Some of us were out observing and recording; if I stepped on someone’s dot it would display his or her name, bio data, and current location.

It comforted me to know that long after my time is complete, this room will still exist. In a way, so will I. Maybe one day there will be Historians traveling back to watch me.

If I ever did anything worth recording.
Normally, I’d be in here to study holo-files and expound on how they had, in my estimation, affected the eventual outcome of humanity. This wasn’t my scheduled period, though. I was supposed to be in Research figuring out what clothing we’d need for our upcoming observation—the trip to 1911 New York City was in a few days—but Analeigh had agreed to cover for me. She pretended to believe that I wanted to check on my Caesar recordings, to see how much trouble waited at my end-of-the-month evaluation, but she must have known it was about him.

Caesarion.

Not knowing anything substantial about my True deposited a feeling of
disloyalty under my skin that wouldn’t dislodge. Ancient Egypt had never called to me as a specialization, and the Academy required only a passing knowledge of major influential events. Now I wanted to know more.

Like, everything.

Something in the way Oz looked at me after hearing the name of my True made me wonder if there was something to know, but I doubted anyone had ever chosen Caesarion for a complete documentation. Even seventy years of regulated time travel hadn’t allowed us to catalog everything. The first Historians began with the most impactful moments. The people whose influence was easily visible in the events that
shaped our collective destiny—for better or for worse—we started with those. For posterity.

Reflection completed our triangle of duty. It required *studying* to stitch together the quilt of history to understand where exactly we went right or wrong—mostly wrong—and to ensure that in another two thousand years, we wouldn’t have to abandon a broken Genesis the same way.

Mistakes could not be repeated.

Once a consensus was reached that an event or decision had led directly to the downfall of society, it went into a document known as the Hope Chest. Nothing could be deleted from that file. As we observed and recorded more
specific memories and traced their influence forward, the Historians came closer and closer to ensuring a future free from the shackles of the past. It sounded cheesy, but I believed in it. We all did. Genesis was good, it was working. The last thing we needed was to start screwing it up.

According to my fuzzy recollection of Caesarion, he had been erased before being allowed to have any impact on the world, good or bad. Dying young was his contribution, in a way, but a small one. Not something to intrigue a Historian. Unless she happened to be his True.

I sat down in one of the smaller alcoves, one tucked away from the main
entrance. The glass polymer benches, tables, and fluid screens made these spaces cold, and I tugged a heavy brown sweater tighter around my shoulders. It was one of the few items that belonged to me—a gift from my brother, a treasure from Palenque, the planet set up for agriculture and food production. It bore no Historian symbol, and wrapped inside it, I felt like simple Kaia Vespasian. It was nice. Historian apprentice Kaia felt pressure to uphold the image of her grandfather, not to mention of this Academy, one of the most respected in the System. Daughter Kaia felt as though putting one toe out of line would break her parents’ hearts all over again. But no one expected anything of
plain Kaia. She could spend the afternoon getting to know the boy who, in a different world, might have loved her.

I slid a finger across the screen embedded in the tabletop, pressing the tattoo on my wrist flat against the chilly surface to gain access to the holo-files. It meant my movements could be tracked, but wanting to know about my True wasn’t so weird. Sure, I should have been in Research, but the Elders largely trusted us. They didn’t check our movements unless they had a reason, and the Guide made everyone aware of the consequences of committing infractions, big and small.

A stern talking-to or even a week of
menial duties seemed a small enough price for learning more about Caesarion.

Using the tip of my index finger, I tapped *The West* and scrolled over thousands of years of human history. Back through the wars, disease, and devastating overpopulation at the end of our time on Earth Before. Past the massive advances in science and technology, the intolerance, the hatred, more wars. Steps forward in human rights, leaps backward. Through the revolution that nearly destroyed France, and the one that birthed the United States. I swept past the Crusades and through the Middle Ages—my least favorite time to visit—and finally landed in ancient Rome, where the flashing
screens slowed under my touch.

Caesarion’s parents were often observed and recorded, which translated to easily located in the database. My True had never had the chance to see whether or not he could make a mark of his own. Instead, his death fell under the too crowded category of collateral damage.

Necessary tragedy.

The scant information in the Archives frustrated me. He’d been born to Cleopatra and Julius Caesar during their love affair, which preceded her more infamous tryst with Marc Antony by several years. When Octavian took the helm of the strongest city in the world after the event we witnessed a few days
ago in Rome, he needed to ensure no one existed who could challenge his tenuous claim to the throne.

After all, he was only the adopted son of Julius Caesar. One from his direct bloodline could have posed a legitimate threat. After studying humanity for the past seven years, the reasoning made intellectual sense to me. It didn’t make it hurt less, or make it any more fair, that a power-hungry jackass had murdered a young man simply to eliminate the threat he might have represented.

Then again, kids younger than Caesarion had died for a whole lot less.

The only Archived observation of him had been recorded the day he was born. I pressed the play icon and rested
my chin in my palm, elbow on the edge of the table as the holo-images flickered to life. My dark hair fell around my neck and shoulders, keeping me warm as the hard profile of Julius Caesar solidified. Now that I’d seen him in person he was easy enough to identify, though his charisma didn’t translate with as much clarity in the holo. An unexpected pang of sadness thrummed in my middle at the sight of him like this, alive and happy, after the way we saw him last.

He strode into an opulent bedchamber. Purple and gold silks draped the windows, and matching linens lay rumpled atop the giant bed. Soft yellow paint splashed the walls. Ornate tile slapped under his sandals as
he made his way to the bed where a woman held a newborn baby wrapped in cloth. Dark hair stuck to her tanned forehead. Bright lights twinkled in her night-sky eyes as she tore her gaze from her son and looked up at the man who’d helped create him.

Until now, I’d only read text Archives about Cleopatra, and her ordinary features took me by surprise. She had a quality about her though, that was similar to Caesar’s. A magnetism, something that drew me to her face, in fear that the tiniest nuance of her thoughts might escape my notice.

“It’s a boy,” she whispered in Greek as he sat beside her on the lush bedding.

His eyes went wide with a difficult-
to-describe expression—a jumble of disbelief and pride, love and fear. He ran a gentle hand over Cleopatra’s head, smoothing back her hair, then reached for the baby. She handed the boy over, and Caesar held him up until he squirmed and started to bawl, inspecting this little person for flaws, perhaps, or maybe just in awe—it was hard to tell. I’d have to reflect many more times to guess the emotions crisscrossing his ruddy cheeks and flashing through his dark eyes.

I could have reflected on them both for hours.

The baby—*my* Caesarion—favored his mother. He had a shock of obsidian hair and his skin shaded darker than his
father’s. Sharp disappointment twisted my heart. His adult face, his voice, his countenance, would remain mysteries.

I wondered how this memory had been recorded. There had been slaves or midwives in the room, perhaps, for a Historian to blend among. I’d heard the Technologies Academy was developing invisibility clothing similar to what they’d created for our glasses. After they perfected it, Historians would be able to access more intimate moments in the past, moments that had been forever hidden from the public.

The recording ended as Caesar laid the baby in a bassinet beside the bed and stretched out next to his lover. I assumed whoever had been in the room had been
dismissed at that point, and the final image was of the Roman and the Greek, their arms wrapped around each other as what looked like early-evening sun streaked through the windows and bathed them in golden light.

I stood and stretched, giving the recording a flick with my fingertip that sent it back to its place in the Archives. Impatience tickled my limbs, an itching desire to do something—to move, to run—but there was nothing to do. No one could save a single member of that family from their collective fate. The hardest stories for me were always the ones that ended in tragedy. To stand in their presence, hear their breaths and their heartbeats and know they’d be
silenced too soon.

But *everyone* I observed had already died. Some of them made me more melancholy than others, and Caesarion perhaps more so than any other, now that I was aware of our connection through time. It seemed natural to hope that someone who would have loved me would have lived a rich, full life.

But maybe he had. It would make me feel better to know what his life had been like as a teenager—that he’d been happy before his adopted brother stole his future. The image of Jonah’s cuff danced in my mind, a temptation that quickened my breath.

I could find out. Just *observe* Caesarion. Not talk to him, of course,
but to know what he was like, how his life felt while he’d lived it, might be worth a sanction.

The rules about contact had the stiffest penalties, and altering the past in even the smallest capacity could mean repeating a year, being assigned a specialty no one else wanted, or maybe even exile. But an apprentice traveling alone wasn’t even listed as an infraction in the Guide, since we didn’t own our own cuffs. So it wouldn’t break any rules.

Technically.

I stared at the floor in the main room, at the colored dots that marked the Historians currently in the field, absently touching them with the toe of my slipper,
one after the other. The seven Historian Elders were spread out, all observing different times and places. My brother’s dot hovered in the present, inside the Academy. Jonah had dug the bio tattoos out of his neck, throat, and wrists before running away. Since they were linked with skin and arteries, veins and blood, he must have had help. Someone from the Medical Academy, or at least someone with training. One of the other pirates was the prevailing opinion, which means they’d been planning his disappearance.

Maybe rebellion ran in my blood.

The ache in my center gnawed harder at the reminder of Jonah. No one knew where he was now, or where he’d be
spotted next. No one talked about the outliers, and the Elders tried—mostly unsuccessfully—to keep news of their attacks and whereabouts off our radar. It made people uncomfortable, the idea that they lived outside. Apart.

I touched Oz’s dot idly, remembering he was scheduled to be at Pearl Harbor, in 1941, today.

Except he wasn’t.

The embedded bio stats read *Bukhara, 1221*. Eastern History gave me trouble—I’d banished many of the details to the back of my mind when I’d decided Renaissance Europe would be my specialty—but focused concentration knocked loose a few facts.

*Bukhara*. A city in Asia, part of the
Persian Empire in the ancient world, and I thought part of the USSR at some point, but in 1221 … it would have been under attack or recently felled by the Mongolians. Their invasion of the Rus territories lasted for another several years before it spread into Europe.

What was Oz doing observing the Mongol invasions instead of watching the Japanese drop bombs on Pearl Harbor? Not to mention visiting the way wrong century? It crossed my mind briefly that he’d lied on purpose, but I dismissed it. He had to be with an overseer, even though he appeared to be alone.

System glitches weren’t unheard of, so maybe the tracking comp needed a
reset. Or maybe their assignment had changed for some reason, even if the Mongol invasions weren’t typical training observations—not high-profile enough, and far too broad in subject matter—and while the Mongols were an impressive civilization, there was nothing significant about how they conquered the Eastern world. At least, not that I could recall.

Before I could turn in an electronic request to reset the comp or sate my curiosity about what Oz might or might not be up to, the doors to the Archives whooshed open, spilling warmer air into the cool space and distracting me from my thoughts. I looked up to find Zeke and his deep purple Elder robes sweeping
inside, the Historian emblem on his breast glittering gold under the harsh fluorescent lights.

Surprise turned quickly to suspicion in his steely dark gaze. “What are you doing in here, Miss Vespasian?”
Chapter Five

His eyes narrowed to slits, and my mouth went dry. He closed his eyes briefly, and I knew he was asking the brain stem tat to give him my schedule. “You’re supposed to be in … Research, are you not?”

Instinct said to lie, but he could bust me with a few punches into the table comp. “I got my Companion card and was curious. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t. Run along.”

I escaped out the hatch behind him, my fast steps betraying my nerves. His black gaze followed me, pricking sweat between my shoulder blades until I
turned a corner and dropped from his line of sight. I stopped, pressing a palm to the wall of the cold, stainless steel corridor until my heart slowed to a normal pace.

Ezekiel was the unofficial leader of the Elders and the head of our Academy. After studying the past for clues, collective humanity decided no one person should hold power, and that went for the Elders as well. But everyone listened to Zeke. Everyone. Even though he never treated us poorly or sanctioned us more harshly than required, he scared the pants off me, a chemical and physical reaction I’m sure my bio stats reflected and catalogued. He had the same effect on Analeigh and Sarah. And before Jess,
Levi, and Peyton split off into their own clique when we were twelve, they had felt the same, too. Oz never mentioned it. He never mentioned much of anything, though, so it was hard to tell whether that meant anything.

I felt sorry for Sarah for getting stuck with him even if she did get to be the one in ten million who experienced true love. If Oz’s name had showed up on my card … Well, it wouldn’t have been a happy day no matter how intense his gray eyes were behind those glasses. I didn’t know if he liked me, or anyone, for that matter. He was probably the best student in our class, giving Analeigh a run for her money both in that department and the seriousness one.
The empty hallways whispered back the sound of my slippered footsteps. I followed twists and turns by memory, nothing on the bare walls to guide me down a correct path, and when the doors to the Research Lab whooshed open, Analeigh’s shoulders slumped with relief.

“Oh, thank the System you’re back. I was worried.”

I smiled, hoping to hide the remnants of nerves slicking my forehead with sweat. “Worried you’d have to lie if someone came looking for me, you mean?”

“Maybe.” She gave me a sheepish grin. “You know I can’t lie.”

It was true. Her face and neck got
these impressive, bright red blotches when she tried. It was why I hadn’t told her about finding Jonah’s cuff, at least not yet. If I did decide to use it—if—she couldn’t be involved. It had to be my secret.

“Did you find anything?”

Discussing Caesarion held little appeal, and there wasn’t much to tell, anyway. I shrugged and joined her in one of the circular booths. A screen sat atop a waist-high pedestal, and three of the surrounding walls were mirrors. The fourth projected clothing on our bodies based on the coordinates we typed into the system. The comps and tats could provide us any and all required information on the spot, but evaluations
showed a higher likelihood of retaining facts when we ingested information the old-fashioned way—manual research. Not having to manually learn languages was the only cheat the Elders allowed, so the days leading up to a new trip were filled to the brim with reading about clothing, mannerisms, customs, and anything else we needed in order to blend into a certain time period.

“Do you need any help with our wardrobe for the Triangle?”

“Nah. Check it out.” Analeigh punched a few buttons and spun me around.

Ankle-length skirts and fitted tops lined with buttons down the back covered us both. The blouses tucked in
at our waists, and boots—with more buttons—covered our feet and ankles.

“Hmm. Don’t we get hats? I feel like Edwardian fashion means hats.”

“No hats in New York City!” Sarah called over the wall from the next cubicle.

“Hats for the wealthy, but we’re going to be fitting in with immigrants. So no hats, but we will get to pin our hair up,” Analeigh clarified.

“But I like hats,” I replied, being difficult on purpose.

She rolled her eyes and punched another button. Wide-brimmed hats appeared on our heads in the mirror with fat, sheer ribbons secured under our
chins. I nodded. “Much better.”

“You can’t wear hats on the trip!” Sarah yelled.

“Sarah, I know you can’t see us, but we’re still only like four feet away. You don’t have to yell.” I gave Analeigh a look, and we shared a quiet giggle.

“Whatever,” Sarah said, poking her head into our cubicle. “We need to finish downloading facts before supper.”

Analeigh switched off the hologram. She and I stepped into the empty space in the room, a circle at the center surrounded by fitting booths, and then the three of us headed for the hatch, matching again in all black, supple Kevlar. We stepped into the labyrinth of sterile, steel-and-white hallways, our
words bouncing back at us like pellets from an old firearm.

“You guys want to split up the research?” I asked as we headed back the way I’d come, toward the Archives.

“We’re not supposed to—”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Stars, Analeigh. As long as we complete the names, order of event, and setting, who cares? We can store all of the research in one file and download it three times under each of our names. No one will be the wiser.”

We’d taken advantage of Sarah’s prowess with comps and tech more than once. It still surprised me she’d been sorted into the Historian Academy instead of Technologies because I’d
never met anyone who could manipulate machines the way she could.

“I guess.” Analeigh sighed. She’d probably do her own, anyway.

Once surrounded by the thick, cloudy glass and dancing images in the Archives, the three of us split the research and got to work. I’d grabbed the easiest third—the manifest. The historians on Earth Before had listed the victims of the Triangle Fire, those who had lived and those who had died, so all I had to do was load it into a file, along with their physical characteristics.

Since every class of apprentices had recorded the Triangle Fire, all of the girls in the building had an extensive file, even though few of them were
individually significant. Their historical contribution lay in their collective demise, not any individual survival. Morbid, but true.

Even the summary of the event hurt my heart. “It’s terrible, isn’t it?”

“Which part?” Sarah frowned. “The part where the poor immigrant girls were underpaid and worked literally to death in those factories for years, or the fact that it took over a hundred of them dying in the gutters of a New York City street on a Saturday afternoon for anyone to give a shit?”

“I vote for the fact that even though that day changed labor laws in the United States, they kept supporting factories that employed the same
practices in other parts of the planet for years,” Analeigh added, her eyes glued to the comp in front of her.

“All of it.” I swallowed hard, wishing I could be more professional like my friends. “It’s all terrible.”

I scanned the list of victims again, and the name Rosie Shapiro jumped out at me. I pressed a finger against the name of Jonah’s True and the comp pulled up her file. It would definitely be interesting to see her next week.

The idea that Jonah had perhaps done this exact same thing spread a comforting warmth through my blood, even if it must have been terrible for him to stand there and watch her die. I didn’t think I could do it, be in the room while
Octavian put my True to death, but Jonah had always been stronger than me.

Rosie’s file pulled up, displaying a picture and a short list of facts from both the original history and the multiple accounts based on Historian observations. She was pretty, my brother’s True Companion, with peachy cheeks, dark curls, and delicate features. The related photographs rolled a shudder up my spine. The sight of a bunch of soaking wet girls my age splattered on the New York City sidewalk squelched my desire for dinner.

I downloaded a picture of Rosie and stored it to the protected file Sarah had set up in my brain stem tat. She’d
created password files for the three of us when we were twelve and thought secret diaries seemed like the coolest thing in the world.

The tat could conjure her photo from the file while we were at the Triangle and use facial recognition software to locate her in the room. It should be easy enough to find her before the fire started. I would probably get into trouble again for focusing too much on one, insignificant life but this time, at least, I knew the reason. It was partly to feel closer to my brother that I wanted to see Rosie Shapiro for myself, but partly because maybe meeting his True face-to-face would convince me there was no real reason to break a million and one
rules in order to meet my own.

*
Analeigh sat me down when Sarah hopped in the shower after dinner, pinning me with a hard gaze. “I don’t know what’s up with you, but it’s something. You’re all jumpy, and you were staring at that table comp like it held the secret to the universe. Downloading a manifest isn’t that interesting.”

The sound of running water filled our suite while I struggled with my reply. I might be good at keeping secrets, but it burned to hold them in my mouth. I wanted to tell Analeigh about Jonah’s cuff and everything else, but it wasn’t fair to her and maybe not to my brother, either.

Plus, I didn’t want her to talk me out
of what I wanted—to go see Caesarion.

“I don’t know. Still thinking about Caesarion, I guess.” Not technically untrue.

“Really?” The dry tone of her voice spiked my worry, but Oz stuck his head in the door at the same moment, saving me from having to outright lie to my best friend.

He blinked at the sight of us, as though we’re somehow unexpected fixtures in our own room, and his storm-cloud eyes filled with irritation as they swept the room, searching for Sarah. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, but words seemed to escape him. Sarah was his reason for being here, and Oz seemed lost at finding her
unavailable. His quiet, watchful nature turned anxious sometimes, like now, although it didn’t make sense in this situation. We’d known him as long as he’d known Sarah, so nerves didn’t make much sense.

Most of the science fiction stories from Earth Before assumed that if we ever advanced to a point like ours—scientifically, medically—that everyone would lead healthier, longer, not anxious, perfect lives. The truth was, our geneticists and medics could ensure all of us were put together in a way that made us live longer, and that no one was born with any kind of disorder at all. That wasn’t practical, though. So, we got to deal with Oz and all of his awkward.
“She’s in the toilet,” Analeigh supplied, taking pity on him.

Oz fidgeted in the doorway, gazing down at his hands. After his third longing glance at the empty hallway behind him, I couldn’t take it anymore. “You don’t have to lurk in the doorway, Oz, for goodness’ sake. Sit down and talk to us.”

Analeigh and I stared as he shuffled toward Sarah’s desk and perched gingerly on the edge of the chair. Oz wasn’t that tall but he was strong. His broad chest filled out the tight clothing, showing off his muscular arms, and his fingers tapped an impatient rhythm on the back of the steel chair in the silence.

“What’s wrong with him? He’s even
jumpier than usual." Analeigh’s whispered voice popped into my head, surprising me. Oz sat close enough to hear the sound of us whispering, but probably not to catch the words.

Scientists on Earth Before had discovered that our throat muscles make the involuntary movements to form words even when we only think them. Not everyone on Genesis had this enhancement, but for Historians, it was necessary. We might need to communicate in a scenario where talking was prohibited or our language program might glitch. We had the most bio-enhancements of anyone in the System—unlike the universal wrist tats, the ones connected to our throats and brain stems
were unique to our Academy.

The throat tattoo worked exactly like talking—limited range, a few feet, usually line of sight—which meant anyone close by sporting the same tech could overhear. Oz was a little close for comfort, but I decided I didn’t care that much if he did overhear.

“I don’t know.” But maybe I did, I thought, my mind flicking back over where his dot placed him earlier today. “So, Oz, how was Pearl Harbor?”

The question sounded innocent enough to my ears, but his sharp gaze snapped to mine. It felt as though he could see right through my skull, knew that I’d seen his dot hovering elsewhere. I tried a smile, which only seemed to
irritate him further, pulling his full lips into a frown.

“Loud and bloody. As expected.”

He was lying. The cut of his eyes toward the bathroom, the way he licked his lips. His anxiety rose even higher and diffused into the air, urging my own into a climb. The bio stats didn’t lie, even if Oz did, and now I was sure what I’d seen in the Archives hadn’t been a glitch. Oz had been in Asia today, watching the Mongol invasions when he wasn’t supposed to be.

The question of why intrigued me more than a little. And if the stats hadn’t been wrong about where he’d been, they also weren’t wrong about him being alone.
Which meant I wasn’t the only apprentice with an unauthorized cuff.

The sound of running water abated a moment before the uncomfortable silence actually killed me. I wondered if he and Sarah talked when they were alone. Maybe they were too busy making out, although I had a hard time picturing Oz relaxing his lips enough to kiss anyone.

Sarah’s lilting singing voice crawled underneath the closed door and helped eased the tension in the room before she banged loose from the bathroom, tugging the towel tighter around her chest when she spotted Oz. “Oh. I didn’t realize how late I was.”

A wrinkle appeared between Oz’s
eyebrows. “It’s okay.”

Sarah tossed a knowing look toward us girls, grabbing her suit off the bed and retreating back into the bathroom. “I’ll be five minutes,” she told Oz, then shut the door.

“Where are you two headed?” Analeigh asked, a little too perky, even for her.

Oz pulled off his glasses, rubbing imaginary spots from the lenses with the hem of his shirt. Without them, his gray eyes were huge and framed with impossibly thick, black lashes. “Studying.”

“For what?” He obviously wanted to sit in silence, but knowing that only made me push harder. I’d grown up with
an older brother. Surly boy did nothing but bring out the annoying little sister in me. “Are you helping Sarah with something?”

“No. She’s helping me with a reflection analytic. For my specialty application next year.”

His application *next year*. Good gravy boats. I hadn’t even thought about it. If anyone else used that excuse it would have sounded like they were just trying to get their girlfriend alone for a couple of hours, especially since Sarah didn’t excel at reflection. But Oz probably *was* working on next year’s applications, which would be reviewed before we were certified as full Historians and used to determine our
permanent field of observation.

Maybe *Sarah* wanted the excuse to spend time alone with *him*.

“You’re that sure you don’t want to travel anymore after we’re certified?” Analeigh asked, unable to contain her curiosity even though being nosy went against her upbringing. Her parents were both from Persepolis; she’d been raised a traditional Muslim, and even though she didn’t practice she couldn’t shake the ingrained reticence and respect. Like the rest of Genesis, the Academies allowed no subscription to nationality or faith or even planetary loyalty. Clinging to those kinds of identities fractured cultures, drew lines in the sand, caused dissension and hate. We were humans
first, our callings second. Nothing more.

After seven years of observing altercations, murder, and persecutions, stripping humanity of their useless and arbitrary labels seemed to be one of the smarter decisions the Originals had made upon our departure from Earth Before.

“I’m sure. But you know they don’t approve many of us for permanent reflection, so I want to make sure all of my essays are outstanding. My goal is to get something added to the Hope Chest before certifications.”

That made more sense, even if the goal was so lofty it never would have entered my mind. Apprentices never initiated the process to finalize a body of
reflections. It would be a coup, and he would probably get approved for whatever he wanted.

Light swirled in his stormy eyes, lit by excitement and passion—two things I didn’t often associate with Oz Truman. I’d never heard him say so many words at once before, ever.

Sarah swept in from the toilet, bringing the fresh scent of perfume and shampoo along with her. The standard black suit clung to her lithe frame, hugging her hips and generous chest. Her chin-length hair shone, appearing brighter in the glow from the bathroom.

Oz gave her an appreciative smile before cocking his head toward the door. “Ready?”
She smiled up at him and the affection in her gaze was impossible to miss. A similar emotion flickereded in his smoky eyes and he smiled for real, bending slightly to press a quick kiss to her lips, disproving my previous assumption.

“See you gals at lights out!” Sarah tossed over her shoulder as she hauled Oz from the room.

The sight of their clasped hands dragged a sigh from my chest. I might not have wanted Oz, but that electricity between them, the excitement and ease born from the simple fact that they knew they were perfect together … that I couldn’t help but want.

I’d never have what Sarah and Oz did. Never be able to touch or talk with
my True.

But I did have Jonah’s abandoned cuff. The more I thought about it, the more it didn’t seem like it would be so bad, my using it just this once. It was a good reason. A once-in-a-lifetime reason. And once I saw him, my curiosity would be sated. Life could go back to normal.

And besides, you’re only in trouble if you get caught.
Once the idea of using Jonah’s cuff to observe Caesarion dug its claws into me, shaking them loose was a lost cause. The logistics of making it happen—without getting caught and without shaming my family—had kept me up half the night, and no amount of rationalizing settled my nerves. Perhaps it was the Historians’ ability to move unquestioned through time and space, but our Elders had always seemed omnipotent. They weren’t, though.

Most likely.

There were seven Elders at each of the twelve Academies, but they weren’t figureheads. They taught us in addition to
doing their own research, and had better things to do than spy on teenagers. No one ruled or presided over anyone else once we’d been certified in our callings. Trust, individual responsibility, expectations, and freedom were cornerstones of our society’s success. The Elders were nothing more than the eldest seven at each of the Academies; they weren’t elected or lauded for anything except still being alive. A combined board made up of Elders from all of the Academies handed down the sanctions, based on the Guide, but no one traced even the movements of apprentices without reason.

But if I was really going to use my brother’s old cuff to travel alone to
ancient Alexandria, I had to hope that was the truth. The Historians had no idea that I had the cuff, and no reason to suspect I would travel alone. Unless I had supremely terrible luck and someone decided to idly touch my dot the way I had Oz’s yesterday, no one would miss me. As long as my absence went unnoticed there would be no harm and no foul. Just a peek and then back to the Academy, easy peasy.

I rose before Analeigh and Sarah, my stomach a snarl of worry and excitement. Our suite was big, and we each had a room that held a bed and two dressers. The common room had the sitting area where we’d held the study session the other night, a picture tube for news
reports and movies, a couch, and three desks. Knickknacks and the occasional physical book, salvaged for sentimentality’s sake, cluttered the rooms’ shelves.

The Originals had allowed people to bring up to five paper volumes apiece for the journey to Genesis. I had a copy of my grandfather’s favorite book—*On the Road*—and my mother’s tattered, coverless copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. My father owned two books about physics, and Jonah had taken our family’s copy of *Romeo and Juliet* with him when he left.

I slipped out of my standard sleep shorts and long-sleeved top and into the black uniform that molded to and
warmed my morning-cold skin. Running water would wake Analeigh—the lightest sleeper in the System, probably—so I didn’t brush my teeth or wash my face, just stuffed my long dark hair into a ponytail, slapped on my glasses, and left the room barefoot.

The hallway floors transferred a chill to the soles of my feet but I ignored it, wanting my privacy. There were two necessary stops before Egypt, and only a few hours before my friends woke and started wondering about my disappearing act. First, I needed to review Caesarion’s timeline and store the info in the password file in my tat. Second, the Research holos would help me figure out a proper wardrobe—I
couldn’t go to ancient Egypt in this getup.

It took me less than five minutes in the Archives to download the sliver of information related to Caesarion. I wanted to meet him when we were about the same age. But getting to Egypt at the right time—before he died, but not long before—would be tricky. The facts were vague, but it helped that he’d died the same year as his mother. Her death I could find, and if the historical outline in the Archives held true, Caesarion left Alexandria around then. The date of her murder seemed like the best place to find him.

If he hadn’t left the city yet, he would be at the palace, and missing that would
be hard.

With plan in place to get in and out as quickly as possible, I headed down the cold halls in my bare feet, slipping into the Research Lab. I had to swipe my wrist tattoo to open each door, but as with everything else, the information was stored but not monitored. As long as I didn’t give anyone a reason to be suspicious, all of my actions would disappear among the hundreds of other wrist swipes today.

The fashion holo pulled sizes and color preferences from my stored bio stats, styling me in a cream-colored linen dress that reached my feet. Black and teal scarves fell off my shoulders and ringed my waist, and heavy
turquoise and gold jewelry adorned my neck and wrists. It wanted my hair darker, almost black, but there wasn’t time to dye it. I hated itchy wigs; my dark brown would have to do. Way to go, Israeli heritage. The leather sandals it chose were softer, more comfortable than the shoes I’d worn in Rome. Black makeup smudged my eyelids and trailed underneath, making me look like a sort of attractive raccoon.

The jewelry, scarves, and makeup were added because I’d entered “elite” into the social strata column. Cleopatra and her family had wealth beyond imagining, and no one without status would be able to get near them, except the servants. I could have easily slipped
into the palace as a slave, and perhaps it would have been the smarter call and simpler to blend in, but at the last moment, I knew I didn’t want to go unseen.

If Caesarion looked up, if our eyes met, I wanted him to notice me. Just for a moment, to glimpse the look in his eyes when he felt our connection. A boy like him would never notice a servant girl.

Nerves quickened my heartbeat. If I waited until tomorrow, or even another five minutes, I would change my mind.

A quick rummage through the closet produced all of the recommended pieces. The memory of old movies with teenage girls digging through piles of clothes looking for a missing shoe or that
one skirt they wanted to wear made me smile. I simply punched in identification numbers attached to each piece of clothing, and drawers slid out, hangers popped away from the racks. The makeup and jewelry followed suit. The girl in the mirror looked exactly as the holo had styled her. It was now or never.

Excitement struggled to take over my nerves, the desire to see Caesarion still warring with the deep-seated worry that something could go wrong. If it did, I would be alone and the only way to get help would be to turn myself in. It might be dumb to take the risk—I knew Analeigh would think so—but I didn’t want to wait. Nothing would go wrong. In and out.
I wanted my moment.

To be extra sure that Analeigh, who loved mornings like some kind of psychopath, wouldn’t freak the hell out and sound some kind of alarm, I sent her a quick wrist comm, scheduled to be delivered at the same time her alarm went off:

Don’t worry.

Dressed in the light linen that swished pleasantly in the deserted halls, I hurried to the portal chambers, swiped my wrist tat, and another record of my movements swirled into the void. I really should have paid more attention to Sarah as she babbled on about comps and how to trick them, but it was one trip. One hour. Two at the most.
The doors air locked behind me with a suction sound, and my ears popped.

An attack of anxiety and second thoughts weakened my knees, and I sank down onto one of the cold metal benches. I wouldn’t get caught. People were asleep. No one knew I had Jonah’s cuff, and the overseers and Elders had no reason to check my movements.

Out of nowhere, hot anger flared, burning my stomach. Jonah had run off; if my absence did trigger some unknown alarm, people might assume I’d done the same. As much as I loved him, I hadn’t been able to forgive him for leaving me. I would never put my parents and friends through the same thing.

Tears stung my eyes, my fingers
curled into fists. I should stay. Follow the rules, be a good daughter and a proper apprentice.

But I didn’t want to. This could be one of my moments, a morning that would change the way I saw the world, and I didn’t want to miss it because of Jonah.

Or because it scared me.

It wasn’t worth the worst of the sanctions, like exile to Cryon, where rumor had it people fried under the too-close sun and beat the shit out of each other all day until they went crazy. But the chance of getting caught was so small, the infraction so unprecedented, it didn’t seem possible to me.

When the panic cleared, those cloudy
what-ifs seemed less scary than never knowing what it might be like to stand in Caesarion’s presence and feel, just for a heartbeat, a perfect connection with another human being. Resolve poured strength back into my limbs and I stood, releasing my bottom lip from between my teeth.

I would be quick.

The four little lights on the cuff glowed red under the fluorescent lights. Twelve rotating dials of numbers and three letters were on the inside, and I spun them until it they read 0812 0030 BCE 0600. August 12, 30 BCE 6:00 a.m. When the date and time were steady, three of the red lights turned to green and I sucked in a deep breath, then
blew my bangs away from my face.

I twisted the cuff around and raised the tiny speaker on the opposite side, to my face. “Alexandria, Egypt, the lighthouse.”

The last red light extinguished, then glowed green.

*
Alexandria, Egypt, Earth Before–30 BCE (Before Common Era)

Egypt was freaking hot. Hotter than hell, or Hades or Tuat, or any other burning plane of existence people had ever believed they would traverse after death. Sweat immediately soaked through the light linen dress, but the salty breeze from the ocean worked to keep me cool.

An overseer would have known a private spot, but the lighthouse was the most inconspicuous place that had come to mind. It ended up being a lucky choice because the immediate area was deserted. The structure was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and until the advent of time travel no one had laid eyes on it for thousands of years.
There were no photos or renderings that could have done it justice, anyway. It rose out of the tip of the Island of Pharos, spewing light into the breaking dawn and giving the illusion of comfort and protection, even though it was nothing but a building.

Sadly, it didn’t do much for a girl drowning in nerves and excitement and the tiniest bit of guilt, so I’m sure much of its appeal slid right over my head.

The waves in the bay lapped gently at the shore. In the distance, across a narrow expanse of water, the royal palace glowed in the early morning sunshine. Caesarion was in there. His mother had just died and his life was falling apart, but he was there. My True.
The clean breeze buffered my overheated cheeks and I gulped air, pulling the freshness into my lungs. Oxygen was one of the best things about traveling to Earth Before. Real air. And nothing beat breathing it near the water.

All of the planets on Genesis had been terraformed with a manufactured oxygen mixture that was recycled, cleaned, and spewed back into the false atmosphere. The air tasted vaguely discarded, tinged with overuse and the sour flavor of other people’s lungs. My grandfather likened it to breathing on an airplane.

I’d never noticed it until my first observation. Zeke took everyone their first time, and he’d herded Oz, Jess,
Analeigh, Sarah, Levi, Peyton, and me atop a Mayan pyramid in 600 CE. They’d been in the midst of constructing a burial mound for their fresh dead, and we’d toiled alongside the workers for the better part of a morning.

We’d broken stone and rock, hauled it up and down barely formed steps, and sweated under the Central American sun. The heat was stifling, not unlike Egypt today, but the way the air tasted—untouched and virginal, like the purest form of anything—had mesmerized me. The morning had flown by and we’d landed back in the air lock too soon, suddenly disgusted by the metallic tinge of the oxygen that kept us alive.

I loved the taste of the ocean.
My glasses went invisible with a light tap. I could have left them at home since there was no way I was recording anything that happened today—no evidence—but their displays and information were invaluable if trouble did pop up.

I turned my back on the lighthouse and then headed toward the bridge that connected it to mainland Egypt, enjoying the squish of sand and seaweed under my soft sandals. The Temple of Isis lurched from the ground in front of me, a massive but not particularly pretty structure of brown-and-tan mud brick. Twin guardians flanked the entrance, each seated in front of an ornately carved panel. Multiple sets of stone
staircases, bright tiled roofs, and what appeared to be some kind of guard tower decorated the interior grounds. I could have pulled a detailed map up in my mind through the bio-tat, but drinking it in with nothing but my own eyes satisfied me. What each building contained no longer mattered, and simply seeing it was new and perfect.

The temple to the goddess, set high in the center, rose up inside the plain and sturdy outer walls. Impressive columns ran down the sides and the detailed images carved into their tops, the golden sculptures peering at me from the safety of Isis’s walls, distracted me to the point that I tripped. My dress tore and the pebbled ground ripped the skin from my
knee, leaving it bloody.

“Damn,” I cursed under my breath.

It didn’t come out that way. It came out in ancient Greek, one of the more common languages in Alexandria during this period. Most inhabitants of the city would also understand and speak Aramaic, Egyptian, and even Hebrew, depending on their interaction with the Jews. My people, I supposed, though none of us thought of ourselves as anything but citizens of Genesis.

I checked my knees, trying to clean them as best I could. Hopefully the injury wouldn’t complicate the contamination check when I returned to Sanchi. Time would be tight, and a forced shower could be the tipping
point. I brushed the dirt and stone dust off my palms and continued walking, taking more care as I crossed the heptastadium to the mainland.

The sight of the library—the most famous in human history, perhaps, and one of our most tragic losses until Georg Trout stumbled on the formula that made time travel possible—stopped me in my tracks. The histories and stories and scrolls that had been lost when nature dumped the coastline of Alexandria into the sea were now carefully catalogued with all of the other documents in the Archives on Sanchi. There was a backup of the entire system on Tanis, too. Our civilization took care with the information it had taken years to amass
and store.

In this world, the scrolls remained safe and sound, at home in the library that rose five or six stories above the shore. Awe made my jaw drop to my chest like some kind of cartoon character. Multiple arches and rows of columns decorated the façade. A crop of palm trees—or maybe date trees—sprouted front and center, obscuring the primary entrance from the road. It looked exactly as a library should look: stately, sturdy, and sprawling, as though it had every intention of expanding along with the knowledge housed inside.

It pulled at me, begging me to go in, to spend hours among the scrolls, but I didn’t have hours. If I wasn’t back by
Reflection class they would come looking for me. If I wanted to see my True’s face, it needed to happen fast. Then things could go back to normal.

The sun climbed as I hiked toward the palace, my feet picking up the pace as sweat dripped down the side of my face. I brushed it away with the back of my hand, leaving a trace of rough sand on my wet skin. Once I reached the finger of land that supported the palace and its grounds, it became clear why it had not survived.

The enormous living quarters, gardens, temples, and various outbuildings perched precariously on an isthmus jutting out into the water. It had simply crumbled away, the same way
erosion, combined with earthquakes, had stolen Southern California in 2210 and then half of Louisiana in 2440.

It was hard to believe all of this would one day rest at the bottom of the ocean.

I’d spent the walk scrolling through historical data in my mind, but hadn’t yet figured out where Caesarion might be at this time of day. The official records lacked confirmed details about his movements, but I still had common sense and historical training to fall back on. Caesarion’s mother had died earlier this morning. Even thinking about losing my mother twisted my heart, swelled panic into my throat.

If she died, I would seek peace. Time
alone, before facing the expectations of the world.

I headed for the immense palace gardens without thinking too hard about the choice. They would hide him, give him privacy to express the severity of his loss. My state of dress should allow me access to the grounds. No one would suspect a lady in broad daylight, and I could easily pass for one of the hundreds of concubines who lived in the royal palace.

What if he was a royal jerk? What if I saw Caesarion and felt nothing and all, and this entire trip became nothing but a worthless risk?

No. Maybe those things would happen, but I wasn’t turning around
before I knew for sure.

I forced my feet the final steps to the gates. My heart pounded so loud it hurt my ears but the palace guards, dressed in animal-skin sarongs with weapons strapped to their bare chests and hips, barely spared me a glance as I entered.

Fifty years into life on Genesis, and as a girl, I still felt dismissed on occasion. It turned out the inclination to judge someone based on their anatomy ran deeper than any other prejudice in our species, and expunging gender discrimination had been the hardest task of the Genesis establishment team. But in Caesarion’s world, my femaleness allowed me access to private grounds that would have been barred to me if I
had a penis. Thank you, vagina.

I’d worried Caesarion would still be in his rooms, or already gone from the city. I wound through the lush gardens, dizzy from the cloying perfume on the sea breeze and the lack of sense in my brain, knowing I would never work up the nerve to try another time if I didn’t find him this morning. My crushing disappointment lifted at the sight of a figure underneath a sagging date tree. It was a boy, seated on a stone bench in front of a burbling fountain. My heart slammed into my ribs, and my mouth went dry. What felt like a million tiny little magnets came alive under my skin, tugged me toward the still form, but walking with knees made of water
proved impossible.

Something deep in the core of me recognized him, even without seeing his face.

Caesarion.
Chapter Seven

Nothing the geneticists or Sarah or anything ever written about Trues had prepared me for this experience. For this feeling of knowing someone else with a glance, for seeing my whole future open up in front of me. My body felt exposed, all of my nerves open and raw as I stared, rooted in place by a pleasant, buzzing terror.

A tunic of dark purple linen covered his slumped, shaking shoulders and his black hair was shaved close to his scalp. Sadness surrounded him like a cloak, diffusing into the air and burning in my throat. An innate desire to comfort him drew me forward even though I should
have turned around the moment it became clear we were alone together.

He heard my footsteps and swiveled his head. Midnight-blue eyes flicked to me for the briefest of seconds, so fogged with grief I doubted they registered much of anything. Then he waved a dismissive hand in my general direction. “You’re very pretty, but passing the morning with you won’t fix anything. Leave me.”

The air between us felt charged, left me short of breath, as though someone had punched all of the oxygen from my body. I dug my fingernails into the rough bark of a date palm to try to anchor myself, but it didn’t help. He’d noticed me. Spoken to me. Shit.

I was in big, fat trouble.
Even though the brain stem tat insisted I leave, that Caesarion—Pharaoh—had dismissed me, moving required muscle control, which required oxygen, which required breathing, and basic motor function felt like the vaguest of concepts. I wasn’t connected to my body, somehow.

Then the reason for his dismissal struggled through the haze, and it felt like an elephant kicked me in the stomach—he thought me a concubine, dispatched to ease his sorrow.

Heat flooded my cheeks. Tingles spread through my skin as I tried to back away from this boy who inhabited a world so impossibly different from mine. Apparently the wardrobe of a lady
and a prostitute didn’t differ all that much around these parts, but regardless, this wasn’t going as planned. Starting with the fact that I was absolutely, positively not supposed to be talking to him.

I glanced up at the sky, waiting for things to start blowing up. For the future to start changing here and now because of what I’ve done.

Nothing happened. Yet.

Caesarion’s long fingers curled into fists where they rested on his thighs. His rigid posture signaled his annoyance—perhaps at being glimpsed in his grief, perhaps because I still stood, rooted to the ground at his back. And despite his dismissive, superior air, when he said
leave me, I heard leave me alone. I ached with the knowledge that his mother had just died, that the foundations of his world had been crumbling for the better part of his life, and they were about to wash completely away.

I didn’t want to leave him. He didn’t have to be alone.

My fear of breaking the no-contact rule, verbal or otherwise, asserted itself even though I badly wanted to correct his rather insulting—at least to me—assumption. Not interacting was the first and most often repeated regulation pounded into our apprentice heads, and offended or not, my tongue might as well have been sawdust.

Before I could obey the bio tat’s
commands to keep silent and turn tail, Caesarion stood on strong legs. I had a brief impression of shorter stature, a sinewy covering of tanned muscle, and an enticing air of power before he stepped over the stone bench separating us and grabbed me.

His fingers bit into the flesh of my upper arm. Terror looped around my heart in a tight coil, squeezing as pain spiked in the base of my skull. I squeaked as the bio tat’s attempt to force me away from my True’s touch almost dropped me to my knees. I gazed up into his face, trying to gauge his intent, or how to escape this situation gone suddenly, horribly wrong, and realized his eyes were closed. I stilled,
mesmerized by the sight of his long, black lashes against his ruddy cheeks.

“Maybe it could help,” he muttered. Pain trickled over his face like a dozen rivers that connected in his eyes, spilling a lone tear down his cheek.

His mouth landed hard on mine before I could think to struggle.

The war between pain and pleasure, between panic and desire, tried to rip me in half. My blood came alive at the feeling of his lips against mine, racing and boiling, aching like it wanted to reach out and touch its likeness in Caesarion’s veins. His lips were soft but demanding, devouring mine in a way that made the earth spin under my feet. The magnetism between us raised the hair
over every inch of my skin.

But as he loosened his grip to slide his arms around my back, tugging me closer, the sudden, sharp stab of agony through my brain ripped a whimper from my throat. The pain cleared my mind. Indignation at being manhandled strengthened my stupid swoony muscles and I planted my palms on Caesarion’s chest and shoved.

He stumbled back, dusky eyes open and really seeing me for the first time. They filled with a wild confusion that looked as intense and debilitating as mine.

“What’s wrong?” he inquired in Greek.

His voice flowed like honey, thick
and sweet with an unexpected undertone of kindness. I swallowed hard and pressed a hand to my chest, begging my heart to return to a healthy pace. The storm of lust and fear and guilt and wonder refused to be calmed, and the uncertainty on Caesarion’s face shuffled toward concern.

“What’s wrong?” he tried again, in Egyptian this time, then again in Aramaic when he received no response.

Tears flooded my eyes. The situation had spiraled so far out of control. I bit my lip, wanting to answer, knowing I shouldn’t. Trying to decide what further harm talking could possibly do. Wondering whether I wanted to be paired with the kind of man who would
have sex with a woman he’d never laid eyes on, the kind of man who assumed my body could be used for his pleasure.

Traveling alone had felt like such a small infraction to me—just another observation, something I did at least twice a month, except without an overseer along. I’d wanted to see his face, maybe meet his gaze and see what it felt like, but the pull underneath my skin was too powerful. It scared me, that with one single touch he could make me forget everything else in the universe—both of ours—in an instant.

