



INDEPENDENTS

TAOREE TRILOGY #2



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Independents

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Independents is Book Two in the *Taoree Trilogy* and is meant to be read as part of a series. This book ends on a cliffhanger, but there is a promise of a happy ending at the end of the trilogy.

This is a gay romance that contains adult language, adult situations, and sexual explicit material between two men. It is rather gruesome, so if you don't like violence, death, blood, and the like, don't read it.

It is intended for ADULTS ONLY.

Chapter One

It had been two days since my brother Wesley's pain began. Two days since his Qiren—those fucking microscopic alien robots—started trying to melt his brain down to allow the Taoree to control him. Two days since Orrean and I started sending our energy, our *light*, into Wes to hold them off. Two days of pushing ourselves to go faster, move farther, and get closer to the Taoree Independent camp. Two *fucking* days and we were still almost two weeks away. Only two and my energy was completely depleted. Two of the fourteen that it'd take us to get there.

How will we ever get him there in time? How?

I can't lose him. I just... can't.

It was still weird to me that I was even able to help Wesley, since I hadn't been able to help Colt. But Orrean had explained that I was able to with Wes because he was a blood relative. And even though Cal was a blood relative of Colt, he couldn't help him because he didn't have some weird connection with our alien friend like I apparently did. A connection that I had ignored since Orrean first mentioned it.

"Did you hear that?" Nolan asked from a few feet in front of me.

"What?" Cal asked him. He was standing behind Nolan, but in front of me and carrying Mandy, his ten-year-old little sister, on his back. Orrean and Wesley were walking on either side of me through a field we were using to avoid the roads.

“I thought I heard someone scream,” Nolan whispered to us.

All of us stopped walking and strained our ears to listen. It took a long moment, but then I heard it. A long, toe-curling scream that sounded like it could be at least a mile away.

We all looked around at one another, then Nolan took off at a run with us right behind him. Nolan and Cal were faster than me, so they pulled ahead. Wes was even slower than I was, so I stuck with him, and Orrean stayed with the two of us too.

I looked over at our alien friend and said, “You should go grab Mandy.” It was well known that Orrean was faster, stronger, and had more acute senses than us humans.

He nodded at me. “I’ll be right back.” Then he ran ahead to Cal and Nolan. I watched as he said something to Cal, then plucked Mandy off his back without either of them breaking stride. Orrean then slowed down to a walk, obviously waiting for Wes and me to catch up.

“You can run ahead, Jeremy. I’ll catch up,” Wes said, breathing heavily beside me.

“No way, little bro. I’m not leaving you and I can’t run much faster, anyway,” I told him honestly as I readjusted my—or Colt’s—blue ball cap on my head. I pretty much never took it off. It made me feel closer to him somehow. Normally Wes and I would’ve been right up there with Cal and Nolan, but my entire body was overly exhausted.

Wes didn’t say anything. He just nodded and kept running, or jogging, really. We were a lot slower than we should have been. The fleeting thought of *I hope we don’t have to run from any Taoree* crossed my mind, but I pushed it down. Better to focus on the here and now and the bloodcurdling screaming we were getting closer to.

“You okay?” Orrean asked both of us as we caught up to him.

“Fine,” I huffed out. Wes simply nodded again. I guess it was easier than wasting his energy by speaking.

We ran for a few minutes as Cal and Nolan got farther and farther from us. I didn’t like being that far from them, but I guess it couldn’t be helped at that point if we wanted to help someone else.

I watched from a distance as the two of them came to a stop with their shoians—the alien weapon made to take out a Feral, aka Feral Sticks—out and ready for attack. I was terrified when they turned a corner behind an old decrepit house and went out of sight.

“Fuck,” Wes panted out. My thoughts exactly.

“Orrean, you need to go help them. I’ll carry Mandy,” I said through my panting.

“I’m not leaving you three,” Orrean stated immediately.

“They need your help more than we do right now,” I argued with the alien who was wearing a hat and sunglasses with his hair tucked in his jacket. If I didn’t know better, I would’ve thought he was just a very tall human. Though there weren’t many humans that were six-foot-eight.

“I’m not leaving you, Jeremy,” he stated more fiercely.

“You need to help them, Orr,” I told him.

“They have it under control at the moment. I can hear them, and we’ll get there before I am needed,” he said, sounding angry and exasperated at the same time. That seemed to be a common combination when he was talking to me.

I gritted through my teeth, “Fine.”

We slowed down once we reached the old house and crept along one wall. I didn’t want to go storming in, in case there were others with weapons. Orrean put Mandy down next to Wes, then whispered into Wesley’s ear. I didn’t hear what he said, but Wes nodded grumpily and both he and Mandy stood against the house’s side. Wes put his arm in front of Mandy. I

figured Orrean had asked him to stay back and protect her. Probably a good idea in Wes's current state... not that I was much better at this point.

Orrean and I rounded the first corner and started walking toward the sound of voices. I couldn't hear what they were saying yet, but I could tell they were fuming. As we got closer, I could hear Cal's voice.

He was yelling angrily, "...you don't, we will shoot you."

A voice I didn't recognize yelled back, "It's none of your business, asshole, so move the fuck along!"

Nolan sounded more pissed than I'd ever heard him. "Release the girl, or you're dead. All. Of. You."

I turned and looked at Orrean with wide eyes. His face looked as horrified as I felt. I mouthed, "How many?" to him. He pushed his sunglasses on the top of his head and closed his eyes for a second, then flicked them open and held his hands up, showing me eight fingers. Twice as many of them than us. *Well, shit.*

I had missed the enemy human's response, but heard Nolan say, "We will kill you."

I heard a few chuckles and the spokesman of the other group said, "You and what army?"

Before I could do anything, Orrean yelled from beside me, "This army, dickhead."

I knew my eyebrows went up to my hairline at his response. He had clearly been spending too much time with us if he was using curse words. I had never even heard him curse... at least not in English. Usually he only used Taoree curses, much to the amusement of the rest of us. When he saw my face, he did a weird shoulder roll that I always assumed was the equivalent of a shrug.

"Show yourselves or we'll kill your friends," Evil Spokesman said.

“If you so much as harm one hair on their bodies, you won’t live to regret it,” Orrean responded. My eyebrows remained where they were—in my hair—because I wasn’t used to him being so livid and forceful. He was usually more on the quiet and calm side... well, unless I said something to piss him off, but still, he *never* sounded like that when he spoke to me.

As if reading my mind, Orrean looked at me and whispered, “No one threatens or hurts my friends.”

I nodded at him and whispered back, “Good to know. So what’s the plan?”

Evil Spokesman was yelling for us to come out, but we ignored him in favor of making a plan. Once I agreed, Orrean pulled his sunglasses back on and ran off into the shadows.

I yelled to the evil group, “You have sixty seconds to let the girl go and leave this area or we will take you out.”

“Shit, Darren, that was a different guy,” a new voice said. “They could have more people than we do. It ain’t worth it.”

Evil Spokesman answered, “The girl is mine. I ain’t gonna le—” his words were cut off by the sound of a flying bullet.

I knew that was the signal, so I stepped out in time to see the man who had been yelling fall to the ground from a bullet to his head. Orrean had gone around to the other side of the old house and taken out the leader of the group. There were a few yells, but it didn’t look like any of them had guns. Still, I aimed my gun—or my reelian, the Taoree gun that could kill humans and aliens alike—at the guy closest to me. Nolan and Cal both had their reelians each aimed at a different enemy.

Orrean came out, a reelian in each hand and aimed at a different man. He shouted, “This is your last chance. Leave now or we kill you all.”

The rest of Evil Spokesman's gang seemed to have an easy time turning tail and running away. None of them even said anything; they just turned and ran.

Orrean shouted out, "If you hurt someone else, I will hunt you assholes down."

Despite the situation, a small chuckle came out of me. I was completely amused by his cursing. It was kind of awesome. Orrean shot me a look with a half-smile before looking down at the woman lying in the dirt. His smile vanished and was replaced with a look of horror, so I followed his line of sight.

There was a woman with dark brown hair lying between an overturned table and some porch stairs. She had one ankle and one wrist tied to each, so her arms and legs were spread open in an X. Her clothes were in tatters, completely ripped up and exposing a lot of her body. Her breasts were visible and her pants were missing. She had blood and bruises all over her body. Her hair was covering her face, but I could hear her crying. I felt bile rise in my throat and had to turn away for a second to get my bearings and force the bile back down.

I heard Orrean whisper, "Enimus, favulis nob," but I didn't understand him since I wasn't touching him.

Nolan took off his coat and ran over to her, placing it over the woman's body. He spoke softly, "It's okay. We're not going to hurt you. I'm going to untie you now, okay?"

She didn't speak or move. Nolan shot Cal a look before both of them got to work untying her. Once her arms and legs were freed, she immediately backed up against the porch and pulled her knees to her chest, using Nolan's coat to cover her entire body. Nolan pulled out his water bottle and held it out to her, but she didn't take it, she just stared at it.

"It's just water," Nolan told her. When she still didn't take it, he took a sip, then held it out to her again. "See? It's safe to drink."

She slowly took it from him and took a long drink. When she was finished, she handed it back, still not saying anything.

Nolan knelt down in front of her, but not too close, then he took off his bag and started looking through it. He pulled out a long-sleeved tee shirt and held it out to her. She took it immediately, but didn't move to put it on.

I turned away to give her some privacy and Cal walked over to me, obviously having the same idea as me.

Cal bent down a little to catch my eye, asking, "You okay, J?"

"Yeah," I answered, not really sure why he'd ask me that.

"Good," he said, then shocked me by pulling me into a hug.

I tensed in surprise, but relaxed into him when he didn't let me go right away. He was shaking, probably from adrenaline, fear, and disgust at the situation. I rubbed his back and asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said before releasing me, but keeping his hands on my shoulders. When I looked into his eyes, I could see him fighting some internal battle and I had no clue what it was, besides the obvious end-of-the-world bullshit we were dealing with. He whispered, "You look tired, J."

"I am, but I'm alright," I told him with my brows furrowed.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Cal," Nolan interrupted. "Do you have that extra sweatshirt?"

Cal gave me a quick squeeze before releasing me to look at Nolan. "Sure." Then he went through his bag, pulling out a green sweatshirt and throwing it to Nol.

Orrean, Wes, and Mandy came around the corner behind me, making me jump. Orrean must've walked back around to get them, for which I was grateful. I didn't particularly like the idea of either of them seeing the poor woman like that, but I also didn't like the idea of them being separated from us. I nodded my thanks at Orrean before turning my attention back to the woman.

"What's your name?" Nolan asked her.

The woman looked around at all of us with her light-brown eyes. I hadn't been sure of her age because of the state she was in, but as I looked her over, I realized she was probably only a few years older than me... maybe mid-twenties. She moved her dark hair out of her face and focused on Mandy, who Wes happened to be holding in a hug. She stared for a while, then looked back at Nolan and cleared her throat, saying, "Tabitha Martin."

Nolan smiled at her. "It's nice to meet you, Tabitha. I'm Nolan, and this is my family. That's Cal, Jeremy, Orrean, Wesley, and Mandy." He pointed at each one of us in turn, then looked at my brother. "Do you still have those sweatpants in your bag?"

"I think so," Wes said before putting Mandy down and looking in his pack. Mandy immediately went over to Orrean, who picked her up and started talking to her quietly and distracting her from the situation. I wasn't stupid enough to think that Mandy, even at ten years old, didn't understand what was happening. After everything she'd seen, heard, and been through, I knew she wasn't naïve, unfortunately. Orrean's calm presence would be good for her.

Wes threw his sweatpants at Nolan, who handed them over to Tabitha. We all turned away when she started putting them on.

A minute later, she cleared her throat. "You can turn back around."

She stood there, looking tiny and way too skinny, but with her back straight and her shoulders squared. I had expected to see her hunched over or even still sitting on the ground, but I was happy she wasn't. She looked strong as she faced off with us, and something about her made me instantly like her. I only hoped we could convince her to come to the Independent camp with us.

“So, uh.” She cleared her throat again. “Thanks for helping me out.”

“Of course,” Nolan said before walking over to Orrean. He whispered, but I was close enough to hear him. “Can you heal her?”

Orrean looked at me for a second before answering, “Yes.”

Nolan nodded, then walked back over to Tabitha. “So, um, we can help with your wounds.”

Tabitha took a step away from him. “Do not touch me.”

Nolan held up his hands to her. “I promise we aren't going to hurt you. We have a,” he winced, “Taoree tool that can heal you. He,” he pointed at Orrean, “knows how to use it. He can show you and you can do it yourself.” He looked back at Orrean again. “Right?”

“Yes, I can give her the *juhere*,” Orrean answered, then looked at Tabitha. “I have to walk over to you. Is that okay?”

The girl looked around for a moment before nodding to him. Orrean passed Mandy back to Wes before walking over to Tabitha. He slowly reached into his pants pocket and pulled out the black metal thing that always reminded me of a computer mouse. He flipped it around and pressed several buttons, making the *juhere* glow blue, then he held it out to Tabitha.

“You just have to hold it over your wounds. It will feel warm and soothing and only take a few seconds to heal you,” he told her.

She slowly pulled her sleeve up, revealing her sliced-open wrist that obviously happened from her trying to get out of the ropes she'd been tied up with. Orrean moved the juhère over her wound and the girl's eyes went wide as she watched her skin knit itself back together.

"Holy shit," she whispered before taking the juhère from Orrean and holding it over her other wounds. I focused on our surroundings as the poor girl went from one injury to another, making me lose track of how many she'd had.

When she was finished, she handed the juhère back to Orrean, saying, "Thank you. So, you're one of them, huh?"

I tensed because I didn't want her to try anything against Orrean. I liked the girl, but I would protect my family any way I could, and Orrean was definitely a part of my family now. I held my hand over my reelian just in case. I figured if I pulled it out, she would back off... or at least, I hoped I wouldn't have to shoot her.

"I am Taoree, yes," Orrean answered, bowing his head down slightly and pushing his sunglasses on top of his head to reveal his dark-purple eyes. Most Taoree looked like they had all-black eyes, with no white whatsoever, but if you looked closely at Orrean's dark eyes, you could see that they were actually purple with a thin vertical black slit as a pupil. He told me once that most Taoree have some color, but they just look all-black from a distance.

Tabitha spoke to Orrean, "So, why are you helping humans?" She looked around at us humans, then back to Orrean. "They are clearly ready to protect you against me. What are you doing with them?"

Orrean smiled softly at her. "They are my friends—"

"Family," Cal interrupted, "we are his family."

Orrean looked over at Cal in surprise, but also in happiness, then he turned back to the woman. "Family. They're my family. We are making our way to a safe place."

"Nowhere is safe," she said.

Orrean told her, “There is a Taoree Independent camp southwest of what used to be Denver, Colorado. It is a safe haven for Taoree and humans alike.”

“It’s the Taoree that are causing all of this. I’ve seen them ordering the zombies around. Why would they need a safe haven? The zombies don’t even attack them,” she argued.

“You are correct. Taoree that follow Emperor Thelonious Serparla are, in fact, responsible for all of this madness. But there are many Taoree that have defected from the emperor and are fighting against him. They want peace with humans. They want to live side by side with humans,” Orrean explained.

“So, you’re actually telling me that there are other Taoree like you,” she nodded at him, “that want to help humans?” She looked past Orrean to the rest of us. “And you actually believe him?”

I spoke up, “We do. Orrean has done nothing but help and protect every single one of us. There is no other reason for him to do that. If he were a member of the Taoree Legion, he would have killed us long ago. The Emperor’s Legion are the ones responsible, not the Independents.”

She eyed me for a long moment before asking, “How long have you known him?”

“We’ve been traveling with him for almost five weeks, but I met him over two years ago,” I answered honestly.

Her eyes widened. “You knew him before all of this happened?” She didn’t believe me.

“I did. Not well, but I knew him, yes.”

She looked me up and down before looking back at Orrean. “I don’t know if I believe you.” *Well, okay, then. At least she’s honest.*

He inclined his head again. “Fair enough. Would you like to travel with us, at least for now? We have food and water. I don’t think we should stay here. There will be Ferals

coming from the noise of my gun. We need to move before making camp.”

“If I come with you, you won’t stop me if I choose to go my own way.” It wasn’t a question, she was telling us a fact.

“As you wish,” Orrean said before turning his back on her to address us. I didn’t look away from the woman as he spoke. “Is everyone okay to travel for a few hours?”

Everyone else answered in the affirmative, but I was too busy protecting Orrean’s back.

“Jeremy?” Orrean prompted. “Are you well?”

“Yes, let’s go,” I responded, still not looking away from Tabitha, who was looking right back at me.

“Are you okay to walk?” Nolan’s quiet voice drew Tabitha’s attention to him and she nodded. “We’re heading west,” he said as he pulled out his compass. “You can walk with me.” She nodded again and the two of them started around the house so we could head in the correct direction.

I walked over to Orrean with the sudden urge to make sure he was uninjured. “Are you okay?”

He gave me a little smile. “I’m fine.”

I reached out and squeezed his upper arm and saw him shiver, so leaving my arm there, I asked, “Are you cold?”

I heard Cal snort behind me, but didn’t turn to see what he was laughing at. I was concerned for my alien friend, who answered me, “I’m okay, Jeremy, thank you.”

I nodded and released his arm. I felt a strange tug in my chest, so I rubbed at it, then turned to follow Nolan and Tabitha around the house with Orrean next to me. Wes, Cal, and Mandy followed. Mandy decided to walk for a while, so she held her older brother’s hand, and Cal kept swinging their arms wide, making her giggle. It was always nice to hear her laugh, especially knowing that she was still able to after everything she’d seen thus far.

We walked for about two more hours before I saw Wes rubbing his temples again. He hadn't said anything yet, but he was clearly in pain—again. I elbowed Orrean, who was still next to me, and nodded at my brother.

Orrean grimaced, then called out, “We need to take a minute.”

Everyone stopped and turned to look at Orrean. The two of us walked over to Wes and Orrean said, “You need to tell us as soon as you feel it. It will be easier for all of us if we can take care of it right away because it will take less energy that way.”

Wes squinted at him. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Orrean responded instantly, then looked at me. “Ready?”

“Yeah,” I said as I put one hand on Wes’s forehead and the other on the back of his head.

Orrean placed his hands on top of mine and I felt his energy run through me and into Wes. I closed my eyes and reached for the place inside myself, that place that felt like pure light. I tugged at it and felt it almost jump with anticipation. The light liked being used and happily flowed from my hands and into my brother’s head. It took less than a minute this time because the Qiren in Wesley’s brain were already being suppressed by us. It was like we had to put a bandaid on them to prevent them from leaking out. Or at least, that’s how I liked to picture it. I could feel my and Orrean’s combined energies intertwining into one light before wrapping around the thirty-one Qiren inside of Wes. I had no clue how I knew that, but I’d stopped questioning all the weird since all of this shit happened.

Once I heard Wes take a deep breath, I pulled my energy back a little and looked at him. “Good?”

He sighed, “Yeah. Thanks.”

Orrean and I pulled our energies back and at the same time we both said, “No problem.”

I snorted at that and closed my eyes, leaning back a little into Orrean, who'd been standing behind me. I felt even more tired now and I couldn't resist leaning on him for a minute. He didn't move away. Instead, he grabbed my upper arm with one hand, holding me in place while he did something with his other hand behind me. I felt him moving around, but I didn't know what he was doing until he said, "Drink this."

I opened my eyes and saw a water bottle in front of me. I grabbed it and drank a few sips, then handed it back to him. Still, I didn't move away from him. I was perfectly content where I was.

"We can make camp here," he said quietly to me, rubbing my shoulder with his thumb.

I looked around at the field we stood in. The others were about twenty feet away from us; even Wes had moved away. Then I looked up at the sky and saw that we still had at least an hour or two of daylight left, so I said, "No, we need to keep going." I still didn't move. I had been missing Colt so much, and this small physical comfort helped soothe my heart a little.

"Are you sure?" he asked quietly.

I took a deep breath and pushed off of him. "Yes." My whole body had a sudden chill sweep through it, but I shook it off and headed toward everyone else with Orrean following behind me.

When I reached the others, that Tabitha girl was staring at me. "What?"

She shrugged. "Nothing."

I scowled at her, but then ignored her and looked over at Nolan. "Lead the way, Nol."

He turned on his heel and started walking with his compass in one hand and the map in the other. I readjusted Colt's hat on my head and followed behind him after Tabitha started walking beside him. I didn't want her behind any of us.

I didn't want to risk her attacking someone from behind and I was pretty sure that she understood that. There was no way I was gonna let her hurt someone, even if I did get the feeling that she wouldn't. We just couldn't risk it. So I followed behind with one eye on Tabitha the whole way.

We walked for another two hours, much to the dismay of my tired body, and found another empty old house to set up near. We liked having something solid at our backs when we set up Orrean's tent. That way we'd only have to watch three sides for an attack.

While everyone was taking off their packs, Nolan came up to me and whispered so no one else could hear him, "I know you're all curious about what happened to Tabitha, but she told me and I don't think we should force her to talk about it again. I'm sure she'll tell you eventually, but you need to trust me on this."

I looked into his baby blue eyes, so he'd know I meant it. "I trust you, Nol. If you think she's okay, that's fine, but I'm still gonna be extra careful with her."

"Okay, but I think she's trustworthy, for what it's worth," he said.

"Good to know." I slapped him on the shoulder.

He nodded. "Will you tell the others?"

"Sure thing, brother," I said with a smile. He smiled back before walking over to help Mandy find her extra pair of socks in his bag.

We set up the tent and everyone went inside except Tabitha, Orrean, and me. She was standing there, staring at the tent, obviously having an internal battle with herself. I could tell that she was afraid of going inside with us since we were strangers, but she also didn't want to go off by herself. I felt for her, but there wasn't really anything I could do that I wasn't already doing.

Orrean spoke up first, "No one can see inside the tent once the door is closed. We have a heater, so it's warm in

there. There is enough room for you, but it will be a little cramped when we lie down. Everyone will keep their distance as much as possible, but we have food and a warm place to sleep.”

When she didn't say anything, I added, “No one is going to hurt you, I promise.”

She looked me in the eye. “If anyone lays a hand on me, I will kill you.”

I swear it sounded like Orrean growled and hissed at the same time. I glanced at him and his special brand of weird, before looking back at Tabitha and reiterating, “No one will hurt you.”

She nodded, then stepped inside, apparently deciding it was worth the risk.

I looked at Orrean. “What was that?” I was pretty sure he understood that I was referring to his growl-hiss thing.

He looked at the ground, mumbling, “I didn't like her threatening you. I couldn't help it.” Then he practically jumped inside the tent.

I shook my head, then followed him inside. He was busying himself with the heater that I knew only took ten seconds to set up, but he messed with it for probably five minutes while the rest of us got some food together. He was clearly embarrassed. His reaction was strange, but it didn't really bother me. Weird tended to follow me around, so I was used to it. Actually, his growl-hiss was kinda funny if you thought about it.

I decided to put him out of his misery. “Orrean, I have your food.”

He looked over from his spot in the middle of the tent, but he still wouldn't look at my face. He mumbled something under his breath that I couldn't really hear, but was sure it was in Taoree. Then he walked over to me, rubbed his forehead with one hand and held his other in my direction, all without looking down at me.

I was sitting, so I had to tilt my head up all the way to try and catch his eye. He was pretty good at not looking at me, though, so I said, “Sit down, Orr.”

He mumbled again and this time I was positive it was in Taoree, which made me stifle a laugh. When he flopped down beside me, he looked straight ahead.

I elbowed him, but he ignored it and continued looking across the tent. I elbowed him again. “Hey.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before turning his head to finally look at me. I offered him a smile as I said, “All I had was one can of soup and one can of green beans. Do you mind sharing both with me so I don’t have to eat an entire can of green beans for dinner?”

He rubbed his forehead again, then whispered, “Sure.”

“Good,” I said with an easy smile as I passed him one spoon and took out another for myself. “Dig in.” I offered up the first can I had already opened with my can opener and turned my body to face him completely.

He turned to mirror me and after a few bites, he said, “Thank you, Jeremy.”

“No prob, Orr.”

After Nolan and Cal gave Tabitha some food, Cal came and sat behind me. He leaned against my back, so I leaned against his as well. It reminded me of when we were kids, which made me smile. Cal and I used to sit like that all the time in the middle of our back yards or even just in the living room when we were growing up.

I had noticed over the past few days that Cal seemed like he needed some physical connection with everyone. I had a sense that he was feeling overwhelmed and vulnerable—*as I’m sure everyone was*—and with what happened to Colt, and now with everything going on with Wes, it was making the situation even worse. Cal and his whole family had always been pretty tactile people. They had never shied away from

showing their feelings and it was pretty clear that Cal needed some affection right now.

After I finished eating, I leaned my head back on Cal's shoulder, then reached back and patted his other shoulder with my hand. Cal was in the middle of talking to Wes and Mandy, so I didn't think he even noticed that he leaned a little farther into me.

After a few minutes, I announced, "I need to go to sleep." I sat up, then stood to get my sleeping bag out of my backpack. When I pulled it out, I noticed almost everyone else doing the same thing. That was when I realized our dilemma. "Shit. We don't have enough sleeping bags."

Everyone looked at Tabitha, who said, "I don't need one."

"Don't be ridiculous," Nolan said. "You can have mine."

"I'm not taking your sleeping bag, Nolan," she said.

"Yes, you are," he insisted.

Before this turned into a big argument, I suggested, "Can't one of us just share with Mandy?"

"That's fine," Cal said at the same time that Mandy said, "Ugh."

I laughed a little at her, which made her angrily say, "You guys are all jerks."

I held up my hands in defeat. "I'm sorry, but you're smaller than everyone else."

She rolled her eyes. "I know, but that doesn't mean I have to be happy about it."

"Come on, sis, let's go to sleep," Cal said with an easy smile.

She huffed, "Fine." Then she threw her sleeping bag at Nolan.

With that settled, I laid mine out and climbed in, placing Colt's hat right above my head on the floor. I always put it there in case we needed to run in a hurry. It was something I didn't want to get left behind, so I always kept it close.

Mandy and Cal were at the farthest side of the tent, then it was Wes, then me, then Orrean, and Nolan was on the end. Tabitha decided to sleep in the corner closest to Nolan. She was more on an angle than right next to him, so there was a little bit of space once the rest of us scooted closer together. I was sandwiched between my brother and Orrean, but it didn't take long for me to fall asleep.

Chapter Two

Of course, Orrean and I were at the stupid fence again. I was getting sick of seeing it every night, although I kind of liked the dreams, just not the location. I sat down against a tree and Orrean sat down next to me, shoulder to shoulder.

He was the first to break the silence. "Can I ask you something?"

"You just did," I said as I picked at the grass around me.

He sighed. "You know what I mean."

"I do, so go ahead."

"Do you like Calloway?" he asked in a whisper.

I turned to look at him. "You think I like Cal?"

He wasn't looking at me, but was staring at the tree across from us as he replied, "Do you?"

"Why the hell would you think that? Cal's been my best friend since before I can remember." As usual, my dream was weird as crap.

"I saw you hugging him earlier and then you were leaning on him after dinner," he said, his voice still quiet and unsure.

"Dude, he's my friend and he needed some comfort. Of course I gave him a hug. And it was comfortable to lean on him. It's not like any of us have had the opportunity to sit in a nice chair or anything." I waved him off.

“So you don’t like him, then?”

I furrowed my brows at him, even though he still wasn’t looking at me. “Of course I like him. He’s my best friend.” Orrean finally looked at me with an expression of hurt on his face, so I clarified, “I do like him, but not in the way you mean. Cal is like a brother to me. Thinking about him like that is just... gross.” I shuddered for emphasis.

He gave me a half-smile. “Are you sure?”

I waved him off again. “Yes, Orr, I’m sure.”

I eyed him for a moment, then noticed a chunk of his black hair had come loose from his braid. It was the first time I had ever seen his hair come out of his braid like that, so I reached up to push it behind his ear. I was very surprised that it was one thick piece and not a bunch of smaller ones like human hair. Instead of pushing it behind his ear, I rubbed it between my fingers, examining it.

I noticed him shiver, so I looked at him with a raised brow. He told me, “My hair is not the same as human hair. I can feel it when you touch it.”

“Really?” I asked, but still didn’t let go. “Does it hurt?”

“Uh, no,” he said and I swore he started blushing. “Quite the opposite, actually.”

“Oh,” I said with a laugh, “sorry.” I pushed it behind his ear, then for some strange reason, I rubbed my hand down the rest of his braid and watched as his entire body shivered and he closed his eyes. I pulled my hand back slowly and whispered, “Sorry.”

He opened his dark all-purple eyes that held so much emotion and said, “It’s okay. I don’t mind. It feels good.”

Without thinking, I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around his waist, and leaned my forehead against the side of his neck. He wrapped his arms around my back and started rubbing circles on it.

After a long moment, I asked, "Will you hold me?" I sounded vulnerable to my own ears, but I didn't care, I was missing Colt. Missing that connection with someone, missing the physical contact with another person. And even though I knew this was just a dream, it still made me feel good. It was even more of a reason to do this here. I didn't have to be strong or brave here. I could just let this dream version of my friend take care of me without having to worry about anyone else.

"Of course," he answered right away. He scooped me into his lap where I sat sideways, tucked under his chin for the rest of the night.

I woke up, still completely squished between Wes and Orrean, but now, Orrean had an arm over my chest. I was surprised by it, but like everyone else, I knew he was feeling the stress of trying to get to the Independent camp, so I didn't move his arm out of the way. I just laid there and waited for everyone else to wake up.

Wes woke up before the rest and rubbed his eyes before turning his head to look at me. When he saw Orrean's arm, he raised a brow, so I just tilted my head and shrugged. In response, he yawned in my face, making me groan at his breath.

"Dude, go brush your teeth," I said quietly so I didn't wake the others.

"Your mouth isn't any better, J," he said, but this time I held my breath when he opened his mouth. He poked me in the forehead, so I snaked my arm out of my sleeping bag and smacked his hand away.

My movement must've woken Orrean because he snatched his arm off of me and mumbled, "Tristabao. Isib et, Eo bo zun."

"Sorry, buddy, I didn't catch that." Without thinking, I grabbed Orrean's arm and said, "Say that again."

He spoke in Taoree again, but I understood him this time. *“Sorry. Mean to, I did not.”*

“It’s no big deal, Orrean,” I said before letting go of him.

Wes said, “God, you two are so fucking weird sometimes.” Then he sat up and looked around the tent.

I followed suit and saw that Tabitha was still lying in her sleeping bag, but very much awake and staring at me with wide eyes. I half expected her to be gone, but was glad she hadn’t snuck out in the middle of the night. I offered her a small smile, but she just continued to stare. I didn’t feel the need to explain what was going on, so I just stretched my muscles and looked back at my brother. “How’s your head?” He yawned again, which made me yawn too. “Stop making me yawn.”

He smirked at me. “My head’s not too bad.”

I opened my mouth, but Orrean beat me to it. “If you can feel it at all, we should *uanria* again.”

“We should what now?” Wes asked him.

I surprised myself by answering, “Energy transfer is probably the closest translation.”

Both Wes and Orrean stared at me with wide eyes, like I had three heads or something. “What?”

Orrean’s voice was so low I could barely hear him. “You weren’t touching me that time.”

For some reason, I looked down at my hands, even though I knew they were in my lap. I looked back at him and whispered, “That’s weird.”

“Told ya, you two are weird,” Wes piped in.

Orrean reached out and touched my arm, then spoke in Taoree, *“New person we should not speak freely in front of. We do not know her.”*

I shocked myself again by saying, “Eo jili.”

Both our eyes went wide when we realized I had answered him in Taoree. I had no idea how I knew what to say, but I had told him *I understand* in another freaking language.

Wes had walked away and I heard him say, “Just ignore them. They always do that. Orrean’s teaching Jeremy Taoree and they’re fucking annoying once they get started.” I was stunned that my brother had so easily covered for us and sounded like he’d meant it.

Orrean spoke again in his language, “*Your skills are developing. Explore this we will, but not now.*”

“Cuito,” I answered, surprising us both again. All I had said was *okay*, but it was really weird that I’d said it in Taoree without even meaning to. We had tested out the whole understanding-Taoree-when-I-was-touching-Orrean thing only about a million times, and I had never before been able to say anything back... even when Orrean tried to teach me some of the simpler words.

Orrean nodded to me before letting go of my arm again, then turning to Wes. “We should do the *uanria* now, Wes, before we eat. The food will replenish our energies.”

“Yeah, okay, but I don’t feel too bad right now,” Wes said as he sat back down on top of his sleeping bag.

“It’s easier to help you when they aren’t as bad, Wesley,” I told him. “It takes less energy.”

He looked at me like I was insane for a moment before saying, “Fine. Go ahead, then.”

Orrean scooted next to me and placed his hands on top of mine on Wesley’s head. We only had to send energy—or our light—into him for about fifteen seconds. I was relieved that we didn’t need to do it for longer than that. I didn’t want to start the day off already exhausted.

Nolan sat up, saying, “I have some of that cereal we found the other day. It’s really dry, but tastes okay.” He yawned, then smiled at Tabitha, who still hadn’t said anything. “Good morning, Tabitha.”

She finally spoke, “Good morning.”

“Is there enough for everyone?” Mandy asked as she climbed out of Cal’s sleeping bag.

“There should be. The box is almost full,” Nolan answered her.

“We need to make a run today,” Cal said without sitting up. He started stretching, but remained lying down as he added, “We need even more food since we have an extra person now.”

Tabitha finally found her voice. “I don’t need you to take care of me.”

Cal didn’t even look at her. “Didn’t say you did, sweetheart, but we take care of each other. If you’re staying with us, you’ll just have to deal with it.” He sounded angry, mean, and rude... typical for when he first woke up.

Mandy spoke to her brother, “Don’t be an ass.”

“Don’t say ass,” he said automatically.

“Stop acting like one and I won’t have to say it,” Mandy stated as she plopped down on Nolan’s sleeping bag and reached for the cereal. “Let’s eat,” she said to everyone, then to Tabitha, “They’re all idiot boys most of the time, but they aren’t bad people.” Then she shoved a handful of cereal in her mouth.

I stifled a laugh and glanced at Tabitha, who was smiling at Mandy.

Mandy held out the cereal box. “Want some? It’s pretty good.”

“Sure,” Tabitha answered, getting up and walking over. “Thank you.” Tabitha sat down next to Mandy and they both ate the cereal.

Orrean looked over at me, so I just shrugged in response, then moved a little closer to Mandy so I could reach the food. Someone placed Colt’s hat on my head. I looked over

after fixing it and saw Orrean sitting next to me. He smiled at me and I nodded my thanks.

Then I noticed his braid. After my dream last night, I couldn't help but reach out and run my fingers down it. He shivered, just like in my dream, so I picked up his braid and held it in front of my face to examine it more closely. For the first time, I saw that it really wasn't like human hair at all. It was several very thick strands, almost like cords or wires that were textured, making it look like hair, but each one was about as thick as my finger. I wrapped my hand around the whole braid and ran my palm down the length of it. He gasped and shivered.

“Tristabao,” I whispered.

“It's okay. I do not mind,” Orrean whispered back.
“You spoke in Taoree again.”

I thought about it and realized I'd said *sorry* in Taoree. I shook my head and asked him, “You can feel it, huh?”

“I can. And no, it doesn't hurt,” he whispered.

I smiled. “It feels good, then?”

He blushed. “Uh, yes, it's... nice.”

“J, what are you guys whispering about?” Mandy asked.

I looked over at her and noticed everyone staring at me, so I said, “Nothing.” Then I shoved a handful of food in my mouth so I wouldn't be forced to talk. I saw Cal chuckling at me, but chose to ignore him.

After everyone ate, we packed up, took down the tent and started on our way with Nolan leading us again. Surprisingly, Orrean seemed content to let him lead. But I was happy with that since it was better for Orrean to be near my brother in case Wes needed him. Orrean and Nolan had both been leading the way before Wes's Qiren made themselves known, but now Orrean was walking in the back of the group with my brother and me. Tabitha stayed up front with Nolan,

and Cal was walking with Mandy right in front of us, in the middle.

Wes kept his voice low, saying, “What was that about earlier? J, you’re speaking Taoree now, too?”

“I guess so. It was weird, but maybe it’s just from being around Orrean and hearing it more than I had before,” I waved my hand in the air, “everything.”

“Were you always good with languages?” Orrean asked just as quietly as Wes.

I cringed. “No, not really.”

Wes snorted. “I think French class was the only one Jeremy didn’t get an A in. I remember him complaining about it constantly when he lived at home.”

I glared at my brother. “I did get an A, asshole, it was just annoying.”

Wes laughed and held up his hands in surrender. “Sorry, I forgot. You and your perfect GPA.”

I pushed his shoulder. “It was the only way to get into college, you idiot. You know how hard it was after the Taoree showed up. There weren’t many colleges left and only like five percent of high schoolers got into them.”

Wes smiled smugly. “It wasn’t the only way to get into college.”

I rolled my eyes and mumbled, “It’s not like I was as good at basketball as you were.”

“Oh my god, did you just admit that I’m better than you at something?”

“No,” I automatically said.

“Yes, you did, I heard it. Didn’t you hear it, Orr?” Wes looked around me to Orrean on my other side.

Orrean was smiling. “Yes, I heard it.”

“Hey,” I said, smacking Orrean’s arm. “You’re supposed to be on my side, not his.”

Orrean furrowed his brows and in a serious voice said, “I am on your side.”

I heard Wes snort, but I said to Orrean, “I was joking, dude. Jesus, you take everything so seriously.”

“No I do not,” Orrean said, “but sometimes your language or... *slang* confuses me.”

Wes laughed again, but I said, “No worries.” Then I turned to my brother. “You’re an idiot.”

“Maybe,” he mused, “but at least I can play basketball.”

I heard Orrean chuckle next to me as I just shook my head at the pair of them.

“There’s fifteen Ferals following us. They’re gaining on us quickly. Prepare yourselves,” Orrean announced as we made our way into a suburban area.

“Damn, they’re on us already?” Cal asked.

“Yes, they noticed us immediately. I fear they are starting to get more desperate,” Orrean answered him.

“Ew, dude,” Cal said. “You mean they’re getting hungrier. Fuck.”

I saw Orrean wrinkle his nose, so I said, “I think he was trying to say it a little more delicately, Calloway.”

Cal flipped me off before pulling his shoian—Feral Stick—out. Then he looked over at Tabitha. “You don’t have a weapon, do you?”

“No,” she answered, then looked at Orrean. “You call the zombies, Ferals?”

I answered before he could, "They aren't zombies." She looked like she was about to argue, so I held up my hand to stop her. "I know they're similar, but they aren't dead. The Taoree are controlling them with, like, nano-robot things called Qiren. The Qiren melt down most of their brain to make them easier to control, then the Taoree give them commands. The Emperor Supporters, or Taoree Legion, can control the Ferals' bodies completely. *That* is why they're hard to kill, you have to disconnect the spinal cord or use a shoian," I held up my Feral Stick, "to kill them. So they're very much alive, but can no longer feel pain or control themselves."

"Oookay," she said, "that's just... crazy."

"Yes, it is, but it's the truth."

She nodded and pointed at my shoian as we continued walking. "So that thing can kill a... Feral?"

"Yes, it electrocutes the Qiren until they fry. It takes about ten seconds," I answered.

"Do you happen to have an extra one?" she asked.

I was about to say no, but Orrean came up on her other side holding one in each hand and said, "Actually, I do." He passed it to her and showed her how to use it, but I stopped walking as I watched them.

I suddenly felt like my chest was constricting and my heart was going to explode.

Orrean looked back at me. When he saw the look on my face, he ran over. "Jeremy, what's wrong?"

I felt tears filling my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. "You took Colt's weapons?"

He grimaced. "I'm sorry, but I thought it would be better to have extra in case something happened to one of ours." He reached out to touch my arm, but I backed away.

"Don't touch me," I hissed. "You didn't have any right to go through his stuff, Orrean. You shouldn't have touched him."

His face fell, so I just turned around and walked away, past Tabitha, past Wes, Cal, Mandy, and even Nolan. I made sure to only walk about twenty feet in front of them, but I needed a little space to process the new information.

Orrean shouldn't have gone through Colt's stuff... taken shit off his body. It wasn't his place. If anyone had the right, it should have been me or Cal, but not him. Not Orrean. Especially not after what he did to Colt. He was the one who... I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I knew it wasn't fair to blame him. Colt had asked him to do it, but he was still the one who killed him. In the end, he was the one who killed my boyfriend. Yes, I knew Colt wasn't even Colt anymore, but it was Orrean who had... *fuck*.

I took a deep breath and waited for the others to catch up to me. Cal was the first to reach me. He just patted my shoulder, then pushed me a little to get me to keep walking.

Cal spoke quietly, "You know it wasn't his fault."

"Knowing it doesn't make it any easier to accept," I stated.

Cal knocked the rim of my hat down so it was covering my eyes. "Give him a break, J. He's a good guy."

I sighed and fixed Colt's hat on my head. "I know."

Before we could say anything else, Wes yelled, "Incoming."

Cal and I both turned and saw the fifteen Ferals coming up behind us. Cal yelled, "Form a circle around Mandy."

Everyone was already moving before he even finished his sentence. I found myself between Cal and Tabitha. Ten seconds later, a Feral was coming at me with a wooden chair raised above his head. It was an interesting weapon choice, but also kind of effective since it made it nearly impossible for me to reach him with my shoian.

I ended up having to pull the metal bat out from between my back and my pack. When the Chair Feral lifted his chair above his head, I swung at his arms, hoping to make him unable to lift the damn thing. He swung it down, so I jumped back and immediately swung my bat at his head. It was a well-aimed hit and he fell to his side, twitching. I held my shoian to his chest before he had a chance to recover.

Tabitha was holding her shoian to another Feral's chest, but I saw a different one trying to get to her with a large knife. Luckily, I finished off my Feral in time to push the new Knife Feral back away from Tabitha and stab it in its neck with my shoian. Tabitha looked over at me with wide eyes. She obviously hadn't seen that one coming. I was glad I was able to get it before it hurt her.

She immediately turned for another Feral that didn't have a weapon. I was surprised and impressed when I saw her place three punches and a kick to the kneecap before using her shoian on it. I ducked under a two-by-four that was probably three feet long. The wood swung over my head, and all I had to do was stab my shoian up to get the Feral holding the wood in the chest.

When he fell to the ground ten seconds later, I looked around, pleasantly surprised that there weren't any more Ferals left. Orrean and Cal were both still using their shoians on two Ferals, but the others were finished. I put my shoian in my alien utility belt, then slid my bat back between my back and bag and hooked the end in a side pocket so it wouldn't fall.

I knelt down and pulled Mandy into a hug. "You okay, Peanut?"

"I'm fine, Jeremy." She sounded exasperated, so I released her. She looked me over. "Are you okay?"

I smiled at her. "I'm good."

"You were upset before," she stated.

I sighed. "I was, but I'm okay now." I stood up and grabbed her hand. "Come on, let's keep going."

She tugged my arm, so I turned and kneeled back down. She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek, saying, “I love you, J.”

I hugged her again. “I love you too, Peanut.” I stood up and started walking, holding her hand. Everyone followed behind us and soon Nolan caught up so he could lead the way.

Tabitha walked next to me a little while later and said, “Thank you for helping me with that zom—Feral. Whatever you call it. Anyway, thanks.”

I smiled. “No problem. Cal was right earlier, we do protect each other.”

She nodded. “That’s nice.” She was worrying her bottom lip with her teeth, so I remained quiet while she worked out whatever it was she wanted to say to me. Finally she told me, “I want to trust you guys, but I’m not there yet. Too much shit has happened for me to believe all this crap about Independents and you guys actually wanting to help me out.”

“That’s okay. I don’t think any of us are expecting you to just trust us right away. We know we need to earn your trust, but you are more than welcome to stick with us as we walk,” I told her.

“I appreciate that,” she said quietly. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry that I’m using the shoian of someone you cared about.”

I looked at her through narrowed eyes. “He was my boyfriend.”

Her brown eyes saddened even further and she whispered, “I’m sorry.”

I gave her a nod, then looked away from her and pushed my emotions down. If everyone would just leave me the fuck alone about it, I could just forget about this stupid day and move on.

“Jeremy,” I heard Orrean say from behind me.

I clenched my jaw. “What?”

“Wes needs our help,” he said.

I stopped walking and turned, seeing my brother rub his temples again. Cal walked over to Mandy, so I let go of her hand and ran over to Wes and put my hands on his head. Orrean walked behind Wes and at my nod placed his hands on top of mine. As soon as he did, I pushed my energy into my brother and felt Orrean pushing his own warm energy through me and into Wes. It was such a normal feeling now that I could almost ignore the warm sensation coming from Orrean. Almost.

I refused to look at him.

When Wesley started breathing more easily again, I whispered, “Are you good, Wes?”

“Yeah.” His voice sounded sad and depleted.

Orrean and I both pulled our energies back and let go of Wes’s head. Still without looking at Orrean, I pulled my brother into a hug and told him, “It’s going to be okay. We’re getting closer, okay? We’re going to make it.”

Instead of pulling away like he usually did, he wrapped his arms around me. “I know.” After a minute he pulled out of my arms and walked away.

Without him there, I accidentally looked at Orrean, who was, of course, staring at me. I narrowed my eyes at him. “Don’t talk to me.” Then I turned on my heel and walked away, but not before I saw the look of hurt that crossed his face.

I heard Tabitha ask Nolan, “What do they keep doing to Wes?”

Nolan started to answer her, but I blocked him out as I took the lead in our walk since I knew we just had to keep walking on this road for a bit.

Cal came over to me, so I held my hand up to him. “Don’t even start with me right now.”

“Wasn’t going to, J. Just wanted to walk with you,” he said with a grin before knocking my shoulder with his. “Wanna be my run partner today?” We had started going into houses in pairs and leaving one person with Mandy outside in a predetermined meeting place. It went faster if we had two groups checking houses rather than all of us doing them one at a time.

I answered him, “Sure, but I’m surprised you’re not trying to get Tabitha to go with you or something. She’s very pretty.” Not that I really noticed, but I’d have to be pretty blind not to see that she was a good-looking woman.

He shrugged. “I think Nolan likes her, so I’m not gonna mess with that.”

“Oh.” I guess I had missed Nolan liking her, but I was also more concerned with her hurting someone than anything else thus far.

He shoulder-checked me again. “Yeah, *oh*. You didn’t even notice, did you?”

I shook my head with a smile.

“God, you are so fucking clueless with that kinda shit,” he said fondly.

I shrugged. “If you say so.”

He laughed. “You really are, J. Half the time when someone is crushin’ on you, you think they don’t like you. It’s actually pretty fucking hilarious to watch.”

I elbowed him in the ribs. “Dickhead.”

He shrugged again. “Asshole.”

“Douche bucket.”

“Dickweed.”

I was smiling, but still said, “Ass licker.”

He scrunched his nose in a way that reminded me of Colt, but this time it made me smile instead of making me sad.

Sometimes Cal looked so much like his brother, it amazed me. He called me, “Cock sucker.”

So I laughed and said, “Hmm, that really isn’t an insult. I like sucking cock.”

“Ugh.” He pushed me in the shoulder, making me laugh even harder. “I seriously don’t want to know about your sex life, dude.”

“Are you sure, because I also like to lick a—”

He slapped his hand over my mouth, cutting me off. So naturally, I licked his hand, making him snatch it back and yell, “Ew! Fucking gross, Jeremy!” He started wiping his hand on his jeans.

I was cracking up at him, but still said, “You always overshare way too many details about your sex life, so it’s only fair.”

“Seriously, I don’t want to hear it... like at all.”

“Your sex life is just as gross to me,” I told him, completely amused at the look on his face.

He scrunched his nose again before admitting, “Okay, sorry. I’ll try not to overshare in the future, okay?”

I laughed again. “Okay.” I nodded at a side street off to the right. “Wanna start there?”

He looked at the street I indicated and said, “Yeah,” then louder so everyone could hear, “Let’s go raid these houses for food.” He pointed down the street when everyone turned to look at him.

After everyone gave him nods and other affirmation, we headed down the street. We decided that Wes and Orrean would stay with Mandy between the two houses we were checking out. Nolan was letting Tabitha go with him. I wasn’t sure I liked that idea, but I also didn’t like the idea of leaving her near Mandy and my little brother.

Before Nolan and Tabitha walked away, I told her, “If you hurt him, I will kill you.”

All she said was, “I know, and I won’t.” Then she walked onto the porch of the other house with Nolan next to her.

Cal and I walked into our house, which happened to be unlocked. I didn’t think that was a very good indication of food being in there, but it was still worth it to at least look. We quickly cleared the house, seeing no one inside, then went into the kitchen to collect everything we could. I was surprised by the amount of canned goods we were able to find.

Before we made it to the next house, Cal said, “Look, I know I said I wasn’t gonna give you any shit, but,” he held up his hand when I went to protest, “let me say my piece. Orrean didn’t do anything wrong and you know it.”

“Oh, you mean besides murdering my boyfriend? Killing your brother?” I asked in annoyance.

Cal put a hand on my shoulder. “You know just as well as me that it wasn’t Colt anymore. The... *thing* Orrean killed wasn’t my brother any more than he was your boyfriend. Colt died when the Qiren took him from us, and Orrean was only doing what Colt asked him to do. Orr didn’t want to, J, but Colt made him promise.”

I felt that pang in my chest grow to a full-blown ache as I whispered, “He killed my boyfriend, Calloway.”

Cal grabbed my other shoulder with his free hand, turning me so I was facing him. “Colt made him do it, J. Orrean didn’t want to.” Cal looked away for a moment before adding, “I went back over there with Orrean. I saw my brother when he wasn’t my brother anymore. He was a Feral who immediately went after me... and that’s something that Colt never would’ve wanted. Orrean took him out, but I’m telling you that he didn’t want to. I’ll... I’ll never forget the look on his face.” He half-shrugged, then rubbed his eyes with the

heels of his hands. “Afterwards he asked to be alone and went for a walk. He was just as devastated as the rest of us.”

My heart hurt. My heart physically hurt in my chest. Thinking about Colt made me feel like I was sinking in quicksand. There was absolutely nothing for me to say to Cal, so I simply stared at him, blinking. I’d had no idea that he went with Orrean that night. I had been wrapped up in my sleeping bag, ignoring everyone and everything.

When I didn’t respond to him, Cal threw his arm over my shoulders and started pulling me along. “Come on.” I saw him wipe his cheeks off before saying, “Let’s check on the others before finding more supplies.”

We moved on to the next house, with Mandy, Wes, and Orrean waiting in a new meeting spot. The door to the newest house was also unlocked, so I figured maybe this had once been a nice neighborhood where no one locked their doors. We cleared out several houses and collected some much-needed food for the group.

We started walking again and Orrean walked beside me, though not too close. After a few minutes, I turned to him and stated, “You need to leave me alone, Orrean.”

He looked completely annoyed and frustrated, and really tired. “I’m literally just walking here. You can move somewhere else if you want.”

I blinked at him, surprised that he was actually standing up to me.

Orrean’s voice was quiet, but sturdy. “I didn’t do anything wrong, Jeremy. I can’t keep apologizing for the same thing over and over. I’m tired... and I’m sick of walking on eggshells around you.”

“I never asked you to.” I huffed out a breath and crossed my arms. We stood there staring angrily at one another for a minute before I couldn’t take it anymore. “Seriously, Orr, how could you do that? How could you even think about

taking his stuff when you had to..." I couldn't even say it, but I didn't have to because he knew exactly what I meant.

Orrean looked away, took a deep breath, then looked me in the eyes. "You know what, Jeremy? I didn't. I didn't take his shit from him. He gave it to me before he turned. He didn't want to risk using it on anyone." I opened my mouth to respond, but he shook his head. "Do you really think this has been easy on me? Do you really think it was something I wanted to do? Something that I don't regret, even if it *was* necessary? Do you think I wanted to kill someone I cared about? Kill my," his breath caught, "friend? But I did what I had to do... what I promised him I'd do. You know he didn't want to live like that, and he didn't want to hurt any of you, so I did it... and it's something I'll have to live with for the rest of my life."

He glared at me, but I didn't know what to say to all of that, so I didn't say anything at all.

After a minute, he sighed. "Really? You can't even acknowledge anything I just said? You're not the only one dealing with loss..." When I still didn't respond, he ground out, "Fuck you, Jeremy." Then he walked away.

I was stunned by his outburst, so I still didn't say anything.

Cal patted my shoulder before jogging to catch up to Orrean. My best friend put his hand on Orr's shoulder and squeezed as he spoke to him.

Wes came up beside me and said, "You know he's right, J. Give him a break." Then he, too, walked away from me.

Nolan shrugged at me as he and Tabitha walked by, then Mandy grabbed my hand and started pulling me until I walked along the path.

We all sat down to eat and Orrean and I ended up having to uanria—energy transfer—Wes again. It had only been about two hours since the last time we had to do it.

Before, we had been able to go a lot longer in between. I was hoping that this wasn't an indicator for what was to come. If we had to keep giving him our energy so soon, I was going to be even more worn out than before.

When Wes needed it done again, two hours later, I figured that was exactly what was happening. By the time we set the tent up for the night, I was drained and ready for bed before we even ate dinner.

Nolan passed out some food to everyone and Orrean came to sit next to me. I glared at him—just because I felt like it—but he told me, “Look, I know you're angry with me right now. I'm pretty pissed-off too. But I think the three of us,” he indicated himself, Wes, and me, “need to stay close when we're sleeping. I think I can figure out a way to keep our energies going through Wes while we're asleep. I don't want the Qiren activating when we're all sleeping. But that means we're going to have to stick close together. I'm sorry.”

Wes reached out his hand and patted Orrean's shoulder. “Don't be sorry, Orr, you're doing an awesome thing, and I can't thank you enough.”

Orrean smiled sadly at my brother. “You don't need to thank me, Wesley.”

