

DEVIANTS

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AIDA AUSUM

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Thank you to those who have inspired me on the way to completing this novel. To my cat, who always made sure to sit on my laptop whenever I wanted to write. To my mother, who never questioned what I was writing about every time I said that “I needed to get my writing groove on”, and to my friends who never once told me to stop. And to you, who is reading this, and wonders why I would ever let my cat plant his hairy butt on my laptop.

I don't. He's just a sneaky bastard.

Chapter 1

Her name had been Rosie, like my sister. She was five years old when she died and her parents' names were Marc and Hellen. The fire that burnt their house took them all and although the firefighters tried desperately to stop the fire from spreading, it was reported that the flames almost seemed to have a life of their own, and spurred up every time they seemed to simmer down again. A young boy, no older than fifteen, was found on location and had been detained. He was the source of the fire. He had killed them all. He had killed Rosie, Marc and Hellen.

I forcefully closed my eyes, refusing to think about the entire ordeal again and snatched the remote off the table, switching the television off. The newscaster would not stop talking about the deaths of the small family in the North. It had almost become an obsessive news article for the newscasters to salivate over. News about Deviants had been coming in almost weekly now and that was a novelty. Though they had been a source of news for a while, the recent increase of mentions had not gone unnoticed by anyone. If anything, the news reports involving Deviants did nothing but confirm the suspicions people had when they were against their existence. Deviants were evil and dangerous. I refused to believe it, but everyone around me

didn't. I didn't have a reason to fear Deviants, nor did I want them gone. What I wanted gone, were my nightmares.

There was almost an uncanny resemblance between the nightmare I'd had a few days before the fire and the actual incident. The face I'd seen in the nightmare apparently belonged to Rosie — she had remained unnamed for the longest time, until her small, chubby face had appeared on the news. Briefly, her little face flashed in front of my eyes as I remembered the nightmare I had so desperately been trying to forget and I once again closed my eyes in order to suppress it. The one thing that had stuck with me through everything had been the little girl's face and the darkness that consumed her. If I didn't think about it — and that damn newscaster would keep her mouth shut and wouldn't publicly display pictures of the now deceased family all over the news — I'd be fine.

"Such terrible news, about the family," my mother piped up when she looked up, slightly bewildered when I turned the television off.

"I'm getting tired of hearing about it," I sighed in response, pressing my knuckles into the hollows of my eyes.

"Are you alright? You look a little pale."

Of course I did. I hadn't slept well for a few days now because of the nightmare. I hoped that somehow, now that the event had actually transpired, the nightmare would fade from my subconscious also, but that was only wishing on my part. At first

the whole situation had freaked me out, but now... I was willing to pretend this had all been a coincidence. I'd be able to believe myself, if I tried hard enough.

"I'm fine," I answered as I walked passed my mother and patted her on the shoulder. "Just a little tired, is all."

She continued to go on about being well-rested and not staying up past eleven, eating enough vegetables and taking enough vitamins — all things I had already heard before during one of the many lectures she'd given me about a good night's rest. I nodded and gave her a few 'mhm-mhm's' to make her think this actually had a point before she grabbed the remote I'd carelessly tossed onto the couch and turned the television back on.

"If you're leaving the room any way, why turn the television off? I like watching the news, actually," my mother emphasized sarcastically.

When I dared to look at the television again, I was greeted by — surprise — more Deviant news. Apparently the young boy who had been found and detained had been sent to 'a government facility' and 'awaited further prosecution.'

"See — what did I tell you?" my mother started, nudging her head in the direction of the television. "Deviants are dangerous. I always told you, didn't I?"

Deviants were people who were gifted. They could do things, like set things on fire or conjure water from thin air. They weren't superheroes or anything, because they bled and died all

the same as the average human being did, but they were capable of things that not everyone could do. The gifts started manifesting once they were teenagers — although there had been a few rare cases of young children displaying the gifts in the past once or twice —, and once that stage had started, there was no telling what would happen. Not everyone was a Deviant — they were rare and it was considered a blessing if your household was free of them. They were considered to be dangerous and a menace and almost created a stigma on the family they came from.

The government wanted the Deviants to solely use their powers for the government itself, as they saw fit and there were always Deviants who refused. For a while, that was alright. People coexisted all the same. But after a while, things became ... shaky. Things were no longer safe for Deviants.

Supposedly the government created a place where Deviants were brought to be taken care of. A place where the government would talk some sense into them and explain to them the urgency behind their requests and the importance of them using their gifts for 'the greater good' and 'the bigger picture'. Rumour on the street was that their gifts would be taken from them permanently if the Deviants declined, but this was all superficial gossiping. Though it was said that this place was near the city center — where the government's officials were also located — the exact location had never been specified. It was called Cocoon — the place of rebirth.

And somewhere — nobody knew precisely where and that was its whole appeal — was a facility that taught Deviants how to properly control their gifts, called the Institution. When the Institution started surfacing more, there was an immediate uproar from the government's side. They believed that Deviants going to an institution where they could practice their special gifts was unnecessary and that it would create large gaps between the normal humans and the Deviants. As a result, an independent group had risen from all parts of the world and had made it their aim to make sure that Deviants would not fall out of order — that group had turned into Cocoon. The government saw their potential and formed an alliance with them, idealizing a world where Cocoon would help Deviants to fit in. The Institution argued that if a Deviant was fully aware of his or her potential and could fully use their gifts, they would be no danger to society. There were only two options for Deviants — either they'd go to the Institution to have themselves tutored, or they'd be caught by the government and were forced to adhere. It was a never-ending cycle, a race of sorts where one tried to outrun the other. They said that Deviants never really remained themselves if the government got to them.