I couldn’t lie to myself that this talking, touching, and kissing wasn’t a big deal.

The softness in his eyes, the concern
in his voice, the way he watched me with interest, all insisted I stay. No matter how pissed I was at being attacked, I couldn’t deny—or ever forget—the way kissing him had blown me to bits.

Rules had already been broken, and pervy asshole or not, I’d never wanted anything more than I wanted to know Caesarion. My emotions and desires surged so far past reason that they drowned out the small part of my mind whispering to run.

“I’m not a concubine.” Out of the million feelings running hot, close to the surface, my irritation popped out first. *Stars, Kaia.*

“Then what are you doing here?”
I moved past him, taking care not to touch, and sank down onto the bench he’d abandoned moments ago. His attitude rose hot anger into my throat, and I wanted to let him have it. Ask him who in Tuat he thought he was, making assumptions about my willingness to kiss him, but the bio-tat reminded me quite sternly that the answer was simple—he was allowed whatever he wished.

I had wanted to know Caesarion, but did I want to know Pharaoh?

The coolness of the bench relieved some of the heat in my skin, and the scent of wet stone wound into my nose. A breeze ruffled the leaves, sprinkling the water in the fountain with sparkles of sunlight. It helped me calm down.
The brain stem tat reminded me that Pharaoh apologized to no one. Not to mention I had interrupted him in semi-private gardens without being invited, so his assumption about my intention had not been outlandish. Still. I hadn’t given this three-thousand-year culture clash enough thought.

Caesarion eased onto the other end of the bench, leaving a good eighteen inches of space between us. Goose bumps appeared along my arm, every inch of me swamped with the awareness of his nearness. How could Sarah possibly have missed the fact that Oz was her True for the first seven years we were at the Academy if they felt anything like this? It feels as though I’ll never
have to wonder where Caesarion is again.

“Are you angry with me?”

I pushed my physical reaction to him aside as best as I could, flabbergasted by the incredulous tone in which he’d asked the question. “No. A little embarrassed and offended, maybe, but not angry.”

“Women are not usually offended when I accept their offerings.”

“I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

His dark eyebrows knitted together, giving him an expression that would have been as at home on a small child caught with a hand in an unapproved bag
of treats. “I do not wish to upset or embarrass you. It’s not often that I am interrupted by accident.”

It wasn’t an apology, but given his upbringing and station, it was probably the best I would get. My wariness eased, defenses slipping. He seemed vexed but not angry, and more importantly, disinclined to lunge at me again. I’d give him an ancient clueless pass, because he’d been born into privilege and also because, like it or not, he was my True.

Now that I’d thwarted his attempt to use pleasure to dull the pain of his grief, Caesarion appeared lost again, the way he had at first glance. I wasn’t going to have sex with him. In truth, I wasn’t even sure I liked him, but it didn’t lessen my
desire to find another way to ease his grief.

“‘I’ll be fine. You didn’t know.’” It killed me a little to let him off the hook, but only minutes remained before I had to return. It seemed a waste to spend them fuming over a misunderstanding.

Relief loosened his posture as he turned to face me. “I have never seen you before this morning.”

“I’m sure you meet too many women to recall them all.”

“Now that I look closely, though, I am sure I would remember you. You never answered my question about your business in the garden.”

He slid a stubborn gaze my direction,
giving me a ghost of a halting smile. Our eyes locked. Warmth pooled my middle and spread until my cheeks and neck felt swollen. Words stuck between my heart and my tongue. The rest of the garden, this world, my world, faded away. I don’t know how long we sat that way before I cleared my throat, desperate to hear him speak again before time ran out.

“I sought peace. What are you doing in the common gardens instead of your own?”

“This is my last morning in Alexandria, I thought … I don’t know. Mother loved the gardens.” Caesarion paused, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down in his long throat, tears
appearing in his midnight gaze. “I suppose I sought peace, as well.”

My heart squeezed at his palpable anguish. He’d lost his mother mere hours ago to the same power-hungry lunatic bent on ending Caesarion’s life, as well. My hand itched to reach out and cover his, to give comfort and to memorize the feeling of his skin against mine. The tattoo linked to my brain overrode my desires based on contemporary custom, apparently choosing to forget the recent, rather physical interaction that had already taken place.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help you find peace, however brief.”

That small smile again, one that made me certain a genuine version would stop
my heart. “That would not have been peace. It would have been at best a temporary distraction. Although it would have sufficed, I find that your presence soothes just as well. Perhaps better.” Caesarion reached out, sliding a finger along my jaw before tipping my chin up, forcing me to look at him. “You make me feel strange. As though nothing is what it seems any longer, not even myself.”

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, and a sound like water crashing over rocks roared in my ears. My entire body stood at attention; my stomach tied into a knot, my heart tripped and paused in alternating patterns. It felt like his fingertip lit a fire on every inch of skin it touched.
I slid back a few inches, unable to think with him touching me, but not missing the flash of disappointment on his face when our skin lost contact. He dropped his hand to his lap, clenching and unclenching a fist.

I groped for more neutral ground, unwilling to broach the real reason we felt familiar to each other. "You said this is your last morning in Alexandria. You’re leaving?"

"I shouldn’t speak of it. Perhaps you give me strange feelings because you’re one of Octavian’s spies." He slid almost imperceptibly closer.

I reached out and covered his hand with mine, unable to contain the gasp that escaped when our skin touched and
fire crawled up my arm. The stabbing pain in the base of my skull returned with enough force to make me clench my teeth, the price of forcing my body to override the commands from the brain stem tat. It wrapped painful fingers around my neck that climbed toward my eyeballs, but I couldn’t stop touching him. Our skin felt fused, and when he flipped his palm against mine, locking our fingers together, the strangest combination of contentment and desire spread through my blood.

“I would never betray you,” I managed.

“I believe you.” Caesarion’s gaze throbbed with what appeared to be the same odd reaction to our meeting, though
he still looked grief stricken and dazed. “To the general who caused my mother’s death, I am nothing but a threat to his quest for power, and Octavian is not the type of man to leave threats blowing in the wind.”

“Is he right to see you as an enemy?”

“I do not know. My paternity was kept from me for a time, and my place is here, with the Egyptian people. My family has ruled for generations.”

“But … ,” I nudged.

“Caesar left us when defending his relationship with my mother to the Senate became too difficult. Antony, not unexpectedly given his weak character, failed my mother as well. Octavian ordered her murder, and mine, and has
eliminated thousands of my subjects. I have no reason to love Rome.” Bitterness clipped the words from his lips, each one pruned and spat into the air.

That Caesarion might have marched on Rome intent on revenge never occurred to me, but the hatred clogging the air between us made the possibility clear.

Of course, he would never get the chance.

Time was short for both of us. I’d forgotten my stupid watch, but the brain stem tat alerted me of Genesis time after my idle thought. Breakfast would end in twenty minutes, and it usually took at least ten to get out of the
decontamination chamber. One of the rules for time travel, put in place by Originals like my grandfather, was that time marched in the past as it did in the present. It prevented stealing time and eliminated temptation for subterfuge. If I passed ninety minutes in the past, ninety minutes elapsed at home. I had to return to Sanchi.

I gathered the remainder of my self-control and stood, smoothing down my dress, already missing my True, already anticipating the cold loneliness of exiting his presence.

“It was a pleasure, Caesarion.” It took all of my concentration to force his given name past my lips, past the discomfort of bypassing the electronic
fingers reaching toward my lips in an attempt to force an appropriate title out in its place.

If my lack of propriety bothered him, Caesarion did not mention it. Instead he reached out, almost like a reflex. “Wait. What is your name, beauty?”

My heart fluttered at the frank compliment. “Kaia.”

His hand tightened on mine, igniting sparks that raced up my arm, and my knees wobbled as his fingers caressed mine with a brief squeeze. “I am sorry to think we may not meet again, Kaia. Not in this world at any rate.”

I couldn’t tell him how far apart our worlds existed already. Instead I smiled, trying to memorize his face and body and
the sound of his voice all at once. “The gods are cruel. You know that better than anyone. But I’m happy to have spent these moments in your company.”

It was the only true reply that came to mind, and one the bio-tat suggested he would understand. The usual parting words, like “see you later” or “be safe,” would have been lies, today or in the weeks to come. I couldn’t see him again without increasing the chance of getting caught, and he would never be safe again. If these were the only moments I would steal with him, they wouldn’t be tarnished by fakeness.

That would have been worse than not meeting him at all.

He nodded, a wrinkle appearing
between his dark eyebrows. Perhaps he wanted to say something more but lost the words as I had, in the space between his heart and his mouth.

The bio-tat forced my knees into a slight bow as I turned and stepped quickly back the way I had come. The common gardens were massive; a hundred nooks and crannies lay waiting for me to duck inside and return home. I found one, a quiet grove shaded by olive and pomegranate trees. A still pool sat against one of the outer walls, soft blue lotus flowers drifting lazily across the green surface. As beautiful as these gardens were, as breathless and perfectly complete as the boy a few yards away made me, I didn’t belong
The self-destruct sequence built into my bio-tat meant I couldn’t stay, even if I wanted to, and Caesarion couldn’t leave. Jonah had brought the oranges—and small, inanimate trinkets could be snagged, like the locket around my neck—anything we could enclose completely in our hands. But not people. We hadn’t discovered a way to bring them forward, and we didn’t travel forward in time ourselves, either.

I felt sure that had we the chance, the two of us would fall in the kind of love that inspired people to write stories. Although Caesarion felt the pull between us, he couldn’t suspect the reason. He only knew that he’d met an intriguing girl
in the gardens, but on the morning his entire world began to fall apart, he would soon be plagued with more pressing worries.

Caesarion had lost his mother, his father, and soon his own life would be sacrificed on the altar of Rome’s expanding power. Octavian’s march toward becoming Augustus, one of Western history’s single biggest influences, had begun. He would impart a lasting imprint on government, military tactics, and cultural expansion that would change the Western world forever. Nothing would change Caesarion’s and my circumstances, and nothing remained but for me to go back to Sanchi.
My fingers found the pendant hanging against my breastbone, toying with the pretty metal as I swallowed, struggling not to cry. How many times had Berenice said good-bye to Titus, assuming it would be the last time?

I drew strength from the past, leaned down and whispered “return” into Jonah’s cuff. The lights changed from red to green, and my adventure came to an end.
Chapter Eight

The pressing ache at leaving Caesarion took a backseat when I checked the time again, aware that Reflection started three minutes ago. Four wrist comms from Analeigh had beeped while the air lock held me hostage, each relaying her increasing concern. It didn’t help that the scrapes on my knees had embedded ancient Egyptian sand and gravel inside them, which meant the stupid scanner forced me into a decontamination shower before letting me loose on the Academy.

At least no alarms had sounded as the scanner swept my hands or face. It didn’t know I’d interacted with anyone, or that
I felt as though he’d touched more than my skin. I hurried toward Reflection, trying to shake loose the lingering feeling of his mouth on mine. My knees were still weak, and it wasn’t just because I was panicking over being late.

“Kaia.” Oz paused reluctantly when we passed in the otherwise empty hallway, adjusting his glasses. “I thought you’d be in the Caesar review.”

“I, um, was double-checking that our wardrobe is set for the Triangle visit and lost track of time.” His eyes narrowed. I swallowed hard, then forced a giggle past my lips. “The hats, you know? I love trying on those hats.”

His gaze shifted from curious to irritated. “Analeigh and Sarah were
worried.”

“I know, and as you said, I’m late for Reflection. So, if you’ll excuse me.”

Oz didn’t move out of the way, his broad shoulders and solid stature so unlike the reedy boy I’d spent the morning with in an Egyptian garden. The way he studied my face made my palms break out in a cold sweat, and for a moment I felt trapped.

“Something’s different about you. Where were you, really? I doubt even you could get quite so flushed over hats.”

“Why did you lie about going to Pearl Harbor?” It slipped out like some kind of an innate defense mechanism, handy for deflecting attention from my own
transgressions.

Oz went very still. I could almost see every tensed muscle relaxing in order, as though he’d started at his head and concentrated on loosening one limb at a time down to his toes. His eyes, typically sharp and focused, turned bored. The entire process took only seconds, but was deliberate enough to wig me out. He was too calm, too apathetic. It reminded me of a lion lulling its prey into a false sense of ease.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I was in the Archives, and I saw you at the Mongolian invasions.”

“Why did you pull up my info in the Archives?”
“Why were you in Asia?”

“Why were you checking up on me?”

We faced each other, at an impasse, the unspoken challenge in the air dampening my skin with chilly sweat. He wasn’t going to admit he’d been in the wrong place, and I wasn’t about to tell him where I’d been, either.

“I’m late for Reflection.” I shouldered past him, moving fast. My heart pounding for a totally different reason than it had in Alexandria. Oz’s eyes followed me all the way down the hall until I turned a corner and escaped his view.

*
All Historians had their own reflection data file under every historical event, person, and archive in which to catalog our thoughts. We filled them with our opinions on the effects of that particular entry on the development or destruction of Earth Before—whether or not a lesson should be recorded for future generations, and what exactly the memory could help us accomplish or avoid in the years to come. In turn, those files were compiled and scanned, and when a large enough consensus was reached, entered in the Hope Chest.

Today we weren’t messing with our files—those were done in individual sessions. Group sessions were to review apprentice recordings, and this one went
as badly as expected. Differing opinions were a part of human nature we’d never escape, but the Originals had sought to balance them by providing multiple viewpoints whenever possible. As a result, apprentices sat through three sessions on each recorded observation, each with a different certified Historian. Maude had dressed me down in the initial recap a few days ago, and Minnie had been even worse the next session. Today, an overseer named Booth taught the final class and embarrassed the crap out of me until my ears felt permanently red.

It occurred to me that I only had to suffer through another year of training. After that I could focus on whoever and
whatever I wanted, as long as I was willing to write up the initial reflections when I entered them in the database. Maybe it would behoove me to pay attention until then so I didn’t die of shame before my eighteenth birthday—or accumulate enough infractions to be delayed.

Booth asked me to stay behind when he dismissed us four hours later, and my stomach sank. “Miss Vespasian, you’re putting all of us in a very awkward position with your continued lack of effort.”

“It’s not a lack of effort, I swear. It’s more of an … excess of attention in the wrong areas. I’ll try harder to focus on the assignments.”
Booth had a gentle nature and was my favorite of the Historian Elders. Wrinkles cut deep grooves in his coffee-bean skin, and the whites of his eyes had gone a bit yellow these past couple of years. He walked bent over with a cane, his spine twisted. At eighty-two he had to be close to the oldest living human in Genesis. Knowing I’d disappointed him shamed me more than the combined verbal torment dished out by the Gatling girls.

He gave me a small, mostly toothless smile and patted the back of my hand. “I see much of Lloyd in you, you know.”

“Really?” It turned up my lips to think people saw my grandfather when they looked at me.
“Yes. He could be easily distracted by the sidelines, believed the real triumphs and failures of human history were to be found in the minutiae of the everyday, in the lives of inconsequential people. Not in the monumental events you’re studying at the moment, but in humanity’s reaction to those things.” Booth’s eyes took on a faraway look, as though his mind had wandered past my grandfather into some secret room that housed memories that would never be archived. “That history could be altered by the simplest of changes to an insignificant life, like tossing a tiny pebble into a pool of water.”

“What do you believe, sir?” I asked, mesmerized by his insight.
His gaze focused on me a moment later, sharp now. “I believe there is no point in thinking about changing the past when our duty is to use our collective knowledge to ensure the most advantageous future.”

The words tightened my chest. After years of training, the mere mention of changing the past made imaginary hives break out across my skin. “I’m honored by the comparison to my grandfather. I’ll do my best to make his memory proud.”

“There is a difference, Miss Vespasian, between being a dreamer and being a rebel. I trust that given your family contains excellent examples of each, you understand where that line rests.”
The sawdust from earlier reappeared on my tongue. “Yes, sir.”

Booth’s insinuation was clear. My grandfather and my brother had gone disparate ways. One was acceptable. The other was not. It didn’t take a genius to know my path took a major swerve toward Jonah’s today. Even so, I fought the urge to defend my brother and his decision to live outside the System. His name was pretty much as taboo as visiting my thousands-of-years-dead True Companion.

And right now, I needed to cool it before my own guilt tipped me completely off my nut.

Booth nodded, but his gaze remained thoughtful. “You may go. I trust on our
visit to see the Sun King in a few weeks you will keep your focus where it belongs.”

“That’s my favorite period. I’ll do well.”

He flicked a finger toward the door at my assurance, allowing my escape into the hall. Only Analeigh had waited, her eyebrows raised in a silent question.

“Pay attention to the assignment at hand, Miss Vespasian,” I rasped in a fair imitation of Booth’s scratchy voice.

Analeigh laughed, but the hollow sound said it was only to humor me. We had been off since I’d found Jonah’s cuff, and this morning’s trip didn’t help. She knew I was hiding something. Neither of us was in the mood for
lighthearted fun, I guessed, and the chat with Booth sobered my lingering high after meeting Caesarion. No matter how badly I wanted to, going back wasn’t an option. The past could never be altered without consequence. I didn’t want to believe he had to die for nothing, but it had already happened; I needed to be happy with this morning’s interaction and leave it behind me.

Analeigh and I stepped into the dining hall for lunch, a larger space than most of the rooms at the Academy, but just as cold and perfunctory. No pictures hung on the white walls, and no carpets spanned the tiled floor. Round glass tables and steel chairs dotted the room, to the entire effect of making the space
feel empty even when we were all in here at once. My mom said the sparseness was a Historian thing, and that the Agriculture Academy had walls made out of vines and flowers.

There were ten tables, one for each class and two extras for any Historians or Elders that wanted to join us, even though they rarely dined in our company. Our class, like most older classes, had split into two distinct groups, but we were no different from the rest of the System and were required to get along. Even the dissension between Jess and me wasn’t much to write home about—nothing like the epic high school battles waged in old movies or the electronic books I’d devoured as a child. No one
had been pushed in front of a bus, no pig’s blood had been spilled. Perhaps because we had no buses. Or pigs.

We didn’t all love each other, but we were polite and avoided confrontation.

Jess, Peyton, and Levi were seated and chatting when I made it to the table, but fell silent at my approach. Oz shoveled asparagus stalks into his mouth like he hadn’t eaten for a week, avoiding my gaze, but Sarah looked up at the sudden pause, guilt darkening her light-blue gaze. I dropped my plate next to hers, my apple rolling toward the center of the table. By the time I’d retrieved it Analeigh had settled next to me, but no one had resumed talking.

“You guys are making it totally
obvious that you were either talking about me or Analeigh, and you know Sarah’s going to spill, so you might as well share.”

Peyton and Levi glanced toward Jess, who shrugged. Sarah stuffed a huge bite of bread in her mouth, obviously keen on waiting for privacy before divulging the contents of the conversation.

“What’s going on?” Analeigh asked, folding her arms across her chest.

Oz mopped up the last of the vegetable juice on his plate with a final bite of bread, then sighed. “Kaia’s brother and his merry band of thieves and rebels are in the news again.”

My heart sped up. Not due to mortification, as Jess had likely hoped,
but because news of my brother and his crew had been in short supply for months. The lack of information worried me. The System wasn’t big, and although there were places to hide, they couldn’t stay away from civilization forever. Since the moons and outer planets weren’t terraformed, eventually the … well, pirates, for lack of a better term, had to return for oxygen, proper attire, and sustenance. They pillaged those things, along with money and food and whatever else struck their fancy.

It was hard to reconcile the reports of their crimes with my playful, quick-to-smile, handsome older brother. No one knew why he’d left. If my parents or any of his friends had suspicions, they had
never shared them with me. My anguish over missing him was rivaled only by my anger at being left behind without a word of explanation.

“What happened?” I asked after a bite, trying not to sound too eager.

“They hit the armory on Roma. Took a bunch of weapons and oxygen tanks.” Levi glanced around as though there were Elders peering over his shoulders, even though talking about subversives like Jonah was taboo at worst, not forbidden.

An idea formed in the back of my mind, tiny but growing into something substantial by the moment. “When?”

Levi frowned, then leaned forward and dropped his voice even further.
“Why are you so interested all of a sudden?”

It was true that I preferred to avoid gossip about my brother. I didn’t hate him the way the Elders thought we all should, and even though I was angry with him, I wanted him to be safe. Jonah wasn’t idle gossip. He was my brother. I loved him even though his actions put more pressure on me to walk the line, a line I’d rather keep just in sight, so our parents could be proud of at least one of their children.

So my grandfather’s legacy wasn’t completely tarnished.

My failure to answer turned all six pairs of eyes toward me. Jess and Pey both looked bored with the conversation,
like they wished I would get over myself so we could talk about something more interesting. Levi’s dark features spoke of idle curiosity, as usual. He was kind of the gossip king of the Academy. Sarah’s face was pinched with concern, Analeigh’s eyes crowded with a million questions.

Oz’s steady gray gaze brimmed with suspicion and annoyance, narrowed and so focused on my face that it made me start to sweat.

I concentrated on not squirming. “I … I like to know he’s okay.”

“It was this morning around six,” Oz supplied, his voice softer. “They weren’t hurt.”

Sarah slid a sidelong glance at him.
The hitch in her body language told me I wasn’t imagining his odd behavior, the gentle thread to his reassurance.

When I didn’t respond, the conversation around the table shifted. Jess changed the subject, blabbering about what decade of clothing she planned to wear for the sixth year’s upcoming certification party. Oz finished his food in three huge bites, then he and Sarah left the table. Pey and Analeigh stayed quiet, and my jumbled thoughts didn’t allow me to inflate the conversation.

Analeigh’s silence unnerved me; she would want to know why Jonah’s latest antics had interested me so much, and why I’d said anything at the table when I
typically hated people talking about my brother. I’d have to think of something other than the *real* reason for my change of heart. Because admitting to my rule-following friend that finding Jonah’s cuff had opened a world of possibilities to me, if I had the guts to grasp them, wouldn’t play well. And now that I knew where Jonah had been, I could travel back and corner him.

Get some freaking answers.
Chapter Nine

New York, New York, United States, Earth Before–March 25, 1911 CE (Common Era)

Heavy clouds pressed together, obscuring the sun over New York City and making the early spring day overcast and dreary, the temperature below average. The high-necked shirtwaist, ankle boots, and long woolen skirt kept me warm enough, though comfort hadn’t been an early twentieth-century fashion concern.

I hadn’t figured out the best time to visit Jonah yet, and today’s observation delayed my plan to travel without authorization a second time even further.
If I was honest, as much as I wanted to throw my arms around my brother’s neck and squeeze out answers, I’d started to waver. It wasn’t getting in trouble as much as disappointing my parents. Again. Our family had been through enough, and I’d taken a huge risk yesterday.

Today’s observation would be a distraction, though not a happy one. We’d drawn Rachel Turing as our overseer at the Triangle since a male overseer would be harder to blend into the crowd. There were men in the building, and some would even perish in a few short hours, but they were, for the most part, too recognizable. On a positive note, Rachel treated us as adults
in a way Maude could never manage, and had left all of today’s horrible research in our hands.

Though the overseers had witnessed this event multiple times, it was new to Analeigh, Sarah, Peyton, and I, and the shortcut research we’d tried to split hadn’t been enough once Rachel had been assigned. We’d all spent hours determining which worktables had empty seats, how many of us needed to roam the room passing out buttons, ribbons, and thread, and the exact spot that would be consumed last by fire and smoke, allowing us to remain until the final moments.

Our work had been accurate so far—the five of us had spent the day sewing
and basting, hauling material and finished products. Even though the guidance spewing into my brain from the tattoo made my hands fairly certain at the unfamiliar work, I’d poked so many holes in my fingers they resembled Swiss cheese. The real kind.

Tables and chairs, baskets of discarded strips of cloth and trimmings littered every square inch of workspace. There wasn’t much room to even walk; I couldn’t imagine the scene when these girls started to panic. As the end of the day drew near, grasshoppers banged around in my stomach. Even though the five of us wouldn’t perish in this fire, the idea of watching it happen to everyone else sloshed bile into my throat.
We were on the eighth floor, where the fire would start in approximately—I glanced at the clock on the wall—fifteen minutes. Restless and unwilling to sit still, I traded places with Analeigh, who had been up, handing out trimmings to the girls at the worktables.

Quitting time inched closer. Foreladies wandered the rows, passing out pay envelopes but not allowing anyone to move from their stations until five. Up and down the rows, I stared into the doomed faces, checking for the one that matched the photo of Rosie Shapiro in my protected file.

When I saw her, it surprised me. She wasn’t sitting at her sewing machine like I’d expected, but coming out of the
coatroom, shrugging into a tattered wool cloak and securing a scarf over her shining curls. My glasses displayed her file, the one that promised she perished on the same day and time printed on Jonah’s True card, but she’s leaving. Now.

She wasn’t supposed to do that.

Her brown eyes were warm and soft, but as they met mine, the horror in them karate-chopped my throat. She *knew what was coming*. That everyone in this room was about to die. She had been warned, and only a Historian could have done it.

*Jonah.*

I thought about Caesarion, and how I wished I could save him. Now, right in
front of me, stood proof that Jonah had struggled with the same feelings. No one else obsessed over their True or broke a gabillion rules to meet them. The others got their card, laughed, maybe read the person’s history, and then stuck it in a digital archive of their life.

But not my brother. Not me.

I wanted to ask Rosie where she was going a half hour early, but even though I’d broken the rules with Caesarion the other day, now Rachel’s watchful gaze made speaking with Rosie impossible. The overseer’s dark eyes latched onto me, probably wondering why this particular girl had drawn my interest, already preparing her lecture about my scattered attention. Instead of asking
Rosie anything, I wandered after her as she made her way to the stairwell, dropping trimmings on the workstations along the way.

A gray-haired forelady frowned, eyes sweeping Rosie’s outerwear. “It’s not quitting time.”

“I know. I’m feeling quite ill.” As though to prove her point, Rosie swayed on her feet, then leaned over and retched at the woman’s feet.

The forelady didn’t even flinch as vomit splashed onto the scraps on the floor, splattering bits onto her shoes. “I’ll have to dock your pay.”

“I understand,” Rosie replied, her hands shaking as she wiped her lips. All of the color had drained from her face;
she looked like a ghost. She looked like she wanted to scream warnings, or maybe wished that she’d never been here at all.

The forelady heaved a sigh. “You’ll have to take the elevator. The doors are locked until five.”

Locked from the outside, she meant. So no one could sneak away.

Rosie nodded, then spun and headed toward the freight elevators that would ferry a precious few of these girls out of this deathtrap before it stopped working. With one final glance around the room, her eyes filled with tears and a sob scratching from her throat, Rosie Shapiro disappeared.

That wasn’t supposed to happen. She
was meant to die.

The thought of what else she would change when she walked out that door, what pieces of history were forever moved or forgotten or dragged into the darkness, closes the room in around me. It’s hard to breathe among the clothes and all of these poor, doomed girls, but when Rachel’s penetrating gaze finds mine, asking what’s wrong, I shake my head.

Get it together, Kaia. This is Jonah’s secret, it has to be. Trust him.

Ten minutes later, a girl near the windows that faced Greene Street shrieked, “Fire!” If I believed in hell the way my mother did, the way Analeigh’s parents did, it would look like this. The
five of us moved quickly to the small space at the front corner of the room, the one we’d determined would allow us to stay and watch the longest.

Most of the girls nearest the windows, where the fire had broken out, were frozen in place, half consumed by flames before they moved from their chairs. Fire spread faster than I could have imagined; the piles of scraps incinerated in seconds, the flames passing quickly to the wooden tables, the walls, and the girls running frantically in every direction.

The doors were still locked. No one opened them, despite the workers beating their fists bloody against the thick metal. The girls closest to the
doors were crushed against the stubborn barriers, slumping to the floor as the rest moved on to the elevators. Smoke choked the room. It burned my eyes and clogged my lungs. Analeigh, Pey, Sarah, Rachel, and I lay flat on our stomachs, but even being farthest from the fire and near a window, where at least a little fresh air attempted to enter the inferno, breathing was difficult. We were supposed to stay until the last girl jumped from this floor, but I wondered how we would stand it.

The elevator stopped working. A few of the braver girls grabbed onto the cables, sliding downward and crashing onto the elevator’s roof. I knew from my research that the ones that went first
would be crushed by the bodies of those who jumped second and third. They would all suffer broken limbs and severe burns to their hands, but a handful would survive.

Then the elevator was gone. It wouldn’t come back.

Screams echoed in my ears, loud and unceasing from the girls around me, muffled from the floor above, where the fire had spread. The girls that would survive took the stairs up to the roof. The rusted fire escape outside the windows broke and fell away, taking more girls to their deaths, and the workers that remained on this floor would burn, asphyxiate, or jump.

I squinted through the frames of my
glasses, through eyes that felt as though they were on fire themselves, trying to record clear visions of these girls’ faces. Terror rolled their eyes back into their heads, tear tracks cut through soot-smudged skin. Fire singed the hems of their dresses and more than one girl slapped uselessly at flames eating away her hair. Farther from the windows, they started to drop, crawling weakly forward but eventually collapsing until the fire ate what was left of them. The acrid smell of burning flesh spilled into the room, mingling with smoke.

Sirens wailed in the distance, then grew closer and finally stopped. Shouted orders and exclamations of disbelief, distant and hard to decipher, lifted from
the street. The female workers perched in the windows, looking down at the street with mixtures of desperation, wild fear, and resignation flashing across their young features.

The oldest girl at the windows couldn’t be past twenty, and there were a couple even younger than me. The manifest in the Archives listed two fourteen-year-old girls among today’s victims, but they were both on the ninth floor.

If the doors had been unlocked, most of them would have lived. Maybe all.

The men who ran the factory ordered the doors be kept locked so that the girls’ purses could be checked on their way out, to prevent the theft of their cheap
material. Neither of the owners would be held responsible for a single one of the 146 deaths taking place at this very moment.

Two girls at the window grasped hands and jumped. More took their places. Some jumped alone, others together, but in the end everyone died alone. It was the one universal truth.

It was a strange moment of peace inside the chaos, the choice the girls had in the manner of their deaths even if they couldn’t choose to live. It wasn’t what the Elders wanted us to see but it was a lesson there for the taking, though small, and I grabbed onto it with both hands.

Choices. We always, always have them.
I started to cough, bloody phlegm hitting the floor in front of my face. Analeigh’s face turned beet red as she hacked away, and the fire crept closer—we would be five additional victims in less than a minute if Rachel didn’t get us the hell out of here. But she’d made this trip before, and the timing had been tested. Thirty seconds later she lowered her lips to the cuff ringing her wrist, the shaking blue haze surrounded us, and the horror disappeared.

*
“Put the masks on, girls. Immediately.”

Rachel’s voice reached through the haze and opened my eyes, which I’d pressed closed in an attempt to erase the images dancing behind them—terrified girls aflame, screaming, sobbing, jumping to their deaths. It was the worst event I’d recorded so far.

Oxygen masks hung from the air lock ceiling and I grabbed the nearest one, holding the clear plastic over my nose and mouth, and breathing the recycled air and cleansing chemicals deep into my lungs. Ten minutes passed before the five of us stopped coughing and our faces returned to normal, healthy colors.
We pulled on the masks until the cords retracted into the ceiling, then stripped off our smoke-scented garments and dumped them in the drawers. The smell permeated our skin, our hair, and the sleek black undergarments, too, and we all headed for decontamination showers without being told.

Twenty minutes later we were cleaned and dressed in the fresh outfits waiting in the drawers. The comps cleared us, the doors swished open and, for once, the smell of canned air was such a welcome respite from the lingering smoke that I wanted to cry. None of us had spoken—not even Peyton, a notorious chatterbox—and we continued down the hall in silence. It
was almost lunchtime, but none of us felt much like eating. Sarah sent Oz a wrist comm asking him to meet her for a walk around the gymnasium, while Analeigh and I returned to our room. We dropped on the couch, then both sighed at once. It broke the tension, somewhat, although my best friend, never one for letting issues grow old and smelly, quickly reminded me that today’s horror wasn’t the only thing we had to discuss.

“Where were you yesterday morning? And don’t give me any crap about the gym because we both know your idea of exercising is to run back to the room to take a nap between sessions.” She pinned me with a serious gaze, her green eyes determined behind her glasses.
It was on the tip of my tongue to confess. I wanted to tell my best friend about meeting the boy born to love me—how he made me feel with a simple touch, the way I could almost sense my body and his making a complete whole, the rules I’d broken—but it would only put us both in bad positions. Not to mention that I didn’t think she would understand.

The idea that I was becoming my brother closed my throat. For all of my promises that I wouldn’t break my parents’ hearts the way Jonah had, it hadn’t taken much prodding to make me forget them. Just the lure of meeting my True Companion in the flesh.

Keeping such a huge thing from
Analeigh pushed my tears past control, and she leaned over, pulling me into a hug that toppled me off balance. I put a hand out, bracing my weight on the wall so I didn’t smash her, and felt Jonah’s cuff slide from my elbow down to my wrist.

It was stupid to keep it on me, but it worried me more to leave it in the room. We shared clothes all the time since everything matched, and it would have been too easy for Analeigh or Sarah to stumble across it in a drawer.

Analeigh’s eyes grew wide as she stared at the golden band, the symbol of certified Historian status glaringly out of place in our apprentice dorms. “Where did you get that?”
I paused for the briefest moment. “I found it in Jonah’s room. On my birthday.”

“How didn’t you tell me? Why haven’t you turned it in?”

“I don’t know. I just … wanted something of his, I guess.”

I hadn’t meant for her to know about the cuff, but relief at being able to set down one secret lifted a little weight from my shoulders. Still, telling her that I’d used the cuff to see Caesarion … I couldn’t. “Did you see the girl that left about ten minutes before the fire started?”

Analeigh frowned, probably trying to keep up with my train of thought. “The one who said she was sick and threw up
on the forelady?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, I saw. Lucky girl.”

“What if she wasn’t just a lucky girl? What if she knew what was about to happen? That if she didn’t get out then she never would.”

Silence stretched between us as our eyes locked, Analeigh chewing on her bottom lip the way she always did while she was thinking. “How would she know?”

“Maybe someone told her.”

“Who would just tell that one girl, Kaia? If someone knew about the fire—and no one did, because none of the contemporary investigations or any of
our reflections on the time period have revealed any indication of arson—but if they did, why wouldn’t they warn everyone?”

The questions were so Analeigh. She saw everything, remembered everything, and analyzed it quicker than any other Historian in our class, or any class, for that matter.

“That girl? Her name was Rosie Shapiro. She’s Jonah’s True.” I paused, running my fingers over the dials on his cuff. “I think he warned her.”
“What?” Analeigh gasped, her mouth falling open.

“I saw it in her eyes. She knew.”

My best friend wasted no time grabbing her personal comp and punching up the archived files on the Triangle Fire. The holo-files could only be accessed from the Archives, along with all of the stored reflection, but everything else could be viewed remotely.

“It says here that Rosie Shapiro died in the fire. That she jumped out the window on the eighth floor and was claimed by her family two days later.”

I nod. “I know. I saw it before we
left, when I was looking her up.”

Analeigh kept scrolling, her eyebrows drawn into a sharp point across the bridge of her nose. “Wait. Oh my stars, look at this.”

Her face went white as she shoved her comp in my face. I grabbed it, scanning the list containing details on over a hundred dead girls without seeing anything worth freaking out over. “What?”

“There are two records for Rosie Shapiro.” She leaned over and stabbed her finger at the screen, rolling it back up until she found the entry that caught her eye. “There.”

Her breathless wheezing infected my own nerves. I peered at the screen, my
heart catching in my chest when I saw what she’d seen a moment ago: another Rosie Shapiro. She had the same date of birth as the one on Jonah’s little blue card, but her date of death was different. According to this second archive, Rosie Shapiro had escaped the Triangle factory via the roof and died in Chicago, Illinois at the age of eighty-seven.

“Impossible,” I breathed, unwilling to admit that my brother had changed history even after seeing her leave the building with my own two eyes.

“Well, something happened, because according to our archives, Rosie Shapiro both survived and perished in that fire we saw today.” Analeigh paused. “She survived. Somehow. Even
though in those original victim rosters, she definitely didn’t.”

“\text{It was Jonah.}” My heart settled a little with the admission, making room for the slightest bit of wonder. The tiniest sliver of jealousy that Jonah had been able to save the girl he loved. At what cost?

Analeigh took the comp back, reading in silence. Her fingers worried at the pieces of lint on her quilt as my mind stumbled through the implications of this entire scenario. The only thing we knew for sure was that Rosie left the Triangle when she wasn’t meant to. I felt pretty solid in my assumption that Jonah had warned her at some point during his stint with the Historians, given their
connection, but what I couldn’t wrap my mind around was how he could have known the resulting ripples wouldn’t implode the world as we knew it.

“Does it say any more about her? The Rosie that lived?”

“A little. She married and moved to Chicago in her early twenties. Had six children with her husband—they were married for fifty years before he died. She did an interview once for the paper about surviving the tragedy, and said how every year on March 25th she had a panic attack. That she never locked her doors again, not ever, after that day.”

Analeigh pushed her glasses up on her nose, squinting closer at the screen. The gears in her head ground almost audibly
as she tried to make sense of this unique and possibly horrifying scenario. “If Jonah really changed this, if he really warned her and she lived when she wasn’t supposed to, he could have killed us all, Kaia.”

The Elders taught us that the reason we couldn’t interact at all was because no one could predict the spiderweb effect of altering even one insignificant life, one innocuous day. There were simply too many options. Perhaps Rosie Shapiro had been no one of consequence, but what if she’d given birth to a murderer who’d strangled John F. Kennedy before he became president? From there, what if the man elected in his place had started a nuclear war with
Cuba?

The entire existence of human history could be altered by slipping a single, tiny block out of place. Saving Rosie Shapiro could have made every single one of us disappear.

As much as I loved my brother, as hard as I wanted to believe in him, my throat burned with shame. Tears filled my eyes and I bit my lip as I nodded, bunching the quilt in my fists. “I know.”

The alarm signaling the end of lunch interrupted us, but neither of us moved. We were due in the next Reflection session in five minutes for a quick debrief on the Triangle Fire so that didn’t leave much time for melting down. Along with all of the thoughts
about my brother and the rules we’d both broken, I was wondering how Rosie lived with herself all those years. How could she leave all of those girls to die? The answer to the last question seemed obvious enough—she had to, and Jonah would have known that. If those 146 girls hadn’t died, women’s and workers’ rights would have been delayed by years. The leaps the United States made in the early twentieth century in proper working conditions, which propelled the country to a place of prominence in the world, would have been hampered or stalled.

It horrified me that people had to see those burned, broken bodies lying in the street with their own eyes before taking
action made sense to them. But they hadn’t died for nothing.

“If he saved her, Kaia, when do you think he did it?” Analeigh’s voice shook. It brought me back to the present. Genesis. Sanchi.

“I don’t know.” I hadn’t thought about the logistics. Jonah had disappeared nearly three years ago, the year he’d been certified a full Historian. “Maybe that’s what made him leave.”

The Elders could have found out. The lecture Booth had passed along yesterday sprang to mind, along with his mention of my brother and the strange reference to changing the past—it sort of made sense.

He could have been talking about
Jonah and Rosie.

“If it’s been three years, we should have seen repercussions from the alteration.” Analeigh stood, running her fingers through her long blond waves. Bags drooped under her eyes that hadn’t been there before we left this morning.

Fatigue rolled balls of lead through my limbs, too. I wanted to skip the afternoon and hide under the covers. I wanted to forget the looks on those girls’ faces as they leaped to their deaths, stop wondering what Jonah had done and whether or not he had broken everything. Most of all, I wanted—needed—to forget the whisper in the back of my mind wondering if I could do the same for Caesarion. Save him.
I had to believe my brother wouldn’t have done it if he hadn’t been sure we’d all be safe. Jonah and I were alike—impulsive but not reckless. Not dumb.

“I guess he got lucky,” I finally replied to Analeigh’s question as she reached a hand down to pull me to my feet.

“What are you planning?” Analeigh rummaged in her desk and handed over a protein tab before chewing one herself. “Nothing. What do you mean?”

“You always answer with a question when you’re up to something. You never told me where you snuck off to the other day, and you never, ever talk about Jonah in front of people the way you did at lunch.” She braided her long hair into a
single plait that hung over one shoulder, then crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Don’t tell me the only reason you’re hanging onto that cuff is for sentimentality’s sake. You’re not that kind of girl. I want to know what’s going on with you, Kai. We used to tell each other everything. What happened?”

My heart climbed into my throat. “I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble. But I’m your friend, and that’s what you do. I don’t approve of the unnecessary risk taking, but I won’t tattle.” Her huge green eyes were earnest behind her glasses.

The stubborn friendship in them broke down the last of my resolve, no
matter how selfish it felt to include her in my subterfuge. Maybe telling her one more thing would be okay. “I want to use the cuff to go see Jonah before this morning’s heist.”

She surprised me a little by not even flinching. “Why?”

“I want to know why he left.” It wasn’t my prepared answer. I had meant to tell her it was to ask about Rosie and how he could be sure the future hadn’t been irrevocably damaged. To do our duty as Historians, to ensure the future by protecting the past, but my heart ached to know why he’d abandoned our family. Left me alone.

Her eyes softened, and she turned her palm up, grasping my fingers. “I know
you do. But do you really think he’s going to tell you? It could be dangerous.”

“Jonah would never hurt me.” Physically.

“I know that. I can’t imagine your brother hurting anyone—he always seemed like the nicest guy, to me—but those people he’s with now ... those pirates.” She wrinkled her nose. “Jonah can’t control them. He’s one of them, and you need to accept that we don’t know what he’s capable of anymore.”

Jonah had taken on an older brother role with all of my friends, and Analeigh had been especially attached to him. Sometimes it slipped my mind that she’d lost him, too. “I’ll be careful. I’ll get
there ten minutes early and stake it out, then grab him when the fewest people are around.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“No, Analeigh. You have a perfect record. You’ll be able to pick your specialty at the end of next year, work in whatever era you want. I can’t ask you to jeopardize that because I’m a big fat baby about missing my stupid brother.”

“First, you’re not fat, or a baby. Second, for all the things Jonah is, stupid isn’t one of them. Third, if he has changed the past, we need to know. We’re Historians, Kaia, and I know that means as much to you as it does to me. Our job isn’t only to observe and record the past. We have to protect it, to make
sure that it all transpires like it’s supposed to, so that everyone we love in Genesis is still here at the end of the day. It’s our duty. The Elders would understand.”

The determination shining in her gaze surprised me. Analeigh never broke rules. Not ever, not the tiniest one. I could kid myself about there being no precedent for using an illegal cuff to time travel without an overseer, or believe they would somehow praise us for taking our job so seriously instead of reporting the discrepancies regarding Rosie and Jonah, but those were lies. None of our actions would come without a sanction, probably a big one, if they caught us, but the thought of having
Analeigh with me choked back my protests. I threw my arms around her neck as Sarah stumbled into the room.

“Whoa, is there something you guys need to tell me?” Sarah asked, staring at us from the doorway. She grinned and it lit up her face. Rooms always brightened when Sarah stepped into them, but now her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were a little glassy.

“Someone just got kissed,” I sang in an obnoxious tone, grinning back.

“What? No, I didn’t. We were working out!”

“I’ll bet you were,” I teased.

“Is that what it’s called now? Working out?” Analeigh gave Sarah a
wicked wink. “Maybe that’s why I haven’t been on a date in a while—I’m behind on the lingo.”

Sarah stripped off her sweaty shirt and tossed it onto Analeigh’s head. My best friend shrieked and pawed it away. A nasty, wet sock hit my nose and cut off my snickers. Sarah escaped into the bathroom, still hurling damp clothes at us as she disappeared.

And for a few minutes, I forgot about Caesarion and Rosie and Jonah’s potentially putting us all at risk. About how I might do the same.
The whole getting-up-hours-before-breakfast thing wasn’t my favorite part of my newfound independence, but it was the best time to use Jonah’s cuff without getting caught. At night there were alarms set at the Academy’s exterior doors, supposedly for our safety but probably more to ensure none of us snuck out for romantic trysts. The Elders took their jobs as teachers and fill-in parents very seriously, though they either pretended ignorance or really didn’t realize there were a host of spots inside the Academy used for that purpose.

There were no official rules on procreation or marriage and divorce, but
after fifty years of indoctrination, social responsibility governed every decision. It meant that even though we had free access to multiple forms of birth control, and most of us dated and fooled around, we were careful not to waste our future on teenage flings.

Unless you were Sarah and Oz.

Oz was acting like nothing had happened between us in the hall the other day. I did, too, but a cloud of suspicion hung between us that had never existed before, and it surprised me that our friends hadn’t noticed. He was lying. I was lying. We both knew it.

I shook away my uneasiness over Oz’s recent attitude change, promising myself I would check his bio information
again the next time I was in the Archives. Sarah had been a good friend to me for over five years, and True Companion or not, she needed to know what kind of guy she’d drawn in the genetics lottery.

“Okay, so you know how to work that thing?” Analeigh pointed at Jonah’s cuff, all lit up with red lights in the quiet, deserted air lock.

I’d insisted on swiping my tat again instead of letting her do it. No one had to know she’d come along. We both shivered in the freezing pod, tugging our cloaks tighter almost in tandem.

“Yes.” I paused, sticking a rubber band between my teeth to buy some time. By the time my hair sat atop my head in a
messy bun, a presentable response that had nothing to do with the fact that I’d already used it spilled out. “We’ve seen the overseers do it hundreds of times.”

Blending in on Roma wouldn’t be a concern, so we didn’t worry about changing our clothing or appearance. People in all manner of Academy garb, not to mention varying factory uniforms, would be around, so we wouldn’t seem out of place. It made sense that the pirates would find enough cover there, as well.