“Of course I do,” my brother argued.

“Come on, then, let's set up our sleeping bags. How're we doing this?” I asked without looking at Orrean. As usual, I knew I was being an asshole to someone who didn't deserve it, but I couldn't help it, nor did I even want to. My anger was helping me deal with all this shit at the moment.

“You're not going to like it,” Orrean informed me.

“Of course I won't,” I said sarcastically, taking a can of something gross-smelling from Cal when he handed it to me. I took a bite. It was so disgusting that I didn't even want to read the label, so I just held my breath and tried not to throw it up.

“Wes needs to lie between us, but you and I need to be touching him all night,” Orrean said.

“Okay, so how do we make sure we don’t move in our sleep? I usually shift around a lot,” I said, holding my breath for another bite.

“That’s the part you’re not going to like,” Orrean said with a sigh. “We’re going to need to tie our hands together.”

I almost spit my food out, but I quickly swallowed it. “We what?”

“We’re going to have to tie our hands together so we can rest them over your brother,” he said quietly.

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “Of course we do.” I sighed, then opened my eyes and finally looked at Orrean. “I’ll do it if it’ll help Wes, but I’m not going to like it.”

He gave me a half-smile that seemed sad. “Didn’t say you had to.”

“Fine, whatever,” I said, then held the can of food out to Cal. “I can’t fucking eat this. You can have it.”

“Here,” Orrean said, “I’ll trade.”

Before I could protest, Orrean grabbed the can out of my hand and replaced it with one that had chicken noodle soup in it. I didn’t even thank him, I just sat down and started to eat. *See? I’m a complete asshole.*

After we ate, Orrean got Cal to tie my left hand with Orrean’s right. We had to rip a tee shirt up in strips so we had something to tie our hands together with. After Cal finished, Wes lay down in his sleeping bag, then Orrean and I lay down in ours. It was super awkward and difficult to get in, but once we were done, we rested our hands on Wes’s chest.

“I am entirely too close to you,” I said to Wes.

He laughed. “Love ya too, J.” Then he stretched his arms behind his head and almost elbowed me in the face. “Uh, yeah, this is gonna be extremely comfortable all night,” his voice dripped with sarcasm.

I huffed out a breath. “I think my arm is already falling asleep.”

Orrean popped up on the other side of Wes. “Do you need to rearrange your hand? We should fix it before everyone else falls asleep.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I wasn’t serious, Orrean. I was joking.”

“Oh. So you’re not uncomfortable?” He was looking at me with concern.

“Aside from being way too close to my brother and holding hands with someone I’m mad at, no, I’m not uncomfortable,” I told him.

“Okay.” He sounded hurt as he lay back down, but I decided that I didn’t care, even though my chest hurt a little at the thought.

“Stop being an asshole,” Wes whispered to me.

I glared at him. “I’m not.” I totally was, but I wasn’t going to admit it.

“Yes, you are and you know it, and you know that everyone else knows it, you butt. He didn’t do anything wrong, Jeremy.”

“Yes, he did,” I said through gritted teeth.

“No, he didn’t. You’re being dramatic and ignorant, so just shut up and go to sleep,” Wes said.

I narrowed my eyes at him and opened my mouth to speak, but Cal’s voice broke through from my other side, “Wes is right, J. Everyone agrees with him, too.”

“I—”

“Don’t argue, just go to sleep. Everyone’s tired,” Cal cut me off.

I huffed out an exasperated sigh, but closed my eyes to go to sleep. Almost immediately, I felt Orrean’s energy going

through my hand and almost tugging mine out of me. I had no idea how he was doing that.

“Do I need to do anything?” I asked Orrean. Even though I didn’t want to talk to him, I knew it was necessary.

“No, I figured it out. You can just go to sleep,” he replied in a flat tone.

I closed my eyes again, and even though I was angry with him, Orrean’s warm energy was soothing and helped me fall asleep only seconds later.

Chapter Three

I sat at the tree for what felt like a very long time by myself. I thought that for once, Orrean wasn't going to show up. I kept thinking that maybe it was because I was mean to him all day, but then I thought about how stupid that was, since it was my dream anyway.

When he finally showed up, he said, "I'm surprised you still came."

I snorted. "It's not like I had a choice. Every time I fall asleep, I end up here or in that weird field. But I didn't think you were coming since I've been an asshole to you all day."

He sat down next to me so our shoulders were touching. I didn't move away.

He sighed. "You have been an asshole."

I chuckled. "It's hilarious when you curse."

I saw him smile out of the corner of my eye. We sat in silence for a while, but he sighed again. "For what it's worth, I am sorry."

"I know," I admitted.

"You are very stubborn," he told me.

"So I've been told."

"Will you still be angry with me tomorrow?"

*"Probably... well, yes, I've decided to be mad at you."
I shrugged.*

He sighed again. "Is there anything I can do to change your mind?"

"Probably not." Then I amended, "Unless you can bring Colt here."

"Jeremy," he whispered, "I wish I could."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do," he insisted.

Instead of arguing, I decided to believe him, so I leaned into him until my cheek was on his shoulder. I thought we stayed that way for hours, or at least it felt like it.

Then suddenly, I felt completely drained of energy, even though I hadn't moved and I was actually sleeping in real life, so I asked, "How is it possible to feel so drained in a dream? It feels so real."

Orrean suddenly moved in front of me and put his hands on my cheeks. "You feel drained?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Isn't that weird?"

"Shit!"

I laughed. "You cursed again."

"Jeremy, I need you to wake up."

"Huh?"

"Wake up, emm Balu, wake up."

I gasped as I opened my eyes. My body felt like it had been run over by a truck.

"Jeremy." I heard Orrean's voice, so I tried to turn toward him. I couldn't lift my head up, so I just looked in that direction. Orrean's face appeared right over top of Wes's head as he said, "Something is wrong. I need you to stop pushing your energy out."

I furrowed my brows. "What? I'm not doing anything." My voice was quiet and hoarse.

“Yes you are, Renuella. I can feel you sending out your energy and I can’t stop you. You have to do it yourself,” he said.

I closed my eyes and concentrated. I could feel my energy practically pouring out of my center, so I tried to put a lid on it, but it wouldn’t stop. I opened my eyes back up to look at Orrean. “I can’t stop it.”

“Shit,” he murmured, “I should’ve known this would happen.” He closed his eyes and said, “Concentrate on stopping it. I’ll see if I can help you.”

“Okay,” I mumbled as I closed my eyes to concentrate again.

I could feel my light pouring out still, so I tried to stop it from coming. I tried to make it stay put, but it didn’t seem to want to stop. After a few more seconds, I was about to tell Orrean that whatever he was doing wasn’t helping, but then I suddenly felt him there, or at least, I felt his warm energy. I thought he was pushing his energy into mine, trying to push it back into my center. At first it didn’t work, but after he sent another burst of his light, mine started to fall back a little. Slowly, oh so slowly, my energy flow started to wane until finally it stopped, making me gasp again.

Breathing hard, I opened my eyes and found Orrean resting his head on Wes’s chest, looking devoid of energy. My body still felt like it had been hit by a truck and by the looks of it, Orrean felt the same way, so I slowly pushed myself up to a seated position.

“Are you okay?” I whispered.

He groaned, “I think so.”

“What the hell are you guys doing?” Wes asked. I hadn’t even noticed him awake, so I jumped when he spoke.

“Something weird happened with my energy and Orrean had to fix it,” I answered.

Wes furrowed his brow. “Are you guys okay?”

“Mostly,” I answered. “I think we both feel like we got hit by a truck.”

“You guys can just sleep and I’ll stay awake, then,” Wes suggested.

“But you need your sleep too.”

“I’m on watch for a while, guys,” Nolan called from across the tent. “I can watch Wes too. It’s not like there’s much else to do, anyway.”

“I didn’t know you were awake,” I said.

“You didn’t hear me ask what you were doing or if you were okay?” he asked incredulously.

“No.”

“That’s why I answered you,” Orrean said to him.

I looked over at Orrean. “You answered him? When?”

“When you were concentrating on your energy the first time.”

“Hmm.” I guess that explained it. “Do you think he could watch out for Wes, or would that be too risky?”

“It would work,” Orrean said, “but we’ll have to fix this problem before tomorrow night.”

“Do you know how?” Wes asked him.

“I think so.”

“Don’t worry about that now,” Nolan said. “All of you need to go back to sleep.”

“Okay,” all three of us said at once before lying back down. I closed my eyes and drifted back to sleep.

When I woke up the next day, my hand was still attached to Orrean's. It was only then that I realized we could have untied ourselves when we went to sleep the second time since we weren't doing the energy thing anymore. Still, when I woke up, I didn't even move to untie it. Not only did I not have the energy, but I liked having that connection, even if I was still angry at Orrean. *Well, okay, I'm not mad at him anymore, but I want to be. Anger is easier than sorrow.*

"Renuella, good morning," I heard Orrean say from the other side of Wes.

"Good morning," I responded back, somehow knowing he was talking to me, even though I didn't know what he'd just called me. "Renuella... what does that mean?"

"Uh, it's a nickname. No direct translation," he answered.

"You don't want to tell me, do you?" I mused.

"No, I do not."

I snorted. "Tell me. Now you have to."

"No way."

"Come on," I said, sitting up to look at him. I saw Cal sitting up near the doorway. Obviously he'd had the last watch and was awake, but staying out of it.

"No," he said, mirroring me on the other side of Wes.

"Please?"

"No, Renuella." He was grinning.

"You cannot call me that if you won't tell me its meaning." I rolled my eyes at him, but reached over with my free hand and ran it over his hair.

He shivered. "Yes I can."

"This is like arguing with a two-year-old," I told him before petting his hair again.

He shivered again, but didn't remove my hand. "No it's not," he argued back.

"Yes, it is. Proved my point there, Orrean." I finally released his hair.

"You are doing the same thing I am, you know... Renuella."

"Stop calling me that. And no, I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"For crying out loud, Orr, you keep starting it."

"No, I—"

"Can you guys please stop arguing in Taoree over top of me?" Wes's voice interrupted.

Both Orrean and I looked down at him and said, "What?"

Wes blinked and shook his head. "I don't understand whatever it is you both just shouted at me. Did you call me a name?"

"We did not call you a name," I said.

"You're still speaking Taoree, Jeremy," Orrean informed me. "I did not realize it until right now."

"I am?" I asked, but then thought about what I'd just said and realized he was right and said, "Oh, now I can tell." Then I looked at my brother and concentrated for a second before telling him, "Sorry, I didn't notice. We didn't call you a name, we asked what you meant, but then we both realized we were speaking in Taoree."

Wes was looking at me like I had a dick growing out of my forehead.

"I'm speaking in English now," I said to him.

"I know, but that's really weird," he said.

"Weird seems to follow me around," I said with a shrug.

“Apparently,” Wes said. “So what were you arguing about?”

Orrean started laughing—no, giggling—so I reached over my brother with my free hand and smacked Orrean’s chest, then answered Wes, “He keeps calling me some weird name that doesn’t translate to English, so I don’t know what it means and he won’t tell me.”

Wes smiled at Orrean. “What’s the name?”

“Renuella,” Orrean answered easily, making me groan in annoyance and Wes chuckle.

“I get the feeling that isn’t something you should call your brother, so I probably shouldn’t call him that too,” Wes said with a smile.

Orrean cleared his throat and wiped his forehead with his free hand before answering, “Uh, no, definitely not.”

Wes laughed, but I was insanely curious as to why Orrean was nervous. He was rubbing his forehead again and that was something he only did when he was nervous or very upset.

I asked him, “What does it mean?”

He dropped his hand and looked at me with a serious expression and wide eyes. “I’m not telling you.”

Wes started cracking up, so I punched him in the arm before punching Orrean. Both of them just started laughing even harder.

“You both suck,” I said, annoyed with them. “I need to piss, can you untie us, Wesley?”

Through his laughter, he said, “Sure.” Then he untied the cloth, chuckling the entire time.

When I walked past Cal, he didn’t even try to hide his own laughter. I walked outside and found a place far enough away as to not be gross, but close enough that anyone could get to me or I to them, then I peed before heading back into the

tent. When I got back, all the others were awake too, and everyone took turns leaving the tent to piss, just like every morning. It would be nice to one day not have to look over your shoulder while relieving yourself, but what could ya do?

When Wes came back inside, I could tell the short trip had tired him and that his head was starting to hurt, so when he sat down, I grabbed his head right away. I didn't have to say anything to Orrean because he had noticed too.

When we were finished helping Wes, we ate some food, then packed up to start our day. Once again, Tabitha was still with us. She seemed nice and I liked her well enough, so I was still hoping that she would follow us all the way to the Independent camp. We only had a little over a week's worth of travel left at this point, so it seemed likely that she would.

Somehow, I ended up walking next to her, all the way in the back of the group. Wes and Orrean were walking and talking quietly only a few feet in front of us and Cal, Nolan, and Mandy were up front. We had been walking that way for about an hour.

I was taking a sip of water when Tabitha asked me, "So how long have you been dating Orrean?"

I almost spit my water out, but somehow managed to swallow it down. I started coughing since some of it went down the wrong pipe. Tabitha patted my back a little harder than I had been expecting, but it helped.

Once I could talk, I told her, "Orrean and I are not dating." I know my eyes had to look like they were about to pop out of my head.

She tilted her head and examined me for a long moment. I had to fight the urge to squirm under her scrutiny. She finally said, "Hmm. I thought you were. You look good together." I raised a brow at that comment, but she just shrugged, then asked, "How long have you been learning Taoree? You seem to speak it really well."

I cleared my throat before answering, “Only a few weeks, I guess.”

“Really?”

I nodded.

“Hmm, how do you say hello?” she asked.

Without thinking I said, “Noa.” Apparently I could understand it, or at least some of it, even when Orrean and I weren’t touching. *This is so strange.*

“No-a. Noa. Am I saying it right?” she asked.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“How do you say ‘how are you’?”

“Zuam yiy vo?” I answered automatically.

“You said that way too fast.” She laughed.

I repeated it slowly and when she tried to say it back, I couldn’t help but laugh. She smacked my arm in annoyance, but laughed at herself at the same time.

Orrean looked back at me with a small smile, so I told him, “She’s trying to learn Taoree. Did you hear her?”

He slowed down to walk beside me. “I did. It seems like your Taoree is getting better, even when you and I are not touching.”

“I know. It’s really strange, but it’s kind of neat. Don’t you like that I’m learning your language?” I asked him.

He smiled. “I like it, but I also think it’s funny that you do not realize when you start speaking it.”

“What?” I asked, then rolled my eyes. “Very funny. No, I didn’t notice... again. But you didn’t notice this morning either.” Apparently our entire conversation had been in Taoree. It was so weird that I didn’t even realize I was speaking another language.

“In my defense, I was just happy you were talking to me again. Also, I had just woken up,” he said with a smile.

Before I could reply, Tabitha said, “That’s just crazy. You’re the first human I’ve ever heard speak Taoree before.”

“I’m sure there are plenty in the military and government that speak Taoree,” I said to her, then at her wide eyes, I realized I still hadn’t switched back to English. I heard Orrean chuckling on the other side of me as I repeated my statement, in English this time.

“Still,” she said, “it’s pretty amazing. Orrean must be a really good teacher.”

“Or I’m just really awesome,” I stated. I heard Wes laugh and saw him shake his head. I looked back at Tabitha. “Can I ask you a serious question?”

She sighed before saying, “You want to know how I ended up tied to that porch, right? I knew I’d have to tell you all sooner or later. I already told Nolan, obviously,” she waved it away, “but I suppose I should tell you guys too.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to ask you, but if you want to talk about it, I’m here to listen,” I said with a little shrug. I didn’t exactly want to know what’d happened since it was obviously terrible, but I’d listen, and try to be encouraging, if she decided to tell me.

“Can your thing wait?” I nodded my head, then she took a deep breath. “I was with some friends from work when the world ended, or you know, almost ended. Our building went on lockdown, so we were stuck inside for a few days. When no one came to free us and the power went out, we had to break down a few doors to get outside to find food and everything. We stayed together and for a couple weeks, everything was fine. Or as fine as it could be when you’re fighting for your life every day. But then we got attacked by a huge horde of Ferals. They were everywhere, and only James and I made it out alive.”

She took a shuddered breath. “It was just the two of us for a while, but James got sick. I think he ate something bad or maybe we didn’t boil our water long enough, I don’t know, but

he got sick, so we sought out help. We came across a group of men that offered to help us out.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “We followed them back to their house thinking they were going to give James some medicine, but when we got there, they turned on us and killed him. Then they dragged me outside and tied me up. I was there for nearly two days by the time you guys found me.”

I tentatively reached out and squeezed her shoulder. “Holy shit, Tabitha. I’m so sorry we weren’t there sooner.”

She snorted through her tears. “Nolan said the exact same thing.”

That made me smile, though my heart broke for her.

Orrean didn’t say anything, but he did reach past me and pat her shoulder.

Wes stopped walking and turned around to face her. “I don’t know if you meant for me to hear, but I did and I’m so sorry.” He slowly pulled her into a hug, obviously giving her a chance to pull away, but she didn’t. She let him hold her for a few seconds before letting go.

She offered a watery smile and said, “I’m gonna go walk with Nolan now, okay?”

“Of course,” I said.

Wes walked on one side of me and Orrean on the other. My brother said, “Sometimes people just suck. Maybe we shouldn’t have let those assholes go.”

“Maybe not,” I agreed. “But I don’t exactly think we should go around murdering people.”

“Those weren’t really people, J, they were monsters,” Wes said.

“I know, but there’s nothing we can do about it now,” I stated the obvious.

“We’ll just have to do better next time,” Orrean said. “Though I hope there isn’t a next time.”

“You and me both, man,” Wes said.

Cal backed up with Mandy walking next to him—I was guessing to give Nolan and Tabitha some privacy—and he said, “Okay, guys, we need a change of subject. This shit is depressing and we don’t wanna talk about it anymore.” He threw his arm over Wes’s shoulders. “So I heard you know how to cut hair. You think you can cut mine if I find you some scissors?”

Wes smiled at Cal. “Sure, but you gotta pay me.”

Cal pushed him. “You little shit. What do you want?”

“Hmm, good question. What are you willing to do for me?”

Cal thought for a minute, then took one arm out of his backpack strap and swung the bag around to start looking through it. It took a while, but eventually he pulled out a can of pineapple and held it up to Wes. “I’ll give you this. I already had one can and it was really good.”

Wes made a face. “I don’t really like pineapple.”

Cal rolled his eyes and huffed, “Fine. Hold on.” Then he started rummaging through his bag again. “What about this?” With a flourish he pulled out a chocolate bar and waved it in front of my brother.

“Where did you get that?” Wes asked him with wide eyes.

Cal smiled smugly. “I found it last week.”

I know my brows went into my hairline, just like Wes’s, who said, “And you didn’t eat it yet?” *Exactly my thoughts.*

Cal tilted his head. “I was saving it for a special occasion.”

“You’ll give it to me if I cut your hair?”

“Yep. I can’t stand it going in my eyes anymore, so it’s worth it,” Cal answered.

“You got a deal, Calloway.”

“Sweet,” Cal said, throwing the candy bar back in his bag.

Mandy walked over to Wes and grabbed his hand.
“Can I have a bite when you eat it?”

Wes chuckled. “Sure, Peanut.” He bent down and picked her up. He only carried her for about two minutes before he had to put her back down and turn to Orrean and me.

Wes said, “I think I need you guys to... what’s it called again?”

“Uanria,” Orrean and I answered together.

“Right, that.”

Orrean called out, “Nol, we need to stop for a second.”

Everyone turned and watched as Orrean and I put our hands on Wes’s head and did our energy transfer. It didn’t take long, but I still felt a little dizzy when we finished. Everyone started walking ahead of me.

I stumbled a little and Orrean caught my arm, asking, “Are you okay, Jeremy?”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Yeah, I just felt a little woozy, but I’m fine.”

Orrean held up his water bottle. “Drink some water, it should help. And here,” he reached into his backpack and produced a sleeve of crackers, “eat a few of these.”

I took the water and crackers. “Thanks, Orr.”

“You’re welcome, Renuella.” I could hear the smile in his voice.

“God, you suck,” I told him before shoving an entire cracker in my mouth.

“Only if you taste good,” he said, waggling his eyebrows.

I elbowed him, laughing. “You did not just make a sex joke.”

He laughed. “I could do with a big juicy cock in my mouth.”

I spit out my sip of water. “Oh my god!” I started cracking up. “I cannot believe you just said that.”

“We’ve been on the road so long, I think I might explode the first time someone touches me.”

“Jesus. I think we’re a bad influence on you.” I couldn’t stop laughing in surprise. “Stop making me laugh.” I had to clutch my stomach from laughing so hard.

“You’re the one that keeps leaning on me and rubbing my back and everything,” he said as he shoulder checked me.

I put my hands on my face, completely mortified. “Uhh,” I groaned, “sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I like it.”

I groaned again, dropped my hands, then elbowed him in the ribs, making him laugh harder.

Only an hour later, Wes needed us to uanria again. And again, I was dizzy after the energy transfer. When he needed it done again an hour after that, I started getting a headache and ended up needing to wear sunglasses, even though I’d been wearing a hat all day.

Another hour passed and I heard Wes yell, “Fuck!”

“What’s wrong?” I asked immediately, even though I was sure I knew the answer.

“It’s coming back again, J. I’m so sorry, I know you’re already drained,” Wes said in a defeated voice.

“Hey,” I said, stepping up to him and putting my hands on his head. “I don’t mind, Wesley. I’m just glad that I can help.”

Orrean put his hands over mine. “We’re going to be okay, Wes, don’t worry. We’re going to make it.”

I couldn’t help but smile at Orrean. That was the first time he’d said that he thought we would make it there in time, so it gave me hope. We had to make it, no matter what.

Orrean and I pushed our light into Wes and I felt it mixing together before wrapping around each tiny Qiren. This time it took a few seconds longer to get all the leaks plugged up, but it still wasn’t too long.

When I let go of Wes, I automatically turned into Orrean, who was standing next to me. I surprised him by wrapping my arms around his waist and burying my head in his chest. After his initial surprise, he wrapped his arms around me and sagged down into me. He was a good six inches taller than me, so he had to bend down a little to rest his cheek on my head. I had my eyes closed because I felt like the ground was spinning.

When I felt like I could speak, I asked Orrean, “Are you as dizzy as me?”

“Yes.” He squeezed me tight.

“Is there anything we can do to help it?”

“Just keep drinking water and eating food,” he said simply.

“That kind of sucks since we’re always running low on food,” I said.

“Yeah.”

After a minute, I gave him a squeeze, then pulled away and looked up at him. For the first time, I noticed dark circles under his eyes. He had definitely lost a little weight over the past week and his eyes didn’t look as bright. I couldn’t help but wonder if I looked the same.

“You guys okay to keep going?” Cal asked quietly.

I looked at my friend. “Sure, let’s go before we lose any more daylight.” I looked at Orrean. “You good?”

He nodded and started walking after Cal, with me next to him. Orrean seemed to be walking slower than usual.
Probably not a good sign.

When we went to sleep that night, Orrean said that he had figured out a way to keep Wes’s Qiren at bay while we slept. I figured we were going to have to have our hands tied back together, but he just said that it would work if Wes and I slept on either side of him.

So I lay down at one end of the tent with Orrean next to me and Wes next to him, with the promise that Orrean had everything under control. It was surprisingly very easy to trust him.

Orrean was curled in a ball under the tree, so I ran over and knelt next to him. “Are you okay?”

He didn’t answer, he just kept shivering.

“It’s okay,” I told him, sitting down and pulling his head into my lap. “I got you.” I rubbed his arm and back as he lay there, shivering with his eyes closed. I tried to use my body heat to warm him, but he shivered all night long.

When I woke up, I blinked away my grogginess, then looked at Orrean next to me. I had to sit up to see better, but he was curled in a ball and shivering, with one hand on Wes’s chest. My brother was looking pale with sweat pooling on his forehead. I put one hand on each of their foreheads. Orrean was ice-cold and Wes was burning up.

I shook both their shoulders. “Orrean. Wesley. Wake up.”

Neither responded.

I quickly pushed out of my sleeping bag and knelt by their heads, shaking them again. “Orrean. Wesley. Come on, guys, wake up.”

“What’s wrong?” Cal asked groggily as he climbed out of his sleeping bag.

“I don’t know,” I said, panicking. “Orrean’s ice-cold and Wes is burning up. They won’t wake up, Cal. Help me.”

“Shit,” Cal exclaimed, kneeling by Wesley and patting his cheek to try and rouse him.

I kept shaking them both and calling their names, but nothing was working.

After a few minutes, Cal grabbed my hands, stopping me. “Look at me, J.” I did as he asked before he continued, “You need to try and heal them.”

“I don’t know how,” I whispered.

“Yes, you do. You’ve done it a million times over the past few days,” Cal insisted.

“Not by myself. Orrean always does it, I just let him use my energy too,” I admitted as I looked down at Wes and Orrean.

Cal grabbed my cheeks and forced me to look at him again. “You do know how. Put your hand on Wesley’s head and push your energy into him. Your body will know what to do.”

I just stared at him. I didn’t think it would work.

Nolan was behind me. “You have to try, J. It’s going to be alright, but you have to try.”

I blew out a breath, but gave them a nod, and Cal released my face. I lifted Wes’s head into my lap, put my hands on Wes’s forehead and immediately started pushing my energy into him. I concentrated and after a tense minute, I found the Qiren. I felt my brow furrow as I wrapped my

energy around each one, but I couldn't find any problem with them; they were all well-secured. I pulled my energy back.

"I don't understand. Nothing's wrong with his Qiren," I told the others, who were staring at me.

Nolan was worrying his lip, thinking before he said, "Try to help Orrean. If he wakes up, maybe he'll know what's wrong with Wes."

I nodded, then moved Wes off of me and scooted over to Orrean. I lifted his head into my lap and cupped his cheeks in my hands. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, then started sending my energy into him. I felt my energy connect with his and I gasped out loud at the collision. It felt like his light was reaching out to mine and wrapping me inside it, in its warmth. I took another deep breath before moving my energy through Orrean, searching for an injury. I didn't find anything wrong with his head or his lungs, but when I reached his heart—that was on his far right side, unlike humans—I felt it beating slowly and weakly.

I pushed my energy toward his heart and wrapped it around. His heart soaked it up for what felt like an eternity until it finally started beating at a regular pace.

I heard Orrean inhale loudly, so I opened my eyes to see him blinking under me. His eyes were flickering around in confusion, clearly disoriented, so I started rubbing his cheeks with my thumbs.

"Shh," I whispered, still letting my light flow into him. "Orrean, it's okay. I have you. You're okay now."

I closed my eyes in relief as my body started to feel drained. I slowly leaned forward over his face until my forehead was resting on his chest, my thumbs still rubbing his cheeks. I felt him lift his arm until his hand gripped the back of my neck, where he started rubbing my skin there.

His voice was quiet and hoarse, "Pull back, my Balu. Too much energy you are using."

"Will you stay awake if I stop?"

“Yes.”

I nodded against him and started pulling my light back until I cut it off completely. After a shuddered breath, I asked him, “Why won’t Wes wake up?”

“His body is fighting hard to keep the Qiren at bay. He needs to use all his energy on that. He will not wake up until we can remove them.” His voice was still quiet.

“Shit. Is there nothing we can do?”

“Just what we’ve been doing, Renuella. I’m sorry.” He squeezed my neck.

“Okay.”

“Does he know what’s wrong with Wes? What’s he saying?” Cal’s frantic voice made me turn my head to the side to look at him. I didn’t lift my head from Orrean’s chest, though.

“Can you not hear him?” I asked, then closed my eyes in understanding. “I really need to get better at noticing when we’re speaking Taoree. Wes’s body is using all his energy to keep his Qiren from activating. He won’t wake until he has the surgery at the Independent camp.”

“Oh, fuck.”

“Yeah.” I closed my eyes and turned my head back so I could hide my face against Orrean’s chest. He was still rubbing my neck and I was still rubbing his cheeks, and I had no energy to move away, nor did I really want to.

Nolan started talking behind me, but I didn’t bother to move, I just listened to him say, “We need to figure out a way to carry him, then. He obviously can’t hold onto our backs. Maybe we could push him, like in a wheelchair-type thing?”

“Where are we going to get a wheelchair?” Cal asked.

“It will probably be a while before we find one. Shit,” Nolan stated.

“What if we pull him? We could find something to lay him on, like a door or something, and hook some rope to it.” Tabitha surprised me with the concern in her voice. “I think we should be able to find supplies to make something like that.”

“That’s a good idea,” Nolan said. “Okay, we’re going to have to split up. Two of us will have to go out to find the crap we need and one of us will have to stay here with Wes, Mandy, J, and Orrean.”

“Hey,” Mandy complained.

“Yes, Mandy, I know you can fight, but Wes, J, and Orrean are in no shape to. You can’t be here by yourself with all of them,” Nolan said.

I heard Mandy grumbling under her breath, but Tabitha spoke louder, “I can go with you, Nol. We can get what we need and Cal can stay here with them.”

“Are you sure?” Nolan asked.

“Yes, I would like to help.”

“Is that good with you, Cal?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Cal answered distractedly.

Everyone started moving around, so I whispered to Orrean, “I need to lie down, but I don’t know if I can move.”

“Here,” he whispered back, then very slowly moved his head off my lap. Without lifting my head up, I slid my legs out in front of me, then turned on my hip and somehow ended up lying on my side next to Orrean with my head on his shoulder. He shifted on his side to face me and wrapped his arms around me, then we both fell back asleep.

We were awoken a short while later by Cal shaking our shoulders. “Jeremy, Orrean, we got Wes all set up. Do you think you guys can walk?”

I rolled off of Orrean—feeling a little weird for sleeping on him like that—then I stretched. I actually felt a

little better, so I said, “Yeah, I think I’ll be okay.”

“Orrean?” Cal prompted.

He cleared his throat. “I should be fine.” His voice sounded hoarse and tired.

I sat up and looked at him. He still didn’t look very good. He had dark circles under his purple eyes and his coloring looked a little off. All Taoree were really pale to begin with, but he almost seemed whiter than white and perhaps a little ashy. I slowly stood up, my body sore and stiff, then I held my hand out to Orrean to help him up.

Before he could grab my hand, Cal was there, scooping Orrean under his arms and pulling him to his feet. Cal had to hold on to the alien for a few seconds so he could get his bearings. When Cal let him go, Orrean seemed even stiffer than I felt, but he and I walked out of the tent while Cal packed our stuff up.

Everyone else was waiting for us outside. I raised my brows at the sight before me. Wes was lying on what I assumed was a door or a big piece of plywood. He was wrapped up in his sleeping bag and had a bunch of ropes wrapped around him and the door—I guess to keep him from falling off. Near Wes’s head, there were long handles with some very thick rope somehow connected to one of the backpacks. The entire contraption was lying on top of a wheelbarrow, or the bottom portion of a wheelbarrow, though it was obvious they were planning on pulling it, not pushing it.

“Where the hell did you find that?” I asked Nolan.

He smiled at me. “We lucked out and found a gardening store not too far from here. We tested everything out after we hooked it together and it works fine.”

I gave him a half-smile, then walked over to my brother. I placed my hand on his head, but right before I pushed my energy into him, Orrean pulled my hand away. I looked at Orrean questioningly.

“He’s okay. Don’t waste your energy,” he said quietly. “I can sense his Qiren. I won’t let anything happen to him.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled at me before walking toward Mandy and kneeling in front of her. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but Mandy gave him a hug before he stood back up. Soon, the others had the tent and everything packed up and we were on our way, albeit slowly, thanks to Orrean and me.

“How many days before we reach the camp, Nol?” Cal asked later that day.

“I’d say at least seven days,” Nolan answered after thinking about it.

“Holy fuck,” Cal said under his breath, but I still heard him.

“We’ve been making good time, but we’ve slowed our pace a little today,” Nolan said in what I was sure he thought was a quiet voice, but wasn’t really quiet at all.

“We’re gonna need to figure something out,” Cal mumbled. “All three of them look terrible.”

“I know, Cal, but I don’t think we can carry or pull all of them at the same time,” Nolan whispered to Cal.

“Why can’t we take a car?” Tabitha asked them quietly.

“Orrean told us the Taoree Legion have specialized equipment made for tracking vehicles. He said we would be captured within an hour at the most. It’s too dangerous,” Nolan told her.

“Well, that’s shitty,” she replied.

I saw Nolan nod at her.

Cal glanced back at where Orrean and I were walking. He was taking his turn pulling Wes at the moment, and luckily for everyone, Mandy had been walking more today than she usually did.

Cal turned back around to look at Nolan and Tabitha. “They both look like they’re gonna keel over at any second.”

Nolan glanced over his shoulder and whispered to Cal, “They look like fucking zombies.” They both actually sounded really concerned, even though that last statement had me amused.

I called to them, “You know we actually can hear you guys, right?”

They both looked back at me with wide eyes.

I snorted and flipped them off. “You two are assholes.”

“Sorry, J,” Nolan stated. “We’re just worried about you.”

“Don’t care,” I called to him.

“We didn’t mean to be offensive,” he told me.

“Seriously don’t care, dude.”

“I really didn’t—”

“Nolan, shut the fuck up and stop treating me like I’m dying. You’re both assholes, but I love ya anyway. Now, it’s way later than usual, so can we stop for some lunch?” I asked, exasperated.

He stopped walking and eyed me for a moment before nodding and sitting down right where he had stopped. I looked around, but upon seeing nothing else to even lean on, I grabbed Orrean’s wrist and led him over to the wheelbarrow. I slid down the side and leaned on the large wheel, then tugged on Orrean’s arm to get him to sit next to me.

He hadn’t said more than two words all day. It was very obvious that he was using more of his energy on Wes than I was. Once seated, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Luckily, he had already dropped his backpack next to us, so he wasn’t leaning on anything awkwardly.

I pulled out a bag of croutons and a can of sweet potatoes from my bag, then found a can of soup in his. I

opened both cans with my can opener and held his soup against his chest until he took it from me. I passed him his water bottle, which he drank from immediately. I opened the bag of croutons, grabbed his hand and dumped some in his palm, then grabbed a handful for myself. We sat in silence as we ate.

When I was almost finished with my food, I turned toward my other companions and said, “One of you is gonna have to get some water and broth or something into Wesley.”

Orrean spoke without opening his eyes, “I have a zheluangi in my pack.”

“A what?” Nolan asked.

“It’ll shut his systems down and put him in a hibernation that will keep him from needing food and water and... the bathroom,” Orr explained, still with his eyes shut. “Each one lasts for at least seventy-two hours. You just snap it on his wrist.”

“How many do you have?” Cal asked.

“There should be a dozen in my pack.”

When Orr didn’t move to get it out, I looked over at everyone else. “Can one of you get it?”

Cal stood up right away. “Uh, I’ll do it.” He walked behind me. I could hear him moving around, but I didn’t even bother to turn around and look. “These bracelet-looking things?”

“Yes,” Orr said.

I finished off my food, then closed my eyes and leaned my head back. I started to nod off and when my head fell forward, making me jump and snap my head back up, I looked around. Nolan and Mandy were still eating, so I leaned over until my cheek was resting on Orrean’s shoulder, like I typically did to Dream-Orrean. He already had his head back with his eyes closed. I managed to fall asleep for a few minutes before the others woke me.

Chapter Four

Every night, we just sat next to one another, laying our heads together and resting. It was like I could actually fall asleep in my dream, when I was already sleeping. Every night I would tuck my arm behind his and slide my hand forward until we could hold hands, lacing our fingers together. It always made me think of Colt, but instead of feeling guilty, it was nice to remember. Orrean and I had lost the ability to talk since our energies were so depleted, but we didn't need to. We just had to sit there with each other and offer comfort.

The next four days were much the same. We walked, with Orrean and me zombie-like and slow, we ate, we slept, and when we were attacked by Ferals, the others fought them. I would take out a Feral with my shoian if it got too close, but Nolan, Cal, Tabitha, and even Mandy generally protected us slackers—Orrean, Wes, and me. In that regard, we had been pretty lucky since we hadn't run into many large hordes of Ferals.

We estimated we were about five days out from the Independent camp. So far, Wesley hadn't woken up once since he first went into a state of unconsciousness. It made me beyond worried, but I also really started to miss my brother, even though he was never very far from me. Orrean, Wes, and I were constantly next to one another. I could feel my energy merging with Orrean's sometimes throughout the day before it would go straight into Wes. Every day I was losing more and more of my light, and every day I could see the strain wearing even further on Orrean and my brother.

“Oh god. Oh no, no, no, no, no,” Nolan started frantically muttering as we walked through yet another endless field.

I didn't have the energy to speak, so I was glad when Cal asked, “What's wrong?”

Nolan turned to him with huge, wide eyes. “Don't you hear it?”

Everyone quieted down and listened. Before I even heard it, I knew exactly what it was going to be. Because, why wouldn't a fucking alien spaceship be on its way to kill us? I mean, this is just your normal, average day in the life of Jeremy Ettner. Why wouldn't aliens, Ferals, and humans alike be trying to kill me and everyone I loved?

“Fuck,” Cal exclaimed before putting the wheelbarrow down and running over to me. “You and Orrean. Get on the wheelbarrow.” He looked at Nolan. “You carry Mandy, I'll get these three.”

I didn't have time to protest—not that I would have—before Cal scooped me up and set me next to Wes's legs on top of the wheelbarrow. Then Cal scooped Orrean up and had to sit him on top of Wes's legs. I had to grab onto Orrean with one hand and the wood I was sitting on with the other when Cal picked the handles back up, so neither of us would fall off.

Cal started pulling us as quickly as he could with Nolan running beside us, carrying Mandy, with Tabitha on our other side holding all the bags. They ran for a good ten minutes, but the hum of the alien ship started getting closer. Cal tried switching directions, but the ship seemed to be tracking us.

When it became abundantly clear that we were not going to be able to outrun this thing, Orrean grabbed my hand and squeezed, looking into my eyes. I knew what he was asking, so I gave him a nod.

With more energy than he seemed to possess a few minutes prior, Orrean said loudly, “Everyone grab my arm.”

Neither Cal nor Nolan stopped, but Nol did say, “You don’t have enough energy for that, Orrean. We have to keep going.”

“The ship’s gaining on us, Nol, you need to grab my arm before it gets any closer,” Orrean argued.

“No way, Orr,” Cal yelled over his shoulder. “We don’t want to hurt you.”

I squeezed Orrean’s hand so he would let me talk. “I don’t like it either, guys, but Orr is right. It’s the only way, and I’ll be helping him too.”

They ran for two more minutes before we felt the wind from the ship. Cal came to a stop with a muttered, “Shit.” He ran back, grabbing Tabitha’s hand on the way.

Cal, Nolan, Tabitha, and Mandy all grabbed Orrean’s arm. I was already holding his hand and Orrean was still half-sitting on Wesley, so he was covered too. Orrean met my eye and when I nodded, I felt the stupid white dome rip out of my chest and back, making me gasp from the sudden pain even though I had been expecting it.

Orrean still had eye contact with me and out of the corner of my eye, I could see the white dome coming from his body as well. We had used the dome thing several times before for protection from Taoree. It was a transparent white dome that surrounded Orrean or me, and anyone that touched us. This time, it also covered the wheelbarrow, probably because we were on top of it. It looked like someone had flipped a giant bowl upside-down over top of us, as if we were trapped bugs. I knew from past experiences that the people outside the dome couldn’t see or hear anything inside and it even went as far as making them look away from us. As fantastic as it was, it was always a last resort because it was fucking painful for whoever was conjuring it and it took a shit-ton of energy... just what we needed in our current states.

“What the fuck is this?” Tabitha’s whispered voice made me look at her.

Nolan answered, “I don’t know what it’s called, but they won’t be able to hear or see us as long as we keep ahold of Orrean.”

“We won’t be able to hold this as long as we usually can,” I said, probably unnecessarily.

“Don’t know what you said, J,” Cal whispered.

I huffed in annoyance, leaned forward to rest my head on Orrean’s—now—bony shoulder, then switched back to English and said, “We can’t hold this very long. Too much of our energy is being siphoned by Wes.”

“Just do the best you can, J,” Cal responded as he patted my back with his free hand.

Orrean rested his forehead down on my shoulder. “I won’t let them find you, my Balu.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to ignore the pain in my stomach and back, then answered Orrean in Taoree, “What does that mean? I understand *emm* to mean *my* or *mine*, but I do not know *Balu*. What am I to you?”

I felt him shake his head against my shoulder. “I am afraid to tell you.”

“Why? Why would you be afraid to tell me something?” I whispered, still in Taoree.

Before he could answer, or come up with an excuse not to answer, we both moaned in pain as a surge of energy went through us. I tilted my head and peeked out, seeing some Taoree Legion foot soldiers walking around. I guessed the white dome—or *onghu*—had to work extra hard suddenly with so many enemies so close to us. After a few intense seconds, the amount of pain seemed to level off, but not enough to regain my ability to talk.

I closed my eyes again and tucked my face against Orrean’s neck, breathing in his cinnamon scent—it was weird that he smelled like cinnamon since it was my favorite smell, but I wasn’t complaining. I focused on his warm energy that I

could feel mixing with my own. That warmth always brought me some peace, even when I was in pain or scared.

It seemed to take forever for the soldiers to leave, and once they did, we were only able to hold the dome for about ten, maybe fifteen additional minutes. As soon as we released it, we both slumped in a heap on the wheelbarrow and the others started running. I could feel someone lift and start to pull us. It took all of my strength and determination to grip the edge so Orrean and I wouldn't fall off. I was happy that Cal and Nolan knew enough from our experiences to understand that it wasn't safe to stay anywhere near an area the Taoree were scouting. They always sent an extra cleanup crew a few minutes or hours after leaving an area. It was safest to get away.

I did everything in my power to stay awake while being pulled, but it was a fruitless effort. I ended up falling asleep, so when we came to a stop, I had no idea how long we'd been traveling and was surprised to find a bungee cord wrapped around Orrean and me to keep us on the wheelbarrow. I heard the others setting up camp, so I was just going to have to trust that they took us far enough away.

It wasn't too long before I was carried away from Wes and Orrean. I started to panic because something in my chest was tugging at me.

Cal must have understood my incoherent mumbling, though, because he said, "It's okay, J. I'm just moving you inside the tent where it's warm. Wes and Orrean will be laying right next to you in a minute, okay? Calm down, buddy."

I calmed a little, but not completely. I was placed inside a sleeping bag, then Cal left me and only a few seconds later, Orrean was laid down right next to me. I automatically reached for him and as soon as I found him lying against me, I could suddenly breathe more easily. Wes was laid down on the other side of Orrean, so I reached out and sent him my energy, only to find that Orrean's was already there and holding the Qiren at bay.

I ended up pulling Orrean's head onto my chest because he was ice-cold and shivering. I rubbed my hands on his arms and back trying to warm him up, but I was soon devoid of all energy, so I placed one hand on Orr's back and one on Wes's arm above his zheluangi that looked like a very thick metal cuff on his wrist.

Nolan came over and lifted my head, making me sip some water and a little soup. He tried to do the same to Orrean, but he wasn't responsive enough to drink anything, so he ended up placing a zheluangi on his wrist. I could only hope that Orr had enough zheluangis to last them both. They were both looking in even worse shape than just a few hours ago.

Before I had too much time to worry about it, I fell asleep.

Orrean was curled up in a ball again, but this time he was clearly crying.

I knelt down next to him. "What's wrong?"

He looked at me with sad eyes. "You're going to hate me when you figure it out."

I furrowed my brow and put my hands on his arms. "Figure what out? I could never hate you, Orr."

Instead of answering he ducked his head so he wasn't looking at me anymore, then mumbled, "This is the only time you're ever going to hold me and I'm so out of it that I can't even enjoy it."

"I hold you all the time," I said, confused because I really did hold Dream-Orrean often.

He looked at me again. "I mean really hold me."

Oh. I had fallen asleep with Orrean's head on my chest, hadn't I?

I sat against the tree, then shifted him around until I was holding him in my dream, too. I didn't know what to do to comfort him. He cried silently for a little while before tucking his head under my chin and finally relaxing.

When I woke the next day, I was fucking freezing, even though I was apparently sharing a sleeping bag with Orrean. He was still lying on my chest and his skin felt even icier than mine did. With one hand still on his back and one on Wesley's arm, I sent out my energy to both of them, but found that Wes's Qiren were taken care of by Orrean and that Orrean's vitals were all low. I tried giving him some energy, but it was like his body just couldn't heal. He didn't have an injury that I could fix, he just hardly had any energy, any light, left at all.

Orrean's body was now using the smallest amount of energy—of his light—as possible, so he could keep himself and Wes alive. Every bit of energy he had was focused on those two tasks, and it seemed that he had somehow managed to make more of his energy go into helping Wes than into helping himself. I couldn't believe he was willing to do so much for my little brother.

Cal came over when he saw me awake. “Hey, J, how you feeling?”

“Shitty,” I answered honestly. “But not as bad as these two. Orrean's barely keeping them alive.”

He grimaced. “Let me get you some food and water. Once you eat, we can see if you can walk. Obviously, we're gonna have to pull him,” he pointed at Orrean, “too. We're gonna make this work,” he mumbled the last part, almost to himself.

When we got going for the day, Cal and Nolan had strapped Orrean and Wes next to each other on the wheelbarrow. At first I was simply walking next to them, but

after about an hour, I somehow knew that Orrean needed physical contact to use my energy for himself and my brother. I grabbed Orrean's hand and could feel a very small trickle of my energy flowing into him—our hands seemed to be the best conduit—then it continued to his heart and some of it went to Wes's Qiren. That amount of energy siphoning normally wouldn't have been noticeable, but with all of us so low on resources, it was leaving me extremely tired and grumpy. I just wanted to crawl into a bed and sleep for days on end. But I knew we should be getting close to the Independent camp... probably only about two days away, so the energy siphoning shouldn't need to last too much longer, thank fuck.

After lunch, I held Orrean's hand as we walked again—of course, because we were *always* fucking walking—when I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I suddenly felt like someone was following us. I instinctively reached out with my senses and came to a stop.

“Cal,” I whispered to him since he was the one pulling the wheelbarrow.

He looked over his shoulder at me and stopped walking when he saw that I had halted. He raised a brow in question at me.

I closed my eyes again, double-checking before saying, “There's a Taoree trailing us. About a quarter mile back. Only one. I can't sense any others, but he's definitely following us.”

Cal looked completely shell-shocked for about ten seconds before exclaiming in a quiet voice, “You can fucking sense Taoree now too?”

I shrugged. “I guess? Or maybe Orrean is telling me.” I waved my hand that held Orrean's a little to show what I meant.

He stared at our joined hands before asking, “Are you sure it's only one of them?”

I closed my eyes again and concentrated. I could sense the Taoree running toward us, but I didn't notice anyone else,

so I looked at Cal, saying, "It's just one, but he's closing in fast."

He gave me a single nod before turning to Nolan and Tabitha. "Did you catch that?" At their nods, he said, "Everyone get out your reelian." When Tabitha didn't move, he clarified, "The gun that can kill Taoree."

She gave him an exaggerated nod before pulling out her reelian and moving to stand next to Mandy, who already had hers out and ready to shoot.

Cal asked me, "What direction is he coming from?"

I pointed in the direction we had been traveling from, then aimed my own reelian that way and said, "Tabitha, can you and Mandy stand behind the wheelbarrow, so you have a shield?" I was hoping that Tabitha wouldn't get offended. I knew she could easily fight like the rest of us, but I wanted her to help protect Mandy. I was hoping she would understand my intention.

"Sure thing, J," Tabitha said as Mandy sighed in annoyance.

We all waited with bated breath for the Taoree to come down the small side street we were walking along. When the nearly seven-foot alien came into view, he paused, taking us in. He had clearly not been expecting us to be waiting for him, but he powered on until he was only about thirty feet from me.

"Stop right there," I called out to him, proud that my voice sounded stronger than I actually felt. "Or I'll shoot."

"Guns cannot harm me, foolish little human." The alien's slimy voice reached my ear, making me want to shiver it away.

"No, but my reelian sure as hell can," I called back.

The alien very obviously blanched at my statement before trying to mask his reaction.

I called out, "Each one of us has a reelian aimed at you and we're all ready to shoot. Do not come any closer."

The Taoree tilted his head like he was thinking before saying, “Give me Orrean and I shall let you and your humans live.”

I snorted at that. “Yeah, I don’t think so, buddy. You need to turn around and go back the way you came.”

“I cannot return without Orreannysius-Anyke Serparla,” he growled, reminding me of Orrean’s long-ass name that I didn’t even think I could repeat. “Hand him over and I will let you all live.”

“Not. Going. To. Happen.”

The Taoree sneered and took a step closer. “He has a bounty on his head, alive or dead, and I *will* collect. Hand him over or I will have to kill all of you, including the Taoree.”

Before I could argue, Cal yelled, “Listen, buddy, this is gettin’ old real fast. Get the fuck out of here or we will kill you. You’re not getting him.”

The Taoree sneered at Cal and started walking toward us, so I followed his movements with my reelian and said, “Stop or I will shoot.” He glared at me before taking another step, so I yelled, “I don’t want to kill you, but I will if I have to.”

The alien smiled this purely evil, wicked grin at me. “That is the difference between you and me. I *do* want to kill you.”

Before I could even blink, the fucking Taoree was swiftly at my side—obviously using some sort of super-speed—and pushing me away from Orrean, making me land on my ass and aiming his reelian at Orrean’s chest.

Suddenly it was like time slowed down. I saw the alien’s finger twitching on the trigger of his reelian and I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was going to kill Orrean. I also knew without a shadow of a doubt that I wasn’t going to let that happen. I would do anything in my power to protect my family.

I lifted my reelian and was pulling the trigger, but someone else beat me to it. One of my other family members—Nolan, I was pretty damn sure—shot that bastard right in the shoulder. The Taoree fell backward with a scream of pain onto his butt. I jumped up with a sudden surge of adrenaline and attempted to block Orrean from the other alien. The stupid bastard got back to his feet, coming right for us, so I lifted my weapon and pulled the trigger.

The bullet landed precisely in the right side of the Taoree's chest—exactly where his heart was. I hadn't forgotten about Orrean telling us where the Taoree heart was located since it was different than humans, but I also hadn't forgotten him telling us that their hearts were better protected by denser bones, so the best place to aim for a kill shot was the head. So before the asshole fell to the ground, I pulled the reelian trigger a second time, aiming for his head. He fell to the ground immediately. My father had taught me how to shoot, and I'd never been more appreciative of it.

After a moment of shocked silence, I bent forward and felt for a pulse. When none came, I stood and turned to face the others, who all had varying looks of shock written on their faces. Then I hooked my reelian back onto my belt and leaned against the wheelbarrow as the sudden rush of adrenaline left my muscles tired and shaky.

Cal silently came over and bent down to check that the Taoree was indeed dead. He nodded in agreement at me before he stood up. He took an awkward step toward me, then stumbled and stopped. If I hadn't been so drained, I would have found his movements comical. Then he looked to my right and in a quiet voice said, "You know he was a bad man, Mandy. Jeremy had to stop him."

"Jeremy?" Mandy's quiet little voice made me turn toward her. She was standing in front of me with tears in her eyes. The sight made the cracks in my heart grow even further. God, she was going to hate me. She was going to be scared of me; I just murdered someone right in front of her.

I felt tears building in my eyes, but as usual, I pushed them down and whispered, "I'm so sorry, Peanut."

She quickly moved closer to me and wrapped her arms around my waist as she cried. "Don't be sorry. You saved Orry. You saved us."

I felt a tear escape and trail down my cheek as I wrapped my arms around her, hugging her tightly to me. I was so relieved that she wasn't scared of me and that we were all okay. I was also trying not to think too much about the fact that I just killed a living, breathing, *thinking* being. I hated killing Ferals, but at least I knew they weren't functioning, living things anymore, but this was... well, it was a fucking alien. I pushed those thoughts down with all the other shit that would probably make me lose my mind if I ever actually analyzed it, and just concentrated on hugging Mandy.

When she finally released me, my hand automatically moved to search out Orrean's until I had his hand in mine. I laced our fingers and closed my eyes as the strange warm feeling filled my chest for a few seconds before I felt some of my energy leaving my body. I took a few deep breaths before opening my eyes and finding Cal standing right in front of me this time.

He wordlessly gave me a hug, then walked over to the wheelbarrow handles and picked it up, pulling it along. I followed next to it, not letting go of Orrean's hand.

I hadn't even known I'd fallen asleep until I jolted awake at the sound of Nolan's voice saying, "Maybe we should search for a car. We're still over ten miles away, possibly closer to fifteen, and there is no way we can keep pulling them that far. We're never going to make it."

"You know how dangerous cars are, Nol," Cal's voice answered. "We can't risk it."

“We could be there in minutes, Cal, instead of hours,” Nolan argued. “At this rate we probably won’t even get there today. Look at them... we need to get there now!”

“We would never make it there, Nol, and I don’t want to lead any Taoree Legion to the freaking Independent camp.” Cal kept up his end of the argument.

As they bickered back and forth, I tried to remember how I ended up lying on the wheelbarrow with both Wes and Orrean, being pulled by my two best friends. The last thing I remembered was walking beside it. I literally had no memory of going to sleep or even stopping for dinner. Did I pass out?

“They don’t look like they’re going to make it,” Nol sounded panicky. “We couldn’t even get any water into Jeremy. How the fuck are we going to keep them alive long enough to walk there, Cal? We don’t even know what the fucking place looks like! I only know that it’s well-hidden.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Cal sounded determined, but his voice also sounded strained.

They walked in silence for a few minutes and I thought I fell back asleep, but I had no clue for how long.

“Guys, Mandy’s stomach keeps growling and I honestly don’t know if I can carry her much longer,” Tabitha announced.

“I know, we’ll switch soon, Tabby,” Nolan said. *Tabby? When the hell did he start calling her Tabby?*

“Mandy is starving. Her stomach has been growling for over an hour,” Tabitha—*Tabby*—said.