"Yes, mom," I voiced, unimpressed. "You were always right. Deviants are scary, looming and evil people who aim to take your soul and devour it for dinner."

My mother merely scoffed and I heard her mumble something about me getting too cheeky, but she said nothing further and disappeared into the bathroom. My mother and father were never too fond of Deviants. Like the average human folk around us, they feared Deviants and expected the worst from them. I'd met several Deviants when I'd been younger. Since there was never really a place where the kids who knew that they were Deviants could go to, they always got together in abandoned warehouses or storage lofts that had been left here in the West. They remained unused for the longest time and by the time the local kids were well into their teen years, every one of them knew that that was where Deviants went to show off their talents. Hiding from the government was part of the fun, apparently.

I'd gone to those locations several times and had met a few of them. Although they were all show-offs, they weren't bad people. At the time, I was around six years old and I assumed they were some kind of magicians. I wanted to be their friend. But they soon disappeared off my radar. They stopped coming outside to play and they stopped attending school. And when we'd ask where they went, the adults would simply say, "They came and took them." We never really understood who 'they' were, but as I got older, I learned that 'they' were the Locators. Locators worked for the Institution and would go around the country and persuade Deviants to come to the Institution to be tutored, instead of letting the government get to them. Little by little, the Deviants that I

knew about went away and disappeared off the face of the earth, it seemed. I never saw them again and no one mentioned them.

It was late in the afternoon when the doorbell rang. My father, who'd come home from work, called me into the living room with the most urgency he'd ever done in my twenty years of existence and when I entered, I stopped abruptly. A group of individuals stood in our living room and when I came into the picture, they all looked at me. Locators. A group of six, no more, dressed in clothes that were surprisingly casual. For some reason, I'd always expected them to be dressed in long, leather capes.

"Are you Lilian Holly?" the one at the front asked. It was a young man with brown curly hair and dark brown eyes and he easily towered over the rest of the group, even though the majority of them was also male.

"Yes," I answered simply. "And you're a Locator, aren't you? A very big one, at that."

I felt a strong jab in my side - no doubt from my mother, but the man did not seem offended. In fact, he smiled and nodded once.

"I am, and so you know why we're here," he answered. I mentally decided to call him The Giant, just in case he wouldn't give me his name. "My name is Paul Terran. These are my colleagues. Unfortunately we don't have enough time to properly introduce ourselves as much as we'd like."

"Locators don't usually come over for tea," I answered quietly, knowing very well why he was there. Locators only came over for one reason, but in my case it made absolutely zero sense. Paul shrugged as he let his eyes drift along several spots in our house. I turned to my parents for a second, eyeing them to see if they knew what to do, but they seemed equally as dumbstruck as I was.

"We are incredibly pressed for time," one of the women in the group spoke up. Her voice was incredibly soft, which was strange since she looked tall and imposing. The fact that she was wearing unnaturally high heels didn't make her look any smaller either. "We are taking your daughter with us."

Although we all knew what it meant to have Locators in your house, this news was a blow nonetheless. It didn't make sense. It was my father who spoke before any of us could.

"That doesn't make any sense. I am not a Deviant," he winced as he said the word, "and neither is my wife. How could she possibly be one?"

Paul smiled at him, apparently having expected this exact response, because his reaction was timed and eloquent.

"Deviants are unique individuals. They don't necessarily need a Deviant bloodline to have their gifts manifest. Deviants are Deviants, regardless of their family members or their history."

My mother seemed unconvinced. "But she has never used any of the gifts," she tried and she lightly tugged on my father's

shirt as if that was going to change anything. Paul's eyes drifted from my mother's to mine and he raised his eyebrows at me. What? What did that look mean? My mother was right, I hadn't used any magic — none that I'd been aware of, anyway. Twenty years of utter moments of exceptional stupidity and my awe at seeing actual Deviants use their gifts was proof of that. Surely if I had any gifts, I would've used them to make my life a little easier and I surely would've seen this visit coming a mile away.

"I believe you'll find that your daughter would disagree." Would I? What did he know that I didn't?

I eyed him carefully, hoping that I'd be able to read anything off his face, but he only kept his eyes steadily on mine.

"Your dreams are rather terrifying."

Oh. *Oh*.

"That's a gift?" I prompted, ignoring the fact that I could see my parents both straighten up at my reaction, clearly more confused than ever. They had always said that I was without any gifts, that I was just like everyone else and I had agreed with them. I wasn't casting spells left and right or making water appear out of thin air like some of the other kids around me had been. I hadn't been shipped off to the Institution like their next project. Now that the Locators were standing in my living room, it seemed that that was exactly what was going to happen.

Paul nodded slowly and he seemed satisfied that I had come to my realization quickly. "Ardorim, even."

"She's *Ardorim*?" My father seemed even more surprised than I was and my mother was apparently at loss for words. She simply stood alongside my father, her fingers pressed gingerly against her lips, her eyes wide.