Our cloaks hid the standard clingy, black material along with the Historian emblem bright on the breast, and we wore black running flats. Our hair swept off our necks in dark and light ponytails.
and the glasses completed the outfits. We couldn’t leave the air lock without the glasses or remove the recording chips until we returned—the portal wouldn’t work otherwise--but nothing prevented us from destroying them instead of archiving the information.

I lowered my mouth to the cuff after turning the time and date dials to the correct position. “Roma, the armory.”

*
Roma, Genesis–50 NE (New Era)
Roma housed the System’s industry and production factories. Day laborers and tall buildings fought for space on crowded central streets, and basic home dwellings were smashed together on the outer edges of the city. The factories supplied everything mechanical for the System, as well as tools, hover transports, ships, electronics, and pretty much anything else that needed to be manufactured. Each planet contributed something specific, and had been designed that way from the beginning.

The cuff dropped us right at the armory’s front door, which was bad, given the extra security cameras that surrounded the only building in the entire
System that housed weapons. Analeigh dragged me behind a recycling Dumpster around the side of the metal and glass building. From there, we snuck around to the back where, based on the news report, the pirates had breached the exterior.

Analeigh’s watch said we had three minutes to spare, and right on time, a band of ragged boys belly-crawled through the privacy fence at the rear of the property. There were four of them, all armed with stun batons and Gavreaus—sonic wavers.

The building held stockpiles of stunners and wavers, the only two weapons manufactured in Genesis. The rest had been left behind on Earth.
Before, having been determined as one of the contributing factors in society’s descent and eventual failure. The recorded history surrounding their mechanics and manufacture had been wiped, and now that knowledge had all but disappeared. I supposed a Historian could re-create it by observing the development firsthand, but otherwise, we’d have to start from scratch to re-invent guns or bombs or anything else.

Their clothes snagged my interest in a less scary way. Instead of the sleek, tight uniforms the citizens of Genesis favored on a daily basis, the pirates wore khaki shorts that landed at their knees, faded T-shirts, ankle socks, and a brand of tennis shoe that hadn’t been manufactured since
Earth Before. I wondered where they had found four pairs that fit and also looked as though they were pretty well intact.

When Jonah’s shaggy dark head came into view a strangled noise tickled my throat and my feet took a step forward, both without my instruction.

Analeigh held me back with a light touch. “Don’t. If you go now it’ll be a distraction and they might not rob the armory. This is still history. We can’t change it.”

I nodded, never looking away from the boys. They were all brunettes, with hair that needed a cut and clothes that needed a wash, but even from here I could tell they were slightly older than
us, good looking, and fit.

“Man, no one ever talks about how they’re, like, the handsomest band of pirates ever,” she whispered.

“Right?” I giggled as softly as possible but the boy at the rear paused.

His head whipped around, and both Analeigh and I covered our mouths. After a moment he frowned and followed his friends up to the back door. My brother slapped a wad of something sticky near the keypad on the thick iron door and all of the boys turned away. A moment later light flared and a soft fountain of sparks flew through the air. A small pop accompanied the display, but the sound barely registered.

The door sagged on its hinges and the
boys disappeared inside the armory.

My mind raced while we waited for them to reappear. Until now, worry over my brother’s fate had been a constant, but abstract, thing. Seeing him carrying a weapon, watching him break into a building with the intent of stealing … it brought it home. My chest felt too tight, like someone had secured a rubber band around my lungs. The idea that I could lose him for real, for good, made me shake all over.

Violence existed in the System, but death was rarely the result. The stunners would knock someone out for an hour or so, and fistfights and the like still occurred on occasion, but the Gavreau wavers—named after their inventor—
were the only weapons capable of killing. Citizens didn’t carry them. They were issued to Enforcers, who handled emergency mortal sanctions, and to one Elder in each Academy in case of emergencies. They could be set to incapacitate, but at their highest setting, the sonic wavers liquefied internal organs.

The thought of that happening to my brother numbed my nervous system.

Mortal sanctions of exposure could be issued, too, but they were as rare as anything else deadly. It had only happened twice in my lifetime, and I didn’t want my brother to be the third.

Sounds of a commotion rang from inside the armory but were short lived.
A few shouts and quick, electrical zapping of stunners later, only shuffling murmurs whispered into the early morning. The boys reappeared a moment later, black duffel bags slung over their shoulders and roguish grins making their faces appear even younger than when they entered.

I took a deep breath and stepped out from behind the bins and into their path. The two boys at the front dropped their bags and grabbed me so fast I couldn’t make a peep. Analeigh flew at them, digging her fingernails into their hair and yanking, but it didn’t loosen their hold on me. One let go of me long enough to fling her at Jonah, who caught her against his chest and held on tight while
she beat at him with her fists.

He held her away, eyes widening in recognition before they slid to me. “Stop! Jean, Teach, let her go.”

“Why? They’re Historians. They could tip off the Elders in two minutes,” one of the boys barked, a dark curl falling into his eyes.

“She’s my sister.”

“So?”

“Let her go, Teach.” My brother took a step forward, his face dark and threatening in a completely unfamiliar way. The boys dropped my arms. Jonah let Analeigh go and she stumbled against me, her hand finding mine.

“Should we run?” she asked silently.
“No. It’s fine.”

Jonah’s dark eyes softened as he ran a hand over my arm. “You okay?”

“Yes.”

“What the hell are you doing here? How did you know where I’d be?”

I eyed his companions—Jean, Teach, and the unnamed third—then cocked my head toward the bins that had provided Analeigh and me cover. “Can I talk to you in private?”

“Jonah, we have to go. Those Dockers aren’t going to be unconscious forever, and we need to be well away from Roma before they wake up. That junker ship of ours can’t outrun the Enforcers and you know it.”
“She’s not a junker, Sparrow. The older models are better, you know that.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that they’ll catch us. We need to go.”

The boy my brother called Sparrow had blue eyes that clashed impressively with his nearly black hair. The old, threadbare T-shirt clung to the muscles rippling across his chest. He grinned when he caught me staring. “You never told us your sister is so … grown up.”

My brother growled, then stepped in between Sparrow and me, cutting off my line of sight. He leveled me with a glare that would have worked on anyone else. “Leave.”

“No.” I stuck out my chin. “I need to talk to you and I’m not leaving until I
do.”

“I don’t have anything to say to you, Kaia. Go back where you belong.”

“I found your cuff in your room. That’s how we got here. And I’m going to keep using it and showing up wherever you do until you talk to me. Might as well get it over with today.”

“Just bring her with us. If she’s got a travel cuff she can get back to the Academy whenever she’s ready,” the one named Teach said.

Light bounced off his honey-brown hair. The false sunlight on Roma shone brighter than in most of Genesis, maybe to compensate for the drab days spent toiling in factories, and I squinted. Indecision fluttered across Jonah’s
features. They’d always revealed his every thought and feeling to me—or so I’d thought before he’d left without a word. He looked different, and not only because of the bumped, horrible scars on his throat and wrist where the tats had been dug free. He seemed older, more serious, than in my memory.

“Jonah, come on,” Sparrow urged, all of the playfulness gone from his voice and posture.


We followed the pirates back through the fence, then jogged through deserted back alleys, hugging buildings and making little noise crossing the glass
paved roads and sidewalks, until we reached one of the four docking portals. Three dockmasters lay sprawled in a heap, their electric-blue uniformed limbs tangled together. Snores emanated from at least one of them, so I assumed they were all alive—either dosed with a sleeping draught or stunned into unconsciousness.

We stepped over them one at a time. Teach and Jean went first, followed by the flirtatious Sparrow, then Analeigh and me, with Jonah going last. We tramped in hurried silence through the air lock and then onto the air bridge that connected the pirates’ ship to Roma. The air changed subtly, turned colder, as we left the terraform behind and hung
suspended in a tube over empty space.

We stepped through a dented metal door and into a second air lock. Jonah slammed the outer hatch into place and turned the lock, and once the oxygen light above the interior door flicked from red to yellow to green, we stepped onto the ship.

Which, no matter what my brother said, was a junker.

Rust spots dotted the cargo bay floor, leaving brownish red splotches across the faded blue metal. Stairs rose to a second level, a thin, wobbly-looking railing accompanying them. Sealed containers littered the bay, filled with stars knew what, and a rack draped with stunners and wavers hung on one wall.
The smell in the air reminded me of mildew and spoiled dairy.

"This is a piece of crap," Analeigh said, somewhat accusingly.

"Hey. Do not insult my baby. She flies with the best of them," Jonah snapped.

"Some of us are about more than a pretty face," Jean joked, elbowing Sparrow in the ribs.

"Jonah’s pickier when it comes to the faces on his fleshy ladies. Not that any of them can hold a candle to Anne Bonny," Sparrow replied.

"Anne Bonny?" I asked, shooting my brother a look.

He shrugged, a slight pink tingeing his
cheeks. “That’s her name. The ship.”

“Okay, well, Jonah, go ahead and have a little chat with your pretty sister. I’m going to get this gorgeous bucket of rust in the air before we get busted and have to really test her engines.”

Sparrow started for the stairs, and I turned to Analeigh. “Why don’t you go with them and check out the bridge.”

“But—”

“Please, Analeigh. I’ll be ten minutes talking to Jonah and then we’ll go back.”

She checked her watch, frowning. “Ten minutes, Kaia. Breakfast is in twenty.”

I nodded and turned, catching Jonah whispering something to Jean, his eyes
on Analeigh as she started for the steps. Teach held out a hand to her but Analeigh ignored it, climbing the swaying staircase unassisted.

My brother jerked his head and Jean followed, leaving the two of us alone in the cargo hold. Jonah watched until Analeigh and his friends disappeared, a strange twist of emotion on his handsome face. It disappeared as he turned back to me.

He heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You can’t go around using that cuff whenever you feel like it, Kaia. Not only could you get seriously sanctioned, but if the Elders traced you right now you’d be putting my life in danger. Is that what you want?”
“Of course not. Not that you considered our family’s safety when you decided to go all space cowboy.” I sank down on an unmarked wooden crate and pulled my knees into my chest.

Pain and guilt flooded his face. It felt good to push my anger where it belonged, but we didn’t have much time to beat around the bush, even if that had ever been our style.

I shrugged and waved a hand, cutting off whatever stammered apology he was working on. “How did you know it was safe to warn Rosie Shapiro?”

The shocked silence confirmed my suspicions.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he managed, not even bothering
to put any force behind the lie.

“I found your True Companion card with the cuff and did some research. Rosie Shapiro was on the original victims’ list. She jumped from an eighth-floor window and died on that street. And yet, when we observed yesterday morning, she claimed illness and left the building around four-thirty, less than fifteen minutes before the fire broke out.” I stopped talking, mesmerized by the sight of the blood draining from Jonah’s face. I reached out and touched his hand, almost surprised that he let me. “It’s okay, Jonah. I know you saved her. How did you know it wouldn’t blow up the future?”

He chuckled. “Well, the Cubs did end
up winning the pennant in 1956 because of me.”

“That’s not funny. What if it had been something worse?”

“There’s not much worse if you’re a Cards fan.”

“Jonah.”

“Why are you so interested in Rosie?” He peered into my face, dark eyes serious a moment before everything clicked into place. “I missed your birthday. Who is he?”

“No one. Someone who died young that didn’t have to.”

“Ah, yes. The Vespasians and their tragic loves. Have you met him?”

My cheeks heated up, giving me
away. His eyes widened a little before a proud grin snuck onto his face. “My little sister, the rebel. And now that you know I saved Rosie’s life you want to know if you can save … ?”

“I’m not telling you who he is.”

The teasing grin slipped from his face as he studied the determined set of my jaw. “There are things that go on in this System that you’re not privy to, little sister. If you’re lucky, you’ll never know they exist.”

“Did the Elders find out what you did with Rosie? Is that the reason you left?”

Our eyes locked. The accusatory tone in my voice banged off the walls of the cargo bay, barely tempered by the tinge of hurt I tried to hide. We didn’t have
time for this now, my pain. It wouldn’t lie quiet, though, after building up all of these years.

“It’s one of them.” He raked a hand through his too-long hair, leaving it unkempt in its wake. I used to give him haircuts; Jonah said he preferred my steady hands to the grooming booths at the Academy. “I know I hurt you when I left, Special K, and that’s the last thing I wanted. But I’m still your big brother, and it’s my job to protect you. Three years ago that meant leaving the Academy, and the System. Right now, that means telling you to keep your head down and stop asking questions about whether it’s possible to change the past. And be careful who you trust.”
“You’re not going to tell me why?”

“People who know why tend to disappear, one way or another. You deserve better.”

“Then why should I trust you?”

He tried to hide the pain in his golden eyes, but it spun me around like a good slap anyway. Guilt welled up in my chest, bubbling like lava, but I didn’t back down. I wanted answers. I wanted to know how he’d known the Cubs’ pennant would be the biggest fallout of Rosie’s existence. More than anything, I wanted the truth about why he left me behind.

The staring contest that followed ended in a draw, which didn’t surprise me since I’d never won with Jonah my
entire life.

“Wait here for a second,” he said, leaving the cargo bay through a door at the back without waiting for my response. He returned a minute later and passed me a tiny metal chip the size and shape of the fingernail on my pinkie. Two long wire antennae, as thin and soft as strands of hair, sprouted from the top.

“What is it?”

“Technology a friend at the Academy developed for me when I went after Rosie. It hurts like a bitch, but if you jam it in the edge of your wrist tat, right there—” he touched a spot in the center of the outer, straight edge—“it holds your location until you take it out. You insert it in your dorm room, you’ll appear to be
in your dorm room until you take it out. Remove it when you get back, though, because they’ll notice if you’re static too long on the locator floor.”

“I’m scared, Jonah. To use the cuff. If I get caught, if the sanction is bad … After losing you, it will break Mom’s and Dad’s hearts.”

“You shouldn’t use that cuff to travel, not to see your True or me or anyone else. You should forget him, and me, and any thought of messing with the past. But I know you. It’s dumb and it’s dangerous, and you don’t have all of the facts, but you won’t be able to resist. That chip works. They never guessed what I did.”

“Then that can’t be the reason you left.” He clamped his teeth together,
staring back at me blandly. My hands curled into fists, frustration mounting so high I almost growled. “But how did you know you could save Rosie?”

“I can’t tell you that. I can say this, though: not everything you’ve learned at the Academy has been true, but one thing is. We can’t change the past without consequence. Every person, every event, affects at least one other. Be careful.”

We sat in the kind of silence that only exists between two people who don’t have to speak to understand each other. Jonah’s warnings rang loud and clear. The pain inside him translated as clearly as his fear and I knew one thing: he believed he had done the right thing in leaving.
My heart squeezed until my chest hurt, and against my best efforts, tears pricked my eyes. I reached out and grabbed his hand, and Jonah held on tight. “I miss you.”

“I miss you, too, Special K.” His voice shook and the sight of tears gathering in his eyes shook me to the core. “I miss you all so much.”

Analeigh’s light footsteps on the stairs ended the companionable grief a moment later, and she cleared her throat softly. “Kaia, we’ve got to go.”

I nodded and stood, throwing my arms around Jonah’s neck and giving him a tight hug. He had been more evasive than anything, but he was my brother and I loved him. In his own way, he had tried
to help.

The Elders and their mysterious secret business didn’t strike me as interesting as the suggestion that I could at least try to save Caesarion. If Jonah wouldn’t tell me how I could verify the trajectories the way he must have before he saved Rosie, and then maybe I could figure it out on my own by spending more time with my True. If I could gauge the potential course of his unlived future, know his mind and his essence, maybe the answers would follow.

The chip my brother had given me burned hot in my palm as the blue, shimmering field surrounded Analeigh and me. Even if, in the end, I couldn’t be sure enough to save Caesarion, the chip
meant that our story didn’t have to be over.

Not yet.
Three days passed before I found time to go see Caesarion again. We had the trip to observe the Louis XIV’s coronation, then a couple of days of mandatory reflection, and I didn’t want just an hour with my True this time. I wanted as much time as I could pilfer.

For every ten days of apprentice work we were granted one free day—not always a pass out of the Academy but time to spend as we chose—and that was today. Twenty-four wonderful, empty hours where no one expected me to be anywhere. Not showing up at
meals didn’t raise any eyebrows, even, since we often chewed protein tabs or ate the snacks stowed in our rooms. We took advantage of the alone time if we didn’t score a pass to leave the grounds.

I told Analeigh and Sarah that I planned to spend the day in the Archives working on my Sun King—an affectionate term for Louis XIV, even if he did drive the monarchy into bankruptcy—reflection because the upcoming certification reviews worried me. I’d gotten enough things wrong in the last several weeks that it sounded plausible to me, but neither of my friends bought it. Analeigh didn’t push, though. She’d been tiptoeing around me since we’d seen Jonah and his pirate friends,
maybe assuming time alone would shine old wounds. It sucked to leave her in the dark. I’d turned into one of those idiot girls who chose a boy over her best friend, but at least this was temporary. A twinge of regret in my chest at the thought of him dying very soon only strengthened my resolve to try to find a way to save him. Just him.

If Analeigh guessed my plan to use Jonah’s cuff to travel alone again, she didn’t say anything. Probably because visiting her True Companion with the idea of saving his life would never enter her mind.

But she didn’t know what it felt like to stare into the eyes of a person who felt like part of her. To know the grim
details of his impending, senseless death but be helpless to intervene. Analeigh hadn’t lived with the empty hole Jonah had left in my house, or borne the weight of lost love, of bitter strength, soldered in the necklace hanging against my chest.

If Jonah could improve his True’s outcome, why couldn’t I?

Since secret travels and illicit contact seemed to be my life now, flying under the radar at the Academy seemed the best plan, so I had done better with my last recording. No one in the crowd at the coronation of Louis XIV distracted me—even Maude Gatling approved during our initial reflection. The less attention the Elders and overseers paid me, the better.
Of course, behaving didn’t stop me from checking on Oz in the Archives a couple more times, out of plain and simple curiosity. He, Levi, and Jess were assigned to observe part of the first Crusade yesterday and his bio information confirmed he’d joined them. It made me second-guess my instincts about him traveling on his own, but I dismissed the thought quickly. Rosie’s second life hadn’t been a comp error, and neither had Oz’s travel.

He was up to something, but I couldn’t worry about my problems and his, too. Not today.

This morning, all that mattered was that I could leave for most of the day and night without anyone thinking twice.
According to Jonah, if anyone did go looking, my dot on the Archive floor would show me in my bathroom, where I currently stood—once I got up the nerve to use the device he gave me.

I took a shaky breath over the sink, grasping my brother’s tiny, metallic disk with a pair of tweezers, poised to jam it into the base of the golden barcode on the inside of my left wrist. This was the price. A little moment of pain, and I could be with Caesarion again. Figure out if saving him was an option.

I gritted my teeth, held my breath, and jammed the sharp metal under my skin in one rough shove. The faint glow of the golden threads under layers of skin flickered and dimmed, then went dark
for the first time in seven years. A quiet groan escaped and I held still, both to wait out the wave of sweating and nausea and to make sure Analeigh hadn’t heard me.

No sound came from the bedrooms. My brother hadn’t lied about the chip hurting like a bitch, but the throbbing discomfort passed as I wiped up the drops of blood on the sink and cleaned off my wrist, marveling at the tiny gash left by the sliver of tech. The two hair-like strands for easy extraction trailed outside the wound, tickling the sensitive skin inside my wrist.

The question of who could have helped him create it remained unanswered. None of the other pirates
were Historians, which meant someone else at this Academy knew the chip existed. Jonah’s class had been five years ahead of mine—his classmates were all certified Historians now, but none of them had been here long enough to be overseers. We didn’t interact, and I didn’t know any of them well enough to gauge their tech skills. It added to my curiosity over what exactly drove my brother onto that ship and out of civilization, but one obsession at a time.

Outside the air lock, I swiped my wrist tat and waited to see the effect of having the chip inserted. Instead of my name popping up, it registered one of the certified Historians. Clever, and less suspicious, for anyone other than an
apprentice to be down here alone. They traveled alone all the time without being questioned.

The knot of tension between my shoulders eased. Being able to go without my movements being tracked made my decision easier, calmed the anxiety doing flips in my stomach at committing such a serious infraction for a second time. It might be too good to be true but for the moment, it seemed the chip allowed me to see Caesarion without consequences.

Now I could turn my attention to trying to find him.

Caesarion’s movements following Alexandria’s occupation by the Roman army were unconfirmed. We knew he left
the capital city hoping to escape, eventually ending up in a city called Berenice, on the Red Sea. I set the cuff smack in the middle, hoping to catch the ousted Pharaoh after he’d moved south along the Nile.

He would soon be lured back to Alexandria by false promises of reconciliation and peace from Octavian. Then he would die.

The details of his death were unknown, with speculation by historians from Earth Before that he may have been strangled and then entombed with his mother and the rest of the Ptolemy ancestral line.

It had been a week since we’d met in the palace gardens. If he hoped to hide,
he would have left quietly, without fanfare. Caesarion didn’t strike me as a man too proud to understand that, so I expected to find him keeping a low profile. They would be traveling on horseback or with a small envoy, perhaps on foot for part of the journey, and couldn’t have made it all the way to Berenice in fewer than seven days. Even on horseback that trip would have taken at least three fortnights.

I wanted to find him sooner than that, anyway. If it were possible to change his outcome, I would need as much time as I could get to figure it out, and I wanted our relationship to be linear for us both. Visiting him any number of times during this, the seventeenth year of his life,
might be possible, but it felt wrong. If these were my only moments, reliving them—redoing them—felt like cheating.

Standing in the icy-cold air lock, dressed again in draped linen and scarves, but without jewelry or makeup, a thought came to me. I whispered Caesarion’s name into the cuff instead of a place, like the overseers typically did, hoping it would take me right to him. It had better work because twelve or so hours didn’t give me enough time to track down a guy on the move in an unfamiliar ancient world, never mind one surrounded by a devoted royal guard.

The blue bubble surrounded me. I crossed my fingers as the lights turned
from red to green, and Sanchi disappeared.

*
Cairo, Egypt, Earth Before–30 BCE (Before Common Era)
The muggy air choking the Tropic of Cancer bathed my skin in sweat, offering a ton more heat and humidity than Sanchi, or even the coastal city of Alexandria. My mistake became instantly clear when the memory swam into focus.

The overseers never specified a person rather than a place because explaining how we bled into existence out of thin air might be a bit of a challenge.

Luckily for me the day had barely broken, and the room where I’d appeared filled with the blessed sounds of heavy breathing and light snores.
Three guards slept on the open sides of the ratty, almost flat straw mattress. Their thick, strong fingers clasped the hilts of various weapons, ready to wake and defend their charge at the drop of a hat.

Caesarion slept, his narrow, handsome face relaxed. He appeared younger without the weight of grief and free of doubt about the future. My fingers twitched with the desire to touch his cheek, to wake him so those deep blue eyes could look into mine. I wanted to be alone in the room and find out what it felt like to be held willingly in his arms, to live in one of the moments people talked about, wrote about, sang about, when immersed in that elusive thing
called true love.

But those guards wouldn’t hesitate to kill me if I tried to get anywhere near Caesarion, and we’d probably have to rehash his previous assumptions if he woke and found me in his bed. Instead of taking unnecessary chances, I snagged a money pouch off the stand by the door, backed out into the hallway, and tramped down the stairs, remembering at the last moment that only whores or servants would be conducting themselves with so little propriety.

The dining area would work as a place to safely pass the time until Caesarion woke and prepared to move on for the day. The inn was small and a little smelly—the floors were packed
with dirt and straw and the wooden tables wobbled under my elbows. Early morning sunlight warmed the room until sweat coated my skin under the light tunic and skirt, but the smell of food coming from the kitchen kicked my stomach into a grumble. I’d skipped breakfast again.

No one spared me more than one curious glance. The innkeeper’s wife took my order and returned to plop down the food, mumbling something about milking the cows before leaving through the open door. My happiness at being out on an adventure in the fresh air of Earth Before, with no need to return to the Academy anytime soon, warred with my bubbling fear that the chip wouldn’t
work. That I'd get caught. That I'd accidentally change something important. I shoved the worries down into my center and locked them away before panic could overtake my excitement. There would be plenty of time for regret later. I wouldn’t waste today.

Another patron joined me, an elderly man who slurped his broth and avoided eye contact, then left a coin on the table and shuffled out before the innkeeper’s wife returned from her morning chores. The denarius I’d swiped off the dresser bought me a bowl of broth and a hunk of bread, which I gnawed for the next hour, every bite ramping up the impressive headache my bio-tat imparted in
exchange for my interaction with the past. The pain retreated with a poof when Caesarion appeared at the bottom of the wooden stairs.

The sight of his sleepy midnight eyes squeezed my lungs into oblivion, and even though staring was impolite, I couldn’t stop. When his gaze found mine, the delighted surprise that sprang onto his face pulled my heart into my throat. I could almost hear his thoughts from across the room, could feel the rush of relief that gushed through me at being in the same space as him pour through Caesarion’s blood as well.

Perhaps I’d imagined it and he felt nothing. Perhaps the True Companion calculations were nothing but parlor
tricks and games invented to entertain us, to prove that true love wasn’t a necessary factor in human happiness. But right now, staring into his eyes while we both grinned like fools and my knees turned to jelly, my heart believed.

He waved his royal guard out of the room with instructions to saddle the horses. One older man, likely his personal servant, limped toward the kitchen. Caesarion crossed to my side, taking a seat across the table from me. His smile turned a bit shy, very unlike the first time we met, and infected my heart with a strange flutter.

“I dreamed I would see you again, mysterious Kaia. But I did not believe it would be in a ratty inn on the road to
nowhere."

My smile felt wobbly. Words jammed between my head and my mouth refused to be spit out. After a moment of silence he leaned forward, elbows on the table. My body responded almost of its own accord, and I copied his posture until our faces were close enough that we shared breath.

“All roads lead somewhere,” I managed, finally.

He gave me a sad smile. “That is true. Since the Hathors long ago foretold my untimely death, perhaps Tuat or Aaru has always been my destination.”

My bio-tat explained that ancient Egyptians believed the entirety of their lives were laid bare at birth to the
Hathors—sort of like witches, or seven ladies akin to the Greek Fates—who predicted the high and low points of every child’s life until death.

“Is death not everyone’s destination?”

“You are beautiful and wise. I have had many years to come to terms with my fate, but after meeting you in the gardens I began to wish for more time.”

“Is that possible?”

“Inshallah,” he whispered.

“Inshallah,” the tattoo forced me to reply.

The phrase filtered through my ears and into my brain. The computer threaded into the base of my skull struggled with an exact translation. The
term was a unique one that encapsulated a universe of beliefs into a single word, and the tat finally spit out a close estimation: *If God is willing.*

“Part of me wishes to demand you explain your reappearance, but the rest does not wish to know—there have been so few mysteries in my life.”

Someone cleared his throat behind me, saving me from having to comment. Caesarion tore his eyes from mine, irritation coloring his cheeks as he looked up.

“It’s time to depart,” the voice said, a whisper of apology beneath the gruff words.

The guards couldn’t treat Caesarion in a proper manner since he was in
hiding and on the run. His fine fabrics and kohl-smudged eyes—not to mention his shaved head—all betrayed class, but certainly not to the degree in which Pharaoh would normally tour the countryside.

“I will be out momentarily.” The presence at my back receded and my True Companion’s gaze turned back to mine. “I have never believed that my fate could be escaped, or even that a reason existed to plead with the gods to consider sparing me.”

“Then why leave Alexandria at all?”

“The innate will to live, I suppose. Reconciling with one’s fate is not the same as standing passively by, waiting for a power-hungry man to end my life.”
He paused, then reached out a darkly tanned hand to cover mine, adding a throbbing component to the stabbing pain in my temple. “Perhaps meeting you is reason enough to live these last days afforded to me.”

My heart flattened and tried to beat, aching in my chest. Nerve endings zapped a hopeless mass of confused emotions through me until I wanted to kiss him and laugh and sob all at once. His finger wiped the wetness from my cheeks and my skin ignited in its wake even as the painful fingers demanding I pull away reached further down my spine. It was strange, the pleasure of touching him combined with the pain that insisted it was wrong.
My own confusion was reflected in his dusky eyes, smothered in something like wonder. I pressed his hand against my cheek. “I don’t want to think about you dying.”

His gaze sharpened, probing mine for answers to questions he must have about my identity, about how I’d managed to find him here in this out-of-the-way place. “You do not seem surprised to learn of my fate.”

“I’m not,” I said simply. If he demanded an explanation I would be tempted to provide it, no matter that telling people in the past about the future was strictly forbidden. Putting lies between us left a bad taste in my mouth, but in the end, he saved me by not
“I would like to stay and talk with you, but I must away, I’m afraid.” He dropped his hand from my cheek and stood.

“Could I travel with you? I can’t … I couldn’t stay much past nightfall, but I, too, like the idea of more time.”

“It is not appropriate for a lady of your station.”

His slight frown gave him a serious appearance, like a little boy who thought he was being tricked into doing something he shouldn’t. After his mistake regarding the reason for my presence in the gardens, I couldn’t blame him, but couldn’t suppress a giggle, either. “There is much you don’t know
about me, Caesarion, but we can start with the fact that I am unconcerned with what others might think of our friendship.”

“Very well. I trust you can ride a horse.”

Well, hell.

*
My bio tat struggled more than a little with forcing my limbs to ride a horse. The knowledge was there but felt rudimentary and awkward, as though programmed haphazardly on the off chance a Historian might need to mount a horse. It had been six hours since we left the inn just south of Cairo and my legs had numbed from hip to toe. They felt permanently bowed, and when Caesarion helped me down for a rest stop, my trek to the banks of a Nile tributary could have only been described as a waddle.

Fantastic. I finally got to spend a day with Caesarion and not only did I smell like horse, I had been reduced to walking like a penguin. Sexy.
The more we talked, and the more accustomed I became to the electric magnetism of being in his presence, the fonder I became of the person underneath his handsome exterior. He differed from me in so many ways, but now was acting less Pharaoh-ish than the boy I’d encountered during our first meeting in the gardens. Not less confident but less superior, as if he knew the life he’d been born into would never be the same. With every step away from Alexandria, he let the pretenses of Pharaoh go and slipped effortlessly into life as simple Caesarion.

He didn’t seem to notice my borderline paralysis as we dismounted, asking the older manservant who had
gathered provisions this morning to set food out on a woolen blanket, then invited me to sit. The guards and servant left us alone, wading to their knees in the cool, burbling water. I was tempted to join them—the dust from the road clung to my sweat-sticky skin in multiple layers and there was no way my hair hadn’t poofed to three times its normal size.

In the end, talking with Caesarion tempted me more than cooling off and I dropped next to him, sticking my legs out in front of me to try to unglue my thighs. He noticed the black leggings that I’d tugged to my calves and reached out to touch them, but then stopped short, as though unsure I’d allow it. I had given
him hell for grabbing me uninvited in the gardens.

Something like fear darkened his expression. “What are these?”

“Nothing.” I pushed my tunic and skirts back into place, and he frowned again like he had at the inn, as though he suspected some sort of trick. “Do you really want to talk about clothing now that we have a few moments alone?”

“I suppose not. It is curious, though. You are curious.” He opened a loose woven basket and extracted a bundle of linen, unwrapping a pile of dates and a flat chunk of bread. “Why were you in the gardens the other day? And why had we never met?”

“I thought you wished to leave me my
mysteries.”

“I’ve changed my mind. It’s too much to bear, the curiosity.”

“I come from somewhere else. You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.”

The system of planets that made up Genesis would not be discovered for thousands of years. The concept would be as foreign to him as a movie or bacteria or automatic weapons.

“Tell me something about yourself, then. That I will believe.” He popped a date in his mouth and offered the pile to me, his keen eyes never leaving mine.

My whole body wanted to smile; it felt swollen and lit up under his gaze. “I’m seventeen. I have wonderful
parents and a brother and friends that are very dear to me.”

Caesarion waved a hand, dismissing my litany. “No. Something about you, Kaia.”

The touch of his fingers on my cheek startled me and I barely managed to stop myself from jerking away. Caesarion’s dark-blue gaze held mine as he brushed away errant hairs that had escaped the bun twisted at the back of my head. The sound and smells of this ancient world intensified around us; heady perfume infused the breeze wafting under my nose, the sound of the wide river tripping over its rocks became tinkling musical bells.

With the inappropriate physical
gesture, Pharaoh emerged again. Unlike before, this time the power surrounding him didn’t scare me. It thrilled me. His hand lingered against my skin, the pain meds I’d popped managing to dull the ache as the bio-tat attempted to make me act according to custom.

All of the biological reactions in my body would be recorded. Which meant somewhere, a comp knew I was sweating, that my heart was racing, and that my skin felt alive for the second time in my entire life. But it couldn’t guess why.

“I hate watching terrible things happen and not being able to stop them. I can’t save anyone.” It was the truest thing about me. I wanted to save people,
not watch them die.

The expression on his face shifted at my confession, moving from entranced to curious in the blink of an eye. The whispered revelation had surprised me as much as him.

Did it mean my aptitude had tested wrong? Or maybe it meant that, like Oz, I would get more satisfaction from studying how to use the terrible things that had happened to save people in the future instead of continuing to stand by and witness them in the past.

“We cannot be saved, Kaia. Our destinies are set as we take our first breath, and though we can decide how to live the years we’ve been afforded, we cannot change the events and people that
will shape our lives.” He dropped his hand, picking up another date. “Like you. I think the gods have foreseen your entry into my life at this crucial moment.”

I wished I could believe in cosmic fate as opposed to science and human nature. Life would be simpler, perhaps, but that wasn’t the same as better.

“You believe in cruel gods, Caesarion, who would see fit for someone such as you—who has done nothing to deserve death—to be taken so soon.”

“I believe in gods. They are neither cruel nor gentle, but simply other. They see the tapestry of life in a vast painting. We are specks, alive for a moment and then gone, like sparks off a fire. Do not
fault them for not caring, as we do not take time to mourn the beetle crushed beneath our sandals.” His smile turned sad. “I am glad you are here.”

“I’m glad, too. Now, tell me something about you,” I said, trying for a lighter tone and crossing my eyes at him while I stole the pile of dates and tore off a piece of flat bread.

“I can’t believe there would be anything you do not already know about your Pharaoh,” he teased back, the sunlight dappling shadow across his tanned face.

“You would be surprised how little is known about you, Caesarion.”

“I am allowing you to remain mysterious because it pleases me to peel
away your layers, Kaia, but soon I will demand answers.”

The idea of him peeling away anything shot hot desire through me, and pried a novel, throaty voice from my throat. “I prefer we enjoy the time we are afforded.”

“I will allow it. For now.” He slid a date into my mouth, fingers lingering for a moment on my bottom lip. They were salty next to the fruit’s tart sweetness. “Something true about me … anger aside, I would not rule Rome in my father’s place, given the chance,” he admitted.

“Why not?”

“My home is Alexandria. I know it would not make a difference to Octavian
—he wants Egypt, too, and would not leave it to me, but I would let go the grievances of my past if he would let my people be.” Caesarion shrugged, his cheeks ruddy, and not from the sun.

“He wants Rome, and Rome wants the world. Egypt is an important conquest. If it’s any consolation, he’s remembered as a great Caesar. Not kind, but important.” My heart leaped into my throat the moment the words passed my lips, but they were too far away to suck them back in.

Caesarion tensed and electricity charged the air. “How could you know such a thing?”

Maybe I should have just told him the truth about coming from the future, about
our connection. Caesarion believed in fate. What held me back even more than the rules was the fear that he would dismiss me as a raving lunatic and never wish to speak with me again. We still had weeks before his death, days that could be spent lazing by rivers, eating dates, and getting to know each other. I didn’t want to give those moments away, not even one.

I sat up straighter, brushing crumbs off my palms and scooting closer until our legs pressed together atop the scratchy wool, trying to forget that the time to leave stumbled closer with every breath. The day was too hot to be touching but the contact spread comfort through my blood, and Caesarion did not
pull away.

“Would you believe me if I told you I have a feeling the world will be better off because of his reign over Rome?”

His forehead crinkled. “You are an oracle?”

“Something like that.”

We fell silent, our legs and arms pressed together, his hand covering mine. The food was gone and the horses would be ready to continue soon. The pull between us had settled into a thrumming, steady current. It heightened my awareness of everything around us; I felt the pulse in his wrist, heard breath pulling in and out of his lungs, smelled the salty sweat on his skin. His heartbeat twined with my own, our breathing
synchronized, and our scents combined until we felt like one person instead of two. It was more than our molecules aligning. I loved everything I’d learned about Caesarion today—his intelligence, the way he talked about his people. That he didn’t fear death. I wanted to be more like him in the same moment as I wanted him to be more like me—to be willing to fight, to break the rules if it meant getting what he wanted—a longer life.

He didn’t necessarily seem to want that, though, and every last atom in my body, each one interlocked with this boy’s, screamed in protest.

Perhaps spending time with him would be enough, and my slide down the slippery slope toward my brother’s fate
could be aborted before rock bottom rose up to crush me. Caesarion would die, as he was supposed to, and I would have my memories. My moments.

The guards waded to the shore and began to saddle the horses, and sadness sank into my bones until it seemed to fuse with a part of me people once called a soul.

Caesarion saw them, too, and turned to me with a rueful smile. “We must press on.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me, my peculiar oracle—if that’s what you are—what caused you to seek me out?”

“We’re supposed to be together.”
“Be together.” He gave me a slight smile, suggestive enough to curl my toes. “In what way do you mean?”

I wanted to tease back, but emotion clogged my throat. Caesarion was my True Companion—as long as I lived I would never feel this innate connection with another person—and now the potential fallout of my impulsive decision to meet him became clear. Nothing would ever measure up again.

“In every way,” I whispered.

We stared at each other for several seconds. His eyes trailed to my mouth before traveling back to my eyes, and the pull between our bodies stirred, increasing with each passing breath. I needed him closer, to see what he tasted
like, but now wasn’t the time or place.

“That gives me hope.”

“For what?” Our breath mingled, our faces hovering inches apart, begging to connect. My skin prickled, hairs standing on end as though reaching for him. Heat swam through my blood, simmering closer to a boil.

“That I’ll get to kiss you again.”

I had fallen so far into his gaze that the sight of a young girl running through the reeds, panic twisting her dark features, seemed at first as out of place as me. Then Caesarion flew to his feet at her frantic words, deciphering the local dialect and taking off with a warning shout.
His guards dropped what they were doing and followed Caesarion through the reeds. I raced after them, responding to the girl’s desperate plea for help, and skidded to a halt at the horrible scene fifty or sixty yards down the riverbank. A woman lay on the shore, her arm torn off at the elbow and her blood pumping into the matted, wet grass. A little boy floundered in the water, choking and sputtering, trying desperately to get to the opposite bank as a crocodile stalked his every move, water sluicing around its ugly snout. The woman sobbed weakly, her eyes on the child even as the light inside her dimmed.

Caesarion barked orders at one of the guards, who dropped to his knees beside
the woman and tied a scarf tight around her bicep. The data flashing in front of my eyes said it wouldn’t be enough, that she’d lost too much blood. Others gathered, faces drawn with concern, as my True splashed into the water toward the crocodile.

He had the advantage of taking the animal by surprise, but it didn’t stop my heart from lurching sideways at the sight of its teeth. My hand grasped the locket at my neck, air burning in my lungs as Caesarion raised a sword and drove it straight down through the reptile’s head.

It thrashed and rolled, smacking Caesarion hard with its powerful tail. He flew sideways and went under, but the wound he’d inflicted seemed to
confuse or frighten the croc enough that it floated away, ribbons of red trailing over the frothing water in its path. Caesarion righted himself and reached for the tiny child, who clung to his neck as they waded back toward the bank.

I looked down to see that the woman had died, but the girl who had run for help embraced the boy. They both looked up at my True with eyes filled with gratitude and a hero’s worship.

Pride swished through me. Underneath it ran a certainty, a knowledge, that filled me with sorrow, but in the midst of this wonderful day, I couldn’t figure out why.
Chapter Thirteen

“I have to leave, Caesarion,” I whispered over the racket in the inn where we’d stopped for supper.

He turned around in his wooden chair, confusion and something akin to panic tightening his cheeks. “No. It’s late. Where will you go?”

My fingers itched to reach out and touch him, but this time I let the bio-tat have its way with propriety. The pain meds had worn off, and if Caesarion and I had the chance to really be alone again it was going to inflict a horrible headache. Not horrible enough to stop me, but still.

“Would you come outside with me? I
need to speak with you privately before I go.”

The request in itself raised eyebrows up and down the table, and the round-faced, too loud innkeeper even shut his trap to stare. Caesarion’s guards kept their gazes averted, perhaps grown accustomed to the strange rhythm of our relationship, perhaps just accustomed to Pharaoh doing what he liked.

The largest guard radiated distrust and anger. He did not like me here, and if it mattered in the grand scheme of things, he would have scared me. Maybe he should frighten me more—there were no rules, physical or otherwise, that prevented a Historian from dying within the past. I was fully here, and
vulnerable. At the mercy of this world, not mine.

I cast the burly man a wary glance while Caesarion unfolded his lanky frame from the short table. He gave his manservant a small shake of the head before taking my hand and pulling me outside. I didn’t stop on the other side of the door, but took the lead, tugging him into the sagging barn to the left of the main building.

A few lanterns lit the interior of the rickety wooden building. It smelled of animals and hay, of spicy earth and manure. Between the lanterns, the last beams of setting sun pierced the cracks in the ancient wood, combining with the warmth spilling through my body and
casting the whole moment in a surreal glow.

“Why must you leave, Kaia? We don’t have long. I had hoped we would spend these days together. I promise to behave.” His voice was soft, coaxing.

In another lifetime, another past or present or future, I would have done anything he’d asked. And I wouldn’t have wanted him to behave.

“Do you think I’m insane? Not right?” I tapped my head, unsure if the translation came through correctly when a Greek word that wouldn’t quite fit into English fell from my lips.

He frowned and reached out, setting his hands on my hips. His long fingers wound around my back, pressing lightly
through the thin fabric and weakening my knees. This molecular compatibility thing wreaked havoc on my basic motor function. And with keeping down dinner.

“I do not know what to think of you, Kaia. You are clearly something different. The things you say, they do not seem possible. And yet . . .”

“And yet?” I pressed.

“And yet they feel not only possible, but true. If a man cannot trust one’s heart, then what can he trust?”

My chest filled with happiness and I grinned up at him, struggling to breathe. “Your heart says you can trust me?”

“My heart seems to know you, even if I do not. Yet.”
I nodded, pulling back a little to try to clear my head. Nerves trembled in my hands and I closed a fist around my ancient locket, determined to draw on my family’s courage.

A deep breath steadied me. We weren’t supposed to speak to people in the past, never mind tell them about the future. Caesarion was different, though. He not only accepted the inevitability of his death, but understood that things happened the way they were meant to. My lifelong loyalty to the Historians warred with my instinctual faith in this ancient king. I knew that I should stop, let him go on believing I was an oracle—something he understood.

But he trusted me. I wanted to show
him that I trusted him, too.

Not to mention, I had to disappear in a minute. There wasn’t a way to explain that he would understand, and the last thing I needed was him freaking out and telling everyone in ancient Egypt about flighty, disappearing girls who wore black pants under their dresses.

A deep breath didn’t help, but three more started to work. In through the nose, out through the mouth. “I’m not an oracle. I know what’s going to happen because I’m not from a distant land, Caesarion, I’m from a distant time.”

Pain slammed into my brain in a fruitless effort to snatch back words already spoken. I tried to keep the effects of it from my face, making a
mental note to bring more painkillers next time.

Breath caught in my chest. Would there be a next time?

Caesarion said nothing, just stared at me, looking a little dumbfounded. I tried to step away, assuming he had changed his mind about my craziness, but his fingers tightened on my waist.

“A moment, please, Kaia. You do not need to run. I need … a moment, is all.”

“I can’t stay in the past longer than twenty-four hours, and the longer I stay, the bigger chance that I will be missed.”

“You are not supposed to be here with me?” he asked after another lengthy pause. The expression in his eyes
conveyed the curiosity I had grown used to, along with a befuddled confusion and the tiniest sprinkle of disbelief.

“No.” A hysterical giggle escaped. “Definitely not. And I’m not supposed to be touching you or talking to you at all, never mind telling you who I really am.”

“Why, then?”

“I told you the truth before—we’re supposed to be together. I wanted to know you.”

He pulled me toward him almost unconsciously, sinewy arms gathering me close until only the smallest sliver of light could wriggle between our loose clothing. “If what you say is true, and we do not exist in the same time and place, how is it that we are supposed to be
together?”

“Our sciences are very advanced. We can predict ultimate compatibility based on a number of genetic factors.” Frustration thickened my tongue. He wouldn’t understand any of those concepts. “Honestly, I’ve never understood it until you told me of your gods earlier today.”

“What do you mean?”

“That our lives are a single breath in an infinite lifetime. Perhaps your time and mine seem aligned to their faraway eyes.”

“But you do not believe in my gods.”

“I believe the universes are infinite, and mysterious, and harbor a great many
secrets.”

He pulled me closer still, raising a hand to my jaw. His thumb swept over my lips. Our gazes locked, and everything except the million feelings crashing over me faded away. His hands on my skin. His eyes lighting a fire deep, deep inside me. The sense of perfect rightness cloaking us as surely as the creeping twilight.

That he would die. That I should let him.

The kiss felt different this time. Familiar instead of strange, with both our bodies desperate to touch the other. His lips were soft, like petals falling against my mouth, and it felt as though my body cracked open. As my hands
found their way to his chest and slid up his neck, he pressed me flush against him. The moment changed, growing demanding as his tongue slipped against mine for the briefest of moments before he eased back.