“Peanut,” Cal said, “can yo—” everyone was silent for a beat, then Cal whispered, “What the fuck is that?”

“Shit! Shit. It sounds like a car.” Nolan’s voice still sounded panicky. “Shit. They’re gonna find us. Shit, shit, shit.”

“Nolan, take a breath, man,” Cal said in a whisper. “Let’s just get off the road.”

“Even if the fucking humans in that car don’t find us, they’re gonna bring Taoree toward us,” Tabby stated, sounding like Nolan’s panic was rubbing off on her. “I mean, right? If the fucking Taoree Legion or whatever can track a car, those fuckers driving are gonna get us all killed.”

“Oh my god, Tabby, they’re going to find us. Maybe you and Mandy should run,” Nolan suggested.

“We’re not leaving any of you,” Mandy argued forcefully.

“I love you, Peanut, but you and Tabby might have to,” Nolan said.

“No! We are—” Mandy and Tabitha both started together and got cut off.

“Would all three of you shut the fuck up and take a chill pill?” Cal’s voice sounded authoritative. “No one is leaving anyone else. We stick together, always. Now all of you calm the fuck down and let’s hide behind that building there. We are going to be okay. Just calm down.”

There were murmurs of agreement all around.

When we stopped moving, I was finally able to open my eyes. I had to immediately close them again because the sun was too bright, even with my hat, making me think that maybe an entire day had gone by. I groaned in annoyance at my weakness.

“J?” Cal’s quiet voice was right by my ear. “Are you awake?”

I tried to say, “Maybe,” but it sounded more like another moan. I could hear the distant sound of a car driving, but I couldn’t tell how far or close it was. I cleared my throat, then in a voice I almost didn’t recognize, asked, “Can I... sit... up?”

“Okay, just be quiet,” he whispered as he untied my chest and pushed me to sit up.

I almost immediately regretted the change of position since I had nothing to lean against, but didn't want to be a complainer. I opened one eye and saw Cal's concerned face way too close for comfort, so I looked down and saw Orrean right next to me on his side with Wes behind him, also on his side—I was guessing so we could all fit. Both of them looked so frail, like skin and bones.

I—much slower than I meant to—reached both hands out and placed one on Wes's hair and the other on Orrean's and checked on them with my energy. Wes's Qiren were still locked up tight with most of Orrean's energy, and Orrean's vitals were still dangerously low. Without thinking, I pulled Orrean's head onto my lap, then replaced my hands on both of them, feeling dizzy.

We were up against the back of a house with blue siding. There was a swing set in the back yard, but no fence. There were chairs and a table on its side near a small staircase that led to the back door without a porch. The swing set was almost overrun with overgrown grass, and the sight made me frown. *This was once someone's home and now it's a long-forgotten place that just exists.*

“Shit, it's getting closer,” Nolan pointed out.

I listened and was surprised that I could actually tell that it was probably only half a mile away. Then I stretched my senses out further and almost choked on my fear.

“Taoree,” I breathed out.

Cal turned to look at me with wide, terrified eyes. “It's Taoree?”

I nodded.

“How many?”

“Three,” I croaked out as a wave of dizziness made my head swim.

I heard Nolan and Tabitha talking, sounding scared, but I couldn't understand what they said. Someone handed me a

bottle of water, so I took a sip. It instantly cleared my head some, but the dizziness remained in the background.

“We can protect ourselves better if we stay here with the house against our backs,” Cal suggested.

“They’ll be here in thirty seconds,” I warned, knowing there was no time to do anything but stay here and fight.

Cal handed me my reelian before turning and standing in front of me with his out and ready.

We all tensed when we heard the car come to a stop on the other side of the house we were huddled behind. We heard the doors creak open and three doors slam shut, confirming that there really were three of them like I had sensed.

“Behind the house I think they are,” a female voice said in Taoree. For once I didn’t have trouble knowing they were speaking Taoree and not English.

“They are hiding, why?” a male voice answered. I furrowed my brow at the strange question and Cal looked at me questioningly since he couldn’t understand them.

“Humans and Taoree,” the last stated, “there are seven. They have not come out, why?” The voice sounded closer. They were obviously making their way around the left side of the house.

Right before they turned the corner that would reveal us, using my adrenaline, I shouted in Taoree, “You want what from us?”

The footsteps stopped immediately and the woman’s voice called out, “We want to help, of course.”

I switched to English, hoping the Taoree would follow suit, so the others could follow the conversation. “Who are you?” I had to take a deep breath as a bout of dizziness hit me.

I was relieved when the woman answered in English, “You may call me Alleean.” The Taoree woman came around the corner with her hands up in the universal sign of surrender. She was a little shorter than Orrean, so probably about six-

foot-five, with elvish pointy ears and long black braid just past her waist and dark eyes staring right at me. She also looked different than other Taoree because she had what looked like a tribal tattoo surrounding her left eye. She seemed to be analyzing me as I aimed my reelian right at her head. She continued in English, sounding surprised, “You are human.” It wasn’t a question, so I said nothing in response. She glanced down at Orrean and I heard a small gasp before her eyes flicked back up to me.

“Don’t even think about it,” Cal said from beside me. “We will kill you if you try to take him.”

Alleean did a once-over of Cal and nodded her head at him in acknowledgement, then asked, “May my companions come out?”

“Yes,” Cal said through clenched teeth.

“This is Cokeeto.” A big Taoree over seven feet tall came and stood next to Alleean. She added, “And this is Dietteo.” Another Taoree that was over seven feet tall came out. When I glanced at the second one, I had the feeling that the two men were brothers, maybe even twins. They both had the same tattoo as Alleean. They were huge and easily the most muscular Taoree I had ever seen. I’d only seen Taoree that were tall and very thin, but these two had a lot of muscle and both had their hair braided down to mid-thigh. All three of the newcomers had their hands up, obviously trying to look nonthreatening. *Good luck with that, assholes.*

“What side are you on?” Nolan asked from somewhere behind me.

Alleean actually smiled a little at that. “We are Independents, of course.”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth?” Nolan asked, almost too quietly for them to hear. I wasn’t sure if he was really asking or just stating how shitty the situation was.

Alleean answered anyway, “We can take you back to our camp and save your friend before the Qiren take over...”

and we can help Orrean.”

I gasped. “How do you know him?”

She offered me a smile that seemed genuine despite her black eyes and said, “He is my brother-in-law.”

My eyes widened in fear. “Oh fuck, you’re married to Thelonious.” I heard the others gasp. I re-gripped my reelian, ready to shoot her at any second, even though I was quickly losing my energy.

Alleean’s eyes went wide and she took a step back. “No! Not Thelonious. I am married to Orrean’s other brother, Oziasriun. We are from the Independent base, I swear it. We want to help you.”

Cal side-whispered, “Does Orrean have another brother?”

“Yes,” I whispered back as I lost my grip on my reelian. I dropped my hand down and leaned my head on top of Orrean’s because I started to feel sick, like I might pass out.

“J!” Cal yelled, but I didn’t feel him move, which I figured meant he was still aiming his reelian at the Taoree.

“Listen to me, please,” Alleean said. “We can help them.”

I found Orrean’s hand and gripped at it. His warm energy soothed and reassured me.

“I don’t trust any of you fuckers,” Cal oh-so-eloquently said.

“You may keep your weapons,” Alleean suggested.

I turned my head to Cal and whispered, “They’re telling the truth.” I wasn’t sure how I knew, but I had learned to follow my instincts and they were telling me that they really were trying to help us. Or maybe I just knew it because of Orrean. Because he was somehow telling me to trust them.

“Okay, fine,” Cal said, “but we are keeping our weapons and we will be staying together.”

“Of course,” she said. “We need to get them in the truck.”

I managed to watch as they slowly approached us and when Alleean squatted down next to me, for reasons I couldn't even contemplate, I whispered, “Orrean hies emm Balu.” *Orrean is my Balu*—whatever the fuck that meant.

I saw her black eyes—or maybe dark blue?—go wide in surprise.

Then everything went black.

Chapter Five

I never wanted to wake up from this dream. Colt's warm body was holding me close, my back to his front. God, it felt so real. It felt like he was really here behind me. I could even feel his breath on the back of my neck and his arm around me, our fingers laced together. It felt like there was some kind of energy flowing between our palms.

I wiggled myself farther into him and I heard a groan that made me freeze. Holy Fuck! That wasn't Colt, that was...

Wait a minute. I could feel him back there. Like actually feel him, as in this-is-not-a-dream-at-all feel him.

I took a deep breath to squash the disappointment that Colt wasn't with me, then I settled myself back down and let myself be held. It was actually really nice. Calm, peaceful, and relaxing. He was warm and he was holding me like he wanted to protect me. I didn't want to be protected, but having someone care... well, it was exactly what I needed. My body felt so weak and vulnerable that I couldn't even open my eyes. I think I fell back asleep, or maybe I'd never even woken up and it was just a dream. I felt like I was floating.

The next time I became aware of my body, I still couldn't open my eyes. I could hear voices, but it took a while before they were clear enough to understand. It was Wesley's voice, saying, "...much longer before I can leave?" He sounded tired.

“You know it’s gonna be a little while.” That was Cal’s voice.

“Ugh,” Wes sighed.

“Don’t worry, man, just a few more days,” Nolan’s voice said.

I wasn’t sure if I had really heard them or if it was just my imagination or a dream. But I was relieved to hear their voices, to know that they were safe. Before I could hear any more of their conversation, I fell back asleep.

I felt him move a little behind me and it woke me from my peaceful sleep. I was still lying on my left side, using his arm as a pillow, and we had a sheet or something over us. He had me tucked against him with his right arm wrapped around me and that hand laced with my left so our palms were pressed together. I also noticed that we were both shirtless, so his very warm skin was pressed against mine. Before I could freak out, I noted that I did, in fact, have on underwear. *Thank fuck!* Though I could still feel his rather large... package pressed against my ass. His skin felt soft against mine. I had the sudden desire to run my hands all over him. I had to take a deep breath to shake off the random feeling.

I remembered hearing voices throughout my sleeping and was relieved when I remembered Wes, Cal, and Nolan talking around us multiple times. I could breathe easier knowing they were all right.

I took stock of my body and overall I felt pretty okay, though I noticed I had a zheluangi on my wrist. Apparently I’d been in hibernation-mode or some shit. My body was warm and nothing felt broken or anything. The only strange thing I could feel—besides Orrean’s body pressed against me—was that the hand Orrean held seemed to have something wrapped around it.

I wiggled my fingers to investigate and realized I couldn’t pull my hand away from his. Our hands were being

pressed together by something—tied together, I assumed.

I finally blinked my eyes open, only to be assaulted by a bright white light. It took a while for my eyes to adjust, and when they did, I had no freaking clue where the hell I was since I was in a room with white walls and white tables with various things on them. I was too dazed to be able to see what they were. Everything looked very sterile, like I was in a hospital or something.

The most concerning thing, though, was the fact that I was inside some kind of clear tube. I moved my head around to get a better look, only to discover that the tube was completely enclosed. I had a brief panic that we were going to run out of oxygen, but I tamped that down for the moment, so I could focus on the man behind me, the mostly naked man.

Part of my brain was telling me to freak the fuck out that I was mostly naked with Orrean and god only knew where we were. But every other part of me—my heart, my body and perhaps even my soul—were screaming at me that I was safe and secure with him. That this whatever-it-was was just plain right.

With that thought in mind, I sucked in some air and turned around to face him. He was awake and helped me move our connected hands easily so they lay over the sheet down by our sides. He was also staring at me with those deep purple eyes. I rested my head back on his arm. His head was on a little pillow, so we were basically nose to nose, with me looking up a little at him.

I had expected to have a conversation with him. To ask him what was going on, but as I looked into his eyes and saw the sadness and open vulnerability in them, all I wanted to do was make him feel better. So I scooted even closer to him. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and hold him, but I couldn't because of our connected hands. So instead, I tucked my head under his chin so my face was pressed against his neck and I was breathing in his cinnamon smell. Since I was flat against him, I couldn't really see his chest, though I

noticed a few ridges in his skin at the base of his throat and I felt more ridges on his chest and stomach. I was kinda surprised by how smooth and soft the rest of his skin felt, though.

He seemed a little tense at first, but he slowly relaxed and eventually rested his chin on top of my head and held me to him with the arm I was lying on. I could feel his own zheluangi on his wrist. Then I felt something in his chest. Some kind of deep trembling started happening, but no sound was coming out. It was more like a vibrating I could feel, not hear. At first I thought it was maybe coming from somewhere else, but I could feel it in his chest. Then I realized it was almost like he was purring, or at least something like purring. I assumed that deep vibration was one of contentment since that was exactly how I was feeling.

“Wes is okay,” he whispered, “his surgery was successful.”

I let out a sigh of relief and my serenity surrounded me completely. His purring-thing seemed to start vibrating until almost his whole body was pulsating. I wanted him content. I wanted him happy. I pressed farther into him, my free hand flat against his chest, feeling some ridges there, and my nose flat against his throat.

We stayed like that for a long time. The entire time I could feel energy passing through our hands, and all the while he was vibrating. The feel of it actually made me even more relaxed, more at home.

“Cal has Colt’s hat for you,” he whispered with a strange note in his voice.

I gasped. I hadn’t even thought of that... and didn’t that make me a shitty person? *Maybe I shouldn’t be leaning against Orr like this?* But it felt... right. I needed the physical connection to him. I squeezed his hand and pushed my nose into his skin, then whispered, “Thank you, Orr.”

“Of course,” he whispered back, holding me tight to him. I took the comfort that I needed—and wanted—from him and hoped that I was offering at least a little in return.

We were like that when I heard a door open, instantly putting me on high alert. I tensed up, ready for an attack, but Orrean started rubbing my back and he whispered into my hair, “It’s okay.”

I believed him, so I started to release the tension from my body and decided to remain where I was. I didn’t even bother to check who came into the room. *How fucked up is that?* I should have looked, I should have made sure there wasn’t a threat, but Orrean had said that it was okay, so I didn’t even care. I was more peaceful and content lying there in his arms than I’d been in weeks, so I was in no hurry to move and soon fell back asleep.

“...means he woke up, right?” Wes’s voice made its way through my grogginess.

“He could’ve just moved in his sleep,” Cal answered, though I didn’t know what the question was.

“But he hasn’t moved the entire time,” Wes said, almost whining.

“So it at least means he’s improving,” Nolan’s sure voice washed over me, making me smile against Orrean’s neck.

Almost immediately, I felt that vibrating in Orrean’s chest again, making me think that he had woken up as well. I really didn’t want to move from my comfortable position, but I wanted my family to know that I was okay, so I groaned a little as I tried to blink my eyes awake.

“Jeremy?” my little brother’s voice asked, making me smile again.

“Hey, Wesley.” My voice sounded rough from being unused when I spoke against Orrean’s neck, because I still couldn’t really move, even though I knew I needed to.

“Holy shit, you’re awake!” my brother exclaimed. “I told you he woke up.”

“How you feelin’?” Cal asked, completely ignoring Wes.

I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with Orrean’s cinnamony scent before slowly rolling onto my back. I was still using Orrean’s arm as a pillow and my one hand was still attached to his. I got a big chill on my bare skin when I moved away from him, so I actually scooted a little closer and pressed my side to his chest. Our legs were tangled and I didn’t bother to move them. Orrean’s cheek was resting on my hair and I could feel our energies running through our connected palms.

I blinked a few times to bring Wes, Cal, and Nolan into focus. They were all looking at me through that weird clear plastic tube I was lying in, but each of them looked well-rested and clean. They had clearly bathed and somehow got new clean clothes. Cal’s blue-green eyes were sparkling so brightly that I had a sudden pang of longing in my heart for Colt, who’d had the same color eyes as his brother. Wesley’s brown hair had been shaved off, but his brown eyes looked happy, as did Nolan’s baby-blue ones. I blinked again at my brother, thinking I was seeing him wrong, but when I squinted my eyes, I made out the same weird tribal, swirling pattern tattooed around his left eye. *Someone let my brother get a tattoo? What the fuck?*

I cleared my throat and blinked again at the bright white lighting in the all-white room, then said, “I’m fine.” I looked at my brother. “Did you have the surgery? Are you safe?”

His face lit up with a smile and I felt instant relief as he said, “I did, and I’m Qiren-free. Everything is good, J.”

I closed my eyes and breathed out, “Thank god.” I took a deep breath before looking at him and blurting, “What the fuck is on your face?”

My brother sighed and rolled his eyes at me. “Of course that’d be the first thing you’d say. I got a tattoo, get over it. Can you at least get out of this tube before you start lecturing me?”

I blew out an annoyed breath. “Fine.”

“Fine.”

When Orrean squeezed my hand, I turned my head a little and looked at him. He was smiling, but it somehow seemed to have a sad undertone to it, so I whispered, “Are you okay?”

He nodded and squeezed my hand again, but didn’t say anything.

I turned my attention back to the others and asked, “Do you know what all this,” I waved my hand in the general direction of the weird clear tube, “is? And why I’m inside it?” All three of them were suddenly looking around the room at anything *except* me. I narrowed my eyes at them. “What is it? What’s going on?”

Cal still wouldn’t look at me, but he informed us, “You guys have been in there and unconscious for two weeks. Well, Orr woke up yesterday, but about two weeks.”

“Two weeks?” I asked, completely surprised. *Holy shit!*

Nolan cleared his throat. “Uh, yeah, two weeks. I’m gonna grab the doctor.” Then he practically ran out of the room like a bat outta hell, making me wonder what in the heck was going on.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked, but no one would answer. “Cal, what’s going on?”

Cal finally turned to look at me for a moment, then his eyes traveled to Orrean for a second before he looked back at

me and answered, “It’s not something that we can explain. You’re going to have to wait for the doctor and then let Orr tell you what’s going on.”

His strange answer made me look at the alien next to me, who also wouldn’t look me in the eye. As I examined him, that sad undertone started to become more and more apparent, making my anxiety climb and worry etch my face.

Before I could ask again, the door to the room opened and a Taoree woman came in with Nolan following behind her. This Taoree was only about as tall as Cal, who was six-four, and had her black braid down to her ankles.

She came right over to the clear tube, speaking in English, “Hello, I am Relandin. I am a doctor.” She looked behind me. “Hello, Orrean. It is good to see you awake.”

“Hello, Rel, it’s been too long,” Orrean responded quietly.

“It has,” she agreed before bringing her attention back to me. “You and Orrean suffered severe energy depletion. Both of your lights were critically low, to the point that a few more hours could have seen one or both of you dead. We had to put you inside the,” she patted the clear tube, “*aluza* in order to save you. We also had to *alumiea* to assure you both came back. I—”

I held up my hand to stop her because I didn’t understand what she was talking about. Before I could ask what she meant, I had the sudden thought that maybe I no longer understood or spoke Taoree, so I intentionally tried to speak Taoree when I asked my question, “*Jili estr alumiea isib Eo bo zun?*” Apparently, I still spoke Taoree, which meant that *alumiea* didn’t have a direct translation.

Before she could answer me, Wes jumped in, “Please keep speaking in English so we all understand.”

I looked at him. “Sorry. I just said I don’t understand *alumiea*.”

She gestured to my and Orrean's bound hands. "I simply referred to binding your hands together."

"Okay," I said uneasily because she had a weird look on her face that made me think that wasn't the whole story.

She nodded and continued, "Now that you are both awake, you will need to remain inside the *aluza* for about twenty-four more hours, at the very minimum."

"What about the zheluangi, is that going to make me fall back asleep?" I asked, showing the giant metal thing around my wrist.

The doctor said, "I think Orrean already switched it down a level so it won't force you to sleep, but it will still keep everything else at bay."

"Uh, okay," I said, then lifted my bound hand in question.

She nodded again. "Yes, you will need to remain *alumiea*."

Her voice did something weird on that word again, making me wonder exactly what it meant. I glanced at Wes and the others, and noticed that they were still avoiding eye contact with me. I had a feeling that they knew exactly what she was hiding. I looked back at Orrean, who was looking up at the ceiling, with that sad fucking look on his face.

I couldn't take it anymore, so I asked, "Okay, why are you all acting so fucking weird? Did something happen? Am I not going to be able to walk or something?" Before anyone could answer that question, a horrible thought occurred to me. "Oh god, is Mandy okay? Did something happen to her?"

Orrean shifted suddenly so his face was only inches above mine. "No, no, Renuella, nothing like that. Everyone is okay, I promise."

I closed my eyes in relief and keeping them closed, asked, "Then what are you all avoiding telling me? Something happened, I know it."

When he didn't answer right away, I opened my eyes only to find his closed. He whispered, "I will explain everything, I promise. Just wait until everyone leaves, okay?" He opened his eyes and started searching mine for something.

His sadness was radiating off of him, so I reluctantly agreed with a whispered, "Okay."

All I could do was stare at Orrean in disbelief. Everyone had finally left and Orrean had just told me the craziest thing I had ever heard, and let's face it, life had been pretty fucking crazy lately. But this seriously took the cake.

I scooted back a little—not too far because of our connected hands—and turned to face him farther. "Let me get this straight. You think that you and I are... soul mates?" My voice sounded strained and disbelieving to my own ears.

Orrean looked completely serious. "I don't *think*, Jeremy, I *know*. You and I are *Balu*. Mates, soul mates, partners, lo—um, there are many names you could use, there is no direct translation in your language, but those are close." He squeezed my hand, then the fingers of his free hand lightly brushed my cheek, making me close my eyes for a moment. "Our lights are one and the same, Jeremy. That's why our lights can mix together, that's why I can use your light and you can use mine. They are two halves of a whole. And our lights are just an extension of our souls." His eyes were shining and his voice lowered to a whisper, "Which means our souls are two halves of a whole. We are connected on *every* level... not just our lights and souls, but linked in every way, everywhere, everything."

He placed his warm hand on my chest over my heart and I could feel his light reaching out to mine. It took my breath away. His purple eyes were endless as I stared into them and the warmth of his light wrapped around me... I

could feel it embracing my entire being. He smiled gently at me. “So yes, Jeremy, in a sense you are my soul mate, though *Balu* is so much more than that and a much more accurate term.”

I swallowed thickly. I didn’t want to admit that I could feel him... everywhere. So I just blinked at him. *What in the hell is this? What the hell is going on? We can’t possibly be... whatever he thinks we are, right?*

He offered me a little half-smile. “I can see that you do not believe me. But if not *Balu*, then how do you explain our connection? How do you explain our energies flowing through one another as if they were already familiar with each other before we ever met? How do you explain how drawn we are to each other? I know you don’t like to admit it, but I also know that you can feel it. How do you explain our... dreams?”

My eyes felt like they were going to bug out of my head. “What do you mean ‘dreams’?”

He furrowed his brow, confused. “Our shared dreams. The ones where we almost always end up at the fence where we first met.”

Impossibly, my eyes got wider. “No. No, no, no, no. Those were dreams. No. You were *not* there.”

His facial expression changed to one that was hurt and he whispered, “Of course I was there. I met you there every night.”

I closed my eyes. *No, this is not happening.* That wasn’t—couldn’t be real. I opened my eyes to glare at him. “You expect me to believe that you were somehow in my dreams?”

He swallowed hard. “We’re usually by the fence, sitting against the tree on your side of the fence, not mine, but sometimes we end up in a field under the stars. No matter where we end up, it’s always night, and you told me before that you considered me your friend.” My eyes went even wider in surprise as he continued, “And the last one I remember, you

told me... you told me you could never hate me, though judging by your face right now, I don't think that was an accurate statement." He started blinking a lot, but I ignored the moisture in his eyes.

"How is that possible?" I whispered, half to myself.

"Balu, Jeremy. You are my mate." His voice was low and numb-sounding.

I smacked his chest with my free hand. "How could you enter my dreams like that? Those were private thoughts, Orrean. You invaded my privacy. How could you not tell me?"

"I thought you knew about the dreams," he defended. "I knew you didn't understand our connection, but I thought you knew about the dreams because we kept finishing our dream conversations when we would wake..."

"What?"

"You sometimes asked me things in our dream, then I answered when we woke... I thought you had figured it out. I'm sorry... I didn't realize you didn't know."

I could only stare at him with wide eyes.

"Plus, you were the one that always brought me to you."

"What? What the hell does that even mean?" I was yelling now.

"I did not invade your dreams, Jeremy, you always brought me to you."

"I didn't even know that was possible, Orrean! How the fuck could I have brought you to me?"

He huffed and fell back on his pillow, pulling my arm with him. I yanked my arm back, just because I could, and he huffed again, but didn't pull his arm back over.

After a moment of thinking about all the strange things that had been happening to me and realizing that just about every one was connected to him somehow, I started to think

that maybe there was something to this *Balu* thing, even though I didn't really think it was fair and I certainly didn't want it.

“Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me we were... mates, or whatever the fuck you wanna call it?” I finally asked at a normal volume.

“Because I knew you would be pissed and not want anything to do with me,” he answered immediately and without hesitation. “I had to make sure you got somewhere safe. If I had told you, you wouldn't have come with me.”

That was true, so I didn't say anything.

After another long pause with both of us staring at the ceiling, I asked, “How long until we can get out of this stupid clear tube?”

“About fifteen hours,” he answered numbly.

“Great,” I huffed, then I closed my eyes and decided to spend the next fifteen hours sleeping so I wouldn't have to deal with him.

It was only two hours before we had yet another visitor come by our stupid aluza. As soon as I saw the guy, I knew who he was. He looked exactly like the jerk alien I was currently attached to. The new Taoree with dark-purple eyes, an angular face, pointed ears, and hair braided to mid-back, looked almost human. He smiled as he approached, seeming so much lighter and happier than his brother.

“Hello, Orrean.” He nodded at me. “Jeremy, it's nice to finally meet you. My name's Ozias, I'm Orrean's brother.”

“Hey,” I said rather stiffly.

I heard Orrean sigh, but I ignored it. Ozias, on the other hand, looked at his brother with concern. “You okay,

Orr?”

“I’m fine,” he responded in a voice that made it obvious that he was absolutely *not* fine.

Ozias switched to Taoree. “What’s wrong? Feeling well are you not?”

Orrean responded in Taoree without looking at his brother, “I am fine.”

Ozias glanced at me before speaking to Orrean, probably assuming that I couldn’t understand him. “Your Balu is not happy? Is that it?”

“He just learned of Balu. No, not happy at all he is.”

“Is it because he’s human? He doesn’t feel the connection?” Ozias asked.

“That’s not it, Ozias. Just leave it alone.”

“But you need to figure this out. I cannot have it affecting your work.”

Orrean turned his head to look at Ozias. “Of course *that* is what you think about. I have never let it interfere with my work. I’m not about to start now.”

“If you cannot concentrate because of the human, I don’t know what we will do, Orrean. We need your expertise. You know this.”

“Jeremy would never interfere. He has seen some of the things the Legion are capable of. Leave him out of this.” Orrean’s voice was low, but he sounded pissed.

“You need to make him accept you so you can focus on the task at hand.”

“I have never, and will never force him to do something he’s not comfortable with. I told you to leave it.”

Ozias sighed and ran his hand across his forehead, the same way Orrean always did. “I am sorry, Orrean. I didn’t mean it like that. I simply wish to see you happy.”

This time, Orrean sighed. “I know. I will be fine.”

Ozias shot Orr a small smile before saying, “At least he is a handsome one.”

Orrean snorted. “He is that. He’s also incredibly stubborn.”

I narrowed my eyes at that, but didn’t say anything since it seemed that Ozias hadn’t realized I could understand him yet.

“Maybe in time, he will see.” Ozias blew out a breath before saying, “I’m grateful you came. I was worried when you didn’t show up in the first week.”

“I told you I’d wait for Jeremy before coming.”

“I know.” Ozias tapped the aluza lightly. “But I told you to simply grab him and bring him here.”

“Do you think it so easy?”

“Yes.” He snorted. “You’re much stronger than him and he’s yours. You had every right to snatch him up as soon as you knew he was your Balu. Any Taoree would’ve sensed it and let you keep the human.”

“Wow,” Orrean said. “I didn’t realize you still believed in the barbaric old ways.”

Ozias shrugged. “I just hope he was worth all the trouble.”

I saw Orrean open his mouth to reply, but I couldn’t take it anymore, so I beat him to it and said in Taoree, “You do realize I can understand every single thing you say, right?” I glared at the wide-eyed alien and switched to English. “Stop being a dick.”

Orrean jumped in, “Jeremy, Ozias is the leader of the Independents, show a little respect.”

I snapped at Orr, “Don’t tell me what to do. I don’t give a shit *who* he is. He needs to stop talking about me like I’m not even here.” I turned my attention to the Independent

King or whatever-the-fuck he was. “And by the way, I’m not a piece of property, you asshole, so stay the fuck out of it.”

Ozias’s eyes went wide. “Enimus. You have a mouth on you.” He looked at his brother. “Good luck with this one... You’re going to need it.”

“Hardy har har, so fucking funny,” I said. “Kiss my ass, King of the Independents.”

Orrean sighed beside me, but didn’t say anything. I glanced at him and saw that he seemed resigned to his fate. *Whatever.*

Ozias chuckled. “I’m sorry I was talking about you. I didn’t realize you could understand me.”

“That doesn’t make it any better.”

“I know,” he said with a smile. “And I apologize.”

I eyed him for a moment, seeing his sincerity, before saying, “Apology accepted.”

Orrean muttered under his breath, but I still understood him. “Oh, I see how it is. You accept his half-assed apology in a heartbeat, but can’t accept my full-hearted one.”

I saw Ozias smirk, but I ignored him and turned to Orrean. “You are my family and you *lied* to me.” He opened his mouth, but I held up my free hand to stop him. “Omitting something on purpose is still a lie.”

Orrean sighed again, but his brother was the one that spoke next. “Jeremy, I have also misled you. I had heard that you could speak Taoree and that you would be offended by some of the old ways of my people, so I was prompting you to see if you really did understand my language.”

I gaped at him.

“I apologize... again.”

I looked at Orrean and asked, “Did you know he was goading me?”

“Of course not. Why in the world would I want you to have *another* reason to be mad at me?”

“You didn’t know he was lying about all that stealing me shit?”

“I haven’t spoken to my brother directly in over six years. So no, I did not know,” he answered me quietly.

I looked at Ozias. “I don’t know if I like you.”

He grinned easily at me. “Hopefully I’ll change your mind in time. And for the record, I think stealing your Balu, no matter the circumstances, is terrible.”

“Oh... um, okay.” I thought about everything he’d said to Orrean, then asked, “Who told you how to goad me?”

He grinned again. “Nolan, Cal, and Wesley.”

I rolled my eyes.

After a short moment of uncomfortable silence, Ozias moved closer to the *aluza*, and put his hand flat against the side as he whispered to Orrean in Taoree, “I have missed you, my brother. A hole in my heart has filled since you returned. My soul feels more complete with you here, with you safe. I am so glad you made it, Orreannysius-Anyke Serparla. I do not know what I would do without you in my life. Love you I do, brother.”

“And I, you, brother,” Orrean whispered back as he pressed his hand against Ozias’s hand on the other side of the glass.

“Thrive and love,” Ozias said before fleeing from the room.

“As bright as the stars,” Orrean whispered to his brother’s retreating back. Then he went back to staring at the ceiling.

I wanted to ask him what that little saying was between him and his brother... if it was something just the two of them said, or if it was a Taoree thing. But I was still mad at him, and

without the buffer of Ozias there, I didn't want to talk to him for fear of losing my temper and screaming at him... or doing something worse, hugging him like my body wanted to do.

So I ignored him and tried to sleep. When that didn't work, I started counting the bricks on the ceiling. There were two thousand eight hundred fifty-seven bricks on the ceiling. I counted them... twice.

Chapter Six

“Are you two ready to get out of there?” the doctor, Relandin, asked when she finally showed up thirteen hours later. Thirteen hours that I pretended to sleep and Orrean, who obviously knew I was wide awake, allowed me to keep on pretending.

“Yes,” I groaned. Orrean said nothing. He just kept staring at the ceiling. *I wonder if he counted the bricks too?*

“Okay, give me about sixty seconds and I’ll release the *aluza*. You are still going to feel weak and probably have trouble walking, but after a few more days of rest and lots of food and fluids, you will be good to go.” She sounded way more cheery than the situation warranted.

“Is Cal still coming back?” I asked her since she’d been here when Cal had told me so the day before.

“He should be here any moment,” she said as she started messing with a white panel on the wall across from my head. She pushed a bunch of buttons and the clear plastic started opening up right down the middle. I hadn’t even seen a seam in the plastic—or whatever it was made of.

Once the *aluza* was gone—where the hell it went exactly, I wasn’t sure; the floor, maybe?—Relandin stood right next to our table and started unhooking our hands. I glanced at Orrean for the first time since his brother had left, and saw that he looked like he was just staring off into space. He wasn’t responding to anything at all.

I rolled my eyes at him and looked away just as Cal, Nolan, and Wes came in through the door with bright smiles. I smiled back at them right as my hand was suddenly freed. I snatched it away—ignoring the strange ice-cold feeling I suddenly had—and started to push up to a seated position. Cal ran right over and helped me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Wes pulling Orrean up, but the alien looked like a fucking ragdoll.

Relandin unhooked my zheluangi, then moved to take Orrean's off, and all he did was just slump forward so Wes had to hold him up.

I rolled my eyes again and said to Cal, "So I'm allowed to eat now. Can you take me to some food?"

He chuckled. "We're going to have our meals in our room for a few days. There's a huge mess hall where everyone normally eats, so when you're feeling better, we'll take you down and introduce you to some of the people. But that can wait for another day."

I put my arm over Cal's shoulders and he grabbed my waist to help me stand. I felt wobbly, but he had me well-supported.

I asked, "We have a room? Is there a bed too?"

He snorted. "We have a suite of rooms together with a sitting room thing in the middle, like an apartment. You have your own bed."

"Fuck, yes."

"Come on, Orrean," Wesley said from behind me. "I need you to help a little bit, at least."

Once again, I rolled my eyes at Orrean's dramatics and said to Cal, "Please take me to the food."

He laughed again and called over his shoulder, "I'm taking him down. I'll see you there."

We walked out the door and almost immediately, my chest started hurting. I rubbed at the spot as we walked, but

with every step, the pain grew and grew. When we got to the end of the hallway, I thought I heard a loud sob coming from behind us, but I ignored it and the pain, and pushed through all the way to our suite.

Cal led me over to a blue couch that was in a very white room. There was a wooden coffee table in the middle of the room with plates of food already on it. I eagerly grabbed one and started eating some chicken—fresh fucking cooked chicken—and some mashed potatoes. I thought I died and went to heaven. I looked at the other furniture in the room; there was a big brown leather armchair, a loveseat that had a very ugly floral print on it, and a small kitchen table with only four chairs. There was also a small kitchenette off of the living room area and a hall that must've led to the bedrooms.

Cal sat on the ugly floral loveseat. “You feel okay after walking?”

“Yep,” I said around my mouthful of real, actual meat.

“Good. So wanna talk about it?”

“Nope,” I snapped before shoveling in another bite.

He sighed. “You are extremely annoying.”

“I know.”

“And you're an asshole.”

“I know. Doesn't change anything.” I took another huge bite and moaned at the deliciousness.

“You shouldn't be angry with him.”

“Don't care if that's what you think. I still am.”

I saw him roll his eyes, but I didn't pay attention to it.

“He saved Wes's life,” Cal pointed out.

“He's still a dick for lying,” I argued as I stuffed my mouth.

“All of us would be dead if he had done anything differently,” he said.

“If you like him so much, why don’t *you* date him... or mate him or whatever-the-fuck,” I suggested.

“Asshole.”

“Dickface.”

“Douche-nozzle.”

“Ass-weed.”

The door to our suite opened before we could get too far into our name-calling and Nolan came in, saying, “Help me for a minute, Cal.”

Cal immediately followed Nolan back out the door and soon returned with Orrean between them. Wes scuttled in behind them, carrying some weird thing that looked like it was made from the same clear plastic that the giant clear tube had been. The thing was shaped like a fender, only wider, but still curved.

Cal and Nolan practically had to drag Orrean because he wasn’t helping them at all. He looked like he was still in ragdoll-form and I briefly thought about asking him if he was okay, but then I remembered that he’d been lying to me for weeks, months if you counted from when the dreams started, so I looked away and continued eating. They bypassed the living room where I was sitting and headed down a small hallway and through a door that I assumed led to a bedroom. Then they were gone and I could hear their voices, but couldn’t understand what was being said.

When Wes came back out first, he was no longer carrying the clear fender-like thing. He plopped down next to me, gave me a look of annoyance, then started eating wordlessly.

When Cal and Nolan came back out, I was finished eating and really just wanted to sleep, since I’d been unable to for the last fifteen hours in the medical room with Orrean.

“Can I get some sleep?” I asked Cal, since he was the only one not frowning at me.

“Sure.” He came over and helped me stand, then led me down the little white hall to a bedroom that had a puke-green dresser and nightstand, and a purple-striped comforter on a twin bed that was pressed against the wall. It wasn’t much, but it was perfect.

He unceremoniously plopped me on the bed, then ran out of the room, only to pop back in a moment later with a glass of water and a pack of crackers in his hands. He placed the items on the nightstand before helping me get under the blankets. “I put a drawing pad and some pencils in the nightstand,” he told me, then rubbed my hair playfully and left the room, turning out the lights. That was the first time I really noticed that this place had electricity. I’d have to get the rundown of the place tomorrow, though I couldn’t fucking wait to draw. I was thrilled that Cal had been so thoughtful. While we were walking over the past few weeks, I didn’t really think I’d ever get to draw for fun again.

For now though, I would have to settle on rubbing the dull ache in my chest and praying that relief came when I fell asleep—that was, if I could even fall asleep, knowing who was just across the hall.

I was sitting in my room, eating my dinner—alone. I didn’t want to see Orrean, and my entire family was eating dinner with him in the little common room in our suite. Whatever. They could do what they wanted, I just didn’t want to be a part of it.

“J?” Mandy’s quiet voice called out from the other side of the shut door.

“Come in, Mandy.” My voice was a little hoarse from lack of use.

She cracked the door, then slipped in, shutting it behind her. Then she stood there, looking uncomfortable for a

moment, so I opened my arms as invitation and she quickly threw herself at me and squeezed my waist. I hugged her tight and kissed the top of her head.

After a minute she pulled away, sitting on the edge of my bed, looking me over as she whispered, “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

I smiled at her. “Me too, Peanut. I’m glad you’re okay and safe... how’s the school stuff going?”

“It’s different.” She shrugged and looked away. “We’re working on basic things like English and math, but we’re also learning a lot about some of the Taoree technology. It’s actually kind of fun because they’re letting us use *onypus*, which are sorta like computers, but not really. And I’m learning Taoree...” She looked back over at me. “They’re also teaching us to shoot reelians and use shoians, and teaching us how to fight.”

I could only blink at her for a moment before asking, “You’re learning to fight?”

She nodded.

“Why? ... Why would they teach you that?”

She shrugged again and quietly answered, “In case the base is ever attacked.”

I let that sink in for a moment before finally realizing that it was probably a good idea to have them training, even if the reason for doing so was horrifying.

Then I pulled her in and hugged her before tickling the shit out of her to make her laugh. She was giggling all over the place, which made me smile... probably for the first time since I’d woken up in that weird tube.

After Mandy left, I pulled out my sketch pad and started to draw. It was amazing being able to express some of my frustrations on paper. I only wished I had some paint so I could put a mural on my walls. I’d have to find out if we could get some.

After a few minutes of getting lost in my artwork, what I was drawing finally hit me. I sat there staring at the perfect replication of Colt. He was smiling in a way that I'd only ever seen him do when the two of us were laying in our shared sleeping bag, whispering under the stars. I'd drawn his hair sticking up all over the place and I hesitantly touched his curls, wishing I could run my fingers through them one last time.

I took a deep breath and flipped the page. I'd just have to draw a landscape or something. That'd be safe enough to keep my emotions at bay.

After I'd been working on my sketch for a good hour, Wes ended up coming in. We both sat on my bed, leaning against the wall, my sketchbook all but forgotten in the middle of the bed. He'd just knocked, then came in without saying a word. We'd been sitting there for at least five minutes in silence. I had no clue what he wanted.

When I couldn't take it any longer, I blurted, "Why the hell did you get a tattoo?"

He sighed and ran a hand over his shaved head. "I just... wanted to feel... *here*. I..." He sighed again before continuing, "I didn't think we were going to make it, J. I really didn't. You and Orr... you didn't look good the last time I remember seeing you, but somehow you guys kept me alive." He swallowed. "When I woke up after my surgery, I was just really thankful, ya know? But you and Orr were still in danger. We didn't know if you could heal each other. They told us that you might not make it. That your... Balu connection might not be strong enough to help you heal." He looked over at me. "I thought you two sacrificed yourselves for me... I was scared that I was going to lose my brother... my only family I have left." His eyes welled up with tears and I couldn't stand seeing my little brother upset like that, so I grabbed him and pulled him into a hug. He rested his head on my shoulder and I felt a little wet spot on my shirt, but he was crying silently.

I whispered, "Even if I wasn't here, you still have family, Wes. Cal, Nolan, Mandy... even Orr and Tabitha." He

nodded but squeezed me tighter.

When he finally pulled away, looking a little less stressed, I smirked and said, “You still didn’t tell me why you got a tattoo.”

He snorted and rolled his eyes. “I needed a distraction.”

I almost asked him to explain why he got that specific one, but he seemed a little defensive. I didn’t feel like having him mad at me since everyone already seemed mad at me for the whole Orr thing, so I let it go for the time being. Though I’d get down to the bottom of what the hell that tattoo meant eventually.

“Where’s that?” Wes asked after pulling himself together.

I looked to where he was pointing and realized he was talking about the landscape I’d drawn. I picked it up and said, “Nowhere, I was just...” I trailed off as I further examined the sketch. Then I swallowed thickly.

“What? What is it?” Wes asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t... I’ve never been there before.” Which was true... mostly. I’d never been there before, not in real life, not physically. I’d never been to the field before, but the dream version of me sure as hell had... many times... and always with Orrean.

I could feel Wes’s eyes on me as I stared down at the drawing of that field with the stars up in the night sky. *Why the hell did I draw this?*

Wes shoulder bumped me. “It’s okay, you don’t have to talk about it.”

I finally tore my gaze away from the paper and said, “I’ve only ever seen this place in my dreams. I don’t think it’s real.”

He eyed me again, then said, “Why don’t you draw me a badass dragon or something for my next tattoo?”

“Pfft.” I rolled my eyes, appreciating the subject change, and I flipped the page. “I can draw you something better than a dragon... but you sure as hell aren’t getting another tattoo.”

“Because obviously I have to do what you say.” He rolled his eyes.

“Obviously,” I agreed, pretending he wasn’t the most sarcastic little shit ever.

He snorted. “What could possibly be more badass than a dragon?”

I took that as a challenge and set to work, joking with my brother, silently thanking whatever higher being would listen for keeping him alive.

That... alien I was trying not to think about... didn’t show up—again. I had shown up at the fence every night for three nights in a row... and Orrean never came. When I woke up, I felt oddly disappointed, even though I didn’t want to talk to or even see Orrean. And to top it off, my chest felt sorer every day. I spent most of my time rubbing at the spot that I tried desperately to ignore.

I hadn’t even seen Orrean since we came back to our suite from the medical wing. I’d been staying in my room resting, eating, and visiting with my family members, but I knew it was time to get over it and explore this crazy place.

Cal came to find me after my shower—with hot water and real soap and shampoo, yay—and decided to take me on a tour now that I could actually walk around on my own. He led me first to the mess hall so we could grab some breakfast.

He pushed open double doors and I followed him in, but came to an abrupt stop as soon as I passed through. The room was fucking huge. There were probably a hundred long

tables lined up in long rows across the floor and there were people sitting at just about every single one of them. Not just humans, though; there were humans and Taoree sitting together, talking and eating, and looking like they were enjoying each other's company. There had to be a couple hundred people in there. It was such a strange sight that I couldn't even get my feet to move.

I watched as a rather large human man dressed in dark fatigues, carrying a tray piled with food, threw his tray down in the middle of a table where ten Taoree were already sitting. The Taoree all greeted him and one even stole a roll off the human's tray. In response, the human picked up a second roll and chucked it at him, hitting the Taoree in the forehead and causing everyone at the table to crack up laughing and start joking around together.

Then I was even more surprised to see Nolan and Tabitha carrying their own trays to that same table, where they immediately started joining in on the conversation and general goofing off.

Cal smacked my arm. "Come on, let's go get our food, then I'll introduce you to everyone."

I nodded at him, then slowly followed him around the perimeter of the room to the left side where a kitchen line with warming trays full of food and people—again, humans and Taoree—were serving a huge array of breakfast food. Cal passed me a plate, took one for himself and led the way down the line. Once I had eggs, toast, bacon, and biscuits piled high on my plate, I followed Cal to the table with the large human, many Taoree, and Nolan and Tabitha.

Cal stood at one end of the table and announced, "Hey guys, this is my brother, Jeremy." I shot him a glance at his calling me his brother, to which he half-shrugged, like it was no big deal. I gave him an appreciative half-smile before giving an awkward wave to the table.

Cal then proceeded to introduce the fifteen people sitting there, so I literally didn't catch any of their names.

Then the huge human guy, who was closest to me, waved at the empty seat next to him. I walked over and sat down next to the big muscle-man.

He leaned over and said, “In case you didn’t catch it, I’m Riley.” He held out his hand to shake, which I took. He gave me a quick, precise, very strong handshake, then said, “I heard you were in medical for a while. You doing okay now?”

I took a sip of water and cleared my throat before answering, “Yeah. I’m fine now, thanks.”

He glanced at me and nodded before shoveling a giant bite of sausage or something into his mouth.

The Taoree on the other side of him leaned forward to address me. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Jeremy. I’m Beknuhm, in case you missed it. But you can call me Bek.” He smiled at me, and I was surprised how well he spoke English. He hardly had an accent at all... he sounded like it was his first language.

“Nice to meet you too,” I managed to get out after my initial surprise.

He smiled, still leaning around Riley as he told me, “So I hear that you’re going to start training this week. Once you finish, you’re going to be added to my team. Riley here is on our team too.” Apparently every ‘soldier’ was assigned a team, and luckily, Cal and Nolan had ensured that we would all be on the same team. *Family sticks together*. That was our motto now. No matter what, we stuck together and didn’t leave anyone behind.

I honestly hadn’t cared about any of the other bullshit as long as I was with my brothers.

Cal and Nolan had already finished the three-week training session, since they started as soon as we arrived. Wes was two weeks behind them, even though he should’ve rested longer than he had. And I, well, I was starting as soon as they’d let me. Cal was going to walk me around the base after breakfast, so I’d get to see the training rooms. He’d told me

that we were already a little ahead of the game since we'd been fighting with shoians and reelians for weeks. But the Taoree and humans who ran this place—and yes, there were humans *and* aliens in charge, which blew my mind—wanted to make sure we had the proper fighting skills and everything before they started sending us out on missions.

At the moment, most of the missions were just going out and scouting for other humans and Taoree that were seeking refuge, and bringing them back here to safety. All the vehicles they used had their own technology that blocked out the Taoree Legion's tracking system. It was all overwhelming, but also amazing. I couldn't wait to go out there and help some people.

“Yes,” I finally answered Bek. “I'm looking forward to it.” I sent him a genuine smile because I truly was looking forward to it. I was also grateful that Bek was willing to wait for me to finish training before heading out too far. Not that he had much choice, if he wanted my brothers on his team. And from what I'd gathered, Wes was a commodity. Apparently he'd become some kind of crazy-awesome fighter. I wasn't completely convinced that Wes, Cal, and Nol weren't just pulling my chain. But I guess I'd see for myself.

Once I finished training, we would travel for a few days at a time before coming back to the camp. Until then, they'd stay close, taking lookout shifts right outside the base walls. Or rather, above and around them, since the base was underground and partially in the side of a mountain.

“As am I,” he responded to me in Taoree. I was finally able to tell the difference. “I heard that you are able to conjure an onghu?” he asked, still in Taoree.

I had a feeling that he was testing me to see if I really spoke his language or not. It was pretty obvious from the looks I was getting from everyone around the table that I'd been a topic of discussion. So I answered in Taoree, “Yes, I am able to conjure an onghu, are you?”

He smiled at me. “No, that is not in my skill set. But I am happy to show you what I can do in the training room later in the week.”

“That sounds good to me,” I replied before taking a sip of my drink. Then I switched back to English. “What are your plans for today?”

Riley answered, “We’re going to scout and guard the area for a few hours, and once our shift is over, we’ll meet you and Wes here for dinner.”

Wes was training, but I had to wait at least two more days before the doctor cleared me. I was going to watch my brother so I’d be doing something other than just sitting around in bed. “Sounds good,” I replied to Riley.

He shot me a smile before saying, “Part of your training is learning to work with your team, so we’ll be in and out of the training room with you over the next few weeks.”

I nodded at him, then buckled down to eat. I had a feeling that I’d need all the energy I could get over the upcoming weeks.

When I was nearly finished with my food, I paused with my fork halfway to my mouth. I felt a weird energy inside of me and without looking, I knew he was standing behind me. I *knew* if I turned around, I’d be faced with those stupid purple eyes. So I took a breath, then refocused on eating. I could tell that everyone around us was waiting with bated breath for what was about to happen, but I didn’t care. Avoidance was key.

Or at least that’s what I thought before the bastard sat down at the other end of the table next to Cal—the traitor.

As soon as I finished my food, I got up, nodding to the people around me, then made a hasty exit out of the mess hall. I only made it ten steps before I felt him behind me again. I stopped in my tracks, but I didn’t turn around.

“Jeremy.” His voice was soft and made my heart squeeze at the amount of pain he could fit into that one word.

It took me a moment, but eventually I asked, “What do you want?”

“I... I’m sorry, Jeremy, for everything,” he said in that same soft voice.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“Could we... talk? Please?” he asked quietly.

I blew out my breath, then turned to face him. “There’s nothing to talk about, Orrean.”

He seemed to sink in on himself. “Please.”

“Orr... I... I just need some space, okay? Maybe we can talk later, but I just... can’t. Not right now... not yet.”

He looked so heartbroken as his eyes got a little glassy-looking and he whispered, “Okay.”

I couldn’t stand being there any longer, so I turned on my heel and walked away. But I didn’t get far enough to drown out Cal’s voice saying, “Come on, Orr, J’s being a dick, like usual. Just ignore him. Let’s go finish eating, okay?”

I didn’t look back. I figured Cal would come find me for that tour after he ate. Whatever.

Cal found me in my room an hour later. Mandy had surprised me by bringing me paint the other day, so I’d started painting my walls. I had started by painting a field on one wall, though I’d also sketched out where I was going to paint Colt on another wall. I thought about him constantly, so it wasn’t really surprising that I’d started painting him. I kept going back and forth between the field wall—my and Orr’s field—and the Colt wall, unable to settle on just one.

“You finally ready for that tour?” Cal asked from the doorway.

I finished up adding a small detail on the trees in the background of the field. “Yep. Let me just clean off my brushes.” I got up and did just that before following him out of our suite.

By the time Cal and I walked back to our apartment, I was completely blown away with how big the place was, and how many people were living here. So many humans and Taoree, and they were getting along, talking to each other, seemingly oblivious to the fact that they were two different species. It was a beautiful thing and something I never really thought I'd see.

I was also completely overwhelmed with where everything was. There were ten levels of housing units, set up much like apartments. Some were single units, while others, like ours, were multi-units. There were two floors of training rooms. One level was divided into five very huge training rooms, set up for training individuals or small groups, and the other was one gigantic training floor, designed for entire teams to train together. There was a floor with several rooms dedicated to education where all the kids were required to go, and adults went to learn Taoree or English, respectively. Then there was the level that had a community center, a pool, and even a library. There were two floors dedicated to nature that had artificial sunlight to grow crops and keep animals alive. The medical wing was set up with different rooms for checkups, emergencies, and long-term patients. There was apparently a control room and some meeting rooms for the Independent leaders, though Cal didn't take me there, as well as some holding cells, or ya know, a prison all the way at the bottom. The mess hall floor had a huge kitchen and a little store where you could get snacks and things for your apartment. Though no money was exchanged, everyone was expected to help out. You either went to school, you had a job around the base, or you became a soldier.

It was fucking humongous. I'd been calling it a 'camp' this whole time. The others had started calling it a 'base' since I'd woken up, and now I understood why. It wasn't a 'camp,' it was a fucking city.

It made me wonder just how long these people had really been planning this, because I didn't understand how they could've possibly built all of this in the nearly three years

since the Taoree had come to earth. It didn't make sense, though I didn't know anything about alien technology or the tools they used, so maybe it was just more efficient than how humans built things.

I was exhausted by the time I laid down for bed that night. When I fell asleep, I went to the field, thinking that maybe Orrean would meet me there since he hadn't come to the fence. But he *still* didn't show up.

Chapter Seven

I landed hard on my back, all the air rushing out of my body, knocking the wind outta me. *Fuck. That is going to bruise.*

My trainer was *not* taking it easy on me—at all. I'd thought that maybe he'd take pity on me since I was still a little weak from healing myself and *that alien I wasn't thinking about. At. All.* But it was pretty clear that he didn't give a shit.

“Get up and try again,” Hakhor, aka Hawk, my trainer, yelled out.

I groaned in response, but sat up, just in time to see Wes get in a punch to Hawk's face... totally worth moving for. Then my eyes widened as I watched my little brother get a couple more punches in. He was moving so fast that he was matching the Taoree's speed. *How in the fuck is he doing that?*

Wes jumped up higher than I'd ever seen him and somehow managed to kick Hawk in the face, making the big guy fall to the ground. When Wes landed on his feet he muttered, “Oh shit.” Then he knelt down beside the fallen alien. He grabbed his shoulder and rolled him so he was on his back.

Apparently they hadn't been yanking my chain at all. My brother was a badass. Not that I'd tell him.