"We don't know yet," the woman from earlier jumped in. "That's why we need to take her with us. What she displayed is an *Ardorim* skill. *Ardorim* Deviants are not to be left unsupervised — ever."

That was definitely true. There had only been one other *Ardorim* Deviant that I had known about. A young boy who was whisked away from his parents when he was fourteen years old. The Locators rushed into his house like it had been on fire and took the child after extreme persuasion towards the parents. No one knew what had happened to the boy, but back in the city it seemed to be all the rage to make up the most incredulous stories as to what had happened to him. In one scenario, he'd died. In the other, he'd been abducted by the Locators and used as a research specimen. I was waiting for the scenario in which aliens came from the sky. Regardless of what had happened to him, it was logical that he had been taken. *Ardorim* Deviants did not conjure fire, or water or anything that had to do with the elements. *Ardorim* Deviants were sorcerers who used the mind — healers, telepaths and so forth. It was the Division of Spirit, of the Soul.

Everyone had Spirit in them and that would technically mean that everyone was *Ardorim*. In essence, that was true —

every Deviant was able to master some of the gifts that were considered exclusive to each Division, but it was considered extremely difficult. The Deviants who were considered true, whole Ardorim exerted a certain amount of power and were faster at learning gifts. Things like mind reading, mind control and similar things were the basic gifts of an Ardorim, where the gifts in the other Divisions were much tamer. Ardorim Deviants were considered gifts themselves to the society and needed to be nurtured and tutored in order to stay pure.

In the back, behind the Giant and the other female stood a man who had become increasingly harder to ignore. I'd tried to focus on The Giant and him alone, but his companions were all equally as interesting to look at. And although I felt like I'd been gawking at them for far too long, this man kept regaining my attention, no matter how often I would look away. He eyed me with such curiosity that I ended up frowning slightly. He seemed to be more curious about what I was thinking than whether I'd go with them or not. He probably assumed I was going to come with them anyway. But his eyes — he was hiding something. He eyed me like he had a secret to share, but couldn't because he'd be in trouble if he did. He eyed me like he could peer into my very soul if he wanted to.

There was something hovering around him like a quilt of energy of some sort and although it resembled the darkness that I'd seen in the dream the Giant had mentioned, this wasn't hostile.

It was bright and powerful, and most importantly, very warm. Inviting even, but I didn't understand why. The longer I kept my eyes on him, the longer he seemed to be pleading me for something and I couldn't figure out what it was. It was unsettling, unnerving and I forced myself to look away, refocusing on Paul. Perhaps the Locators weren't as unsuccessful in scaring me as I'd previously thought they were.

"You can provide my daughter with the protection and education she needs?" my mother asked, her eyes scanning Paul's face in both wonder and fear.

"There is really no reason to worry about anyone needing protection, but should it have to come to that then yes, we can provide your daughter with sufficient protection," he answered calmly, obviously trying to calm my parents down. It seemed to work slightly as they glanced at each other, remaining quiet.

"She will be trained at the Institution. Instructed on how to deal with her gifts. Once she has been taught everything she needs to know, she will be able to return to her everyday life if she so wishes."

My mother scoffed — she believed I'd naturally want to return to my everyday life. Judging by Paul's choice of words, that wasn't as normal as my mother guessed and that fact alone made me even more curious than I already was. Was the Institution some kind of Deviant paradise I wouldn't want to leave once I'd arrived?

"I really don't know about this," my mother spoke up quietly, though her voice left no room for speculation whether she meant what she said or not. "We've heard stories about the Institution, and not all of them were as positive as you would like us to believe—"

My father straightened a bit and briefly touched my mother's back, making her glance up at him. It was the nicest way he could've told my mother to simmer down and it had the desired effect. My mother, who was known for voicing her opinion even when she wasn't supposed to, exchanged glances with my father and swallowed her words back.

"What my wife is trying to say is that there have been a lot of stories about children going missing and never being heard of again. Let alone all the information the government is giving us. Forgive our ignorance if it is all incorrect, but we are inclined to believe that at least some of it could be based on the truth."

A woman with shoulder length brown hair stepped forward, looking less intimidating than her colleague who had spoken up before. She smiled at my parents, small laughter lines appearing around her bright eyes. "It is understandable that you have doubts — you have every right to them. But the information you have been given by the government is not true, I can assure you that. We are all Deviants who were tutored at the Institution. We know what we're doing and what is best for our fellow sorcerers." She walked up beside me and gave me the same gentle

smile she had given my parents not a few seconds before. It was a calm gesture and I breathed out slowly, trying to adopt a similar steadiness to the woman standing beside me.

"If the government decides to take your daughter with them, she will have no choice but to do as she's told. She'll be assigned a place to work, regardless of whether she wants to or not. The government, as you might have heard already, wants Deviants to be solely used to improve the country, our military and anywhere else they see fit. They take away the sorcerer's free will and risk letting them operate in every day life without fully harnessing their gifts. It is dangerous, first and foremost, and that is what we want to prevent. Training is essential and we believe the Institution is the best place to undergo it."

An uncomfortable silence hung in the air and I watched my parents carefully. My father kept his eyes focused on the carpet underneath our feet for the longest time.