Shock dimmed the pleasure in his eyes. “Apologies, Kaia.”

The bio-tat admonished me with facts about proper courting behavior for ladies of class during this time and heat rose to my cheeks. “Don’t, please. I’m not upset.”

“We’re not … I’m not …”

He looked so helpless and flustered that I couldn’t help but laugh, standing on my tiptoes and pressing my hands to his cheeks, then planting another kiss on his
mouth. “Caesarion. This is not a normal situation. We’re breaking so many rules, you kissing me in a barn is hardly worth getting upset over.”

“I’ve never felt this way before, it’s … different.”

I felt my eyebrows shoot up, a self-conscious tug clenching my gut. “Different bad?”

“No, definitely not. It is good, but only … After the way we began in the gardens, I worry. I don’t wish to have you because I am Pharaoh and you must submit to my wishes.” He closed his eyes and blew out a breath. “I’m saying this wrong.”

I bit my lip to suppress the laugh this time, giving him as serious a look as I
could muster. “You’re doing fine. That was a misunderstanding.”

“Not to you. I made you feel less than the lady you are, and I cannot fix it.”

The edge of sorrow in his words sliced through my heart. “We come from different times and places and cultures. But I promise that I kissed you just now because I have never wanted anything more, and I sincerely hope to do it again.”

He bent forward at my words, passion burning in his eyes, and our mouths connected. This time he kissed me without fear and I tasted him, drank him in like he was lifesaving water on that first, scorching trip to Central America. Every bit of me responded,
melting into him as I memorized the softness of his mouth, the heat of his tongue as it played with mine, the gentle nip of his teeth along my jaw.

Caesarion eased back too soon, breathing hard. “Please say you’ll return.”

“I’ll try.”

I had kissed boys before—Oz had been my first kiss, strangely enough, during a game of Seven Minutes in the Air Lock our third year at the Academy—but nothing like this. Nothing that had come close to making me feel completely lost, transported, confused at what present and past and future meant anymore. What my entire life meant.

“I do not need to remind you that my
time is running out.” Tears gathered in my eyes at the sorrow in his words. One slipped away. He brushed it with a thumb. “No, don’t cry. Say you’ll return before that day.”

“I promise. This isn’t good-bye.”

He pulled me against his chest, crushing me in a tight hug that was probably almost as inappropriate as a kiss, then set me away. “Very well. Then go,” he said gruffly.

Neither of us moved. I tipped my head, unsure of the new rules. Maybe there weren’t any. “Um. Are you going to watch?”

“I want to know everything about you.”
“Caesarion, I’m trusting you with a great secret. History—this planet, these people—they’re much more fragile than they might seem to you. If anything significant is upset, we may never see each other again. I might disappear altogether.”

“And that is reason enough for me to keep silent, though I would not have thought to betray your confidence. Your trust is evident, and it means a great deal that you’ve given it to me after such a short time. At any rate, this lonely, discarded Pharaoh has not a soul to tell.”

Loneliness spilled out of his every pore, tingeing the air with regret. It squeezed my heart into a pancake. The
truth of his words pounded in the base of my skull harder than the stupid bio-tat had when he’d kissed me. He had no one. His family was gone, his city abandoned to Octavian and Rome, with only a few loyal guards willing to risk their lives to save his.

In a few short weeks, he would die alone.

“See you,” I whispered.

The cuff fell down to my wrist with a sturdy shake. A couple of quick punches and one whispered word marked my return trip, and the blue field spread around me. It usually comforted me, the knowledge that the strange and often horrific events of my day had concluded, but now, it put impossible miles between
me and this boy I could have loved, leaving me cold.

Lost.

The last thing I saw before the final light switched to green was Caesarion’s wide, sad eyes watching me go.
“Kaia, what in the System are you still doing in the Archives? You’ve been in here all day! And why aren’t you answering my wrist comms?”

Analeigh’s voice made me jump three feet into the air, and I hadn’t even been doing anything wrong. At least not at the moment. Mostly I’d been trying to deal with my guilt over betraying the Historians, even if it was to my True.

“You scared the space trash out of me.”

“That usually happens when you’re doing something wrong, but this just
looks like a reflection on ...” She peered over my shoulder at the archive I had pulled to the front of the screen. “The destruction of the Temple? Why are you bothering with that?”

Analeigh swiped her finger a few times, enlarging the recording data, but that it marked the beginning of my ancestral line didn’t register.

I rolled my eyes at her and elbowed her away. “I guess I’m feeling nostalgic. Family and love. Broken hearts.” Analeigh wrinkled her pixie nose. “What for?”

“I don’t know. Just curious, I guess.” I paused, wishing she could understand. Knowing she couldn’t. “I think they were Trues. Her and Titus.”
She got it then, and flopped onto the waist-high stool next to mine with a sigh. “Are you being sappy again? Is this because of your Companion card? I knew you shouldn’t have looked. You’ve always had too many romantic illusions, and now you’re all moony because Caesarion died a long time ago.”

“Maybe it’s not that he died so long ago, A.L., but that he didn’t have to die so young. It’s not that I had any expectations that I would get an Oz of my own—”

“Thank the stars. Who would wish for that?” she interrupted with a frown. “I mean, I know it’s cool that they’re, like, instantly in love or whatever, but how is that even possible? That they’ve
known each other for five years, then she gets a card and suddenly, *boom*, feelings?”

*Boom, feelings* pretty much described my past couple of days, but she had a point. I had felt the undeniable draw to Caesarion from the moment I’d laid eyes on him. Sarah had always been kinder to Oz than the rest of us, more understanding of his awkward silences. Quick to defend him, protesting that he was shy, not weird. It had made a strange kind of sense when her card had come out with his name on it, but still … now that I had experienced it, I had a hard time believing they hadn’t felt it.

Then again, people were different. It stood to reason that love would be, too.
“Maybe they did have feelings for each other but never acted on them. I mean, it’s not like Oz has ever been super into girls or dating or anything.” I shrugged.

“Right? I think you’re the only girl he ever kissed before Sarah.”

“Don’t remind me.” I needed to change the subject before she remembered I hadn’t answered about where I’d been all day. “So, you know Jonah confirmed he saved that girl. Rosie.”

Analeigh’s expression grew wary. “Right, but he didn’t say much else.”

“Well, he must have warned her ahead of time since she never left the building that day. I still can’t believe he
was so irresponsible. He could have killed us all.”

“You’re being dramatic. It was just one girl.”

“Nobody’s just one girl, Kaia. What if it had somehow affected the invention of the atmosphere that supports human life in Genesis? Would the terraforming just have dissolved?”

She gave an extreme example, but those kinds of unknowns existed. The Historians had mapped most of Earth Before’s major events over the past fifty years and had flagged specific people and happenings that were essential to our ability to survive, but there were simply too many outside influences to draw every single event backward and
forward through history—to know for sure what could make them disappear or change their course.

One of our first lessons with Minnie Gatling had been trying to trace the influences on Hitler. We researched every moment from his birth to death, but being sure what could have happened if a single outside influence had been removed—the father who abused him, the ancestor who passed down a genetic proclivity toward mental illness—those lines grew blurry fast.

Which was the reason for the hard and fast _never interfere_ rule. Even if it meant letting a madman murder six million people for no reason at all, because what if the alternative turned out
to be even worse? With all of our advances, everything we knew, we couldn’t predict the future.

“You want to get out of here? It’s Pey’s birthday, and she left passes for us in case we wanted to meet everyone at Stars in My Pies.” Analeigh looked hopeful—whether because she wanted to go out or wanted the two of us to get back to normal was hard to say. Maybe both.

I stood, stretching my muscles, still sore from riding that bloody horse. I had changed out of my ancient Egyptian garb, and the decontamination shower had washed the sand and dirt out of random places on my body. “Sure. Is Sarah there?”
“Probably. She and Oz went with his dad to dinner, but if she had anything to say about it, I’m sure they’re free now.”

The mention of Oz’s dad twisted my lips in a grimace. Yet another reason to be happy he hadn’t been my True. His father was a Historian and an Elder, and as stern as they came. The man saw everything with these beady black eyes. Like some kind of hawk or vulture.

“I could go for some pie.” It wasn’t real pie, like the kind we’d seen in diners on observations, because we only had synthetic milk, but it was good enough.

Analeigh frowned. “You should shower first, because you smell weird.”

I froze. “Weird like what?”
“Like … livestock?” She narrowed her eyes at me. “Where were you really, Kaia? There are no cows in the Archives. Or on Sanchi. Or in Genesis.”

So much for the decontamination shower. I should have used the shampoo instead of forgoing a hair wash.

I wandered away from the table comp, touching several dots with a slippered toe until I found Oz’s. I poked it, trying to bide my time before answering Analeigh’s question, but also curious. Instead of recording him in Stars in My Pies, as expected, the bio data claimed he’d been in early eighteenth-century London for the past twenty minutes.

Nothing significant came to mind, as
far as events of that time and place, but we were all off duty today. He shouldn’t have been anywhere, except with Sarah.

With my own transgressions hogging my head space, I almost pushed Oz’s weird travels aside. But something stopped me. Jonah had known saving Rosie Shapiro wouldn’t change anything significant, but if there was a way to track history forward as well as back, no one had told me. My brother warned me that everyone at the Academy couldn’t be trusted—that the Historians had a secret.

And Oz’s dad was an Elder.

Jonah had traveled alone, and I’d caught Oz doing the same thing. My brother and I shared a double dose of
stubborn, so maybe Oz presented a better alternative for finding out whether it might be possible to predict the consequences of saving Caesarion’s life.

When I closed Oz’s dot and turned, Analeigh stared at me with her eyebrows raised, arms crossed over her chest. All of the secrets felt heavy on my shoulders. To unburden myself meant weighing down my best friend and that felt selfish.

“I want to tell you, Analeigh, but it’s better if I don’t. You’re a terrible liar and this isn’t your problem.”

I tried moving around her but she blocked my path.

“Kaia. I am freaking out. You found your brother’s cuff and the first thing you
did was break major policy to go see him. Jonah ran off without a word, never said good-bye to anyone, and now you’re disappearing, and keeping secrets, and …” Tears filled her big green eyes. “I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want you to leave. I want us to take our certifications and stay here. Together.”

My throat tightened. “I don’t want that, either. I’ll tell you everything, I promise. Just not right now. Give me a few days to try to figure it out.”

Her eyes were serious as they lingered on mine. It was the look Sarah and I jokingly referred to as her “mom” expression. “Promise me, Kaia.”

“I promise.”
I flashed her a wobbly grin that reflected none of the ache gnawing me open from the inside and fled the room, heading for the safe solitude of the shower.

I didn’t want to end up like my brother, living outside established rules, an outcast from the System—not at all. True Companion or not, Caesarion lived in the past. Even if he could be saved, he could never be mine forever. I wanted to fall in love with a boy and get married, have children of my own, and continue my work at the Academy, and there wasn’t anything I believed in more than the calling of the Historians. It was important and, more than that, I loved it.

But I wanted to know Caesarion, too.
And I wanted to be a good daughter and a good friend. And to make sure future generations of humans had a healthy society to grow up in. And yes, fine, I wanted to save the ancient boy I was meant to love from the unfairness of his world.

Jonah’s cuff and his chip allowed me to be both selfish and remain at the Academy, at least for now. Hopefully, my luck would hold until I could figure out whether I could alter Caesarion’s fate without upsetting the fate of the universe.

Or until Octavian killed him.

*
“Are you sure you don’t want to come?”

“Yeah. I’m kind of tired. I might be coming down with something.” I avoided Analeigh’s gaze by snuggling into my bed and rolling toward the wall. I’d shoved the chip back in my wrist while I’d been in the bathroom, the sound of running water covering my muffled groan.

I needed to grab some clear, adhesive bandages from the infirmary so the wound wouldn’t get infected in between travels. Some healing salve wouldn’t hurt, either.

Analeigh paused for a moment in my bedroom doorway, looking torn between giving me space and being terrified I’d
disappear like Jonah had if she let me out of her sight. Finally, she sighed softly and flipped the lights off on her way out of the suite.

The shower had given me time to think and for the first time in days, a boy other than Caesarion filled my thoughts. My mind turned over Oz’s secret comings and goings, and no rational explanation came to mind. If Oz had gone rogue, traveling alone and observing without authorization, someone had to stop him. Someone should stop me, too, because I didn’t have the willpower to cease and desist on my own, but since no one had, that left me free to follow Oz.

The halves of me—the one in love
with my calling as a Historian, and the one connected to Caesarion—were at war, but if Oz was taking chances that could affect us all, the Elders needed to know.

First, I needed proof. The suspicions I had, based on his bio info reflecting odd times and places, wouldn’t be enough. He would claim a system error, and I could end up drawing attention where it would be potentially disastrous—onto myself. His father being an Elder, they would believe Oz in a game of He Said, She Said between the two of us.

With everyone out at Stars for the next hour or two, I could travel back and follow him to England earlier tonight. Try to get answers. Traveling alone
twice in the same day counted as reckless, but I had to know what he was up to. If he could help me.

I didn’t want to waste time figuring out clothes, so I ran to the wardrobe closet and grabbed a generic black trench coat that fell to my knees, knotting it securely around my waist. My leggings and black flats showed, but with my glasses and hair twisted into a knot under a kerchief, no one in 1714 England would spare me a second glance.

The air lock registered a different certified Historian’s name this time when I swiped my wrist. The tech must have been programmed to switch it up, which eased my anxiety further.

The laws of physics prevented
Historians from crossing paths on different trips in the same past—like, we didn’t see the previous groups of apprentices observing Caesar’s death or the Triangle Fire. There was some intricate set of principles that made it impossible, but I didn’t need to understand them to work as a Historian. Those worries belonged to the Science Academy. Essentially, the only way to watch Oz was to go with him, so I’d have to travel back in Sanchi to when he’d left, then leave from there. I set the dials on Jonah’s travel cuff for ten minutes before Oz’s departure, then whispered “Air lock, Historian Academy, Sanchi,” into the tiny speaker.

I disappeared and reappeared in the
same place, just about an hour and a half ago. I reset the dials and requested a trip to “Norwich, England, Outskirts,” hoping the vague instructions worked.

*
Norwich, England, Earth Before–1714 CE (Common Era)
The soft landing in the middle of nowhere pleased me. Beautiful, rugged coastline stretched out for miles, all green and browns, trees giving way to waist-high grasses before easing into sand and rock that took a beating from the crashing surf. There wasn’t time to admire it, and a quick request for the route into town brought up a map on the lenses in front of my eyes. The hike into town took the better part of an hour and sweat trickled down my back, partly from the exercise and partly fear that I would miss Oz’s arrival.

The town of Norwich yawned in front of me, paved with quaint cobblestone
streets and pretty, sturdily crafted storefronts, row houses, and churches. A gazebo sat in the middle of the town square. The market bustled with people out shopping for bread or cheese or new clothes for the squalling children they towed through the streets behind them. There were women in full skirts chattering around a round marble fountain that burbled and twinkled in the morning sun, and men in suits walked with purpose into money changers’ offices or held heated discussions, pipes dangling from their lips.

The brain stem tat returned Oz’s location in response to my query, but his wardrobe blended so well it almost fooled me. The fact that he looked super
handsome caused me to do a double take. He strode purposefully down the main street, clad in expensive gray silk, knee-length breeches and a matching waistcoat, paired with off-white stockings and a linen shirt. A darker gray frock coat and a bicorn hat on his head finished off the look, though if my bio-tat hadn’t been working overtime spewing information, the details would have escaped me.

It all fit him perfectly, stretched across his broad shoulders and accentuating things on the rear end of Oz I’d never considered assets before today. I must be off my nut, checking out Oz’s ass in broad daylight.

My idle admirations screeched to a
halt, every muscle in my body tensing, when I noticed the Gavreau strapped in the belt at his waist. The sight dropped a leaden ball into my stomach.

There was no good reason to bring a sonic waver on an observation.

Oz whipped around, as though sensing my eyes or my steps dogging his. I turned my face away at the same moment I registered how the gray coat brought out his eyes, and ducked behind a group of women waiting in line to buy fresh bread. The smell of it cooking filled the air, and brought back the sharp memory of sharing a snack with Caesarion. My heart pounded so hard my ribs hurt.

When I peeked again after counting to
thirty, Oz had continued down the street.

The cobblestones made my steps unsteady, tripped me more than once before he turned down a less crowded alley, then onto a different street. A man stood on the stoop of a legal office, and Oz headed toward him. When my eyes focused, the glasses followed my gaze, analyzing the time, date, and place, and running facial recognition on the man before displaying details in my peripheral vision.

James Puckle. Lawyer. Three years hence, inventor of the world’s first machine gun technology. Married twice. Children with the first wife, Mary (decd), none with the second, Elizabeth, wed two months hence.
None of it meant anything to me. The glasses and my bio-tat gave no indication that today would be special, not in Norwich, not for James Puckle. He had impacted the world with his technology, but not yet.

*Not yet.*

My mouth went dry at the thought, recalling the sonic waver nestled against Oz’s hip. At the memory of Booth’s random comment about changing the past, at the realization that I now knew that it had been done before—by my brother. The chance that he was the only one seemed remote now, watching Oz move with such purpose.

Before my imagination ran wild, my classmate swerved into a young woman
who had bent to retrieve a bundle of rosemary she’d dropped into the street.

Her coloring didn’t match the rest of the commoners in town; her skin was shaded an olive color similar to my own, and her long, silky black hair was pinned into a knot at the back of her neck. When Oz banged into her she toppled sideways and right into James Puckle, who caught her in his arms and righted her, concern softening his rigid features. His concern shifted to irritation as his gaze swept the street, probably looking for Oz, before he asked her something in a voice too soft to be overheard. She nodded.

The wisp of Oz’s coattails turned at the end of the street and I hurried after
him, turning right to discover an empty, smelly alleyway. He had returned to Sanchi.

The scene I’d witnessed left no doubt in my mind that Oz was up to no good. Whatever this was, it wasn’t an observation. He’d interfered. Pushed that woman so that she and Puckle interacted. Touched the past, as I had done the other day. I knew why I had broken the rules—to meet my True Companion. But Caesarion was personal; I wanted to save him because of my feelings, but it didn’t mean the rules that governed the Historians weren’t smart or in the best interest of humanity as a whole. I would never jeopardize our lives on Genesis or our
future.

Nothing I had done so far would change anything significant. What I’d witnessed a moment ago, though … I had a feeling it could. Would.

It left me with the lingering question of whether Oz felt the same way about what we’d been taught at the Academy, or if he had different plans altogether for those of us living in Genesis.
This morning we were working on private reflections, entering our individual conclusions on the Triangle trip, and this afternoon we’d have our last supervised reflection on the event.

Our footsteps and hushed conversations banged off the walls of the empty hallway as my class made our way to private reflection. I’d read old mystery novels where characters overheard conversations through heating ducts or in sewers—the entire Academy felt that way. At least our dormitories, with our blankets and furniture, soaked
up some of the noise.

The seven of us found the main Archive room empty, with the exception of a third-year boy whose name escaped me. He scooted past us and out the door without a word. Oz escaped to the private carrel he had on permanent reserve before the rest of us dropped our things. We spread out, two or three to a table, all subdued in the early morning.

It was my first chance to get back to the Archives since following Oz to Norwich, and I wanted to jump right into figuring out what in the System had happened there, but the Triangle reflection came first. There was no way I was ever going back into that memory if it could be helped, and if our deep
reflections weren’t approved at our end-of-month review, we had to redo the observation.

The Triangle Fire had been reflected to death—what it meant for women’s rights, workers’ rights, the development of unions, the reinforcement of greedy businessmen by the American court system, the horrible truth that people had to see injustice with their own eyes before it meant anything at all. Those truths had been established long ago and dissertated by Historians before me.

We were expected to bring new observations to the table during deep reflection, and after fifty years, that required focusing on smaller aspects. Which meant, in this instance, my
distractions gave me an advantage. Deep reflection was one of the only times my tendency to obsess over the sidelines came into use. While in the past, we were supposed to record what they assigned, but in the Archives any focus was fair game.

The first original reflection I gathered was about the lives of the survivors—how humans had the capability to go on in the face of personal tragedy. There were diary entries in the system from later in Rosie’s second life, along with multiple interviews about the fire, and in every one, her guilt over leaving her friends and coworkers behind oozed from the words. She’d never forgiven herself for surviving, but she hadn’t
disgraced her friends’ sacrifice by wasting the years she’d been gifted by my brother. She had fought for workers’ rights, and then women’s rights, and later, civil and gay rights. Rosie Shapiro had spent a lifetime making her good fortune count.

I thought briefly that my reflection might bring too much attention to Rosie, and therefore Jonah, but it seemed unlikely. For one, the only record that she had died was in the original manifest from Earth Before. Any Elder—if they even noticed—would assume the original records had been incorrect and corrected by one of our many trips.

The next two reflection topics were harder, but after three hours I managed to
get the table comp to accept as unique contributions the devolving of humanity into a more animalistic state in the face of imminent death and the idea that the majority of the girls chose to have control over how they died.

Everyone else’s eyes were still trained on their comps, fingers nudging observations and typing reflections, with the exception of Oz, who had finished and left an hour ago. He’d probably been sitting alone in his room being boring and ruminating on these reflections since we’d gotten back from New York, wondering if one might be his ticket into the Hope Chest. Aside from his unauthorized trip to England, of course.

I got up and stretched, shaking out the
kinks in my legs and neck as I paced the floor, searching for the single red dot roaming outside the Archives, which would have to be Oz’s. The more nonchalant I acted, the more Analeigh’s suspicious gaze burned between my shoulder blades.

When I finally found Oz, he wasn’t in the mess hall or the gardens or the dormitories. His dot disappeared from the travel chamber, then blinked a moment later in Canada, 1934 CE.

What in the System was that boy up to? Whatever it was, he could have used a handy dandy chip like the one Jonah handed me.

My Historian training, coded into my DNA as deeply as my attraction to
Caesarion, demanded to know why he’d interfered in England. He changed something. I just didn’t know what. Or why.

If I cross-checked the places he’d gone, maybe a common thread would show up.

A quick press of his dot displayed bio data, and another punch pulled up a two-week history, which I transferred to my locked file before I slid back onto my stool across the table from Analeigh. I ignored her stare and after a moment, she heaved a sigh and returned to her reflection.

Two thousand years ago, someone would have had to flip through volumes upon dusty volumes of actual books to
piece together a connection between thirteenth-century Mongolia, eighteenth-century London, and twentieth-century Canada. A thousand years ago, computers could have attempted the search, but the user still had too much influence as far as entering parameters.

I knew he’d gone to see James Puckle, inventor of the Puckle gun, in 1714. That was a start.

I punched in the dates and asked the table comp to find any historical connections, then picked at the chipped polish on my fingernails while it processed. Strange anachronisms, like fingernail polish that didn’t last longer than a few days, filled society in Genesis. Vanity was generally frowned
upon, so even though we could time travel, contemporary travel faster than the speed of light, and manufacture vitamin-packed synthetic food, things like the polish, hair dye, and makeup had never been improved. We could probably invent a way to permanently change the color of our nails or hair if the scientists committed a couple of days to the project.

I frowned at my hands. Sometimes I wished they had done the nail polish.

The table comp beeped twice and then displayed a short list of possible connections between the three times and places, giving me a simple, glaring answer. All three were instrumental in the development of guns and
ammunition.

The Chinese had invented gunpowder, and it had been introduced to the Western world during the Mongolian invasions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In 1934, John Garand of Canada had developed the first assault rifle. It said nothing about the Puckle gun being invented in 1717 even though it had been in the Archives the other day when I’d followed Oz—it had only displayed for me during the observation.

And now it was gone.

The memory of him shoving that woman right into James Puckle flashed through my mind. My fingers trembled as I pulled up the man’s biography with a
few punches. Nothing about his inventing a gun. He’d married a woman named Mary and had children, which matched the information the glasses had given me the other day. Then he’d married again, only … I felt sure his second wife’s name hadn’t been Elira. It had been something English.

A click on the second wife’s name brought up nothing but their wedding photo. It was the woman from the street, the one Oz had shoved into Puckle’s path.

There was a paragraph on why their union had been recorded—she had been a Muslim from the region that would become Albania, and their union had changed Puckle’s rather rigid, vocal
outlook on Muslims as mortal enemies of his own beloved Catholic Church.

There had to have been more about Puckle in the Archives previously, about why and how he’d invented that machine gun. Violence and weapons were one of the five major contributors to our evacuation from Earth Before, so anything related to firearm development would have been cataloged.

Oz’s actions had apparently wiped it from the record.

Because of his interference, Mr. Puckle had met Elira instead of Nice Catholic Girl, and it had erased the desire to create advanced weaponry from his mind.

Cold fingers made of fear gripped the
back of my neck. How many other things had changed because that gun had never been invented? It seemed like it should be a good thing, slowing down the progress of weapons development, except it didn’t matter now. That wasn’t the reason Historians were allowed access to the past—not to change it or try to repair mistakes. We couldn’t fix history. All we could do was make sure fatal errors didn’t happen again here in Genesis.

Oz had heard the same lectures as the rest of us all of these years. His father was an Elder, for Pete’s sake. What did they know that the rest of us didn’t?

I swiped the search results away, pecking with my fingertips through files
on the development of weapons, unsure what exactly I was looking for until I found an early reflection by Minnie Gatling. For the first time, I realized she and her sister descended from the Gatlings, a family instrumental in the development of guns in America. My instinct insisted that information and Oz’s travels might be connected, but my feeble human brain struggled to connect the dots.

Minnie wrote this particular reflection after visiting a shooting in a Colorado movie theater—it was a trip we no longer took as apprentices because the spray of bullets was unpredictable and hard to map. A Historian overseer had been shot during
an observation trip about twenty years ago, and though he hadn’t died, we now observed either a shooting at a Columbine high school, in an Australian shopping center, or on the Gaza strip for our lesson on weaponry in the hands of civilians.

Young Minnie’s reflection made it clear why she’d been chosen to oversee—the writing was concise, the scene laid out with a keen eye—but her reflections came off perfunctory. She wasn’t the ideal reflector, being unwilling to delve beneath the surface the way Oz loved to do.

“It is an interesting development that weapons meant for military defense and armed militia have found
their way into the hands of private citizens, and in a world that no longer requires one to regularly defend their person, family, or nation. So many wish to blame the machinery itself, which I think is incorrect. My own ancestor was instrumental in the development of the Gatling gun, and some of our contemporaries have hated me on his behalf, but it’s not the weapons that pose a threat. It is, and always has been, the nature of humanity that’s at fault.”

*Hated* her? Hate didn’t happen in Genesis. Did it?

I paused and looked over my shoulder, sure one of the Elders would show up any second, ready to hand out a
sanction for snooping. No one came, though, and I remembered that I was a Historian, too. Maybe just an apprentice, and maybe off on a tangent that had nothing to do with today’s assignment, but our Elders encouraged exploration and knowledge. We could spend as much free time in the Archives as we could stomach. Oz practically lived in here, a fact that would have inspired annoyance a week ago. Now, I was thinking he had reasons for holing up that went beyond taking the nerd recluse lifestyle to the extreme. Feeling more confident, I returned to Minnie’s reflection, interested to see where her argument was headed.

“The original settlers of Genesis
were right to leave all weapons behind on Earth Before, and to ban their manufacture in the System, with the exception of necessities for defense in the unlikely case of an attack by an unknown foe. Though I believe my ancestor, Richard Gatling, did not create something inherently evil, humanity is constantly challenged to fight the evil inside of us. We cannot trust ourselves or others with machinery that can take a life in a matter of seconds.

“In conclusion, I do not agree with previous reflections that deem the men who created killing machines partially responsible for the collapse of society on Earth Before. As with all of our
assignments that revolve around understanding the reason for our exile to Genesis, I believe the nature of humanity responsible for our greatest losses. And as I’ve stated, I am part of a small contingent of believers that this will happen again, despite the efforts of Zeke and his followers to ensure that it doesn’t. We cannot change what we are.”

Zeke and his followers? The Gatlings were Elders, too, and I’d never guessed at a rift between any of them. Perhaps I’d read too much into her words. Plenty of us had differing opinions regarding the fall of Earth Before, the events that led up to it, and even with seemingly insignificant reflections we often
disagreed about the potential repercussions or positive benefits.

Other pieces of Minnie’s reflection stood out to me as off, too, pricking suspicion. Mostly the words she used, like “exile to Genesis” instead of “relocation to Genesis” or “evacuation to Genesis” as we were taught. Her reflection also seemed to suggest that prior classes of apprentices had a specific assignment to determine what could have been changed on Earth Before to prevent our leaving.

Which was very different from what I’d been taught during my time here—focus on what we could learn, lessons we could apply, that would make Genesis viable going forward.
The development of sophisticated weaponry had been determined to be a factor in the collapse of society, and that had to be what drew Oz to those three specific places. But it didn’t explain why he was so interested, or why he’d pushed Elira into James Puckle and essentially stopped him from creating that gun, or why he was traveling unsupervised in the first place.

Everything I knew about Oz made it hard to believe he’d commit all of those infractions on his own, yet there was no reason to suspect the Elders or anyone else had sent him.

Except Jonah’s warning.

Frustration balled a knot under the tat in the back of my neck and I rolled it
from side to side, trying to stretch out my thoughts. I was missing something. A connection between Oz and Jonah, the only two people who had the hubris—or the knowledge—to change the past. A link between Oz and the Elders, or Jonah and the Elders—not to mention whatever had caused my brother to run.

I absently tapped on the link under the Gatling gun, reviewing a quick-and-dirty history of the world’s first machine gun prototype. It had led to the Maxim machine gun and finally the gangster-favored Tommy gun, which had all culminated in weapons sophisticated enough to take out everyone in this Academy in under two minutes, provided we were all in the same room.
Once the guns of the late twenty-fourth century came into play—the models powerful enough to bang through walls made of metal or plaster, or anything really—they could take us all out in under three minutes, even spread out.

If Oz had also made alterations on the Silk Road, or in Canada, how long before changes started showing up in the Archives? Before the descendants of people murdered by guns started reappearing?

*
The morning left a lethargic feeling in my bones akin to the way the actual Triangle Fire had affected me, and my feet dragged down the cold hallway to the mess hall. Oz had returned, and the seven of us sat together, as always. Also as per usual, Jess commanded the conversation.

I blocked her out, but couldn’t come up with any answers to the questions somersaulting through my mind. It all eventually came back to the question of why Oz—and my brother—had felt confident that the changes they’d made wouldn’t rip Genesis from existence.

I needed to talk to someone, to hear how all of this sounded outside my own head, but I couldn’t confide in Analeigh
without admitting that I’d used the cuff on my own.

Caesarion’s face hovered in my mind, those sharp, thoughtful, midnight-blue eyes trained on my face. He knew my secret now, and I trusted him more than seemed plausible after a day together. I could talk to him, if I could get away soon. The sand in Caesarion’s hourglass ran faster by the minute, and the memory of the trust in his face when I’d promised to return clung to me like barnacles to the hull of a sea ship. I was determined to see him again—hopefully more than once—before our stolen days together expired.

“What are you wearing to the certification party, Pey?” Jess sipped
from her bottle of colorful, enhanced water, peering over the rim with dark, almond eyes.

The parties took place once a year, after certifications were approved and a few months before the next class officially completed their apprenticeship, and they were pretty much a required function. We got out of our standard-issue clothing for the night as well, which girls like Jess loved. Girls like me, who enjoyed wearing different things but had absolutely no fashion sense or period preference, struggled.

Jess had committed to a 1970s vibe, as far as clothing, which she pulled off well. Having visited the time period, I
actually thought she looked a lot better than most of the hippie girls bouncing around Berkeley in clouds of pot smoke.

The majority of my plain clothes were hand-me-downs from my mother, which meant cute little mid-twentieth-century dresses. Analeigh was obsessed with early nineteenth-century fashion, and her closet contained a disturbing number of frilly undergarments.

Boys had it easy. Pants and a shirt. Done. Maybe Oz would recycle his dashing 1714 look. Sarah would probably think she’d died and gone to old-fashioned heaven.

“I think I’m going to fool around with an ancient Greek drapey thing,” Pey replied.
“What about you two?” Jess shot a glance in Oz and Sarah’s direction. “Doing something stupid and cute, like color-coordinated taffeta and cummerbund?”

“Seriously, Jess, have you *met* Oz? I’ll be lucky to get him into a tie and a shirt that doesn’t have some kind of food stain on it,” Sarah quipped, choosing to ignore Jess’s snotty undertone.

Jess was not-so-subtly jealous of their pairing. Most of us felt the same way, but we tried hard to be happy for the two of them instead of making them feel as though they were some kind of freaks under a microscope.

“Have you got your pirate wench outfit all picked out, Kaia?”
“That joke was funny the first time.” I rolled my eyes at Jess, then slurped a spoonful of soup. “You need some new material.”

“I’m not a writer, I’m a Historian.”

“Good thing,” I spat back.

Tangling with Jess got old fast, especially when there were too many important things vying for my attention. Like when I’d be able to see Caesarion again, or whether Oz or I was going to blow up the future first.

My mind wandered, dismissing the rest of the lunch conversation, until a prickly feeling lifted the hairs on my arms. I looked up to find Oz watching me while Sarah and Pey discussed which branch of the Historians they
preferred once we were certified. His gray irises were clear and as enigmatic as ever behind his thick black lenses, though less haughty than normal. I stared back, willing a challenge into my gaze. Oz knew I was up to something, but so was he—and I hadn’t altered anything. Not yet.

An answering challenge lit Oz’s eyes on fire. He and I were locked in some kind of battle of wills, but I didn’t know the rules or the reason for the declaration. A month ago we had been Kaia and Oz, two apprentices a little more than a year away from being certified as full Historians and taking up the mantle of observing, recording, and reflecting. Two people who had known
each other since we were kids—not friends, exactly, but not enemies. Now we were both traveling on our own, with our own agendas.

Maybe we both needed to be stopped.

“I mean, of course it would be fun to focus on reflecting, so Oz and I would have the same schedule, but maybe he doesn’t want to spend every day in the lab with me.” Sarah nudged Oz’s side, turning to smile at him.

The playful grin dropped when he didn’t reply to her question, because he was still staring at me with a little too much intensity. My cheeks flushed from the attention, from the guilt and worry. Not because anything about Oz turned me on, but because sometimes it seemed
as though those eyes could see right through a person’s skin.

Could he tell I was nothing more than a girl about to tumble headlong down the wrong path, who couldn’t resist the pull of even a long-dead true love? A girl sitting here judging him instead of herself?

“Oz?” Sarah asked, frowning now. Her blue eyes flicked between us, confused, maybe a little worried.

My roommate’s expression made me look away, and under different circumstances, I might have laughed. Whatever was happening to my relationship with Oz these past couple of weeks, it wasn’t romantic. Simply the dance of two people with secrets they
were determined to keep.

He finally realized the entire table was staring at him—at us—and glanced down at his True Companion. “What?”

Oz’s admittedly handsome—if tired—face softened as he registered the worry in Sarah’s expression, and he lifted a hand to brush a piece of short blond hair off her forehead. The tenderness in his touch twisted loose a piece of my heart. I felt the ghost of Caesarion’s lips on mine, a perfect fit I would never know again, and in that moment, realized that I never should have experienced it in the first place.

I never should have met him, because now, nothing in my life could ever live up to the sense of balance and
completion offered by his presence.

“Of course I want you to choose reflection, Sarah. I don’t want you off gallivanting at all hours when you could be home with me.” He slid an arm around her waist.

It impressed me that he’d heard her question. While our eyes had been locked, I had barely heard anything over the roar of my own panic, but Oz’s response made me frown. Sarah would hate being relegated to reflection; she loved the observations and recordings. It would be terrible to see her chained to not only surly, superior Oz, but the table comps, too.

The future had always seemed far away, a little murky. For me, it surely
held a Chosen Companion, children, and a job at the Academy in some capacity. Now it appeared obscured by the kind of fog that concealed the ground on Angkor. Most people preferred to steer clear of the swampy mist, yet the planet seemed like a dream to me, as though each step meant an adventure—maybe you’d crash into a hole, or maybe the path would lead you into a beautiful re-created bayou filled with cypress trees and Spanish moss.

Sarah glanced between Oz and me one last time, concern tightening her features. But when a loud alert signaled the end of lunch, she shrugged and let it go. Her laid-back demeanor made her one of the easiest girls at the Academy to
get along with, but also one of the easiest targets. She was altogether too nice for her own good. Whatever was going on with Oz, and whatever had shifted between him and me, it could hurt her. I needed to make sure that it didn’t.

We all left the mess hall for the Archives, scheduled to spend the afternoon on our final supervised Triangle reflection. Everyone moved slowly after eating, or perhaps because spending the rest of the day watching teenage girls burn to death didn’t appeal to a single one of us.

Oz and Sarah sat next to each other on one side of the largest, square metal table. Analeigh and I took the two seats
next to them, across from Jess, Levi, and Peyton. Two Elders stood at either end of the table, and today we were blessed with a double dose of Gatling sisters. Jess and Peyton chattered about something that had happened at Stars last night, but as the clock ticked to the hour we fell silent without having to be asked.

The sisters were both heavyset with unruly, gray old-lady curls, a permanent ruddiness smeared over their cheeks, nose, and chin. Their icy eyes could wrap chills around your spine faster than you could pretend to be paying attention, and standard Historian garb didn’t flatter either one of them, accentuating every pucker, roll, and dimple they’d earned
with fifty-plus years of life. Neither of them were mean, but they were strict. They expected our best.

There actually weren’t any Elders that didn’t command our respect, but the Gatlings froze the frame every ten seconds from the beginning to the end of the recorded memory and asked you to analyze the choices you made. It was brutal.

Today, Maude pulled up her own recording of the Triangle Fire on one end of the tabletop screen and Jess’s on the other. Everyone looked as green about the gills at having to relive the situation as I felt.

We watched the recording in ten-second spurts, comparing what Maude
recorded to what Jess had seen, and of course my least favorite classmate’s work was nearly perfect. There was a brief mistake, maybe five or ten seconds when she looked away from the girls jumping out the windows. I didn’t blame her.

Analeigh and Oz’s observations were also both hard to fault—Maude had plenty to say about mine, of course, and my distraction by Rosie Shapiro. Levi and Pey both got a lecture on how to make sure the camera cut through smoke so it didn’t obscure anything.

Viewing the fire as it played out seven more times didn’t make it any easier. If anything, it made it worse, but by the end I felt numb toward the entire
thing. I watched Rosie go for the last time as we reviewed Minnie’s recording, smiling a little at the thought of the Cubs winning an unscheduled World Series because of my brother. Sports were encouraged in Genesis, on an amateur level, but reflection had determined that a vast separation of wealth had been significantly detrimental to the health of our previous society, so professional athletics had not been reinstated after.

The silence in the room shifted, electrified. Analeigh’s eyes grew big and focused over my shoulder, and when I turned, I found Oz’s father, David Truman, staring at me from the doorway. His eyes, a darker shade than his son’s,
flashed with subtle suspicion and rage.

“Kaia, come with me, please.”

My heart thudded, then fell into my butt. I’d been in trouble enough times to recognize the tone of his voice, and at the moment, there were any number of infractions that could have been discovered. I could only hope it wasn’t one that could get me into seriously hot water.

There was nowhere to run in Genesis, or on Earth Before, where the Historians couldn’t find me. So I followed him, trying to prepare myself to face the music.
Chapter Sixteen

Elder Truman led me down the echoing metal hallway, past a giggling group of first-years who went silent and wide-eyed at the sight of him. He didn’t do much overseeing unless he wanted to experience a particular event again or spend the day with his son, and never taught reflections, with one exception: the reflection on the actions of his ancestor, Harry Truman.

That class revolved around the American president’s decision to test nuclear weapons on defenseless civilians. Oz’s father never tired of dissecting it. We kept our honest opinions unspoken and unreflected
around him, but after my certification I planned to revise my file on that event to include the words *despicable*, *thoughtless*, and possibly *sociopathic narcissism* for good measure.

Not everyone agreed, the Trumans included, but witnessing that horrible day had turned my stomach. All of those people. There one moment, gone the next. For nothing. Then again, military tactics had never made sense to me. That’s why there were many Historians, so that history could never be observed and reflected through a singular, distorted lens. I tended toward one side, while people like Oz and his father peered through a vastly different one. Neither was wrong.
Well, that’s what they taught us. I was pretty sure I was right.

“Sit down, Miss Vespasian,” a scratchy old-man voice commanded.

*Oh my laundry, Zeke Midgley.*

He sat at the head of a long, wooden table in a small chamber in one of the offices. None of the other rooms at the Academy had anything but metal or stone accoutrements, but the additions of heavy cloth drapes and the thick wooden table and chairs made this space eerie. Truly quiet. It would be intimidating even without Zeke and his nearly colorless eyes staring me down from behind his own Historian frames.

If a sighting of Elder Truman was rare, Zeke, the last surviving Original
settler of Genesis, was a ghost, a tall tale. And I’d seen him twice in the past couple of weeks.

“Yes, sir,” I managed, plopping into the chair at the opposite end of the table.

No matter how many times they called me on the carpet, it never failed to redeposit all of the moisture from my mouth onto my palms. I’d given in to Analeigh’s protests and left Jonah’s cuff hidden in the mussed covers of my bed, so at least they couldn’t find it on me and take it away. The seat cupped my rear and wasn’t cold, the combination making me long to leap to my feet. I had a strange mental image of the chair sucking me in and eating me for dinner.

Focus, Kaia. You’re in some serious
trouble here. Maybe you should hope the chair does eat you for dinner.

Truman slid into a chair on the right side of the table, leaving four empty ones, and Maude Gatling came in, taking a seat on the left. They all studied me until I felt naked. I couldn’t stop swallowing in a desperate attempt to turn my tongue back into a usable organ, as opposed to its current impression of a cotton ball.

“Do you know why you’re here?” Zeke asked.

I shook my head, not trusting my voice. There were any number of reasons I could be here, and opening my mouth upped the chances I’d confess to an infraction that had escaped their
notice. My eyes were stretched so wide I worried they wouldn’t stay in my face much longer. Trouble and I were well acquainted, and I’d been sanctioned plenty of times for my wandering eye during observations and a couple of instances of breaking curfew, but this room meant something bigger.

“Why were you reviewing Minnie Gatling’s reflection on the development of weaponry?”

The question threw me. Thoughts jumbled in my head, scattered like a bowl of marbles dumped on the glass floor, but I kept catching the same one—I had only done that this morning, too soon for the Elders to perform a random review of any of our reflections or
research paths.

Which mean certain files had to be flagged in the Archives.

They’d never told us that.

My insides bolted seven different directions, unsure what they wanted to hear. “I was finished with my assignment, and my reflections never get very good marks so I thought I would study some of the overseers’. You know, to work on improving.”

Zeke’s eyes narrowed. “Kaia, my dear, you have many talents. Improving yourself without prompting is not usually one of them, unless you have decided to turn over a new leaf.”

“If that is the case,” Elder Truman
interrupted, “why did you also initiate a search cross-referencing people instrumental in the development of guns minutes prior to reading Elder Gatling’s reflection?”

Ice ran in my veins. Minnie’s file hadn’t been flagged. The search path had.

I needed to throw them off track, because if they kept digging into my recent actions, they were going to find two unauthorized trips into the travel air lock. “I didn’t realize there were off-limits files in the Archives. Perhaps you should mark them.”

“They’re not off-limits, Kaia, but we do monitor access to the Archives that deal with the major contributing factors
to our exile from Earth Before.” Zeke’s empty eyes bored holes into my face.

There was that word again, the same one Younger Minnie had used. *Exile.*

“I think you know that the System takes a hard stance on the development and use of weapons,” Maude added, her steely eyes kinder than usual. “Given your brother’s current situation, it would be understandable if he influenced you, maybe asked you to do some research into such things? Perhaps he and his pirate friends are looking to create new versions?”

My jaw dropped at the same time relief turned my limbs to wet pasta. They thought this was about Jonah. “No! I haven’t talked to my brother since he
disappeared, and I would never support the re-introduction of weapons to private citizens. Read my reflections on the topic!"

"Then why were you so interested in those particular archives?" Zeke demanded. "Stop backpedaling and stammering excuses. A simple answer for a simple question, so we can be done."

Answers raced through my mind, but none of them were good enough. Or simple, for that matter. They hadn’t bought my line about improving myself, and I couldn’t blame them. I thought briefly about throwing Oz under the bus, but his suspicions of me made it too risky that he would turn the tables, not to
mention his father would defend him.

The sweat on my palms traveled to my armpits. The long delay would confirm I wasn’t telling the truth. Lying was my best ally, normally, and now in my moment of need, the nefarious sections of my brain misfired and failed.

Then Truman, the least likely candidate for help, came unwittingly to my rescue. “Is it because my son has been researching the same events for his independent reflection application?”

Zeke grunted, mouth turned down as though he’d bitten a lemon, and Maude shifted, her gaze on Truman. I gathered all of my courage and met Oz’s father’s eyes. He tried and failed to convey a false empathy—all I saw was the typical
contempt that withered my courage into fear.

They knew what Oz was researching. Did they know about his travels, too? His interference? Tears burned the back of my throat and welled in my eyes.

These people, the Historian Elders, had raised me from the age of ten. I believed the things they’d told me about our world, about the truth of what had happened on Earth Before, about my duty to protect the past from alteration and ensure a profitable future. It hurt in unexpected places that now, in this moment, I’d lost the ability to trust any of them when I needed it the most.

“Why would I want to copy Oz’s research?”
“He said you’ve taken a special interest in him lately,” Truman clarified.

If he thought I wanted to be more like Oz the Perfect Student or something, let him wander down that path. It was littered with fewer landmines, for sure.

Unless he thought I was interested in Oz. Shit.