Suddenly the Taroe started laughing as he caught his breath. Then he looked at my brother and said, “Nice shot. I'm going to have to get Bek to take a shot at you, he's our best fighter.”

Wes started pulling Hawk to his feet. “He should be here in a half hour.”

Neither of them even noticed that I was still on the floor, out of breath, sitting with my arms around my knees. I just sat there, trying to get my breathing under control after fighting for six hours straight with the fucking craziest Taoree I’d ever met... not that I’d met many yet, but still.

“Come on, J, we need to go again,” my little brother called over to me with way more energy than necessary after all of this freaking training.

I groaned, “I can’t move, Wesley. I have zero energy left.”

“Well, that sucks, but you’re gonna have to get off your ass anyway,” Bek called out from behind me. I hadn’t even heard him walk in.

“Don’t even think about making an excuse, J,” Cal added as he came into the room too.

I groaned, but I knew he was right, so I got up and faced Bek. Before I could even blink, he was in my face, punching me in the gut. I stumbled backward and clutched my stomach, then raised my arm to block his blow to my head. He kicked me in the hip, then punched me in the stomach, then the shoulder, and the hip again. Each punch was pushing me farther back in the room until I was against the wall. I couldn’t even punch back, and he was fucking hurting me. He wasn’t just getting in practice hits, he was hitting me for all he was worth.

I coughed when he punched me in the side, then I tasted blood in my mouth. I could hear my friends yelling at him to stop as they tried to pull him away from me, but he was too strong. And I heard the moans from my own mouth, but the bastard just kept hitting me.

When he hit my face and I heard a crunch, I realized that this guy wasn’t going to stop. This fucking alien bastard was going to kill me, he was going to fucking beat me to

death. And I didn't want to die. I needed to be there to protect my family.

I felt something deep inside of me start to bubble. It felt like anger and love wrapped up together in some kind of weird, hot energy, and I needed to get it out. I could tell that it *wanted* to be released. So I let out a yell, trying to push the weird energy away from me, and suddenly a huge white light blasted out of my chest and hit Bek, making him fly across the room.

I took a deep breath as I slid down the wall to sit on the floor, and my brothers came running over to me. Wes covered a wound on my arm and Cal was grabbing my face to look me in the eyes. "Holy shit! Are you okay?"

"Just peachy," I managed to get out.

I heard Hawk's pissed-off voice from across the room, "Was that really necessary?"

"Yes," Bek replied in Taoree. "It was the only way to teach him how to use his onghu as a *linhu*. You know I wasn't going to kill him, I'm not stupid."

"You *are* an idiot. I was going to teach him tomorrow."

"We don't have time for that. We need to get out into the field. We're losing too many soldiers as it is."

"What in the fuck is wrong with you?" Orrean's angry voice came from the doorway.

I looked over at him, surprised by the amount of anger coming off of him. His eyes were almost glowing, he looked so pissed. After everything we'd been through, I'd never seen him look like that—not once, and I knew he'd been pissed at me before, multiple times, in fact.

"How *dare* you," Orrean practically growled, which made my eyes widen even farther.

Hawk helped Bek stand up, but then he backed away from Orrean with his hands up in a show of surrender... I couldn't really blame him. Orr was terrifying.

But Bek stood tall. “I needed to show him how to make a linhu.”

“There are better ways. You could have come to me. I could have taught him.” Orrean was still growling, though he’d switched to Taoree.

“You told me yourself that he wanted space from you, that you weren’t supposed to be around him,” Bek growled back in Taoree.

Orrean got in Bek’s face. “There are better ways.”

“But not faster. We need to get back out there. There’s too much at stake.”

Orrean pushed Bek so hard that the alien fell on his ass again. Then Orrean bent over and growled quietly, though it somehow seemed even more menacing, “Do not touch my Balu again. If you lay one finger on him, I will come after you. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Bek said through clenched teeth.

Then he stood up, walked over to me, knelt down and grabbed my hand in his. I almost pulled away, but without a word, Orrean started pushing his light into me and my body started healing immediately. I almost stopped him, but I looked into his eyes and I couldn’t.

He was staring at me, looking so angry, but underneath it all, he looked heartbroken, and I didn’t have it in me to make him stop. His warm energy felt so good, and his purple eyes were so intense that I had to close my eyes so I didn’t get lost in them.

When I was healed, Orrean let go right away and turned to Wes. He covered the little cut on Wes’s shoulder and when he pulled away a few seconds later, the cut was gone. Wes smiled at Orrean and said, “Thank you.”

Orrean nodded, stood and started walking toward the door. Right when he was in the doorway, I called out, “Orrean?”

He looked over his shoulder at me, waiting for me to say something.

Only, I never did.

I meant to say thank you, I meant to say sorry, I meant to tell him that I knew he did the right thing in order to save me and my family... but none of that came out. Instead I just stared at him, silently, unable to say even one of the million things I needed to say to him. After a very long moment, he turned around and walked away. I instantly had to rub at my chest—the pain was intense and the longer it lingered there, the worse it was getting. But I had other shit to deal with right then, so I pushed it away, bottled it up and decided to leave it for later.

I looked over at the other two aliens in the room. “What in the fuck was that about? Why the hell did you attack me like that? Couldn’t you have just told me I had some weird-ass energy shield I could shoot you with, you fucking asshole?”

“Linhu,” Bek had the balls to say.

I yelled in Taoree, “I know what it’s called, you prick. I am fluent in Taoree, remember?” I was fluent—that wasn’t a lie—but ten minutes ago, I hadn’t known what it was called. I mean, how could I, when I didn’t even know it existed? But I wasn’t going to tell him that.

He shrugged. “It was the quickest way to teach you.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve going after my brother like that, Bek,” Cal yelled, stepping in front of me. “Especially after I saved your ass earlier today.” Wes stood next to my shoulder, looking like he was ready to pounce.

“I wasn’t going to kill him or anything, I knew we could heal those minor injuries.” I snorted at *minor injuries* since they sure as hell hadn’t felt minor. The Taoree ignored me and argued back, “I needed him to find his linhu so we can teach him how to use it.”

“I don’t care what reason you had for it, Bek, you don’t do shit like that to my family. How do you expect me to trust you when we’re out in the field?” Cal was still yelling.

“I’m sorry, but it was the best way.”

“Obviously not, you bast—”

I put my hand on Cal’s shoulder to cut him off. “It’s okay, Cal. I understand why he did it.”

Cal looked back at me. “No, it’s not okay, J. I spent weeks watching you slowly dying in front of me. It’s *not* fucking okay.” He looked like he was holding back tears. I knew he was upset because of everything, and I knew he was still hurting because he lost his older brother, but I hadn’t realized how distressed he really was until now.

I put my arm over his shoulder, pulled him close and whispered, “It’s gonna be okay. Let’s hear them out and see what they have to say. If they’re still assholes, we can find another team, alright?” I resisted the urge to pull him into a hug, but only because I knew he was trying to hold it together in front of the Taoree and I didn’t want to make it worse. I’d have to give him a hug later or something... I needed to make sure he was doing okay.

He gave me a nod, then turned back to Bek and Hawk and demanded, “Explain yourselves, or I will report your asses and get you locked up downstairs.” It took me a moment to remember that there was a prison on the bottom floors of the camp, deep underground. I was still learning where everything was.

Hawk started this time, “Jeremy has some of the Taoree Elite qualities because he’s Balu to Orrean. Orrean is from one of the royal bloodlines and they have the ability to use their light in different ways. Jeremy can use his light defensively, as protection and healing. That’s why he can make an onghu—”

“The white dome thingy,” I added so Cal and Wes would know what the guy was talking about, then I waved at

Hawk to continue.

“And that’s why he can use his light for linhu... to protect himself and those around him when the time comes. Apparently Bek thought that the best way for him to realize this skill was to beat the shit out of him,” Hawk finished with a shrug.

Cal blew out a slow breath, then he and Wes both turned to me before he asked, “What do you think?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know... I mean, it worked, but it wasn’t exactly a pleasant experience.”

Wes added, “Orrean wouldn’t have left us with them if he thought they were a real danger to us.”

“That’s true. He would’ve killed them and taken us somewhere else safe,” Cal agreed.

Bek stepped forward. “I’m sorry I hurt you. I won’t ever do that again, I swear on my life.” I didn’t know him, but for some reason I felt like he was telling the truth. He tilted his head and slowly examined me as he said, “Can you find the linhu again? Can you feel where it is inside of you? It’s an extension of your onghu.”

I thought about his question as I slowly stepped away from Cal and Wes, and closer to Bek. I focused on my light and felt a small part of it start building up again, waiting to burst out of me. Instead of answering Bek’s question, I let my linhu fly out—it looked like the white dome thing, but smaller and only right in front of me... it reminded me of a shield. My linhu went far enough in front of me that it hit him right in the chest, sending him falling on his ass. *Serves him right.*

Hawk started chuckling and Bek sat up in a daze, sputtering, “I’ll take that as a yes.”

I smirked at that.

Hawk looked over at me. “Your linhu and your onghu are like a muscle, so you need to keep practicing with them to make them stronger so it takes less energy and you won’t be

left as defenseless after you use one of them. I'll get some weights out and things so you can practice shielding yourself. Though," he pointed at Bek, "that was a damn good shot."

I smiled at him before sending a glare in Bek's direction. I understood what he was trying to do, but for fuck's sake, he could've tried to get me to find my linhu without beating my ass like he did.

I heard Wes's whispered voice ask Cal, "Why did Orrean get so tired after he used his onghu if it just takes practice to build it up? Hasn't he been using it his whole life?"

"Yeah," Cal whispered back, "but remember Orrean said that because he was undercover, he'd kept his abilities a secret when he was with the Legion. He ended up not using them for years, so he just needs to keep practicing again."

"Yeah, it's just weird," Wes replied.

"Talk to Orrean at dinner if you want."

I cleared my throat. "You two realize I can hear every word you're saying, right?"

My brother rolled his eyes at me. "It's not my fault you're eavesdropping and being a jerk to Orr."

I rolled my eyes back and said, "Can you just drop it?"

After a beat, Wes said, "Fine," and Cal just shrugged at me.

"Where's Nolan?" I eventually asked as Hawk came out with beanbags, weights, and blocks of wood, setting them up across the room.

"He's learning about some new tool for the cars... I dunno what it is, but he loves learning that shit, so Orrean set it up for Nol or somethin', I dunno," Cal told me.

"Oh... huh."

"Ready?" Hawk asked.

"Sure."

He smiled and picked up a beanbag. “Try to keep anything from hitting you. We’ll slowly work up to the heavier stuff.”

I nodded and set to work. It was a weird feeling, but every time I pulled at my light with the intention of guarding myself, it came pretty easily and almost felt like it *wanted* to make a shield. I sorta felt like a superhero... Well, I did until Hawk started chucking wooden blocks at me and they started making their way past my shield and hitting me in the chest and stomach. I was going to end up with a hell of a lot of bruises. If I’d been talking to Orrean, I could’ve gone to him to heal me.

But I wasn’t going to, even though a big part of me missed the tall jerk.

I was sitting by the fence against a tree, just waiting like I usually did, picking at the grass and throwing tiny rocks I found in the dirt. I was bored and annoyed. I mean, why the hell did I keep coming here and just waiting around instead of having normal dreams? Why was I even waiting for that stupid alien, anyway?

“Jeremy?” a whispered voice said.

I startled and looked around for the source, but didn’t see anyone.

“Jeremy?”

I couldn’t tell exactly where it was coming from, but it sounded like maybe it was coming from the other side of the fence. At first I thought it was Orrean, but there was no way his voice could ever sound so... sinister. I stood and walked over to look through the hole in the fence. I could see the round huts on the other side, just like the first time I visited

this place, but I didn't see anyone. There was no movement or flashing lights, either.

"Jeremy?" the hushed voice hissed.

"Hello?" I whispered, suddenly afraid of what I might find when I finally encountered whoever the hell was saying my name. The voice was so soft and strained, I could hardly make it out.

"Jer...e...my," the spine-chilling voice whispered, making goosebumps pop up all over my skin.

I swallowed thickly and looked around on my side of the fence, but didn't see anyone, so I looked back through the hole. It was dark over there and very still, not even a breeze to shift the grass. Suddenly my side of the fence went completely still, too, and something in the air changed. My heart started pounding in fear as I slowly backed away from the fence.

"Hello, Jeremy," the awful voice said from directly behind me.

I turned, but no one was standing there. I kept my back to the fence as I looked out into the trees.

"Oh," the voice said from the other side of the fence, "did I scare you... Jeremy?"

I turned around, backing away again as a shadow moved across the hole. There was someone... something on the other side of the fence.

Then laughter started echoing around me. Terrible, horrible, bloodcurdling laughter filled the air, and I saw the flash of something black through the hole. An awful screeching sound pierced my ears and the metal fence started ripping to tatters right in front of me.

When a giant fence panel flew backward, I muttered, "Oh fuck." Then I turned on my heel and started running through the trees.

The laughter followed me, no matter how fast I ran. I felt as if I was being chased by a predator. A big, giant, scary-

as-fuck predator. I felt it right behind me. It was going to catch me any second and tear me to shreds. The laughter was right behind me and the creepy voice said, "You're mine now, Jeremy."

Then I stumbled and screamed in pain as something sliced down my back. I turned around, ready to fight it off, but the trees around me had disappeared. I was in a field... my field... no, my and Orrean's field.

My breath caught. "Orrean?"

Orrean was standing in the middle of our field, looking confused and disoriented, but still there. He turned at the sound of his name, looking at me, bewildered. "Jeremy? I don't... how... how am I here?"

I ignored his question since he was the one that'd told me about dream-walking in the first place, and I ran over to him. Before I could think twice, I threw my arms around his waist and buried my face in his chest, soaking up his scent.

Orrean tentatively put his hands on my shoulders, then gasped. "You're trembling. What's wrong?" He wrapped his arms around me and started rubbing my back.

My words came tumbling out, jumbled, and my whole body started shaking even more. "I was at the fence and I heard something saying my name, I thought it was you, but it wasn't, it was, I don't know what it was, but I ran and it caught me, but when I turned around it wasn't there, and it cut my back, and it laughed, and—"

"Hey." Orrean cut me off by grabbing my cheeks to force me to look at him. "It was just a nightmare. You're okay."

I looked up into his dark-purple eyes, blew out a breath and asked, "Are you really here? Are we dream-walking?"

"I... yes, I'm here, but I don't know how."

"What? I thought I pulled you to me or something. Isn't that what you told me before?"

“Well, yes, but I...”

When he trailed off, I realized he still had his arms around me. I thought about pulling away. I knew I should. Staying in his arms felt like a betrayal to Colt. But... but this was only a dream, and after the fucked-up nightmare, there was no way I wanted to be alone. Just being in his presence made a huge part of me settle into place, even when my nerves were frazzled from some imaginary foe.

So instead of pulling away, I moved closer to him, wrapping my arms around his waist and tucking my head under his chin. I took a deep breath, inhaling his cinnamon scent, and I whispered, “Please stay with me tonight.”

He started to pull away. “Jeremy, I—”

I hugged him tighter. “Please, Orr... just for tonight... just here, in this place... please stay with me.”

His shuddered breath ruffled the hair on my head. He whispered, “Okay.”

I nodded against his chest and squeezed him in thanks. His arms wrapped around me, holding me tight and making me feel safe after the crazy nightmare. We stayed that way for a long time. His calm presence soothed my soul.

But I needed more.

So I slid my hands up his chest to his neck, palms flat on his skin, my thumbs rubbing his jaw. Then I leaned up on my toes and pressed my cheek against his. His skin was soft and made me breathe out a sigh at the feel of it against my own. Then I wrapped my arms all the way around his neck and tucked my face against the side of his neck.

Somehow Orrean knew exactly what I wanted because the next thing I knew, he was lifting me so he could sit in the grass with me in his lap. I didn’t move my upper body, but I straddled his legs. He hugged me tight to him, so our chests were flat against each other, both of us breathing sighs of relief at finally being close together again.

I couldn't help myself, I needed his scent to fill my lungs completely, so I took deep, full breaths, then nuzzled my face farther into him. He smelled so good, felt so good against me. Having him in my arms, being in his... made my heart feel almost at peace.

My lips lightly brushed the skin under his jaw and we both gasped. I felt a buzz spread all over my skin, down to my toes. So I pressed my lips just under his ear, then farther down his neck, then on his throat, then the other side of his neck. Why did it feel so good, so natural with him? How could it after I lost my love? Why did I want him when I shouldn't? Was this feeling real, or was it just some stupid byproduct of our connection? My heart was heavy as I kissed under his other ear.

"Hey," Orrean whispered as he pulled me back to look at him. When he started rubbing my cheeks, I realized I was crying. "It's okay, Renuella," he whispered with that sweet, understanding voice.

I squeezed my eyes tight and whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Shh," he cooed before kissing my forehead and pulling me back into his chest. He shifted us around until we were lying in the grass against each other with my head on his shoulder and his arms tight around me.

As he slowly rubbed my back, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he understood. That he knew I still wasn't ready to embrace him... and I didn't know if I'd ever be.

Still, he held me and kept me safe for the rest of the night.

When I woke up, I looked around, my empty room feeling so much lonelier than it had when I'd gone to bed alone last night. My chest started throbbing in a painful beat that made it difficult to breathe and my back felt like it was cut. So I grabbed a pillow, pulled it to my chest and pressed my face into it. In that moment I couldn't tell who I was

missing more, Colt or Orrean. But it didn't matter, because I was fucking lonely.

I knew I could walk across the hall to Orr's room, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Not when Colt's beautiful face kept flashing behind my eyes.

It took me a long time to get out of bed to start my day because my chest felt like a heavy weight was sitting on it. While I was in the shower, my chest pain increased—though I tried to ignore it—and my back stung in the hot water. When I looked in the mirror, I had a pretty big scratch in the middle of my back. *What the fuck? I didn't cut my back yesterday, did I?* My eyes widened as I realized I'd felt like my back was cut in that nightmare last night... but that couldn't possibly mean anything. I must've done it yesterday and had been hurting in my sleep... right? I shook off the weird thought and immediately started gasping as a sharp pain shot through my chest.

I had no doubt that Orrean had snuck out of the apartment... away from me.

Later that night after I went to sleep, I waited in the field, but Orrean never showed up. I couldn't blame him. I knew it wasn't fair for me to ask him to stay with me in a dream when I didn't want to be around him in real life. I just... wasn't ready, didn't know if I ever could be. I didn't want him to replace Colt, he *couldn't* replace him. My and Orrean's connection wasn't going anywhere, but neither was the love and connection I'd shared with Colt. He was a part of me, just as integral as my light.

Nolan sat between Tabby and me at dinner and literally talked the entire time. I didn't think I'd even gotten more than four words in by the time I finished eating. He was really excited about learning how to use the technology they had

here. He went on and on about the shields they had for cars so the Legion couldn't trace us, then he talked about the tracking devices they were developing to find Taoree and humans alike so we would know where to go to help people, then he told me how he was helping draw up new maps of all the areas we'd traveled since we'd seen some of the overrun towns, then he told me about learning how to fly one of the smaller alien ships the Independents had on site. He was geeking out like a madman, and I couldn't help but smile at him.

“Will you come up to the control room after we finish eating? I can show you some of the tools and the surveillance and stuff,” he suggested before *finally* taking a breath and a bite of food.

“Sure,” I replied. I still hadn't been, since no one but the leaders and staff were allowed in there. I tilted my head and asked, “How are you even down there, anyway? I didn't think we were allowed in there. I thought the control room was only for the leaders or whatever.”

Nolan looked past me, sharing a look with Tabby before looking into my eyes and stating, “Orrean is one of the top-ranking members of the Independents. He thought I could help, so that's what I've been doing.”

I blinked at him. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “I went through training, just like everyone else, but now I'm doing further training in intelligence. Apparently they're trying to train at least one member of every team so each team will be well-rounded.”

“Hmm. Makes sense, I guess.” I nodded at him. “So will I even be allowed in there?”

“Yep, you'll be fine if you're with me.”

“Sweet.”

After we finished eating, Nolan led the way to the control room. Cal ended up coming with us, but Wes and Tabby went back to our suite. When the three of us walked down a long hallway, a sense of misery shot through me as it

became vastly apparent that we were missing a crucial member of our party.

“I miss him too, you know,” Cal said as we turned a corner.

After I recovered from the shock of him reading my mind, I asked, “How did you know I was thinking about him?”

Cal sighed and nudged me with his elbow. “You get this look on your face... it’s the same look you had when you stopped talking for over a week.”

I cringed at that. “I’m sorry I did that.”

“I know you are.” After a moment he added, “You’re not allowed to do that again, though, okay?” He stopped walking and faced me, making me stop beside him. Nolan stopped, but didn’t interrupt. “I don’t care what the fuck happens, you’re not allowed to shut down again.”

I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. I knew I’d hurt him. I could see it in his face, but I couldn’t fix anything I’d done in the past, so I simply replied, “Okay, I promise.”

Cal searched my eyes for a long moment before nodding. “Good.” Then he walked to the control room door with me following behind him.

When I walked in, I had to squint my eyes from the sudden onslaught of a million different lights and screens everywhere. The buzz of electronics made me tense because it reminded me of the buzz of a flying alien ship. I shook off the uncomfortable feeling and looked around, noticing how much the control room resembled that circular alien hut *someone*—who would remain nameless—had taken us to in the Taoree camp behind our old houses. I followed Nolan over to a Taoree I hadn’t met yet.

“This is Gledia,” Nolan said.

“Nice to meet you,” I replied, shaking her hand. She gave me a small smile that reached her dark-green eyes before going back to the strange device in her hand.

Nolan pointed at a skinny guy with black-rimmed glasses, short brown hair sticking up in all directions, and grey eyes that were examining me intensely. Nolan said, “This is Owen. Owen, J.”

I shook the guy’s hand. “Nice to meet ya.”

He eyed me, nodded and replied back, but I didn’t hear him because I saw an alien sitting in the corner. He looked almost exactly like a certain alien I wasn’t thinking about at the moment, though I knew it wasn’t him because I couldn’t sense him, not the way I could sense Orre—I mean, that other alien.

I stepped closer to the practical-stranger and said, “Hello, Ozias.”

The Taoree smiled at me, then stood to his full six-eight height. “Nice to see you again, Jeremy.” He held out his hand, offering a kind smile.

“Right,” I replied, hesitantly shaking his hand. I was happy that I didn’t feel any weird pull like I did with you-know-who. “You’re twins, aren’t you? He told me he was the youngest.”

Ozias huffed out a little laugh. “Technically I’m fifteen minutes older than him, so that is not untrue.”

I nodded. “I didn’t even know you were a part of the Independents until you came by medical.”

“J,” Cal whisper-yelled at me, “he’s the freaking leader of the Independents, you ass.”

My eyes went wide. I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten that. “Oh, right.”

Ozias chuckled. “I’m glad you made it here, Jeremy. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

I cringed. “That doesn’t sound promising.”

He chuckled again, then turned to Gledia, who handed him a piece of paper. As he read it, I noticed that he had one of

those weird tribal tattoos on the back of his neck, and behind one ear.

Before I could stop myself, I blurted, “What’s with the weird tattoos?”

“Jesus, J,” Cal huffed under his breath.

Ozias smirked at me. “They’re a sign of freedom. My brother, older brother that is, took away many things from my people before we even came to Earth. Many of our freedoms that we used to take for granted were suddenly stripped from us. We had curfews, and limitations on where we could travel, who we could talk to; so many, many things were taken from us. Some small, some large.” He rubbed his tattoo, though I didn’t think he realized he was doing it. “He outlawed inkings, or tattoos, as you call them, years ago. When we came to Earth and fled his rule, my Balu—mate, wife—and I and some of our friends decided to show our independence from his tyranny.” He pulled down his collar so I could get a better look. “This is just one way we feel united... and free.”

As I examined his tattoo, I realized it was written in Taoree. I didn’t even know I could read Taoree, but apparently I could because his tattoo read *United and Free*. I whispered, “It’s beautiful.”

He stood and smiled at me. “Thank you. You met Alleean, she’s the one who brought you in and happens to be my Balu. She designed it.” He waved his hand around the room. “Nolan wanted to show you something, I think.” He winked at Nolan, then turned so his back was to us as he started typing on some kind of alien computer.

Nolan cleared his throat. “Let me show you our surveillance.”

I followed him over to a large screen. He sat in the chair and pulled out a keyboard, then started showing different areas of the world. He showed a picture of Earth, as in, from outer space. Then he hit a button and the screen switched to a shot of New York City, or at least what was left of it. Some

buildings were on fire, and there were people running around in the street, though the camera was too far away to see if they were still humans or not. Then he hit a few buttons and he showed the cul-de-sac we'd lived at our whole lives. There was some trash floating around in the yards and on the street and a body on the sidewalk. My mom's minivan was still in the driveway.

I cleared my throat, but my voice was still hoarse as I said, "Change it, Nol." It was just too fucking much to look at. I didn't need yet *another* reminder of how much the world sucked right now.

He immediately changed the screen to some farmland I didn't recognize. He flipped through a few more pictures, or videos, or whatever the hell they were. It didn't make any sense. How was he doing that?

"I don't understand, Nol. Won't the Legion realize you're hacking their system and eventually track us?" I finally asked.

He grinned up at me. "These aren't Legion satellites. The Legion is completely ignoring all human technology—besides vehicles, obviously. But they've left everything else alone, choosing to use Taoree advances instead, which gives us a bit of an advantage. They may have better technology, but this has been our home for thousands of years, and we're finding ways to use that oversight against them. We're bouncing our signals off of human satellites. We're not even on their radar."

I furrowed my brow. "How can you be sure they won't know what we're doing?"

"Don't worry, J," he said, "Ozias is a brilliant hacker, and so is Owen."

I glanced over at the two in question and noticed that they were both already staring at me. I raised my brow in question and Owen immediately looked away, blushing slightly, but Ozias just smirked at me before turning to Owen

to resume whatever conversation they were having. I followed suit and let Nolan overwhelm me with his vast knowledge of everything in the control room. I seriously couldn't even follow most of the conversation. Cal kept smirking at me, knowing full well that neither of us knew what the hell Nolan was talking about, but that neither of us wanted to tamp down his enthusiasm.

I may not have understood half of what Nolan said, but I did get that he was helping the Independents come up with a plan for taking down the Legion's satellites. He also told us that there were other Independent bases. Apparently the Independents had set up all over the world, though this base was the central headquarters because Ozias was, in fact, in charge of the whole damn Resistance.

Ozias, Owen, Gledia, and a human military guy named James were planning an attack on the Legion's main base, once we discovered where it was, though Ozias was sure it was somewhere in North America. He was also sure that Emperor Thelonious had moved from his original headquarters in Ohio once he'd started activating the Qiren. He went into hiding so the government wouldn't have time to hunt him down before things went to complete shit.

The Independents wanted to set up our attack so we could strike from the south while the Northern Independent Base attacked from the north. I wasn't allowed to see much of the plan, obviously, only that there was a plan forming to take down the emperor and all his fucking minions. Though it'd be months before we could attack. So the first priority was to track down that bastard Thelonious.

The entire time I was there, I kept glancing at Ozias, sneaking peeks at him whenever he wasn't looking. It amazed me how much he looked like Orrean, only he seemed younger somehow, less serious. Orrean may have been fifteen minutes younger than Ozias, but his life as a spy, living with the enemy and keeping his true nature hidden for so many years, had aged him in a way that Ozias hadn't experienced. Orrean was always so serious. Quiet and serious. Lost in his own head

most of the time. It made sense when I thought about it. I couldn't imagine what it felt like to have to hide in plain sight like that. To have to pretend to hate humans and want them dead while secretly trying to save them. To live in such a hostile environment for so long where one wrong word could mean death.

I respected what Orrean had done for us. For humans at large, and for what he'd done for my family and me. For supplying information on the enemy while risking his life to do so. I even felt like maybe I was on my way to forgiving him for omitting so much information about the state of our relationship for so long. I would forgive him. I knew I would. I wanted to, even. But I just wasn't ready to face everything that came with forgiving him. Not after Colt. Not so soon after losing the person I loved and wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

Ozias looked over at me and sent me a sad smile, almost like he knew where my mind had drifted. He even patted my back as I walked past him to leave the control room.

When I went to sleep that night, I expected to find Orrean in my dreams, part of me *wanted* him to meet me there. But he never showed up, even though I waited by that damn fence all night long.

Chapter Eight

After two weeks of training, Hawk *finally* decided to release me to my team, so I was going on my first mission. I even got my own set of camo, which everyone—Taoree and humans alike—wore. Apparently the Independents wanted humans to recognize us as friendly—probably a good idea so they didn't attack us or run away—so they'd started making the camo out of their special material that was harder to puncture, but still looked like the human army uniform. I wore Colt's blue hat everywhere I went and no one had said a word to me about it, even though it wasn't a part of the uniform. Everyone knew what that hat meant to me, and they probably knew I'd wear it whether they told me I could or not, so they didn't even bother. At least I had it on backwards so it wouldn't get in the way of my vision.

We also had small packs filled with basic essentials in case anyone got separated or stuck away from base, and each of us had a belt that was filled with weapons and a *ricah*—a communications device—so we could contact our team or the base if we needed to. It was hooked up to an earpiece which every single one of us had in one ear.

I'd gotten good at using my linhu to guard, not only myself, but several people around me, too. The only thing that sucked was that I couldn't shoot, stab, or even punch anything through the linhu. It blocked me from being hit, yes, but it also didn't allow my weapons to pass through, so I couldn't really fight anything if my linhu was in front of me. But it was nice as a backup.

I'd also developed better fighting skills, with and without a shoian, and with many other weapons. I'd had a crash course in healing, but I'd developed that skill pretty well already, thanks to Wes. Because I had an affinity for healing, I could push my light through a juhere to heal anyone more efficiently and effectively than a juhere could by itself, though I could obviously heal Wes and Orrean without one. But I'd also learned basic first aid in case I couldn't spare my light and needed to stabilize someone or more than one person at a time. Each of us was made to memorize about a million maps so we'd know where known Legion camps were, and we had to learn how to use a Taoree locator device, and how to read it, so we could give our exact location if shit hit the fan. I was feeling pretty good about finally getting out of the base and running a mission.

Orrean had been respectfully keeping his distance like I'd asked. He was still staying in the same suite as me because my brothers, Mandy, and Tabby wouldn't let me kick him out since he was 'part of our family.' But he'd done a great job of leaving before I woke up and sneaking into his room before I got home or after I went to bed, so he wouldn't run into me. Not that I'd asked him to go that far or anything... I wasn't *that* much of an asshole. He seemed to need the distance too. The only reason I knew what he was doing was because I could sense when he was nearby. Even if I couldn't see him, I could *feel* him. Some nights he wouldn't even come home, which always made me worry, causing me to have a restless night thinking about where he was staying or what he was doing. I knew I had no right, since I'd told him to stay away from me. But I missed him. I hadn't even seen him since that day in the training room—not counting when we dream-walked, but I chose to pretend that didn't happen... it hurt too much to remember, anyway. So I hadn't seen him until this morning.

Apparently as soon as he found out that I was leaving the safety of the base, he just went ahead and added himself to our team... even though he hadn't trained with us at all. But he

was one of the higher-ups of the Independents, so he got to do what he wanted. Everyone on my team was grumbling about it and shooting me looks since they blamed me. Actually, Nolan, Wes, and Cal were all perfectly happy about it, but the rest of our team felt like they had a boss looking over their shoulders to watch every little move they made. I couldn't really blame them for being mad.

As far as Orrean went, he hadn't said one word to me that day. He was trying to keep his distance, though I knew he'd had his eyes on me nearly the entire time we were walking around. I just ignored him, even though being that close to him after weeks apart made me want to hug him and breathe him in.

"I don't get it," Wes said quietly as we walked down what appeared to be an abandoned neighborhood. We were split up into smaller groups of two or three, and unfortunately my brat of a brother was in my group, along with a Taoree named Sanjha that hadn't said a word to me yet. I didn't think she liked me much.

"There's lots of things you don't get. What exactly are you talking about here?" I asked with a smirk.

He pushed my shoulder. "Shut up, dick. I don't get why we were sent to this town when it's so empty."

I sighed and took a minute to answer, "Well, isn't that the point? We're supposed to make sure that there aren't any people looking for refuge."

"But the control room has been monitoring everything before we patrol it. They obviously knew this area was pretty much empty."

"That's..." I didn't know what to say to that. It was true. They should've known how vacant the town was, so it made no sense why we'd been sent here.

Before I could analyze it further, I heard what sounded like scraping metal, so I put my hand up to my mouth to tell Wes to be quiet, then I made a few hand signals and pointed in

the direction I'd heard the sound coming from. I motioned to the team behind us before Wes, Sanjha, and I started down an alley toward the sound right as I heard the metal-scraping noise again.

When we reached the end of the alley, we turned the corner and I breathed out a sigh of relief when I saw a knocked-over stop sign hanging by one bolt and occasionally scraping a car roof. I didn't see any Ferals or other humans or Taoree around, but I knew if the sound attracted me, it could attract Ferals easily, so I hadn't lowered my weapon as we took a closer look.

I looked over the roof of the car and noticed what looked like fresh blood on it, and all over the stop sign. Without making a sound, I got Wes and Sanjha's attention to point it out. Sanjha's nostrils flared when she saw the blood, but I didn't know her well enough to interpret the look. I'd been spending all my spare time with my team, but she hardly spoke at all, and never directly to me. I had no idea why she didn't like me.

"It's a trap," Wes whispered in a horrified voice.

I looked at him with wide eyes, then looked at Sanjha, but she was scanning the area. I scanned it too as the three of us went back to back so nothing could sneak up on us.

"It's Ferals, I can hear them," Wes whispered eerily.

"I don't hear anything," I whispered back a moment later. But as soon as the words left my mouth, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. I looked to my right and saw something moving behind the dumpster there, so I whispered, "Movement, my three o'clock."

"There's a whole horde of them. At least eighty," Wes said.

I didn't have time to wonder about how or why he knew that many were nearby because suddenly Ferals started stepping out from behind cars, dumpsters, and yards. They had

us completely surrounded. Wes was right, there were at least eighty of them, and they were on all sides of us.

I quickly grabbed my ricah, held down the button to contact my team and said, “Bravo team is surrounded by more than eighty Ferals. Our coordinates ar—”

I didn’t have time to rattle off our location because as one, all of the Ferals came at us, though I knew the others would hear the fighting and come even without the coordinates. I picked up my two reelians first since I could fire off two shots while they were still a distance away. Normally we wouldn’t use our reelians because the sound would draw more Ferals to us, but the fact that we were already surrounded made that a moot point. So each of us fired and killed a couple of Ferals, but then we had to pull out our Feral sticks—okay, shoians, but I still liked my name for them better—and start some hand-to-hand combat, holding a reelian in one hand and a shoian in the other. Every time I used my Feral Stick, I’d shoot my reelian to take out another one... though the bastards just kept filing in, like they were never-ending.

They were fucking everywhere, and they had so many different weapons. Saws, wrenches, pieces of wood, lamps, planting pots, brooms, one guy was even using a crock pot, plug and all. It was ridiculous.

I had taken out five by the time I heard a voice in my earpiece, “Alpha, Charlie, and Delta coming in from all sides. Hold and we’ll get to you, Bravo.” It took me a second to realize it was Cal’s voice. I was relieved that they were helping, even if I couldn’t see them yet.

I ducked under a metal pole as I held my shoian up to a Feral, and I aimed at the Metal Pole Feral with my reelian, taking the shot. It hit him in the stomach, but unfortunately, as he fell, his pole knocked me on the side of my head, making me have to shake it out as my eyes went a little blurry.

The Feral I got with my shoian fell to the ground on top of Pole Feral and I was immediately stabbed in the shoulder with a pitchfork.

“God dammit,” I muttered as I shot the asshole who stabbed me.

I held my breath and winced as I pulled the pitchfork out of my shoulder, then I flipped it through the air and brought it down on another Feral, knocking him on his ass. I dropped the pitchfork and stabbed him with my shoian, then turned my reelian on a Feral that was heading toward me with a rather large knife.

After I shot him, I aimed behind him and saw Cal standing there, fighting off a Feral that had a big old, rusty sledgehammer. I shuddered when Cal caught the sledgehammer on his forearm as he protected his face. That had to hurt like a bitch.

I heard Cal let out a little yell as he thrust his shoian at the Feral with his now-broken arm. I knew he needed help, so I shouted over my shoulder to Wes, “Cal needs help, go back-to-back with Sanjha.”

“Got it,” he shouted back as he moved completely behind the Taoree.

I shot two more Ferals as I made my way to Cal, and as soon as I reached him, I started covering his back and right side as best I could.

“You need to heal that,” I shouted at him as I fought the Ferals around us.

“I... don’t... have... time,” he panted out as loudly as he could.

I knocked down a Feral and noticed that I had a very small break before any more got to me, so I pulled out my juhere, reached behind myself to grab ahold of Cal’s arm, and pressed the button as I pushed my light through it and ground out, “Let me heal you.”

Cal didn’t say anything, but he didn’t pull away from me either, so I knew he was fine with it. He was moving around, obviously still fighting off some of the bastards, but he was trying to keep his arm in my grasp. It took less than thirty

seconds, but it felt like an eternity since we were still being attacked.

When I felt that his arm was healed, I shouted, “We need to make...” I whacked a Feral upside the head with my reelian, then shot him in the head before continuing, “make it to Wes and Sanjha.”

“Agreed,” Cal shouted back before giving me a little push so I knew to move.

We remained back-to-back as we slowly fought our way over to Wesley, and as soon as we got there, he and Sanjha moved to make a bigger circle with us. We didn’t even need to say anything, we all just knew what needed to be done.

“What the fuck is that?” Wes said loudly.

“What? What is what?” Cal asked from beside me. The sounds of the rest of our team fighting were all around me, and I caught a glimpse of a camo jacket to the left of where I stood. The others were trying to reach us.

“I don’t fucking know...” My brother’s voice sounded freaked out. “Sanjha, what the hell are those things?”

When I could see most of the other members of my team through a small break between Ferals, I looked over my shoulder real quick to see if I could figure out what the hell Wes was talking about. It took me a second to find it as I scanned the area, but once I found it, I almost wished I hadn’t. There was a thing at least two feet tall, and just as wide, moving toward us, and it looked like a fucking metal spider, or maybe a crab. Its silver body was off the ground, being carried by at least eight silver legs. The top of its body was clear, but I caught a glimpse of a blue light inside of it. And its creepy legs were crawling over top of dead Ferals to get to us.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

Sanjha answered my brother, “I... don’t know... but it looks like a—”

She cut herself off, but Wes said, “A what, Sanjha? Just tell us.”

“It sorta looks like... a giant Qiren,” she said breathlessly.

“No. Not fucking happening,” Wes announced. “We are *not* dealing with brain-melting giants right fucking now.”

“I don’t think you have a choice, little bro,” Cal replied before shooting his reelian at a Feral.

“I’ll just shoot,” Wes said before I heard his reelian go off. I turned to see the giant-Qiren-spider-crab-thing get pushed back from the force of the bullet, but then it just powered on toward us.

“Fuck,” Wes breathed out.

Before I could respond to that, Cal said, “Oh no.”

“What now?” I asked as I followed his line of sight.

“Oh no,” I blurted, “They’re fucking everywhere.” And they were. There were giant-Qiren-spider-crab-things everywhere I looked. I saw Orrean and Nolan trying to fight one off together, but the thing had so many legs that it just kept attacking them with its extra limbs. “So. Not. Good,” I whispered in terror. There were a lot less Ferals running about, but those creepy things were everywhere.

“Let’s go take one of those bastards down,” Cal said to me, then added to Sanjha, “You and Wes take that one. Watch his back or I’ll kill you.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Sanjha actually sounded like she had a smile in her voice—so weird under the circumstances, especially since she *never* smiled, though I supposed Cal had that effect on people. “It’s always with the threats with you.”

“Just do it, Sanj,” he replied while shooting a Feral that was running full-speed at me.

“You know I will, tiny human.”

Cal snorted at that, but didn't reply. Instead, he said to me, "Let's get that one at my ten. Ready?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Follow my lead," he said, ignoring me.

When Cal started running for the giant-Qiren-spider-crab-thing, I followed, shooting both my reelians at two Ferals, using my last reelian bullets for the time being, so I took the extra reelian from Cal's belt and shot another. Cal used his other reelian to shoot the stupid giant-Qiren-spider-crab-thing, but the bullet merely ricocheted off its gross metal body.

"Use your shoian," I suggested as I put my back to him so I could continue fighting off the Feral horde.

Cal was grunting and jumping around a little behind me, but thirty seconds later he sounded panicked as he panted, "Shit, J, it's not working." He jumped and knocked into me so hard I stumbled as he grunted out, "It didn't... even twitch... or anything... Fuck!"

I used my shoian against a Feral's neck as I shot another with my reelian. As they both fell to the ground, I saw Orrean and Nolan still fighting off what I suspected was the same giant-Qiren-spider-crab-thing as before, then I noticed Tabby and Leeknohr fighting their own giant-Qiren-spider-crab-thing. It didn't look like they were having any more luck than the rest of us.

"Let's both use our shoians at the same time," I ground out, "maybe that... will be... enough power."

"When... ever... you're..." Cal sounded very out of breath, "ready."

I quickly turned and yelled, "Now," as I thrust my shoian onto the giant-Qiren-spider-crab-thing. The thing stopped moving for about two seconds and I thought we were going to kill it, but then it used one of its eight legs to knock my feet out from under me, making me land on my ass with a loud, "Omph."

Before I even had time to recover, another one of its legs wrapped around my ankle and pulled me so forcefully, I fell on my back, hard, knocking the wind outta me and making me hit my head. My hat got knocked off as it dragged me over dead bodies. *Ow. Motherfucking ow.*

“J!” Cal yelled. “Jeremy! Fuck! Shit!”

I looked behind me and saw that Cal had taken chase, but the damn thing had *eight* legs, so it ran a hell of a lot faster than he did. I started looking frantically around for a weapon. Something, anything that I could use to knock it hard enough to let go of me. I needed to get away from it before it... dragged me back to... wherever the fuck it was taking me.

We were still passing dead Ferals, so I grabbed the first weapon I could reach, which happened to be a shovel. Then I held it over my shoulder, sat up and swung at it with as much force as I could from my seated position. I must’ve hit it pretty good, because it stopped walking—running, really—and its grip on my ankle loosened.

I took advantage and knocked its leg with the shovel so I could get my foot away from it, then I scrambled to my feet. The giant-Qiren-spider-crab-thing didn’t seem to like that because it started snapping all its limbs at me, making me jump and move around like I was playing fucking jump rope or some shit. I knocked its legs again, but it retaliated by jabbing one of its legs out and stabbing me in the calf.

“Fuck,” I yelled out in pain. “You stupid fucking bastard,” I screamed as I raised the shovel over my head. Then with all my might, I slammed the shovel down, blade first, right into its body. The shovel blade went through the clear metal top—somehow I knew the alien metal was called nzok—and right into the weird blue light inside it and I swear to god, that fucking thing screamed so loud my eardrums were ringing.

But then the screaming stopped, the blue light faded out, and the giant-Qiren-spider-crab-thing went completely still. I killed that motherfucker.

I was out of breath, but I pressed the button on my ricalah—my comm—and panted out, “Stab them... through that blue light... to kill the... things.”

“Fuck, J, you okay?” Cal asked as he stopped beside me, panting. I pointed to my calf that was covered in blood and he immediately pulled out his juhere, knelt down and started healing me.

“S’fine,” I mumbled as I tugged the shovel out of the dead robot.

“Good, ‘cause there’s like three more heading our way,” Cal said as he pulled the juhere off my now-healed leg.

“Fan-fucking-tastic.” I took a deep breath. “You need a shovel or something, Cal.”

“On it,” he muttered as he ran a few steps away and pried a metal bat out of the grip of a dead Feral.

When he made it back to me, I asked, “What is with you and bats?”

He stood at my back, so I felt rather than saw him shrug. “My weapon of choice.”

I rolled my eyes even though he couldn’t see me, then I stepped forward, raised my arms above my head and brought the shovel down into another giant-Qiren-spider-crab-thing. It twitched its legs a few times before falling still. I could hear Cal swinging his bat over and over, hitting metal against metal as he tried to break through another’s body.

“Doesn’t work so well against giant-Qiren-spider-crab-things, does it?” I managed to breathe out as I dodged the legs of another one.

“No,” he panted, “not... really.”

“Trade,” I shouted. Cal knew exactly what I meant because suddenly a bat was over my right shoulder at the same time that I held the shovel back over my left. I grabbed the bat, Cal grabbed the shovel. It didn’t surprise me that he’d understood what I wanted. We’d had to trade weapons many

times, especially before we had shoians, and occasionally even afterward when one of us would get a shoian knocked out of our hands.

Pretty soon, we were trading back and forth. The metal bat was good for knocking the bastards off-balance, but it didn't seem capable of breaking through the metal on the giant-Qiren-spider-crab-things' bodies. I could only pray that the others had found suitable weapons to use against these things. The only plus was that the Ferals seemed to be gone, at least for the time being.

When Cal stuck the shovel through the last giant-Qiren-spider-crab-thing around us, neither of us wasted a moment to catch our breath. We just took off, back toward the rest of our team, to make sure everyone else was okay.

We reached Wes and Sanjha, and Cal stabbed one giant-Qiren-spider-crab-thing in the blue light. Then the four of us stood back-to-back, just watching, listening, and waiting for the next threat. After a few moments, Nolan and Orrean joined our circle, then Tabby and Lee—aka Leeknohr—joined us too. Eventually everyone from our team made it to us, though we were all covered in blood, some ours, some not, and most of us had injuries. The worst one was a broken leg that Orrean started healing as soon as Bek showed up with it.

Everyone stood in the circle for several long minutes, just listening and waiting.

It didn't surprise me that Cal was the first one to speak. "So any theories on what the fuck those things were?"

"They looked like giant Qiren," Devon, another human on our team, stated.

"No shit. Any idea what they do?" Wes asked.

"You mean besides drag you by the ankle to fuck-knows-where? No," I said.

"One of them dragged you?" Nolan asked.

“Yes, it dragged him,” Cal answered for me. “It was fast as shit, too. I couldn’t keep up with it. Thank fuck J grabbed that shovel.”

Nolan cleared his throat. “Okay. Everyone heal your injuries, then we need to load up a couple of Feral bodies and a couple of these Qiren things. I’ll check them for trackers while you finish scouting the area.” I made a face at the implication that there could be trackers in the Ferals or the giant Qiren. I was sure that the Legion would do whatever it took to find out where our base was so they could take us out in one fell swoop.

Everyone started gathering what Nolan wanted to carry back to the trucks. Orrean walked over to me and I startled when he placed my blue hat on my head, then he just walked past me.

“Thanks, Orr,” I called after him when my brain—and mouth—caught up to what he’d done. I was more relieved than I’d ever admit that he’d found my—Colt’s—hat. I had no doubt that I would’ve been a mess later if he hadn’t found it. It had become more than just my good luck charm over the months.

When I saw Sanjha’s arm bent all weird, I reached for it to heal her, but she moved away and said, “We have other things to concentrate on right now.” She started walking away immediately without waiting for a response from me.

Not wanting to push the issue, I just shrugged it off and turned to Nolan. “How did the Ferals band together like that? How is it even possible?” I asked, still trying to catch my breath.

“They were being controlled,” Nolan supplied from beside me.

“Gee, thanks, Professor Obvious. I didn’t realize that the fucking Ferals were being controlled by the fucking Taoree Legion,” I stated.

Nolan rolled his eyes at me and wiped some blood from his cheek. “I meant, they were being controlled by a Taoree that was in close range.”

“What?”

He sighed. “Really, J, do you ever pay attention when I’m talking to you?” I shrugged a little and he sighed before continuing, “I told you the other day that we predicted this would happen. We predicted that the Legion were going to start sending out small teams to control the Ferals in certain areas in order to lure, capture, or kill humans and Independents by setting traps.”

“You’re telling me that Ferals are now going to be working together to kill off any remaining humans?” I asked with wide eyes.

“Yes,” he answered before walking a few steps to Tabby, running his hand through her hair, cupping her neck and kissing her temple. I heard him whisper, “You okay?”

She smiled at him. “I’m good. You?”

He kissed her temple again as he whispered, “I’m fine.” The two split apart before Nolan came back over to me. “We need to scout the area quickly for any refugees and get the fuck out of here. You, Cal, Wes, Orrean, Sanjha, and Lee need to scout the west end.” He pointed to my right. “Tabby, Bek, and I are staying here to check for any active transmissions that we can track, and the others are scouting the east end already.” I nodded and he walked over to the others on our team to give them jobs while I followed Wes over to Cal.

I was surprised when I’d first heard that Nolan was made second-in-command on our team, but I had to admit that he was fucking great at it. Even if I didn’t want to be on the same team as Orrean, who was technically Team Leader. Orr seemed satisfied in letting Nolan handle things today... probably since he hadn’t actually trained with us yet. *Idiot.*

I was a little disappointed that we didn't find anyone hiding when we went quickly through the neighborhood. I'd been hoping to rescue a few humans, but I was still glad we'd been able to kill as many Ferals as we had, and take out those fucking new monsters. I mean, it helped in the grand scheme of things, and if some humans happened upon this town, at least they'd have less to worry about and a better chance of survival. Or they would if the Legion didn't immediately fill it up with Ferals and bug-robot-things again.

As we circled back to the trucks, the sound of a gunshot in the distance went off and before I could even react, I was pushed up against the side of a house with my face pressed into a chest that smelled like cinnamon. Another gunshot went off and Orrean somehow pressed himself into me even farther, trying to tuck me under him and cover my entire body with his. I allowed myself one moment of smelling him, and maybe I accidentally pressed my nose into his chest a little farther—not that I'd admit it—but at least I held back on wrapping my arms around him. I couldn't help myself. He was my favorite smell and I hadn't been around him in two weeks.

So instead of hugging him, I took an extra breath, then pushed his chest back as hard as I could to put a little distance between us. I ground out, "What the hell, Orrean?" Apparently I was back to embracing my anger, rather than focusing on my hurt.

He did that stupid shoulder-roll-shrug thing—that I would never admit to missing—as he said calmly, "There were gunshots."

"No shit, Sherlock. In case you haven't noticed, there's been gunshots all damn day. In fact, some of them were from *my* reelian. Why did you press me up against a wall? The shots weren't even close."

He looked away for a moment, then looked back at me with a pinched face. "I was too far away earlier, when you were dragged away..." He sighed and looked down to take a

breath before refocusing on me. “It was a natural reaction to protect you.”

What the hell was I supposed to do with that?

Orrean and his damn big purple eyes just stood there staring at me, looking like he was waiting for me to yell. He looked sort of pathetic and adorable and like maybe I’d kicked his puppy and he was waiting for me to do it again. *Why does he always have to be all sweet and caring all the time?*

“Dammit, why are you always such a wanker?” I asked without any real heat as I ran a hand over my eyes so I’d stop looking at his stupid face.

“Huh?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it,” I mumbled before looking back at him and quietly asking, “Can you try to not... do that again?”

For some reason, a small smile formed on his face.

“What?” I asked as he continued making that weird face at me.

He just shook his head and walked away.

“He’s so weird,” I muttered under my breath.

“Not as weird as you,” my brother supplied as we followed Orrean.

I lightly pushed his shoulder in retaliation.

“We’re going to meet at the trucks. The other team is closer to where the gunshots came from, so they’ll check it out and we’ll head over that way for backup,” Lee said after talking to Nolan with his rich.

When we met back at the trucks, Nolan was busy with Tabby and Bek. I walked closer and immediately turned away when I realized they were dissecting a Feral in the back of the truck. Or rather, they were removing the Feral’s brain. *Fucking gross.* Apparently the scientists back at the base asked for something specific from a Feral brain, or what was left of it

once the fucking Qiren melted it. What for, I had no fucking idea, and I didn't think I wanted to know, either. *Ughhh*.

Nolan called out over his shoulder, "Delta team found two humans right outside of town. They're bringing them back now, but they're on the fence about us, obviously, so try not to act like total douchebags when they get here... Jeremy."

"Me?" I asked, startled that he'd single me out like that.

"Yes, you. You've been moping around and acting like a jerk. Be nice."

I opened my mouth to argue and ask what the hell he thought he was doing, but then Cal started snickering and Nolan looked over his shoulder at me with a ridiculous grin, so I knew he was just messing with me. I muttered, "Dickhead." Nolan laughed and went back to the melted-brain removing thing, so I followed a laughing Cal back to our truck as I pulled out my juhere to start using it, along with my light, to heal the injuries everyone had acquired and not yet healed. Apparently my team was filled with a bunch of stubborn idiots.

When I got to Sanjha, she moved away from me again, so I said, "Let me heal your arm. There's nothing urgent at the moment and it'll only take a minute."

She ignored me, but turned and started walking away. I followed after her and said, "That has to hurt, Sanjha. Just let me help you."

She glared at me over her shoulder, but didn't say anything, and didn't slow down, either.

"Would you just come on," I said, starting to get frustrated.

She still wouldn't answer me or stop walking.

"Are you seriously *still* not going to talk to me, Sanjha? What did I ever do to make you hate me?" I finally asked angrily.

She turned to me with a fire in her eyes as she quietly, but fiercely stated, “Having a Balu is a gift. It’s something that should be revered and cherished, yet you walk around like it is a burden to you, like you hate it and you don’t want it.” She shook her head at me before storming off. Bek tried to put his arm over her shoulders, but she shrugged him off and stomped over to the trucks, hopping in.

I looked over at Lee, noticing that he wouldn’t look at me. Then I glanced at the other Taoree on my team, seeing them all looking at anything but me, so I asked, “Do you all feel that way?”

Lee answered when no one else spoke up, “We don’t understand why you fight it the way you do. You’re lucky to have found your Balu... but no one is pissed the way Sanjha is.”