"We can't make the decision for you, Lilian," my mother piped up, her voice firm. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and that stance alone was enough to tell me how she felt about it, but there was a mutual understanding between us. She was letting me know what she thought of the whole situation, but this was not her decision to make. I was an adult — their opinions were only guidance.

"The choice is yours, Lilian," my father spoke up, casting his focus on me. Yes, the choice was mine. I had thought about it

for weeks, months of my life, wondering if perhaps I was a Deviant myself when I'd see the others and what I would do if I turned out to be one of them. It had been both a fantasy and a fear, balancing on a chord of uncertainty. Would I want this life and if so, what kind of life would it be?

Would we be sorcerers who cast magic left and right, making the world so much more beautiful than it seemed, or would we be pariahs, dangerous and a menace to every day society? Which side was a lie and which side was the truth and was I willing to find out?

I had made my choice a long time ago.

"I'll go."



I was led outside by the Locators in silence. The streets were empty, as was common here in the West. People didn't go out unless they had to, for groceries and such and the neighbours never talked or greeted each other in any way. If conversing with each other was not necessary then it was not done at all. The people here weren't too social, but it was simply because of the area we lived in. It wasn't safe where we lived, with thugs and others out who only had bad intentions. We'd learned the hard way that, not responding at all sometimes could save your life. Still, I saw the curtains in one of the houses opposite of mine move

and a curious young girl peeked through them. Beside her, a small boy, who I knew was her younger brother, eyed us expectantly.

The people here weren't properly informed about Deviants, but we all knew what this meant. I would've known what it meant too, if I'd seen it happen to anyone else. Locators were hard not to recognize. When I glanced around curiously, I saw more curtains move in several different households and in a small few, some even opened the front door to see what was going on. It almost seemed like someone was being arrested, judging by how they were acting. I would probably be shunned by some of them now that they knew I was a Deviant.

The Locators didn't seem to have any specific instructions for me to follow and instead, the calm woman who'd spoken earlier grabbed hold of my hand. She gave it an assuring squeeze, which made me look up at her. I hadn't even noticed that I'd been looking down at the floor after I'd forced myself to stop looking at my overly curious neighbours. Their looks, composed of shock and distaste, did not work well for my mood and my conscience. I felt like I'd done something wrong and that they were all judging me now.

Giving the woman a small smile back, I took a deep breath and watched as Paul spoke to my parents one final time. They seemed to be confused and sad more than anything and my heart lurched at the sight of the first tears coming from my mother's eyes. She hardly ever cried, she was a strong woman, yet I couldn't

figure out the exact reason why she was crying. Was she sad that I was leaving, or was she sad that her child was indeed a Deviant? It seemed like that was going to be a question that would remain unanswered, but I would make sure that the time I spent at the Institution would be well spent. If she had any reason to be doubtful of me and the gifts I apparently had, I would make sure those doubts would disappear once I'd return. I forced myself to repeat one thought, as a way to reassure myself that I had made the right decision. *I will never be controlled by our government.*

"My name is Natalie," the woman beside me started. She still hadn't let go of my hand and her voice brought my attention back to her. Thankfully so, because I would've turned into a blubbering mess myself if I had looked at my mother a second longer.

"It's nice to meet you, Natalie," I croaked out. Her shoulder-length auburn hair curled naturally around her face and shoulders and her eyes were piercing, bright blue. Her nose was what caught my attention though — small and cute, almost like a button. Despite this, I could tell she was not one to mess with. The grip she had on my hand wasn't painfully tight, but tight enough to let me know that she was in charge and that she could probably incapacitate me within a matter of seconds.

"You should say goodbye to your parents," Natalie spoke, nudging her head in the general direction of where my parents stood. "For now," she added quietly, giving my hand another

reassuring squeeze like she'd done before, before she let go. I made my way over to my mother and father, both their eyes red from rubbing their eyes to try to keep the tears back — something my mother was failing miserably at. By the time I was in front of her, she hid her head in her hands as I pulled her towards me for a hug.

"You'll be so far away from home," she mumbled against my shoulder. "I assume, anyway. I mean, we have no idea where this place is. I won't know if you're doing well, or if you're not doing well, or if you're..." she stopped briefly before mumbling out the last word which sounded a lot like the word 'dead', but I tried to ignore it. "I don't trust this, at all. If anything goes wrong — anything at all, you come back immediately, do you hear me?"

I pulled out of the embrace and fought the tears that I felt stinging in my eyes and said, "I'm going to be fine. Have you looked at these people? They're capable of keeping me safe. And I'll be back much stronger and capable of taking care of myself."

"She's right," my father spoke up, and even though his face barely showed any emotions, I heard his voice crack. He reached his hand out to touch my elbow briefly and the small gesture made my heart swell with affection. That was my father's way of saying goodbye — he didn't want to cause a scene and knew that if he did, the parting would sting even more than it already did. It was simply so sudden, so unexpected that none of us had time to think of what the correct response to it was. This was all on impulse —

not a few hours ago, I'd been asleep, dreaming and now I was being sent off to the one place parents never wanted their kids to be sent to — The Institution. If all the horror stories were true, I was in for the ride of a lifetime and I wasn't sure if I was qualified for everything that was going to happen, even though I'd said yes.

