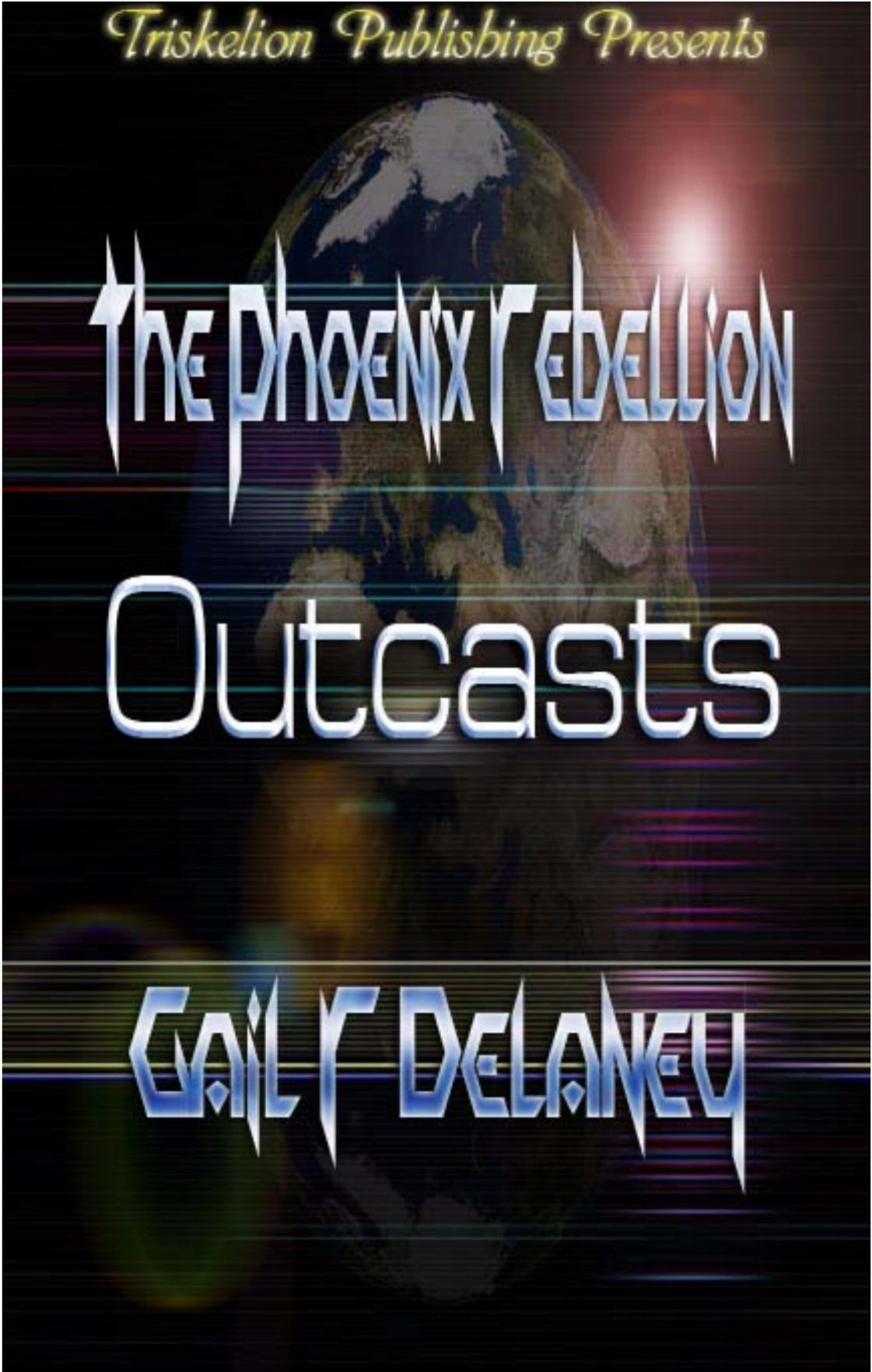


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THE PHOENIX REBELLION  
Outcasts

GAIL DELANEY

# **The Phoenix Rebellion**

## **Book II**

### **Outcasts**

**By**

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## **Dedication**

To- Patrick. You did more than was necessary, pushed harder than I thought I needed, and supported me 200%. I love you.