A second glance at the smug assumption darkening his eyes suggested he just might.

“Elder Truman, Oz is the True Companion of one of my best friends.”

“I am aware of my son’s unique situation,” he replied dryly. “It doesn’t mean that you have not developed some ill-conceived feelings for him.”
Before I could control my reaction enough to play along—the Elders thinking I had an embarrassing crush on Oz Truman was a far better choice than their learning the truth—Truman turned to Zeke with a dismissive shrug.

Zeke studied his friend for a moment, then checked with Maude before focusing his intensity on me. “Is this true, Miss Vespasian? A teenage infatuation led you to research a path concurrent with Mister Truman’s in order to cultivate idle conversation in the hallways?”

A giant, sloshing pitcher of my pride fought to pour denials past my lips, but I swallowed them back. They burned in my stomach and my face caught fire,
growing so hot my hair might have smoldered. My indignation must have looked like mortification to the Elders, but it was best if they believed their ridiculous interpretation of recent events. So I nodded. “Yes. I know Oz and Sarah are together, but he’s just so smart and, uh, handsome,” I managed to choke out.

Zeke pointed a bony, yellow-tipped finger in my direction. “That had better be the truth, Miss Vespasian. Your family was given a reprieve after the egregious betrayal of your brother due to your grandfather’s stature in Genesis. His dedication molded it into the safe haven it is today. But I’m sure I don’t need to remind you that another exception will
not be made. We take our mission to protect the future of our System very seriously, and Historians are held to the highest standard. If you hope to join our ranks at the scheduled time, you would do well to remember that.”

“Yes, sir,” I answered, keeping my eyes on my hands and the indignation out of my voice.

Resentment roiled in my chest. That I had to falsely cop to a stupid crush on Oz Truman, that these Elders had been keeping secrets even as they lectured us about duty, and that Zeke threatened my family and insulted my brother twisted my stomach painfully. I clamped my teeth together to keep it all trapped in my throat.
In principle, I agreed with the thinking behind flagging certain files. It should have occurred to me, actually, that anyone researching the trajectory of weapons development—or anything that had contributed to the previous society’s downfall—would be monitored. Humans hadn’t changed, not at their core, no matter what the Originals had hoped. We all guarded against relapse, against a repeat of Earth Before. It was the reason for the Hope Chest. The reason this Academy existed.

The way they’d gone about it felt icky to me, though. Slimy, somehow, as though they’d covered me with a hundred slugs. And Oz. Maybe he had been working on his certification
application the entire time, and he’d tripped into that woman on accident, nothing more. It wouldn’t be the first time my overactive imagination had gotten the best of me. His father could have loaned Oz the cuff, given him permission to collect those recordings alone.

Or I could have been right all along.

Everything I’d been told for the past seven years had been upset in a matter of days. Nothing felt familiar. The last time things had felt right, felt like home, had been wrapped in Caesarion’s arms. I might have promised to stay in line but the idea of the slightest bit of peace drove every thought of keeping that pledge right out of my mind.
I was tired of thinking about doing the right thing. So, without much thought at all, I did what I wanted.
No one knew where Truman had taken me or how long I’d be gone. On one hand, it kind of seemed like the dumbest time ever to sneak back to Caesarion, but I convinced myself otherwise. My friends wouldn’t go looking for me or asking questions when the Elders were involved, and the Elders seemed convinced I was nothing more than an easily distracted, lustful teenager.

Not wrong, just misguided.

Let them think I’d gone back to my room and cried myself to sleep, then woke up telling myself all of the ways I was going to be a better apprentice in the future.
Making my roommates worry gave me pause, but just for a moment. I had the rest of my life to make it up to them, but Caesarion had only a handful of days. A couple of weeks, at best. I considered sending Analeigh a wrist comm, but she wouldn’t let me get away with a vague don’t worry for a second time and besides, it would blow the cover the Elders provided when they grabbed me from Reflection.

By my calculations, even Caesarion’s tentative timeline in our Archives seemed to be off. Historians on Earth Before guessed that his mother had sent him from Alexandria prior to her death, but now I knew he left the same day Octavian ordered Cleopatra to surrender
or die. I promised myself that one day I would correct his path in the Archives so my True Companion would be remembered by everyone, not only me.

I jammed in the scrambling chip with more efficiency than the first couple of times and grabbed a change of scarves from Sarah’s closet and a bottle of painkillers, then hurried down to the travel chamber. My Egyptian clothes waited in the broken decontamination drawer where I’d stashed them the other day. A quick switch of the sash from navy to aqua changed enough to make me feel fresh, and the dusty sandals molded to my feet. More and more, ancient Egypt felt like home, but I knew it was Caesarion and not the time or place that
suited me.

With time travel, Caesarion never *really* had to die, at least not for me. If I were a full Historian—one willing to break the rules—I could return to the day in the gardens and meet him for the first time again and again. I could return earlier, run alongside him in the reeds along the Nile, play silly games together as children, or I could arrive in the days before his death and steal the same hours from now until eternity.

But it didn’t feel right. It’s why we chose to return and observe specific moments and events in a linear fashion, and why the Originals had implanted the twenty-four hour self-destruct. No matter the advancement of our technology, or
the tattoos and comps that helped us seamlessly adapt to different worlds, languages, and cultures, life was meant to move forward.

As I set the date, time, and place on Jonah’s cuff, then lowered my mouth to the speaker to request that it take me to Caesarion, I knew that once he returned to Alexandria I would never see him again if I could help it.

This was my life, our story, and like all moments in time, it could only truly be lived once. Memories could be recalled and re-examined but never redone. We did our best to say the right things, to express enough, in the moment.

Or we lived with the regrets.
Berenice, Egypt, Earth Before–30 BCE (Before Common Era)

My luck with timing my arrival didn’t hold a second time. When I arrived, Caesarion and his party were taking supper by a small fire, and by the looks of things, he was the only one happy to see me.

Shock and anger colored the guards’ features as I shimmered into the evening. Caesarion’s relieved and delighted grin barely registered before his contingent of protectors flew to their feet and rushed me. I didn’t fight, unsure how to best handle the situation and following the instruction flooding my brain through the bio-tat, which insisted I appear as nonthreatening as possible.
Caesarion stood, his eyes hard as one of his guards yanked my arms behind my back and two others pointed swords at my chest and belly. The one behind me twisted my arms hard, and I cried out.

The blood drained from my True’s face, his white-hot fury electrifying the evening. “Do not hurt her, Ammon, or I will snap your head off with my bare hands.”

The guard behind me, who must have been Ammon, loosened his grip in surprise but didn’t let go. My eyes met Caesarion’s in an attempt to convey both my gratitude and to warn him to proceed with care.

“She appeared from nowhere, my Pharaoh. The girl is a dark one.”
“Or a *sihr,*” a second guard spat, disgust dripping from his chin.

The last word didn’t translate exactly into English or Latin, or even Greek, and it took my brain stem tat a minute to give me a workable definition. It provided a loose translation to *sorceress* or *witch,* and then returned a file on ancient Egyptian belief in witchcraft and magic. The knowledge relaxed the tightness in my shoulders. Magic and witchcraft intertwined with daily life for these people, and wasn’t considered inherently evil, as it would be once the Catholic or Islamic Church established a foothold. But a layman, and a female, harnessing the *heka* raised their defenses, especially around their
revered Pharaoh.

“I’m not going to hurt him,” I stated, putting all my honesty on my face. Forthrightness heard in the voice, seen in the eyes and posture, crossed worlds and cultures and centuries. I only hoped they would choose to see my intention. “I love him.”

Caesarion startled at the confession, and Ammon dropped my arms. I took a hesitant step toward my True, stopping short when the other two guards didn’t lower their weapons and the old manservant stepped in front of his royal charge.

Stalemate.

I considered returning to the Academy and trying again after a few
hours had passed, when all but one of the guards would be asleep, but then Caesarion shouldered the manservant out of the way and reached for me. My hands slid into his and contentment flooded every muscle. Snuggled against his side, the two of us faced his guards, their weapons still trained on me but all of their faces uncertain. Confused. With the exception of the guard who still emanated anger and hatred.

His shaved head gleamed in the light from the moon, his desire to hurt me reflected by the dying fire. Sweat beaded and dripped toward his hard, black eyes. They filled with distrust, and the smell of his fierce protectiveness broke out gooseflesh on my skin. That
man would kill me to protect Caesarion, even if it angered his master, and sleep well that night, secure in the knowledge that he’d done the right thing.

My mind struggled to find a way to explain or to make this right, but it came up empty.

“She might be a dark one, or a sihr, but she will not harm me.”

“Pharaoh … You are a young man and naive to the ways of the world outside the palace. Let Thoth explain it to you—women cannot be trusted, especially ones who claim to love you.” The hateful guard glared, his wary anger as hot as a bonfire. “The dark ones kill without warning, without weapons. We have seen it.”
The explanation spun a web of confusion in my brain. The translator came up with no additional information for the term *dark one*, and the mention of killing infected me with uncertainty.

Caesarion’s arm tightened around my back, washing warmth through my body and deepening the headache at the base of my neck. I needed to pop some painkillers.

“Thank you for your insight, Thoth, but I am Pharaoh. You will not harm her, and she will not harm me. You will not speak of her presence ever, not to anyone. Do you understand?” His voice took on an authoritative tone that straightened the backs of the guards, who nodded in unison.
I never thought I would be a girl turned on by power, but the ease with which Caesarion wielded his filled me with pride and lust in equal measure. With thousands of years of known history and a thousand more still to come, this confident, beautiful, thoughtful man was meant to be mine. And for a few more days, I could have him.

The guards dropped their weapons to their sides, and I heaved a sigh of relief.

Caesarion turned to face me, his hands running from my shoulders to wrists, checking for wounds. “Are you hurt, my love?”

Breath caught in my chest at his subtle return of my sentiment. We’d spent two
days together and I felt love, real and consuming, which in any other situation would seem ludicrous. Jonah had been the one to connect with Romeo and Juliet, to find it romantic, not me—I found it unbelievable and silly.

Before this. Before him.

There were scads of books, plays, and movies from Earth Before where the boy and the girl claimed to love each other from first glance, but it was rarely real love. It was simply an intense physical compatibility, which certainly still existed in Genesis and began many a Chosen pairing.

Caesarion and I were an exception. There was instant recognition between every cell, every molecule in our bodies
that we had found our one perfect fit, and from the moment I had laid eyes on him, I’d loved him. I may have chosen not to act on it, had we not resolved the initial misunderstanding, but since then he’d proven a handsome, well-spoken, intelligent man underneath the pampered, entitled exterior. A man worthy of love, and so much more than he would receive from the world.

I felt lighter at his side, the troubles at the Academy eased by his smile, if not forgotten.

His eyes shone bright with emotion, telling me he hadn’t called me his “love” without meaning it. I felt as though I’d toppled into a pool of cool water, and let it wash over me as we stared.
I smiled as he brushed his palms down my face, then trailed them down my arms. “I’m fine. Not hurt. Thank you for saving my life.”

The words tumbled free before I could think, but it didn’t stop them from bruising my heart. I didn’t know if Caesarion heard the unspoken addition, but it rang clear in my ears.

*Thank you for saving my life even though I’m not going to save yours.*

Sadness tinged his smile, as it so often did. “It was my pleasure. Now, are you hungry?”

I shook my head, wishing the melancholy that tried to supplant my happiness could be shaken loose, too. “No. Have you eaten?”
“Yes, we just finished.”

The guards were still staring at us, and Thoth looked as though he was plotting ways to make my death look like an accident. The weight of their gazes made me uncomfortable, and the fact that I wanted Caesarion to keep touching me and saying beautiful things made me wish for at least a modicum of privacy.

More than anyone on this planet would consider appropriate, but we were past caring.

I ignored the germ of worry gnawing a hole in my stomach. Now that the guards had witnessed my appearance, Caesarion’s wasn’t the only history that had been changed by my unauthorized travel. Thoth and Ammon, along with the
manservant and unnamed guard, would be affected by these encounters in ways I couldn’t begin to guess. What if I traveled back to Sanchi only to find everyone and everything gone, erased by my stupid impulsiveness?

Caesarion squeezed my arms, concern pushing aside the pleasure in his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I forced a smile and banished my anxiety. What was done was done. “Can we take a walk, perhaps?”

“Of course.”

He turned to his guards and spoke softly in a local dialect, raising his voice a few times but winning the argument about going off with me alone. We
wouldn’t wander far, and if we did not return within the hour, he gave them permission to verify their Pharaoh had not been murdered.

It didn’t seem like the time to mention that an hour still left me plenty of time to kill him and abscond.

That settled, Caesarion took my hand and led me away from the men and the fire. They had reached Berenice, a beautiful ancient city that rested on the southwestern coast of the Red Sea. The salty breeze twisted refreshing, cool air through my hair, a welcome change from the day we had spent in the baking hot desert, and the sky turned the water a deep blue under its winking stars.

We navigated the beach in silence
until we left their earshot. Once nothing except the moon and stars interrupted the darkness, Caesarion dropped my hand and drew me into his arms. They were strong around my waist, and he lifted me to his chest, holding me tight. The musky scent of sweat and man went straight to my head and I closed my eyes, attempting to memorize everything about this moment. He breathed in deep against my neck, as though trying to accomplish the same thing, and the sensation of his breath moving my hair washed my skin with hot tingles.

“I thought you wouldn’t come back. That I’d dreamed you,” he whispered against my throbbing pulse.

I shifted, unwilling to remove my
arms from his neck but wanting to see
his face. “You didn’t dream me. But I’m
not exactly real, either.”

“You feel real to me, Kaia.”

The husky tone of his voice betrayed
his own response to our nearness and
flushed me with heat all over again. His
lips sought mine, hesitant at first, but
with more abandon every passing
second. An unintentional sigh slipped
out of me when his tongue slid against
mine. The two of us pressed together
from head to toe, and if becoming one
physical being were actually possible,
maybe we could have stayed that way
forever.

He pulled away too soon and set me
back on my toes in the deep sand. My
knees weren’t working properly, dumping the rest of me into the golden grains too, and I pulled Caesarion down beside me. “I confess I might have returned just to kiss you again.”

His chuckle warmed my heart, and the slight flush of his cheeks in the moonlight made me smile. “Then I am even happier you are here.”

Things couldn’t get out of control. A baby from a three-thousand-year-old daddy might not even be possible, but if it was, it had to rank high among hard things to explain away to the Elders. I wanted to kiss him all night, though, so I lay on my back, dragging him down until he braced himself above me, hands sinking into the sand on either side of my
shoulders.

Moonlight lit the desperate sorrow in his eyes, and a crease deepened between his eyebrows. “For the first time in my life, I wish it didn’t have to end.”

“What?” I asked, reaching up to rub my hand against the tunic covering his heart.

“Everything.”

Pain spilled out of him, coating me with a raw ache. I wanted to say I could save him, that we would steal more hours, more days, but it might be a lie. Oz had changed James Puckle’s destiny. Jonah had found a way to alter Rosie’s. But I still didn’t know how. Or if I could.
“Everything ends, Caesarion. Like you said. But we’re together now.”

I pulled him toward me until his elbows bent and propped him against my chest, until our lips met in the quiet, seaside night. The sound of waves licking the shore blended with the roaring between my ears as he kissed me, slowly at first, then with increasing ardor as his hands left the sand and found my hair, and the weight of his body fell onto mine.

My own fingers roamed, finding the corded muscles in his back. My body responded to his, my heart thrilling with every response I elicited from him. I didn’t know how long we lay there, exploring one another fully for the first
time without haste, but it was not long enough.

He eased away, panting a little while he rested his forehead on mine, our sweat mingling. “I have been with many women, Kaia, but never felt as I do in your arms. I have never loved another.”

The phrase *many women* lodged in my brain, dampening even his first confession of love, and the brain stem tat tried to spill unwanted facts about the Egyptian royals and their free and loose sexuality into the forefront of my mind. I shoved them away and smiled up at him, loving the way he looked framed by the night, secure in the knowledge that no matter how many women he had been with, this was special to him, too.
“I’ve never been in love before, either.”

I left out the part where I’d never had sex. In the ancient world, a woman’s purity was of the utmost importance so that proper and valid heirs could be ensured, even more so when it came to ruling families.

“And have there been other men in your life, my Kaia?” A wrinkle appeared between his eyes, as though he couldn’t decide whether he wanted to know or why he had asked the question.

“No. My world is vastly different from yours, Caesarion. We do not grow up so quickly.”

“Explain.”
He lowered his lips to my neck and worked his way to my collarbone, driving all rational thought from my head for the next several moments. I reveled in the feel of his mouth and his tongue, the weight of him, and tried not to pout when he stopped.

“You are used to being given what you demand, I imagine. Including girls—or boys, if the mood strikes you. Why are you not demanding more of me?”

Part of me wished he would go further, ask more—I didn’t know if now, in this moment, I could deny him. It might be my only chance to know what it felt like to be with my perfect match, and to give that up in the interest of propriety didn’t exactly feel right. The other part
of me quaked in terror at the thought of that kind of intimacy at all, and a teeny, tiny voice worried about the man I would one day love enough to marry—that I would remember this one perfect night, and nothing could ever compare. That I’d know I’d settled for less.

“I do not want to hurt you, Kaia. It surprised me, your confession of love back at our camp, but it stunned me more to feel love in return.” A gentle smile softened Caesarion’s face. “This is all unknown, to me. I have known familial love, and the love of a people, but never this pull to a woman. I find that I want to protect you, even if it means denying myself what I want very badly, to ensure you remain intact.”
Intact was not how I felt. I felt exploded into a million pieces, scattered over the sand and naked in front of the winking heavens. It was vast and impossible to describe, the feeling of being with him, of hearing him attempt to express the same emotions that rolled through me like waves.

But no matter what decision would be made regarding the two of us and how far we would take these stolen days, tonight I was not ready, and his sweet understanding pricked my eyes with tears. “It doesn’t make sense, to love a man I’ve spent only hours with, and yet I do. Love you.”

He didn’t reply, trailing a single finger down my throat until his palm
settled over my heart. The Egyptians had been the one to latch onto the idea of the heart as the center of feelings in the body, and even when later sciences confirmed they originated in the brain, the colloquial importance of the heart remained even now, in Genesis.

Caesarion picked up my necklace, toying with it the way I often did when thinking of him. “What is this?”

“A family heirloom.”

His eyebrows pinched together as he squinted at the engravings in the moonlight. “The laurel wreath and the palm branch. Not symbols often paired. What does it mean?”

I closed my hand over his. “That sometimes love doesn’t arrive when it’s
most convenient, but that obstacles can be hurdled when people care enough to find a way.”

“There is no way, Kaia.”

I scooted to the side, and he shifted off me and onto his back, propped up on his elbows as he studied the sea. I turned on my side, my head resting in my palm so I could drink him in. “I want to know more about you.”

“I would not deny you a single desire.”

A shiver raced down my spine at the implication I heard in his words, something silky and sexual, even though I couldn’t be sure he’d meant to put it there. *Down, hormones.* “Why are you not betrothed? You are more than old
enough, and a Pharaoh of Egypt.”

He glanced at me, gaze lingering a moment before he lay all the way back with his arms behind his head, peering up at the heavens. “My sister is too young to marry.”

I swallowed the revulsion climbing into my throat at the admission. The Ptolemies were a Greek family ruling Egypt and had intermarried for generations. Cleopatra had been married to more than one brother, I thought, but ignored the bio-tat’s confirmations. They hadn’t known better, and Caesarion had not been forced to cross that strange line yet.

It wasn’t strange to him, I knew, and wasting time explaining the facts and
dangers of crossing closely related genomes didn’t appeal to me. He would be gone long before it would become a worry for him, anyway, and we were not given time travel so that we could fix Earth Before.

Except, based on Minnie’s reflection, it seemed as though altering previous outcomes had been a consideration at one time.

Caesarion turned his head to look at me, his blue eyes big and full of wonder. “I never expected to know love, Kaia. I have known pleasure, and my sister Selene is a sweet child who will make a fine wife, but love … It is a thing of myth, reserved for the gods.”

I reached out and slid my fingers
between his, locking our hands together on the beach between us. “Until now.”

“Yes, my love. Until now.”

“I understand why the guards think me a *sihr*, but what did they mean by a *dark one*? I’ve never heard that term before tonight.”

“There are ancient stories of people dressed in black, who appear out of thin air and murder without touching. Their victims simply collapse, turned to liquid on the inside, and the dark ones disappear in the same fashion as, well … as you do. It is superstition, nothing more.”

My heart rattled against my ribs. It didn’t sound like nothing to me. It sounded like Oz had been popping up
other places with his Gavreau waver, and perhaps doing more than knocking over pretty girls. How many times had he traveled, intent on changing one thing or another? It had to have been more than once to start the kind of association the guards had made between my appearance and death.

“What is it? You are as white as the stars, Kaia.”

Words snagged in my throat, partially because of the bio-tat, but more because as soon as I brought up the trouble at home, this time was no longer only ours.

“Please, tell me. Perhaps I can help. I know I don’t look it, but I can be quite smart.”

That made me laugh, and the lump in
my throat dissolved. “I think you look clever.”

“And handsome?”

“Of course. And handsome.”

He waited, a soft thumb brushing the back of my hand. My muscles relaxed, one at a time, and I knew it was time to ask for his help. It was the reason I’d come back—one of them—and time ran short. “There’s a boy.”

“I do not like the sound of that.”

“Not in that way, trust me.” I gave him a smile. “Like I told you, we have strict rules about traveling through time.”

“The ones you’re breaking here with me.”

“Well, yes. This boy, he’s breaking
them, too, but I don’t know why. I followed him the other day and he interfered with an important development that afterward disappeared from history. I don’t know why, or if he’s working alone, or how he can be sure his actions won’t have terrible consequences. It could erase more things in the future.”

Silence hung between us for several minutes. Misery brushed the edges of my happiness, not as potent or desperate as it had been during my questioning with the Elders, but still there. Waiting.

Caesarion stared out across the Red Sea, his features thoughtful, and when he faced me again, his gaze looked reproachful. “How do you know talking
with me will not erase the future?"

“I guess I don’t, not for sure. Except we haven’t altered your destiny, or Octavian’s, or Rome’s. Merely the fact that you met a strange girl on your journey, and now your guards have their own dark one tale to tell.”

“But this boy, he changed something you know is important.” I nodded, heartsick, and he continued. “How do you know what the consequences will be?”

“I don’t. We can’t predict the future based on an altered past.”

“Explain.”

“Well … let’s say you decided not to return to Alexandria. There are too many
trajectories that could result from that one different decision for our sciences to predict the eventual outcomes. It could change nothing in the larger scope, or it could change everything. It would depend on the choices you made going forward—like, would you try to take back Egypt for your family, or would you be content to leave, to settle in Judea or another province and live your life as a commoner? Would Octavian find you anyway? It’s … too big. We can’t do it. It’s why we don’t change anything.” I sucked in a breath. “At least, that’s what I’ve always believed.”

“But now you do not. Because of this boy.”

“Yes. He’s breaking rules, but Oz
isn’t dumb or reckless.” Neither was my brother, but one complication at a time.

We fell silent again, nothing but the sound of the waves sucking at the shore and our quiet, mingled breaths interrupting the night. I felt hesitation from my True, as though for the first time since we’d met he seemed unwilling to be frank.

The look in his eyes reproached me. “I think you have been irresponsible, Kaia. Coming to me. Telling me of the things that will be without knowing what could be affected.”

It stunned me, his admonishment. The tiniest spark of fear ignited in my gut and I wondered if my trust had been misplaced. If he wasn’t as okay with the
hand he’d been dealt now that I’d presented him with options. “What do you mean?”

“You, like this boy, have taken unnecessary chances. You’ve been given a gift and in return, accepted a responsibility. We are not so different, you and I. I was born a Ptolemy, my tiny shoulders burdened by the lives of others. My mother died for them, and I will do the same.”

My worry over his betrayal dissolved into anger. If I dug beneath it, I’d find embarrassment and guilt, but I wasn’t ready to go there. “So, you’re sorry I came to find you,” I snapped.

“I can’t be sorry for that. I’m simply saying that people like you and me
cannot forgo the best interests of many in order to please only ourselves. No matter our connection, your duty is to your people. It’s to the future. It’s not to me.” His eyes held onto mine, insisting I understand.

“You want to die for duty rather than live for yourself? You want me to go home and pretend we never met, pretend there isn’t a chance we could save you?”

“What is written will come to pass, Kaia. If nothing else results from our time together, I hope you will remember that no matter where your heart lies, the promises you have made your people take precedence. It’s not your job to save me if it is not my destiny to live.”

My brain struggled with my heart,
trying hard to ease my anger. He was right. I *knew* coming here was wrong, that telling him about the future could have consequences I couldn’t see, but I’d done it anyway. It had been selfish. Here with Caesarion, though, I still struggled to see things his way. I wanted to beat my fists into his chest and tell him his noble actions, the way he stood by his people, wouldn’t mean anything at all. Not to anyone. Not in the long run.

Caesarion and Oz had much in common. Oz would be equally appalled at the chances I had taken, the potential risks involved in sitting here, chatting with Caesarion. I knew in my gut he would never do the same, not unless he had solid proof that no harm would be
done in the process.

There were too many questions, and none of them would be solved in ancient Egypt. Caesarion and I didn’t have much time left, and I didn’t want to spend it arguing. Or think too hard about anything he’d said.

“I wish you would fight,” I whispered.

“With you or Octavian? Or perhaps the gods themselves?” He winked, easing the tension between us further. “Honestly, I’m not sure who would be harder to move.”

“I’m being serious. You don’t have to die.”

“I do, Kaia. We all do, and I will not
run, nor abandon my people to live under Rome’s rule while I watch from a distance. I have accepted the brief nature of my time on this plane, and please … I need you to do the same.”

He thought we were alike, but we weren’t. I wasn’t brave. I didn’t accept that some things were meant to be awful, not now, not after I’d touched him and kissed him and known him.

A quick, silent count to ten dissolved the rest of my irritation, leaving me nothing but raw truth that I was nowhere near ready to accept. I burrowed into Caesarion’s side, resting my head on his chest and marveling in the steady, strong beat of his heart. “We probably have a few minutes before your guards return
and decide that murdering me is best, no matter your orders.”

He chuckled and tangled a hand in my hair. We stared up at the sky, the Milky Way a picturesque streak across the navy blue that I’d never seen quite this way. The bio-tat tried to force an astronomy lesson on me without giving up on encouraging me to drop Caesarion’s hand, and I wished I had chewed another couple of painkillers. My whole head throbbed, but the pain held no sway over the agony ravaging my heart.

“Tell me a story about the sky.” My voice sounded wet.

His fingers loosened in my hair, trailing down my neck. “Surely a girl from the world to come knows more than
I about such things as stars.”

“Maybe. But you have better stories.”

It was something we’d lost along the way—the ability to be awed by the unknown, to create myths that made sense of the inexplicable, instead of boiling mysteries down to their basest components. It was true I knew the science of the Milky Way, but the science wasn’t beautiful. Right now, when all the universe seemed spun by magical hands of ethereal beings, I craved the sound of Caesarion’s voice telling me of Hathor, of the smeared river of stars that led to the world beyond this one.

And he did. He told me how Hathor was the Egyptian goddess of fertility, of
life, and Osiris the god of death and rebirth, a symbol that a corporeal death only marked the beginning of one’s journey.

“Why is Hathor connected with the Milky … um, the river in the sky?”

“Hathor is the milk of the mother, the river where Ra and the Kings of Egypt travel between their celestial realm and their creations on this planet. She floods the Nile to give life to my people and bursts water from the womb to signal an imminent birth.” He rolled toward me, pressing his hard chest against my side as he absently ran a hand over my belly. “Do you know the tale of Osiris?”

“No,” I whispered. It was the truth. Though I could know it in a matter of
moments with a single request to the biotat, I preferred hearing it from him.

The sound of a cleared throat and clomping boots interrupted the cocoon we’d built, signaling the end of our hour and time for me to return to Sanchi before Analeigh hit the panic button. Our wrist comms didn’t work while we were in the past, but I suspected mine would be full of frantic, angry texts upon my return.

Caesarion and I both struggled to a sitting position and looked up to find the mean, bald guard glaring down at us, his hand on the hilt of his cruel-looking dagger.

“It is time we retired for the night, my Pharaoh. The sihr will go.” He spat into
the sand, the wad of saliva landing a little too close to me.

“Give me a moment to say my farewell, Thoth, and then I will return to camp. I presume you and Ammon have procured lodgings?”

“Yes. The innkeeper will hold your secret as long as the gold flows.” Thoth sounded disgusted, and even though he clearly wanted to kill me, I was glad Caesarion had someone who looked after him well, whether the loyalty was born of duty or something more intimate.

The two men stared at each other until Thoth finally backed down and left.

Caesarion pulled me to my feet and wrapped me in another hug, his fingers digging into my back. “Is this good-bye,
my Kaia?”

“Didn’t you just lecture me that it should be?”

His arms tightened. “I wanted you to understand that what this boy is doing and what you have done are no different. If it is wrong for him to interfere, it is wrong for you. But no. I do not wish this to be good-bye.”

My throat burned and I clung him, using his solidity to hold myself together a little longer. I didn’t know if or when I could come back, or how many days remained before he returned to Alexandria and certain death. All I knew was that if he had more time, I would find more time.

It wasn’t too late.
“I’ll come back, Caesarion. At least once more while you’re still here.”

“Am I going somewhere?” He pulled back to peer into my face, searching for answers or for the comfort he perceived rested in knowing the future.

“Yes. You’ll return to Alexandria at Octavian’s request.”

His lips pursed as he seemed to consider why he would acquiesce to such an obviously unwise request, but then straightened his shoulders. “It is my time to die, and Octavian’s time to rule. The gods have willed it, and why should a mortal run from the beautiful life that awaits me on the other side of death?”

The words started my waterworks all
over again. Tears fell onto my cheeks and slid past my lips. His understanding was ancient, yet oh-so-accurate even given my extensive knowledge of the world that had passed Before. Some people impacted the world by living; others changed the fate of history by dying. No one escaped those simple truths, and whether by the hand of the gods or by simple chance, my True fell into the latter category.

It was wrong to believe he didn’t matter because he had to die.

I had known. In my heart, I had known when he’d risked his life to save that boy from the crocodile, that I could not rip Caesarion from his country, from his people. From his path. If I could have
convinced him to run away, he would not be the man I had fallen in love with.

Caesarion put gentle hands on my cheeks, drawing me onto my toes until his warm mouth pressed against mine, his tongue flicking over my bottom lip to catch my stray tears. “You will not be with me in that world, though, and I find that truth rends my heart.”

My own heart wrenched in two, as though in sympathy for its twin. “I’m sorry. You’re right. It was selfish of me to come here. You were happier before you met me.”

“It hurts me further to think you could believe such horrible thoughts. Whether or not I agree with your decision to come does not matter. I would not
exchange these days with you.” Caesarion rubbed a smooth thumb across my mouth. “And one day, you will join me in the afterlife, and we will be together. I know it.”

I had never put much stock in what people had believed for so many years about the destination of our consciousness after death. There were still some in Genesis that clung to the idea of unknown realms that could never be discovered or understood by our minds alone, and in that moment, I wanted more than anything to believe.

“How do you know?”

“Return once more, Kaia. I’ll tell you of Osiris and Isis, and you will know, too.”
Chapter Eighteen

Sanchi, Amalgam of Genesis–50 NE (New Era)

“Where have you been?”

The sight of Oz waiting for me outside the decontamination chamber nearly knocked me flat on my ass. It definitely shoved me out of my Caesarion-scented dreamland.

I glared at him in an attempt to cover up my guilty face. “None of your business.”

He stepped in front of me when I tried to shove past, then pushed me back into the air lock, slamming the heel of his hand against the button to close the doors. It meant we were stuck in here
another five minutes, minimum.

“Kaia. I know you were in Egypt, the days before Caesarion died. And I know you were alone.” Before I could move he reached out and yanked me toward him, running rough fingers up my arm until he felt Jonah’s cuff. “Where did you get that?”

“Illicit Cuffs for Apprentices. Same place you got yours, I guess. Did they give you the deep shit discount, too?” He let me go, and I stepped back, glaring for real now at being manhandled. “How do you know where I’ve been? Were you following me?”

“You mean like you’ve been following me?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”
“I saw you in England. You need to work on blending in.”

Son of a biscuit eater.

“Thanks for the advice,” I snapped.

“L’avenir est dans le passé.” He murmured the phrase, foreign to me, his smoky-gray eyes a mixture of fear and desperate hope.

I’d never heard the phrase before, and after all these years of Academy indoctrination there couldn’t be a Historian mantra that escaped even my sometimes sporadic attention. My brain stem tat quickly filtered the French into English, and a frown snuck onto my lips. “The future lies in the past? What the hell is that, some kind of riddle? Why
are you acting so crazy?”

Disappointment crowded the other emotions from his face, and in that moment, he appeared to be the lost, scared little boy I’d met when we all arrived at the Academy seven years ago. Then it fled, making room for his anger, and I shrank back against the far wall as he took a step toward me. He seemed bigger, all of a sudden, filling up the space and making me acutely aware of the fact that I had nowhere to run.

A tray slid out, waiting to collect clothing and blood samples, but neither of us had anything to discard. I reached out and let it prick my finger, and Oz did the same.

“What’s ‘the future lies in the past?’
Why did you say that?”

“Never mind. Forget it. Why were you in Egypt? Did you go to see him?”

“I’m not talking about this with you,” I deadpanned, crossing my arms over my chest to thwart the chill from the room. At least, I told myself it was the chill from the room and not from Oz, whose cold demeanor sent panic signals zapping from my brain to my limbs.

“Caesarion.” He clenched his fingers into fists and shook them loose, over and over again, but his tone softened. “Do you seriously think you’re the first Historian tempted to observe their True Companion?”

“So what if I did want to see him? What are you going to do about it?”
“Kaia. If you knew what … If I could tell you the things I knew about your brother …” Oz dragged a hand through his too-long black hair, making pieces of it stand up in odd places. Frustration oozed from his pores, and every word that fell from his mouth confused me more.

“Oz.” I stepped toward him, swallowing the lingering fear and reaching for his hand. Remembering I knew him, that he wouldn’t hurt me.

He jerked away when I touched him, his stormy eyes wide in surprise. “Don’t.”

“What is going on with you?”

“What’s going on with me? You’re
the one taking unauthorized, unsupervised travels with a stolen cuff to see a boy you were never supposed to meet.”

“How could we never be supposed to meet if we’re meant for each other? What sense does that make?” I didn’t mean to yell, or to start crying, but that didn’t stop both from happening.

Most boys fumbled when girls cried in their presence, or at least tried to offer awkward comfort, but Oz only stared. The unreadable expression on his face betrayed nothing of his feelings. “It doesn’t have to make sense. You’re abusing your Historian privileges and you know it.”

His accusation, so similar to
Caesarion’s, hit me like a slap in the face. It made me cry harder because it was true. And he didn’t even know the whole of my transgressions. That not only had I traveled alone to observe Caesarion, but had talked to him. Held him, kissed him, told him the truth about us. About me. Whether or not the Elders had let us all down by hiding something, I had let everyone down, too. Yet, even now, barely able to breathe from under the guilt, I couldn’t regret it.

Wouldn’t.

“It’s not like you’ve been Mister walk the line, Oz. You’ve been traveling alone, too. We both have our secrets, and yours are worse.”

“I’d rethink that if I were you.”
“You know why I’m traveling. I’ll even tell you where I got the cuff—I didn’t steal it, I found it in Jonah’s room. He left it.” Oz’s lack of emotional reaction clenched my own fists in response, and swept confusion into my tangled web of thoughts. He wasn’t scared of anything I knew, and that scared me. “Why are you traveling?”

When he didn’t respond, I pushed harder, hoping he would confide in me. “I know you’ve been tracing the development of guns, starting in ancient China.”

The air in the room changed, electrified, and my fear from a moment ago returned. It slammed into me, wet my palms with a slick, cold sweat, but I
didn’t move. It grew so thick that it couldn’t only be mine—there was too much.

“Stop. Checking. Up. On. Me.” Oz enunciated each word through clenched teeth, fury and something else, something almost like the terror slicing through me, clouded his gaze behind his thick, black spectacles.

“Or what?” I whispered.

“Or I will report what I know about your actions to Zeke and the other Elders. You will face a sanction more serious than you’re prepared for, and that’s if you’re lucky.” He stepped toward me, his hand reaching out and circling my wrist, clamping down so hard I bit my lip to stop from crying out.
“You have no idea what you’re dealing with, Kaia.”

The dread in my mouth tasted horrible. “Tell me.”

He ignored my pleading, more pronounced aloud than it had been in my mind. “You can’t break these rules. They’re in place for a reason, and it’s to ensure that this society we’ve worked so hard to form stays intact.”

The phrase *stays intact* brought Caesarion’s kind face to my mind and calm swished through me. It also reminded me of the tactics and maneuverings that colored the ancient world, and I recognized that Oz and I were in a negotiation of sorts—and that he did not hold the only hand.
“What makes you so high and mighty? You stand there and tell me that I’m such a terrible apprentice for not following the rules, but you’re doing the exact same thing!”

“I have permission and you know it.” He smirked, a mean expression hardening his gaze. This wasn’t Oz. Oz was shy and quiet and awkward and yeah, sometimes haughty, but mean? He never had been. “You know, I’ve been warned by my father not to fall for your supposed advances.”

Mortification heated my blood, but denying it was dumb. “I let them believe what they wanted.”

“So your real secret would not be found out.”
“You know my real secret, Oz, and you’ve always loved reminding all of us how much better and smarter you are. Yet you’re here threatening me instead of telling your father what you know. Why?”

“Because we’ve known each other most of our lives. I consider you a friend. Our history counts for something to me even if it doesn’t to you. And I’m warning you—I’m begging you—you’ve got to stop.” He dropped my wrist, staring a little at the red welts he’d left behind as though someone else had made them, blood draining from his face. “I’m trying to help you.”

The decontamination doors released at that moment, the hiss of the air lock
popping my eardrums. I shoved past him and into the hallway, struggling to breathe. My entire body shook from head to toe, as though there hadn’t been enough oxygen in the pod. My wrist burned from his tight grip and I gulped air, determined not to cry in the halls. Determined not to run away from him.

The escape brought my anger back on a swift and powerful wave of indignation. “Newsflash. I didn’t ask for your help, Oz, and I don’t want it. You say we’re friends and that means something but you can’t even tell me what’s going on. So you know what? Turn me in or don’t, but don’t act like you’re being a friend of any sort.”

I didn’t wait for a reply, stomping off
toward my dorm. The shakes wouldn’t be left behind as easily as Oz, though, and our confrontation added to my fear and confusion over everything that had happened these past several days.

The Elders were lying. Oz had a secret, and it had changed him. Just now, the first boy I’d kissed, who’d said exactly two words the entire first year at the Academy, had hurt me. Threatened me.

He was wrong about one thing—those seven years counted for something for me, too. It meant that, even without realizing it, I heard what he hadn’t said.

Oz was scared.

And if a guy whose father sat as an Elder, who had traveled alone with
supposed permission and altered the past as though he knew the outcomes had a reason to be afraid, I had to assume I did, too.

*

*
I found Analeigh in our room, thanking the stars she was alone. I didn’t think I could stand to see Sarah’s face right now, not after my confrontation with her True moments ago.

My best friend leaped up from her bed, fear and worry drawing her features together in a pinch. “Kaia! I’ve been texting. Where have you been? What happened to you?”

I crashed into her, wrapping my arms around her back and letting loose the sobs that had been building since the good-bye with Caesarion on the beach.

“Whoa. It’s okay. The Elders let you go; it must not be too serious.” She sank onto her blue comforter and took me with her, smoothing my hair like my
mother would have.

My uncharacteristic display of emotion probably freaked her out, but I was pretty freaked out, too. Everything had turned into such a mess in the blink of an eye. When my sobs finally subsided into hiccups I sat up, wiping my sore eyes and feeling dumb.

“Sorry. It’s been a crazy day.”

“Start with what happened when the Elders pulled you out of Reflection, and tell me everything.” Analeigh pinned me with her toughest gaze, the concern in her eyes pushing my guilt to new levels. “Everything, Kaia.”

The secrets were too many to keep now. They reached too far, impacted too many other people. They churned inside
me until they threatened to hurl out in actual vomit instead of words. The Elders, and Oz, and my brother, had been keeping everyone’s eyes closed to some greater truth, but we were all Historians and we deserved to know.

“Okay. First of all, the Elders pulled me out of Reflection because I accessed a trail of files related to weapons development. They thought Jonah had asked me to help him figure out how to make new ones. Truman assumed I’d been snooping into the files Oz has been reflecting on the past couple of days to, like, stalk him or something.”

She sucked in a breath. “It doesn’t surprise me that militant whack job keeps close tabs on Oz’s bio data, but I
had no idea certain search parameters were alarmed.”

“Neither did I. They said any file related to the primary reasons for the fall of society on Earth Before are flagged. Weapons, segregation, overpopulation, organized religion, class distinction.” I rattled off the big five, then remembered the strange tone of Minnie’s reflection, and relayed that, too.

“Exile? That’s what it said? Not evacuation or relocation?” Her manicured eyebrows drew together and she worried her bottom lip between her teeth. “Strange. Like they thought they could fix it. Return.”

“I thought so, too.” I paused. “And Oz hasn’t just been researching the
development of weapons. He’s been going out on observations alone, and he changed a trajectory during at least one of them. I know because I saw him, and followed up in the Archives.”

“You saw him? You followed him to the past?”

“Yes.”

She frowned. “But he can’t … we can’t do that. Change things.”

“I think we both know we can. We’ve just been told that we shouldn’t.”

Analeigh’s skin turned green and sweaty. She leaned back against the wall, breathing deep. “We have to turn him in.”

“They know he’s traveling. At least,
Truman does. We need to find out if the Elders know he’s altering things before we can decide what to do.”

I didn’t mention we also couldn’t do anything because then I would be caught, too. That I was just as bad as Oz—maybe worse, because I believed he had known the consequences of his interference.

“How did you get out of the interrogation? Why did you tell them you were reading those things and following Oz’s research?”

My face flamed at the memory, then got even hotter remembering that Oz knew what had been said. “Well, since Truman assumed I have some kind of stupid crush on Oz, it seemed like the
best idea at the time to let him believe it. I couldn’t think of anything else.”

She snorted, the kind that made the corners of my mouth twitch against my best efforts, and the tension that threatened to strangle us both eased the tiniest fraction.

“Shut up, Analeigh. It’s not funny.”

“It’s hilarious. You and Oz Truman? Can you even imagine such a thing? You’d be bored out of your mind in less than an hour, and he’d go stark raving mad from having to corral you twenty-four seven.”

“Exactly. Hilarious.” The observations hit a little too close to home, given the exchange between us in the decontamination chamber. As though
those five minutes had been a microcosm of our imaginary relationship.

It didn’t make a lot of sense, now that I thought about it, that Elder Truman would think for a moment that his son and I could have been a good match. Then again, he assumed I had a wayward crush, not that anything more substantial or two-sided was going on.

And it wasn’t. At least, not in the way he assumed.

I took another deep breath, knowing this second confession would be harder, because it put me under the judgment microscope, not someone else. Analeigh might make fun of Oz for acting like he had a stick up his ass all the time, but she followed the rules, too. Best to dive
right in, like jumping in one of the ice-
cold pools on Persepolis.

“T’ve been using Jonah’s cuff to
observe Caesarion.”

“Kaia,” Analeigh gasped, her face
drained of color and her eyes giant
round disks. “How many times …”

I waited for more, but she appeared
to be at a loss for words. That said more
than anything else, really, and since I’d
shocked her into silence with that
revelation, I chose to keep quiet on the
rest of my transgressions, at least for the
moment. “There’s more.”

“Oh, stars. I can’t take more.”

“When I got back from Egypt, Oz was
waiting for me outside the air lock. He
shoved me back inside and said he knew where I’d been and why I’d gone. Told me I had to stop or bad things would happen. It was scary. For Oz.”

That tidbit hung in the air between us, thick and dreadful. I held out my wrist and she took in the red welts ringing the skin below my tat. Her green gaze burned hot with anger behind her glasses. “He hurt you? What a hypocrite! He can’t say anything because you know he’s been traveling alone, too.”

“That’s what I thought, and I told him as much, but he said there are things I don’t understand. And like I said, it was pretty clear from my session with the Elders today that Truman knows he’s traveling. He claims it’s for next year’s
“All these years, everything about Oz has seemed so straightforward and boring. It’s weird even thinking about him putting us all in danger this way.”

“I know. And I don’t care what Truman says, there’s more to what’s going on than a simple application. You didn’t see his face. Oz is terrified—for me, for him, maybe for everyone, I don’t know. But when he saw Jonah’s cuff he said something in French.”

“What?”

“L’avenir est dans le passé,” I repeated in passable French. I was one of the few who struggled more with Romance languages than German-rooted dialects. It was annoying.
“The future lies in the past?”

“That’s what he said, and when I asked him what the hell he meant, he seemed crushed that I didn’t know. It sounds like some sort of Historian motto, except it isn’t. Right?”

She shook her head, blond waves falling around her shoulders. “No. And I can’t imagine it would be. If anything, the future sprouts from the society they’ve built in the System. Our evacuation from Earth Before is a natural break in the pattern, we move forward from there. The past informs our decisions, how we’re set up and governed, but I don’t see how it could be our future.”

“I know.” I paused, gauging her
reaction and whether it had been smart to share, but I needed someone here who understood the Historians and what we stood for. I needed Analeigh, the brains of our friendship. Without her I was lost, not only as to what to do next, but how to get out of this quagmire created by my own rule-flaunting ways.

I was starting to think that my favorite mantra, that you’re only in trouble if you get caught, might not hold water when it came to rearranging the past.