I knew why I'd said yes. I knew that if I stayed with my parents, knowing I had these gifts, I would go crazy. What would be the point of sitting at home, wondering what the true extent of my powers was if there were people out there willing to teach me? Willing to teach me even more than I could possibly imagine? If they were genuine like they seemed to be, they would tutor me and make me stronger. If I stayed at home, it would only be a matter of time before the government would be on our doorstep, ready to take me away. Unlike some people, I was not a fan of our government. Their perfectly polished facade on television was so over the top sometimes that it was practically impossible not to assume they were lying. Plus, I had seen some Deviants being forcefully taken by Cocoon when I was younger and that definitely did not correspond with them telling the people that Deviants joined them voluntarily.

Natalie extended her hand toward me. I reluctantly stepped away from my parents and took hold of her hand once more.

"The fastest way to travel is through transportation. Are you up for it?" She had an almost devilish smirk on her face that made me incredibly weary of what was going to happen.

"Do I have a choice?" I replied in a hasty chuckle. Both Natalie and Paul let out a small laugh, one that clearly said, 'No, of course you don't.'

"By the ways of fire, water, air or earth?" Natalie asked and as she did, she used her free hand to straighten out some of the wrinkles in her clothes. Everything was so casual, it seemed they were forgetting that I was new at all of this.

"It's alright, we'll do all the work for you this time. Just choose one." Paul gave me a brief nod.

"Uh, by earth?" I choked out, having no idea what possible horrible doom I'd just chosen for myself. But Natalie beamed at me, one of the biggest smiles I'd seen her sport in the time she'd been here.

"Just like I predicted. Don't let go of my hand, no matter what you do."

"Wait, what happens if I do?" I stuttered out, watching as the other Locators disappeared on the spot. Paul literally evaporated into thin air, while a girl next to him went up in smoke. It all seemed so unreal.

"Don't let go," Natalie warned me one last time before I felt a sharp tug on my arm. In the next few seconds, it felt as if I was running a marathon. Wind whizzed by my head and when I dared

to open my eyes, I saw a blur of what I suspected to be people and places all around me. Glancing down at the ground, I noticed that dirt changed to pavement and pavement changed to grass and then suddenly I emerged in what seemed to be a cave. There were more people there, several distraught groups of people and some of them turned when Natalie and I arrived.

"Well, how was it?" she asked, the content smile from earlier still present. I myself had no idea what just happened, let alone how I felt about it, so I stared at her. "Feels good though, doesn't it? Being connected to the earth like that?"

"We were connected to the earth?" I blurted out before she could say anything else. "That felt nothing like being connected to the earth!"

Natalie only smirked at me. "Oh really? And how would you know?"

How? It felt like I was being tossed from left to right and back in one of those inflatable castles that kids used to have for their birthday parties. If that was 'being connected to the earth' then I'd rather stay disconnected.

A man dressed entirely in a blood red suit came up to us and gave Natalie a timid smile.

"A new one, I presume?" he asked, his eyes darting from Natalie's to mine.

"What gave me away?" I interjected sarcastically, letting my eyes trail to the groups of people nearby. Although I was

shaking where I stood, I opted for the semi-confident appearance. Never mind the fact that I felt like puking.

"The usual deer-in-headlights look that every Deviant seems to have when they arrive here at The Harbour," the man replied with an unsettling smirk. I didn't like him and I couldn't quite figure out why. The way he eyed me was almost as if he wanted to know my every secret and it looked like he was busy digging a hole in my mind. The Harbour — that made sense though. The cave we were in was without any water, but there was a long dock that ended quite abruptly somewhere halfway the in cave. The groups of people, who were apparently new Deviants like myself, all stood on the dock in groups of five.

"Come, I'll escort you further," the man smiled, placing his hand firmly between my shoulder blades. I hurriedly glanced behind me at Natalie, but she merely winked and, to my horror, took a step back and dissolved in the rock wall behind her. Was that what it had looked like when she transported me? Did we just dissolve into nothing? If so, I feared my mother and father had had a small heart failure when the Locators took me.

The man continued to lead me onto the dock and after a minute or two, he stopped me in front of a group of three Deviants, which was odd, seeing as the majority of the groups were composed out of five, like I'd noticed earlier.

"You'll join this group here," he said and he looked at us all individually. Beside me was a girl with shoulder-length curly

brown hair and brown eyes, a really tall guy who seemed like he was just as lost as I was and a guy with black messy hair and a deep scowl on his face. In the end, we all looked incredibly the same. Stuck between young and grown-up and completely confused. The group I was in at least looked stable. No one was crying or puking like a part of me wanted to and everyone was equally as curious as I was.

"How did you travel?" the girl asked. She'd been standing next to me from the moment I'd arrived on the dock and eyed me with such curiosity that my first reaction was to frown at her. Why was she so curious?

"By inflatable castle," I answered her, it being the first accurate description that came to mind. Her response was quite unexpected. She scrunched her nose up slightly and smiled as she leaned to the side in order to see what was going on at the end of the dock.

"It's intense, isn't it? I nearly puked." Apparently she wasn't too confused by my inflatable castle synonym and she also had no trouble admitting what I was trying to brush off. Maybe I could learn to like this girl.

Behind us, the guy sporting the scowl scoffed. "Puked? That's a little excessive," he said, keeping his eyes firmly on the line in front of us.