“Why is she so mad?” I eventually asked.

All the other Taoree had started healing one another’s wounds, but Lee stayed with me and whispered, “Sanjha found her Balu when she first arrived at the Independent base.” I furrowed my brow at him because that still didn’t explain why she was so pissed at me. Lee’s dark-blue eyes softened before he added, “He did not make it. He was killed on the second mission they went on. He died before they were able to complete their bond, but they had started connecting. She now has to live with the fact that she will never know what a True Bond feels like, and with the knowledge of knowing her one true Balu is gone, but he didn’t take her with him.”

I let that sink in for a moment, and I swallowed hard before asking, “What do you mean he didn’t take her with him?”

He gave me a weird look before whispering, “Because their bond was incomplete, she lives on while he is dead.”

My mouth went dry at that, but I still managed to ask, “Are you saying that you die when your Balu dies?”

“That is typically the case, yes.” He was staring at me like I was the one saying something crazy-as-fuck.

All I could manage was a nod before I got up and joined my brothers who were looking at a map. I couldn't help but glance at Orrean. He had a deep frown on his face, but I couldn't tell if it was because of me, the situation we were in, or the fact that Lee had told me that if I ever completed the bond with him or whatever, we'd both die if one of us was killed. Why in the hell would he even want to complete the bond with me, if that was the case? *I'm a human, and humans are easily killed, especially now, in the fucked-up world we are living.*

Or maybe he didn't want to complete the bond with me. Maybe that was the reason he'd been giving me my space and not even meeting me in my dreams, even though I knew for a fact that I was trying to pull him to me. Maybe that was the real reason he'd held back on telling me about the bond.

For some reason, the thought that he didn't want to complete the bond with me made the air rush out of my lungs and my heart race, almost in a panic.

But I had no right to be upset. Not when I didn't want to complete the stupid bond anyway.

Orrean looked over at me, concern clear on his face. He started toward me, but I waved him off. I was fine, I didn't need him.

Even as the thought crossed my mind, I almost laughed out loud at the ridiculousness. I wasn't fine, and a part of me did need him. I just wasn't ready for that part of me yet.

I climbed into one of the trucks and shut the door so I would stop looking at him and getting lost in those stupid purple eyes.

Chapter Nine

That night when we made it back to the Independent base, we brought in the two humans and gave them food, fresh clothes, and beds to sleep in. Then we all went back to our suites to clean up and eat. After I showered, I walked out to the common room in our apartment where everyone else was already eating, including Orrean.

He stopped what he was doing and stared at me. When I sat on the loveseat next to the couch he was sitting on, he got up and started heading to his room.

“Wait,” I called after him.

He looked over his shoulder at me, but didn’t say anything.

“You don’t have to leave,” I said. “Let’s just eat as a family.”

His eyes went wide and he whispered, “Are you sure?”

I shot him a half-smile and shrugged. “Please stay... you’re a part of this family too, Orr.”

The smile he sent my way was shy, sweet, and hopeful. When he sat back down, he whispered, “Thank you.”

I ignored that in favor of asking Wes, “What’s for dinner? I’m starving.”

My brother looked relieved as he told me what we were having. I didn’t hear a word of what he said because I couldn’t stop sneaking looks at the alien that, for better or for worse, had become an integral member of my family. Even if I

wasn't ready to figure out the whole *Balu* thing, my family, my *entire* family deserved to have some happiness in their lives. It wasn't fair for me to have them walking on eggshells in their own home. This should be a place filled with love and laughter, a place we could all go to relax and be ourselves, where we didn't need to worry about fucking Ferals or bug-robots or anything else.

Mandy came into the room and immediately climbed onto Orrean's lap, and he didn't even blink. He just started asking her about what she'd learned in school that day and if she'd finished her homework. Wes was talking to Cal, who'd sat on the floor leaning his back against Wes's chair, and Nolan and Tabby were whispering to each other over at the little kitchen table. Everyone looked happy. For the first time in months, my family was safe and content.

A pang of loss shot through me, knowing that we were missing a member of our family. Knowing that my sweet, beautiful Colt would never again get to experience this, and that we'd never again get to experience him.

My leg was nudged by Cal's toes, so I looked at him questioningly.

He shot me a little smile and whispered so only I could hear, "He's always with us, you know."

I sighed at that. When did Cal get so good at reading me? "I know," I eventually agreed.

"This is nice," he stated a little while later.

I nodded and took a deep breath. "It is."

He shot me another smile and patted my thigh before he got up to open the suite door because someone had brought our food up to our room.

Orrean was looking at me when I glanced at him, so I sent him a soft smile, which he returned. I had a feeling he was good at reading me too, and knew exactly what I was thinking.

I got up to help Cal with the food. Once we'd passed out all the plates, I looked around and realized that Cal had taken my seat, so the only seat left was on the couch, next to Orrean. I shot Cal a glare, but he just grinned and shrugged at me, then the butt shot Orr a wink. I looked at Orr and watched him tense up.

So I set my plate on the coffee table and plopped down next to Orr, close enough that our shoulders were touching. Then I elbowed him in the ribs. "Just ignore him. That's what I do."

Cal snorted, but Orr looked at me with a little smile, which I returned. Then we dug into our food and I didn't bother to scoot away, even though there was plenty of room beside me. If Orr cared that I was in his space while he was trying to eat, he didn't say anything. In fact, he kept shooting me shy smiles.

After we cleaned up our dinner dishes, I made sure to sit beside Orr again. I'd missed him, missed his calm and peaceful presence. We played cards around the coffee table for a few hours, but I started losing my energy. It'd been a long day, and as nice as it was to spend a quiet evening with my family, I was drained and my eyelids started to droop.

I jerked my head up when it fell forward. Nolan laughed at me, but I noticed that no one was playing cards anymore, they were just talking. Pretty soon, my eyelids closed again.

I startled awake when I felt my cards being pulled out of my hand. As I looked around, I realized I was using Orrean's shoulder as a pillow. I wiped my mouth in case I'd drooled, but in my half-asleep daze, I didn't move off his shoulder. When he started to pull away, I grabbed his arm and pulled my knees up to rest on his thigh as I muttered, "Don't go, you're comfortable."

When he whispered, "Okay," I closed my eyes again, listening to everyone else leave the common room. I didn't bother to open my eyes when I felt Orrean shifting us around. I

didn't even open them when I felt him lie down beside me on the couch and place my head on his shoulder. He whispered, "Is this okay?"

I nodded against him, then slid my hand up his chest to the side of his neck. Both of us shivered as our skin connected and I rubbed my thumb over his jaw. "Stop avoiding me, Orr." I couldn't be blamed for anything that came out of my mouth when I was half-asleep.

"As you wish."

Right before I fell asleep fully, I whispered, "I've missed you."

I felt him brush the hair off my forehead and press his cheek there. "I've missed you too."

That night, I dreamt. Real dreams, not the dream-walking kind. I didn't feel the need to try pulling him to me, maybe because he was already there, holding me and protecting me like he always did.

I woke up in the middle of the night feeling warm and comfortable... and lying on someone's chest. Enimus! I fell asleep on Orrean.

He huffed out a put-upon breath. "Are you about to yell at me?"

I winced, even though that was totally deserved, since I'd been such a jerk. I took a deep breath. "No... I'm just..." I had no clue how to finish that sentence.

He rubbed my back a little, but said, "It's okay. We can just get up and go back to our rooms."

I leaned up on my elbow so I could look at him. He looked sad and hesitant. My hand was still on his neck, apparently having stayed there in my sleep. But I still didn't

move it since I liked that extra contact. My face was only inches from his, so I whispered, “Do you want to leave?” I waited a beat, then asked, “Can we just stay here?”

He blew out a breath, but nodded slightly, then brushed my hair off my forehead. When he ran his fingertips down my cheek, I closed my eyes at the sensation. Everywhere our bodies were touching was sending sparks through me. I felt my light take notice of his closeness, but I also felt my cock twitch with interest, which made me swallow and look at him again. The way our legs were tangled left little doubt that he’d noticed. He kept brushing his fingers over my cheek and through my hair as I stared at him, unmoving.

Looking into his gorgeous purple eyes, I was hit with a huge wave of *want*. I wanted so badly to close that short distance and press my lips to his. I wanted to feel his skin, to taste it. Part of me wanted to forget the past, forget everything going on around us, and just focus on the here and now. But that wasn’t something I could do, and it wasn’t fair for me to just forget about Colt and what we had together, even for only a minute. And I didn’t know how to be with Orrean. Everything inside of me was still just too raw.

I saw him glance at my mouth and I knew he felt the same pull. I knew that he wanted to kiss me.

But I couldn’t do it. I wanted to, but I *couldn’t*. So I bypassed his lips and pressed my cheek to his, then tucked my arms behind his neck and held him tight, burying my face between my arms and his neck. It took him a few seconds, but he eventually enveloped me in his arms, holding me tight.

I took a shuddering breath and a wave of tremors racked my body, making Orr tighten his hold on me. I didn’t understand what was happening to me. I didn’t understand the pull I felt toward him. I didn’t understand how these feelings were floating around inside of me when so much of my heart was still shattered after losing Colt.

I didn’t understand any of it. But I could *feel* him there, always, wherever I went, wherever he was... and I wanted to

be close to him. I couldn't deal with any of the emotions, but I needed to be close, if only to soothe both our souls for a short while.

When I shivered again, Orrean held me tighter and whispered, "Shh... it'll be okay, Jeremy."

For some reason, I believed him.

We both wound up falling back asleep, and when we woke in the morning, I squeezed him tight before we separated and went to our own bedrooms to get ready for the day.

"So you're telling me that the bug-bots have needles in their legs and will stab you in the brain to insert Qiren into you. And that these Qiren are the newest strain and therefore fast-acting, so there'd be no chance of getting back here in time to remove them. Is that what you're saying?" I asked Nolan. My voice had gotten embarrassingly high-pitched by the end of that.

Nolan sighed. "Not exactly how I put it, but basically, yes."

"Well, fuck," Cal said.

I couldn't agree more with that.

"Bug-bots? Really?" Orrean asked me, clearly trying to lighten up the mood of our team.

I shrugged at him. "It's better than calling them giant-Qiren-spider-crab-things, which is what I was calling them until right now." I shot him a grin.

His smile lit up his face and I was blown away by the beauty of it for a moment.

Lee cleared his throat. "I assume weapons are being made to take these, uh, bug-bots out?"

Nolan nodded. “Yes, but apparently they’re just going to be spears that will stab through the metal more easily than the shovels and stuff we were using yesterday.”

Orrean seemed to regain his composure because he looked away from me to Nolan and asked, “Do you want to tell them that we weren’t the only team to encounter these bug-bots?” Orrean had obviously talked to Nolan and Ozias already, but he was letting Nol take the lead again. Still, I grinned at his use of my name for them. Nolan had given us the technical term for them—mexbetzcilsih-Qirenniren—but it was long and stupid-sounding, so I was glad everyone was using my term instead.

“One other team ran into them. They lost two men. They were turned into Ferals right before their eyes.”

Everyone went silent at that. I was sure that everyone had seen someone they loved turn into a Feral. It wasn’t something you’d wish upon anyone else.

After a long moment, Nolan said, “We have been given the command to stay in today because they need time to make the spears. There should be enough spears for our team by tomorrow, but Commander Ozias doesn’t want anyone else being killed by the bug-bots. So it looks like we have time to train today. If anyone wants to go for a run, I’m heading down to the track field in a half hour.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Cal and I said in unison.

Nolan nodded at us before leaving the room, probably heading down to the control room. Every one of the team leaders worked in the control room and close to Ozias when they weren’t out in the field with their team. It made me wonder how the hell Nolan ever had time to eat or sleep. He was seriously constantly working, though I supposed that everyone was. If I wasn’t eating or sleeping, I was training or learning about some Taoree tool I needed to know how to use. I was secretly hoping that I’d get to learn how to fly one of the smaller spaceships they had, though I wasn’t sure how likely it’d be.

Everyone started to leave the meeting room, but when Orrean walked by, I said his name. He looked at me expectantly, so I asked, “Are you coming running with us?”

He grinned. “Sure.” Then he made his way out the door.

Cal elbowed me and said in a sing-song voice, “You have a crush.”

“I do not,” I argued.

Wes laughed from the other side of Cal. “Don’t even try to deny it, J. You obviously like Orr.”

I rolled my eyes at them. “You guys are stupid, he’s my...” Now that I knew what it meant, I didn’t really want to call him my Balu out loud. At least not yet.

Cal threw his arm over my shoulders. “We’re just giving you shit, J. Don’t have an aneurism over it.” He and Wes started chuckling.

“You both suck.”

They laughed harder and it made me smile. I was happy they were having a good time, even if it was at my expense. Finding these little pieces of happiness was what made fighting for our lives worth it.

“Are we allowed to eat lunch with Mandy since we’ll be home today?” I asked as we walked down the hallway, Cal’s arm still draped over me. He was still being even more handsy than he normally was... or maybe clingy was a better word. Not that I minded. I’d been enjoying the extra hugs I’d been getting from my best friend, since I needed them too, it was just strange and taking some time to get used to.

“We should be able to, unless she’s too embarrassed by us,” Cal answered.

“Why would she be embarrassed by us?”

Wes started laughing again. “I think she’s just embarrassed by you two.”

I reached behind Cal and punched Wes, though even that movement didn't make Cal let go of me. I heard a weird hiss-growl sound and looked around, eventually finding Orrean standing at the end of the hall watching us. When we reached him, Cal finally dropped his arm from my shoulders, though I saw a frown on his face that I returned.

I looked back at Orr. He was leaning against the wall with his arms folded in front of him and his ankles crossed, scowling at us. When we passed him and he didn't follow, I looked over my shoulder and asked, "Aren't you coming with us?"

He nodded and pushed off the wall, following behind us.

After a minute, Cal called over his shoulder, "Are you following behind us just so you can check out J's ass?"

"What?" Orrean sputtered out, "No! No... I'm not... I didn't..."

Wesley and Calloway started cracking up laughing, holding each other up as they continued walking. The dorks.

I shook my head and walked beside Orrean, who immediately said, "I promise that's not what I was doing."

I frowned at him. "Is my ass not nice to look at?"

He gaped at me and opened and closed his mouth several times before I couldn't hold back my laughter. I shoulder bumped him as I laughed. "Dude, I was joking. Relax, Mr. Serious."

He gaped at me again before finally recovering and saying, "That's not my name."

I snorted at that. "Be careful or I'll start calling you Captain Obvious."

"Captain... Obvi—oh. Oh." He shoulder bumped me back and said sarcastically, "Hilarious, Jeremy."

I chuckled. "I thought so."

He huffed out a laugh and shook his head as we followed my idiot brothers down to the track field. When Orr started stretching beside me, I couldn't help but run my eyes over the long lean muscles of his body. He was seriously hot, and even with my heart in a million pieces, I couldn't help but notice. Unfortunately Orrean noticed me ogling him, because he smiled a knowing grin at me, then hip checked me as he ran by and called out, "Like what you see?" He started laughing as he ran.

I held in a little groan as I watched his backside jogging away. Then I shook it off and ran to catch up with him. I grabbed onto his arm and yanked him to a stop to face me, ready to argue that I wasn't checking him out, even though I totally was.

But the moment I looked into his eyes, I lost my ability to speak. I was drawn in like a moth to a flame, and before I could stop myself, I was pressed against him, chest to chest. Both of us were breathing heavy, our chests rubbing against each other and sending sparks all over my body.

He leaned down toward me and I went up on my toes, but I paused with my mouth mere inches away from his. Something squeezed around my heart and a pang of guilt ran through me. I knew Colt was no longer with us, but that didn't stop me from feeling like kissing Orrean would be a betrayal of his memory. No matter how badly I wanted to.

So I faltered and leaned my head down so my forehead was on his chest instead. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with Orrean's delicious smell. He put his hands on my shoulders and rubbed my muscles there, calming me. After a few more deep breaths, I lifted my head to talk to him.

"Orrean," I whispered.

He brushed the hair off my forehead. "Come on, let's run," he said quietly with a small smile, though the hurt behind his eyes was noticeable.

Still, I was grateful for the pass he was giving me, so I nodded and we took off again beside each other.

We caught up with Nolan and nearly everyone from our team on the track. Even though I knew Orrean could run much faster than me, he stuck by my side for the entire two-hour run. We didn't say much, but I found that I didn't mind. At. All. In fact, I was at peace for the first time since we'd come out of that weird tube. I was relaxed, and so was he, and our family members seemed at ease as well. Orrean even sat beside me when my whole family met Mandy for her lunch break from school. Mandy was, in fact, embarrassed by us, but I knew she was also secretly pleased that we'd all come to have lunch with her.

I looked around and found myself in the place of my worst nightmares. But then I turned around and found Colt standing there and I ran for him. Oh god. Finally. Finally. Colt finally came to me. I couldn't believe he was really here.

"Colt? Babe?" I sobbed out as I reached for him.

But my arm slipped through his body. What the hell? I tried again, but my hand slipped through him again. Why? Why can't I touch you? I could always hold Orrean in my dreams, and now Colt finally came and I couldn't even touch him. What was going on?

"Colt?" I begged. "Please, Colt, I need to hold you." Tears were running down my cheeks.

"Promise me," Colt suddenly whispered, looking like he was in pain.

"I promise," I heard my own voice come from behind me.

I turned and saw myself standing there... and I was holding onto Colt.

No. Oh, god, no.

This wasn't a dream... this was a memory... my memory of Colt... dying. I felt more tears fill my eyes as I realized what was happening.

Colt looked over my shoulder and asked, "You will keep... your promises?"

"I swear it," Orrean said from behind me. I spared him a glance, but I didn't want to take my eyes off of Colt. This was the first time I'd seen him in months.

Colt nodded slightly at Orrean, then he looked at me, but not me, he looked at the memory-me and panted out, "Don't be mad at him... I made him... promise." He closed his eyes tight and groaned, then reopened them. "Give him a chance."

"Wha... what?" My voice asked him.

I watched helplessly as Colt clung to my arms and I pulled him into a tight embrace as I whispered over and over, "I love you. I love you."

I took a step back and watched as he started screaming in pain, and in my memory, I sobbed as I held him. Though I sobbed now, too.

There was nothing I could do but watch as my heart shattered all over again the longer he screamed in pain. His screaming went on for what felt like an eternity, but then, it suddenly stopped, and he stood up straight, pulling out of my arms as he started chanting.

Watching Orrean pull me out of the house as I screamed and fought him only made me cry harder. I tried to walk toward Colt to get one last look at his beautiful face, but then everything around me faded to darkness.

Suddenly a new picture appeared around me and I found myself staring at Orrean as I beat on him and screamed and cried and blamed him, standing on the porch outside.

Orrean was trying to calm me, trying to hold me and comfort me, but I fought him until I finally wore myself out. I watched Orrean's face closely. He was crying, but trying to hold it in, trying to keep himself from falling apart like I was. I could feel the anguish in his heart as he held me.

My surroundings faded and reappeared again. Orrean was standing in front of Colt... only, it wasn't really Colt, it was a Feral. Colt's eyes were foggy and white, and he was going after Orrean with a fire poker.

"Colt, please," Orrean begged as he held out a shoian. "Please." I heard Orrean let out a loud sob.

"It's okay, Orrean." The sound of Cal's voice made me jump. I turned and found him standing in the doorway with his arms crossed and tears running down his cheeks. "That's not Colt, Orr. You saw what he tried to do to me. You have to... it isn't him anymore. You have to do it." Cal ran his hand over his face. "It's going to be okay, Orrean... I'm sorry."

Orrean glanced at Cal and nodded, then turned back to Colt and whispered, "I'm so sorry I couldn't save you." Then he held his shoian up to Colt.

"No!" I yelled.

Colt started shaking from the electrocution, then he dropped to the ground.

Orrean fell to his knees and buried his face in his hands, but Cal came over and pulled him into a hug.

The scene quickly faded out, and for a split second we were standing on a different porch, and I watched myself push Orrean down the steps as I screamed at him, "You killed him, didn't you? You fucking killed my boyfriend." I pushed him again.

He stepped off the porch and away from me. "He didn't want to live like that."

“I’m going to fucking kill you. How could you?” I was screaming.

The scene switched again and I cursed. We were outside and I was standing beside the memory-Orrean as we both watched me pull back the sheet over Colt’s head and play with his hair and kiss his forehead, then his lips. I could feel Orrean’s anguish and heartbreak as if it were my own.

I gasped as I woke up. I couldn’t get enough air. I couldn’t fucking breathe.

My bedroom door flew open and Orrean ran through, kneeling beside my bed and pushing me to sit up, facing him. He took my head in his hands and pulled me forward so my forehead was on his shoulder. Orrean’s light started pushing into me, filling me with warmth and allowing me to breathe again.

After a minute, I pushed up, wiped the tears I must’ve shed in my sleep off my cheeks and croaked out, “Why did you take me with you?”

He opened his mouth in surprise, but no sound came out. He swallowed hard before he whispered, “I didn’t mean to.”

I stared at him.

He quietly told me, “My *fekioirs* fell off my hand.”

“Your what?” I asked.

“My *fekioirs*.” I had no clue what he was talking about, but luckily he explained, “I wear it on my hand at night to prevent me from dream-walking. It must’ve been knocked off in my sleep. I’m very sorry.”

That’s why he hadn’t been coming to me in my dreams? He was purposefully blocking me out?

“Why are you doing that?” I finally asked.

He looked away from me. “Because you told me not to dream-walk with you anymore.”

Oh. “Uh... I guess it fell off when you came to me after,” I took a deep breath, “my nightmare?”

He shook his head. “It was still in place when I woke. I don’t know how you pulled me to you that night.”

I swallowed and he shoulder roll-shrugged one shoulder. Obviously he was just as clueless as me with all this shit.

I cleared my throat. “So, um... you can bring me into a memory?”

He nodded. “Yes. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

I nodded and decided to change the subject. “You... why were you thinking about Colt?”

“I...” He ran his hand across his forehead. “I saw you holding his hat for a long time before you put it on this morning. I knew you were missing him, so,” he shrugged, “I was thinking about him... and missing him too.”

I nodded and looked away from him. “I’m sorry I was a dick when... he died.”

Orrean put his hands on my thighs. “You have nothing to apologize for. You were grieving.”

I looked down at him. “Still... I was a jerk to you.”

He did that shoulder roll shrug thing and one corner of his mouth lifted into a little smile. “It’s okay.”

I had to look away from him as I said, “I know you didn’t want to do it.” I sighed. “That had to be hard.”

He stood up and I thought he was going to leave, but then he sat on the bed beside me and looked me in the eyes again. “You know, he’s not the first person I cared about that I had to watch go through the torture of Qiren... melting their brain.”

“What? Are you serious? Who else?” Did one of his friends turn before he found us in my childhood home?

He took a deep breath. “How do you think the Legion had the technology when we came to Earth? Thelonious tested out different strains of Qiren on my home planet. Anyone that spoke up against him was used as a test subject. When he found a strain that worked on the Taoree brain, he wanted to show me and Ozias. He took us down to his lab one night.”

Orrean smiled sadly and his eyes started to fill up with tears as he continued, “Autnomlias was my best friend, my first boyfriend. We grew up together, yet there he was, strapped to a table with wires hooked up all over his body. I tried to go to him, tried to pull off his restraints, but Thelonious had a couple of guards hold me back.” He ran his hand across his forehead. “I had to watch as the Qiren melted his brain... it was one of the first strains ever made, so they weren’t as efficient. It took almost an hour for the Qiren to finish the job.”

I grabbed his hand and squeezed. He didn’t pull away, but he wasn’t looking at me, not really. He was staring off, a million miles away as he continued, “Thelonious forced me to watch as he slowly killed my boyfriend right in front of me. No matter what I did, he wouldn’t let me go to him. When Autnomlias reached out to me, I couldn’t...” He took a shaky breath, obviously trying to hold back tears. “It was a warning. I’d spoken up to him earlier that week because I didn’t agree with one of the laws he was passing.” He finally looked at me. “Just because I questioned one thing he’d done, he tortured and killed my best friend... my only real friend.”

Orrean paused and sighed. “Later that night, I snuck back into the lab. Autnomlias was fighting his restraints, trying to break free. I wanted to free him so badly, but Thelonious had already explained what he’d done. I could see that my boyfriend was no longer there, even as I looked into his foggy white eyes. He was gone.” He sighed, but his eyes were watery. “When the Qiren were taking him, when he was screaming in pain, he looked at me and begged me to kill him.”

He begged me to put him out of his misery. It was the last coherent thing he said to me.” I saw a stray tear run down his cheek. “So I snuck back down and killed Autnomlias so he wouldn’t suffer further because of me... It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.” Orr looked right at me and whispered, “I was fourteen. Thelonious thought he’d been scaring me into blindly following him, but he accomplished the exact opposite. That was the day I decided that I would do anything and everything I could to stop Thelonious... it’s been about sixteen years, but I still swear to Enimus I will take that bastard down, one way or another.”

What the hell was I supposed to say to that? That I was sorry? That it sounded like the worst thing I’d ever heard and I couldn’t believe he’d had to go through it? That his brother was a dickhead bastard that deserved to have his balls chopped off, followed by his head?

No, there wasn’t anything I *could* say to that.

So I did the only thing I could think of. I pulled him into a hug and squeezed him tight. He was tense and immovable for a long moment, but finally he relaxed into the embrace and tucked his head onto my shoulder and wrapped his arms around my waist. I couldn’t help but think about the way he fit in my arms, almost like the way Colt fit in them.

Colt. My Colt. Orrean’s Autnomlias. They were gone. They left us behind.

We stayed that way for a long time. So long that I lost track of time, but I didn’t care. I just wanted to hold him and make him understand that I was here. Even though I’d been a jerk, I was here. Even if I couldn’t be here the way he wanted, *I was still here.*

He pulled back and when I looked into his eyes, I got lost in them, like I always did. My hand lifted of its own accord and cupped his cheek. He closed his eyes and leaned into my touch for a moment, then opened those gorgeous purple eyes that were depthless. They started to fill up with

tears and when one slid down his cheek, I wiped it with my other thumb, then placed that hand on his cheek too.

I leaned closer to him so my nose was only centimeters from his. Then I closed my eyes and slowly closed the distance, lightly pressing my lips to his. As soon as his soft lips touched mine, I felt a spark shoot through my entire body and fill me with a warmth I'd never felt before. I could feel it in every shred of my being, I could feel it in my soul. It was like my body and soul exploded, then came back together and settled in a different, better place. I could feel my light come alive and buzz with excitement.

I heard a little groan that wasn't my own, and I froze. That wasn't Colt's voice. Those weren't Colt's lips. That wasn't Colt's light filling me with the most amazing contentment I'd ever felt. It wasn't Colt.

Colt.

Oh my god, what have I done?

I pulled away and dropped my hands, my eyes wide with fear.

He was panting and trembling, searching my eyes as he whispered, "Emm Balu?"

I looked away. I didn't need the reminder of what I was to him. I blew out a breath and braced myself before saying, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that."

His face sank, suddenly looking miserable and dejected.

"I'm so sorry..." I scrambled, looking for the right words. "Oh, god, Orrean, I'm so sorry. I don't... I didn't... I... I want to be friends, Orrean. Family." I glanced at his heartbroken face before finding a spot on the wall to focus on. "You're a part of my family, you're my friend... but..." I huffed. "It can't be more than that, okay? I'm so sorry... I shouldn't have, uh, kissed you." I sighed. "I just... I just need you to be my friend."

I took a chance and looked at him. His purple eyes were filled with tears again and I watched as his double eyelids blinked across, then down, and a tear fell from his eye. His voice was barely above a whisper, but I heard him say, “Okay.” He took a shaky breath and wiped his cheek.

Then he got up and I didn’t miss the way he looked at the mural on my wall, the mural I’d painted of our field. He took another deep breath as he stared at it before walking out of my room, shutting the door behind him, and making my chest hurt worse than it had when I woke from that dream... from those horrible memories.

Chapter Ten

Orrean and I had been skirting around one another all week, avoiding eye contact, barely saying more than two words to each other. We were making things super awkward for not only each other, but our team members and family too. And Cal hadn't shut his big fat mouth about it, either.

When we got back to our suite, or apartment as we'd taken to calling it, after a scouting mission, Cal announced that we were going to have a family dinner in our apartment. And that everyone had to be there or he'd drag us there by our ears. I had no doubt he would.

After I took a shower and put on my sweats and a tee, I made my way out to the common room in our apartment. Cal and Nolan were in the little kitchen area and Orr was sitting on the couch. Wes and Mandy weren't out there yet. I automatically went into the kitchen so I could avoid Orrean.

As soon as I stepped in, Cal said, "Nope. You're not welcome here."

"What?"

"You're not allowed in the kitchen, J."

"But... I thought you wanted the whole family out here," I said, confused and a little offended.

He rolled his eyes at me. "You're such a dumbass. Go sit in the living room." I opened my mouth to argue, but he cut me off. "Right. Now."

“Cal...”

He narrowed his eyes at me, then suddenly pulled my arm, making me turn, then he held onto my shoulders and marched me back out to the living room. When we got to the couch, he maneuvered me around until he could push me to sit on the couch... beside Orrean. Cal grinned at me and I huffed out a breath at him, then crossed my arms and leaned back on the couch. Cal chuckled as he walked away.

Orr and I sat in uncomfortable silence for a good five minutes. But finally, I couldn't take it any longer, so I said, “What are you doing?”

“Reading,” he said bluntly, waving the book in his hand a little.

I sighed in annoyance. “What are you reading?”

“Some book about wizards and magic and a wizard school. It's fascinating.”

“Are you reading Harry Potter?” I asked kinda loudly, making him flinch and stare at me.

“Yes, have you heard of it?”

I laughed at that. “Dude, those books are awesome. The movies were good too, but I love the books. Which one are you on?”

His eyes were wide, but he turned the book so I could see the cover.

“Oh, only book one. Hmm... you don't look like you're very far into it. You definitely need to read all of them. When you finish, maybe we can hunt down a TV and a DVD player or whatever. I'm sure we can find the movies in a house somewhere. They're really popular.”

He kept staring at me with widened eyes. Very slowly his vertical eyelids blinked, followed by his horizontal ones. It used to freak me out a little, but I was completely used to it now. Plus, out of everything we'd experienced, that was like the *least* weird.

“Why are you just staring at me like that?”

He swallowed, then quietly said, “That was the most you’ve said to me at one time all week.”

I cringed at that and sighed. “I know. I’m sorry.”

He set the book on the coffee table and turned toward me. “Do you really still want to be... friends?”

Without realizing what I was doing, I ran my hand over his hair, making him shiver as I whispered, “Of course I do.”

He nodded, then settled into the couch, facing forward again. “I thought you were only being nice the other night, and that was why you’ve been avoiding me all week.”

I faced forward, too, and nudged him with my shoulder. “Nah, I’m just a jerk. Sorry. I meant what I said about being friends and family.”

He nodded and leaned forward so his elbows were on his thighs. “Good.”

I touched the end of his braid and asked, “Why do all Taoree keep their hair braided? I mean, you even keep it braided in your sleep... or you did when we were traveling.”

“We keep it this way to protect it. When it’s not braided, the individual strands are weaker, but together they are strong.”

“Why would they need to be strong?”

“If Taoree hair is cut, it will not stop bleeding.”

My brow furrowed. “Your hair bleeds?”

“Yes.”

I slowly asked, “Are you saying that you will bleed to death if your hair is cut?”

He nodded. “I hear it is a very painful way to die.”

I blanched at that, then stated, “I thought you said a reelian was the only way to kill Taoree.”

“No, that is not what I said. I told you that a reelian was one of the few weapons that could kill Taoree, but we can bleed to death just like humans.”

“Why didn’t you tell us that before?”

“It isn’t exactly efficient in a battle to chop off someone’s hair and just wait for them to die. It isn’t as if they wouldn’t keep fighting, now is it? It is much quicker to shoot a Taoree in the head or heart with a reelian.”

“Does that mean you could bleed to death if you, like, lost an arm or something?” I asked.

He nodded. “It is possible, but like I said, it is not efficient.”

“Possible, but not absolute,” I stated, rather than asked. “But with your hair, you sounded as if you would definitely bleed out.”

“I do not know of any Taoree that survived their hair being cut,” he said quietly.

I swallowed thickly at that, not wanting to think about it. I touched his hair and stopped to look at one of the beads in it. “Why do you have beads in your hair?”

He shot me a small smile. “They aren’t beads, they are called *riadias*. They are kind of like mementos. Every Taoree puts them in their hair for different reasons. That *riadias* you’re playing with was Autnomlias’s, you know, my best friend when I was growing up. It is a way to remember him.”

“I’m sorry,” I said as I let go of the bead, or the *riadias*.

“I do not mind, Jeremy. It’s nice to share that part of my life with someone.”

I nudged him a little with my shoulder and when he looked at me, I smiled gratefully. He smiled back. Then I changed the subject. “I’ve run out of room in my bedroom to paint. I think I might start out here.”

“That would be nice,” he said. “The painting of Colt in your bedroom is gorgeous. It looks just like him.”

“Thank you.” I nudged him again before sitting back. When I looked at him, I couldn’t help but run my hand over his hair yet again. I didn’t know what the fuck my problem was, but it was becoming a habit, though Orrean never complained or seemed to mind.

“Don’t be a dickhead,” Nolan yelled in the kitchen, making both Orrean and me laugh.

Tabby walked in, looked at us laughing, raised her brow, then walked past us without a word. I heard her say, “Cal, quit being an asshat.”

I had no clue what the hell my friend was doing in there, but it didn’t surprise me that it was something that made both of them yell at him.

Orrean wiped his hands over his face and said, “I’m glad you’re talking to me again.”

“Me too,” I said simply, because I’d fucking missed him, even if I didn’t want to admit it. I ran my hand over his braid—yet again—and he quivered.

“Jeremy,” Orr said quietly, in a strange tone of voice that I didn’t recognize.

“Yeah?”

“If we’re...” He blew out a breath. “If we’re going to be friends... just friends, I mean.” He cleared his throat. “Then you should probably stop touching my hair.”

I blinked at him for a long moment, not quite grasping what he was saying. Then I furrowed my brow and asked suspiciously, “Why?”

He puffed out his cheeks, then ran his hand across his forehead. “Uh... so the thing is... touching a Taoree’s hair is... intimate.”

I blanched. “What? What does that mean?”

He ran his fingers across his forehead again. *Great, he's fucking nervous. This outta be good.* He cleared his throat before saying, "So, you see... well... okay..."

"Just spit it out, Orrean." *I've never seen him like this. Jesus, what did I do to him?*

He cringed. "Taoree hair is extra sensitive, and, um... feels almost like it would if I were to rub your nipples, or your... um, area." He waved his hand in the direction of my dick.

I heard Cal, Nolan, and Tabby start cracking up laughing, but I could only stare at Orrean with wide eyes. Eventually I said, "So you're saying that every time I touched your hair, I was..." I cringed, but pushed through, "turning you on?" Cal started laughing so hard, he sounded like he couldn't breathe.

Orrean huffed out, "Yes."

"And you kept letting me?" My voice rose so high and loud, everyone in the whole base probably heard me.

Orr looked away from me, and I saw his cheeks start to turn pink as he whispered, "I liked it."

I opened my mouth in shock, then snapped it closed, then opened it again. "Dude. You were letting me *fondle* you!" I was totally yelling now.

"I'm sorry!" He yelled back. "I couldn't help it!" His eyes were wide and he started doing that shoulder-roll thing again and fidgeting all over the place.

"Orrean!" I yelled, but started laughing a little. He was ridiculous.

"I'm sorry. I should've told you sooner."

"Yeah, you should have," I agreed, but seeing his cheeks turn even redder made me laugh a little bit.

He eyed me for a moment. "You're not mad?"

“I’m... I don’t know what I am, but no, I’m not mad. I just feel a little... dirty or something.”

He furrowed his brow. “You just had a shower.”

I couldn’t help the laugh that burst out at that. “That’s not what I meant.”

He threw his hands up. “You and your fucking slang.”

I was still laughing. “I can’t believe you just said ‘fucking.’”

“I’m allowed to curse.”

“Never said you weren’t.” I grinned at him.

He sighed, then leaned over and gave my shoulder a little push. “You’re incredibly frustrating.”

My grin turned to a full-blown smile. “Aww, thanks, man.”

He glared at me. “That wasn’t a compliment.”

I laughed a little. *He is so fun to tease.*

Cal came over and pushed me until I scooted closer to Orrean so he could sit on the couch in the corner. I complained, “How come you always get the armrest?”

“I’m older... and bigger than you,” he said and flashed me a smirk.

I scowled at him. “You’re only twenty-one days older than me, you jerkface.”

“Still counts, dickwad.”

Nolan settled onto the loveseat with Tabby on his lap, and a minute later Wes and Mandy joined us in the living room. Wes sat beside Nolan, and Mandy pulled the chair closer to the coffee table and laid out her notebooks to start on her homework.

When Orrean leaned forward to help Mandy read something in Taoree, Cal looked at me, nodded at Orr and

asked, “You thinking about running your hand through his hair again?”

“Cal!” I punched his shoulder, but couldn’t help but laugh, especially when I heard Nolan, Cal, Tabby, and Orrean all laughing too.

I had the fleeting thought that this friendship thing with Orr might just work.

It was nice to just have us together, laughing and spending time with one another. I loved every minute of it. I looked around at my family and decided that I’d do anything to protect them, including trying to take down the entire damn Legion if I had to.

I was heading from the training room to the mess hall. I’d decided to practice with the new spears after my team was attacked by over twenty bug-bots yesterday. We were beyond lucky that we’d managed to make it out alive. I’d been pulled by the leg by one of the bastards again. The thing knocked me over and pulled me away from the group, then started climbing up my body, going straight for my head. I’d started to panic when I wasn’t able to get a good angle to spear it. Had Orrean not shown up above me, I would’ve been turned into a Feral and possibly hurt or even killed someone.

I couldn’t let that happen again.

So I’d trained after we got back from a quick scouting mission this morning. The spears our people had made were pretty badass. They were double-edged and about eight feet long, but when they were stored on our backs, they were only around two feet long because the poles sorta folded into themselves. The case they were carried in allowed one end of the spear to hook into the bottom, so when the other end was pulled, the pole would lengthen and snap into place before the case released it. But once one was pulled out, it was

impossible to get back into its smaller form because they instantly hardened into a material that was nearly impossible to break. Being durable and strong made them super valuable in a fight. Being strong didn't stop the bug-bots from grabbing them or knocking them out of our hands, though, so we always had to carry a bunch with us.

When I rounded the corner, I heard voices arguing in Taoree. It was coming from a small hallway up ahead. Normally I'd have just walked right past, but when I recognized one of the voices, I slowed down to eavesdrop.

"You don't understand," I heard Orrean whisper-yell.

"For the millionth time, Orrean, it's not that I don't understand. I just don't agree with you." It took me a moment to place the voice, but my eyes widened when I realized it was Ozias.

"The evidence is right in front of you, brother. Why do you keep pushing it aside, as if it doesn't matter?" Orrean sounded seriously pissed.

"Put yourself in my shoes, Orrean. I've been working with these people for fourteen years."

"And you believe them over me. Why would I ever expect my own brother to believe me?" Orrean's voice was cold. So cold, it sent a shiver through me.

"Do not turn this into something it's not," Ozias said, even colder than Orrean.

"How can I not? How can I not take it personally when *you* are the one making it personal?" Orrean practically roared.

I peeked around the corner to make sure I didn't need to break up a fight. Neither of them seemed to notice me.

"So every time you say something, I have to believe you. No matter what. Is that what you're saying?" Ozias asked.

"When I present the proof to you, yes."

Ozias sighed and they both looked at the floor, mirroring each other. Then Ozias seemed to get a second wind because he squared his shoulders and said through clenched teeth, “You know I didn’t ask for this job, right?”

“What?” Orrean asked.

“I. Didn’t. Ask. For. This.” Ozias got in Orrean’s face. I thought about stepping between them, but I didn’t think he would hit him... I hoped, anyway. Ozias tried to tower over Orr, but it looked ridiculous since they were the exact same height. “They voted me in.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Orr asked quietly.

Ozias’s nostrils flared as he took a deep breath. “When you... when you stayed behind to gather intel on Thelonious, and the others and I made it out of his reach, there was a vote. I was nominated and voted in, even though I told them I didn’t want it. They told me that was exactly why I had to take it.” He took a step back and rubbed the back of his neck. “You say you didn’t have a choice? That you didn’t get a say in being sent on that mission? On being forced to stay? On being away from those that actually loved you... Well, guess what, Orrean, I didn’t get a choice either. And it’s not like I had anyone, either, until a couple years ago. You’re not the only one that has suffered and sacrificed for the cause, not even close.”

Orrean’s jaw ticked and I could tell he was pissed. I was surprised that he switched to English. “I never said I was. There are plenty of others who have sacrificed more than me, sacrificed their lives and their families. That wasn’t the point I was trying to make, you asswipe. This isn’t some contest, or some way of showing your masculinity, Ozias. I was simply pointing out that while you’ve been here, safe in these walls for nearly three years, others have been in the front lines, facing the danger of discovery every day. Clearly, there’s a mole in your midst, a mole that gave away the location and names of our spies. How else do you think eighty percent of our spies have been captured or killed? Eighty percent, Ozias.

You don't know what it's like out there. You don't. So maybe you should start listening to those of us that have been out there for the past fourteen years. Maybe if you'd shut the fuck up, let go of your precious pride, and listened for once in your life, you might actually discover something helpful." And with that, Orrean turned on his heel and marched down the hallway, right toward me, anger practically visibly pouring off of him. He didn't even acknowledge me as he stormed past.

Ozias looked at me, opened his mouth, then snapped it shut.

When he didn't say anything, I offered a half-shrug and marched off, determined to find my friend and hopefully calm him down before he ended up snapping at someone else.

I somehow knew he'd gone back to our suite, back to his room, and before I could stop myself, I knocked on his bedroom door.

The door swung open to reveal a very pissed-off alien.

It took me a moment to get my wits about me. Still, all that came out was, "Orrean."

"What do you want, Jeremy?" His voice was still cold. It felt like he'd slapped me across the face.

But I knew he was upset, so I asked, "You wanna talk about it?"

"My brother is a fucking idiot. End of story."

My nostrils flared in annoyance. "Can I come in?"

"Fine." He left the door open and stomped over to his bed where he sat, leaned his elbows on his knees and stared at the floor.

I made my way in and closed the door, then leaned my ass against his dresser, crossing my arms over my chest. "You think there's a spy here?"

"I *know* there is," he ground out.

I knew his anger wasn't aimed at me, so I tried to ignore it. "I believe you."

His eyes snapped up to mine in surprise. "You do?"

"Of course I do." I waved him off. He should know by now that I trusted him, even after everything. No, *especially* after everything. "Do you know who it is?"

"No." He sighed. "My brother won't let me look at some of the records since I don't have the clearance. He doesn't trust me."

"I didn't know there was anything you weren't allowed to see."

"Neither did I, until he wouldn't let me access some of the communication records."

My brow furrowed. "Why the hell wouldn't he let you see that?"

He held his hands out, indicating he didn't know. "I've been assigned to find and bring back as many of our spies as possible, yet he won't let me see the messages sent. It makes no sense."

I chewed on my cheek for a moment, unsure if I should voice my thoughts or not.

Orrean rolled his eyes. "Just spit it out, Jeremy. There's no way you could piss me off or upset me more than I already am right now."

I wasn't so sure about that, but I figured I owed the truth to him, myself, and everyone living here. "You don't think Ozias is the spy, do you?" I cringed.

Orrean sighed, then ran his hands over his face. "If you'd asked me that question a few years ago, I'd have said no way. But now I'm not so sure."

I chewed on my cheek as I pondered the situation. Then I sighed, pushed off the dresser, sat beside Orrean, then

popped onto my back on his bed. I stared at the ceiling as I said, "I guess that means it's just us, then."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's up to us to figure out who the spy is and take the asshole down."

Orrean froze, but then slowly lowered his body until he was lying beside me with his shoulder against mine. He looked up at the ceiling as he spoke. "You'd do that? Help me figure out what's going on and who's on our side?"

"Of course I would," I said without hesitation. "We're family, Orr. Family sticks together." I bumped his shoulder a little, but kept staring at the ceiling. "I know you've never had that... a real family, I mean. I know your childhood was never pleasant. But this is what family does. We help each other out, we stick together. You're my family, for better or worse; no matter what, you're stuck with me." He didn't say anything, but I could tell by his lack of motion that he was probably just overwhelmed. I added after a minute, "I guess we need to have a family meeting tonight so we're all on the same page. I bet Nolan could gain access to some records since he's obsessed with the control room."

Orrean cleared his throat, but his voice still came out sounding rough. "If we get caught, we could be thrown into the holding cells. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Of course." I waved him away again. "The others will too."

After a moment, he whispered, "Thank you, Jeremy."

I shrugged, then immediately changed the subject. "Dude, you seriously need to do something with your room. How can you stand all these white walls?"

He snorted. His voice was still thick with emotion, but he asked, "Are you offering to paint my room?"

"Definitely. As you know, I ran out of space in mine a couple weeks ago. And the living room is always crowded

with people distracting me. What do you want me to paint?”

He thought for a moment, both of us content with lying side-by-side on the bed. I could feel the heat of his body this close to mine and it sent a pleasant tingle down my spine. So I scooted closer to him and pressed our shoulders and arms together. He leaned back into me.

He sighed. “What about some wizards or castles or something?”

I grinned at that. “You’re obsessed with Harry Potter, aren’t you?”

“Ugh... maybe. I’m already on the last book,” he admitted.

I laughed a little at that. “We can totally figure out something to pai—”

“Orrean! Jeremy!” Cal’s voice yelled through the apartment.

“We’re in here!” I yelled back.

A minute later Cal opened the door and exclaimed, “Oh, thank god you’re both decent. I was afraid you’d be naked or something.”

“And yet, you burst through the door anyway. You trying to see me naked?” I looked up and grinned at him.

He made a face. “Unfortunately, I’ve seen your bare ass more times than I care to admit.”

Orrean leaned up on his elbows and smirked—the first smile I’d seen since his argument with Ozias. “So it was me you were trying to see naked, then.”

Cal’s mouth opened in shock, then he shuddered dramatically. “You’re both disgusting. Now come on, we need to go to dinner.”

“Actually,” I said, “we need to eat up here tonight. There’s a problem.”

Cal grimaced. “What kind of problem?”

I blew out a breath. “There’s a mole somewhere within the Independents that’s leaking our intel to Thelonious.”

Cal looked back and forth between Orr and me. Then he turned and slumped his back against the doorjamb, banging his head on it. “Fuck.”

I plopped back on Orrean’s bed. “My thoughts exactly.”

Chapter Eleven

Six Months Later

We finally caught a break, though not with our mole investigation, unfortunately. The summer had been brutal so far, and the month of August was the hottest yet. We'd been going out on missions every day; sometimes just for the day, sometimes even for weeks. But we worked every single day, looking for survivors and for clues about where the Legion was hiding Emperor Thelonious. He hadn't made an appearance once since he released Hell on Earth. I was beginning to wonder if he was even alive. Every time we ran into any Legion, Thelonious was inevitably absent. We traveled as far and wide as we could, steering clear of the Legion camps unless our mission was to scout one, or to go in to extract one of our spies.

Every day it seemed that we found fewer and fewer people alive, fewer and fewer survivors. Though we killed more and more Ferals, they were still never-ending. And to top it off, the bug-bots were patrolling along with groups of Ferals. It seemed that the Legion was controlling Ferals remotely with the bug-bots. Our enemies were becoming more organized, which made them harder to kill, and harder to trick and evade.

But we were fighting back, and we were collecting data, searching for that bastard and a way to take down the Legion.

The control room had been monitoring the areas surrounding our Independent base, keeping an eye out for

possible threats and attacks. They'd noticed a lot of movement about fifty miles northeast of us. There were many vehicles and alien ships coming and going from a huge-ass warehouse, and many people in the area. We weren't able to get close-ups of the people without being detected, so we didn't know for sure if they were Taoree or humans. We needed to get closer.

So my team, along with two others, were assigned to stake it out, and move in if necessary. We were told to spread out and surround the large industrial buildings—though only one looked to be in use—and keep watch for a few days, then discuss a plan of action.

We'd been there for two days already. The only thing we'd seen was a bunch of Taoree going in and out, sometimes carrying a human prisoner with them. I'd been surprised that the humans were alive. I hadn't thought that the Legion was taking any prisoners. I, along with most of the others, had thought they were simply killing everyone, but I'd seen it with my own eyes... though I didn't know what they did to the humans once they had them behind closed doors. I shuddered at the thought.

"Looks like you're on first shift with me," Cal said as he returned to my side after getting some food.

I yawned, scooted down the hill and rolled off my stomach so I could sit up, using the hill to block me from view. "Okay."

"Here." He passed me a canteen.

I smelled it and was pleasantly surprised to find it contained coffee. "Thank you."

Cal shrugged. "I got you some bread too." He passed me a loaf of bread, or something that resembled bread, anyway. I remembered seeing Orrean eat something similar when we first started traveling together. The Independents had been working on a sort of bread-like food that we could easily carry in our packs, that was lightweight, but would fill us up. It tasted like absolute shit, but it kept me from going hungry and

was honestly better-tasting than the quasi-chocolate they'd also packed for us. *So fucking gross.*

"Thanks, man." I tugged on his ear.

He smacked my hand. "I swear to Enimus I will shoot you in the foot if you do that again."

I laughed at that. It was still completely amusing how much he hated it, though I knew better than to tug on his ear for a second time. I had no doubt he'd retaliate with violence if I touched his ear again. I took a bite of the offending 'bread' and after chewing asked, "What shift is Wes on?"

"Same as us. Nol, Tabby, and Orr are opposite. Wes said he'd switch spots with Bek so he could be closer to us since he's bored."

I nodded. "I want to ask him about that girl we saw him with the other day."

Cal snorted, laid on his stomach and army-crawled up the hill to take over my lookout position. "I can't believe you're still going on about that. They were just talking."

I shrugged. "So? I can't give my brother shit about it?"

He chuckled and shifted a little so he could get his binoculars out and scan the building for the millionth time today. "You know, he was talking to a boy that day, too."

"What? He was? When?"

"Right before you came into the mess hall. I'm pretty sure the guy and that girl he talked to are siblings. They're all the same age as Wes, but they have to go to school. I think all the teenagers envy Wesley since he's the youngest soldier we have."

I frowned at that. "Hmm... still gonna give him shit about it."

"I figured." Cal shot me a grin before refocusing on the building.

“Hey, did you get me any?” Wes said as he plopped down beside me.

“In my bag,” Cal answered.

Wes reached across me to grab Cal’s bag. I waited until he had a bite of bread in his mouth before I asked him, “Who was that girl you were talking to, and that boy in the mess hall before we left base?”

Wes started coughing on his bite, but got it under control after a second. Once he swallowed he asked, “Who? Lindsay and Lincoln?”

I shrugged since I didn’t know their names.

“Yeah, that’s who J’s talkin’ ‘bout,” Cal supplied, still on his stomach.

Wes furrowed his brow at me. “Just some kids asking me about our last mission.”

I raised a brow at him.

He shrugged. “It’s not like I told them anything.”

“Didn’t think you would,” I responded.

“What’s with the face, then?” He pointed at me with his bread.

“You called them kids. They’re the same age as you.”

“Technically, they’re a year younger.”

“Just because you turned seventeen last month doesn’t mean you’re a whole year older than them.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “You are such a prick sometimes. And I’m not an idiot. They’re twins, they just turned sixteen like last week or something. Fuck. What does it matter?”

“I was jus—”

“Guys,” Cal’s whispered voice brought my attention to him. “Look.”

He nodded toward the building, so I laid flat on my stomach, crawled up and pulled out my own binoculars. It took me a few seconds to find what Cal was talking about, and when I did, I could only gape at the scene. There was a large truck parked next to the building at the loading dock. The back was open with a ramp leading straight into the building... and walking down the ramp was a group of Taoree... a group of *bound* Taoree.

I counted ten of them, that I could see, and every one of them was gagged, with their hands tied behind their backs and chains around their ankles. There were about fifteen other Taoree surrounding the truck, each one with a reelian pointed in the direction of the Taoree prisoners. *Did they capture Independents? Or did they find more of our spies? Shit.*

“What the hell is going on?” I whispered.

“Dunno... I’ll go tell the others,” Wes said before scooting back down the hill. We’d been using our comms as sparingly as possible while this close to so many enemy Taoree. We didn’t know what kind of technology they had in that warehouse, and we didn’t want to take the chance of having them pick up our signal.

Cal and I stayed silent as we watched the armed Taoree usher the prisoners into the building. I was surprised when the armed guards came back and ushered eight humans inside as well. *What the fuck?*

Nolan army-crawled up beside me with his binoculars, and I told him what we’d seen before he signaled for me and Cal to follow him back to the group. Once there, he sent Sanjha and Lee to the other teams so we could meet up, discuss our findings, compare what they’d seen, then formulate a plan.

We spent an entire day going over the plan to break into the building, kill or capture the Legion members, and rescue the humans and Taoree captives. It was a good plan. Orrean, Nolan, and the other team leaders and seconds-in-command had spent what felt like hours figuring out the details of it. There were four entrances into the building: the loading dock at the back, the front door, and two small doors on either side of the building that seemed more like emergency exits than actual doors.

Team Three was going to split up and block the two side doors, Team Two was going in through the front, and Team One—my team—was going in through the loading docks.

Everyone had their night vision goggles on, though we'd possibly need to take them off when we got inside, since the building definitely had electricity. I had my reelian at the ready and an extra in my utility belt, along with two shoians, a dozen spears on my back, and a shit-ton of knives stashed all over my body. If I lost one weapon, I'd have another to take its place. My team members had just as many weapons.