We were silent for a long time, the gears in my mind working so hard I could almost hear them. Analeigh chewed her lip almost raw but said nothing.

“I think that phrase is some kind of
secret saying, and when Oz saw I had a cuff he wondered if I was part of whatever it is, too.”

“Part of what, Kaia?”

“That’s what we have to find out.”
“Shouldn’t we say something to Sarah?” Analeigh asked while the two of us brushed our teeth before bed.

I watched her in the mirror, her wavy hair piled atop her head, pale legs sticking out from under her shorts, glasses spattered with toothpaste. We’d both changed into our standard-issue pajamas—striped linen shorts and long-sleeved tops. Hers were light blue, mine were pale purple. The familiarity of the routine had lulled me so that the question startled me.

“Sarah?” I asked, trying to focus.

She looked at me as though I’d gone as mad as Alice’s hatter. “You know, our
roommate? The girl betrothed to the new crazy version of Oz who accosted you, tossed you into a decontamination chamber, and proceeded to threaten you?”

I snorted so hard at her goofy, movie-dialogue phrasing that toothpaste shot up my nose. It burned so badly my eyes watered. “What would we tell her? That her boyfriend is running around the past knocking over pretty women and possibly trying to kill us all in the process?”

A mischievous twinkle lit her eyes. “It’s better than telling her Elder Truman thinks you have a thing for Oz.”

“Shut up. We’re definitely not telling her that. Or speaking of it ever again.” I
banged my toothbrush on the edge of the sink and rinsed out my mouth with disinfectant, then rubbed enamel strengthen and whitening goo across every tooth's surface. When I raised my head to check the mirror one last time, my dark eyes met Analeigh's light ones, and the comfortable mirth wriggled from the room.

Weight hung between us, too heavy for two girls who had never been prepared to question their Elders. Never imagined a mystery beyond a really tough reflection, or that our friends—Sarah and Oz—might be in real trouble.

This situation shook our foundations, our beliefs, our ability to trust pretty much blindly that the fate of humanity
rested safe in the hands of our Elders. If Zeke, or Truman, or even Oz was involved in something secret that threatened the System, then Analeigh and I—and probably Jonah—could be the only ones who knew.

“What do we do?” Analeigh whispered. She sounded more like the little girl who had raced me around my mother’s greenhouse until we both collapsed, covered in real dirt, than the confident friend she’d grown into these past years.

“First we have to figure out what’s going on. Then we can figure out what to do.”

The suite’s front door banged open, followed by the sound of a bag hitting
the floor and weight flopping onto a couch.

“Hey, guys,” Sarah said, her voice thin and tired.

“Has she been in Reflection all night?” I whispered.

Analeigh nodded, her eyes worried. “She’s behind. She’s so good at the rest of it, but she can’t see the connections very well sometimes.”

“Oz should be helping her, not the other way around.” Defensive anger rose again with the memory of how he spoke to me, and now how he was treating my friend, who he was supposed to love more than anyone. “We’re not telling Sarah anything. Not until we have proof.”
Analeigh bit her lip. “What if we don’t want to know, Kaia? What if we can’t do anything about it, or it’s worse than we thought? We can’t leave the Academy.”

We couldn’t “un-know” anything. We couldn’t go back. Like Caesarion reminded me earlier tonight, my job was to look forward, to put the people of Genesis first.

“It doesn’t matter whether we want to, Analeigh. It’s our obligation as Historians. They give us the privilege of travel and in return, we protect the future from the mistakes of the past. Maybe it means we protect the past from Oz, too. Or his father.” Guilt tore at my throat, trying to push the remainder of my
confession out to Analeigh, that I had already broken that trust a million times in the past two weeks.

That as big the risk now that Oz knew about my cuff and where I was going, I knew I would do it again. I needed the comfort of Caesarion’s presence. I wanted to hear the story of Osiris and Isis, to try to believe the way my True did that we would meet again, in the blink of a god’s eye.

Sarah’s head appeared in between ours in the mirror, the whites of her tired eyes split by red veins, her smile thin. “What are you two whispering about?”

“Nothing. Kaia has a new crush,” Analeigh blurted.

For shit’s sake. Analeigh’s panicked
gaze met mine. That girl could not lie. If she had a secret, she babbled, and things like this tumbled out of her unbidden.

Sarah turned to me, hands on her hips. “Spill it, Kaia.”

“It’s ... um. Well ... I.” My mind stumbled, thick with the plotting, the secrets trying to drown me, the exhaustion from the piles of stress that had accumulated over the past couple of hours. Days. Finally I blurted the first name that came to mind that wasn’t Oz. “Evan.”

“Evan Pritchard?!” Sarah nearly shrieked.

I slapped a hand over her mouth a little harder than necessary, panic boiling in my veins. “Shhhh. These walls
are like paper and you know it.”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, rubbing her cheeks. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “But Even Pritchard? You and every other girl on Sanchi.”

“Or every girl that’s ever seen him,” Analeigh added drily.

I shot her a look. She’d started this whole thing with her guilt-fueled blabbermouth. Analeigh shouldn’t be allowed to speak at all when she was keeping a secret.

Evan Pritchard was in his last year as an apprentice. He stood at least six foot five with a muscled chest as wide as Analeigh and I put together and a chiseled face topped by shaggy blond hair. Bright green eyes completed the
pretty picture, which resembled a traditional California surfer boy.

If Evan had any idea I was alive at all, it had to be a vague one. And probably because of my brother. I’d admitted having a schoolgirl crush on two different boys today, and having everyone and their mother think I was prone to such things started to irk me. Both were lies, but they also felt like the tiniest of betrayals to the boy I did love, who waited more than three thousand years in the past to see me once more before he died.

“Are you going to ask him to the party?” Sarah teased around a mouthful of toothpaste.

“Who?” The thoughts in my head had
pulled me into a different world.

“Your new crush, dummy.”

“Are you off your nut?” I countered. “Ask Evan Pritchard to his own certification party, the night before to boot? Yes, I think that sounds like a fine idea.”

My friends dissolved into giggles, probably at the thought of my even speaking to Evan, never mind asking him to spend the evening with me. I ignored them and went into my bedroom, grabbing my personal tablet comp from my desk on the way past and snuggling under the covers.

The mention of the party tomorrow reminded me that I hadn’t put together an outfit. The contents of the wardrobe
closets were loaded into the central database, and even though we weren’t allowed to research for observations without being in the pods, dressing ourselves for events by flipping through virtual options was allowed.

Our dormitory closets and drawers were filled with little other than our black, skin-molded suits, undergarments, and the standard issue pj’s. We each had a few hand-me-downs, brought from home, but events that allowed for actual clothing got all the girls in a stir. I had more on my mind than picking out a dress for the certification party, but it had to be done. Fitting in, going unnoticed … those had become desirable goals since I found that cuff.
Sarah plopped on my bed, smashing my legs. I scowled at her but relented, shifting so there was room for her and Analeigh, who joined us a moment later. Our pajamas and glasses might match, except for the colors, but the three of us were opposites in so many ways. The two of them were pretty blondes with light eyes, though Sarah’s hair fell straight to her chin while Analeigh’s tumbled in waves almost to her waist. Both a contrast to my olive skin, chestnut hair, and matching eyes.

“What are you wearing tomorrow night?” Sarah asked, her eyes lit with interest.

“I was trying to figure it out.” I fanned through eras of clothing, my mind
torn between Caesarion and the mystery with Oz, my heart aching for what Sarah might face with a lifetime of his new inclination to do what he pleased.

She took the personal comp from my hands, and then she and Analeigh bent over it, fighting over whose finger took control of finding me an outfit.

“That one,” Analeigh said, stabbing at something I couldn’t see.

“No, she’ll look like that old mouse.”

“What old mouse?”

“The one from Disney World’s girlfriend.”

“Minnie Mouse?”

“I’m with Sarah,” I interrupted, recalling the mouse in question. “No
polka dots.”

“It would be a sexy Minnie Mouse.” Analeigh pouted. “Maybe Evan likes polka dots.”

If looks could kill, my best friend would have been dead and buried.

“I think it’s the right style, Analeigh. Just not red polka dots. The 1950s housewife totally fits Kaia’s personality.”

“Except for the ‘doing what she’s told’ part.”

“Not actually being a housewife, ew.” Sarah rolled her eyes. “Just the pretty dresses that show off those legs that make us both totally jealous.”

I snuggled back into my pillows,
tucking my cold toes under Analeigh’s thigh, and let my friends take over dressing me for tomorrow’s party. Their chatter and discussion faded into the background as my thoughts returned to the bathroom, to the lingering feeling of betrayal all of my fake crushes ignited in my heart.

Loving another couldn’t be a betrayal to Caesarion. He was dead and gone, turned to dust long ago, and unless his beliefs held true, we would never meet again after his death, or after mine. My life was now, and in the years to come; I couldn’t look on new relationships as somehow tarnishing the perfect connection between Trues. No one else thought that way. People in Genesis
enjoyed love, great love, with people they chose. As much as I cared for Caesarion, as much as I loved being with him and hated the idea of losing it, I hated to think I’d never be happy again.

I had adored every moment of being with my True, but the push and pull of my feelings tied my insides into a huge knot of confusion. As though the Kaia that took the risk of traveling back to Egypt wasn’t the Kaia sitting here now, listening to her friends plan for a party. We were separated by something distinct. Knowledge, maybe. Or simply time.

Whatever it was, I had to find a way to let that earlier, naive version of myself go.
To let Caesarion go.
Chapter Twenty

Something was coming.

I felt it, like electricity in the air before a storm on Earth Before. The promise that the sky would soon darken and change, that rain would lash the earth, trees would bend in the wind, and anyone with good sense would take cover indoors. I had been accused of many things these past several days, but possessing good sense had not been brought up once, so of course, I chose to ignore it. My path wasn’t changing, not right away—I promised Caesarion I would return once more to ancient Egypt and I would. As soon as I got this ridiculous certification party out of the
way.

There were three gathering rooms at the Academy. Table comps and uncomfortable desks in metal study carrels filled one, what passed for homey furniture around here and walls lined with holo-sets for watching old television shows and movies decorated another—although most Historians considered doing so for pure entertainment and not research wasteful and idle. We lived in observation and reflection mode pretty much all the time. Every piece of history, even if it were originally meant only to entertain, held details that helped us better understand our forebearers. Our duty was to soak it in and spit it out, each in our unique way,
not laugh at it.

The third room, where we crowded for the certification party, served as a group gathering area. Study groups or book clubs used it for discussions, and the younger classes sometimes used it for practice reflections before they were given access to the Archive database.

Tonight, the chairs and round tables had been removed. A long, rectangular table with a bowl of lemonade at one end and sherbet punch at the other sat off to the right side. Plates of vegetables and fruits, along with desserts that looked good but tasted like cardboard, rounded out the display.

I’d been running late, mostly due to my nervous dawdling, so Sarah and
Analeigh had gone ahead. Sarah had to meet Oz and his father for the requisite couple photographs, since they were both in actual clothes instead of uniforms, and Analeigh left when I’d insisted she stop hovering.

My hands shook as I smoothed the thick, dark purple material of my dress. It was sleeveless, the scoop neckline landing right below my collarbone, the hem brushing the skin about two inches above my knees. Sarah had tied a dark gray, silky scarf around the high waist that made the skirt flare, showing off my legs the way she’d promised, and the silver heels already killed my feet.

Sarah looked adorable in her early nineteenth-century-inspired empire-
waist gown. The silky, cream-colored material flowed off all of her curves, the gorgeous blue ribbon under her boobs matched her eyes, and the floor-length skirt hid her calves, which she hated.

I had to admit Oz looked handsome in his standard black tuxedo, for a potentially dangerous nutball. His gray eyes, always his best feature, trained on his True as she laughed with Levi. He must have styled his hair with some kind of product that pushed his unruly thick chunks into a loose semblance of order, and the cut of the suit accentuated his broad chest and shoulders. The memory of his strong hands squeezing my arms, shoving me into the air lock, returned the churning guilt and anxiety to my stomach.
I glanced down at the fading red mark on my wrist, frowning.

“Hey.” Analeigh sidled up and handed me a cup of sherbet punch.

I took it and smiled, tipping the cold drink against my lips. It helped cool the heat creeping up my neck from the paranoia that wouldn’t quite dissipate. “Thanks.”

My best friend went all out, donning the same pretty peach ruffles and layers of petticoats she’d worn on our excursion to the Sun King’s court. With her hair a mass of fat curls pinned off her neck, breasts shoved up toward her chin, and the dress’s color setting off the natural china-doll pink of her skin, Analeigh was easily the prettiest girl in
the room.

“I’m sorry about the whole Evan thing. It just came out,” she whispered in my mind.

“It’s okay.”

We watched the room, comfortable in our roles as observers. Tonight belonged to the oldest apprentice class, who would join the ranks of full Historians in a few weeks. They took turns getting fitted for their new cloaks, all smiles and laughter. Evan Pritchard looked as gorgeous as ever, but his blond-haired perfection couldn’t hold a candle to the passion in Caesarion’s dusky blue eyes under the Egyptian moonlight.

The younger kids laughed at the edges of the dance floor as a disk comp flipped
through decades of music, never playing songs from the same year twice. A few third- and fourth-year apprentices moved awkwardly on the floor—dancing wasn’t exactly common outside of weddings and the occasional party—but a few couples in the older classes gave it a good shot.

Sarah and Oz wandered over a few minutes later. She grinned, but he looked as though he had leeches attached to his ass, which may or may not have had anything to do with our confrontation yesterday. Hard to say.

“Hey, guys! Are you having fun?” A thin sheen of perspiration wet her forehead, and her pale, freckled skin glowed. They’d been bopping around the
floor a few minutes ago.

“Yep. There’s sherbet punch and eye candy. What more do I need in life?” I joked, nodding in Evan’s direction. It sounded flat to my ears but Sarah didn’t seem to notice.

I chanced a glance at Oz and found him staring back, intensity smoldering in his smoky eyes. Analeigh stepped on my toe before Sarah caught me staring and got the wrong idea; Oz apparently hadn’t considered that because his gaze didn’t leave my face.

A ballad from the decade prior to the abandonment of Earth Before spewed from the speakers embedded in the walls and floor, and Sarah nudged her boyfriend. “Sherbet can’t be the
highlight of your night. Go dance with Oz. My feet are sore from being stepped on.”

“Oh. No, really, that’s okay.”

Oz cut off my protest, his smile tight. “Evan loves dancing and he’s quite skilled. Maybe you should practice first.”

Heat flooded my face and I choked on my punch. Sarah had the good sense to look apologetic in response to my glare. Clearly she had blabbed to Oz about my supposed crush. Embarrassing, but the knowing set of his jaw told me he didn’t buy it. He’d heard me talk about Caesarion. Watched me cry over the unfairness of it all.

Now *that* was mortifying.
I didn’t have any desire to be alone with Oz, or to let him touch me again, but there wasn’t a way to say no without drawing attention. Protesting could make things look more suspicious. The Elders were here, too, and maybe the dance would reassure Truman and Zeke they were right about my focused searches being related to feelings for Oz.

I slid my fingers into his, trying not to frown too hard. His hand was warmer and gentler than it had been yesterday as he led me to the dancing area. At least he couldn’t threaten or manhandle me again in the middle of all these people.

In the center of five or six other couples, Oz stopped and turned, then settled a hand lightly on my waist, as
though he expected me to swat it away. When I didn’t, he took my right hand loosely in his left, I set a palm against his solid chest, and we moved.

“I’m sorry for yesterday. I shouldn’t have lost my cool with you, Kaia,” he murmured.

His eyes held honest regret, with perhaps even a tinge of nausea over the whole thing, and holding grudges had never really been my thing. It took too much energy, not to mention I’d always been a big fan of the old adage about keeping enemies as close as friends. “It’s fine. Thank you.”

Oz lowered his voice to a whisper. “It doesn’t change the fact that you’ve got to stop seeing him. I don’t want to
report your use of Jonah’s cuff—"

“Then don’t,” I hissed back.

He stepped on my already pinched toe, and I winced.

“Sorry.” Oz’s cheeks flushed red, but he quickly shook off his embarrassment at his truly horrendous dancing. “Like I said, I don’t want to turn you in but I will if it comes to that, in order to keep you safe. You have to trust me.”

Irritation spiked my blood, speeding my pulse until it throbbed in my forehead. I started to pull away before I caught Elder Truman’s eye over his son’s shoulder, and his cold, narrowed gaze kept me in place. I forced my eyes back to Oz’s and gritted my teeth, squeezing my fingers tighter around his.
“People keep saying that. I don’t want to be safe, I want to know. Being kept in the dark pisses me off.”

His fingers gripped my waist with more force, and he swallowed hard. His gaze softened until it almost pleaded. For a brief moment, the quiet, nonconfrontational Oz reappeared, painting the changes in him over the past couple of weeks in a harsher light. “I know you as well as anyone, Kaia, and your curiosity isn’t a well-kept secret. As your friend, I’m asking you to leave this alone.”

When I didn’t answer, he ducked his face until I couldn’t avoid his gaze. “I know what you’re thinking. But you can’t save him.”
My heart stopped. The fingers on my free hand went to the necklace hanging against my chest, some kind of tick, or tell, though of what I couldn’t be sure. I swallowed two times, and then again, struggling to find a response that didn’t sound defensive or like a lie. Nothing emerged, and the song ended. Oz turned me loose as though he’d been burned.

“Thank you for the dance.” He left me standing there, unable to make my brain cooperate as far as words.

Determination simmered to a boil, because although his ability to read my desires unnerved me, it didn’t change the annoying fact that both he and Jonah assumed they knew what was best for me. “Whatever you’re mixed up in, Oz,
I’m going to find out what it is. I double dog dare you to stop me,” I muttered under my breath.

*
Oz and Sarah steered clear of me for the rest of the night, mostly dancing on their own, sometimes hanging around with some of Oz’s older friends from his reflection-intensive study group. Analeigh had gone to the bathroom when I noticed the congregation of Elders had split up. Some of the overseers moved around the room, speaking to their apprentices, congratulating the older kids getting ready to join their ranks, and others had excused themselves. But four were huddled together and headed for the rear door, three of whom had questioned me yesterday. Quiet warnings that had blipped on my radar since talking with Jonah escalated into pealing bells.
Zeke’s hunched figure shuffled toward the exit. Maude stood at his elbow, supporting him lightly. Minnie and Truman followed the head Elder’s subtle nod, and a moment later, Oz slipped out behind them. Without thinking too hard about the consequences, I waited a minute and then followed.

The hallway loomed, empty and lit by energy-efficient lightbulbs. One flickered overhead, in need of a tightening or a change, and cast an eerie pall over the scene as I pulled off my heels. I didn’t know what I was doing, only that if something secretive was happening at the Academy, like Jonah said, I’d bet my one and only set of
pretty teeth that Oz knew what it was. If he was sneaking off to some kind of private Elder meeting about the past being the future or whatever nonsense he’d spouted earlier, I wanted to hear it, too.

The hallway went two directions. One led toward the rest of the common areas, the dormitories, and the mess hall, the other toward the Archives, Research facilities, and the offices. That was the direction I chose.

Voices echoed back at me after only a minute—for once the stark metal and glass design of all the buildings on Sanchi offered something other than a constant chill. I stopped at the next branch in the hallway, unwilling to turn
the corner until the voices moved farther away. They definitely headed in the direction of the Archives, which didn’t make much sense. All of the Elders had table comps in their personal offices, along with smaller versions of the holo-walls. They weren’t as elaborate as the ones in the Archives—more like a chart as opposed to a map, and there were no running scenes being observed, but they were functional.

As I took a step forward, intent on continuing to snoop until they arrived at a destination and settled in for whatever discussion they were about to have, a warm hand clamped down over my mouth.
Chapter Twenty-One

I struggled, elbowing my captor in the gut hard enough to knock the wind out of him and loosen his hold, then whirled around to find Oz rubbing his stomach.

“Are you following me?” I hissed, trying to remember that the sound-bouncing hallways worked both ways and the Elders hadn’t gone far.

“I’m pretty sure you were following me.”

“And you were following the Elders. Don’t let me stop you.” I turned and continued my trek, silent in my bare feet, but the pant of his breathing told me he followed. I ignored him, intent on my mission. Hoping he’d get annoyed and
give up.

A few more turns led me past the Archives but still hadn’t brought me to the Elders. They had moved beyond the offices, into a place that I had always been told was reserved for storage of extra wardrobes and comps. Outside a final doorway, their voices became clear.

Oz’s hand pressed against the small of my back. His gray eyes darkened with worry as they flicked between the hushed tones filtering into the hallway and me. He jerked his head back the way we came, expression turning from pleading to frantic and finally to anger as I shook my head repeatedly, a finger pressed against my lips.
He gave up, throwing his hands in the air, and I turned my attention to the conversation he didn’t want me to overhear. One of the Gatlings spoke—their voices were indistinguishable even when they weren’t on the other side of a closed door, so I had no idea which one.

“… assignments for this week?”

There were a few beeps and shuffling noises, like the sound table comps made as they raced through a search request. I had no idea there were more research labs back here.

“Maude, you and Minnie try to figure out how to influence Cecil Beaton,” Zeke’s unmistakable voice rasped. “I’ll continue to scrub the references we decided on, and David has an
assignment already.”

David Truman cleared his throat.
“And Oz?”

Before I could hear the answer, footsteps approached us from behind. Oz’s hand tightened on my wrist, whipping me around to face him, and before I could protest he’d shoved open the door to the room across the hall and dragged me inside.

Then his lips were on mine, his hands shoving me against the wall as he kissed me hard.

My instincts begged me to scratch at his eyes, punch him in the nose, and scream bloody murder, but as the door across the hall flew open and twin exclamations of surprise rang out, I
understood he was trying to give us some cover.

I felt his surprise as I relaxed and kissed him back, softening my lips against his to play my part. His arms tightened around me, pulling our bodies flush together.

We broke apart at the sound of a cleared throat. Dizziness tipped me off balance—shocked from being caught, disoriented from being kissed by Oz, of all people, and a little bit stunned by how quickly my life was spinning out of control.

Truman and Booth stood in the doorway, eyebrows raised.

My face heated with confusion and embarrassment, and for his part, Oz
looked properly flushed and ashamed. To an outside eye, the two of us looked exactly like a couple of teenagers who’d been caught making out in an off-limits area, not people who spent their days threatening one another and the last ten minutes stalking the Elders in charge of their futures.

“What are the two of you doing here?” Booth demanded. His lanky, frail frame filled the doorway, and with his arms crossed, he was imposing enough to make me shrink closer to Oz.

I don’t know what instinct made him snake an arm around my back in support, but at the moment, it steadied me. It was even better when he spoke first.

“Do we really need to answer that?
Because I’m pretty sure you just got an eyeful of the answer.”

Oh, stars, did he really just say that like a cocky asshole who’d gotten handsy in the back of a closet at a party? He really was well and good off his freaking nut.

Booth didn’t look amused by the smarmy answer. The lines of his face appeared stern even when he meant to be kind, and his dark eyes studied us with more disappointment than anything.

Before he could respond, Truman reached out and grabbed a fistful of his son’s shirt, dragging him away from me. “I expect these sort of infractions from Kaia, but not from you. We’ve all taken a great risk, believing that you’re ready,
based on how responsible you’ve always been. This is unacceptable. You have a True Companion. This girl is not worth losing everything.” Truman let go of Oz’s shirt, shoving him a little harder than necessary so that he banged into me.

I reached out to steady him, unsure whether I was playing the part of the insulted lover or simply being nice. “Hey. I’m standing right here. If you’re going to talk bad about me at least wait until you’re alone.”

“Sarah Beckwith is your friend, Kaia. Your roommate. What are you thinking?” Booth asked, his voice soft, filled with the concern that had been missing from Truman’s.

The question twisted my stomach,
shame and guilt churning the sherbet punch into a soup of nausea. I hadn’t wanted to kiss Oz, but Booth didn’t know that. And Sarah wouldn’t, either, if she found out. She might not even believe me. I suddenly regretted not confiding everything to her and Analeigh at the same time because the thought of her believing I would ever do any such thing felt like a punch in the chest. Oz and I were … friends, I supposed. Classmates. Now, apparently, conspirators. But would she believe me?

“I don’t know, Elder Booth. I … we got carried away. It won’t happen again.”

“Please return to your dormitory. We’ll decide on your sanction and meet
with you both tomorrow morning.” Truman dismissed me, his cold gaze trained on his son.

My feet refused to move, for some reason concerned about Oz. Only I had been dismissed, and the fury flashing in his father’s gaze almost made me worry for my classmate’s safety.

I didn’t need to feel responsible for Oz getting into hot water, and Truman wouldn’t hurt his own son. I had enough trouble managing my regrets over getting myself in trouble after my questionable decision making these past several days.

Booth stepped to one side of the doorway, beckoning me through with a pointed look, his patience clearly wearing thin. Oz nodded when I looked
back at him, his eyes hiding whatever he was feeling. He reached up to wipe his lips, as though trying to smudge away the memory of mine.

With my emotions a jumbled mess, I hurried back toward my room. Sanctions were public record, so the hope of hiding what had happened tonight didn’t exist, and one question weighed on me heavier than all the others right now.

How in the System was I going to explain this to Sarah?

*
“What were you and Oz doing sneaking around the storage areas, anyway?” Sarah’s tan freckles stood out against her blanched cheeks.

It was impossible to tell if she was angry, hurt, or confused. Probably some mixture of all three, which pretty much described my feelings at the moment, too. Analeigh’s gaze burned the side of my face, saying she wanted me to come clean, to tell Sarah everything. It would hurt her even more to wonder whether or not she was betrothed to … whatever Oz was these days. That confused me as much as anything. I couldn’t pin him down.

In the end, her happiness meant too much for me to break her heart. If Oz
was going to do that, he could damn well do it without my help. My pause must have been too long, because Sarah’s eyes filled with tears a moment later.

“If there’s something going on between the two of you, please tell me. I don’t want to be the dumb girl who’s the last one to know her own True doesn’t want to be with her.”

“Sarah, no. No.” If she weren’t so distraught I would have laughed at the ridiculous suggestion that someone who had the chance to actually be with their true love wouldn’t take it. “I wanted to go and watch holo-files of Caesarion, but I was too embarrassed to tell you guys, so I snuck out during the party. When I heard the Elders coming down
the hall and acting all secretive, I just ... well, you know how I am. I was curious and wanted to snoop.”

“But Oz left the party right when you did. How do you explain that?”

I couldn’t, but Oz could take care of his part of this mess on his own. “You’ll have to ask him. I didn’t see him until I snuck out of the Archive room to follow the Elders. He asked what I was doing, and then tried to talk me out of it—of course.” That coaxed the slightest smile out of her. “And when I ignored him, he followed me. Probably to try to keep me out of trouble, except we both got caught eavesdropping and now we have to go to a sanction in the morning.”

Sarah didn’t say anything for a long
time. I closed my eyes and tried to stop my heart from pounding. Oz’s secret travels and clandestine assignments might be off-limits but I couldn’t lie to her about tonight. Not totally. It would hurt her worse to hear it from other people, and thinking that I tried to cover it up would all but solidify, in her mind, that there was something to cover up.

“He kissed me.”

Sarah’s eyes flew to my face, and Analeigh sucked in a sharp breath. Before either of them could start yelling, I pushed on. “It was only so the Elders wouldn’t think we were snooping, and it didn’t mean anything, I swear.”

Tears rolled down Sarah’s cheeks. Each one burned my heart like acid, pain
I deserved for being in the position to hurt one of my best friends, even if it had been unintentional. “Sarah, I’m sorry. I swear to you, nothing is going on between Oz and me. Wrong place, wrong time. That’s all.”

“So, the sanction is about being caught making out in a restricted area?” she choked out.

“Yes. His dad was one of the Elders who caught us, though, so I’m sure the penalty isn’t going to be terrible. A few weeks of mopping duty, maybe.”

Moppers, those with lower aptitudes that cleaned our Academy, normally changed the sheets, dusted the nooks and crannies, things like that. Taking over their duties for a week or two was a
standard sanction for minor infractions. I’d done it a few times. It was kind of peaceful, actually, and a good way to let my mind wander over upcoming reflections when it wasn’t terribly disgusting. Cleaning the bathrooms in the boys’ dormitories nearly cured me of committing infractions ever again, though.

“That’s really all there is to it? You were snooping, he tried to get you to stop, and then you kissed him to cover up the real reason you were in the restricted storage area?”

I swallowed my protest that he had kissed me. Oz had saved my ass, so it wasn’t fair to throw him in front of the transport ship now. “That’s really all. I
swear, Sarah.”

My insides, from my stomach to my heart to my throat, clenched painfully at the lie. Not because the kiss had knocked loose hidden feelings for Oz, other than more confusion. Because even though I knew Sarah was asking whether he and I were involved in some kind of illicit affair, it felt like a lie to omit the twisted battle of secrets in which Oz and I were mired.

They weren’t our secrets, but that wouldn’t matter when she learned that I had known he’d possibly been betraying us all and had kept it from her. She could hate me forever.

I would hate me forever, if I were in Sarah’s shoes.
Now, she took a deep, shuddering breath, climbed off my bed, and wandered into her own room. A series of squeaks and rustles said she’d burrowed under her covers, finished dealing with me for tonight. Analeigh and I looked at each other, and I read disappointment and sorrow in her reproachful gaze. She knew nothing was going on between Oz and me, but we both knew if I hadn’t snuck out tonight none of this would have happened.

“Should I have told her everything about Oz?”

The throat tats came in handy once in a while, and Sarah’s bedroom left her too far away to overhear our silent whispers, even if she was faking sleep.
Analeigh shrugged, then shook her head. “No. We can’t ruin her trust in him without proof.”

“The Elders definitely know he’s traveling alone, and they were talking about giving him some kind of assignment.”

“We don’t know that what he’s doing is bad. Maybe it’s good,” she replied, her tone doubtful.

I wanted so badly to believe that. That everything and everyone I’d believed in my entire life had humanity’s best interest at heart, that Oz cared about Sarah and wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize our lives or our future in Genesis.

“They’ve always told us it’s wrong,
to mess with history. Deadly. And even Jonah said it’s dangerous.” Even though I trusted Caesarion, the truth of their warnings rang in my bones.

“Right, but Jonah is dangerous, according to the Elders and the Enforcers. It could be that we only want to believe he’s still good because we love him.” Analeigh’s cheeks turned pink as she reached out and squeezed my hand. The quiet reprimand in her expression earlier dissolved, making room for empathy and confusion. “I’m sorry for being harsh earlier.”

“When?”

“I was thinking it and you know it. But you didn’t mean to hurt Sarah, and I doubt Oz did, either. Maybe … do you
think you could talk to him again? Get him to trust you?”

I shook my head, my fingers lifting to my mouth before I realized what was happening. I pinched my lower lip, trying to erase the memory of the kiss. “I don’t know. He’s scared.”

He had frightened me, then pissed me off, and that had taken precedence over any concern for his well-being. Maybe he’d climbed in way over his head. I could try talking to him. For all of his bluster in the air lock yesterday, he’d gone out of his way tonight to help me when he could have easily shoved me into his father’s arms and told Zeke everything he knew about me traveling with Jonah’s cuff. And he wouldn’t have
been wrong to do it.

“What are we going to do, Kaia?”

I squeezed her hand harder, holding on for dear life. I don’t know.”

She pressed her lips into a thin line, worry wrinkling her brow and erasing her instinctive disapproval of my antics as she glanced toward Sarah’s doorway. We were in this together, no matter how hard she wished I had just followed the rules, had never grabbed Jonah’s cuff or found out Oz was up to something.

Another memory from tonight surfaced. “Do you know anything about someone named Cecil Beaton? The Elders were talking about influencing him.”
She paused, chewing her lip, then shook her head. “I know I should. It sounds familiar. We could look it up.”

I put out my hand, stopping her as she went for her personal comp. “No. After earlier, I’m not sure what we can research without arousing more suspicion. Let’s just think about it for a few days, and if we don’t come up with anything, ask Sarah to help us get around the system security.”

“If she forgives you by then.”

For all of her meek exterior, Analeigh was always on my side. Perhaps not where Caesarion was concerned, but as far as things went with the goings-on at the Academy. And Oz.

Since he and I had yet another “date”
first thing in the morning, I might as well give talking to him a shot.

It couldn’t be a worse idea than kissing him.
Chapter Twenty-Two

The next morning dawned far too early, and since Oz and I were summoned to the private sanction before breakfast, sleeping in qualified as a pipe dream.

I rose twenty minutes before the alarm, deciding to take Analeigh’s advice to try again to talk the truth out of Oz. I brushed my teeth and threw my long hair into a crooked bun on top of my head, then slid into my familiar apprentice uniform. An attack of chills led me to grab my warm brown sweater at the last minute.

The halls were empty because all sane people were snoozing the morning away. The door to the room Oz shared
with Levi opened before I’d had the chance to work out what to say, or knock, and Oz stepped into the hallway. I watched him before he saw me standing off to one side, my heart stopping at the sight of a light bruise blooming across his jaw. He stretched his arms above his head, groaning a little as his joints popped and sleep-stiff muscles worked loose. His black hair was wet from a shower and curled around his ears, and the rings around his eyes suggested he hadn’t slept much better than I did.

“Good morning,” I said, loud enough to startle him. Unable to tear my eyes away from his marred face.

“Kaia,” he said, recovering quickly. “I didn’t know you were capable of
It took me a minute to react to the unexpected, good-natured teasing. “Have you been body snatched by someone with a sense of humor? Because I need to talk to the old Oz about why he changed James Puckle’s trajectory.” I watched him carefully for any nonverbal response, but the only one I got was a quick flicker of determination in his eyes.

“There’s no reason for you to worry.”

“Oz. That’s not what you said last night. You said there were things I didn’t understand, that I should leave it alone.” I paused, watching him seriously. “And that bruise on your jaw? That makes me
worry.”

“You don’t need to worry about me.” He glared, but fear lurked behind his eyes. “I did a lot of things last night I shouldn’t have done.”

The reminder of our kiss heated my cheeks and made it easier to ignore the proof that things with his father had gotten out of hand. Easier to stop wondering if it was the first time, knowing it couldn’t be. It was stupid to be so embarrassed about that kiss anyway, to let it affect me. It hadn’t meant anything, and it wasn’t like I’d never been kissed before, and by much more effective lips.

“You shouldn’t have kissed me, but ___”
“I didn’t enjoy it, I promise you.”

I glared at him. It was better than kicking him in his balls, which was my first inclination. “I was going to say, before the new smartass version of Oz came out to play, that I appreciate the bailout. Also, you should know that I told Sarah.”

“You what? Why would you do that?” He turned green, like he might heave all over my sneakers any second.

At least we hadn’t eaten yet.

“She and Analeigh knew something happened. She saw me run after you like some kind of lovesick stalker, and it’s not like the rumor mill isn’t going to be churning with the news of our sanction this morning, anyway. Would you rather
we lied about it like there’s something to hide?”

His face fell and I almost felt sorry for him. Whatever else was going on, Oz clearly cared about Sarah and their relationship. After meeting Caesarion, I understood. The thought of disappointing him or making him hurt, even unintentionally, twisted my heart into a knot. It softened me toward this boy whose secrets were an infuriating source of dangerous intrigue.

“I had to tell her, Oz. I mean, maybe you and I each have something to hide, but we don’t have anything to hide. And that’s what she would have thought.”

He nodded, eyes downcast. “Thank you for telling me.”
We moved down the hall toward the wing that held the Elders’ offices. The space where judicial panels were held sprang off Zeke’s office, the rooms sort of modeled after a courtroom or judges’ chambers on Earth Before.

“I didn’t enjoy kissing you either, you know,” I added, even though it sounded defensive. I just couldn’t let him think I’d been all weak in the knees over his dorky lips.

Oz shot me a wry smile. “Noted.”

“What did they say to you after I left?”

That one question changed the air between us, folded it up and sucked it into a black hole until we might as well be standing on opposite sides of the
Oz’s face shuttered, all of the openness of a few minutes ago wiped away, replaced by a blank slate. He rubbed his jaw, winced.

“Oz. Please. I know something’s going on. We might only be apprentices but we’re still Historians. We protect the past. Ensure the future.”

“Since when do you take duty and oaths seriously, Kaia?”

The stinging insult flung hard into my gut. The hours spent with Caesarion tried to hammer me with guilt, but those impulsive visits didn’t negate my belief in this institution. “I may not always follow the rules, Oz, but I wouldn’t put the future of humanity at stake.”

“But I would?” he challenged.
“I don’t know. Would you?”

Oz shook his head, refusing to look at me. “You don’t know anything.”

“If you’re not putting us in danger, then you must be able to predict trajectories. To know for sure the effects you are creating. How?” I tried hard to keep the desperation from my voice, but the flicker in his gaze said he’d heard it.

“That’s impossible. Your imagination is getting the best of you. Again.”

*He was lying.* Like calls to like, in science and in life. To my untruthful brain, untruths sang loud and clear.

“Jonah said something dangerous is going on at the Academy. I think you know what it is.”
“I thought you hadn’t spoken to him since he left?”

“You’re determined that I’m not special enough to be privy to your secrets, so why should you be privy to mine?”

“You brother is a delinquent and a criminal. If anyone is a danger to the continued validity of the System, it’s him.”

This was going nowhere. He wouldn’t admit he knew anything about a project that was a secret from the apprentices. Jonah had insinuated that the Elders—well, at least Zeke—were behind it. So, how did Oz, not even a full Historian yet, fit in?

In a last-ditch effort, I reached out
and wrapped my fingers around his strong, pale forearm, dragging him to a stop. His skin pricked under my palm before he pulled away as though my touch pained him.

"Oz. If you need help, you can trust me."

His rain-cloud eyes grew heavy, as though holding tight to a storm of confessions that begged to break free. I hoped my own dark brown gaze urged him to give in, said I could be his friend, because it was true. If for no other reason than to help Sarah, I would be Oz’s friend in this—whatever that meant.

I found that, after everything, I did care about him and not just because of how his fate intertwined with my
friend’s. Our history did indeed count for something.

After what seemed like an eternity, but probably lasted only a minute or less, he shook his head. Black chunks of hair flopped in front of his glasses, and he raked it back with his long fingers. “I can’t trust anyone,” he said softly, before turning and walking the last few steps to the judgment chamber alone.

*
The sanction meeting had gone about as well as expected, except they’d declared mopper duty for a month, not two weeks. And not together, of course, given their assumption that the two of us couldn’t keep our hands off each other.

Ugh.

Elder Truman refused to even look at Oz, his eyes hard, lips set in a grim line. Oz’s mother had died giving birth to him, but aside from his gray eyes, all of his physical traits must have come from her. Truman definitely seemed like the type who would never get wrapped up in a relationship, True or not. That his supposedly perfect son had made such a cosmic error in judgment probably embarrassed him half to death, but it
wouldn’t surprise me if that emotion came out of him as anger. A brief stab of worry sliced through me and I glanced again at the bruise on Oz’s cheek.

Oz probably had quite the time explaining his tryst with me, given that he’d been gifted with the rarest of loves. Boys were weird, though. Maybe he blamed it on cold feet or sewing wild oats or some other such nonsense.

Caesarion had sown his own wild oats—probably wilder ones than Oz could dream up—and it wasn’t like I’d never had a crush, or butterflies, or been kissed before now, but even so. If I’d gotten to keep what Caesarion and I had—if we had been as lucky as Oz and Sarah—I would never even look at
another guy again.

I’d gone to the infirmary after our sanction meeting and complained of a headache. The medic pulled my recent bio data and recorded the spikes of pain that had recurred in the previous days, ran a few tests to make sure they weren’t something to be concerned about, then typed in an excuse that let me out of my assignments for the remainder of the day.

The medics only had access to the medical readouts, not what had been happening when the headaches spiked, so there was no way for her to know that I’d brought the headaches on myself by disobeying the culture prods from my brain stem tattoo by rolling around in the ancient Egyptian sand with a boy.
I used my wrist comm to send Analeigh a message, letting her know I was fine, but not to worry if she couldn’t find me for a few hours. It was as vague as possible, and if anyone read it, it could very well be a poorly worded message about my planning to nap off my headache.

She was going to be pissed.

The Elders were too smart to not double-check on me in the coming days, and to be honest, I was scared the tech Jonah had given me wouldn’t hold up if they dug too deep.

This would be my last trip to see Caesarion. To say good-bye. As hard as I’d been hanging onto the idea that I could save him, I hadn’t been able to
find a shred of information that led me to believe it would be okay. I had run out of time.

My anxiety eased the moment I’d accepted my True’s fate. Caesarion could never have turned his people over to Octavian without a fight, would never have been content living the quiet life of a commoner. It would have felt like abandonment, like cowardice. I should have known the day I watched him risk his life to save a little boy he’d never met, a boy who shouldn’t have mattered to someone as important and high-born as Pharoh, but I hadn’t wanted to see.

The Kaia who had snuck off to Egypt to meet him believed her desire trumped the rules, but the girl he’d helped me
understand I needed to be was different. I had gone to Egypt for selfish reasons—to have my moments. I’d had them, but now I understood that I’d been lucky they had not come at a cost. My role as a Historian, the mantle entrusted to me by the Elders and my family and the people of Genesis, had to take precedence. Caesarion would die as he was meant to. And I would let him, as I was meant to.

It was our destiny. If he could be brave enough to face it, so would I.

Running around the ancient world seemed childish now, among other things, while everything I’d ever believed crumbled in my present. But one more visit couldn’t make anything worse. It was kind of like dying twice or
saying something was overly wet. You were either dead, or wet. And if they discovered I had technology that shorted out my location tracking, I was royally screwed as it was. If I was going down, it might as well be in a big, splashy way.

The creamy tunic and skirt fit comfortably now, and the emerald green sash contrasted prettily with my bronzed skin. My hair wasn’t in the style of the time, but I was getting better at setting the cuff, and since Caesarion would still be in the south of Egypt, I wouldn’t startle anyone but the guards again.

I set the cuff for a specific latitude and longitude that I’d researched—it should land me on an undeveloped section of the Red Sea coast—and set
the year for what would most likely be the last time. A moment later, I was there.
Chapter Twenty-Three

Berenice, Egypt, Earth Before–30 BCE (Before Common Era)

The Egyptian night stunned me with its beauty as though it could persuade me to change my mind. Thirty BCE had never looked more gorgeous to me, and the sea breeze had even managed to bank the suffocating heat. Too many stars to count, far more than we ever saw from Sanchi, sprinkled the black sky. The glow from the moon smudged a ring of midnight blue around the orb that had seemed such a beautiful mystery to my ancestors.

In front of me, craggy foothills rose into rolling mountains. At my back, waves lapped gently at the shore, rolling
against the sand with a sighing whisper that unwound the knots in my neck and shoulders. I recognized a funny-shaped piece of driftwood from my walk with Caesarion on my previous visit and smiled, feeling proud. Maybe they wouldn’t want me to be a Historian once all of this came to light, but it didn’t change the fact that I was one.

The feeling of accomplishment straightened my tired spine as I trekked up the beach and then away from the shore, searching for the inn where Thoth had secured lodgings.

My bio-tat pulled up the best available mapping of the surrounding area and located two inns within walking distance. One sat a five-minute
walk from the beach, much closer than the second, and I slipped in the front door ten minutes later.

No one stirred, not even Ammon, who slept in the corner by the fire, a tankard of wine tipped over by his sandal. The sight of him simmered resentment in my gut. Even though the most vigilant of guards could not save my True, they were supposed to be trying. Staying awake while on duty would be a good start.

There was one set of stairs and only three rooms lining the hall at the top. The first door revealed a sleeping Thoth, along with the still nameless third guard. The second room sat empty, and in the third, Caesarion slept on a thin mattress
while his older manservant paced the floor.

His eyes flew to mine, hand grasping the hilt of his weapon. I held up my hands, and when he recognized me, bright fear lit his gaze.

“You’ve come to kill him,” he whispered, almost choking on the words.


“His time is almost here. You are a dark one, appearing from nowhere and filling Pharaoh’s head with clouds. He doesn’t eat or study, and he hasn’t taken a woman to bed in weeks.”

Pleasure tingled under my skin. I ignored it, intent on remembering my
larger purpose. “Tell me about the dark ones.”

“It is best not to speak of such things.”

“Please.”

Whether because he feared me or because he had grown used to taking orders I didn’t know, but he relented after a moment of consideration. “Like you, they appear from the air. Melt into being, covered from head to toe in black, even their faces. They carry a small box that turns people into water from the inside. Then they’re gone.”

It had to be sonic wavers. I’d bet my teeth on it. But how? The technology wouldn’t even be considered until the Nazi scientists started dreaming up
creative ways to kill people in the mid-twentieth century, and they wouldn’t be perfected until the twenty-fifth century. Nothing else could cause the physical destruction he described though. Not here and now.

Oz’s gray eyes, turbulent but determined, hung in my mind. He’d pushed that woman to change the course of James Puckle. Had he killed others to change their courses, too?

“I’m not here to kill Pharaoh. But I would like to be alone with him.”

I had no idea whether he would comply with my request, which the sharp, stabbing pain in the base of my skull said was completely inappropriate, but after a moment, he nodded.
“Only because it is Pharaoh’s wish.” He swept from the room, giving me a wide berth on his way past.

Caesarion slept, undisturbed by the hushed conversation of my latest intrusion in his life. His bare chest rose and fell in a soothing rhythm, the sound of life moving in and out of him almost bringing me to tears. How much longer would his lungs fill with air, his heart pump blood through his thrumming veins?

Not long.

I moved to the edge of the sagging bed and sat, reaching out a hand to touch the bristle of his dark hair. He startled at the soft brush of my hand, his midnight-blue eyes flying open in surprise that
changed quickly to pleasure.