"I was only joking," the girl replied calmly, not offended by the fact that he had jumped at her at the first opportunity he saw.

The guy merely raised his eyebrows at her and shook his head. Apparently he didn't have a very interesting witty comment back at her, because he remained quiet.

"Do any of you actually know what the hell is going on?" a third voice spoke up behind us. I turned and met eyes with the tall, broad guy with curly brown hair. He tried to pretend like he was fine with the whole situation, but his eyes said otherwise. He was nervous and was only doing a partially good job at hiding it. If no one noticed his fidgeting fingers at the corner of his jeans pocket like I had, he'd be golden.

"How would we know — we got here together with you." The other, black-haired guy had a point. None of us seemed to know what was going on and I had arrived as one of the last in the group. I expected them to be more informed than I was, but apparently they were kept in the dark as well. All we knew is that we were — supposedly — going to the Institution. At least, that's what I assumed.

The two guys got caught up in some kind of argument and I let out a small sigh as they did. The cave made their voices echo and blurred out the conversation even more than it already was in their jumbled mix of words. It was the girl who spoke up before I could.

"You Penthayen are always such hotheads," she muttered. Penthayen was the only Division I knew about, aside from Ardorim. Penthayen was the fire Division and were generally

considered troublemakers. They never shut up when they had to and always said the wrong things. All harmless, you'd say, but the problem with Penthayen was that they usually didn't care. That was usually what got them in trouble. Back home, I'd known several Penthayen who had later been taken by the Locators. My parents did not want me to be around them, but sometimes I wondered if I myself wasn't one. I had a big mouth every once in a while and I usually said what was on my mind. I had no filter — that was my biggest problem.

Either way, the girl's comment seemed to capture the guy with the scowl's attention, because he eyed her carefully before the tiniest smile appeared on his lips. Apparently he appreciated the comment a bit more than she had expected.

"And you Delucian are always too gentle," he mused. I could tell by the casual and calm look on the girl's face that she hadn't meant to break up the fight or to say anything to aim for that, but she'd done so by accident.

They lost me at Delucian. I didn't doubt that it was another Division, but I knew nothing about it. My parents never took the time to educate me about the Divisions as they figured I wasn't a Deviant. Wrong move there. All I knew was that Penthayen was fire and therefore danger. Besides that, there was Ardorim, but everyone knew about Ardorim. They were the real superheroes — every Deviant wanted to be one and was ultimately disappointed if they weren't. Even the non-Deviant folk appreciated the

Ardorim, because they often were used as healers and telepaths to connect deceased loved ones with the living. They were valuable and could not stay unprotected and unsupervised, which is why the Locators came and took me from my home. They thought I was Ardorim — I was fairly certain they were wrong, but they didn't want to listen, so here we were. All the information I had, I had collected over the years of talks I was able to have with Deviants, before they disappeared.

"How can you be so sure of what you are?" I managed to ask, eyeing the two young men. It was the taller one who answered me.

"Not everyone sets their entire birthday cake on fire if they just want to light the candles."

It remained silent for only two or three seconds and directly after that, all of us laughed. Even the guy himself laughed and his dispute with the other male seemed to matter very little now. They simply smiled at each other at the aftermath of the story. "I already knew though," the tall guy admitted. "The cake thing happened years ago. I don't know why The Locators never came to get me sooner."

I caught myself trying to think of what it would be like — to simply want to celebrate your birthday, only to light up your entire birthday cake by accident. He must've been terrified and for a few seconds, I found myself pitying him. I had displayed no gifts, ever, and that had been a good thing, I guessed.

"Looks like we're getting closer...," the black haired guy's voice brought me back to reality. He was right — the crowd in front of us was thinning rapidly, with groups of five constantly being called forward. Not much longer until we ourselves would reach the end of the dock, and then ... I didn't quite know. I'd tried looking at those in front of us, but our sight was blocked the majority of the time. It seemed the other girl had noticed the same and we had both given up at some point while we waited.

"I'm Brienne, by the way," she spoke up, giving all of us a genuine smile. She really did seem to be fond of all of us already and how that was possible was a mystery to me, but it was a nice feeling at least — I caught myself smiling back at her.

The tall guy raised his hand in the air to grab our attention.

"Urie," he introduced, smiling as well. I watched as everyone turned to face the other guy and I did the same, eyeing him expectantly.

"I'm Otis," he said after a moment's silence and then the attention shifted to me. "And you, inflatable castle girl?" he chuckled, his hands tucked in the pockets of his jeans.

"I'm inflatable castle Queen Lilian," I joked and that gained several bigger smiles in response. So far, so good. This whole Institution thing wasn't so bad just yet. If this turned out to be a horrible cult where we would meet our doom, at least I wouldn't be alone. The smiles on their faces disappeared quickly enough

and when I glanced over my shoulder, I understood why. We'd reached the end of the dock.

In front of us stood two people, one man and one woman. They too, were dressed in a blood red outfit and the fact that 'blood red' was the only accurate name I could think of to describe it with disturbed me.

The woman smiled, however — a genuine smile, not like the one the man had given me a while back.

"You've almost reached the Institution, there's just a little further to go. Behind me, you'll see a pathway leading off of the dock. Follow it and do not stray off it — none of you. As a security measure to ensure that you all make it to the Institution safely, I would like to make note of your names before you leave."