I followed behind Wes with Cal right behind me. Orrean was leading the way, but he was a few people in front of me. We quietly snuck in through the open loading dock door and made our way through the large warehouse to a regular door that led to the hallway. That smaller door had been locked, but Orrean used his *sziej*—a super-fancy electronic alien lockpick—to open it.

The hallway looked like it had a hundred doors—okay, maybe like twenty—so we split into groups of four, and as was usually the case, I ended up with Wesley, Cal, and Sanjha. I always felt slightly affronted that no matter what group I ended up in, I was always with Wes. And I could tell that Orrean had only grouped me with him because Wes was our best fighter... *as if I can't take care of myself.*

We walked into a room, but it was empty, so we went back into the hallway. The next room we checked was

occupied by one Legion Taoree that fired a reelian at Sanjha when I yelled in Taoree to drop his weapon, so Cal shot him in the head. Luckily Sanjha hadn't been hit. But apparently these guys were not going to come in quietly.

After Wes pocketed the guy's weapons, we moved on again down the hallway.

I didn't know why I was surprised that there were bug-bots guarding this place, but I was. Especially when I hadn't even seen the one crawling along the wall—the freaking wall! Those things gave me the fucking creeps.

The fucker jumped off the wall into my shoulder, knocking me sideways. Thank god we were in a hallway and I merely bumped into the other wall. Had the thing knocked me off my feet, I would've been screwed.

I quickly switched my reelian out for one of my spears while the thing scurried to its feet. The hallway was small, so I didn't have that great a range of motion, but I still tried to lift the spear over my shoulder. I heard Cal cursing behind me, but I didn't look away from the enemy in front of me. I couldn't or I'd be dead, or worse, turned into a Feral.

The bug-bot started slicing its two front legs in my direction as I backed up, trying to get a good angle to stab its blue light out. If I could just get it to back up a little, I'd be able to kill it, but I'd learned from months of experience that lifting my leg to kick one was a bad idea... a very bad idea. More than one of us had fallen into their trap and tried to kick them, but those bastards had eight legs. If you lifted one of yours, you'd be swept off your feet in a heartbeat.

Since I couldn't lift my spear up high enough, I pulled it back and drove it into the bug-bot's face, or what I thought was its face. The spear couldn't get in deep enough to penetrate the blue light, but I had a plan. I pushed the bug-bot, using my spear, and shoved it into the wall, then I used the opposite wall to hold the bug-bot in place by pushing the other end of the spear against it. I knew it would figure out how to get out of that hold eventually, so I quickly pulled another

spear off my back and was able to move to the side of the bug-bot and aim for the blue light. Almost as soon as I hit the blue light, the bug-bot went motionless, essentially dying, even if it wasn't alive to begin with.

I turned around when I heard Cal let out a little yelp.

“Oh, fuck,” I muttered.

Cal was on his back, having apparently had a bug-bot pull him off of his feet. And now that stupid creepy-ass thing was crawling up his body. I knew exactly what it was trying to do. It wanted to stab its disgusting silver metal legs into my best friend's head and fill his brain with Qiren. We'd all witnessed the bug-bots at work more than once over the past few months.

I wasn't going to let it turn my friend, my brother, into a freaking Feral.

No. Fucking. Way.

I pulled out another spear just as the bug-bot shot a little spikey ball out of its mouth, hitting Cal in the chest. *Shit!* These bug-bots had *enkpi* inside of them. Cal's body tensed, then started shaking as the little spikey ball—*enkpi*—electrocuted him. I ran the few steps toward Cal, lifting the spear over my shoulder. If I'd had more room, it would've been easier, but I still used as much force as I could to push the spear forward and down on an angle and into the bug-bot. Thank god my aim had been okay and I hit the thing's blue light, killing it.

“Fucking bug-bots,” Cal muttered as he jolted a little from leftover electrical shocks. He pulled the *enkpi* off his chest, and together we pushed the heavy-ass bug-bot off of him. I pulled him to his feet. “Thanks.”

I nodded, but couldn't respond because a flurry of bullets came flying down the hallway. Cal and I ran down the hall as I shielded us with my *linhu*—I'd been getting better at it, using less of my light to hold it—and we turned the corner. Sanjha and Wes were able to go back in the last room we'd

cleared, so at least they had cover. There were so many Legion Taoree running and shooting in the hallway that all of the Independents were scrambling to take cover.

I squatted down at the edge of the wall, and Cal automatically stood beside me and leaned over top of me. Then I nodded three times and we both popped our heads around the corner, aimed and started shooting Legion Taoree with our reelians.

I *hated* having to kill things—Taoree, humans, Ferals, it didn't matter. I didn't want to kill anything, except maybe the bug-bots, but they weren't living beings. Unfortunately, killing Legion members had become another part of my norm. It was us versus them, and I'd do anything to protect my family and to protect my people—the Independents and any innocent being still on this planet. Still, I hated it. Their faces still haunted my nightmares, no matter how evil they were. At least with the Legion Taoree all dressed in that same stupid grey jumpsuit, they were easy to pick out.

So we shot them.

Cal and I would shoot until our reelians needed a minute to recharge, then we'd shoot again. And the other Independents did the same. Soon, the sounds of bullets flying and people dying quieted, so we all resumed searching, and hopefully capturing some bad guys and rescuing some good ones.

The hallway Cal and I were in led to only one rather large door, so we headed that way. When I pushed open the door, there was a quiet gasp to my right, so I turned and saw a Taoree in a lab coat pointing a human gun at me. His hands were shaking, as if he was scared of shooting me. I glanced around the room to check for any other enemies, then I looked at Cal, who was hidden by the door, but still had a clear shot of Lab Coat Guy. Cal had my back, as always. There were several doors around the room, but they were closed. The metallic smell of blood filled my nose and I saw four people

strapped to tables, but decided that the only threat in the room was the guy in the lab coat.

I called to him calmly in Taoree, “Put down your weapon.”

The guy’s hand starting shaking even more.

“Put. Down. Your. Weapon. Now.” My voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. I continued speaking in Taoree since we’d discovered that many Legion didn’t speak English.

“Pl-please don’t sh-shoot me,” the Taoree whispered.

“If you put down your weapon, I won’t hurt you, I promise,” I said.

The guy nodded and I saw his braid fall forward. It only came down to his shoulders, which I found odd since I had yet to find an adult Taoree with hair that short. When he set the gun on the table, I walked to him, grabbed his hands and cuffed them behind his back. The guy started crying, but I ignored it, keeping my hold on him so he couldn’t escape or somehow hurt me.

Wes had finally caught up with us and he walked in with his reelian out, so I quietly said to him, “Take this one so I can do a sweep. There’s some people strapped down over there, but I don’t know if they’re alive.” I nodded with my head at the table, though I was too far away to see if the person on it was even breathing.

Wes grabbed Lab Coat Guy, so I slowly moved over to the first table. It was a human, split open with his insides spread over a smaller table next to him. I was pretty sure I saw the guy’s heart and stomach—clearly no longer breathing. Holding back my vomit, I walked to the next table where I found a Taoree woman, also strapped down with body parts strewn about, covered in blood, and hooked up to a machine with wires and tubes. She was very unmistakably dead. On the next table was a dead human woman. Or at least, I thought it was a woman. She was so carved up, it was hard to tell.

As I walked to the last table, I could tell there was a Taoree strapped down, and that his chest was rising and falling so shallowly that I knew he couldn't be getting much oxygen. I had my weapon out, but as soon as I realized how much blood the man was covered in, I hooked it on my belt to see if I could help him.

“Oh god,” I breathed out, holding back bile.

The Taoree was naked with black straps across his neck, hips, and limbs. He had at least twenty different wires and tubes connected to different body parts, some of which were pushed into his muscles and organs. And he was completely sliced open, though I hadn't a clue where his skin was. His chest was open, so I could see his ribs, stomach, and muscles underneath *so much* blood. One of his arms and both his legs were sliced open too, as if someone had been skinning him alive.

“Enimus, favulis nob,” I muttered under my breath. *Holy Deity, help us.* I looked over at Wes. “He's still breathing, but... they skinned him.”

“What?” Wes asked with wide eyes.

“They... they cut off his skin,” I repeated, then looked at the Lab Coat Guy and said, “How the hell could you do this to someone?”

“I...” He started shaking his head. “I didn't do that.”

I couldn't tell whether or not he was lying, but it didn't matter. I needed to help the Taoree in front of me.

I put my hand on the Taoree's forehead. He was burning up. I pulled out my juhere, though I didn't think it'd be able to heal him because of the extent of his injuries—even Taoree technology had its limitations—and put it over his chest. It would at least provide a little warmth, even if it couldn't heal him. “Hey,” I started speaking to him in Taoree, like I usually did when I came across a new alien.

God, how was he still alive? He's just meat and bones. How long has he been ripped open like this? I can't even

imagine the pain he's in.

I swallowed and tried to focus on the guy's face... the half that still had skin. "We're here to help. You're safe now. It's going to be okay," I kept whispering to him as I unstrapped him.

"Here, J, I got it from here," Cal said as he placed his juhere next to mine on the guy's chest.

With shaky hands, I stepped back, nodded at Cal, then continued searching the room. I needed to see where the huge metal doors led and make sure no other enemies were in the vicinity. The sounds of gunshots in the building were becoming few and far between and the earpiece of my richah had been announcing room after room being cleared. So most of the building had been secured already, but we needed to clear the doors that ran off this room too. I opened the first door, seeing that it was a storage room. I still had to do a sweep, so I made my way down the aisles, looking around for anyone, and taking notice of what was stored in here. There were body parts—both human and Taoree—in jars on the shelves. There were piles of bones in boxes, labeled in Taoree 'Human Male 456' and 'Taoree Female 107' and so on. Boxes upon boxes, jars upon jars. There were containers labeled 'Human Blood' and 'Taoree Blood' and they were completely filled to the brim.

It looked like the Legion had just torn people apart, putting them into jars and boxes, and using them for god only knew what.

Then there were chemicals. So many chemicals. I didn't recognize most of them, but I saw a few different types of acid among the shelves.

I was happy when I reached the last aisle and didn't come across anyone. I made my way out of the room and to the next door. I was blasted with a stench of blood, chemicals, and what could only be rotting. I swallowed down my disgust, then nodded at Orrean—he and the rest of our team had made it into the main room—and Wes as they joined me to search

the room. Sanjha and Cal had walked Lab Coat Guy out to one of our trucks while Nolan and Tabby were trying to help the poor skinless creature on the table.

I was sickened by everything we saw. Tables and chairs were occupied by human and Taoree bodies... and body parts. It looked like we'd come across a torture chamber, though the room itself was set up more like a lab with equipment, curtains, and pieces of robotics laid about with the human and Taoree body parts. Some of the bodies were missing limbs, jaws, eyes, and hair. Some were burned and disfigured. Most were hooked up to wires and machines that I wasn't sure I wanted to know about.

We found nothing living in that horrid room. Everyone was dead. We were too late to save these poor souls. These unfortunate people were tortured to death in this lab, and it made me sick and filled with rage. How could anyone do these things to another living being?

Orrean was standing beside me and when I glanced at him, he looked pale—well, paler than usual. I could tell he was upset, so I reached up and squeezed his shoulder. He closed his eyes and leaned into my touch a little. Comforting him helped soothe me too. Then he took a deep breath, opened his eyes and nodded at me. I nodded back, then looked to my other side and reached out to squeeze Wes's neck. He swallowed hard and gave me a little nod too.

I was sure that all of us would have nightmares tonight.

When we walked out into the main room, I noticed a storage closet—it was just a plain wooden door, unlike the other giant metal doors in the room I'd already checked—but just in case, I walked over to see what supplies lay inside, keeping my fingers crossed that no one was hiding in there. I gasped loudly when I opened the door.

It wasn't a closet at all. "Shit. There's stairs in here."

"What?" Orrean asked as he looked over my shoulder. "Okay, let me grab Lee and Sanjha before we go down."

They're just in the other room and I don't want to interfere over the comms with Team Two still clearing rooms." He bent down so he was looking directly into my eyes as he said, "Promise me you'll wait until I get back with the others." Over the months, he'd gotten pretty good at letting me out of his sight when we were on missions. At first it had been a constant struggle, but he'd eventually realized I wasn't going to do anything stupid and that I seriously needed my space. But right now, something in his gaze was telling me that I needed to listen.

He kept staring, waiting for me to agree. The intensity of his eyes was freaking me out, so I said, "I promise."

He searched my eyes before giving me a short nod and hurrying out of the room. Wes came and stood by me, but I stayed where I was, trying to listen as I waited. I heard someone shuffling around, but for all I knew, it could've been an animal or even a bug-bot. A shudder ran through me at the thought. Even six months of dealing with those things didn't stop them from giving me the creeps.

I kept my eyes focused on the bottom of the stairwell. I didn't want anyone sneaking up on us, and I didn't want to look at the Taoree with no skin. He'd started making some whimpering sounds behind me, but I didn't dare look. I didn't want to see how much pain he was in, and I knew Nolan was helping him.

It was only about two minutes before Orr came back with Lee and Sanjha. Lee automatically took the lead, followed by Sanjha, Wes, myself, and then Orrean taking up the rear. When we made it to the bottom of the steps, I knew exactly what we'd walked into. It was a prison, or a holding facility for... people.

There were cages piled one on top of the other, pushed side by side, and inside each one was a human or Taoree. I looked around and saw that the basement was just as big as the building itself, and it was completely filled with cages.

Hundreds of cages. Hundreds of humans and Taoree stuffed inside.

I got a closer look and saw that some of the people were missing whole limbs, some were missing eyes, some were sliced open, and some didn't look like they were breathing anymore.

When we turned down another row of cages, Orrean whispered, "Enimus, favulis nob." The cages were filled with Ferals.

I could only nod in agreement with him. What in the holy fuck had we walked into?

Mixed in with the Feral cages were a handful of humans that were crouched, shaking and whimpering as the Ferals beside them tried to get through the bars to, I assume, eat them. I started to head over to let the humans out of their cages, but Wes stopped me with a hand on my arm as he whispered, "Not yet. We need to secure the room first. If there are any Legion in here, we don't want anyone getting caught in the line of fire."

I hate it when my little brother is smarter than me. I gave him a nod. I understood, obviously, but I felt terrible leaving those poor people there, even if it would only be for a few minutes.

A moment later, we turned down the next row, and the sound of running footsteps came from the row we'd vacated.

"Shit," Orrean exclaimed before turning back with me on his heels. He ran, raised his reelian and shouted, "Stop! Or I'll shoot!" When the Taoree didn't stop, Orrean repeated the phrase in Taoree, "*Gazxe! U minatgre Eo luitno!*"

The Taoree slowed down and raised his hands in defeat, but didn't turn around.

Orr and I slowed, both keeping our reelians pointed at the Legion member. Orrean kept speaking in Taoree, "Do not move. How many others are down here?"

“None.” The Taoree’s voice was cold and distant. I didn’t know if I believed him or not.

“I’m going to restrain you.” Orrean’s voice was calm and precise. He hadn’t switched over to English yet in case the man truly didn’t understand it, but I still wasn’t about to say anything in English that I didn’t want the Legion man to know, just in case.

I nodded at Orrean, telling him I had his back so he could lower his reelian and cuff the guy. Once Orr had the guy restrained, he and I waited for the rest of our group to come over. When they’d seen that we’d had it under control, they’d stayed back, watching for any other surprise Legion men running around.

I told the others in English, “He said there are no others down here, but I think he’s lying.”

They nodded and Lee said into his comm, “We need backup in the basement; the entrance is through the west-end lab. We’ve restrained one Legion, but there could be others.”

Nolan’s voice responded in my ear immediately, “On our way. Hold your position.”

“Roger that,” Lee told him before clicking off his comm.

It was maybe only sixty seconds before Nol, Cal, Tabby, Sanjha, and Bek joined us. I knew without asking that the other teams were handling the prisoners and bodies upstairs. Another thing we’d started doing was burning the bodies we would leave behind. It was something we would do once we were ready to drive away from our location because we couldn’t risk bringing attention to our whereabouts. But it really needed to be done. There were whole towns that had begun to just smell of death. There were bodies everywhere. If we wanted our world to survive once this war was over, we needed to start cleaning it up a little, too.

Nolan announced, “Riley and Devon are guarding the exit. No one is escaping.”

We nodded, then proceeded to walk down row after row of cages. I stopped looking inside them and started only concentrating on finding anyone outside of the cages.

Tabby and Sanjha found a Taoree in a grey jumpsuit hiding in a supply closet and they easily detained him. Once that was taken care of and we'd cleared the entire floor, we all just stood there staring at each other for a few moments.

Orr started rubbing his hand across his forehead, then he blew out a breath and said, "We need to go down each row and release the humans and Taoree, and... and we need to kill the Ferals."

I took a deep breath, and just so he wouldn't have to be the first to do it, I headed down the first row, pushed my shoian through the bars of a cage and killed the Feral inside. Then I moved on to the next cage. Soon, my fellow Independents were following suit.

I was insanely relieved when I got to the following row and saw that it was only half filled with Ferals and the rest were human or Taoree. I killed two Ferals in a row, and was about to put my shoian through a third cage before I noticed the hunched figure in the corner was crying. I looked around and cringed when I realized the poor guy was surrounded by Ferals on all sides, even above him.

So I squatted down, unlocked the cage with my sziej and opened the door as I whispered, "Hey, it's okay. We're going to take you somewhere safe."

The hunched figure only froze and tried to quiet his crying. He didn't even look up at me. I looked him over and realized he was a young child, his braid not even reaching his shoulders, and he was very tiny and underweight. He was only in a pair of ripped-up shorts, with no shirt on. I swallowed as I looked at his skin... his pale-white skin that was covered in burn marks. Some of the marks were scarred over already, but some were still blistered with blood and pus.

I reached for my juhere before remembering that I'd left it upstairs on that poor soul who'd been skinned alive.

But this terrified Taoree in front of me, who couldn't be much older than Mandy, was clearly in a ton of pain. I mean, fuck, when I burned just the tip of my finger, it hurt. I couldn't even imagine what having your entire back burned would feel like.

The Ferals around us were snarling and clawing at the sides of their cages, trying to get to us, so I quietly used my shoian on them all, hoping their absence would help ease the little boy.

"You can come out, buddy. I'm not going to hurt you." I kept my voice gentle as I spoke in Taoree to him.

He still didn't move.

So I tentatively reached my hand out. It took me a few seconds to find a part of unharmed skin—the last thing I wanted to do was cause more pain. Finally, I held his forearm. He flinched away at the touch, and for some reason, I naturally sent my light into him, thinking that it would help calm him and make him trust me. That it would let him see that I was trying to help. I didn't know how I knew, but there was no way he could feel my light and not understand my intentions. It was the only way to prove that I wasn't going to hurt him.

He looked up at me, his dark-blue eyes filled with pain, terror, and... surprise.

As I continued pushing my light into him, he and I both gasped as the open wound above his elbow started to close. I inspected his wounds, seeing all of the open ones closing. I had no freaking clue how I was healing him without a juhere, but I didn't care as long as it helped. I pushed my light into him even more forcefully, and soon all of his open wounds were healed. I tried to heal the scars on his skin, but my light couldn't heal old wounds. They were healed and whole, and even though they didn't look very pretty, they weren't hurting him anymore either, so my light wasn't needed

there. Before that moment, I hadn't even known that Taoree could scar. I'd thought they healed their wounds on their own.

So I released the small blue-eyed Taoree and said, "Will you come with me? We can take you somewhere safe."

The little boy finally responded with a small nod, then he grabbed my hand and allowed me to pull him out. I started walking him out, and when we got to the top of the stairs, I was happy to see that someone had collected some blankets from the rooms in this place of horrors. I wrapped a blanket around his shoulders, and when Sanjha offered to walk him the rest of the way, I shook my head and walked the boy all the way to one of the trucks.

"Stay here, okay?" I told him. "I have to help the others, but I'm riding back in this truck, so I'll see you soon."

He gave me a slight nod, so I patted his knee lightly and headed back in. When I passed Riley, I whispered, "Keep an eye on the kid, okay? I don't want him taking off."

Riley shot me a small smile and nodded before escorting another freed victim to a truck.

The next victim I freed was missing an arm, and the one after that had slice marks all over her, like she'd been bled multiple times. All of the Independents were quiet, only talking softly to the people they were rescuing, as we made our way through the warehouse.

I got to the last row at the same time as Orrean, and I didn't know which one of us was more surprised by what we found. The row was filled with Ferals... but they weren't Feral *humans*, they were Feral *animals*. Wild animals and... pets. Dogs, cats, wolves. Why in the hell would the emperor want to change animals into Ferals? What purpose was there? I mean, a dog could attack a human, I suppose, but it wasn't like there was a lack of fucking human Ferals *everywhere*.

"He probably uses them as a distraction before setting the real Ferals or bug-bots on humans," Orrean said quietly, almost like he'd read my mind.

“That’s...” I didn’t finish because I didn’t know what that was, it just was, I guess.

“Yeah,” Orr whispered before using his shoian on a Feral dog in front of him.

I swallowed hard before following suit and making my way down the row.

My nightmares are going to be horrible tonight.

When I finally finished tasing the last Feral in my row, I backed up and looked around. Killing that many people and animals, even when they really were monsters, was rougher than I’d like to admit. You’d think that after all this time, I wouldn’t give a shit about it. But I’d never been forced to kill something that was trapped in a cage. Every other time, it’d been a matter of defending myself or my family, a matter of life or death. This hadn’t felt like that at all, and I was feeling rather disgusted with the situation.

Glancing around and adjusting my hat, I noticed everyone else finishing up, but I didn’t see Orrean anywhere, so I called out to Cal, “Do you know where Orr went?”

“I think he went outside to get some air,” Cal answered.

I nodded. “Okay, I’m gonna go check on him.”

Cal just nodded, but didn’t seem to be paying much attention.

As I made my way upstairs and outside, I passed my fellow Independents and many of the victims. Some were crying, some were shaking, some were unresponsive. There were so many of them and they all needed help. But they weren’t my concern at the moment. For some reason, I knew that Orrean needed me. I could *feel* it and I didn’t even want to ignore it. I wanted and needed to find him.

Once I was outside, I bypassed one of the extra trucks that’d been brought in to take the victims back to base—Orrean had signaled his brother once we’d cleared the area of

Legion, so reinforcements were sent—and made my way to the side of the building. I found Orrean there, leaning against the building with his hands behind his back and his face turned away from me. I walked over and stood beside him, leaning my shoulder against the building so I could face him.

After a minute of silence, I whispered, “You okay, Orr?”

He shook his head slightly, but didn’t look at me or say anything.

When he still hadn’t moved or said anything a few minutes later, I asked, “You wanna talk about it?” He shook his head, so I said, “Can you at least look at me?”

He still didn’t speak, but he did pull his hands out from behind his back. As he raised them to his face, I noticed them shaking. After he rubbed his face, he finally looked at me and a pain shot through my chest at the amount of hurt I saw there. He looked utterly devastated.

“Orrean,” I whispered before pushing off the wall and moving to him. I grabbed him in a hug and pushed his head down to my shoulder. He was tense and unsure of letting me comfort him, but when I refused to let him go, he finally sank into me and wrapped his arms around my waist. He pushed his face into my neck as his whole body started trembling.

I was pretty sure it was ghosts of the past haunting him after what we had to do. I couldn’t even imagine how hard it had been for him to kill his best friend all those years ago after his own brother turned him into a Feral. His best friend—Autnomlias—had been tied down to a bed, much like many of the victims we’d come across in the labs. Seeing everything inside the warehouse today must have brought back some horrible memories. I hadn’t been brave enough to ask him for more details about the things his fucking brother, Thelonious, had done to him. From the little I already knew, Orr’s childhood had been a living nightmare. I truthfully didn’t know how he even survived it, let alone remained such a kind man.

When Orr's shaking seemed to ride him even harder, I squeezed him tighter, then started rubbing his back and hair in a comforting manner. He was folded so far down because he was so much taller than me, that I went up on my toes so I could try to pull him even closer.

All I wanted to do was make him feel better. All I wanted to do was take his pain away.

Then it hit me. What the fuck had I been doing? I'd been treating this caring, sweet, gentle man like shit, all because I was scared and feeling guilty. But I hadn't been taking his feelings into the equation. He was hurting, I knew he was because I'd *felt* it every day since I'd kissed him, then turned him away. He was one of the best people I knew and I'd been the worst friend a person could have... even when I'd felt it in my soul that he was hurting, I'd ignored it. I'd pushed aside his feelings, all because I didn't want to admit I had feelings for him in return. But he was a part of my life, he was a part of me. I'd been denying him all because of the guilt I carried over Colt. But that wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to him, it wasn't fair to me, it wasn't even fair to Colt, since I'd promised him I'd try, that I'd give Orr a chance... and I'd done the exact opposite. I should've been helping him, trying to make him happy. But I'd only been adding to his pain and sorrow these past months, not helping it. *My god, I am such a selfish asshole.*

I didn't know how to fix this. I didn't know how to apologize or how to make up for everything I'd done to him or where to even start. I didn't think there was anything I *could* do to make it up. I didn't deserve him, I didn't even know if he'd ever want me like that after what I'd done. But I had to try. For both our sakes.

I somehow managed to hug him tighter as I whispered, "It's okay. We're okay. We're going to be okay." When another wave of shivers racked his body, I stopped talking and just tried to hold and comfort him as much as possible.

The problem was that he didn't trust me not to hurt him, so he never seemed to calm.

We eventually moved apart and he nodded at me before walking away without a word. My heart and my fucking soul broke as he turned the corner without looking back.

And I had no one to blame but myself.

Chapter Twelve

By the time we got all the victims out of the warehouse and back to the Independent camp, the sun was coming back up again, and I just wanted to fall into bed and stay there for at least a week straight. But my family members were looking worn-out and distraught, and I couldn't fault them for it. So I announced that we were going to have some food brought up to our suite so we could eat and shower before going to bed.

Everyone reluctantly agreed... everyone but Orrean.

I watched the Taoree walk in and give Mandy a huge hug and a kiss on the cheek before he disappeared into the bathroom. I heard the water shut off ten minutes later and about two minutes after that, I heard his bedroom door slam.

I tried not to let it get to me, but I was upset that he hadn't come out to join us. He was a part of our family and he was hurting. I wanted to help him heal those old wounds, but I didn't know how.

Cal must've noticed how upset I was because he patted my shoulder and whispered, "He'll be okay. I think he just needs to be alone."

I nodded, even though everything in me wanted to argue that alone time was the absolute last thing Orrean needed. But I didn't have a right to claim what I knew to be true; even if I felt down to my bones that he needed to be surrounded with love and family, I couldn't say that. I'd pushed him away. So I nodded at Cal and decided to try and concentrate on the rest of my family... even if a huge part of me felt like it was being ripped apart.

I cleared my throat and sat next to Mandy on the couch, who was getting ready to go to school. She'd been staying home, with Lee's sister watching over her in our absence. "How was your week, Peanut?"

"You do know I'm eleven, right?" she said before shoving a bite of a pancake in her mouth.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes and Nolan said, "Didn't you get the memo last week, J? Mandy is all grown up now and refuses to answer to 'Peanut.'" Tabby was sitting on Nolan's lap, smiling in amusement.

"Well, that's just too bad," I said with a grin before grabbing her into a hug and dramatically rocking her back and forth as she squealed, complained and tried to get away. "You'll always be my little Peanut."

She was still trying to escape, but she started laughing too. "Jesus, you are such a dork! Get off of me, you ass!"

"Don't say 'ass'!" Cal yelled from the table.

Mandy and I both laughed as I finally released her and we settled back into the couch. A minute later she elbowed me. "You're a major nerd, but I'm glad you're home for a couple days."

"Me too, Peanut, me too," I said quietly with a grin.

She rolled her eyes again, then asked all of us, "You'll be home for dinner, right?"

Nolan answered her, "Of course. We have two days off to recover, though we might go down and help the new refugees tomorrow."

Wes came out from showering and sat on the chair in the living room. He looked at Mandy and asked, "Wanna go down to the community room with me after school, Peanut?"

Mandy smiled brightly, apparently ignoring the *Peanut* thing with him. "Yes, that'd be great. You can meet some of

my friends.” The community room was pretty much the only place the kids could go to hang out—besides the mess hall—since they weren’t allowed outside, obviously.

“I’ll meet you outside your classroom so we can walk down together.” Wes shot her a tired smile. I could see the strain on his face. Everything we’d seen over the past day had taken a toll on all of us. I had a feeling that he wanted a happy distraction. Plus, I was sure he missed Mandy. I’d noticed that he tended to worry about her a lot when we were away from base... all of us did. But we always reminded ourselves that she was at the safest place she could be. She stayed in our suite, and Lee’s sister would come stay on our couch and make sure Mandy ate and got to school and everything okay. It was hard having her out of sight, though.

“Sounds good.”

I asked, “How come he gets to call you Peanut?”

Mandy rolled her eyes *again* and turned away from me, making plans with Wes. If I had a dollar for every time that girl rolled her eyes at me lately, I’d be a rich man... not that money was even relevant now.

I sighed out loud.

After our food was brought up from the mess hall by a volunteer, we ate, Mandy left for school, and the rest of us went into our bedrooms to sleep.

I kept seeing that poor Taoree man that was skinned alive, that little boy that had burn marks all over his torso and neck, that woman that was missing an arm and a leg, those puppies that were missing various body parts...

It was a long-ass time before the nightmares of my reality faded and a dream took me far, far away from that warehouse and the horrors within.

I opened my eyes to find Orrean sitting on a log under the stars next to... my breath hitched and I ran over to him... to my Colt.

“Colt,” I croaked out, but he didn’t turn to look at me. I tried speaking again, “Colt,” but he still didn’t look. He just kept looking at Orrean expectantly. I reached out a tentative hand to touch Colt’s cheek, but my hand went right through him, making me gasp and sob. When I saw him, I knew it was too good to be true, but I’d still hoped I’d get to hold him.

I looked between the two of them, confused and hurt, but I knew this was a memory. Just not my memory. I had somehow tapped into one of Orrean’s memories again.

I sat back on my haunches, not able to move away from my beautiful Colt, but wanting to hear what they had to say. Tears ran down my cheeks as I watched him, as I sat so close to him without being able to touch him.

Colt spoke up first. “Please, Orrean. You have to promise me.”

Orrean looked at Colt with those sad eyes. “Colton... please. I can’t. He’ll never forgive me.”

“He will,” Colt insisted. “I know he will.”

“Colt,” Orrean choked, looking like he was fighting back tears.

“Listen to me,” Colt said. “He will forgive you, you know he will. He’s your other half, Orrean.” Orrean’s eyes went wide as he stared at my boyfriend, but Colt smirked at him. “Yeah, I know. My Taoree friend explained it to me, though I hadn’t believed him at the time. It took me a few days to understand... to come to terms with it, but I do know. You two were meant to be together... and you will be.” Orrean opened his mouth, looking like he wanted to argue, but Colt held up his hand, stopping him, and continued, “I know he loves me and I love him, but your souls are connected. You and I both know it’s true, and we both know that I don’t have much longer.”

“I’m so sorry,” Orrean whispered.

“I know you are. I am, too. All I ask...” Colt trailed off and looked away, rubbing a hand through his hair before looking back at Orrean. “All I ask is to let me be with him until I’m gone.”

“I would never hurt either of you.”

Colt smiled sadly at him. “I know that. And believe me, you have more control than I could ever have. If the roles were reversed, I don’t think I could step back the way you have. You are a good man.”

“So are you, Colt... I wish I could save you,” Orrean whispered softly.

Colt laughed humorlessly and mumbled, “Just goes to show what a better man you are than me.”

“Colt—” Orrean sounded like he was about to argue, but Colt cut him off again.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that.” He looked away again. “You two are Balu. Part of me wishes it wasn’t true, but now that I know I won’t be here much longer, I’m glad he’ll have you.” He shifted on the log and started fidgeting with a button on his coat. “I just... I just wish I could stay, you know? I wish I didn’t have to leave him.”

Orrean had a few tears dripping out of his eyes. “There’s nothing I can do. I’ve been trying to stop the Qiren, but they’re too strong for me to do it alone. I can try to use more energy, but I’ll never be able to hold them off until we get there, Colt. I just...”

Colt shot him a sad smile. “I know.” He whispered, “Please don’t use all your energy on me. I know my time is close. I need you to reserve your energy and keep my family safe.”

“You know I will.” Orrean wiped his cheeks angrily. “I would never let anything happen to them.”

“I know,” Colt whispered, then looked into the distance for a few minutes.

Orrean looked like he was falling apart. Like he was about to lose it, to burst into even more tears, or maybe scream.

“I’m at peace with it. With dying... and with you and him,” Colt eventually said. “But promise me you’ll take care of him. That you’ll protect him and love him... forever.”

“I promise with all of my heart,” Orrean said forcefully.

“Promise you’ll protect the rest of my family, Orrean. You’re their best shot at getting to the Independent camp. You have to get them there, no matter what else happens.”

“I will.” Orrean sniffed, but sounded determined.

After another minute, Colt whispered, “I know you already love him.” Orrean looked like he might interject, but Colt stopped him. “It’s okay, I get it... obviously.” Colt smiled easily. “He’ll come around eventually, you know.”

Orrean started shaking his head and looking away. “I don’t know if that’s true.”

“He’s stubborn as hell, but he will come around... sooner or later.”

Orrean snorted and agreed, “He is that.”

Colt looked at him again, smiling sadly. “You’ll be good for him, you know. I know you think he doesn’t feel the connection, but he does. I can see it in his eyes. He doesn’t understand it, but he does feel it.”

They were both silent for a long time, but Orrean finally spoke. “Thank you for that, Colton.”

Colt shrugged. “So will you do it? Please?”

Orrean breathed out a long sigh. “I don’t know if I can.”

“Listen, I know it’s not fair of me to ask, but there’s no one else. I can’t ask any of the others. They’re all my family and I just couldn’t do that to them. But I don’t want to live like that, either. I don’t want to hurt anyone.” Colt turned his body so he was facing Orrean full-on. “Please. When my mind is no longer my own, I need you to kill me. I’m sorry, but it has to be you. Please.”

“Okay,” Orrean said after a long-suffering pause.

“Thank you, Orrean.” Colt reached out and squeezed his shoulder.

“Colt,” I heard my own voice call out from a few feet away.

Colt smiled sadly at Orrean, who wiped a tear off his cheek. Then Colt looked toward where I called out from. “Coming, Sweetheart. I just had to piss.” He got up, patted Orrean’s shoulder again as he passed him and walked over to me.

I watched as Colt opened up the sleeping bag we had shared and climbed in, taking me in his arms and kissing my forehead. When Colt pulled the sleeping bag over our heads and I could no longer see either of us, I turned to look back at Orrean, who had more tears falling down his cheeks.

I woke up, or rather came out of the memory, with wet cheeks. I sat up and reminded myself that we were at the Independent base already and that we were safe, even though no one else was near me.

Then I started crying, sobbing into a pillow at the memory. How had I not known that Colt knew what was going on with Orrean and me? How had *he* known? How horrible had I made him feel with that knowledge? I did love him. I loved Colt. I knew I did, but did he know how much I loved him?

And then there was Orrean, who was clearly suffering through watching me with Colt, and yet he was a big enough man to let me be with him while I could. He looked so sad, so

defeated. I knew I had never made it easy on him. More often than not, I'd been taking my anger out on him, even though he'd been nothing but patient and kind to me this entire time.

I felt like a hand was squeezing around my heart, making my chest hurt worse than ever before. The sobs racked my whole body and I couldn't breathe.

I heard the door to my room open, but my eyes were so filled with tears that I couldn't even see who had come in. I didn't have to, though, because I knew who it was, even before I felt the dip of the bed as he sat down next to me. His arms wrapped around me, pulling me into a chest that was hard and somehow always smelled of my favorite scent.

I let Orrean pull me to him and I went willingly as he cooed, "Shh. It's okay. It's going to be okay."

"I miss him," I cried out, "I miss him so damn much."

"I know." His voice was shaky. "I miss him too."

I just cried into his chest. I couldn't even explain myself. I couldn't tell him what a terrible person I'd been to him and even knowing that, I was still taking comfort from him as he held me. That even though I'd hardly offered him any comfort over the months, I was still taking it from him. And even though I'd pushed him away, he still always came to me when I needed him the most. I couldn't tell him that even though I'd been a jerk and was always mean and rude and stubborn, I still cared for him so fucking much that it hurt.

I had no idea how long Orrean let me cry on him, but it felt like a long time. When I finally calmed down some, I felt completely drained and exhausted. I finally got myself under control and almost immediately I felt Orrean start to pull away from me.

He let go of me, getting out of my bed and saying in a quiet, disheartened tone, "I'm sorry, Jeremy. I could feel your distress and I had to come to you. I'm sorry I invaded your space, I'll leave you be now." His sorrow was breaking my heart.

As he stood up, I reached out and grabbed his forearm, stopping him from moving away. “Please don’t go.”

Orrean turned his purple eyes to me with confusion clear on his face. “I thought you didn’t want me with you.” Fuck, my heart was squeezing in my chest again and it was all my fault. Why had I been such a dick to this beautiful man?

I couldn’t even look at him, so I looked down at my legs, whispering, “I’m sorry.” I took a deep breath. I needed to just say it, just tell him. *Stop being a pussy, stop being an ass.* I looked back up into those amazing eyes. “Please stay with me.”

Orrean nodded his head once. “As you wish.”

I scooted closer to the wall so he could fit more easily in the bed and he sat back down. I could tell he was uncomfortable—yet another thing I did to him—so after a short pause, I grew a pair and scooted back over to him. Then I picked up his arm and wrapped it around my shoulders. He was stiff and tense, but that didn’t stop me from leaning into him farther and pushing him until he was lying down flat on his back.

“Orrean,” I whispered, though I didn’t know what I was going to say. I just needed him. I *needed* him.

I rested my head on his shoulder, but none of his tension had vanished yet, so I scooted even closer to him and draped my arm over his chest. Instead of it relaxing him like I had intended, he became impossibly tenser. I wanted to cry again, feeling like the biggest asshole in the world for making him feel that way, but instead, I slid my hand farther up his chest. Then I slid it up his neck—his bare skin making me shiver—along his jaw and up to his cheek. I felt his breath hitch, but none of the tension melted away. To try to calm him and show him how sorry I truly was, I started rubbing his cheek with my thumb.

A little of his tension finally started to dissipate, but it wasn’t enough, so I whispered, “Orrean... please hold me.”

He let out a long-suffering, shuddering breath, then turned his whole body toward me, wrapped his other arm around my back and held our chests together. I leaned my head back, resting it on Orrean's bicep so I could still look at him.

He was so beautiful, with his dark purple eyes that were always filled with such emotion, his angular nose, and sculpted cheekbones. I couldn't help but brush my fingertips over his cheeks, nose, forehead, and even his pointed ears. I was lost in the depths of his eyes for a long time, but the tension was still there and that scared me.

I finally whispered, "Don't leave me."

Without missing a beat and with such conviction I knew it was true, he whispered back, "Never."

I felt us both sigh in relief and finally, finally start to relax into one another. Even with our bodies so close and our legs and arms tangled with one another, I still needed more. So I took the arm I was laying on and sought out his hand. He must have read my intention on my face because his hand found mine. As soon as I felt his skin, I laced our fingers, pressing our palms together to feel our energies mingling, reaching out to one another.

I scooted even closer somehow and rested my head under his chin. He held me tight and for the first time since I woke up from that weird mate hibernation thing, I felt *completely* content, I felt safe. I started falling back asleep as I felt his body relax and his breathing even out. But I needed to explain.

"Orrean?" I whispered.

"What's wrong, Jeremy?" His voice was so soft, so caring.

"I..." I trailed off, scared and unsure of what I should say. But Orrean was as patient as always, giving me the time I needed to gather my thoughts. When I was finally ready, I took a deep breath and said, "I'm sorry... I didn't... I was afraid

that accepting you would mean..." Tears gathered in my eyes again and I had to stop or I'd sob.

Orrean leaned back and cupped my cheek. "No one can take what you had with Colton away from you."

I shook my head. "But if you're my..." I angrily wiped a tear and when Orr started to pull his hand away, I grabbed his wrist and closed my eyes to lean into his palm. "Does it mean that what I had with Colt wasn't... significant, wasn't meaningful?"

Orrean tilted my face up so I'd look into his eyes. He smiled gently at me. "The love you and Colt shared was... a beautiful thing, Jeremy. It *was* meaningful. I know it was, and so do you. Nothing can change that."

I searched his eyes and I couldn't help but tell him, "I loved Colt."

His thumb brushed my cheek. "I know you did." He pulled me in and I hugged him, burying my face in his neck. "He loved you, too, and *nothing* will ever change that, I promise."

I nodded against him and squeezed him tight as I let my emotions overtake me. He rubbed my back and hair and just held me tight. Once I calmed and started to drift off to sleep, I was suddenly nervous about what he might want or do, so I pulled back to look at him again and asked, "Will you be here when I wake up?"

"If you would like," he said quietly.

"Please... please stay." I took a deep breath to gain courage, then finally said what I'd wanted but had been too afraid to admit, "Stay now... stay always."

He stared at me, his eyes flickering back and forth between mine, obviously looking for something, then he pulled me into his chest almost desperately. His voice was shaky and filled with emotion as he said, "Always, my Balu. Always."

I squeezed his hand and with my other hand, I rubbed the back of his neck, then I nuzzled my face into his throat and gently placed a chaste kiss there, making us both shiver. Then holding him tight, I whispered, “Goodnight, Orrean... my Balu.”

A huge shudder racked his body when I called him mine for the first time. I hoped he knew that I meant it, that I was finally willing to accept my fate, accept him and what he was to me.

I kissed his throat softly, trying to tell him without words that I wasn't going to fight this anymore.

Orrean's deep, sensual voice was shaky when he replied, “Goodnight, Jeremy.”

I burrowed farther into him as we held onto one another, both feeling overwhelmed with our connection. For once since we'd arrived in this crazy place, this crazy world of Independents, I fell asleep understanding exactly where I was supposed to be. Right here, with Orrean.

Chapter Thirteen

When I woke up, I was still on Orrean's chest, but he had somehow curled around me, almost cocooning me in his embrace. I felt safe and protected. Even though I knew I didn't need him to protect me, I still enjoyed the feeling of his body around mine.

I felt him stir, and I knew the moment he fully woke because he froze, as if he was afraid of what I'd do. I couldn't blame him for his reaction after everything I'd put him through, and it made me feel a little guilty—okay, a lot guilty.

“You stayed,” I whispered against him.

“You asked me to.” He sounded unsure, like he thought I was about to make him leave.

I leaned back and reached up to cup his cheek and tilt his head so he'd look at me. Then I smiled at him and lightly traced my fingers over his forehead, down the bridge of his nose to his cheek, then I took my thumb and brushed it over his bottom lip.

Staring into his eyes made me feel like I was falling. Falling into an endlessly beautiful and chaotic sea. There was so much depth to them, so much pain and sorrow, so many memories. All I wanted to do was make that pain go away. I wanted to see happiness, I wanted to see joy. I wanted him to know how I felt about him.

But after all this time, I was at a loss for words. I didn't know how to tell him how sorry I was. I didn't know how to tell him how much I cared about him. I didn't know how to

tell him what an amazing man he was. Or that I'd meant what I'd said last night, that I wanted him to stay, that I wanted always and forever with him, that I was finally fucking ready to open myself to him, to let go of all my hurt and guilt and just dive in with both feet. I didn't know how to tell him how much I just wanted to be with him.

But maybe I could show him.

I scooted myself up, keeping my thumb on his lip. I slipped my other hand up and ran it over his head to the base of his braid and wrapped my fingers around it as I slammed my lips against his and pulled my thumb down, opening him up for more access. He moaned before running his hands up and down my back while devouring my mouth.

When our tongues met, it was like sparks were shooting from my mouth throughout my body. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. Every brush of his tongue sent another spark flying... and I could practically *see* purple sparks hovering around us.

I felt his braid start to move and slowly wrap around my wrist. The texture was strange and foreign, but not unpleasant. It felt soft, but had rough ridges. The movement freaked me out at first, but when I realized how good it felt against my skin, I moaned in pleasure and held his braid tighter. Somehow, his braid was sending little spikes of desire through me.

He cupped the back of my head with one hand while the other slipped under my shirt and pressed flat against my lower back. I could feel his light trying to connect with mine, and I let it go. Not like I'd done before, where I'd been reserved and held back. No, I let my light fly. I let my light finally, *finally* find its way to his light, to where it'd wanted to be since before I'd even met him.

I hooked my leg over his hip and pulled him closer to me. He groaned into my mouth and it sent a shock right to my cock. *Oh fuck*. His light pushed further into mine, but he didn't

move his hands. I could tell he was still being timid with me, and I didn't want that.

I was past questioning our connection. I was over feeling like I *shouldn't* feel anything for him. We were connected—obviously—and I wanted, no, I fucking *needed* to stop fighting it. I needed him... and I knew he needed me.

So I rolled us until I was lying on top of him, then I ground my hips into him, feeling his already hard cock against mine, and eliciting a delicious, surprised gasp from him that allowed me even more access to his mouth. When I rutted against him again, it was like he finally let go of his inhibitions because suddenly, his hands were everywhere. They were running up and down my back, in my hair, on my thighs, and when both his hands squeezed my ass, I breathed out into his mouth, “Oh, fuck.”

I got on my knees and straddled him, holding the back of his neck without letting go of his hair. Then I grabbed his back and pulled him up to a seated position. His hands slid up my shirt and started lifting it up. When his thumbs ran over my nipples, I moaned and broke the kiss, leaning back on his thighs. His whole body froze and he stared at me with such vulnerability, with such worry, that I leaned down and placed a soft kiss on his lips.

When I leaned back again, I whispered, “I want you.”

He searched my eyes, then his hair released its hold on my wrist and he pulled my shirt over my head. I reached for his tee and yanked it off of him before running my fingers over his chest and abs, my eyes following the movement and taking him in while he rubbed my skin, too.

His skin was pale and he was covered in cut muscles, though his muscles were leaner and longer than a human's. He had an extra ridge running up and down his sides that humans didn't have. I was surprised he had nipples, though they were the same color as his skin. He didn't have a lick of hair all over his body. His skin was smooth and soft.

What I noticed the most, though, were all the scars. As I looked him over, I couldn't help but count out more than twenty scars, though a couple were more prominent than others. I'd felt the ridges in his skin when we were under that sheet in the clear tube, but I'd just thought it was the texture of alien skin. Now that I could look, well, it was clear that there were many scars on his gorgeous body. One was jagged and ran from the bottom of his throat all the way to his navel. I couldn't even imagine what had caused it. Most of the others were over his stomach, but there was one on his right pec that looked pretty messy. With a shock I remembered that that was where Taoree hearts were. *Had someone tried to kill him?* I didn't even know how to ask that question.

As I traced the longest and most pronounced scar, I whispered, "What happened?"

He brushed the hair off my forehead and whispered back, "I will tell you anything you wish to know... but... can we not darken this moment with horror stories and tears?"

I searched his eyes again, seeing their depth and pain once again, though I also saw a little hope this time. I swallowed thickly and nodded, but still asked, "Do they hurt?"

He shook his head. "Not anymore, Renuella. Sometimes they're sensitive to the touch, but you may touch them freely without causing pain."

I wanted to ask more. His scars were further proof that Taoree scarred just like humans. I hadn't been sure when I found that little Taoree boy yesterday.

Orrean's scars were just another reminder of his painful past. I wanted to know what and who had caused him harm and why the hell they hadn't been healed. But I didn't want to ruin this moment. I wanted to savor him, I wanted to make him see that I was finally ready to let him in, to let him in fully, to finally be there for him the way he'd always been there for me.

So I ran my hand down his hair again, causing him to shiver, then I gently pushed him onto his back and closed my mouth over his. My skin against his felt fucking amazing. I started grinding against him. With my legs bent, I had better friction and could better feel his very hard, very large cock rubbing against mine while he fondled my ass and rubbed the skin on my back.

After a minute of making out and frotting, I squeaked quite unmanly-like when Orrean suddenly flipped me onto my back. He'd moved so quickly that I hadn't even registered it until I found myself on my back. He started kissing me again and pulling down my sweats, but he wasn't laying his body on top of mine like I wanted, he was sort of hovering over top of me. So I grabbed his shoulders and tried to pull him to me. I could feel more scars on his back, but I didn't want to ruin the mood, so I didn't say anything. I tried pulling him down again and the bastard didn't budge. I may have whined a little into his mouth. I felt him smile against my lips.

I lifted my ass so he could pull my sweats off, then he finally laid over me and I was able to push my hips up. My cock pushed against his stomach and I gasped at the much-needed friction. Orr used that opportunity to drag his lips down my jaw and neck. He sucked on my collarbone and I lifted my chin to allow better access. Then he was making his way down my body, sucking and licking every inch of my skin. I kept my hands on his shoulders and I felt his hair touch my fingers every now and then, but it didn't wrap around me again. His mouth and tongue felt incredible, like every part of my skin was coming alive and buzzing with excitement.

I had never been harder in my entire life.

Before I knew what was happening, Orrean was between my legs with his tongue licking my cock from base to tip. He licked one side of my cock before circling his tongue around the tip and sliding his tongue back down the other side. He repeated the motion, driving me fucking crazy.

He slid his hand along my stomach to my chest and laid his palm flat. Immediately, a warm sensation started filling my chest, making me gasp loudly. His other hand slid down my thigh, then tugged on my balls just as his mouth closed over the head of my cock and he took me all the way to the back of his throat.

“Orrean,” I gasped out.

When he started moving his lips slowly back up my cock, I reached down and ran my hand over his hair, leaving it resting lightly on the back of his head. I laid my other hand over top of his hand on my chest and laced our fingers together, though his palm was still flat against my skin, sending his light through me. As he licked around the tip of my cock, I felt his hair slowly wrap around my wrist again.

It kept wrapping around my wrist, all the way up my forearm. I never would’ve thought that my wrist would be an erogenous zone for me, but holy hell did it turn me on even more, especially when the ends of his hair started rubbing the skin on my arm. I started panting and thrusting up into his mouth, unable to control myself. There were so many sensations all over my body that it was almost too much.

Everywhere we were connected, I could feel him... not just his skin or body, but his presence, his *soul*, and I felt like my entire being was coming alive more and more with each passing second.

The buildup through my body got to be so much that I was a little afraid of what might happen. I breathed out, “Orrean.” I didn’t even know what I wanted, but I knew I needed something.

He let go with his mouth and looked at me with those fucking gorgeous purple eyes. “It’s okay, emm Balu... you can let go. I’ll be right here to catch you.”

Not only could I see his sincerity, I could feel it through our connection, through our lights mingling together. I took a shaky breath and nodded at him. He smiled sweetly at

me, kissed my thigh, then suddenly swallowed me whole again, making me cry out.

When he bobbed up and down a few more times, his hair tightened its grip, and Orr's hands on my chest and testicles started emanating even more light into me, I couldn't hold back. My entire body started quivering and purple stars flashed in my eyes. Every nerve in my body exploded in wave after wave of pleasure.

"Orr..." I moaned loudly, then panted heavily through another round of purple stars sending sparks all over me.

Orr sucked me gently until I finally came down from blissville. I felt him lick me clean, then he carefully sat back a little. I could hear him panting, but I didn't look since I couldn't move.

Holy fuck.

I wanted to look down at him, or at least say something, but I wasn't capable of even lifting a finger. I couldn't even be bothered to open my eyes. That orgasm was so intense that every single body part was drained... even my damn toes. *Holy fuck.* What did he do to me? I'd never felt anything like it. It was fucking amazing.

I felt Orr move up onto the bed, between me and the wall, then he managed to wrap himself around me. He even lifted my head onto his bicep, then turned me onto my side so he was spooning me. I didn't even help, I just let him move me like a ragdoll, though I was happy to have his warmth and his scent surrounding me. I may have made some kind of grunt of satisfaction at him, but my brain was still foggy, in a post-orgasm haze, so I didn't know if it actually came out or not.

We lay like that for so long that I drifted off to sleep again. But when I finally opened my eyes, I whispered, "That was... intense... I don't think I can move."

I heard a little chuckle behind me, but felt him pull me in closer as he kissed my hair. "I should've warned you," he said quietly.

I cleared my throat a little. “Is it... always like that?”

“I do not understand your meaning, Renuella.”

“Uh... is it always like that for Taoree?”

“Oh... um... no.” He started running his fingertips along my chest, leaving goosebumps in their wake. He lowered his voice as he spoke. “It was like that because we are Balu.”

“Oh,” was all I could think to say. Thinking about the whole Balu, destined mates thing still freaked me the fuck out, so I didn’t typically think about it, even if I knew it to be true.

I closed my eyes again, deciding to just bask in the feeling of him holding me, of his fingers trailing my skin so gently. After a little while, when I had enough energy to at least move an arm, for some unknown reason, I reached back and ran my hand down Orrean’s hair and pulled his braid forward so it was draped over my neck. I felt Orr shiver at the touch and somehow pull me even closer to him. I didn’t know why, but it just felt nice to have his hair on my skin like that—probably some weird alien thing—but whatever, it felt good, so I wasn’t going to question it.

After another minute, I snapped my eyes open at a sudden realization. “Orr...?”

“Hmm?”

“If you give me a little longer to recover, I can... reciprocate.”

“Mm.” He kissed my hair. “No need, Renuella.”

“But... I want you to feel good too.”

I could hear the smile in his voice. “I do feel good.” He squeezed me tight, indicating that he liked where we were and how we were laying. “But it’s unnecessary. I... came at the same time you did.”

“You did?” I asked, surprised since I knew he’d had both his hands on me. How could he have possibly jerked off,

then?

He hummed in agreement. “I could feel your orgasm through our connection, which initiated my own. Then mine flashed back to you, so we were... kind of in a loop. That’s why it was so intense.”

I thought about that for a moment. “Are you saying that it’ll feel like that every single time we have sex?”

He nodded against me. “Yes.”