“Kaia, my love,” he breathed in a sleepy voice that had me curled up beside him in a matter of moments.

His body radiated warmth from the woolen blanket, and his long arms held me tight against his chest. With my cheek against his heart, my own found a matching rhythm, heavy with the knowledge that this night would be our last.

We stayed that way a long time, together in silence, his breath moving strands of hair on top of my head. I toyed with the dark hair curled across his chest, running my fingertips over the play between coarse and smooth, trying to memorize everything.
When he finally spoke, it startled me. “I am glad you came. I’ve delayed my departure for Alexandria in the hopes that you would.”

My blood turned to ice. I raised my head slightly so I could look into his handsome face, my stomach sinking. “You shouldn’t have done that. I could have found you.”

He gave me a halfhearted smile. Weariness that hadn’t been there the last time we’d spent time together appeared in the rings around his eyes, the slump of his shoulders, and poked holes in my heart. “We haven’t discussed the intricacies of your comings and goings. The summons from Octavian has come, but leaving immediately didn’t seem
important in the grand design of life at the moment, and I didn’t want to take any chances. Don’t worry. I’m still going back.”

I pressed a kiss to his soft, salty lips. His hands came up, cupping my cheeks and then sliding into my hair. We were both breathless a moment later when I pulled away, stars in my eyes and body close to reneging on the decision I’d made not to complicate things further.

We had one night left. Taking things further would make things more painful or just plain awkward. He smiled at me, happiness nudging away some of his fatigue. It filled me with pride that a few minutes kissing me could erase the years that had found his face over the past
several days.

“I can’t stay very long, and you need to get on your way first thing in the morning. Let’s go do something."

He sat up on his elbows, kissing me again, then eased away with a perfect, roguish grin that would have been at home on the fashion magazines that would become popular two thousand years in the future. “What would you like to do?”

“This is your world, Caesarion. Pretend I’m a lady you’d like to impress. What would you show me?”

“I am not at home in Berenice. However, as you are the only lady I have ever wanted to impress, aside from my mother, I will make an attempt.”
“That’s what I like to hear,” I teased, rolling off the bed and handing him his clothes.

I turned my back as he dressed over the next several minutes, then called the manservant, who brought fresh water and soap. After Caesarion finished washing up, we eased into the hallway, where he spoke softly to his servant. I caught enough of the whispered conversation to know that he’d promised we would return by daybreak, and they should be ready to depart for the capital city.

We paused outside the inn’s front door while Caesarion shook the kinks from his back and neck. He resembled a tiger waking in the jungle, a masterpiece
of long limbs and lithe, capable movements. No matter how hard I wanted to enjoy tonight, every time I looked at him tears clogged my throat.

I tried to smile when he reached for my hand. “Where are we going?”

“Just follow me, my love.”

I started to make a joke about the Pied Piper, then realized it wouldn’t mean anything to him. Gauging by the trek of the moon across the heavens, a couple of hours remained ours before sunrise. The night was silent but for the crunch of our footsteps until the sand muted those, as well, and we walked until a wooden dock appeared, set back in an inlet where the water barely moved with a current. Farther away, toward the
center of the bustling seaport, bright evidence of civilization gleamed in the darkness.

Caesarion and his guards had surely chosen to reside on its outskirts to avoid the entourage and notoriety that came with parading Pharaoh around town, especially one whose power had been called into question by Rome. The biotat spat facts at me about the volatile relationship between Egypt and Rome, about the port city of Berenice—population, mineral wealth, coral reefs, the booming shipping industry—but it all felt less than the scene in front of me. I didn’t want facts about this place. It was enough to experience it.

"Would you like to make use of a
“What do you mean, *make use of?*” I asked, feeling a bit wary after the horse riding incident.

I’d never been to Petra, the water planet in Genesis. Sanchi had a small lake that we’d stocked with fish, but it wasn’t large enough for boating, and swimming wasn’t permitted.

“This is a quiet cove. We could row out a little, drop a small anchor, and enjoy the privacy.” He gave me a small smile. “I do not mean to suggest anything untoward. Only that I want to spend these final hours with you uninterrupted, Kaia.”

“Okay. Yes.” His straightforward words took my breath away, leaving me
lightheaded and drowning in a million emotions.

How could it be that I’d only met him days ago? It felt as though some part of me had been tangled with him since the beginning of time.

Together we dragged a small, wooden craft with a few pictures carved into the bow down to the shoreline and pushed until it let go of the sand. The warm water of the Red Sea splashed around our ankles before we climbed aboard. I took a deep breath, wondering if a boy who had spent his entire life being taken care of knew how to row a boat, but Caesarion surprised me with his competence.

He took hold of the twin black oars,
and while he paddled, I stared at the muscles straining across his arms and chest. We didn’t go far before he hefted a stone anchor tied to a simple, thick line of rope, and dropped it into the depths. The cove must have been shallow; the water was a light blue, almost green in the moonlight, and the rope tugged tight within the space of a few breaths. The little craft had two wooden benches, both too narrow to share comfortably, but a meter-wide section of the bow was covered with reeds. Caesarion slid backward onto it, then beckoned to me, and the two of us lay on our sides, facing each other.

His body warmed mine, bicep pillowing my head as we stared into
each other’s eyes. Those midnight-blue irises did funny things to my stomach—and lower parts—but he didn’t move to kiss me. Finally, he brushed a thumb over my cheek, then over my lips, and gave me a sad smile.

“Tell me about the future, my Kaia. About this world I will never see.”

“Which one?” I whispered. “Do you want to know what will happen in your world after your death? Or two thousand years from now? Or three?”

“I want to know everything.” His gaze betrayed his seriousness, even though we both knew a couple of hours wasn’t adequate for the history of the world.

“For what it’s worth, Octavian does
well with Rome. Under his rule, it becomes the largest and most influential empire in the Western world. The citizens are well cared for, art and religion and science all flourish. For a time.” I paused, gauging his reaction to see if perhaps my honesty was too much, but Caesarion watched me with interest.

“And then?”

“Nothing stays the same, Caesarion. Empires fall, new ones rise. Good people struggle against those who are corrupt, until eventually good loses more often than it wins and this planet begins to suffer.”

“Rome is no more?”

“This entire planet is no more.” He looked startled, so I reached out,
covering his hand on the reeds between us. “I mean, it still exists, but it is no longer inhabitable. We live out there, now.”

I motioned to the stars, bright and too numerous to count, and stared as wonder crawled across his face, lighting up one feature at a time.

“We live in the stars?” he murmured, sounding reverent and as though my story was as unbelievable as any he’d been told at his mother’s knee.

“Among the stars, yes.”

“You’re from the stars. I knew that a girl who could steal my heart, my every thought, in the space of a day could not be of this Earth.”
He shifted the short distance to press his soft lips against mine. The kiss was sweet and filled with longing, with the desperate desire to hold on to something that had been slipping away the moment we’d grasped it.

“Tell me more,” he whispered. “What of Egypt?”

“Your Egypt is remembered as one of the most advanced cultures of this time. Children and scholars studied it for centuries. We still do. Much of Alexandria was lost to the sea—your beautiful library, your mother’s palace. People still know your story, Caesarion. Yours and your mother’s. Your father’s. You’re memorialized in theater and books, and live in everyone’s memories.
even now.”

“People in the stars remember me?”

His mother and father more so, but he didn’t need to know that. Right now, he did not appear to be a grown man, the way he would have been considered by his contemporaries. He looked like a scared teenager facing certain death just days after losing his mother.

A boy who wanted to believe he would not be forgotten.

“They do. I do. And that’s never going to change. I promise.” Strange how the desire to be remembered had never faded in our psyches, never eased. We all wanted that. A lump of sorrow burned in my throat.
Octavian has stolen his future, and with it, the chance for him to leave a legacy of his own. Perhaps he would have been an awful tyrant. Another Ptolemy who married his sister and ruled Egypt, fought against Rome’s growing choke hold over the Mediterranean, become a father.

Or perhaps he would have just lived his life. Left the world better than he’d found it.

“It seems impossible, these feelings for you. As though my heart has melted and spilled happiness into my blood.” The words emerged hesitant, as though they embarrassed him, but the determination in his eyes filled my body with a responding emotion. “I love you,
Kaia, and I’m glad you came to visit me.”

“I love you, too. I always will.”

Tears wet my cheeks as we kissed hard, my teeth pressing against the inside of my lip. Caesarion gentled it after a moment, easing me onto my back and kissing me until I’d forgotten my name, and that we rocked gently on a boat in the middle of a cove on the ancient Red Sea. His free hand roamed through my hair, trailed wakes of fire down my neck, grabbed firmly at my waist so he could pull my hips against his.

I felt dazed, as though we were both underwater and my perceptions were off, but the gutted expression on his face pulled me quickly to the surface. The
salty tear tracks on his cheeks when he pulled away shoved a blazing dagger through my chest.

“I don’t want to die,” he managed.

My heart squeezed flat, like a pancake trying to pump blood, and nothing had ever hurt so much in my entire life. I barely got words past the lump in my throat, and tears burned like acid in my eyes, against my cheeks. “I wish I could save you. I wanted to, maybe convince you to hide away in a faraway land, but we both know I can’t.”

He wiped my face, shaking his head. “You said Octavian will be important to the world, and I could never leave my people and pretend I am not Pharaoh, son of the great Caesar of Rome. If I
lived, it could only be as ruler of Egypt, and then Octavian might not walk the same path.”

“I know.”

Caesarion rested his forehead against mine, both of us sweaty and out of sorts. After a moment he shifted onto his back, tugging me over until my body curled into his, my head resting on his chest. The boat rocked us as though we were babes being lulled by an indulgent mother. I loved the smell of the sea, the way the stars sparkled on the water, the constant, gentle motion that reminded me nothing stood still. Not even the past.

The edges of the horizon lightened almost imperceptibly, and the shift shot dread into my limbs. Caesarion tightened
his arm to press me against him.

“You come here and we talk about life, about the stars and what might have been, but I can sense the fear in you, Kaia. I want to help. Tell me about what is happening at your home.” He paused. “With the boy.”

I struggled in vain to brush off his question, to pretend everything outside of this last night with him didn’t exist. Except it did. Strange, how he had become a friend as instantly as he’d become so much more. “Things are worse than the last time we talked. The Elders—the people in charge of my training—are hiding things. They have ways to track us that they’ve never told us about, and they know the boy is
traveling to the past alone. I don’t know if they know he’s changing things.”

“You haven’t told them. You do not trust these Elders?”

A few weeks ago, that answer would have been an unequivocal yes.

Not anymore.

“I don’t know who I can trust. I want to trust them.”

“Continue.”

The command in his voice sent a shiver of desire down my spine, and I wondered what had gotten into me. Power could be as dangerous as it was attractive, but I knew in my heart, had he been given the chance, that Caesarion would have wielded it with honor. “And
the boy knows what’s going on, but he doesn’t trust me, either.”

"Why do you think?"

"I don’t know. Maybe he’s scared."

"People who have no one to trust are dangerous. Fear is even more so. You must find a way to get through to him."

He paused, running a gentle hand up my arm before settling it at the back of my neck, his fingers toying with strands of my hair. "People with power—and your ability to travel through time is power, no matter how it is viewed—are susceptible to corruption. If your heart says you cannot trust what you have been told, then you must follow it."

I wanted to go back to when things were simple, to trust blindly in those
who were supposed to be incorruptible—shit, our entire *society* was built to resist the narcissistic and power hungry. But Caesarion and his instinct for understanding hierarchy and political strife made me sure that at least some of the Elders were working to change the past.

Oz must know why, and what they hoped to accomplish. I had to convince him that his loyalty lay with the many, not the few.

“What intrigues future people about those who are no longer relevant to your world? Would you not rather study the sciences or become a priestess? Or a mother?”

His question brought me back to the
moment, reminded me that though problems waited for me back in Genesis, time with Caesarion slipped quickly through my fingers. “You are still relevant. The past harbors an endless supply of lessons, all waiting to be unearthed so that we can help the people of the future live more stable lives. But that’s not what intrigues me.” I considered how to put my interest into words he would understand. “It’s the moments. The way each one matters, even if the person experiencing it doesn’t realize. In a small way, I get to possess many lifetimes. Those moments make me feel alive.”

“I think you are beautiful, Kaia. Your words. Your face and your body. Your
heart. I feel unworthy to be yours, even for as short a time as this.”

I’d never felt beautiful. I wasn’t a girl who looked in the mirror and hated what she saw, but while my face was pretty enough, my on-the-big-side nose kept it short of anything to write home about. But now, in Caesarion’s arms, there could be no mistaking the truth in his voice. To him, I was beautiful. And not because I had a pretty face or a perfect nose. Because he loved me.

Emotions tumbled like acrobats through my bloodstream, pounded in time with my throbbing headache until my heart begged to explode and get this over with once and for all. Instead, I snuggled closer. “Thank you.”
The sky lightened again, turning to deep purples that gave way to lavenders and azures as the stars faded to transparent ghosts of their former selves. Caesarion and I sat up, our fingers interlaced and our bodies pressed tight at the sides, and watched the sun—Ra—rise from the depths to preside over another day.

It was past time to go. I had been gone for five or six hours, and the travel was designed so that Historians couldn’t roam the past without accountability—couldn’t steal time.

And Caesarion had a date with Octavian, who would soon rule the free world. My True couldn’t pilfer any more time, either.
As though reading my thoughts, he turned and gave me a smile. This one was not melancholy or filled with regret or fear. He looked peaceful and happy with the potential of a brand new day. “It’s time to take the next steps into the future.”

“Just not the same one,” I lamented.

“One day, Kaia. We will be together. I must believe that.”

I wished I could believe anything as strongly as Caesarion believed in the all-knowing beings who decided his fate the day he took his first breath, the beings who would accompany him on another journey after his trek through this life ended.

“How do you know?” I asked,
desperate to soak up his hope.

“I promised to tell you the story of Isis and Osiris. Are you still interested?”

I ignored the files the bio-tat shoved at me, shaking them away. “Tell me.”

“So demanding,” he teased, but quickly sobered. “Their is a tale of love, of loss and grief, and finally of acceptance. They were lovers, the greatest my Egypt has ever known.”

He paused, and I considered telling him how his mother and Antony are actually considered the greatest lovers Egypt has ever known, but I held my tongue. I was Team Caesar, anyway.

“Set, their brother, was jealous of
their love, so he murdered Osiris and threw his body in the Nile so that Isis could not bury him properly and say her farewells. Her grief knew no bounds; she did not sleep or eat or think of doing a single thing but finding his body. It is said that she knew the moment her love expired though no one could have known of Set’s evil triumph. Isis searched the world until she found his remains in Phoenicia. She returned him to Egypt and hid him in the Nile’s swamps to prepare his life’s celebration, but Set found the coffin and cut Osiris into fourteen pieces, scattering them to the ends of the earth.”

“Why was Set such a sphincter?”

Caesarion chuckled. “I do not know
the word, but can assume you’re asking why he was so relentless in his hatred?”

“Yes. That.”

“Set is a jealous god. Ra imbued him with the worst parts of man.”

“That’s unfortunate.” The tale distracted me from my grief over losing my own love, for the moment, but I sensed Caesarion chose to tell it to me for a reason. “Please finish the story.”

“Isis searched and searched, finally gathering thirteen of the pieces of her husband and using her considerable magic to re-form him. Once whole, Osiris descended to rule over Amenti, the land of the dead, until their son avenged his death and restored him to the world of the living. Every year her
tears flood the Nile, give life to the people her husband loved so well, and remind them that evil will not triumph.”

“They were together again? Isis and Osiris?”

“Oh course. How could a love that Isis fought so hard for be denied forever by the gods?”

My heart swelled painfully against my rib cage. A lump pulsed painfully in my throat as Caesarion and I stared into each other’s eyes, his passion swallowing me, drowning me, killing me. Then I kissed him, pressing gently at first but quickly desperate for more of him. His strong hands pulled me closer until the heat between us rivaled the steamy Egyptian evening, and his fingers
toyed again with the two-sided necklace lying against my chest.

“What happened to them? The people from different worlds?”

“They found a way to be together. At least for a while.” I swallowed, trying desperately to be strong, to be the kind of girl who deserved a man like Caesarion. “We can do it, too. We’re stronger than our circumstances.”

“Yes. Stronger than death. That’s why I told you the story. You came searching for me across many suns and many worlds. I will walk through the afterlife seeking your face, my Kaia, until I see it again. No matter how many lifetimes pass before you return to me once more.”
The sky lightened again, and we both knew the time had come. Caesarion helped me back up to my bench, then rowed us through the humid morning in silence. The moment seemed surreal and untouched, suspended in time like a moving painting, too perfect to be true.

Until we neared the dock and I saw Oz standing there in his Historian garb, arms crossed over his thick chest.

He definitely looked pissed.
I put my hand on Caesarion’s arm, not taking my eyes off Oz. “Wait. Stop rowing.”

He followed my gaze, squinting against the sunlight. The protective growl in his voice when he asked who waited on the docks warmed my blood.

“He’s the boy I told you about.”

“You are sure he is not more than a friend?”

I snorted. “I’m not sure he’s even that anymore.”

Caesarion’s shoulders relaxed. “Perhaps he has come to put his trust in you after all.”
“Maybe. But I want to say farewell here, while it’s still the two of us.” Oz would be able to see, but it was better than trying to leave Caesarion with Oz standing right there.

My True nodded, swallowing hard, then uttered a chuckle that sounded the opposite of funny. “This moment has been waiting since the day we met. I did not expect it to be so hard.”

Tears pricked my eyes and I moved, struggling for balance in the rocking boat, but managed to maneuver next to him. His arms folded me against his chest and I squeezed back for all I was worth. When he bent and kissed me, I forgot about the rest of the world for the next minute, losing myself in this strange
place that would never exist again. His tongue sought mine and I opened up to him, tasting his love and his sorrow, marveling at the way we fit together, at the way I could have sat in this boat kissing him for the rest of my life.

“Let’s not say good-bye,” I whispered when we broke apart. “We’ll meet again, like you said.”

“What shall we say instead?”

My mind landed on the most absurd thing. When my grandfather had had surgery once to repair an injury—the only allowable surgery in Genesis—he had been silly from the anesthetic when he’d woken. He’d started singing an old song, one I’d never heard, but he claimed it had been featured in one of
my grandmother’s favorite films.

“I’ll be seeing you, Caesarion.”

He stared at me a long time before the barest hint of a smile lit his eyes. “I’ll be seeing you, Kaia, my love.”

I helped him row the boat back to the shore, then drag it safely away from the water. Caesarion and I didn’t speak again, maybe afraid to ruin the memory.

Oz’s footsteps were almost soundless in the sand, but I felt his approach. He grabbed my bicep, yanking me toward him, and Caesarion growled. I gave him a look, pleading for his understanding. “I’m fine, Caesarion.”

“Let go of my arm, asshole.” I hoped silent words could feel cold in Oz’s
head.

He dropped his hold, looking a little startled. I realized he and I had never communicated that way and how it always felt a little invasive the first time with someone new. I really didn’t care.

“Kaia, you don’t know what you’ve done.”

I gave Caesarion one last look, then stomped away down the beach. Oz followed me until we were out of sight, since we needed to travel and because he’d shown up here without the appropriate attire—he looked completely out of place in his tight black clothes and cape.

At least dealing with Oz held me together when all I wanted was to fall to
pieces. To run back to Caesarion. To die with him.

But the Historians were my life, and the people of Genesis might be in danger. Turning my back on my life, on my world, would be to let down all Caesarion had given me.

My brain moved my numbed limbs forward, forced me to focus on the task of getting home, but everything seemed as though it happened to someone else, as though I watched my own body struggle through the sandy Egyptian coastline.

Now that we were alone, I switched to verbal communication, not wanting any more of an intimate connection with Oz than we’d already formed. “Let’s
Without waiting for an answer, I started to set the dials on the cuff, but he reached out and stopped me. “Kaia.”

“Don’t. You’re not my father, you’re not an Elder. I don’t need a lecture from you about breaking the rules to spend time with Caesarion.”

“I wasn’t going to lecture you. I was going to ask if you’re okay.”

“My head is killing me.” Tears gathered in my eyes. It was more than the physical pain. Walking away from Caesarion tore at my insides, ripped like the loss was tangible, and the pain in my head paled in comparison.

Oz handed me a few painkillers,
which I chewed. “Thanks.”

“I’m surprised you’re handling it so well, honestly. Denying the bio-tat impulses isn’t easy.”

“You would know,” I snapped, wishing he would shut up.

“I would.”

“I’m still waiting for the lecture.” I was actually buying time to steady myself before having to face my actual life three thousand years in the future.

“I assume you’ve taken precautions to ensure they will not know the extent of your infractions—the interaction, for instance—unless they follow you. There is nothing I can say that you haven’t thought of yourself, and still you came to
this decision.” He paused, looking the direction we left Caesarion. “I can only guess you found the risks acceptable in light of the reward.”

The way he said *reward* bothered me, as though assuming Caesarion hadn’t been worth it. It wasn’t fair. He got to live this every day with Sarah.

I ignored the inclination to bring up his True. I didn’t want to talk about his eternal happiness. “Why did you say I don’t know what I’ve done?”

His eyes remained up the beach, the direction we came, and his body tensed. “This discussion will have to wait, I’m afraid. We’ve got company.”

I whirled to see Thoth, Ammon, and the third guard rushing our direction,
weapons drawn. "Yeah, they don’t like me."

Oz laughed, a startled sound. "I can’t imagine why not."

"Let’s just go."

I finished setting the cuff for the return trip, my anxiety growing as the lights turned to green and the blue field surrounded us. The guards were less than ten steps away when the ancient world dissolved, the future tech delivering us safely home.
Sanchi, Amalgam of Genesis–50 NE (New Era)

The air lock felt too sterile, too cold, after the warmth and beauty of the Red Sea sunrise. Oz’s presence grated on me, made me hyper aware of the hole in my heart. With each passing moment, I fought harder to hold it together. I wanted nothing more than to curl up in my bed and cry.

My grandfather’s death, and then the loss of Jonah, taught me that grief could be delayed but not bypassed. Walking away from Caesarion hit me every bit as hard, even though I had known from the beginning that I couldn’t keep him.

I supposed we couldn’t keep anyone, even ourselves, in the end.
“I need to show you something,” Oz said.

“In the air lock?”

“No.” He studied my face for several moments. “I know you’re in shock, Kaia, but this can’t wait long. It’s why I came to get you.”

I was dressed in Historian garb, now, but Oz was naked except for a white towel since he’d gone to Egypt in the clothes on his back. The decontamination chamber wouldn’t let us out until all of the outerwear had been tested and analyzed.

His words barely registered. The longer I sat here the less I cared about anything. A buzzing took up residence in
my head, separating me from the present. Oz said nothing more, just watched me carefully from across the room, then dressed when the drawer returned his clothes.

When the air lock clicked open he helped me to my feet. “I’ll walk you to your room.”

“I’m fine.”

“I know you are, but I’ll feel much better if you let me help.”

“It’s all about you, huh?” I tried a weak joke in an attempt to shake off my lethargy. This was silly. It had been inevitable.

“That’s me. Selfish as the day is long.”
He left me at the door to our room. “We’ll talk in the morning. Get some rest.”

“Wait, this was so important you traveled to get me but now I can rest?”

He glanced down the hall, as though expecting someone to catch us alone again, then turned back to me, impatience in his gaze. “I need you sharp, and you’re a mess. Get it together.”

He stalked off before my overly tired brain conjured a response, but it was just as well. I was exhausted and I did need to pull myself together.

I tiptoed into my room, trying hard not to make any noise, but my roommates weren’t there. My stomach unknotted a
little. Analeigh and Sarah were my friends and I loved them, and maybe one day I would find the courage to tell them everything, to let them help me. But tonight my grief, my Caesarion, belonged only to me.

I changed quickly into my pajamas and climbed into bed without any other preparations, turning to face the wall. My body felt heavy—all of it. The outside, the inside, the blood in my veins. Sluggish, as though none of it could decide if it still wanted to work in a world without true love.

The moments I’d had with my True were so much more than most people even dreamed of, and I knew I should feel lucky. The word repeated over and
over as I let loose the sobs that had been building inside me like a storm, soaking my pillow and shaking me apart.

*
Meeting Oz the next morning provided a distraction, if nothing else. I had gone through the night on autopilot, exhausted from the sleepless hours passed leaking tears and staring at the wall while scenes from the past couple of days played out in my mind.

Caesarion had to die. I knew it, and I’d accepted it. I had to move on.

Oz waited for me in the hallway, smelling fresh from a shower but wearing a less solicitous air than when he’d left me yesterday. He gave me a once-over and nodded, apparently convinced I had gotten my shit together, or at least feeling good about my not succumbing to some sort of girly meltdown.
“Time’s up,” was all he said.

Our footsteps echoed as I followed him down the hallway, back toward the restricted storage rooms where we’d gotten caught the other night. Quips and sarcastic remarks floated in my brain, comments about how I wasn’t making out with him again or hadn’t we broken enough rules for one week, but they all disappeared before they turned into words. Speaking required so much energy.

He stopped outside the door where the Elders had met the other night, then turned back to me. “I have to hold you against me.”

“What? Why?”

“I need you to see what’s inside this
room, but it only admits one person per wrist swipe. My tat will work, but yours won’t. We have to walk in like one person.”

“Good gravy boats, more touching?”

“You didn’t seem to mind so much with Caesarion.”

The comment seemed to surprise Oz as much as it startled me, and red splotches grew on his cheeks. My heart throbbed at the memories. No smart reply choked out, no matter how badly I wanted to let Oz have it.

After a moment, he found his voice, but only barely. “I’m sorry, Kaia. He’s your True, and I’m … I shouldn’t have said that.”
Tears filled my eyes at his unexpected kindness. I looked away, determined not to let him see, and cleared my throat. “Let’s get this over with.”

Oz opened his arms, and I stepped against his chest. His hands found the small of my back, pressing me tight against him until the top of my head wedged under his chin. His breath moved my hair, wrenching loose more memories of Caesarion. For a moment, I wanted to cling to Oz, to break down and let him hold me simply because I needed to be held. To steal comfort.

My breakdown had to be worse than I’d thought to even consider taking comfort from Oz, no matter how easily he could cradle me against his chest.
“Step up so you’re standing on my feet.”

I did as he asked, my body shaking with the effort of not relaxing into his embrace, until our cheeks pressed together. Without another word, Oz maneuvered us both over the threshold, walking with me standing on him without any extra effort at all. Once we were clear of the doorway and close to the center of the room, he dropped his arms, leaving me both cold and relieved.

A waist-high, glass pedestal sat at the center of the room. The top held a table comp, but the base and stem were riddled with tiny pinholes. None of the other pedestal or table comps in the Academy looked like this; they were
solid glass and gears. The rest of the room was empty. The holo screens that made up the walls were blank and transparent, and no dots to track apprentices, Historians, or Elders skittered across the floor.

Before I could ask Oz what we were doing here, what this place was, or why the Elders kept it a secret, he moved from my side and to the pedestal. His fingers flew over the table comp’s screen, punching in mysterious information.

His smoky eyes held mine as he finished, a quagmire of guilt, sorrow, trepidation, and maybe even concern. “I shouldn’t be showing you this, Kaia. But I know you won’t believe me if I just tell
“Tell me what?”

“That your actions in thirty BCE have had disastrous consequences. We have to set them right.”

My heart thudded to a stop. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been wondering why you’ve seen me traveling alone, and to places we haven’t been authorized to go for apprentice observations. You’ve figured out, likely from your brother,”—he made a face that clenched my hands into fists—“that there are secrets at the Academy. This is it.”

Oz hit one last button on the table comp, then swiped his wrist tattoo over
some control along the side of the pedestal. The room lit up. Glowing strands of virtual string spurted from the countless holes all over the pedestal, crisscrossing the room like an elaborate game of cat’s cradle. They seemed to sense objects in their path and left a hole around me, but I moved quickly to Oz’s side when he asked. With both of us in the center of the room, the glowing strands multiplied until the room resembled an elaborate, multicolored spiderweb.

When it finally stopped expanding, there were far too many threads to count or keep track of with the naked eye. If they had been physical, we could have used them like a hammock.
I reached out an experimental finger, intent on touching one of them, but Oz covered my hand and shook his head. “Not yet.”

My eyes stretched wide. “What is it?”

“It traces the trajectory of decisions. Deaths and births, mostly, but it can also track events forward or backward to their point of inception.”

No appropriate answer to this information existed. We’d never been able to do such a thing—not officially. That was the whole reason we needed so many Historians. So that we could do our best to trace the events that led to our evacuation, but also the events and the people who had lifted us up.
If this comp could do it for us, why would Genesis need Historians at all?

“How?” I breathed.

“It’s not perfected. That’s why I’ve been going to suspected points of origin, tracing development of certain things—”

“Like weapons,” I interrupted dully.

His gray eyes narrowed. “Exactly. Like weapons. To see if the comp is right.”

“And is it?”

Oz shook his head, his dark hair falling over one eye until he impatiently brushed it aside. “There are still too many variables.” He motioned at the tangle of virtual threads spread out around us. “And the further back we
start, the harder it is to predict an outcome.”

“Explain it to me.”

“I’m showing you the trajectory stemming from Caesarion.” He watched me closely, but I didn’t respond, even though my insides jerked at his name. “Something happened when he didn’t leave Berenice when he was supposed to.”

“What?” My knees went weak at the thought, the same instinctive panic I’d felt when Caesarion told me he’d delayed his departure.

If this room could predict the consequences of his living, maybe it was possible that he would now. Even though it was wrong, even though it couldn’t
happen, my heart still hoped. This had to be how Jonah knew he could save Rosie and not affect anything but a baseball season, and the reason behind Oz’s decision to knock that girl into James Puckle’s path. But Jonah had claimed this knowledge was dangerous.

It would be cool to easily trace the development of technology, the trajectory of the people who changed Earth Before for the better and for the worse. But why would we need to know the alternate consequences? The one thing that remained constant about the past was that changing it created unknown outcomes. This mass of twine proved that to me again—there were simply too many possibilities.
Oz studied the table comp for a moment, then touched a button. One of the strands in front of us glowed orange and zigzagged across the room, turning haphazardly this way and that until it dead-ended over by the door.

“What’s that?” In spite of how slow my mind felt after enduring hours of grief, this room warmed it up again. It felt good to flex my mental muscles.

“When Caesarion doesn’t arrive in Alexandria when he’s supposed to—supposed to by our documents, not by any specific day Octavian is expecting him—the delay causes a shift in history. The man who is supposed to execute Caesarion is killed in a robbing. The executioner Octavian chooses as a
replacement is sympathetic to the Egyptian ruling family and brings the burned body of a commoner in Caesarion’s place. Your True lives, and it is many years before Octavian—by then Augustus—learns of the treachery."

“I saved him,” I whispered. My heart swelled at the knowledge Caesarion lived, but my gut churned with horror.

Oz grabbed my arm and squeezed, shaking me out of the trance. “Kaia. He has to die. Caesarion ends up challenging Augustus for Rome, and the years the two of them spend fighting sets the development of the ancient world back hundreds of years. Art, military advancements, annexing new provinces, written language … it’s all affected.”
“How could one boy affect that many things?” I scoffed.

No matter my dismissive response, years of training promised it was possible. Not only possible, but likely. One person’s life affected countless others, even when he wasn’t the son of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar.

“This orange line represents the direct changes to his life in particular. He’s killed at the age of forty in a second battle at Actium, one that puts the first to shame.” Oz touched the table comp again, and more lines lit up. Some were green, others purple, blue, and red. “These are the other major time lines that are affected by the alteration. Major. This doesn’t take into consideration the
countless other, minor lives affected.”

“What do the colors mean?”

“Levels of influence on history.” He reached out and touched a purple one. “This is your family, Kaia. If Caesarion doesn’t die within the next month, your family will never exist.”
Chapter Twenty-Five

Shock coursed through me, so potent I reached out to steady myself on the comp. Concern etched lines on Oz’s face but my expression kept him from steadying me.

Our families couldn’t be connected … could they? “How?”

He touched the purple thread, making it glow brighter than the others, then turned me to face the pedestal. “Look.”

In purple letters, the trajectory of that particular line spread across the screen, and all of the air left my body. “The Vespasians will never rule Rome.”

“Right. Vespasian, the father of your ancestor Titus is killed in a battle against
Egypt that shouldn’t exist. His son Titus never becomes a general, never invades Judea to destroy the Temple, never meets and falls in love with Berenice.”

My hand went instinctively to the necklace at my throat, but instead of the familiar olive branch and laurel wreath, the piece of metal felt smooth. Panic shot through my veins, scalding and quick, as I ripped the chain in my frantic battle to tear it loose. My chest heaved, lack of oxygen blurring my gaze, as I struggled to see the proof of my transgressions in my palm.

The symbols were there.

My heart pounded, sweat forming on my forehead, but ten deep breaths started to calm me down. Common sense said
that if those symbols had faded away, I wouldn’t have been here to see it—because if Titus and Berenice didn’t meet and fall in love, I would disappear, too. Along with everyone in Genesis, since my grandfather was instrumental in making our relocation happen. I’d spent all this time feeling smug about the fact that I hadn’t changed anything, that Oz and Jonah were the ones taking unnecessary chances, but it had been a lie. My stomach heaved.

I could have killed us all.

Oz hit another button and the screen changed. “It’s not only your family, Kaia. Another dozen or so families in Genesis will simply disappear. Penicillin will never be invented. Monet will not
survive long enough to paint.”

The threads crisscrossing the room blurred as tears welled and spilled down my cheeks. “How do you know that it wouldn’t be better?”

“What’s better? We are here now, on Genesis, and what matters most is ensuring a future.”

His words struck a chord. There was something going on other than my bad decisions. This machine hadn’t been created purely to show potential outcomes of making historical changes—what would be the point? Especially given that we weren’t supposed to make changes.

But Oz’s face was earnest and open, with none of the secretive pissiness of
the past several weeks. Whatever his involvement with this project, it was clear he thought it aligned with the Historian principles and tenets that had been drilled into our heads over the past seven years. If so, he was deluding himself.

“Oz, you can’t believe that the future in Genesis is the only reason they developed this comp. Why would they want to predict these kinds of effects without any plans to use them?”

“We are using it. It’s helping us understand how decisions affect the future.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Is this why you knocked into that lady in England?”

“What lady in England?”
“Oz, I followed you. You saw me, I know you did. Enough with the games.”

He refused to meet my gaze, tapping his finger on the edge of the pedestal. “That was an accident. The woman.”

Lie. The action had changed the development of ammunition and firearms, and he had done it on purpose. No one was more in control of every action than Oz Truman, so this machine must have convinced him his actions were safe. I wanted to understand. I wanted him to prove to me that his alteration hadn’t changed anything horrific, while my unintentional change would wreak havoc. The sight of the line, the one that had ended with Caesarion’s death before I went to meet
him, took precedence at the moment, though.

Terror ran like ice water in my veins. If Oz and his string-spouting comp were right, all hell was going to break loose in less than a week.

If I didn’t do something about it.

“So, if the guy who’s supposed to kill Caesarion is going to die, and the one who takes his place refuses to do it ... how do I fix it?” The truth dawned on me the moment Oz’s face hardened. “No. No, Oz, I can’t do it. I can’t kill him.”

“Is there another alternative?”

I sat down on the cold floor, drawing my knees up to my chest and wrapping myself into a ball. My mind scrambled, a
desperate attempt to find another way, but found nothing. It was impossible to tell how Oz was feeling, except maybe nauseous. Probably at revealing such a big secret to the resident rule breaker.

“Kaia, I can help you get your hands on a sonic waver. It will be quick and painless.”

Oz, as helpful as ever. Like I wanted to think about ways to kill the boy I loved.

As much as I wanted to scream, to kick him and punch him and blame him for putting me through this, it wasn’t Oz’s fault. It was mine.

I started this, and because of my colossal inability to accept the limitations and realities of my world, I
had to finish it, too. People in Genesis couldn’t die because of me. If it was only me that would pay the price, I might have been willing to do it, but not my parents. Not Jonah. Not others.

“You’re going to have to kill his guards, too. They’ll tell people about you. We can’t have more instances of strange people in black that appear and melt people’s organs.”

“So you know about the dark ones?” I paused, waiting for him to decide whether to trust me, or keep lying. “Where did the legends start? Or when?”

Oz paled, busying himself at the pedestal comp until the glowing threads disappeared, making the room feel
cavernous. I grabbed his arm and pulled myself up, forcing him to face me. His eyes stayed stubbornly on the floor.

“Oz, why are there new myths in the past about people in black arriving and turning people to liquid, then disappearing into thin air?” My question was careful. My growing anger was not.

“There aren’t.” His jaw clenched, and when he finally slid his gray eyes to mine, it was clear he would say nothing more.

Fine. He could believe that because he’d somehow gained access to this room that he had authorization to change whatever he saw fit. I swallowed the urge to spill what I’d read in Minnie’s observation. That Analeigh and I thought
maybe some of the Elders wanted to find a way to undo the bad decisions that had led to our *exile* from Earth Before.

Oz could pretend all he wanted, but it didn’t mean I believed him.

*
As much as I needed to clean up the mess I’d made in Caesarion’s world, nothing had changed as far as my having to pick and choose the best time to sneak away. Jonah’s chip might ensure no one knew where I had gone, but it didn’t stop me from being missed. The Projector, which is what Oz called the machine he’d shown me, said I had a week to make sure Caesarion met his proper fate before things started to change that couldn’t be undone.

We had an observation scheduled for today, and there was no way I could skip it. I’d already had to copy Analeigh’s research for wardrobe since I’d spent our allotted independent study time running around Egypt, and it was our
first observation where the reflection focus was left up to us—there was no assignment. They never told us when we were being tested, but this felt like a way to gauge whether we were ready for more autonomy going into our final year.

Oz was coming today, and so was Levi. Part of me wondered if Oz would show up or if he’d been diverted to another assignment, but he waited calmly in the air lock when Analeigh and I arrived with two minutes to spare.

He and Levi were bare-chested and wearing patterned swim trunks. Booth, our overseer for the day, had similar bottoms but wore a blue T-shirt with the phrase “Surf’s Up” scrolled across the front. Analeigh and I both had pretty
skimpy bikinis on underneath short dresses that served as cover-ups, and all five of us wore cheap plastic flip-flops.

We were all basically naked, a feeling that left my skin crawling with unease. The wardrobe complemented our destination, though—a beach in the Maldives, off the coast of Sri Lanka, 2001. The boys had chosen this particular observation—Analeigh and I had voted to observe the fate of Anastasia, lost daughter of the last Russian tsar, but we’d been overruled.

Instead we got to watch some famous Californian extreme athlete drown. Lovely.

Extreme sports fascinated Levi in particular, and he planned to work on
isolating a common strand of human evolution that had sparked a desire to call dancing with death an entertaining pastime. Jay Moriarty had died one day shy of his twenty-third birthday while free diving—diving deep under water without oxygen tanks, a hobby that did not seem advisable. He had been happily married, according to history and our previous observations, and was described as a gregarious guy who loved life. But apparently not enough to want to continue living it. In truth, I wasn’t sure what there was to learn from him or why this even made the list of options for today’s trip.

I found the story depressing, but the worst part was how avoidable his
untimely death had been.

If these past seven years had taught me one universal truth, it was that the humans who died the youngest, who had been gifted with the least amount of time, managed to do the most with it. They were often remembered, these tragic children, and their legacies lived on in ways that people who had been given entire lifetimes couldn’t seem to achieve. The reasons behind that observation would make an amazing reflection topic. Maybe I would explore it one day.

Analeigh and I tossed our Historian uniforms into the drawer next to the boys’ and Booth’s. Gooseflesh popped out on my arms and I shivered in the
freezing cold air lock, crossing my arms over my chest to avoid giving the boys a show.

Booth checked to make sure we were all ready, then set his cuff and gave it an exact location that would be deserted at the time of day we were arriving, which was just after breakfast, when Jay left his friends to go snorkeling.

The lights on the cuff turned to green, and the five of us shimmered inside a blue bubble for a moment until the decontamination chamber disappeared and we stood several yards away from a deserted beach, under the cover of a grove of coconut trees.

*
Maldives, Indian Ocean, Earth Before–June 15, 2001 CE (Common Era)

My skin immediately warmed in the sticky, tropical air. The view from where we stood stunned me: the beaches were pristine and white, the ocean unbelievable cascading shades of blue. It was almost clear, a crystal aquamarine as it washed onto the shore and deepening to turquoise, then cobalt as it spread farther from the shore.

“Whoa.” Analeigh breathed the word next to me, her eyes round as they took in the perfect paradise.

“It looks a lot like Petra, but the water there isn’t blue like this. More of a greenish brown. This is better,” Levi observed.
If Petra resembled the Maldives even a little bit, I could see why the property there had to be drawn in a lottery.

Over the next hour, the beach filled with sunbathers and surfers, snorkelers and divers, and Analeigh and I stripped off our cover-ups. We all slathered on sunscreen, an unnecessary little product in our System missing natural sunlight. It smelled wonderful. The sand burned the soles of my bare feet, and the sun baked the skin on my shoulders. Waves washed over my toes as I wiggled them, displacing tiny sand crabs that scurried to find new places to hide.

Booth led us to a more secluded section of shoreline, where boats floated just offshore, their red and white diving
flags fluttering in the gentle breeze. The lenses on my glasses indentified Jay Moriarty, a rather handsome guy about the same age as Jonah, with a smile that hit me like a punch in the gut from sixty or seventy yards away.

He faced the water alone, his tanned, toned body obeying his commands to stretch and go through some complicated breathing exercises. A blue mask and snorkel sat on his forehead and he fixed it in place, jumping in the water and kicking lazily back and forth for a while. The expression of contentment on his handsome face felt incongruous, but only because I knew what was about to happen. Still, if I had to die, it would be good to know it would be doing
something I loved half as much as this boy loved diving in the ocean.

That was this recording’s hidden moment of beauty. Jay’s passion.

When Oz’s lips brushed my ear, it startled me. I jerked away and shot him a glare, but he moved in closer, using a hand to hold me in place. “Do you know what would have happened had he not died today?”

I kept my eyes, my glasses, trained on Jay. I didn’t need any more trouble.

Oz switched to silent speech, apparently realizing an outward conversation would be recorded along with our observations. “He would have died tomorrow in a boating accident with his wife.”
The whispered words, facts that could only be glimpsed with the help of the strange Projector, sent shivers down my spine. My mind lost complete track of what I was supposed to be recording as Jay grabbed hold of a rope anchored to the sea floor and kicked below the surface for the last time.

“His is the only trajectory I’ve ever seen that keeps stopping no matter what. If we saved him, it would buy him another twenty-four hours. If we saved him tomorrow, he’d get another week.” Oz leaned in even closer. “It almost makes one believe in fate.”

I gave a small shake of my head and elbowed him away from me. I didn’t believe in fate. None of us did. The
concept was nothing more than the result of choices made by men—by us and the people around us—and, despite the anomaly Jay Moriarty apparently presented, could always be altered.

Still, Oz’s little Projector lesson turned over and over in my mind, like a pancake flipped and flipped until both sides were burned black. I used the brain stem tattoo to search information on Jay Moriarty, a task that should have been completed before we’d left had I been paying proper attention to my studies the past couple of days. I found more than one reference to the fact that Jay, even as a boy, had felt a strange certainty that he would not live a long life.
Then again, one could argue that if he hadn’t been attracted to dangerous sports, this day might have been avoided.

Except according to Oz, Jay’s early death was predestined. It made me think of Caesarion and his belief in beings who watched our lives play out, planned from beginning to untimely end. As much as I wanted to believe, as hard as I tried and wished there was a grand design that would bring us together again in another realm, I didn’t. Couldn’t.

We stood still on the beach, moving every once in a while to shift position or wander toward the water so that no one would take note of the group of five people seemingly riveted to smooth,
clear water when Jay’s body was later discovered.

A while after he’d kicked to the bottom, two other divers roamed the area. The eyeglasses shared the strangers’ eventual eyewitness accounts with me, including the fact that they’d seen Jay on the bottom but had left him there, assuming he was training.

It was sad, and interesting, but I didn’t understand why we were here. Aside from Oz’s strange and cryptic statement about fate and Levi’s obsession with the psychology behind extreme sporting, if Jay Moriarty had never been meant to live, then his death couldn’t have any lasting positive or negative impression on humanity.
Could it?

Perhaps *that* was today’s lesson. The overseers might have a specific aspect of today in mind, one we should have noticed. I should have been paying more attention. As usual.

We left before Jay’s friends sent out the search party that would recover his body. It wouldn’t look right for the five of us to be in the same spot, morning to night. People would remember that, once this day became memorable to them, and despite the ancient Egyptian tale about *dark ones* showing up in the pages of history, we’d been trained to take every effort to ensure no Historians accidentally appeared in Earth Before’s history books.
Silence accompanied our group on the way back up the beach. We’d witnessed the death of a boy of only twenty-two, and even though it wasn’t violent or horrifying like so many of our observations, this unsettled me, too. Perhaps it was the idea that we could be so fully alive and present one moment and gone the next. That the smallest choices could change everything.

A small group of people—two girls, four boys, all young—sat around a crackling fire at the edge of the beach, books embossed with the title *Holy Bible* opened in their laps. They looked as though they might be seminary students of some kind, based on their serious expressions and the fact that they
sat on a gorgeous beach to read religious texts instead of enjoying the sun or water. One of the boys read aloud in a pleasing tone that helped ease my mounting tension.

“So, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’”

He continued, his voice fading as we passed by, making our way back to the secluded coconut trees. The words sounded right, and yet they didn’t. My mind played with the verses, trying to figure out why they felt wrong. My brain
stem tattoo was no help—every version of the *Bible* it searched came back with the passage read exactly like the boy had intoned it moments ago, yet my memory, which had always been excellent, insisted it was off.