My focus drifted from her speech as I peered over her shoulder to see that indeed, as she'd said, there was a small, out-of-place looking staircase that led off the dock. It was impossible to see from far away and had made the dock look like it ended, when in fact that was not the case. It was fairly dark, though. I was hoping that whatever crazy path they were sending us on to at least had some lighting ingrained into it.

She took our names one by one — mine, then Urie Musa, Otis Cross and Brienne Tarway — before she stepped aside and wished us safe travel.

Urie took the lead and descended the staircase first and when we saw that he didn't plummet to his death, we followed.

The steps underneath my feet were a little uneven, but they were stable enough to stand on and soon enough they ended, leaving all of us with flat surface. In front of us, Urie hesitated as he eyed us, but when none of us had anything to say or point out, he started moving forward tentatively.

The outline of his back was hard to make out in the dark, but I was relatively close enough to keep an eye on his movements. After a few steps, the only light coming from up and behind us up at the dock, Brienne spotted a small light in the distance.

"Light is good...?" Otis mumbled under his breath and brushed past us with a surprising amount of confidence, an amount that was hardly displayed in the way he'd ended his sentence in uncertainty. The light grew as we walked toward it in silence and by the time we reached the source of it, I was in awe.

In front of us was an arched iron gate, held in place by a solid rock wall around it. The material of the bars were clearly iron, but the light lit them well enough to see that there were strange bumps and cuts in the iron, giving the bars a rough look. Behind the gate was an average sized lit plain room with white square tiles, without anything of significance in it. At the end was another gate, which was ajar just the slightest.

Otis, who had passed Urie in his confidence, was now at the front and placed his hands on the shut gate in front of us in order to shove it open. The edges of the bars glowed fiercely red

for a matter of seconds, the red bleeding into the nooks and cuts I'd noticed before. My eyes absorbed the sight greedily, the crimson lighting up what appeared to be symbols and unintelligible text. Although Otis was momentarily dazed, he squared his shoulders and pushed the gate open. It screeched loudly against the young man's weight but moved, opening the pathway into the lit room.

I heard Brienne mumble something along the lines of '*that was totally awesome*' as we crossed the room slowly — cautiously. Behind me, a loud iron slam made me jump up into the air and my yelp, in turn, made the others jump. When I glanced back, I found the gate locked back in place. The others had stopped momentarily at the sudden jolt and I eyed them sceptically.

"I'm guessing we're supposed to go forward."

Brienne stepped forward this time and pulled the slightly opened gate open further. She pouted slightly in disappointment when nothing significant happened to those iron bars and I watched as Otis let out a chuckle at her expression. Instead of lingering, she turned her head away from him forcefully and moved up the steps, Otis following behind her as he said,

"Hey, not everyone can be cool, you know?"

Urie glanced back at me, one eyebrow raised at the bickering, but my eyes were drawn to the bars of the gate. They glowed bright blue, faintly but assuring and like Otis' red intensity, swiftly and accurately washed over the iron material

and settled between the sharp indents. When I looked back at Urie with a smile, he smiled along with me and then proceeded to ascend the stairs in front of us.

I paused momentarily, lightly hovering my fingers in front of the bars of the gate. If I would touch it, what colour would it glow with? Red was Penthayen, surely. Blue was Delucian, which my mind automatically assigned to water. It would make sense, seeing as Brienne and Otis were complete opposites. This was all so incredibly new to me — everyone already seemed to know something about themselves, but I was in the dark. Perhaps if I would touch it, I would see the bars glow bright red as well and have something confirmed.

I briefly touched the bars, hesitantly and hardly with any force, but before anything could happen I dashed up the stairs with a hint of a smile. It was alright, no matter what colour the bars glowed, or whether they would glow at all. I was a Deviant and that was all that was certain. The rest would become clear eventually, I was sure of it. All I felt at that moment was a mixture of fear and anticipation, a bubble of excitement at the pit of my stomach and a nagging desire to have all my questions answered.

Behind me, I heard the iron gate slam shut.

Chapter 2

I emerged in what seemed to be a large hallway. Above my head were stained glass windows for ceilings and the light shining through it created a mixture of colours. There was a large staircase at the end of the hallway that led to what looked like an ordinary landing and from where I was standing, I could see that there were doors up there. In every corner of the hallway was a door, but they were all firmly closed and to the left and the right were two long corridors. There were several confused looking Deviants in the hall with us, particularly the group of five that had departed down the edge of the dock a few minutes before us. I found Urie standing about two steps away from me and I made my way to his side.

Otis and Brienne were only a few steps away from him and they greedily took in the sights surrounding us. I was about to question any of them if they knew what we were supposed to do, but instead we were approached by a group of people dressed in dark red outfits. What was it with the Institution and the colour red? Luckily this wasn't the blood red that I'd seen before, but it was equally as worrying. They all held little clipboards in their hands as if they had a checklist and they all started to call out names of Deviants who then proceeded to step out of the group and towards them.

"Lilian Holly?" a young woman called out and Urie elbowed me in the side just in case I hadn't heard her. He seemed to know me pretty well already and I couldn't decide if that was a good or a bad thing.