“Well, holy shit.”

He chuckled behind me.

I absently started playing with his braid as he continued rubbing my chest, side, stomach, and hip. He was being soft and gentle, like he just wanted to keep touching me, but I didn’t think he was trying to turn me on. He was just taking me in and exploring. If I’d had more energy, I would’ve turned so I could explore him further, but I was enjoying the feel of his warm fingers all over my body. Even in his caresses, he was being the sweet man I knew him to be.

“Why am I so drawn to your braid?” I asked after a while.

“Are you?” he asked quietly, sounding vulnerable.

He had so much doubt and I didn’t like that I’d put it there. I lifted his hand, kissed his palm and laced our fingers together. “I’ve always been drawn to your hair, Orr. I’ve been drawn to *you* since that first night at the fence. I just held myself back because I didn’t understand, and then once I did... well, I was... scared of you.”

He sucked in a breath and started to pull away a little.

I panicked when I realized how he’d take what I’d said and I quickly turned to face him. I threw my arm and leg over him so he couldn’t escape before I had a chance to explain. I looked him in the eyes and whispered, “I didn’t mean that the way you’re thinking. I wasn’t scared of *you*. I was scared of what you were to me. I was scared by how much I just wanted

to be with you and around you. You have *never* frightened me, Orrean, not even when I kept running from the fence. I was scared by how you knew my name, and by what was on your side of the fence, but I wasn't scared of *you*." I reached up and brushed my fingers down his temple and cheek. "I'm so sorry." I brushed my finger over his eyebrow and belatedly realized that it was the same texture as his hair. "Please don't run away from me. I know it's not fair of me to ask that of you after everything I put you through, but I'm going to ask anyway. Please don't run. I meant what I said last night. Please stay... always... stay forever."

He searched my eyes for a moment, then slowly closed his and pulled me into him. I willingly went and wrapped my arms around him, hugging him close to me as I buried my face into his chest and breathed him in.

After a long moment, he answered my original question, "You already know Taoree hair is different. I can feel my hair, almost like an arm or a leg. I can move it a little, though it's easier to just let it hang there, and sometimes it moves on its own. But it is also a point of connection."

When he didn't continue, I asked, speaking into his throat, "What do you mean?"

"It is a point of connection between sexual partners, lovers, and especially between Balu."

I leaned back and looked at him. "I don't really understand."

"You know how our hands are a point of connection or a good conduit for our light?" he asked. I nodded. "It's like that. Our lights can reach one another easily through our hands and through my hair. Taoree hair helps build not only a light connection, but an emotional and physical connection too. So you're drawn to my hair and it's drawn to you because you are drawn to *us*, to our connection."

"It's drawn to me?"

“Yes. When it wrapped around you, I didn’t consciously move it, it moved itself because I instinctively feel you as my Balu.”

That was fucking weird, but whatever. I seriously lived in the land of weird. I thought about that, then furrowed my brow. “But I don’t have hair like yours.”

He ran a hand through my hair. “I know.”

I swallowed. “Does that mean our connection will never be as great as two Taoree Balus?”

He smiled and kissed my forehead. “Of course not. Our connection is already stronger than many.”

I shot him a look of doubt. “But I brushed you off and pushed you away for months.”

He snorted. “You did, Renuella, but we remained friends and stayed close, even though you were an ass.” I glared at him, but he gave me a little smile. “And that just made our connection even stronger. We are connected even outside of our Balu, which means we are more solid and stable together.”

“So my lack of Taoree hair isn’t going to do anything?”

He smirked and looked me up and down. “You make up for it in other ways.”

I snorted and smacked his shoulder. “That was a serious question, Orrean.”

He sobered a little. “I know, Jer. And our connection is strong. I can feel your light so easily, even when we are separated by distance. That is not typical for Taoree Balu.”

“What do you mean?”

“Most Balu can only feel their connection when they are holding hands or their hair is wrapped around their Balu’s hair or hands. I’ve only heard of a handful of Taoree that could feel it when they weren’t touching their Balu.”

“Really?” I was a little shocked, though I should know by now that I was weird, even among the weird. He nodded, so I said, “But I’ve been able to feel you since that very first time at the fence. I mean, I didn’t know what it was back then, but it was there. And we started dream-walking when I was hundreds of miles away, and you healed me when I got stabbed in the neck, and you helped with the white dome thingy and... and I didn’t even know you!”

He smiled and ran his hand through my hair again. “I know.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Then finally I said, “I don’t even know what to say about that.”

He looked amused, but didn’t say anything. He rubbed the skin on my back and I settled back into him.

A while later I said, “Dude. I don’t even know how old you are.”

He chuckled. “I think in human years, I’m around thirty-ish.”

I wrinkled my nose at that. “You’re eleven years older than me?”

He shrugged. “Something like that.”

I gasped. “Ew, Orrean, I was only sixteen when I met you.”

“So?”

“So... you totally lusted after a teenager.”

“Technically you’re still a teenager, for several more months, anyway.”

“You dirty old man. What is wrong with you?”

He started chuckling. “You’re the one with a Daddy kink.”

I gasped again. “Dude, what the hell have you been reading?”

He sounded like he was giggling. “I can’t help what they have in the library.”

I joined in his amusement and laughed with him. When we finally stopped laughing, we lay there for a short while in silent companionship.

I absently started tracing the lines of the large scar over his heart. I didn’t even realize I was doing it until Orr whispered, “My brother... Thelonious, I mean... he gave me those scars when I was in ‘training,’ as he called it.” His voice was quiet and distant and nothing at all like it had been only moments ago.

I pulled my hand away from his skin and whispered, “I’m sorry... I didn’t realize—”

He grabbed my hand and put it flat over his heart, over that awful scar that could’ve only been made by something terribly painful. He whispered, “It’s okay, Renuella. I want to tell you, and you’re allowed to touch me... anytime, anywhere, always.”

“I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories, Orrean.” I pulled up the arm I was lying on so I could trace his chin with my fingertips. “Or ruin the mood.”

He smiled gently at me. “You didn’t ruin anything... is it okay if I tell you?”

“Of course.” I kissed the corner of his mouth.

His eyes softened at me, but then they hardened again as he started speaking. “Thelonious used to give Ozias and I ‘special training,’ but really it was just an excuse to beat and torture us whenever we spoke out against him. I suppose he didn’t want to kill us, like he did to others that spoke out, but he used to force us to that damn lab and test some of his tools on us, then keep us down there in cages or chained to a table while our bodies tried to heal. He kept the injuries on our torsos so we could cover them in front of his Elite Taoree.”

I swallowed, trying to keep the bile down from picturing him being tortured, so I decided not to focus on that

part. I'd seen enough of Thelonious's torture experiments to last me a lifetime, and my nerves, as well as Orr's, were too frazzled to go there right now. "But... I thought Taoree healed naturally. Why do you have scars?"

"It's true that Taoree heal quicker than humans in general, but unless we use a juhere, we still scar."

My brow furrowed. "But you healed me without a juhere and it didn't leave a scar or anything, and I'm human."

"You are my Balu, and my specialty is healing. We can heal one another well... most Balu can."

"Oh... if your specialty is healing, why didn't you heal yourself?"

"I was usually too weak, and the few times I successfully healed myself or Ozias, well." He sighed. "Let's just say that it was better to leave the wounds we'd already collected than to suffer more and far worse ones."

"Fucking hell, Orr," I said and ran my fingers over the soft skin of his cheek, then over his hair. "I'm sorry you had to go through that," I whispered before deciding I needed time to process all the information he'd given me. I leaned into him and hugged him to me, holding him tight and praying that one day we'd be able to put all this shit behind us and just be.

When we settled down a little, I leaned back to look at him again. "I was going to go take some art supplies to the new refugees today. I'm hoping that letting them draw and paint might help them a little." I shrugged. On the days we were home or got back from a mission early, I often went to the common room to teach some of the kids—and a few adults too—how to paint and sketch. It was a nice way to relieve some stress, not just for me, but those that I taught, too. "You know, take their minds off everything and do something fun and happy. Would you like to come with me?"

He took a shuddered breath before saying, "I'd love to. I have to meet Ozias later, though. So maybe I can come with you and you can come see my brother with me later?"

I narrowed my eyes at the strange facial expression he was making, but then I realized why he was making it. “You only want me to go with you because you don’t want to face your brother alone, don’t you?”

He sighed. “That’s part of the reason, yes. But I’d also like to spend time with you... when we’re not being attacked or killing things.”

I shot him a half-smile. “Okay. We’d better get going, then. We need showers, and we’re supposed to have a family dinner again tonight... that you *have* to come to.”

“I was upset last night and I didn’t think I could handle being around you... without being *with* you. I’m sorry I didn’t come.”

“I’m sorry about... being a douchebucket and everything.”

Orrean smiled at that, then leaned in and kissed me.

I wanted to see what he looked like—what *all* of him looked like. So I stripped his sweatpants off. It didn’t surprise me that all of his skin was that pale color—even his dick—and I also wasn’t surprised that he was, in fact, completely hairless. His cock was much larger, much longer than any I’d ever seen before, and it had what looked like a second and third ridge underneath the head. So similar, yet so different, and I couldn’t wait to explore it further. He pressed me to the bed and kissed me fiercely after I got a quick look.

“We really need to get ready,” he said into my mouth.

I could only nod as he kissed me again.

When we finally came up for air, I had to force myself to move away from him. Otherwise, we’d never leave the room, and we had important shit we needed to do. It didn’t stop me from pulling him across the hall into the bathroom, though. And it sure as hell didn’t stop me from pushing him into the shower with me and jerking us both off while I kissed him and savored his taste, his skin, and the feel of his hair

around the back of my neck as it wrapped around our shoulders, keeping us close together—as if I'd want us to part.

It was fucking awesome. And I was fucking happy to finally bring some joy to those sad purple eyes.

Chapter Fourteen

“Did you want some paper and pencils?” I asked one of the young Taoree we’d rescued yesterday. I recognized him as the little kid I’d found in a cage with burn marks all over his torso. He was currently wearing a shirt, but I could still see some of the scars on his neck and on one cheek. I smiled at him when he sat across from me. “I’m Jeremy. What’s your name?” I asked in Taoree.

He started looking around, scanning the room. His dark-blue eyes were dull because he was so unhealthy, the poor little guy. He cleared his throat and looked down at the table, his voice quiet and wavering as he said, “Tenj.”

I smiled even though he still wasn’t looking at me and kept speaking in Taoree in case he didn’t know English. “It’s nice to meet you, Tenj.” I pushed some paper and a set of pencils toward him. “Here’s some supplies, if you’d like to draw.”

He glanced up at me, then down at the paper and timidly reached for them. He mumbled, “*Domewhee*.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied, earning a glance from him.

He tilted his head, examining me, then said in Taoree, “You saved me yesterday.”

I replied back in Taoree, “It was me that helped you, yes.” His eyes went wide, and I figured it was because of my language skills. It wasn’t like there weren’t other humans that spoke Taoree, even before everything, but I’d been told by

many that I didn't have an accent, which was apparently very strange.

"Is this place for real?" the kid asked me.

"What do you mean?" I figured I knew, but I wanted to check.

"Are they really fighting back against the emperor?"

"They are," I said, using my pencil to scratch under my hat. "We're going to beat him, too."

He looked like he didn't believe me, but he nodded a little, then grabbed a pencil and pulled a sheet of paper to him, though he didn't start drawing, he just played with the pencil. I didn't want to push him after fuck knew what all he'd been through, so I just picked up my own sheet of paper and pencil and started drawing. I didn't even think about what I was doing, my mind, and my heart, automatically went to the same place it always did. When I looked down, I realized I'd started to draw Colt.

"Who is he?" Tenj's quiet voice made it over to me.

I looked up at him and swallowed. "He's... he was my boyfriend."

Tenj nodded. "He died." It sounded like a statement rather than a question and my heart broke a little at that... at this poor young kid that already understood what a cruel place this world was.

"He did," I confirmed.

"My dad died after they killed my mom and my older sister... I watched them all die." He said it so matter-of-factly, like he was devoid of emotion. "That's why they burned me. They went through my mom and sister first, then came to me. They did it to torture my dad, to get information out of him. But then they killed him anyway. I heard them say they were saving me because I still had some good... parts left." He swallowed thickly at that. As if some of the emotions he was clearly holding back were finally rising to the surface.

I didn't know what to say. What could I say to someone that was tortured and forced to watch his family die? "I'm sorry," I whispered, but the kid just nodded and went back to drawing.

The bench I was sitting on shifted when Orrean sat beside me, straddling the bench seat. "You okay?" he asked.

"Huh?" I blinked at him. "Sorry, just lost in thought, I guess."

Orr nodded, then looked at my drawing. "That looks just like him."

I looked down at the sketch, then stammered, "I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking and I—"

Orrean cut me off with a finger on my lips. "Don't ever be sorry for remembering him," he whispered. "He loved you, and you loved him. He *should* be remembered."

He let go of my lip, but I had to take a moment to get my emotions under control before I could whisper, "Thank you."

He smiled gently at me, then grabbed my hand and rubbed his finger over the back of it before giving it a squeeze and releasing me. I looked away, a little overwhelmed, and noticed that Tenj was staring at us in open curiosity. I cleared my throat and changed the subject. "Orrean, this is Tenj. Tenj, Orrean."

Orr smiled at the kid. "It's nice to meet you, Tenj. Your father was a great man. I'm very sorry for your loss."

I'd had no idea that Orrean would've known his father, and from the surprised look on Tenj's face, he hadn't expected it either.

Orr smiled at him. "Your father and I went to school together when we were young. I hadn't seen him since before you were born, though."

Tenj nodded, then went back to drawing again. Orr grabbed his own sheet and pencil.

We sat there together, the three of us, drawing and taking peace from it. We stayed that way for a couple of hours. Tenj didn't talk much, but he definitely listened when Orrean or I did. When he did speak, it was always quiet, but I'd seen him smile a couple times when I messed with Orr. Eventually Tenj's stomach growled, so we found him some food, then headed out with a promise to visit again soon.

We only had maybe an hour before we had to meet our family, so we quickly made our way to the control room in search of Ozias. I kept shoulder bumping Orrean as we walked through the hall and Orr smiled at me. "You look happy today, Renuella."

I smiled at that. "I am happy." I laughed a little. "Are you finally ready to tell me what *Renuella* means?" I could've had one of the other Taoree explain what it meant, but for some reason, I'd never been inclined to ask anyone else. Since it was the nickname he'd given me, and there was no direct translation, I wanted his impression of the word.

He made a face, then ran his hand over his forehead. "It's... an endearment... like 'Baby,' 'Sweetheart,' 'Honey,' or... 'Love' is pretty close. There really isn't a direct translation."

"You were calling me 'Love' months ago? Before we even made it here?"

He blew out a breath. "Yes... it just naturally came out. And then it made you smile, so I never stopped. I'm sorry."

I elbowed him. "Why would you be sorry?"

He shoulder roll-shrugged at me. He looked really nervous and uncomfortable with the admission, so I grabbed his arm, pulling him to a stop. Then I leaned up on my toes and kissed the side of his neck as I rubbed the other side of his neck with my hand. Then I kissed the corner of his mouth and leaned back to look at his shocked eyes. I rubbed his cheek and smiled softly at him before grabbing his hand and pulling the dazed alien down the hall.

I laughed when he stumbled, but he seemed to finally snap out of it because he shot me a grin.

When we finally walked into the control room, I automatically looked for Nolan since he seemed to spend most of his free time in there, but I didn't see him. I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. He'd been gone by the time Orr and I left my room, so I'd thought he'd be here. I had no clue where the hell else he would've gone, but I was glad he was taking a little time after yesterday.

"Brother, hello," Ozias said in Taoree before looking at me. "Jeremy."

"Ozias," I said with a nod.

He grinned at me. I'd only heard my family and I call him by his first name. Most everyone else called him 'Commander' or '*Zhidante*' in Taoree. I'd hardly spoken to the guy, but for some reason, I didn't feel the need for the formality.

Ozias looked at Orr and said with a serious look on his face, "So you finally decided to come see me, did you?"

Orrean shoulder-rolled at him. "Whatever, Ozias. It's not as if you've been listening to me anyway."

Ozias sighed. "It's not that I don't listen, it's that I don't agree with you and you get irate and run off."

"You do realize that we found three of our spies in that factory yesterday, don't you? And two of them were dead. The other is still in medical and unconscious." Orrean's voice took on that cold quality he'd had when speaking to his brother for the past few months. "Do you really think that's a coincidence?"

Ozias started looking around the room, then he waved his hand toward the door. "Walk with me." I started to follow and Ozias looked at me. "This is private."

Before I could even blink, Orrean said, "I have no secrets from Jeremy and I never will. He walks with us."

Ozias eyed me, then his brother, then grinned a little before looking serious again. “As you wish.”

Orrean nodded and the three of us walked out of the control room. Ozias led us to his quarters, which I was surprised by, but as soon as we stepped inside, he said, “I sweep this suite for cams several times a week myself. We can speak freely here.”

Orrean just stared at Ozias, but as I examined him, I gasped. “You believe him, don’t you?”

Ozias sighed. “I’m starting to.”

“How long have you been sweeping your room for cams?” I asked.

“About six months.”

“So since Orr told you his suspicions.”

He sighed again.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” Orr asked.

“I can’t just go around accusing people of spying, or even showing my suspicions, now can I? It was better to have you pissed and suspicious of me. I figured you’d get over it eventually once we found the mole.”

Orr eyed his brother, then he sighed. “You could have told me. I’ve been a spy for more than half my life, it would’ve been easy to act angry with you, you know.”

Now Ozias eyed Orrean, and I was struck by how much they looked alike. They were identical twins, but I usually didn’t think they looked alike for some reason. Ozias seemed so young and free, and Orr seemed so serious and stoic, that normally they looked like completely different people to me. But right now, they both seemed a little run down, worn-out.

“You’re right,” Ozias said quietly. “I should’ve told you.”

Orrean simply nodded like he wasn't surprised by Ozias's admission. But I was hella surprised that he'd admitted he was wrong so easily.

When neither of them talked for over a minute, I spoke up. "Sooo... do you have any idea who the mole is?"

Ozias shook his head. "No, not really. I have a list of who has access to the information about our spies, but without knowing what other information he's passing to Thelonious, it's hard to narrow it down. We don't even know when this information was given to him, so it's not like we can go back and check our recordings or anything like that. I'm at a loss for who has betrayed us."

"May I see the list?" Orrean asked.

"I don't have it written down. I have it memorized. I didn't want a paper trail that could lead back to me."

"Okay," I said. "So tell us your list."

He cringed and didn't say anything.

Orrean sounded a little amused, but also annoyed when he said, "I'm on your list, aren't I?"

Ozias nodded. "I had to consider the possibility."

"I mean, you're on our list too, so whatever, but why would you even suspect Orr when he's the one that brought this to you in the first place? You weren't even looking or thinking about a mole before he said something," I said, a little annoyed.

Ozias looked at me. "You're right, but I had to be thorough. I kept him on the list simply because he had access to all the spies and their locations."

"That's not true," Orrean said.

"What do you mean?"

"You forget that I've been undercover for many years. It's true that I know many of the spies from when we were young." Orr looked at me and quietly said, "The boy, Tenj. His

father was my friend and fellow spy.” I cringed, but the information didn’t surprise me after what Tenj had told me downstairs. Looking severe and expressionless, Orr looked back at his brother. “I knew what division many of our old friends were at because I was a commander for Thelonious, but that’s as far as my knowledge goes. I don’t know where they were supposed to go after the Qiren activation began, or whether or not they were even still spying for us. I stuck to my job, passing intel on to you about Thelonious’s movements and plans. It was safer for all involved if I didn’t have contact with those on our side. If even one rumor would’ve started, Thelonious would’ve taken me and anyone I spoke with.” His eyes turned hard again. “You know what he does to those that turn on him.”

A shudder ran through Ozias’s body and his eyes glazed over, clearly lost in a memory, but he nodded.

I gave him a moment to get his bearings, then I said, “Tell us your list. We can compare it to ours.”

He nodded again, cleared his throat, then began, “Gledia, Owen, Hawk, Dietteo, Cokeeto, Nolan, Sa—”

“Did you seriously just say Nolan? Are you insane? He’s human, first of all, and second of all, he wasn’t here before all this started. How the hell could he be the mole?” I asked, outraged.

“I’m sorry. I simply named everyone that has access to the control room. We shouldn’t assume it’s a Taoree. Thelonious could’ve easily manipulated a human or captured a human’s family to force compliance.”

“Okay, that’s true,” I agreed easily. “But you *know* it’s not Nolan. It doesn’t make sense.”

Orrean said, “Ozias, there’s evidence that the mole has been giving Thelonious information since the start of this. It’s not Nolan.” He said it so assuredly that I sent him a grateful smile.

Ozias thought for a minute before nodding and blowing out a long breath. “Okay, so not Nolan. You’re right, it doesn’t make sense. I just... I don’t know where to start with this.” He waved us over into the living room. “May as well have a seat.”

We sat down and I asked, “Has Owen been here long?”

Ozias nodded. “As soon as the peace treaty was made three years ago, some of us fled the reach of the Legion and set up our base here. We went searching for a few humans that could bring insight to your world and technology. Owen was one of them. He’s been here almost as long as I have.”

I nodded. After thinking about it for a while, I asked, “Why didn’t Thelonious just drop a bomb on this place as soon as you built it? Why isn’t he destroying it now?”

Ozias shook his head. “I don’t know. That is something I’ve been asking myself for the past six months. The only thing I can think of is that the mole doesn’t want to give my brother the location... or maybe the mole is afraid he’ll get killed in the process if Thelonious attacks here. I do not know.”

“Okay, it doesn’t sound like we’re any closer to figuring out the mole. Will you allow me to see those records now?” Orr asked Ozias.

“Yes, but I don’t think you’re going to have any more luck than I have,” he said as he got up and walked into a room down the hall.

I looked at Orr and raised my brow. I didn’t want to ask out loud whether he believed Ozias or not. Not while we were in his suite where he could overhear or possibly be recording us. Luckily Orr seemed to understand because he did his little shoulder-roll, so I knew he meant that he wasn’t sure if he believed him. I wasn’t sure either, though for some reason, he seemed honest.

When Ozias returned, he handed Orr a stack of papers and Orr said, “I thought you didn’t want a paper trail.”

“There is nothing strange with the Commander of the Independents having copies of communication transactions. I could easily say I was searching for something specific.” He waved Orr off. “Having a list of suspects is a completely different story.”

Orr nodded and started going through the papers while I sat there awkwardly. Ozias gave me a glass of water which I took, grateful to have something in my hands.

“So,” Ozias said suddenly, “you finally decided to embrace your Balu.”

I was taken aback. “That is none of your business.”

Ozias chuckled. “Sometimes I do not understand you humans.”

“You and me both,” Orr added without looking up from the paperwork.

I narrowed my eyes at Orrean and after a few seconds, he looked up and smirked at me, making me roll my eyes at him, though he didn’t notice since he went back to reading. I glanced at Ozias and saw the little smirk on his face, too. So I rolled my eyes at him too and admitted, “Fine. Yes, I embraced my Balu or whatever.”

Orrean snorted in amusement and Ozias smiled at me and said, “I’m glad.”

I looked him up and down and decided that he was sincere, so I nodded. “Where is your Balu?”

“She’s out on a run.”

“I don’t know how you can stand it,” Orrean said, placing the papers down on the coffee table.

Ozias sighed. “I don’t like it, but Alleean is a free spirit, it’s what I love the most about her. She wants to fight, so she fights.” He shrugged.

Orrean nodded. “I’m just glad I can go with him when he goes out. I don’t know if I could handle knowing he was in

danger and being so far away... not again, anyway. He gives me enough heart palpitations as it is.”

“I’m sure he does.” Ozias’s voice was laced with amusement.

“He has a habit of running off into danger.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“You guys do know I’m sitting right here, right? I mean, come on! I’m literally two feet away from both of you,” I said quite loudly.

Orrean smirked at me while Ozias chuckled. When I glared at Orr, he started chuckling again.

“Why do you like annoying me so much?” I asked, still glaring.

He kept laughing. “You’re fun to tease.”

I almost argued, but then I tilted my head and nodded. “Okay, I like teasing you, too, so I guess that’s fair.”

Ozias’s chuckle turned louder. “I’m glad to see my brother has met his match, in more ways than one.”

I just shrugged since I wasn’t sure exactly what he meant.

Orr sobered. “Can we take these with us?” He pointed at the records.

Ozias tilted his head back and forth before nodding. “Yes, but if anyone finds them, or comes searching your rooms, you need to hide them, and burn them when you’re finished with them. You know the other officials wouldn’t like you fishing around.”

Orr nodded. “I am aware.”

“Okay.” Ozias sighed. “I need to head down to the refugees. We’re trying to find permanent places for them to stay. We’ve run out of rooms and suites, so we might have to

start bunking people together.” He sighed again. “This whole thing is a mess.”

We stood and Orrean patted Ozias’s shoulder. “We’ll figure it out, Oz. We’re all in this together. You need to remember that.”

Ozias shot him a half-smile. “You should heed your own advice, brother.” Then he surprised me by pulling Orrean into a hug. Orr was stiff for a moment, but then hugged Ozias back. “I have missed you. I’m sorry I didn’t confide in you sooner.”

Orrean looked at me over Ozias’s shoulder and said quietly, “It’s okay. I’ve missed you too.” Then he closed his eyes and squeezed his brother a little tighter.

When they released one another, I was taken by surprise when Ozias pulled me into a hug too. I heard that fucking hiss-growl sound—again. I hadn’t heard it in a while, but I finally realized what it was. I looked over at Orrean and smirked at him while I hugged his brother back just to make him more jealous. Orr glared at me. I smiled because he really was fun to tease.

Ozias leaned down and whispered into my ear, “Please keep him safe.”

“I will,” I said without hesitation.

He released me and we all made our way out of the suite.

“Thrive and love,” Ozias said as a farewell.

“As bright as the stars,” Orrean replied back, making me smile at them.

Ozias went toward the refugees and Orr and I went toward our apartment. As we walked, I grabbed the back of Orrean’s neck and pulled him down so I could kiss his cheek. *God damn, he’s tall.* He smiled and walked close enough for his arm to brush my shoulder.

As we walked I said, “There’s something I don’t understand.”

“What’s that?”

“I thought Ozias left you with Thelonious twelve years ago, but he just said he didn’t flee the Legion’s reach until the peace treaty was signed here on Earth three years ago. I don’t get it.”

“I stayed behind with Thelonious when Ozias and the others fled long ago so they’d have an inside man. My contact with them was very limited and never direct. I rose in the ranks of Thelonious’s army over the years until I became a commander. When we came to Earth, the Independents traveled with us under disguises, spread out among many ships so if one was caught or taken down, the others would still make it. They were essentially stowaways.”

“And Ozias wasn’t on your ship?” I asked softly, remembering that they hadn’t seen each other for six years.

He shot me a sad smile. “He couldn’t be. I was well-known among my men, well, Thelonious’s men. Had any of them seen Ozias, we both would’ve been killed and the Independent cause would have suffered greatly. It was not worth the risk.”

“But you were so lonely.” I hadn’t meant to say it, but it decided to come out anyway.

He nodded. “I was, but I couldn’t risk the fate of two species just because I didn’t have anyone to talk to.”

I pulled him to a stop, then reached up and cupped his cheeks. “You are such a good man, Orrean. Thank you for everything you’ve done.”

He grabbed the back of my neck with his free hand and whispered, “It led me to you, so it was well worth it.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat, then leaned up and kissed him gently on the lips. Then I grabbed his hand

and pulled him along so we could get those papers behind closed doors before someone saw us.

When we walked into our home, our family was in the common area, so I said, “We need to sweep.”

No one even questioned me. They just got up, grabbed the cam detectors that Nolan had given us and we each swept a different area of our suite. This was something we’d been doing since we’d started investigating the mole. Luckily we didn’t find anything that wasn’t supposed to be there.

Then we settled in the common room with the new records from Ozias, and Orr and I told our family what we had discovered while we ate dinner.

When we went to bed that night, I pulled Orr into my room. We fell asleep tangled together in the sheets, and for the first time in months, he met me by the fence and we talked all night long.

The following day Orr had some annoying administrative shit to take care of, so I went back to the room with the new refugees with some art supplies again. I placed some supplies on various tables, but when I noticed Tenj sitting by himself instead of with the other kids, I went over and sat across from him.

“Hey, Tenj. How you doing today?”

He glanced at me before looking at the table again.

“Okay, I guess. How are you?”

I smiled at that. “I’m doing really well, thank you. Do you want to draw?”

He glanced at me again before nodding, so I passed him some paper and pencils.

He started drawing immediately, so I followed suit and the two of us sat there drawing for over an hour. I was content to let him lead the conversation, or lack of conversation, as it were. I had a feeling that he didn't want to be alone, but he didn't know what to say, so I was happy to just keep him company.

He did eventually say, "They haven't found me a place to stay yet."

He'd said it so quietly, I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. I took a second before asking, "What do you mean?"

"The other kids... the ones you helped rescue too, they all... had an adult offer them a place to stay. I'm the last one." He didn't look up from his drawing the entire time he was speaking. "I don't think anyone wants me."

"Why in the world would you think that?"

He shrugged, but didn't look up. "Because I'm ugly."

"Hey," I said a little more forcefully than I'd intended, making him jump and look at me with wide all-blue eyes. "You are *not* ugly."

"You don't have to lie," he whispered. "I know my scars are gross."

My nostrils flared in anger. "They are not gross."

He huffed. "Whatever." He looked down and resumed drawing again.

I looked around the room and noticed that all the other kids were playing together, talking, and some were even using the art supplies I'd brought, but not even one of them had come over to our table the entire time I'd been there. *Are they being mean to Tenj because of his scars?*

I didn't know what to think and I didn't know what to say to him to make it better, so I swallowed my reply and decided to talk to Orr and the others about it later. There probably wasn't anything we could do, but maybe all Tenj needed was a few friends.

When I made it back up to our apartment that evening to drop my art stuff off and walk down to the mess hall for dinner, I wasn't surprised to find most of my family up there.

"What's wrong with you, J?" Tabby asked as she sat on Nolan's lap. The two of them had been inseparable since we'd gotten back from our mission.

I shrugged. "Just thinkin'."

"Uh oh," Cal said before taking a sip of water. "Whatcha thinking about?"

I blew out a breath and answered, "I met this kid, one of the refugees. He's the only kid that doesn't have a place to stay."

Orr walked into the common room then. I smiled at him and he nodded at me, but looked a little awkward as he tried to find a place to go. I watched in amusement as he walked one way, then the other, then headed back toward the hall and leaned against the wall there, facing us and putting his hands behind his back as he looked at the floor.

I walked over to him, put two fingers under his chin and gently nudged him so he'd look at me. I whispered, "You okay?"

He swallowed thickly, but gave me a short nod. So I leaned in and kissed his lips softly. I knew he was still unsure about us, about me, but I had every intention of proving to him that I wouldn't hurt him again. I leaned back to look into his eyes as I brushed his cheek, then I turned and leaned back against his chest. I reached back and pulled his braid forward to drape it over my shoulder and chest. I absently started playing with the ends.

When I realized how quiet it was, I looked up and saw everyone staring at me. "What?"

"Uh..." Cal cleared his throat. "Is this a thing now, then?"

"What do you mean?"

“You and Orry are together?” Mandy asked with wide eyes.

“You guys saw us together last night. What are you talking about?” *Were they blind last night or something?*

Cal actually started laughing, like hysterically.

“What the fuck is so funny?” I asked him.

“You...” he started breathing really hard, trying to calm down, but he was still totally chuckling. “We didn’t know if you were together or if...” He laughed loudly before sobering, kind of. “If you just couldn’t help but touch his hair... *more* than usual.”

I looked down at my hands that were holding on to his hair, then back up. “I don’t usually touch his hair, though.”

Cal’s eyes went wide. “Dude, you are forever touching his hair.”

I frowned at him.

“Every time you’re near him, you run your hand down his hair... and last night you kept doing it, like way more than you usually do. Didn’t you hear us laughing at you?”

I was about to respond, but then I felt the chest behind me jerking around. I looked over my shoulder to find Orrean trying—and failing—to hold in his laughter. I smacked his shoulder, then turned back to the others. “Okay, fine, I like his hair, so what? It’s not like I normally lean on him and shit. How did you not notice last night?”

“How did you not just tell us that you finally got over yourself?” Wes asked.

I rolled my eyes at that. “Whatever. Yes, Orr and I are together now, okay? Get over it.”

Orrean was still laughing, but he finally wrapped his arms around my waist and held me close as he kissed my cheek. I heard Mandy say, “Awww,” but I ignored her.

I whispered, “Why were you weird when you came out here?”

Orr spoke into my ear so the others wouldn’t hear. “I wasn’t sure how comfortable you were with showing me affection in front of them, and I didn’t know if you even wanted to tell them.” He kissed my temple.

“You could’ve just asked, Orr. I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

“You’re fine.”

I lifted one of his hands and kissed it before leaning back on him and talking to everyone again. “Would you guys maybe want to meet Tenj? Maybe we could have him eat dinner with us tonight?”

“That would be nice,” Mandy said.

I shot her a grateful smile.

Orrean added, “Ozias is having trouble finding him a family to stay with.”

“Why? He’s a sweet kid.”

“He has some medical issues that many do not want to deal with.”

“You mean because he’s scarred?”

Orrean hesitated, then cleared his throat. “That is one issue, yes, but he also has some other things that require medical attention.”

“Can a juhère not help him?”

“He has a... sickness deep in his belly that will take years of daily juhère exposure to get rid of, though it may never go away. It is a very rare disease among my people. We cannot find anyone willing to take on that responsibility.”

I frowned at that, wishing he could just stay with us. But then my eyes went wide and I turned to face Orrean. “He could stay here.”

“Where?” Orr’s eyebrows drew together.

“You can move into my room, and he can take yours.”

He made a weird face and remained silent.

“Do you not want to move into my room?” I asked slowly.

“I... I do not wish to move in if the only reason you want me there is to help someone else.” He looked away from me, not meeting my eyes.

I grabbed his chin and pulled his face back. “That is not the only reason, Orreannysius-Anyke Serparla.” I surprised myself by saying his full name flawlessly. “I don’t want to spend any more time away from you. Were you planning on spending nights away from me? Is that it?”

He shook his head. “No. But I want to be together for the right reasons.”

I leaned up and whispered in his ear, “I want you in my bed and in my arms. I don’t want to be alone anymore, and I don’t want you to be alone, either.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I didn’t even hesitate, not anymore. “It’s not like we just met. I’ve spent every day with you for nearly a year, and like you said before, we’re Balu. You are the other half of my light. You should be beside me where you belong.”

He blew out a breath, then nodded. “Okay.”

I smiled, placed a quick kiss on his lips, then turned to face the others, all of whom were pretending not to look at us, even though they were totally being nosey. “What do you guys think? Do you mind if Tenj comes to live with us?”

“I’m good with it,” Nolan said, “but what about when we’re not here? I mean with his medical issues or whatever.”

I shrugged. “I’m sure we can set something up with one of the doctors up in medical. And I’m sure Lenahz would

be okay with it. She already stays here with Mandy when we're gone. I don't foresee it being a problem."

Everyone nodded, then each gave me the go-ahead.

I smiled at my family, then said, "Okay, let's go find him and see if he's up for it."

We all made our way down to the mess hall and when we got there, I sent my family ahead for food while I searched for Tenj. It didn't take long to find the poor kid sitting at a table in the corner all by himself.

I sat beside him this time and said, "Hey, Tenj. Is it okay if my family and I eat here with you?"

"Sure."

I decided to ask before he was overwhelmed with the others. "I have a proposition for you."

He looked over at me questioningly.

I took a deep breath and blew it out. "Would you like to come stay with me? In my suite? There's seven of us and we just figured out that we have an extra room."

"Are you serious?" he whispered.

I nodded. "Yeah. We're sometimes gone overnight, but Mandy is only eleven, so she stays there and a friend comes over to stay with her. But you'd have your own room and everything."

He just continued staring at me for a long time.

When he didn't say anything, I prompted, "What do you think?"

I let out an, "Oomph," when he suddenly collided with my chest. His tiny arms wrapped around my waist in a tight hug, so once I realized what was happening, I hugged him back.

"Thank you," he whimpered into my chest, making me squeeze him a little tighter and rub his back.

When he finally let go of me, I smiled and asked, “So I take that as a yes, then?”

He nodded with wide, amazed eyes.

I laughed. “Good. Oh look, here’s the rest of my family, just in time.”

When everyone settled at the table, I made introductions. Tenj hardly spoke the rest of the time, but he looked happier than I’d seen him since I found him in the god-awful cage.

Orrean let Ozias know what we’d decided and Orr said his brother was relieved and thankful, so we went ahead and had Tenj come back up to the apartment with us. We told him we’d get all of Orrean’s belongings out of the room tomorrow so he’d have room for his stuff. He told us he didn’t have any belongings.

So we’d have to get him some at some point.

We left him in his room and Orr followed me inside mine. I was exhausted and I could tell Orr was, too. The past week had worn us out, no doubt. Plus I was worried about the new kid in our suite, the mole we still hadn’t found, and the fact that Ozias hadn’t been able to get ahold of anyone at the Northern Independent base. From the lack of movement outside the base—our satellites couldn’t seem to get a good picture—we were pretty sure they’d been attacked.

Everything seemed like shit.

Orrean cupped my cheek, bringing my attention to him. “Hey. It’s okay. We’re okay, just focus on that.”

“I know, I just...” I looked into his eyes for a moment before closing mine and dropping my forehead onto his chest. “Everything is going to shit.”

He started rubbing my back. “Don’t worry about that right now. You just did a wonderful thing by making that poor kid feel welcome. You made him feel like he has a home.”

“He does,” I mumbled. “He belongs here with us.” I shrugged. I didn’t know why, but I felt like it was true.

Orrean kissed the top of my head. “Come on, Renuella. Let’s go to bed.”

I nodded against him before stepping back and pulling my shirt over my head and my pants down so I was only in my boxers. Orrean did the same. I bit back a groan at seeing his mostly-naked body because even though I was exhausted, my cock, of course, took notice.

Orr smiled and held out his hand. I took it immediately and he flicked off the light, pulled me into bed and covered us with the blanket. As the skin on our chests touched, my body seemed to zing to life. Only moments ago, I’d been ready to drop, but being in his arms, in *our* bed, had me wide awake. So I leaned back, ran my hand over his braid and used it to pull his mouth down to mine. When our tongues touched, I moaned softly and couldn’t help but press farther into him.

I pulled his underwear down, then my own, and we both wiggled the rest of the way out of them until we were naked. I rolled us, holding him down into the mattress so I could press my hips against his, making our cocks rub against each other. His braid draped across my shoulders, the end occasionally brushing across my throat or over my chest. It felt glorious. We were both suddenly overtaken with passion for one another. I laughed into his mouth when he rolled us so he was on top of me. He smirked before devouring my mouth again and thrusting his hips against mine.

I ran my hands all over him. His soft skin felt amazing under my callused hands, and his braid sent pulses of pleasure across my skin everywhere it touched.

“I want you, Orrean,” I breathed into his mouth only a moment before I flipped us so I was on top again. He groaned and kissed me hard for a minute, but gradually eased his kisses until he lightly pecked my lips, then pulled away slowly, looking up at me.

“Will you...” he looked away and didn’t finish, so I used one hand to push his cheek and make him face me.

“What, Orrean?” I whispered, “You can ask me anything, emm Balu.”

His eyes softened and I felt him quiver. He reached up and rubbed my cheek with his long fingers. “Will you... take me?”

I felt my eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “You want to bottom?”

He nodded slowly.

I didn’t know why that surprised me so much, but it did. Not that I wanted to bottom or anything—I never had—I’d just thought we were going to have to fight over topping or just do other things, like a long sixty-nine session or something. I could still see some hesitation in his eyes, so I asked, “Are you sure?”

He nodded, but said, “I’ve never done it before.”

“You’re a virgin?” My voice rose an octave.

“No, I mean I’ve never bottomed before.”

“Oh.” I rearranged my arms so my weight was on my elbows on either side of his face and I started running both of my hands over his hair. “We can do something else this time.”

He shook his head. “I want to feel you inside me.”

I groaned and closed my eyes which he chuckled at, then he grabbed my ass and pulled me closer, rutting his hips up into mine. I captured his mouth on a moan and we started kissing fiercely, almost frantically. I was completely desperate for him. For every part of him, inside and out. He was gorgeous and beautiful, sweet and fierce, brave and selfless. He was everything I’d ever wanted, more than I’d ever dreamed I could have, and so much more than I deserved. He was perfect in so many ways, more than perfect for me. I’d been an idiot to push him away for so long. He hadn’t deserved it, and I’d do whatever I could to make it up to him.

“Jeremy, please,” he said into my mouth.

I groaned, then pulled my mouth back and panted out, “Lube? Condom?”

He shook his head. “We don’t need a condom. We’re Balu, we could never pass one another diseases or hurt each other or any such things.” I’d never gone without a condom, so that would be a new experience for me... and I couldn’t wait. Orrean was out of breath and his cheeks were flushed. I was happy that I’d been the one to put that look on his face. It was such a far cry from the typical stoic expression he wore around others, though he was usually more relaxed with our family. Still, it was a good look on him. He asked, “You have lube in your nightstand, right?”

I nodded. It had been there when I came to my room the very first time. I had a feeling that Cal had thrown it in there, though I never asked him, ‘cause *gross*.

Orr must’ve seen it when he put some stuff in here earlier. I leaned over and grabbed it, then whispered, “Lay on your side.”

I moved behind him as he rolled to his side. His braid maneuvered around to stay draped across my shoulders and the back of my neck, which forced us to stay closer together, not that I was complaining. I had one arm under him so my hand was flat on his chest. As soon as I started pressing my light into him, like he’d done to me, he groaned and started trembling. My chest was flat against his back, so after pouring some lube on my fingers, I pushed my hand between us. Before I found his hole, I said, “Kiss me, Orrean. My Balu.”

His body started trembling even more and he twisted back to close his mouth over mine. When my finger pressed into his hole, both of us moaned as one, and before I knew what was happening, Orrean was pressing himself back onto my finger. He was so hot and tight, I couldn’t even fathom how it would feel once my cock was inside him, let alone barrier-free. He wasted no time before he was demanding, “More,” and I was adding a second, then a third finger. Then

Orrean reached back and grabbed my cock, slicking it with lube and saying, "I'm ready."

As soon as I pulled my fingers out, Orr lined me up and pressed his ass back onto my cock, making me gasp and groan loudly. He let go of the base of my cock and grabbed my ass as he slowly pressed himself onto me. When I bottomed out, I saw purple stars and whispered, "Enimus."

He chuckled at my small curse, then leaned back and whispered my words back to me, "Kiss me, Jeremy. My Balu... don't stop kissing me."

I whimpered at that, then leaned up a little to better reach him. I kissed him slowly, relishing his mouth, and I wrapped him in my arms, holding him tight and waiting for him to adjust. A few seconds later he nodded slightly and released my ass, telling me he was good to go. As I pulled out slowly, he laced his fingers with mine while our lips and tongues kept up their sensual dance.

I could feel him everywhere as I thrust in and out of him at a slow, leisurely pace. If I went any faster, I wouldn't be able to stop my orgasm from igniting and I wanted this to last. God, I just wanted to stay here with him for as long as we possibly could. He seemed to be of the same frame of mind because he was still trembling, but didn't try to take over the pace.

But after a few minutes, I lost all control over my body. It was as if my body was just seeking its own release, trying to bury itself inside of Orrean's heat and stay there forever. I gradually started to speed up. Our bodies were completely in sync with one another. Our lights were mingling, playing with each other, our skin was buzzing with purple electricity all over, our hearts were beating as one, our souls were touching and clinging to one another, and our cocks were throbbing with more pleasure than I'd ever thought was possible. His pleasure was mine, and mine was his.

The world disappeared and there was only him and me, me and him.

There was no difference between us. We were of the same body and soul, and when we came, the whole world imploded, then exploded, then came back together as our bodies floated away in carnal bliss. We both cried out, but our mouths didn't part.

We rode it out together, our bodies, hearts, and souls singing and dancing as one.

When we finally started coming down minutes or hours later, we were both shaking. We kept our mouths fused as I pulled out of his ass. He turned around and we wrapped each other in our arms, tangling our legs together. I gently started rubbing my hands over his cheeks, his neck, his back, all over his skin, and he did the same to me, though we never stopped kissing.

Gradually, our kisses slowed, even if our lips never parted, and we eventually fell asleep, wrapped in each other, breathing one another in.

When I opened my eyes, we were in the field, lying together naked, much like we were in the real world. We stayed that way for a long time, just holding each other and staring into each other's eyes.

"You're beautiful," I told him later that night.

He smiled at me and ran his fingers over my forehead and cheek.

"Does it bother you that I keep pulling you to me again? I'm not even doing it on purpose," I said.

He smiled at me. "Not at all. I enjoy our time here."

"I missed it, missed you... when you were blocking me, I mean. I kept trying to pull you here, but it didn't work," I told him as I rested my cheek on his shoulder.

"Had I known, I wouldn't have used the fekioirs to block me from dream-walking. I didn't know you wanted me here."

“I know. I’m sorry... for everything I did to you,” I said quietly.

“Can you do something for me?” he asked after a silent few minutes.

“Anything,” I responded, meaning it completely.

“Can you stop apologizing? You don’t need to and I don’t want it.”

I smiled a little at that. I didn’t know how the hell he was still always so sweet to me. I knew I’d treated him like shit. Still, I said, “Okay.” I took a deep breath and when I inhaled that cinnamon scent, I mused, “Even here, you smell like cinnamon.”

He made a sound of happiness in his throat and whispered, “Cinnamon is your favorite, right?”

“Mhmm. How did you know that?”

“You smell like my favorite scent, too.”

“I do?” He nodded, so I asked, “And what’s your favorite?”

“Itudo.”

“What’s that?” I didn’t recognize the Taoree word.

“It was a... fruit, I suppose is accurate. It used to grow on the Oreslum part of my home planet. When the Oreslum started to crumble, the itudo was just one of many things that died along with it.” He put his nose against my hair and took a deep breath. “I hadn’t smelled it since I was a young child until that day we met at the fence.”

“You smelled me from the other side of the fence?” I asked amusedly.

He nodded. “It was one of the many reasons I knew we were Balu.”

“What do you mean?”

“Besides the pull I felt toward you, your scent clued me in because Balu are made for one another in every way, so they always smell like each other’s favorite scents.”

I took that in for a little while before asking, “Are there other human-Taoree Balu pairings?”

He blew out a long breath. “Not that I know of.”

“Hm.” After another minute, I stated, “You accepted it easily enough.”

He didn’t say anything for a long time, so I thought he was going to accept the statement and move on. But when he spoke, he ran his fingertips over my cheek and smiled so softly that I had to cup his cheek just so I’d have more contact. “I felt drawn to Earth as soon as we could see it from space, and when we broke into Earth’s atmosphere, I knew exactly where I needed to go. The spot behind your house was not our original destination. I made my driver go off course. When we were floating in the air for the week before we were finally grounded, all I wanted to do was jump out of the ship and hunt you down.” He offered a little smile and started tracing my jawline. “But I couldn’t, and I didn’t want to put you in danger, so I stayed away. But then I felt you come up to that fence. I sensed you close and I had to get to you.”

He smiled in amusement. “When I saw the weird eye with whites and browns and a circular black pupil, I honestly didn’t know what the hell I was seeing at first. I had never seen a human in real life, I’d only seen some of the shows and such. It was kind of shocking and just so strange-looking.”

“Hey.” I laughed a little and gave him a small push.

He laughed back and grabbed my hand, kissed it, then put it flat on his chest. “But there was no denying my pull toward you. I wanted to go after you when you ran away that night, but I knew it would be safer for you to stay away, at least while I was so deep undercover. There was no way any Legion would’ve accepted us as Balu, whether they felt it to be

true or not. They would've killed you and either killed or tortured me. So I kept my distance. But I kept my eyes on you."

"You did? How?"

"I made sure to know where you were. Know your schedule and things like that."

I blinked at him. "You were totally stalking me."

He cringed. "No, I wasn't stalking you, I was making sure you were safe."

"By stalking me."

He sighed, resigned.

"You were like creepy-looking-in-my-window stalking me."

He sighed again. "I didn't stalk you."

I gasped. "You had a wall covered in pictures of me, didn't you? You followed me around and threatened my boyfriends and snuck into my house to steal locks of my hair and made a shrine and—"

He cut me off with a kiss and I laughed into his lips, but kissed him back fiercely.

When he leaned back he said, "You are the most frustrating human I've ever met."

I cupped his cheek and smiled. "You are the easiest Taoree to tease that I've ever met." He rolled his eyes, so I leaned up and kissed his forehead. "I'm lucky to have met you, Orrean, and I'm grateful to have you in my life."

He pulled me into a tight embrace, tucking my head under his chin and wrapping his arms and whole body around me. His whispered voice was soft, sure, and comforting. "You are my whole world, my Balu... and I wouldn't have it any other way."

We stayed there all night and I'd never been happier or more at peace. I was right where I was supposed to be.

Chapter Fifteen

Orr and I were woken by a knock on the front door of the suite. Orr was out of bed in a flash, calling out to the others, “Let me get it.” I wasn’t surprised that he wanted to answer it since we’d never had someone knock on our door before. I stood in my doorway and noticed Cal and Nolan in theirs too. “Can I help you?” I heard Orrean ask.

A voice I didn’t know said, “This is from Ozias.”

A moment later Orr said, “Thanks,” and the door slammed shut.

He came back to the bedroom door holding a piece of paper. “The Taoree you found,” he said to me, “he’s awake.”

My eyes went wide. “You mean the guy that... was skinned?”

Orr nodded. “Ozias wants me to meet him in the medical wing so we can question him.”

“Can I come with you?” I asked.

“Of course, but... he is still not... whole.”

I cringed at that, but nodded. I was still going to go with him. I looked at Cal and Nol. “Can one of you stay with the kids? I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“They’ll be fine, J. I’ll stay with them,” Cal said. The kids didn’t have school today, so they’d be home.

I nodded my thanks and went into my room to get dressed. I smiled at Orrean when he snatched Colt’s blue hat

off the dresser and placed it on my head as we headed out the door. It made me happy that he was always so willing to help me honor and remember Colt.

Ozias was waiting in the hall outside the room, looking pretty grim. He simply nodded at us, then held the door open and followed us in. I hadn't been to the medical wing since I was released from that clear tube and at that point, we'd been the only ones there, at least while I was awake. I hadn't needed to go to the medical wing otherwise. Orr and I healed our friends with the help of our juhères and the few times I'd been severely injured, Orrean had healed me without me even asking.

Now, though, this place was overcrowded and filled to the brim with people in pain. There were Taoree and humans on beds and in chairs, all in different states of health. They weren't even using curtains to block the patients from one another and give them privacy. There just wasn't enough room for the curtains. Well, for most of the curtains. There was one curtain pulled around a table all the way in the back. I had a feeling that was where we were going. I was sure they didn't want the others seeing just how badly the Taoree was hurt, or the fact that he hardly had any skin left on his body.

I felt like I was walking through a house of horrors as I passed the many injured men, women, and children.

Ozias pulled open the curtain and the three of us slipped inside. I cringed at the sight in front of me. I'd thought the guy would've looked a lot better than he had the other day, since he'd been healing for a few days, but he honestly didn't look any better. At. All. He was missing so much skin and I could still see his... insides, but at least they had white net-like sheets on top of his open wounds. I knew from the little bit of medical training I'd received over the months that it was a skin graft. Unfortunately, I could still see through them a little.

Ozias walked closer to the guy's head and quietly said, "Innaku? Are you awake?"

I gaped at Ozias.

“Innaku, we’d like to speak to you,” Ozias said softly.

“What did you just call him?” I asked in a whisper.

Ozias tilted his head at me. “His name is Innaku.”

I closed my eyes as the memory hit.

Orrean was sitting across from me in my old living room answering the questions thrown his way. Colt was beside me with his arm around my shoulders as he told us, “My Taoree friend, Innaku, was part of the Resistance. I believe the Independents do exist.”

“He knew Colt,” I whispered.

“What?” Orrean asked.

“He,” I pointed to the unconscious alien, “knew Colt. Don’t you remember when Colt told us about Innaku?”

Orrean slowly closed his eyes. “Yes, I remember.” Orrean was making a strange face that I couldn’t interpret.

“Is Colt here?” a rough, hoarse voice asked.

I looked over and saw that the alien was slowly blinking his dark-green eyes. I moved closer to his face and whispered, “I’m so sorry. He didn’t make it.”

Innaku closed his eyes and muttered almost under his breath, “I’m sorry, my friend.”

I cleared my throat. “We tried to meet you. We waited for you at your meeting spot, but you never came.”

He stared at me with furrowed brows. “Who are you?” His voice was quiet and pain-filled. I couldn’t even begin to fathom the amount of pain he was in.

“My name is Jeremy Ettner. Colt was my friend... my boyfriend in the end.”

“Jeremy?” he asked. I nodded. Something like a small smile formed on his barely-there lips. “He liked you.”

I felt tears in my eyes. “I liked him too.”

His smile fell. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." I hesitated, then said, "I'm sorry we didn't find you. I wish we would've waited longer or looked harder. I'm sorry for all you've endured."

He tried to shake his head a little, but grimaced and held still. He still sounded like he was in pain and having trouble talking, but he pushed through anyway. "No. You did the right thing. I'd already been captured... right after my last meeting with Colt, they arrested me."

My eyes went wide. "That was nearly a year ago."

"That long, huh?"

I nodded with wide eyes. "Were you tortured that whole time?"

"They would torture me, then throw me in a cage to heal, then torture me again and repeat. So no, it wasn't every day."

"What kind of information were they after?" Ozias interrupted.

Innaku blinked as he tried to focus on the other Taoree. "Ozias?"