As we gathered together inside the blue bubble, waiting for our return trip, it hit me. The passage had been missing something—the words “be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it.”

My mouth went dry and my knees buckled, causing Analeigh to reach out a hand to steady me and Oz to raise a sharp look my direction.

All I could think was that since my brain stem tat hadn’t been able to find
any texts with the correct wording, they were missing from the historical record.

Which meant someone, sometime, had purposely taken them out.
Chapter Twenty-Six

Oz’s prickling gaze remained on me until we left the air lock, but I refused to meet his eyes. He’d been watching me too closely these past days, and though we knew each other’s secrets—some of them, anyway—he wasn’t my friend. I wasn’t sure he was a friend to any of us anymore. He’d been working behind our backs, trusting the Elders, and it was too soon to tell whether he actually believed the bullhonky they were feeding him.

No matter how understanding he’d been about Caesarion, or that he’d shown me the Projector instead of telling the Elders where I’d been and what I’d caused … he hadn’t been totally honest
with me about anything. There had to be more to the project the Elders had him working on.

Analeigh sensed my unrest, her body rigid and her breathing quick at my side. It was hard to believe Booth and everyone else couldn’t hear my heart pounding and the bile sloshing in my stomach. If spending a few days with Caesarion had such massive consequences, who knew what kind of shit storm altering a text like the Bible—a book that literally influenced the daily life of billions of people—would stir up.

Oz, and maybe the Elders, were using the Projector to change life on Earth Before. To alter the time lines that led to
the major issues that destroyed society—first, Oz and gun development. Now, religious texts, particularly those of the Judeo-Christian variety were being changed to no longer encourage procreation—which would go a long way toward curbing devastating overpopulation.

I dragged Analeigh into our room, even though the dinner alarm had sounded, and waited for the door to slide and lock into place behind us. Sarah had already left—she and Oz had a standing supper schedule and she wouldn’t break it, especially not since he’d been gone all day.

“What happened?”

I sank into the chair behind one of the
desks. My stomach had never been twisted into more knots and my head pounded, this time not because of fighting the bio-tat’s instructions. “Did you hear that kid reading from the Bible on the beach?”

“Um, I guess?”

“You didn’t notice anything weird about the passage?” My voice sounded strangled even to my own ears, the words spilling out in such a jumble they almost felt out of order.

Analeigh’s face paled. “Kaia, you’re freaking me out. Tell me what’s going on.”

The air in our room hummed with unspent energy. Analeigh and I had been friends for long enough that our moods
played off each other’s, and I sensed her discomfort and the fear mounting in the face of my own. I couldn’t do this alone anymore. Oz didn’t count, and Caesarion wasn’t an option any longer. I needed my best friend.

I sucked in a deep breath. “I think I know what Jonah was talking about, the secret the Elders are keeping. And it’s dangerous, like he said.”

Analeigh sank down on her bed, her green eyes never leaving me. “I’m ready.”

“They’re trying to find ways to fix Earth Before, based on the largest issues that led to our evacuation.”

Her eyes went wide, her knuckles white as she gripped her bedspread.

The sputtered questions died out as I shook my head. “I don’t know, Analeigh, but that Bible passage was missing the command about populating the earth—the part the Church used for hundreds of years to assert God’s resistance to birth control. What’s one of the primary contributors to the loss of Earth Before’s viability?”

“Overpopulation,” she whispered.

“Right. And that’s not all. Oz’s trips all focus on the development of automatic weaponry—unmitigated violence. That’s another major contributor.” I paused, my brain trying to click pieces into place. “They’re trying to fix it.”
“How can they? After all these years, drilling into our heads that even the slightest alteration made—allowing ourselves to be seen or heard, acting inappropriately in the past—how can they be sure their actions won’t inadvertently wipe us all from existence?” Her voice rose, red circles on her fair cheeks betraying her panic. “That Bible verse, Kaia. How many people won’t be born because contraception isn’t frowned upon? It could be our grandparents.”

She crossed her arms, grabbing her biceps and squeezing as though she might disappear any moment. Her words echoed my own fears, barely mollified by the knowledge of the Projector or any
of Oz’s nonsense about fate. If the Elders were altering the past, they had a reason. Intentions.

“There’s more. You’re going to be pissed at me for not telling you sooner, but you were already so angry, and ... I knew you would tell me to stop and I didn’t want to.”

“Kaia, I think what’s happening with the Elders pretty much overshadows any additional rules you’ve managed to break. Not that there were many left,” she added dryly.

I told her everything. About all my transgressions with Caesarion, about what Oz had shown me regarding the consequences of my unintended effect on my True’s demise. About the Projector,
and that Oz refused to admit the danger it could pose.

Her face grew so pale I worried she’d pass out, but as always, Analeigh proved to be stronger than she looked. “How are you not being tracked?”

I got up and rummaged around in a drawer, pinching Jonah’s chip between my thumb and forefinger and holding it up. “Jonah gave it to me. He said someone made it for him when he went back to save Rosie.”

“How does it work?” Her eyes hardened and flickered, and the flatness in her voice pricked my curiosity. It almost looked as if she’d seen the chip before.

“I shove it into my wrist tat and it
shorts out the tracking. When I get back, I use those two filaments to jerk it out. It hurts, but I’m kind of used to it.”

She didn’t say anything for a while, staring at the chip in my palm and chewing on her lip. “Sarah made it.”

“What? We were barely third years when Jonah left.”

“She’s brilliant with comps and tech, you know that. And she had a huge crush on Jonah before she found out Oz was her True.”

“Are you sure?”

Analeigh’s eyebrows pinched together. “Yes. I remember her showing me drawings, babbling on about crap I couldn’t understand, and honestly, I
didn’t really want to know why she needed to invent such a thing.”

We fell silent, both looking at the tiny piece of tech that had allowed my brother—and me—to change the past. Sarah had never said a word, but surely Jonah had asked her to stay quiet.

“Anyway, after today, I think it’s clear they are changing things, and I don’t see how that Bible verse could have been removed from every version by accident. Someone went back and changed the original text.”

She nodded. “I agree. And I don’t think Oz would do this alone, without an assignment or direction. He’s … well, he’s always been quiet. Different. But he’s not a liar, Kaia. Or a bad person.”
“I really don’t care what Oz thinks or doesn’t think right now.”

“Right. Sorry. Bigger fish.” Her wide eyes met mine. “Starting with, are you really going to kill Caesarion?”

“I either have to do it or get someone else to do it. And I don’t see how the latter is possible.” Nausea bubbled, but I swallowed it. “This is my mess and if I don’t fix it, I wipe out my family. My grandfather.”

That statement sunk in and her shoulders slumped. Maybe if my grandfather hadn’t been there, someone else would have stepped in to initiate the idea of colonizing Genesis—someone must have because the Projector only showed the loss of twenty or so families
from the System, not all of us being sucked into oblivion.

It might have been possible for me to go back and save Caesarion’s executioner from the robbery, but messing with more people and events and time lines seemed like a recipe for disaster.

“How are you going to do it?”

“Oz said he can grab me a sonic waver. It will be fast.” I meant to sound confident, but it came out in a wet whisper.

“It won’t be without some repercussions. How are the ancients going to explain liquefied organs?”

“The freaking Bible just changed. I
“Think organ soup is the least of our worries.” The weak joke did nothing to dull my pain and we sat in silence for several moments, until I recalled the other reason it wasn’t going to be as shocking as my best friend thought. “Also, there are people who have seen Historians already. Caesarion’s guards called me a dark one, and they were scared.”

“Dark one?”

“They have stories about people dressed in black who appear out of thin air, kill without weapons.” I moved to the bed while that sank in, wanting to feel her warmth, the consistency of her presence in my life.

“Oz has killed people?” Now
Analeigh looked as though she was going to puke.

“I don’t know if it was Oz, but someone has—and it must have happened more than once. I can’t imagine that kind of pervasive rumor stemming from a single incident.”

Analeigh reached out and grabbed my hand, smashing it between her palms.

I needed proof of what was going on, or better yet, which Elders we could trust. They couldn’t all be bad, and the ones who weren’t would realize the dangers the Projector posed.

After all, these were the people who made me believe we were better off now, and that our jobs as Historians ensured we would stay that way.
We might be able to get answers, especially if we could convince Oz to help, but the Elders were already monitoring the Archives that could lead an apprentice to stumble upon their little experiment. I found that out when they busted me for following the development of gun production.

“I’m going to sneak out tonight before lockdown. I have to get this Caesarion thing over with as soon as possible.” In spite of all my false strength, the words caught in my throat. Analeigh reached out and squeezed my hand, not saying anything, just being there. I swallowed, siphoning her strength. “I’ll be back before breakfast.”

“What can I do? In the meantime?”
Her gaze was determined behind her glasses. “We need to compile evidence. Something the Elder Council would have to listen to, even if it’s against Zeke.”

“I started collecting information on Oz and his travels. It’s hidden in my private file that Sarah set up. I can share it with yours, but you have to be careful. Figure out how to search from a different angle. They’ll know if you start looking directly, the way they caught me following the gun files.”

She pursed her lips, fingers absentmindedly unwinding her long braid. “They can’t track every tangent sprouting off the Bible. I can start there, hopefully find evidence of that alteration.”
“Yeah. Maybe check passages that could affect the other major contributors—commercialism, environmental degradation, sectarianism,” I recited from memory. Those were the big five, and of course they were largely interconnected. There were another dozen or so minor causes, all subheadings under those five. Hatred. Hunger. Widening class division. War. Civil Rights.

“Okay. Right. Out of those, the environmental causes are probably the easiest to research and have the widest range of contributors. Maybe I can find something they tried to change there. If they want to fix Earth Before, they’re going to need to fix the actual planet, not
just the people who lived on it.”

“That’s good thinking. Okay.” I leaned in and gave her a quick hug.

“Don’t get caught, Analeigh. They’re not going to believe we both accidentally wandered into the wrong archives in the same week. Even if we didn’t know they were flagged.”

“With your massive fake crush on Oz, I can’t believe Zeke isn’t watching your every move already.”

I almost wished Zeke would intercept me on my way out tonight. Then I could pass the buck. Let someone else take the life of the one person I wanted most to live.

But our future was on the line. Everyone’s but most of all, my family’s.
Now that Analeigh was involved, her trajectory tangled with mine. Sarah, too, if she really had invented the chip tech for my brother. I wasn’t sure even David Truman’s position would excuse Oz if the Elders found out that not only had he shown me the Projector, but that he’d helped hide my illicit travels and forbidden interactions as well.

I may not have liked Oz very much, but I didn’t want his blood on my hands. Caesarion’s would be enough, even though it had been and would remain on Octavian’s hands. A blood sacrifice that would tie the future imperial seat of Rome up in a neat little bow.

All I had to do was murder the boy I loved. Save the world.
Egypt, Earth Before–30 BCE (Before Common Era)

Caesarion looked surprised to see me. I didn’t blame him. I’d toyed with the idea of sneaking up on him and his guards in the middle of the night and using the waver Oz had handed over, but it didn’t feel right. My True knew he had to die, but Caesarion valued honor and bravery. Murdering him in his sleep seemed cowardly.

Unworthy.

I’d seen many deaths over the past seven years. Some violent, others calm. The ones that left the bitterest taste were the sucker punches, like Jesse James or Dillinger. We’d watched Caesar get one
of the biggest ones of all time mere weeks ago, and his son would not die the same way. Not if I had anything to say about it.

Which, it appeared I did.

They were taking a break from riding, the horses grazing along the banks of a stream and the guards wading in the shallow water. Caesarion stood barefoot on the bank, staring down into the trickle of brackish liquid as though it held the secrets to unlocking the universe. Now, with him alive, breathing in front of me, and looking damn sexy in such a relaxed pose, my courage to do what needed to be done withered.

My lips tried hard to smile when he caught sight of me, but I knew they
failed. His handsome, tanned face curled up in a sad grin, dusky blue eyes crinkling at the edges. My heart climbed into my throat and throbbed until he blurred into a human-shaped form that reached out and pulled me against his chest.

He whispered words that meant nothing, nonsensical comfort, into my hair. “Kaia, my love, what’s wrong?”

Over his shoulders, all of the guards had sprung from the water and studied me warily, hands on their weapons. They would kill me if they got the chance, and it hurt that my actions would shorten their lives unfairly. Nothing about this was fair.

I shook my head and held on tighter,
never wanting to let him go. Staying long would be too great a risk with Analeigh digging through the Archives at home, but maybe a few minutes. Thirty at the most. Caesarion had to die at the end of them, but surely I had time before it had to be done. Before the rest of my life without his touch and his voice and the warm presence of his solid, lithe form.

“\textquote“I just wanted to see you.”\textquotear

“I wanted to see you, too. From the moment you left.” He pulled back and studied my face. “There is something else. What has happened?”

Our relationship had begun with a misunderstanding born of the vast gap between our worlds, and there were still so many things he could never
understand. I wished that he could return with me to Sanchi, but it was impossible. We had not perfected time travel from the past into the future—the few attempts had not been successful in circumventing the aging process. Caesarion would be nothing but dust by the time we arrived in 2560.

Staying here wasn’t an option. One second past twenty-four hours and my own organs would liquefy. A voice in the back of my mind whispered that perhaps that was the poetic choice—to die with him in a big pile of romantic goo. But Analeigh was counting on me, and the rest of Genesis was, too. They just didn’t know it yet.

“Nothing happened.”
“You are a terrible liar,” he said with a small smile, before bending to kiss me.

I kissed him back, nothing romantic or sexy about the tears and snot and desperation racing through me and pouring onto him. My legs shook when I pulled away and tried another smile, with a bit more success this time. “I’m actually a pretty good liar. You just see through me.”

“I’m not sure whether that makes me feel better or worse,” he mused.

He grabbed me around the waist and hoisted me onto his chestnut mare, then leaped up into the saddle. His lips moved against my ear, sending tingles and excitement through my abdomen that quickly spilled lower, landing in my
knees. It was a far cry from the way Oz’s whispered questions had affected me earlier that day in the Maldives.

Caesarion kicked the horse into motion, his guards following a little too close for comfort. I almost hadn’t bothered with period-appropriate clothing but was now glad I had—we would be riding past other contemporaries, most likely, and the fewer people I had to take out with my waver, the better. We rode in silence for a while, the clomping of the horses’ hooves and the far-off patter of human voices a low hum in the late afternoon heat.

“How long are you staying?”

“Not long.” I pressed my back harder
“Perhaps until tomorrow?” he nudged.

I didn’t respond. He pointed out animals and constellations as they appeared, but mostly we breathed together in the soft evening. I put my hand over his and pulled the horse to a stop, turning so that I faced him, my thighs draped over his and our fingers clutched together.

My eyes burned and my throat felt raw from holding back the truth. “Your time, Caesarion. It’s now. Not tomorrow. We’ve already changed too many things, and …” I trailed off as my fingers found Oz’s sonic waver in my bag and pulled it loose.
Fear flashed in Caesarion’s gaze. My heart shattered into so many pieces it would take poor Isis a hundred lifetimes to find them and put me back together.

Steely acceptance banished the other emotions racing across his face. When his eyes raised to mine, they held love and sorrow in equal measure. “If I must die, I want it to be in the arms of the woman I love, not at the hands of a cruel executioner.”

The words squeezed the air from my lungs. The request should have made this easier, but somehow it made it worse that he trusted me enough to give me his final moments. To share them with a girl who had made everything in his life harder from the moment she’d walked
I nodded, and tried to gather some courage, because that’s what I had come here to do—kill him. Make sure that the time line was righted before the repercussions were too many and too far-reaching to be recalled. I slid from the horse onto the marshy ground, then pulled my Historian cloak from my bag and secured it around me. One of the biggest barriers to sonic weaponry during its early development was that the person holding the device became as susceptible as their unsuspecting victim, but the cloaks were built with an adequate barrier. I tied it at my throat, ensuring all of my vital organs were covered, except my face. I would do that
Tears spilled down my cheeks. “It will be fast. It won’t hurt.”

Caesarion dismounted and beckoned his guards to do the same, then walked to my side. “I will send them away. If they see you kill me, they will take your life.” He moved a sweaty piece of hair off my forehead. “We can’t have that. You’re going to live a long life, and be happy.”

Happiness seemed impossible in this moment, sacrificed at the altar of my disobedience.

As my True spoke with his guards, who eyed me with distrust but led the horses away until they dropped from sight, I palmed the waver and secured my hood over my hair. My thumb flicked
the safety off, the device slipping against my sweaty skin.

Caesarion closed his eyes, pushed his shoulders back, and waited. Tears burned in my throat and I squeezed the waver harder, trying to remember the thousands at home instead of the one in front of me. It wasn’t working. I wasn’t ready.

Everything Caesarion had taught me about duty felt like faraway concepts when faced with putting them into action. I had been kidding myself. I was still the same silly Kaia—a girl who broke the rules but couldn’t grow up enough to handle the consequences.

He’s already dead, I told myself, trying to use the truth as reassurance.
I couldn’t do it. Failure crashed through my system, the hot despair and self-loathing like slime in my veins, but none of it spurred me into action. I dropped my arm to my side. Caesarion opened his eyes when a sob tore from my throat, but didn’t move to touch me. My weakness was making this harder for him, and that killed me more than anything else.

“I’m sorry.” His face blurred through my tears and I gripped the waver tighter. “I can’t.”

Before he could move, Oz popped onto the scene behind him. He held a second waver in his outstretched hand, his body cloaked from head to toe. His gray eyes flicked wildly about the scene,
probably searching for Caesarion’s guards. “Kaia, close your hood,” he shouted.

My grief cleared immediately, making way for a panic that jammed my racing heart into my throat. It couldn’t be this way. “Oz, no!”

Caesarion paused, looking between us with fear returning to his posture. The scene moved in slow motion as I ran to his side, but as Oz pushed buttons on his waver and tugged the strings to shield his own face, I instinctively did the same.

The telltale, invisible thrums, like the heartbeat of a small animal in your palm or a million lead balls dropped onto a silent gong at the same moment, shook
my blood. I stumbled the final steps, blind with the shield in place, and crashed into Caesarion’s body as it crumpled. We landed on the ground in a heap as my arms found my True Companion’s and held on tight.
“Kaia. Kaia, you have to get up. We have to go.”

The words sounded far away, as though Oz spoke underwater, and for a moment I thought he’d liquefied my organs, too. Then raw sobs replaced his voice, proving I was alive. And the one making a racket. My fingers tore at the strings of my cloak, freeing my face to see Caesarion.

He lay with his eyes closed, looking at peace but for the fluid leaking from his ears and nose, his hand slack in mine. I clutched his tunic, begging my mind to take hold of the rest of me.

“I’ll be seeing you,” I whispered.
My emotions settled sooner than expected. My anger toward Oz for taking this responsibility from me, for robbing Caesarion of final moments filled with love and replacing them with confusion and fear, ripped through me with shocking ferocity. I stood and threw myself at Oz, pummeling his chest with my fists. My hair stuck to the sweat and tears on my face, but as big a mess as I must have looked, it was my insides that would never return to normal.

He’d stolen my job. Ignored Caesarion’s last request. Made me feel as though everything I’d been through with my True had ended in failure, and in that moment, I hated Oz almost as much as I hated myself. “What the hell
do you think you’re doing? This was my job. I was doing it!” I shrieked, too mired in loss to think about being overheard.

“Not fast enough. Kaia, I—” He held me at arm’s length and took my beating, his eyes darkened by sorrow.

The pounding of sandals, of guttural cries filled with rage and hatred, interrupted him. Caesarion’s guards spotted their Pharaoh lying on the ground, obviously killed by these two strangers they had never trusted, and the murder in their eyes said Oz and I were about to pay their price. This time I moved first, yanking my hood back into place and jerking the strings to cover my face. Oz followed suit without having to
be asked, responding to my motions as though we’d been working in tandem, sonic waving memories to death as a team our entire lives.

I flicked off the safety and aimed the waver, hoping no one else had been summoned by the guards’ shouts and wandered into range. The waver pulsed in my fingers for five seconds, and when it buzzed again once, letting me know the area was clear of danger, I undid my hood and surveyed my damage.

The three guards had collapsed in mid-run, their mouths open, eyes turned to goo and melting from their sockets. Oz grabbed my hand, but I jerked it away.

“Be pissed at me if you want, but we’ve got to go. Now.”
My anger had crowded everything else for the past several minutes, but now the panic encroaching on the edges of his voice registered and my heart dropped into my knees.

“What happened?”

“It’s Analeigh. The Elders caught her in the Archives. They’ve got her sanctioned already and they’ve recommended exposure, Kaia. Death. They’re looking for you now, and if they find you here they’ll activate your remote auto-destruct.”

None of it made sense; the information was too much all at once. I didn’t care about me, and the one thing that stuck in my mind, repeated on a loop, was that Analeigh was in trouble.
Because of me. She was going to die because of me.

“No. Oz, why? She’s never been in trouble before, and that’s not a capital offense!”

His own eyes shone with tears. “I don’t know. I swear, I don’t. They’re panicked about something … whatever she found out or stumbled across.”

“They want to shut her up.”

“Yes. And they’ve … they’ve got Sarah, too. Something about private files and schematics.”

“Shit. Shit.” My knees wobbled and threatened to dump me back onto the ground. I reached out and grabbed his arm, using him to steady my legs as my
mind struggled with the transition between losing Caesarion and saving my friends.

Caesarion’s manservant peered into the clearing, his face ashen at the scene. He seemed to want to flee but his feet refused to move, instead he stared at the two of us, so obviously out of place in our cloaks, electronic devices in our hands. I realized we’d both been speaking aloud in English the past several minutes, too.

“Don’t run,” I called to him in Greek. “We’re not going to hurt you as long as you never speak of this day. Take Pharaoh’s body to Alexandria and ensure Octavian learns of his death.”

He nodded and kept bobbing his head
as though it was on a spring. It would have to do.

“Let’s go.”

Oz nodded and set his cuff, beckoning me closer so that the blue field could encompass us both, and we returned to Sanchi.

*
Our time in the decontamination chamber seemed to last an eternity. My heart and body and brain were a mess of emotions, part trying to mourn Caesarion for the second time, part furious with Oz for his interference, and all of me terrified we would be too late to save my best friend.

Analeigh needed us. So, I shoved my emotions into a compartment and locked it tight, intent on dealing with it later. If I wasn’t dead.

I dumped my dress, tunic, and sash into the decontamination pod and stepped into the shower at the behest of the electronic voice that discovered too
many particles on my skin and hair. The air lock was still closed when we were clean and dressed in clean uniforms.

“Tell me.”

“I did. The Elders dragged Analeigh to a public sanction, and you know she can’t lie very well.”

“What did she say? When they asked her why she was in those Archives?”

“Nothing. She said nothing, just sat there and stared at them.”

I wanted to cry, but nothing came out. My tear ducts felt hollow. Maybe the anger crashing through me made it impossible, or the fear tightening my muscles had dried them up. “And then?”

“I left to come get you.”
The air lock clicked open and I shot out the door. Oz pounded at my heels as we climbed from the travel decks of the Academy up to the dorm levels, then raced toward the judgment rooms. I would turn myself in, tell them everything and that I’d made Analeigh do it.

The sight of Teach and Jean outside the chamber stopped me in my tracks so fast Oz slammed into my back, sending both of us toppling toward the pirates. Which, given that they both held sonic wavers at the ready, jammed my heart into my mouth.

Oz and I managed to right ourselves, and I shoved him away.

“What are you two doing?” I
demanded, my eyes searching the corridor. “Is Jonah here?”

Shouts erupted from inside the chamber, a voice that sounded like Oz’s father’s rising above the din in a scream. “Don’t let them leave!”

Jonah banged out the doors, metal ringing against metal as they flew open. He had Analeigh dangling under an arm, her face white and streaked with tears, hair a tangled mess as she struggled in his tight grip.

They both gasped my name at the same time, Analeigh in a wet, broken whisper and Jonah in incredulous anger.

“Let her go, Jonah.” I reached out and locked my hands around Analeigh’s wrists, tugging so hard my cuff...
dislodged from its spot at my elbow, over my wrist, and jangled right onto hers. She pulled toward me, trying to get loose, but Jonah held on tight.

“You don’t get it, Kaia. If you’d just listened to me, this shit show wouldn’t have gone down.” He glanced behind him at the Enforcers and Elders hurrying from the rear of the room, weapons held up, and then Jonah started quickly away. Jean and Teach followed, and I saw Sparrow at the end of the hall, his features pinched and impatient.

“You need to come with us,” my brother shouted over his shoulder as he hauled Analeigh down the hall.

The whole thing happened so fast—Analeigh’s struggle, my brother’s
appearance, the pirates apparently kidnapping my best friend. Two Enforcers pinned Sarah between them in the room even though she didn’t struggle. Her accusing gaze fastened on Oz and me.

Two horrible choices trapped me, too—go with my brother and Analeigh, become an outlaw, break my parents’ hearts all over again, or stay here with Sarah and Oz to face the Elders inside that room. If Zeke knew what I suspected about the Projector and the real reason for its development, he would probably order my exposure, too.

“Kaia!” Jonah shouted once more, his eyes filled with equal amounts of fear and impatience.
I started toward him, but couldn’t move. It took a moment to realize that Oz’s strong arms had snaked around my waist, holding me in a vise so snug there was no way loose, no matter how hard I squirmed.

“Research Zeke’s last name. It’s the answer.” Analeigh’s defeated voice filtered into my brain.

Oz’s arms loosened for a second, as though he’d been shocked by her silent words, which had surely reached him, too, but not for long enough to allow my escape.

“Let me go,” I screamed, beating uselessly at his hands and arms, desperate to get to my brother and my friend, to the only safety left in the
Oz didn’t respond except to grunt under the assault from my fingernails and the few kicks my heels managed to land on his shins.

He’d been working with the rogue Elders this entire time. It had been a stupid mistake to trust him, one I was about to pay for with my life.

With my family’s lives. With Analeigh’s future.

The Enforcers and Elders plus a few scared apprentices spilled around us. Two Enforcers stopped, yanking Oz and me apart and holding me hostage. More raced down the hall toward Jonah and his friends. The desperation in my brother’s face crashed into guilt and
grief.

“I’m sorry, Special K. I’ve got to go.” My brother’s voice broke, telling me that however angry he was with me for not listening, leaving me behind had not been Jonah’s wish. Then my brother and my best friend and the pirates disappeared around the corner, along with my only chance at escape.

*
They left me alone in a small holding pod, perhaps five feet by five feet of thick, clear glass, with nothing inside but a thin bench that ringed the perimeter. Oz guarded me from outside the cell, but even if I’d wanted to talk to him, to ask why he’d held me down instead of letting me escape, the cameras that watched us made it impossible to even think about strategizing.

At least I hadn’t been too distracted in the decontamination chamber to destroy the final recording of Caesarion’s death, and stow Jonah’s chip under my tongue. They would know I’d been out of the Academy without a pass but not that I’d been in Egypt or the extent of my infractions.
Booth approached the outside of the cell, waving Oz away and pressing a button on the wall that allowed his voice to be heard inside the soundproof glass. “The recordings are paused for forty-five seconds. Listen closely. Kaia, how much do you know about the Return Project?”

“Nothing.” It was the truth. I knew something but had never heard the term.

Booth’s eyes narrowed. “Then you had nothing to do with Analeigh’s research?”

“Why should I trust you?”

“You don’t have a choice.” His dark eyes flicked the direction Oz had moved. “You have to lie in the sanction hearing. Lie. You know nothing about what
“Analeigh was doing or the Projector or any possible design to return to Earth Before.”

Booth stared through the glass, eyes locked on mine, while his words tumbled through my brain like a million marbles tossed haphazardly onto the floor. *Any possible design to return to Earth Before.*

“Good luck.” Booth turned and left.

The lights on the cameras turned red again, assuring me that I was again being watched. Oz returned, and we stared at each other through the glass. The unreadable expression in his gray eyes dampened my skin with a cold sweat.

Two Enforcers appeared outside my cell and unlocked the door. Oz motioned
for me to go first, and when he fell in behind me, he whispered, “Follow my lead.”

At this point, it seemed best not to trust anyone but myself.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

It seemed like the entire Academy was jammed into the largest of the judgment chambers. The room felt overly hot, even though no room in the Academy was ever too warm. Sarah’s light blue eyes trained on me, the cool accusation in them quickening the dread in my heart. What had her sentence been for creating unauthorized tech?

Oz climbed the bleachers until he sat beside her, the expression on his face as indiscernible as ever. Whatever the Elders thought they knew about what happened today, they were blaming me alone. Or perhaps, because of Oz’s father, they were choosing to deal with
him in private.

I looked away. The Enforcers took me to the front of the room, where I stood facing a bench of the Academy’s Elders. Zeke Midgley, David Truman, Maude and Minnie Gatling, Booth, Silas Bohr, Rachel Turing, and even the sickly and rarely visible Darya Gagarin had put in an appearance. None of their faces were friendly. Even Darya looked pissed, probably at having been dragged out of bed to deal with the likes of me. Could they all be a part of the secret Return Project, whatever that meant? Booth might be the only one who seemed even remotely trustworthy, though both Silas and Darya never worked with apprentices so they were mysteries to
Zeke pounded a gavel, and the murmurs scuttling around the room quieted. He looked around, hesitance on his features, leading me to believe he questioned the intelligence of holding this session publicly. They had gone out of their way to ensure no one knew about the Projector, but now they thought Analeigh knew and that I did, too. What was to stop me from accusing them in open court?

The answer came quickly enough.

“I don’t need to remind you, Miss Vespasian, that the future of your remaining family rests on your shoulders.” Zeke peered at me over the frames of his glasses, his hard, glittering
gaze making his threat completely clear. “Your brother’s continued antics provide more than enough reason to exile all of you to Cryon, and if you are found to have committed additional transgressions, the Vespasians will be exposed to the vastness of space. Is that clear?”

Cryon might be worse. There were terrible rumors about how people went crazy, started to eat each other and stuff. A shudder racked my body.

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat and nodded. There wasn’t anything to accuse them of, not at the moment. Without proof and facts, talking nonsense about a Projector and a Return Project and rogue Elders would do
nothing but make me sound like a desperate nutcase and get my parents killed in the process.

“Very well. As you may have surmised, your friend and roommate Analeigh Frank was caught out of bed and in the Archives, researching unauthorized historical events and compiling them in a file. What do you know about this?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“The file was started by you several days ago.”

“I believe we talked about the reason for my research at the last, private hearing.” Heat flooded my cheeks, part anger and part embarrassment at having to bring up my supposed crush on Oz, the
boy who betrayed me.

"Your other roommate, Sarah Beckwith, created technology that allowed your brother to travel untracked through the past, and we know she encrypted the personal files in both your and Analeigh’s brain stem bio tattoos. You’re going to say you knew nothing of this, either?"

“I know about the private files but not about her helping my brother.” I cut my eyes toward Sarah, but she avoided my gaze. “I enjoyed having a place for my private thoughts.”

“That is normal for girls her age, Zeke. As we decided with Miss Beckwith—her using her impressive skills to give her friends what amounts
to a diary is hardly worthy of this council’s time,” Darya interrupted in a scratchy voice.

“Yes, but that does not explain where she was last night.” Zeke’s eyes snapped back to mine after glaring at his colleague.

My silence lasted until Truman lost his patience, slamming his hand down and startling me out of my skin. “Answer the question, Miss Vespasian! You were missing last night while your friend added to your unauthorized research files. Tell us how and why this instant, or the Enforcers at the back of the room will be dispatched to your parents’ house without further consideration.”

“I …” I swallowed again, fisting my
sweaty hands. Booth had said to lie, but the best one danced outside my reach. Nerves buzzed in my ears and tears burned in my throat. Analeigh was gone, Sarah had been sanctioned.

“I took her to the past so we could be alone.”

Oz’s voice forced the deep breath I’d taken out in a *whoosh*. The room exploded with shocked exclamations and excited whispers. Zeke pounded his gavel, shouting over the din, as I looked up to find Oz standing, his own hands clenched.

Sarah’s eyes filled with tears of betrayal, and sliced my battered heart in two. After all of the promises I’d made her that nothing was going on, here was
her boyfriend, admitting the opposite in front of all of our classmates.

It wasn’t true, but there was no way I could explain that to her now.

My voice had abandoned me. Oz climbed down the bleachers and arrived at my side the same time Zeke finally gave up on settling down the room and ordered everyone out. Truman’s furious gaze flicked from his son to me and back again. Even though I refused to meet it, the pain from the white-hot accusation burned my skin.

The room fell silent after everyone exited, reluctant expressions on most faces. I tried to catch Sarah’s eye, to convince her with my gaze alone that she could trust me, but she refused to look up
as she filed past us and out of the room.

We were alone with the Elders. As before, I wanted to protest, to punch Oz and run, to deny it all—but doing that would put my family at risk. If Oz had been acting with the permission of the rogue Elders and it meant I could stay at the Academy and try to figure out what was going on, try to find a way to get Analeigh back, then let them think it.

“Mr. Truman, where did you procure a cuff? Neither of you are full Historians so they haven’t been issued to you.” Zeke asked the question carefully, eyes warning Oz to play along.

That told me all I needed to know about whether all of the Elders were involved in this harebrained, potentially
deadly scheme to try to restore Earth Before.

“IT’s mine,” I said. “I found it in Jonah’s room at home.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Oz shift slightly. His cloak fell farther down around his wrists, hiding the cuff he probably still wore. If the Elders glimpsed his surprise in the slight jerk of his shoulders, they said nothing.

“What is the cuff now?” Booth asked.

“Jonah took it back. He was just here. Did you see him?” I couldn’t help the sass. Knowing that at least some of the Elders were in as tight a spot as me right now gave me a slight edge of power.
Truman glowered. “You would be wise to watch your smartass mouth, Miss Vespasian.”

Minnie Gatling waved in his direction, a frown on her wrinkled mouth. “Language, David. Now, the two of you have been sneaking off to engage in an affair of sorts, since Mr. Truman is betrothed to his True Companion, Sarah Beckwith. Since you discovered a cuff in your brother’s room, the past seemed like the safest place to meet without being discovered. This is correct?”

I ground my teeth together and nodded.

“And you know nothing about Analeigh Frank’s research trajectory or how your brother, the rebel Jonah
Vespasian, knew to arrive in time to rescue her from her sentence today?” Maude prodded.

I definitely didn’t know the answer to that, though I wished more than anything that I did. How had Jonah known Analeigh was in trouble? Why had he come to save her but left me behind? “No, ma’am.”

“And Oz?” Darya’s feeble voice crackled like old paper.

“I know nothing of Analeigh’s research, Elder Gagarin. Or of any pirate activity.” He said the last part with such disdain there could be no doubt how he felt about my brother.

“You should know that Miss Beckwith has been sanctioned heavily
and her certification will be delayed one full year.” Maude raised her eyebrows at me, but no one waited for me to answer.

I didn’t have anything to say. I already hurt so badly for Sarah I couldn’t stand it.

“You have been warned before, Miss Vespasian,” Zeke cut in. “Your multiple sanctions of cleaning duty seem to not have worked as a deterrent.” He sighed and sat back in his chair. “Of course, finding a cuff and not turning it over, then using it to travel without an overseer … that is more serious than carrying on a relationship with someone’s True or digging through unauthorized archives.”

The air in the room thickened and swirled, made it hard to breathe. The
eight of them conferred about my sentence through their throat tattoos in whispers too soft to be overheard.

Oz reached out and slid his hand into mine, pulling me against his side. I wanted to push him away, but without him there, I might have fallen down. Instead, I leaned into his side.

“Your parents are hereby exiled to Cryon. You will complete your Historian apprenticeship, delayed one year and without any input into your specialization, and without further infraction, or you will join them.” Zeke pounded his gavel.

“No,” I gasped as my knees gave out.

Oz wrapped an arm around my waist, holding me up before the cold floor
rushed up to smack me. My brain and body went numb. The tears that flooded my eyes, washed down my cheeks, and dripped off my chin were silent.

“Mr. Truman. Please see Miss Vespasian to her room and then return for your own sanction. Say your good-byes—the two of you would do well to avoid each other in the future.” Zeke glowered.

Oz nodded at Zeke and started to drag me away. My brain screamed, finally urging my feet into motion, and I broke away, rushing back toward the bench.

“Please, send me away. Please. Not my parents. They didn’t do anything wrong, they’re good people, they’re important. It’s me. I’m the bad one.” The
words tumbled out, tripping over one another in a race to get off my tongue first.

The Elders didn’t answer. Not one of them responded to my pleas, their faces cold and stony in their refusal to recant their sentence of exile. Only Booth met my gaze, the tiniest bit of sympathy flickering in his rheumy eyes. Oz’s hands were gentle this time as they grabbed my waist and hoisted me off the floor, then prodded me out of the judgment chamber.

*
We made it almost back to my dorm before my mind snapped out of the fog. I jerked free from Oz’s grip, then whirled and slapped him across the face. “How could you?”

“How could I what? Save your life?” He took the strike without flinching, his stormy eyes roiling with a confusion of anger and hurt. “Or are you referring to my handling your business in Egypt since you obviously weren’t going to be able to do it on your own.”

The pain that spiked at the mention of Caesarion almost broke me in two. “Save me? By letting Analeigh get kidnapped? Breaking Sarah’s heart for the second time? If you would have let me go with Jonah …” I trailed off. There
had to be a reason for Oz’s actions. All this time I assumed he’s been acting, been lying, the same way I had but now … what if he hadn’t?

When he kissed me the other night, when he followed me into Egypt … just now, when he’d confessed we had feelings for each other and handled me so gently … no. I shook away the stupid thought. He had a True, the chance at a lifetime with the one person in thousands of years who matched him. No way he could fight that feeling. I knew from experience, now.

“If you had run off with your brother, your parents would have probably been exposed. The penalty for having both of their children turn pirate, leave behind
the System wouldn’t have reflected well. Not to mention you would be branded an outlaw, meaning both you and Analeigh would never be able to return.” He swallowed, blinking his eyes hard. “And let me worry about Sarah.”

Shame and guilt burned in my throat, making it hard to hate Oz more than I hated myself.

His face softened. “This way, your parents are alive. Analeigh was technically kidnapped, even though she was in trouble, so should anything change in the future she could still return.”

“What’s going to change, Oz?”

He paused, swallowing a half dozen times as his eyes swept the hallway. “I
need you here, Kaia. You’re the only person who knows what’s going on.”

My laugh sounded like someone was trying to strangle me with a tube sock. “I have no idea what’s going on, Oz. And you heard them. If I put one more toe out of line, it’s curtains for me and my family.”

“I was running some trajectories last night on the Projector when everything started to hit the fan with Analeigh and Sarah. Kaia, I think there’s more going on, like you said. I don’t think the Projector is just to enhance our understanding of how things went wrong, and I don’t think the missions they’ve been sending me on are simply to test the validity of the trajectories. If they
continue to alter such significant developments, it’s not only death for your family. It’s curtains for all of us.”
Epilogue

Sanchi, Amalgam of Genesis–51 NE (New Era)

The months had stretched out, each day lonelier than the one that preceded it. I had no friends. Sarah and I existed largely in silence; she and Oz had patched things up, though I had no idea how he’d managed that or how much he’d told her since three months had done little to return our friendship to normal. Or even frigid.

I had a right to be angry with her, too, given that she’d done something illicit for my brother and never thought to mention it, but my guilt overshadowed my indignation. Every night before bed I
told her nothing had happened between us and she said she knew, but other than to talk silently about how we might clear Analeigh’s name, we didn’t speak.

The fact that I’d failed in Egypt haunted me every time I closed my eyes. In my mind, it meant I might not be as cut out for this job, for this life, as I’d always believed. Even though my work improved, my enthusiasm waned.

Observations continued, as did the reflections and group sessions, lunches and dinners. The Elders watched me closely, but nothing had happened that allowed me to distinguish the ones who were part of the so-called Return Project and those who weren’t. Oz and I hadn’t had a moment alone to speak—the
overseers assured we took separate trips, our reflection times were opposite, and the group sessions were always supervised.

We’d returned from a trip to England, where we’d witnessed the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. The rest of the class had been issued a pass for Oz’s birthday celebration at Stars in My Pies, and although they would have given me one, too—for all of the anger and watchful eyes, the Elders outwardly took care to treat me the same—I didn’t feel welcome. Or like celebrating. At all.

I didn’t know how to go through the Archives without triggering some kind of alarm, and clearly whatever Analeigh had learned about Zeke’s family had
gotten her into trouble. I still had Jonah’s scrambling chip, but no chance to use it—not to mention nowhere to go, even if I hadn’t lost his cuff.

Oz had said he needed me here, to help him figure out how to get the proof we needed about the danger of the Return Project to present to the full Elder Council, but I felt useless. Analeigh had been gone, stars knew where, for three months. My parents had been banished the day after the hearing. I hadn’t even been allowed to say goodbye.

The suspicion that the reason they had been banished and not me was because they wanted me here to monitor my movements. It made no sense that
Analeigh would be exposed, my parents banished, but I would remain here, my day-to-day life largely unchanged.

I brushed my teeth and climbed into bed with my mom’s copy of *Pride and Prejudice* when my best friend appeared out of nowhere on her bed. Like she never left.

I threw myself into her arms and we held on for dear life. Relief and guilt and loneliness so strong it forced sobs from my gut crashed through me like thunder, and for a long time we cried together. Then I realized she must have traveled here from the future, and that Sarah and the others would be back soon. We couldn’t waste all our time crying.

“What are you doing here?” I
managed, wiping the wetness from my cheeks.

Her white-blond waves were piled high atop her head in a messy bun and her Historian clothes had been swapped for shorts and a blue tank top with green dots that hugged her slim figure and showed off her chest. Pink splotches decorated her cheeks and excitement lit her green eyes behind her glasses, still in place after all this time. The angry scar on her wrist and throat where the golden bio-tat had been was new, though.

“I had to see you. We’ve been working on how to get back inside without tripping the new security but it’s taking forever.”
“There’s new security?”
“Yes. It’s good, too. Sarah designed it. They probably made her.”
“Are you okay?”
“I’m fine. Your brother is fine, too.”

The pink splotches deepened before her eyes turned sad. “Your parents are doing okay. They’re confused and we haven’t spoken to them, only checked in since Cryon is pretty heavily monitored, but they’re safe.”

“I miss you.”
“I miss you, too. I want to come back, but this is bigger than you and me. Jonah knew about this Return Project—they recruited him at the beginning, bribed him with the incentive of saving Rosie
Shapiro, then left him no choice but to run when he found out their end game was to return to Earth.”

“How is that even possible? Will there be anyone left to take back with them?”

“Jonah left the Academy more than three years ago, so who knows what they’ve figured out since then. He thinks Oz was probably roped in somehow, too, and that they didn’t tell him the full scope of consequences.” She paused. “Have you talked to him? Oz?”

“No. They keep us apart, but if they plan on sacrificing people in order to return, I’d guess he didn’t know.” I paused, trying to decide what to ask next. “How did Jonah know we were in
trouble?”

“When we visited him and he pulled me aside?” She waited until I found the memory and then continued. “He gave me a beacon in case we needed him. They have access to satellite feeds on the ship and it beamed a signal. I slapped it under one of the table comps when the Enforcers caught me in the Archives.”

“Why didn’t he give it to me?”

“He knew I’d recognize trouble even when you refused to ask for help.” She smiled, but it was quick to fade. “I have to go. Sarah’s going to be back soon, and you’re going to have your hands full. We need her on our side, Kaia. She’s the only one in the Academy with the brains
to outsmart their tech.”

“What do you mean, I’m going to have my hands full? And what were you trying to tell me about Zeke’s last name?”

“When I researched environmental causes of our evacuation, his paternal founder—Thomas Midgley, Jr.—kept coming up. He pretty much had the biggest singlehanded detrimental effect on the environmental destruction of Earth Before. Gasoline and fluorocarbons, among other things. We know Truman’s ancestry. The Elders involved all come from families with negative impact on our previous society—so they’re trying in some sick way to make it right.” Her cuff beeped and she
looked down. “Gotta go, Kaia. I’ll come back soon.”

She hugged me and disappeared before a protest could slip past my lips, and the door to our room swung open a split second later. Sarah’s pale face caught me off guard, along with the tears streaming down her cheeks. Hurt and anger burned like wildfire in her icy eyes. She crossed the room in two steps, reeled back, and slapped me across the face.

My eyes watered, cheek blazing under my palm. “Are you off your nut? What the hell did I do?”

She shoved a crumpled blue card into my hand, went into her room, and slammed the door. Still trying to retrieve
my senses from where they’d been smacked loose, I looked down at the paper, dazed. Oz’s name and bio information printed across the top, along with his birthday—today.

Underneath it, the name of his True Companion marched in black typeface against the light blue background, impossible to miss, even harder to believe:

*Kaia Ruth Vespasian (August 16, 33 NE—)*
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About the Author

Trisha Leigh is a product of the Midwest, which means it’s pop, not soda, garage sales, not tag sales, and you guys as opposed to y’all. Most of the time. She’s been writing seriously for five years now, and has published 4 young adult novels and 4 new adult novels (under her pen name Lyla Payne). Her favorite things, in no particular order, include: reading, Game of Thrones, Hershey’s kisses, reading, her dogs (Yoda and Jilly), summer, movies, reading, Jude Law, coffee, and rewatching WB series from the 90’s-00’s.
Her family is made up of farmers and/or almost rock stars from Iowa, people who are numerous, loud, full of love, and the kind of people that make the world better. Trisha tries her best to honor them, and the lessons they’ve taught, through characters and stories—made up, of course, but true enough in their way.

Trisha is the author of THE LAST YEAR series and the WHITMAN UNIVERSITY books. She’s represented by Kathleen Rushall at Marsal Lyon Literary Agency.

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