As I made my way over to the front and through the small groups of Deviants, I heard a female voice say "Good luck!" and when I turned for a moment to see who it was, it was Brienne — who I mentally decided to call Bree instead — with both her thumbs up. She was being so nice to me. I wasn't sure if I felt entirely comfortable about it, but I gave her a genuine smile back nonetheless and stopped in front of the woman who had summoned me. She crossed me off the list and instructed me to follow her.

I followed her down a narrow corridor that had passageways to many different doors and rooms, but we entered none of them. Eventually, we stopped at the final door in the corridor and she gestured for me to enter. I entered quietly as she herself took her leave and I immediately spotted a large, black and red ornamented chair in the room with opposite of it a smaller, completely black leather chair. Aside from that, there wasn't that much else to look at. A simple bookcase stood against the wall, but the shelves were not completely filled and some books were even gathering dust.

"Have a seat."

The voice startled me and I jumped up slightly, glancing to the side to see who had addressed me. For a second, I was at loss for words — it was a middle aged Asian man, and he looked like he just got off the runway. Not necessarily because of his face — although his strong eyes and the combination of his facial features made him very attractive to observe — but because of his clothes.

He wore a black suit which looked to be custom made for him with small, golden details at the cuffs and on the shoulders. The most important detail that stood out, however, had nothing to do with material additions to his person. From his left ear, down to his Adam's apple and down onto his chest was a black tattoo. It was a long string of words or perhaps never-ending sentences — I wasn't close enough to make any of it out properly. To my surprise, I spotted the same line of words peek up from under the cuff of his jacket. The words stopped right at the edge of his wrist.

I watched as he took a seat on the smaller black chair opposite of me, his brows furrowed together at the sight of me.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm sorry," I stuttered out, eyeing him curiously. "You surprised me, that's all."

He extended his hand towards the large chair. Right. Have a seat. I was still baffled by the tattoo as my curious side wanted nothing more than to find the nearest magnifying glass in order to investigate the text etched into his skin, but I took a seat anyway.

"So, Lilian Holly," he started, the same gentle smile on his face. "My name is Noah Jurian and I am one of the council members here at the Institution."

A council member. Great. Had I done something wrong?

"You didn't do anything wrong," Mr. Jurian chuckled out almost immediately, as if I had posed the question out loud.

I sat back in my chair so much from shock that I apparently looked like a frightened baby, because his expression changed immediately.

"Please, don't be frightened. Your mind is very open, you see."

"Stop reading my mind!" I gasped out, the words coming out as an unsteady order.

Was he reading my mind? He had to be. He answered a question I hadn't voiced but had only thought and on top of that he basically said that he had free access into my mind.

For a moment, I was tempted to think of a number between one and a thousand and make him guess it, but he started to talk before I could do anything like it.

"I have to, it's part of your particular initiation process," he answered politely. Had he gotten the memo that the Locators thought I was an Ardorim?

"I handle the initiations involving potential Ardorim Deviants," he paused, sitting back in his seat before he continued.

"You choose the ways of the Earth, yet the choice is not correspondent with what I've heard about you."

"You mean the dream thing?" I answered hesitantly.

"Yes," Mr. Jurian nodded. "The...," he paused and cleared his throat. "... dream thing, as you put it. People choose Ardorim but they sometimes cannot handle the power that comes with it. The ones who do, are true Ardorim. Everyone has Spirit in them, or Soul, however you may want to call it, as everyone has a soul. That is the true essence of the power behind the Ardorim — the power that we believe comes from Isis, the Egyptian Goddess of life. Anyone could choose to teach themselves Ardorim skills, but not everyone would succeed in mastering them. Most will, in fact, die trying to master them. Those who carry the gifts with them like it's a part of them are true Ardorim. Their gifts are their second nature, as it is with every Division."

He shifted in his seat, his hands folding together gently. "If, for example, someone incredibly struggles mastering Penthayen gifts, then they are not true Penthayen and the same rule applies to every other Division. If a Deviant struggles with mastering a certain gift belonging to a certain division, it is not their division in the first place. Gifts come naturally once you are sorted into the right division. Ardorim are powerful Deviants. Their power chooses them, just as much as they have chosen it. The violent truth-telling dreams you've had are categorized as Ardorim — we

call it Vision Leaping —, but I have a strong feeling that you are not part of the Division itself."

His little speech made sense, but I still had a lot of questions. Most importantly: if I was not Ardorim, as I had expected from the very beginning, then where did I belong?

"What you did was something entirely different and something quite extraordinary, especially for someone who has not mastered any of the skills yet. I need to know why you have access to an Ardorim skill, while trying to figure out where you truly belong. You've put me in quite a tough position, Miss Holly."

"Can you?" I prompted, my voice hoarse from not having spoken in a while. "I mean, can you figure it out?"

There was an uncomfortable feeling of dread that was starting to creep up on me. Why couldn't I just make bars glow red or have birthday cakes explode? At least I'd know what I was dealing with.

Mr. Jurian reached forward and clasped his hand over mine and the warmth of his palm on mine brought a wave of calmness over me. His fingers were so warm on my hand that I started to wonder if he was perhaps Penthayen, but I had a feeling he wasn't, especially since he had read my mind. No, I had a pretty good idea of which Division he belonged to.

"That girl you saw in your vision was terrifying, wasn't she?" he prompted, his hands releasing mine.