"Yes, my old friend. You're safe at the Independent base."

"It's good to see you."

Ozias chuckled. "It's good to see you too, though I wish the circumstances were better."

Innaku smiled, then frowned. "They mostly seemed to do it for fun... like they enjoyed watching me suffer because I was a traitor." He coughed and it sounded like his lungs couldn't get enough oxygen. "And they always took as much skin as they could and saved it, but I don't know what they used it for. The most commonly asked question was where the Independent bases were located."

“And you never gave away the locations?” Ozias asked him.

“Of course not. I’m a professional.” Innaku looked offended. I, on the other hand, was disgusted that part of his job had required him keeping quiet when tortured. What kind of training had he undergone in order to prepare for keeping his mouth shut when he was *skinned alive*? I glanced at Orrean. Had he gone through the same training? Was he trained in being tortured? The thought made me shudder.

Orrean must’ve noticed because he placed his hand on the small of my back before asking Innaku, “Can you think of anything else they asked you?”

Innaku brought his attention to Orr. “You must be Orrean. I’ve heard about you.”

Orr nodded. “I’m sorry to meet under such terrible times, but it is good to meet you.”

I glanced at the three aliens. It was weird to me that Ozias had called Innaku an ‘old friend’ but Orrean didn’t even know him. I had to keep reminding myself that for the past twelve years, possibly longer for all I knew, Ozias and Orrean had lived completely separate lives, away from one another. I still didn’t understand how Orrean stood living that way for so long; surrounded by enemies, away from his true family, and unable to be himself without risking detection. I would’ve never survived that amount of loneliness.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” Innaku whispered.

“Don’t believe a word my brother says,” Orr said good-naturedly.

Innaku grinned, then frowned. “I remember them asking about specific names. Sometimes I recognized them, sometimes I didn’t. I didn’t tell them anything.”

“Why did they bother keeping you alive, then? If you weren’t talking?” Ozias asked.

Innaku glanced at him, then sighed. “I told you they were using my skin for some... project or something. But they also used me as a... they would torture me in front of others to get them to talk. I lasted longer than many, so it was easier to use me to get more information out of other people.” He looked away as if he was ashamed, as if it was his fault he was tortured or others were hurt.

I looked down and grabbed his hand, the uninjured one. Without thinking, I pushed my light into him, trying to heal his pain. I heard him gasp, which made me look around to see why he was gasping. To my utter surprise, I saw the skin around the gaping wound on his chest start to close up. It looked like he was growing skin right before my eyes. The outer ring of skin was gripping onto the skin graft that covered the wound and slowly climbing to the center. I pushed more light into him and he gasped again. The other large wounds on his cheek, legs, and arm all started growing closed too.

“J... you’re going to use too much energy.” Orrean’s concerned voice sounded distant, even though I knew he was right there.

Without a word, I grabbed Orrean’s hand with my free one. He immediately started pushing his light into me and we continued healing Innaku together. It took a few minutes and most of my energy, but soon Innaku’s injuries were all healed.

When I released my energy, I fell back a little, but Orrean was there to catch me and wrap me in his arms. I sank into him, completely depleted. I closed my eyes for a moment and wrapped my arms over his as I caught my breath. When I felt like I could, I opened my eyes, only to discover Innaku and Ozias both staring at me with wide eyes. But Innaku was sitting up, so I smiled at him.

“Feel better?” I asked.

He nodded slowly.

“Good.” I looked over my shoulder at Orr. “I’m really hungry now. We skipped breakfast, so can we go eat?”

He grabbed my head and kissed my temple, whispering, “Soon.” I grumbled, but was resigned to my fate because I could tell the aliens around me still wanted to talk. Orr looked at them. “Not a word to anyone.”

“Of course not,” Innaku whispered, then looked around the curtained area that was the opposite of private since there were probably a hundred people in the room with us.

Ozias asked him, “Can you walk?” Innaku nodded. “Okay, come with me... all of you.”

Since we were in the back of the room, Ozias was able to pull another curtain shut to block the back door from sight. Then we followed him out that door and all the way to his quarters where he shut and locked the door, then motioned for us to sit in the living room. I gratefully took a seat on the couch, then grabbed Orrean’s hand and yanked him down beside me. He looked a little surprised, but I didn’t really understand why.

I grabbed his hand and laced it with mine. Both our lights were weakened, but they could help replenish each other with our palms together. And I totally wanted to use his shoulder to lean on, so I did. He was stiff and stressed. I kissed his shoulder and he blew out a long breath, releasing just a hair of his tension.

When I looked around, I noticed that all the Taoree seemed seriously tense. *What the actual fuck?*

“What the fuck?” Apparently I couldn’t keep my mouth shut. “Why are you all being so weird?”

Ozias was the first to speak, though not until a long-ass minute of silence passed. “What you did down there should not be possible.”

“What do you mean? I just healed him. It’s not a big deal.” *God, why are Taoree always so damn serious?*

“Jer,” Orr said, looking down at me. I hadn’t moved off his shoulder. “Do you remember that I told you we can heal one another because we’re Balu and we could heal Wes

because he's a blood relative?" I nodded. "For everyone else, you need to use a juhere... but you just healed Innaku without one."

"Oh." I just shrugged.

Orr closed his eyes. "If someone finds out you have this ability, they will try to exploit it."

"You think someone's going to make me, what? Heal people to death?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I think. That they will make you heal people to *your* death."

I opened my mouth, then snapped it shut. Then I shrugged. "Okay, so we don't tell anyone, got it."

"People will see Innaku and want to know how he healed so fast," Ozias said.

I had nothing to say to that.

Innaku cleared his throat. "Then I will stay hidden until enough time has passed that a juhere and the skin grafts would've healed me."

Ozias nodded. "That is the only option. You can stay here. I have an extra room."

I narrowed my eyes at Ozias, thinking about how he could've offered Tenj a place to stay if he had an extra room. What a dickhead, douchenugget, cocknozzle, buttmunch.

Ozias smiled at me. "I know what you're thinking."

"I highly doubt you'd be smiling, then."

He chuckled, then sobered and said, "I am hardly home, so I couldn't offer Tenj a place to stay. If he were older and okay on his own, I would have, but I cannot take care of a child, let alone one with medical issues, when I have so many other responsibilities and my hours are always changing."

I narrowed my eyes at him, then thought about it. I *guess* I could understand that he had a busy schedule, what

with running the whole war and whatnot, but still... Ugh. And I *guess* I did have others living with me that could help, so maybe I did understand... a little. "I'll give you a pass... this time."

Orrean let out a resigned sigh, but Ozias chuckled at me. Innaku's eyebrows rose to his hairline. I guess he wasn't used to people speaking to their leader that way, but whatever. He'd get used to me after a while.

When Orrean and I left the apartment, I whispered, "Do you know why I could do that?"

"I don't know, Balu. Maybe because you're human?"

I wrinkled my nose. "That doesn't make sense. Humans can't do any of the shit you Taoree can."

He just shrugged, then grabbed my hand to continue replenishing our lights as we walked down to the mess hall, where we figured Cal would've taken Mandy and Tenj by now. Luckily we found them.

As soon as my ass was on the seat, Cal said, "What the fuck happened to you? You look like shit."

"You're always so kind," I said with a roll of my eyes. "I'll tell you later." As soon as Orr sat beside me, I grabbed his hand. Not only did I want the contact, but our lights still needed to heal one another. The food would help, but I figured I'd feel crappy till tomorrow.

Cal eyed me, then nodded and turned his attention to Orrean. "So, Orr, since you're now with my best friend, I have a few questions for ya."

"Oh god," I muttered. "Really, Cal? As if you haven't been living with him for like eight months or some shit."

Cal completely ignored me and asked Orr, "What are your intentions toward J?"

Orr chuckled, looking at Cal amusedly, and said, "I have many *intentions* toward him."

I snorted at that and elbowed him.

Cal narrowed his eyes and said, “I won’t let you hurt him.”

My eyes widened at his seriousness. I’d thought he was only joking around.

“Of course not. I would never hurt him,” Orr said quietly, making me look at him. Now he looked serious too. *What the hell?*

“Wow, okay.” I cleared my throat. “Both of you need to chill out.” Poor Tenj was just sitting there looking back and forth between them.

“We know you have at least one crazy, asshole brother. Are you going to have any other random family members pop up on us, Orrean?” Cal asked him, still completely ignoring me.

“Oh, I forgot that you have a sister,” I said, trying to insert myself into the conversation. “What’s her name again? Where is she?”

Orrean looked at me with a sad look on his face and whispered, “Her name’s Tyzlihin... that is a long story and not something I wish to speak of in the mess hall. May I tell you at home?”

“Of course.” I kissed his shoulder, then left my cheek there and said to Cal, “Are you done with your crazy-talk?” He narrowed his eyes at me, so I rolled mine at him. “You’re being absolutely ridiculous.”

I was surprised that Orr was the one that argued, “He loves you and wants to make sure you’re safe.”

I sighed at that and muttered, “Whatever.” But I still noticed Cal and Orrean exchange a few looks, almost like they were speaking telepathically. I had no clue what they were doing. So I looked at Tenj and said in Taoree, “Has Mandy been able to translate for you?”

“Yes,” he answered softly.

I nodded. The kid admitted last night that he understood most of what was said in English, but he couldn't speak it, so Mandy would've had to translate anything Tenj said to Cal today. Cal understood very little Taoree and spoke even less. I said to Tenj, "I'm glad. Is your new room okay? We can paint over the walls if you'd like? Figure out something that you like instead?"

"I like the walls," he said with a small smile.

Nolan and Tabby ended up bringing food over for us and we all sat there and ate, though I barely moved off of Orr's shoulder. Even after the food, I was still really depleted, so we all wound up sticking around in the mess hall for a while, just talking. Luckily, Cal and Orr's weird *whatever the hell it was* had seemed to pass and everyone was in a pretty good mood.

"Orrean, I need you to come with me." Ozias's sudden voice startled me. He sounded fierce yet sad.

Orrean stood, so I nodded at Cal, who nodded back, then I gently squeezed Tenj's shoulder and said, "We'll see you in a bit, buddy."

He nodded, so I stood and followed Orrean. I heard Ozias sigh after he looked back to see me following them, but Orr reached back and grabbed my hand. Apparently sighing at me was no longer restricted to only one twin. *Fun.*

When we reached the control room, there were pictures running over all the monitors... pictures of the Northern Independent Base... or what was left of it. There was so much smoke it was hard to see, but I could still see the lick of the flames shooting high up into the sky. What I saw under the smoke, though, that was the most terrifying thing. There was just a... crater. A huge hole in the earth with pieces of metal and brick and wood burned to a crisp.

I looked at another monitor that was circling the area around the crater. There were bodies... so many fucking bodies and body... parts... and So. Much. Blood. I had to look away.

I wanted to scream and cry and flip the fuck out because seeing that base destroyed like that... fuck... How the fuck were we ever going to win this war? How the fuck were we ever going to take the Legion down when our Northern reinforcements were destroyed?

I swallowed hard at the implications... at the fact that so much of my hope had been shattered with one small glimpse of the destruction in front of me.

What the fuck are we going to do?

“Play it back, Owen,” Ozias said quietly.

Owen pushed a few buttons so all the screens were playing the same thing. We watched as Taoree Legion surrounded the crater and started shooting anyone that tried to escape the flames. Head shot after head shot after head shot. The Legion were killing anyone that moved, there was no prejudice between humans or Taoree escaping. There were bug-bots crawling around too. With their eight legs, they had an easier time climbing and squeezing into places the aliens couldn't. But even when someone crawled their way out of the wreckage, the Taoree Legion were there to shoot them, no matter their species, or even their age. It made me sick to my stomach to watch, but I couldn't seem to escape it, no matter which direction I looked.

“How long ago did this happen?” Orrean asked.

Until that moment, I hadn't realized I was squeezing his hand in a death grip. I had to make a conscious effort to loosen my hold.

“It's been about three hours. We started keeping an eye out when we had trouble making radio contact with them. We... watched it happen, but there was nothing we could do. By the time we saw it, it was too late to save them from the explosion,” Ozias said.

“Is the Legion still patrolling the area?” Orrean asked.

“It looks like the bulk of their force has pulled back already. The area is nearly cleared now.”

Orrean just stared, taking in all the videos around us. Eventually he asked, “Do we have eyes on the escape tunnel?”

Ozias shook his head. “There are too many trees covering the area.”

“Escape tunnel?” I asked.

I expected Orrean to answer me, but Ozias did instead. “Our Northern base has, uh, *had* an escape tunnel, much like our own, that opened into a safe house about a mile away from the base.” I’d completely forgotten that there was an emergency tunnel off of the lower levels of this place.

“Do we have a video feed from the safe house?” Orr asked.

Ozias shook his head. “All their comms and monitors must’ve been destroyed in the blast.”

Orrean blew out a breath, still searching the monitors. After another minute, he said, “Four teams in two hours. I’m taking lead.”

“There might not be much left,” Ozias said softly.

Orrean looked his brother in the eyes. “We still have to try. Even if we only rescue one person, we have to try.”

Ozias nodded slowly. “Okay. You sure you need four teams?”

“No, but four would be better if you can spare them.”

“Okay, they’ll be ready in two hours.”

Orrean nodded, then started to head for the door, pulling me with him.

“Hey, Orrean?” Ozias said.

Orr looked over his shoulder at him.

“Be safe, brother,” Ozias said.

Orr nodded. “Thrive and love.”

Ozias smiled sadly as he responded quietly, “As bright as the stars.”

As Orr pulled me out the door, I asked, “What is that little saying you and Ozias do?”

“What is your meaning?” he asked.

I snorted, glad to forget the devastation I’d just seen and focus on something else, something good, something Orrean. Sometimes he cracked me up with how he used some of my slang easily, but then he’d turn around and ask a question like that. “Is that just something that you and Ozias do, or is that some kind of Taoree thing or something? I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone else say that.”

“Oh, I see. Ozias and I started saying that when we were young. We used to climb up to the Oreslum—you know, the outer ring of my planet—with our mother and stargaze. Then when we were older, the stars were our escape when we didn’t have one.”

I rubbed my thumb over the back of his hand as he pulled me. After a moment, I asked, “What happened to your parents?”

His steps faltered, but he soon picked up his pace as he answered, “That is another long story that I’d rather not speak of before we go on a mission. Would it be okay with you if I told you another time?”

“Of course,” I said softly.

He stopped suddenly, jerking my arm to stop beside him. He cupped my cheek with his free hand and whispered, “It’s not that I do not wish to share, it’s just... hard. And I do not wish to lose focus.” He obviously thought I was upset with him.

I placed my hand over his and pressed my cheek farther into his palm. “I understand, Orr. You can tell me whenever you’re ready.”

He blew out a breath, then closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against mine. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” I placed a soft kiss on his lips, then pulled away and whispered, “Come on, we need to tell the others.”

He took a shaky breath, then nodded. “Let’s go.”

As we rode in the back of a truck, I closed my eyes to try to ease my nerves, regain my energy and replenish my light. Of course the guys were all talking around me, but Cal’s voice broke through my relaxation. “So... Orrean?” *Oh god, what does he want this time?*

“Yeah?”

“I know you guys came here because your planet, uh, Orlia, is dying or whatever, right?” I opened one eye and saw Orrean nod. Cal nodded back and asked, “Okay, so I get that, but why is it... why are you guys kinda human-like? Or humanoid or whatever you want to call it?”

Orrean eyed him, then sighed. “Our planet’s ecosystem is similar to Earth’s, so we evolved similarly, only Taoree are a few million years older than humans.”

“So, like, you guys are just more evolved than humans?”

“Yes,” Orr said with another sigh.

“You moved in like a horde of sexy locusts,” Cal said.

My eyes widened as I let out a laugh. “Did you just call Orr sexy? Something you wanna share, Cal?”

“That wasn’t who I was thinking of,” he muttered, and I didn’t miss the way his eyes shot over to Sanjha.

I exchanged a look with Nolan, who simply shrugged at me, obviously not missing Cal’s significant look, either.

Nolan looked upset, so I asked, “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head, but Tabby answered, “He’s mad at me.”

When Nolan didn’t deny it, I asked, “Why?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Tabby huffed and mirrored his position, both of them looking away from each other. I decided not to get in the middle of... whatever that was, because they were both visibly pissed. Instead, I looked at Cal with a grin. “You think Orrean’s sexy.”

“Not what I meant,” he mumbled.

Orr and I chuckled at that as I leaned back and closed my eyes again.

“How long is it going to take to get there?” Cal asked, clearly wishing to change the subject. Somehow I managed to hold in my laugh—somehow, though it was freaking close.

With yet another sigh, Orr answered, “We’ve only been driving for six hours, so I’d say at least another eighteen, though twenty is more likely since we’ll need to avoid certain areas. Hopefully we don’t run into anything that will delay us.” Orr sighed again.

“Are you sighing like that to try and get me to stop talking to you?” Cal asked.

“Yes,” Orr said with another sigh. I couldn’t help but grin at that.

“I’m just trying to distract myself. This is making me antsy.”

I opened my eyes and looked seriously at Cal. “We’re going to be okay.”

He nodded at me, but bit his lip, not looking like he believed me at all.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Wes said quietly from next to Cal.

All of us stared at him, but I asked, “What do you mean?”

My brother shrugged. “Just a feeling I get sometimes... I sorta... think something bad’s gonna happen.”

I stared at him for a long moment before saying, “It’s going to be okay. We’re going to be alright.” I tried to sound convincing, but even I could hear the slight tremble in my voice. If Wes had a bad feeling... well, that meant there was most likely something to fear.

“Yeah,” Wes said with the worst pretend smile ever, “it’s probably nothing.”

Cal exchanged a look with me and I could see the trepidation in his eyes. I saw Nolan reach for Tabby’s hand, though the two still weren’t looking at one another, and I, in turn, reached for Orrean’s hand. I turned Colt’s hat around so the rim covered my eyes. I wanted to block out everything else—not that it worked, really—and I didn’t want Wes to catch me watching him. I leaned my cheek on Orr’s shoulder, and I felt some of his tension fade away, but I didn’t miss the way he kept glancing at Wes every time he thought Wes was looking a different way. It was going to be a long-ass drive.

Chapter Sixteen

As soon as I exited the truck, I saw at least a hundred bug-bots all around us. And it looked like most of them were heading our way, so I turned my hat backwards so I could see better. Luckily, the other three trucks were right behind us. We'd gone pretty slow so we wouldn't get separated, which added probably four hours onto our commute, but I was grateful we had reinforcements. There was no way we'd be able to take all those fucking bug-bots down ourselves.

Fucking bug-bots.

I pulled my spear from behind my back as Orrean yelled, "Prepare yourselves. They're going to reach us before the next truck catches up."

I glanced at the truck that was maybe one minute away, then I looked at the incoming bug-bots that were maybe twenty seconds away. Fucking hell. *I think I hate bug-bots more than I hate Ferals.*

I squatted down with my spear in front of me so I could take the first one down from under its belly. A second later the evil little thing crashed into my spear. I pushed and used its own momentum to bring it up into the air a little and slam it down into the bug-bot behind it, knocking it onto its back. I re-gripped the spear and jumped, pushing the spear with my body weight through the bug-bot and into the one underneath it, rendering them powerless. It was kind of sad that *that* had been a practiced maneuver used on many, many bug-bots over the months. It worked, but it also sacrificed my spear to do it. Luckily, we'd all learned to carry several on our

backs since the bugs often tended to knock and grab the spears out of our hands.

I reached back and grabbed my second spear, just as another bug came over the two I'd killed. I didn't have time to get underneath the newcomer before it jumped, launching itself at my chest. I raised my arm in front of me, my forearm taking the brunt of the hit and making me grunt. The bug merely fell back, landing on its feet. Because of course it did.

I twisted my upper body to bring the side of the spear in front of the bug, distracting it. While it was focused on that spear, I reached over my shoulder with my right hand and grabbed another spear, yanking it out, then down as quickly as I could. The spear tip cut through the clear top but didn't penetrate the blue light, so I released my other spear and used both hands to push it farther into the bug's body. Luckily, it was enough to stab the blue light, making the bug go dark and freeze.

I had to reach back to grab my fourth spear. I only had eight left after this one. Since more were already coming, I didn't have time to bend down and pick the one up from the ground, and I didn't want to risk lifting my leg too high in order to push the last bug off that spear. A bug climbed on top of my double-bug-kabob, looking like it was ready to launch at me, so I held my spear out, ready and braced for impact.

Suddenly there was a loud bang and the bug flew back off the bug-kabob. I kept my spear at the ready as the third truck, with its machine gun armed with bug-bot arrows instead of bullets, pulled up toward us. After a couple minutes, the loud-as-shit machine gun stopped firing and all the bug-bots fell still.

"Holy shit," Wes panted from beside me. "That was fucking loud. Every damn Feral within fifty miles is going to be headed this way."

"We should probably hurry, then." Orrean sounded annoyed, though not at us. Using that machine gun was a bad fucking idea. What the fuck had they been thinking?

“Lead the way,” I said, trying to catch my breath.

“Why do you think there were so many of them?” Wes asked as we followed behind Orr with our reelians ready.

I shrugged. “Maybe they heard the explosion yesterday? There’s probably a lot of bug-bots and Ferals in the vicinity.”

He nodded. “True, though I don’t see any Ferals.”

“That’s really weird,” Tabby said from behind us.

I agreed wholeheartedly, so I nodded.

“Alright, the entrance should be up on the left,” Nolan said to Orrean as he pointed. Nolan and Orr had been studying the maps of the area for hours, so I trusted that they knew where they were going, even if I couldn’t see where in the hell the entrance was. Apparently the safe house was well-hidden within the trees.

Orrean nodded and the two started heading that way with the rest of us following. When they got to what I could finally see was a door camouflaged with moss, leaves, and dirt, all of us took our positions, preparing for them to open it. When our team was set with our backup right behind us, Nolan held up a sziej—Taoree lockpicker—to the lock and we heard the little machine work its magic. Then Orrean silently counted with head nods and threw the door open. I was holding my breath, hoping that some Independent survivors would make their presence known to us, but nothing happened.

After waiting a moment, Orrean went in, followed by Cal, then Wes and me, with Nolan holding the door open for everyone. Tabby was guarding Nolan’s back, just in case, while the other teams followed our lead.

I followed my brother down a long hallway that opened up into a room with a few cafeteria-style tables in it, but we didn’t run into anyone. There were two sets of doors at the other end of the room, so Orr waited for the team behind us to file in, then he pointed them toward one door while my

team followed him to the other. Once again, Orr nodded three times, then threw the door open. Nothing happened, so he walked in and we followed in the same order.

When I passed the door, I was surprised that the next room was at least twice as big as the room we'd come out of, and that the other team's door led to the same place. The room was a large rectangle with a second floor that overlooked it, with tall rails and several doors all along the walls up there. I figured that there must be some bedrooms up there, and maybe some offices. They probably used this part of the big room as a place to set up extra cots once all the bedrooms filled up, though it had several round tables in it at the moment. I didn't think it was a good sign that we hadn't run into anyone yet.

"It's, like, eerily quiet," Cal whispered to me when he let me catch up to him.

I nodded, because it was. *Creepy.*

"We need to search all the rooms and check the escape tunnel." Orrean's voice was quiet, but firm. "There could be a collapse. Maybe that's why it seems that no one is here... the tunnel could be blocked." He sounded in control, but I could tell that he was upset and extremely worried. We were hoping to rescue survivors, not just explore an empty safe house.

People started forming smaller groups to search, but there was a sudden, loud banging sound that made me jump. I looked around, trying to place the noise and found that the doors leading into the large room had been shut... both sets of doors.

I didn't have time to react or warn anyone by the time I realized what was happening.

We were trapped.

The quiet room was suddenly thrown into complete chaos as the sounds of reelians being shot and people screaming filled the air. Taoree Legion men, in their stupid grey jumpsuits, burst through the doors up on the balcony and began shooting down at us. Everyone was running, trying to

take cover from the onslaught of bullets. Bug-bots started making their way over the balcony and jumping down into the fray.

I grabbed the back of Wes's collar and pulled him with me under the balcony. As I pushed my brother behind me, I got a reelian bullet to the shoulder. I cried out in pain, but I had to ignore it and protect Wes, so I pushed him farther under the balcony. The Taoree above us couldn't reach us from here, though the ones across the room surely could. When a flurry of reelian bullets headed our way and we had nowhere to hide, I used my linhu to shield both me and Wes. It made me grunt as I took the pressure of the bullets, but I held it for a full minute before we got a break.

I dropped my linhu as Wes said, "We need to get to that door." He pointed to a door I hadn't noticed yet, so I nodded at him. We were too far away from the doors we'd come in through and most of the Independents were trying to go back that way, so I didn't think we'd make it through the crowd, anyway.

We ducked down and I followed him, covering my head with my arms as best I could. A bug-bot jumped right in front of us, going after Wes. I grabbed one of my spears, and with it concentrating on Wes, I was able to bring the spear down quickly from the side. Wes nodded at me, then we kept going toward that door.

I looked around, trying to find my friends and family as we walked. I saw Cal, Lee, and Sanjha ducking behind a table turned on its side, trying to use it as a shield... not that it made a good one considering some of the bullets could easily pass through it. I didn't see Orrean anywhere, but I could sense that he was, at the very least, still alive. I kept searching, but I couldn't find Nolan anywhere, either. I was praying that he'd found a good hiding spot, that he wasn't one of the many bodies lying on the floor covered in blood.

"Wes," I hissed, "we need to help Cal."

Wesley stopped and looked at me, then to where I'd nodded. "There's no way we're getting to him without being shot."

"We can't just leave him!" I practically shouted. Normally that'd be a bad thing, but it was so loud in there that it went unnoticed.

"We'll be shot, Jeremy." Wes's voice was firm, but not without passion. "If we try to get to him, we'll both die."

"I'm not leaving Cal." I started heading toward my friend, but Wes put an arm across my chest, stopping me. "Let go of me!" I yelled through clenched teeth. "We need to get him, Wesley. He would never leave us!"

Wes grabbed my uniform and got right in my face. "The best thing we can do is sneak out and find a way to attack the Legion up there from behind." He pointed up to the balconies, then pushed my chest a little. "That is how we help him. That's how we save *everyone*."

I looked around at the chaos, at the dead bodies and the people screaming in pain, and I knew he was right, but I didn't want to leave my best friend out there in the middle of all of that. I looked back at Cal and he made a shooing motion at me, telling me to get the hell out of there. I shook my head and he rolled his eyes, but immediately had to duck and cover his head as some bullets flew over him. When he looked at me again, he yelled, "Go! Get outta here," but I couldn't hear his voice over the sound of flying bullets and dying men.

Wes grabbed onto me and pulled me along. When we got to the door, I looked back at my best friend and watched in horror as he got shot in the chest. *No!* I saw him scream in pain. *No! There's so much blood.* I saw Sanjha grab him, trying to stop the bleeding. *There's too much blood. How can there be that much?* Wes pulled me through the door before I could tell whether or not Cal was going to be okay, but his pale face and bleeding body were etched into my brain.

The door slammed shut, the big metal door cutting out the sounds of people fighting for their lives. I tried to get it back open, but my asshole brother was leaning against it, blocking it from me.

“Let me through! Get the fuck outta my way, Wes. I need to heal him!”

“He’s going to be okay,” Wes said.

“We need to go back in there, Wesley.”

“He’s going to be okay.”

“You don’t know that!” I screamed as Wes continued to block the door.

“I know,” he said quietly. I finally took a look at him and could see that he was struggling to keep it together, that he was having just as hard of a time with this as I was. He was just handling it differently. “His best chance is for us to get up there and start taking these bastards out, okay? The only way he’ll make it is if we can stop them from shooting at them.”

“He’s dying, Wes... Cal’s...”

Wes pushed my shoulder. “Hey. You need to snap out of it. Stop feeling and think. We need to help our people, Jeremy. Get your shit together.”

I knew he was right, so I took a shaky breath, angrily wiped the moisture from my cheek, then nodded. Wes pushed off the door and I followed my brother, who acted as if he’d been here before and knew exactly where he was going. My shoulder was bleeding and felt like it was on fire, but I guess I had enough adrenaline in my system to ignore it for the moment. As we walked, I tried to stop the blood flow with an *angi*—an emergency bandage that slowed blood loss when you couldn’t perform surgery on the field, since a *juh* couldn’t heal with a bullet still inside you—but I whispered, “Did you... did you see Nolan? Or Orrean?”

He shook his head. “No, I couldn’t find them.”

When the first door Wes opened was the stairwell leading upstairs, I asked, “How do you know where you’re going?”

“I... don’t know. It’s like I’ve been here before...” he said, his voice quiet, “but almost like I... dreamed it.”

I stopped in my tracks. “You dreamed about this place?”

He nodded. “More than once.”

What the actual fuck? “Was there anyone here with you?”

He started up the steps. “What do you mean?”

I followed. “When you dream about this place, is there someone here with you?”

“Uh... I’m not sure?” he said it like it was a question. He thought for a moment, then said, “I usually feel like there’s someone watching me, but I’ve never seen anyone.” He waved me off when he reached the door that I assumed led out to that balcony. “I’m going to crack this open and look so we can formulate a plan, okay? I want to take out as many of those bastards as possible before...”

When he didn’t finish, I supplied, “Before they kill us.”

He frowned, but nodded.

It was a weird thing, letting my brother take charge like this. But I knew he was perfectly capable. He was a better fighter than me, even if I’d never admit that to him out loud. He’d always been better at all the athletic, physical stuff, something I was loath to admit. I’d always been the artist while he was the athlete.

After he spent maybe fifteen seconds inspecting whatever was on the other side of that door—though from the sounds drifting in, we were definitely in the right place—he shut it and whispered to me, “There’s three directly in front of the door, then another off to the left. The rest are more than

twenty feet away, so we'll have worry about them after we take down these four. I can't see very far to the right." He pointed as he counted out, "One, two, three, four." I knew he was referring to where our enemies were on the other side of the door. "You take one and three, I'll take two and four. You're taller, so you go high, I'm low."

"Got it," I said as I stood behind him with my reelians ready.

"Once we take down those four, we can let the rest come to us since this metal door makes a nice shield."

"Okay," I agreed easily, since that made sense and was part of our training, anyway.

"Alright... one... two... three." Wes threw the door open enough that we could each fit two reelians through it.

I fired a head shot at Legion One and the force made him hit the rail, but his body slid down to the ground, dead. Legion Three had a little more warning, so my first shot only grazed the side of his head. He moved quickly, but I got another shot off before I had to duck behind the door, using it to block the bullets he'd sent flying at me.

"He's down," Wes said, still kneeling in the doorway.

I nodded—not that he saw since he was concentrating on shooting—then I moved back over top of him and prepared to take down as many of those nasty bastards as possible. I aimed, ignoring my shoulder even though it was slowing me down, and fired a shot at a Legion guy that was maybe twenty feet away. It hit him in the arm rather than the chest, so I shot him again, making sure to get him in his heart. A reelian was not a good weapon for distance, so aiming for a larger target—like his chest—was a far better option than trying for a head shot. We really needed to start carrying *reelianosiz*, which were basically reelian rifles. They were heavy as shit, though, so we never had them on us.

The Legion guy went down slowly, but I could tell that he wouldn't be getting back up.

I shot another Legion Taoree that had started heading our way, firing at us. It took me three shots to get him down, but he did go down. I scanned the area and realized that Wes had killed five more Legions in the time I'd taken down two.

Dude was kinda badass.

“We’re going to have to open the door and aim the other way,” he said. “The rest are smart enough not to come within range.”

“We won’t have a shield that way,” I reminded him.

He nodded, then stood up and shut the door to examine it. After a moment, he asked, “Do you think there’s a way to pull these hinges out?”

I looked at them. “Uh... maybe we can use a spear? The tip might be able to break through that metal since it looks like it’s made of nzok.” Wes gave me a blank look, so I elaborated, “The metal the bug-bots are made of. Our spears are made to penetrate it.”

“Good idea,” he said, grabbing one of his spears and pushing it against the hinge.

It took about two minutes—we stopped every thirty seconds to open the door and make sure no Legions were sneaking up on us—but we got the door off the hinges.

“Okay, one more check to the left, then we’ll push the door out and use it as a shield so we can take out some Legion on the right,” Wes said.

“Alright, I have the door.” I nodded three times, then held the door open a little so Wes could check and shoot anyone coming close.

He shot his reelian three times while I struggled with the heavy-ass door, my shoulder making the task even more difficult. It was bleeding through the angi bandage, which was a seriously bad sign since those things typically stopped all but the most severe bleeding. I’d lost a lot of blood already, too. I

really needed to pull out the bullet so I could heal the wound with my juhere.

Wes moved and pushed the door back in place. I was out of breath, but he said, “You ready?”

“Yeah, let’s do this.”

He stood and the two of us pulled the door back toward us, tilted and turned it on its side, then pushed it out the doorway with us ducking behind it. The bottom end was still against the doorframe, helping to keep the door up on its side. Reelian bullets started hitting the door immediately. I held one of my reelians out, aiming it toward anyone that dared to come too close to our unprotected side.

“You cover our backs, I’ll pop up and shoot the bastards on the other side,” Wes said.

I didn’t really like the idea of him putting himself in danger like that, but I knew we had a better shot of taking more Legion down if he was the one aiming, so I said, “Be careful.”

“I will.” Wes’s voice was a little softer than it’d been the entire time we’d been fighting. Wes leaned up and shot his reelian twice before sinking back down, with a “Shit” on his lips.

“What’s wrong?” I asked before taking a shot and missing—normally my aim was a lot better than this, but shit, my shoulder was screwing me right now—a Legion that kept ducking behind the rails perpendicular to us. The bastard kept shooting at us, but luckily his aim didn’t seem any better than mine. Though I saw a couple more Taoree join him over there. *Freaking great.*

“There’s at least ten of them and when they’re not shooting at us, they’re still shooting down into the first floor. Some of our guys are still trapped down there.”

“Fuck,” I muttered. I glanced over the rail, but had to look away. It looked like a slaughterhouse. I didn’t want to look too close for fear of seeing all the people I’d come to

know over the past eight months, so I looked away and thought for a moment. “Do you want to tag team?”

He nodded. “Yeah, that’s good. Four shots at a time, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Kay, I’m going in,” he muttered before looking up and shooting his reelian four times—I waited, but none of the assholes came at us from the other side—then he sat back down.

I immediately took my turn, popping up over the door and shooting at the Legions that were slaughtering my people down below. I had to rely on my right arm doing most of the work since my left was slowly losing more and more strength. I shot one in the neck—dammit—then shot another in the chest—he went down—and my next bullet grazed a guy’s shoulder. I shot another time, but ducked back down because several of them started shooting at me. Wes started to go back up for his next turn, but I grabbed his arm and pulled him down, shaking my head.

Luckily, he didn’t protest.

The Legion perpendicular from us started shooting at us too, so I switched to my other reelian—my first needed a chance to reload itself—and started shooting at them. Wes got one in the head and they paused their shooting. Lucky for us.

But unluckily, I heard loud footsteps coming from the stairwell.

Fucking hell, we were about to be surrounded... and probably dead.

“You know I love you, right?” I whispered to Wes.

He rolled his eyes at me, then flicked me really fucking hard in the nose. “Don’t do that, you asshole. It’s just Orr and Bek coming... how do you not pay the fuck attention to your senses?” And with that he looked back over the door and started shooting again.

I didn't say anything because he had a point, though I didn't understand how *he* could tell it was them. God, when did my little brother grow up and become so wise?

As soon as I saw Orrean's face as he walked up the stairs, I breathed a sigh of relief, and saw him breathe out too. Even though I'd known deep down that he was alive, it wasn't the same as being able to see him in person.

He had blood on his cheek, hand, and stomach, though I didn't know if it was his or someone else's. But he smiled, just a tiny bit, at me and I felt my light sing. I shot him a small smile back before turning and shooting my reelian.

I'd hardly even noticed Bek with him, but the huge Taoree somehow managed to move in front of me and sit beside me, all the while shooting at those stupid assholes behind the rail that wouldn't die. Orrean was now on the other side of Wes, helping him shoot at the bastards on the other side of the door.

When the two of them sat down, I asked, "Anyone seen Cal or Nolan?"

"No," both Orr and Bek said, but Bek added, "Haven't seen anyone but Orr when he pulled me out from behind the trashcan I was using as a shield."

Fuck. Fuckity fucking fuck.

Bek interrupted my mental freak-out. "I'm going to crawl a little closer and try to take those guys out." He pointed to the railing crew, so I nodded. "I got your backs, you three take down the others."

We agreed, so Bek started army-crawling and the three of us popped up at the same time, trying to shoot the others. I got one in the head with my first—lucky—shot, then I shot three more times before I had to duck down and switch my reelians again.

When Wes plopped beside me, I heard this booming laughter, like it was being played over a loudspeaker. Wes and I exchanged terrified looks. I had no clue who in the hell that

voice belonged to. I only knew that whoever it was, was absolute, no-doubt-in-my-mind, complete and utter *evil*. *Fucking. Pure. Evil.* I didn't know how I knew that, I didn't know why some guy's laughter would send chills down my spine, and I didn't know why my thoughts were reflected back to me in my brother's face. But I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he felt the exact same way.

"Thelonious," Orrean whispered.

I looked at my Balu, and he glanced at me for a second before taking off at a run into the stairwell and down the steps. I looked at my brother and before I knew it, he was running after Orrean too. *What the fucking fuck!*

"Damn assholes," I muttered. Of course it'd be those two trying to play hero or some shit. I wasn't even surprised. *Idiots!* I started to get up, but I couldn't. Not with Bek still up here. "Bek!" I yelled. He was too far away to hear me, so I did the only thing I could do. I stood up and started shooting the guys on the other side of the door. There were only four of them left. If Bek was going to have my back, I'd have his. I'd just have to pray that Wes and Orr could take care of each other until I could catch up to them.

And when this whole thing was over, I'd kick both their asses for running off like that. Stupid bitches.

I was able to kill another Legion on the other side of the door, but I had to duck back down. My shoulder was starting to burn worse with every passing second, but I tried to ignore it.

Bek was firing shot after shot, so I switched out my reelians and stood back up. It took two more reelian switches to kill the other three Legions. When I slumped back on the door, I gasped because Bek was lying facedown with blood pouring out of his head. "Bek?" He didn't answer. "Bek?" He still didn't answer and I didn't see his chest moving.

God dammit. Not Bek... not another friend.

I had to push down my feelings so I could find the rest of my family. I couldn't dwell on this. After this shit was over, I'd mourn my fallen comrades and friends, but right now, I had a job to do. And we were dropping like flies.

The guys on the other side of the balcony started running toward me, shooting, so I had no choice but to pull up my linhu and run into the stairwell. I didn't even think twice. Bek was dead and I couldn't hold off that many Legion by myself, so I ran... away from them, but toward my Balu and brother... wherever the fuck they'd gone.

I didn't know what was leading me, but I ran as fast as I could through a series of hallways. I was still losing blood, but I pushed that thought to the back of my mind. My Balu needed me. I could feel it. He needed me and I was going to get to him. I'd get to him and help him. I didn't care what I had to do. I could see the doorway I needed to go through, but suddenly I felt something hit me in the back and an electrical pulse shot through my body, making my muscles freeze and forcing me to fall to one knee.

You've got to be kidding me. I was shot with an enkpi?

"Ultoka Renum demano," I heard snarled behind me.
Stupid human.

"Fuck... you," I breathed out as soon as the pulse stopped.

I heard more than one person laughing, but before I could turn around, the pulse went through me again and one of the bastards hit me in the back of the head, making me fall forward onto my stomach. When the pain from the pulse stopped, it took all of my energy to flip onto my back, though I lost my hat in the process.

Oh fucking fuck! There were three Taoree Legion staring down at me... laughing.

I am so gonna die.

One of them started speaking in Taoree, oblivious of my ability to understand him. "This scrawny little runt is the

one that killed twenty men?”

“Yes, but he had help,” another answered.

“The others went where?” the third asked.

As they discussed where my ‘helpers’ went, I started moving my hands to my reelians. My body was still jolting from being electrocuted, but I knew if I didn’t get my hands on my weapons, I was going to die, probably painfully, and if I was dead, I couldn’t help the rest of my people.

They were arguing about how they wanted to kill me, so I used the distraction to my advantage. I gripped a reelian in each of my hands, then lifted them and pulled the triggers. I hit one Legion in the head, but the other bullet missed, hitting the wall behind the guy because my hand jerked from the freaking electricity.

The two remaining Taoree ducked and the one guy used the dead alien’s body as a shield—smart one, that guy. The other alien lunged for me, so I shot both reelians at him, hoping one of the bullets would stick. I got him in the chest and he started coughing up blood as he fell. He landed right on my lower body, pinning me to the ground.

The only guy left said in Taoree from behind his dead-body-shield, “You shouldn’t have done that.”

I pushed up onto an elbow, dropped one reelian and reached behind myself for a spear. Then I used as much force as I could to sit up and push the spear through the dead body and into the Taoree behind it, making that dickhead cry out. I figured that tactic had worked on bug-bots, so why not?

However, the Taoree wasn’t dead yet, so I pushed the other one off my legs, then shakily got to my feet and walked over to him. I raised my reelian to his head and panted out in Taoree, “You shouldn’t... have killed... my friends.” Then I pulled the trigger.

I scooped my other reelian off the ground and hooked it on my belt as I walked down the hallway toward the room I knew Orr and Wes had to be in. As I walked, I was able to

reach behind myself and pull the stupid spikey-ball-thing out of my back. Freaking enkpi. Not the first time I'd been hit with one, but I hated those stupid things.

I finally made it to the large doorway that opened up to some kind of large storage room. Or at least, that's what it looked like since I could see rows of shelves with boxes stacked on them. I kept one reelian out. I would've kept one in each hand, but between my shoulder and being electrocuted, my hands were shaking. Or at least that's what I told myself the reason was. It couldn't possibly be from fear.

"Get out of here, Wes," I heard Orrean roar and I froze.

"I'm not... leaving you," Wes shouted back, evidently breathing heavily.

Then I heard it... that maniacal laughter that sent chills down my spine and fear through my veins. When he spoke, his voice sounded like snakes and death and terror, making my heart pound so loudly I was sure they'd know I was getting closer to them. The deranged, terrible voice said, "I see you've found a loyal pet, little brother."

"Wes! No!" Orrean's shout made me run to the end of the aisle.

When I rounded the corner, I could see that Wes had caught up to Emperor Thelonious Serparla and was already in hand-to-hand combat with the disgusting bastard. *What the fuck is Wes thinking? He's going to get himself killed.*

Orrean caught my eye. He was on the ground, clearly having been thrown into one of the shelves, and he was covered in even more blood than before. So much blood that he was dripping with it and leaving small puddles on the floor. He looked right at me and said fiercely, "We need to get him out of here." Whether he had read my mind when I was thinking about Wes, or he was just thinking the same thing, I didn't know.

Orrean was across the room, but I couldn't get to him, not with Thelonious between us.

I pulled my other reelian out, so I had one in each hand, at the ready. It was time to kill the fucker responsible for all of this. When I scanned the room for additional threats, I was surprised that we were the only ones in the room. I'd have thought that Thelonious would've been surrounded by guards.

Why the hell did they come here by themselves? What were they thinking?

"I'm sorry," I heard Orrean say, like he'd read my mind again. "I thought I could stop him. End this." Orrean wiped blood from his mouth and pushed himself to his feet.

But I couldn't respond because the combat in front of me was going so fast that it was hard to keep track.

Wes punched the emperor in the stomach, but the alien punched him right back in the shoulder. When Wes kicked him in the shin, the emperor landed a blow to Wes's cheek. For every hit Wes made, Thelonious made one right back. They were moving so quickly, I couldn't get a shot in for fear I'd hit Wes.

I didn't know what to do. Orrean and I were not fighters, not the way Wes and Thelonious were. There was no way I could jump in there without hurting my brother and I knew Orrean felt the same. Plus if I were fighting the bastard, I'd be weaponless and I couldn't kill the emperor without a reelian. Too much could happen if I tried waiting for the bastard to bleed out.

"Thelonious," Orrean suddenly yelled, causing the other Taoree to look at him. Orrean shot his reelian, but the emperor was quick enough to jump out of the way, so the shot went right past him.

"Wes," I tried to yell when I saw Thelonious's intention, but my shout caused more harm than good.

Wes was distracted, looking at me, so he didn't see it coming.

Thelonious grabbed my brother, pulling a struggling Wes against his chest as he pulled Wes's reelian out of his belt

and put it to Wes's chin. Wes was fighting him, struggling to break free, but the Taoree pushed the weapon even farther into Wes's chin. Then Thelonious pulled a reelian out of his own belt and pointed it at Orrean. Orrean hesitated and Thelonious pulled the trigger, hitting Orr right in the chest and causing him to drop his weapon and fall to the ground, holding the oozing wound.

"Orr," I shouted without moving. I had both of my guns aimed at Thelonious's head, but he was so close to my brother. I didn't trust my aim, not when my muscles kept freezing up from residual electricity. I took a chance and glanced at my Balu, seeing that he was bleeding and in pain, but that he would be okay. The bullet didn't hit his heart, so I'd be able to heal him once I got to him. I refocused on the threat in the room, even if shooting was a moot point with the emperor using Wes as a shield.

I stared into my little brother's eyes, trying to convey the attitude that I had this under control, even though I sure as fuck didn't. Wes looked pissed, a little scared, but he mostly looked determined. His jaw was clenched in controlled anger, and he was staring at me, right in the eyes, showing me that he was okay. That *we* were going to *be* okay.

"Ah, ah, ah," Thelonious said with a laugh in his snake-voice, "I wouldn't touch that reelian if I were you, little brother. Not if you want this one to live."

I saw Orrean stand up out of the corner of my eye and I knew he didn't go for his weapon. *Fucking dammit*. I knew Orr wouldn't take the chance and risk my brother.

"Okay, Thelonious, what do you want?" Orrean asked in a deep voice.

Thelonious laughed loudly and I looked him over. He was very similar-looking to Orrean, so much so that it was a little unnerving. They were nearly the same size, though Thelonious was thicker and his braid was longer. But what was most eerie was looking into Thelonious's dark-purple eyes, because you could easily see how unhinged he was. His crazed

eyes looked at my Balu as he said, “I want you dead. You’ve always been my biggest pain-in-the-ass sibling.”

“More like your biggest threat,” I accidentally mumbled out loud.

Thelonious cackled as he looked me over in amusement. “So you’re the human I’ve been hearing about, huh? The Balu to my brother, who can conjure an onghu. You’re nothing special. I’m surprised my spy even thought to mention you.”

My eyes widened in shock as he so easily admitted to having a spy. That didn’t bode well for our survival.

Thelonious laughed again at my reaction before turning to Orrean with a serious expression. “Kick the reelian toward me now.”

Orrean didn’t move.

Thelonious tilted his head. “Have it your way, little brother.” Then he holstered the reelian he’d pointed at Orrean and pulled out a knife. Without any warning, he dug the knife into Wesley’s chest right under his collarbone, making my brother cry out in pain as blood started pouring out.

“Wes,” I shouted as I took a step forward, but stopped when I saw Thelonious grin and shake his head.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t hit any major arteries,” Thelonious said, before adding, “yet.”

Wes was crying in pain as he tried to cover his bleeding wound with his hand, but he was still looking at me with determination in his gaze. *Fuck, he wouldn’t be in this position if I hadn’t yelled for him.* What the hell had I been thinking?

“What do you want, Thelonious?” I ground out angrily.

He considered me for a moment before a sinister smile spread across his lips. “I want Orrean dead.”

I blanched.

Thelonious's smile grew. "You get to choose, Jeremy David Ettner. Your brother or your Balu. You pick, but know that you're only getting one of them out alive."

I glanced at Orrean in a panic, but he was already looking at me, smiling sadly, but very clearly giving me permission to pick Wesley. But I couldn't pick. I couldn't let my little brother die, and I sure as hell couldn't let my Balu—my mate, my partner—die, especially not when I'd only just gotten my head out of my ass and decided to be with him.

I shook my head at Orrean before turning back to my brother... my brother whose eyes were starting to fill with terror, my brother that had tears in his eyes as he bled from his chest and had an alien holding a deadly weapon to his chin. My little brother that I'd promised to always love and protect, even when he was annoying the shit out of me.

"Your brother or mine, Jeremy. Or I will kill little Wesley here, then shoot my brother, and kill you... slowly as I force you to stare into their dead eyes." Thelonious's sinister smile grew as he continued toying with me. I stared into his manic eyes. The eyes of a madman, the eyes of someone that held all the power in this situation, and instead of just killing all of us, he wanted to watch as we all slowly suffered. He was playing with us... and I didn't know how to win the game.

I swallowed thickly. "Both. I choose both."

His smile turned impossibly crueler. "You have ten seconds to shoot Orrean before I decide to take your brother with me as a toy. I've never been with a human before, but I'd be willing to make an exception... he is rather pretty." Thelonious brushed the hair off of Wes's forehead, making his intentions clear.

Wes's nostrils flared in fear and disgust.

I looked back at Orrean, who said, "Don't let him take Wes, J. He'll torture him and use him until there's nothing left." Orrean's voice broke and I could tell how terrified he was for my brother. Not for himself.

I stared at my lover for a moment before a memory came through, a memory of Orrean being pissy at me because I was being an ass. *Orrean had rolled his eyes and said, "We will always be connected. Deny it all you want, it doesn't change a thing. We are Balu. I will be with you always, everywhere, no matter what. Even in death a part of me will stay with you, just like a part of Colt has stayed with you."*

I felt tears prick my eyes at the thought. I couldn't lose him, but I couldn't lose Wes either, and I sure as hell didn't want Wes to be tortured and raped by that motherfucker hiding behind him.

I looked at Orrean and whispered, "I'm not losing you. I can't." Then I looked at Thelonious and I aimed my gun at his head and pulled the trigger, but he ducked behind Wes.

"Try that again and your brother dies." The fucker took his knife and ran it across Wesley's cheek, ending so close to his eye that my breath hitched, thinking he was going to carve his eye out.

Wes had tear tracks on his cheeks. I knew he was scared and hurting.

"Last chance, Jeremy," Thelonious called out before he started counting, "Five... four..."

"It's okay, Jer, we need to save Wes," Orrean said quietly to me, then he picked up his braid, pulled out a knife and held it to his own hair. He looked at Thelonious and said, "You will return Wes, alive, to Jeremy immediately."

"No, don't do it, Orr," my brother ground out before Thelonious pulled Wes's hair back, making him groan in pain.

Thelonious almost looked gleeful. "You have my word."

"No, Orrean," I cried out, finally catching up on the conversation.

But he looked at me and said, "Thelonious may be a lot of things, but he is true to his word." He smiled sadly at me,

his purple eyes glinting. “You’ll be okay, my Balu.” Then the idiot sliced through his braid, screaming at the top of his lungs.

His scream of agony tore through me like a part of my soul was being frayed. When he dropped to the floor and I saw his blood pouring out, every fiber of my existence wanted to go to him, to heal him and stop the bleeding. But I forced myself to turn away and look at my brother and Thelonious through my blurry, tear-filled eyes as my heart felt like it was being ripped out of my chest again. I’d already lost Colt, I wouldn’t survive it if I lost Orrean too.

Thelonious had the gall to start laughing at his brother’s pain, then he demanded, “Throw down the reelian, and I’ll let Wes go.”

“You got what you wanted,” I said, my voice watery. “Let my brother go.” I fought my instinct to drop to the ground and save Orrean.

Thelonious tilted his head as he fiddled with his pocket and repeated, “Throw the reelian away from yourself, and he’s free to go.”

I glanced at Orrean, seeing blood *gushing* from his hair—*there’s so much blood*—then I glanced at Wes, blood dripping down his arm and cheek, a reelian still under his chin. I didn’t have a fucking choice. I threw my reelian too far for me to lunge for it, no matter how badly I wanted to.

Then I watched in horror as Thelonious started laughing hysterically, pulling a small tube out of his pocket.

“No,” I yelled, though it made no difference.

Thelonious shoved the tube up Wes’s nose forcefully as my brother screamed out in pain, then fell silent as his body started to seize. Thelonious smiled wickedly at me as he dug a finger into Wes’s shoulder wound, then licked the blood off his finger and continued cracking up laughing. He shoved my brother toward me and took off at a run, still fucking laughing. I caught Wes and dragged him to Orrean, then lowered us both to the floor so I could put his head in my lap. A sob tore from

my throat as I realized I had no idea what to do for someone having a seizure, especially if they had some alien shit causing it.

I looked over at Orrean again, his skin even paler than usual, his eyes dimmed, but focused on me. He'd lost too much blood, and he was dying right in front of my eyes.

I cradled Wes's head in my lap with one arm, then put my other hand on Orrean's chest, trying to stop the never-ending flood of blood. I sent my light to both of them, but immediately started sobbing even harder. There was no doubt in my mind... I didn't have enough light left to save them both.

“Enimus, favulis nob.”

Holy Deity, help us.

End of Book 2

J's story continues in
Book 3 of the Taoree Trilogy:

Dissolution

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Feel free to contact me on Facebook. I'd love to hear from you.

If you enjoyed this book, please think about leaving a review.

Every bit of encouragement is a huge help to authors, especially indie authors, so every review helps. Thank you!

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and I'm so thankful to have you interested in my many crazy stories. Thank you!!!

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Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoyed it!!!
Thrive and love, as bright as the stars! <3

About the Author:

Michele is married to an awesome husband that puts up with her and all the characters in her head—and there are many.

They live together in Baltimore, Maryland with their two young boys and two crazy dogs. She grew up dancing and swimming and taught dance—ballet, tap, jazz, hip hop, & modern—for ten years before her kids came along. Now she stays home to write about the sexy men in her head and does PTA everything—as long as coffee is involved. Two other tattooed moms run the PTA with her, and though she wants to rip her hair out from it, she still loves it.

Books by Michele Notaro:

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