To-Jenifer. Once again, you came through.

To-Tricia. My one-woman cheering squad.

To-Everyone who asked "When will you finish book two?"

## Acknowledgment

My use of *The Marine's Prayer* is my way of saying “Thank You” to *all* the service men and women all over the globe who fight for their country. More information on the prayer, the Marines, and other armed forces of the United States, visit <http://rangerjarhead.com> or a multitude of websites dedicated to our nation's greatest heroes.

*“Out of ashes, humanity will rise again”*

## Prologue

*Sunday, March 3, 2052  
Washington, District of Columbia  
Former United States of America*

*"I had a brother at Ke Sahn fighting off the Viet Cong. They're still there. He's all gone..."*

Ancient music of a nation that no longer existed thumped against the walls and scratched against the inside of Jackie Anderson's head like steel wool on rust. The interior of the backstreet bar was dark and hazy, curls of contraband cigarette smoke hovering in the red glow of the ambient hydrogen cell lighting embedded in the walls. Jackie shifted on the tall stool she had perched on over an hour before, crossing her legs with a sharp tug of the short hem of her dress. She nodded at the tall, broad, dark-skinned man behind the bar; tipping the bottom of her highball glass towards him. He walked to her, grabbing a bottle of amber liquid as he came.

"You waiting for someone in particular?" he asked, pouring a finger of scotch in the glass.

"Maybe. Guess I'll know when they get here."

She slid her hand inside the small bag she had set on the bar, and before the thin cigarette touched her painted lips, the barkeep had a match lit and the end of the cigarette glowing. "If he doesn't show by closing time, maybe I'll do?"

Jackie smiled, blowing a long trail of smoke from the corner of her lips. She let her gaze slide slowly over what she could see of him from mid-stomach to short-cut hair. "Maybe you will."

Someone called to him from the other end of the bar, and he turned away with a cocky smirk. She raised the glass to her lips to suppress the groan that tempted to escape, swallowing the burning liquid. *Damn it, she hated scotch.*

"Do you have any idea how much you've pissed them off?"

Jackie set the glass down with practiced ease and turned her head, letting her long hair slide across her bare back to look at the man who now sat beside her. "We're not exactly in the business of keeping *them* happy."

"Oh, but this time is different," Bruce Wilcox said, not asking permission before snagging her glass and throwing back the remains of her drink. "They are *really* pissed. Have you talked to Castleton? Do you know the details of what went down in New Mexico?"

"I know the gist of it. We infiltrated one of the top Alliance facilities and extracted a couple dozen humans the Areth were holding as lab rats. I'm sure it pissed them off."

"Oh, you did a hell of a lot more than that, sweet cheeks."

Jackie scowled, but Bruce missed the subtle warning, signaling to the bartender to refill her glass and to bring him one of his own. Bruce swallowed the alcohol before the hunk with the booze had a chance to pour Jackie's, and swirled his hand over his empty glass for more. With a sidelong glance at Jackie, the tender left and Bruce leaned into the bar; his knuckles braced against his temple.

"Are you going to enlighten me, or are you just going to get drunk?" Jackie asked, smashing out her cigarette. *Nasty things.*

"Well, apparently your little band of merry men not only made off with their favorite lab experiments, but one of their greatest scientific minds. Goes by the name of Victor. The whole lot of 'em are running scared."

"Why?"

"By what I hear, Victor hasn't been the most *stable* of good little Areth brethren the last century or so. Barnabas and the other uppity-ups at this facility are nervous as hell that it won't take much for Vic-ol-boy to spill his guts to anyone who'll listen."

Jackie arched an eyebrow. "Really..."

"Oh, but I'm not done."

Jackie sighed and glanced at her watch. "Look, Bruce. This conversation is truly stimulating, but I don't have all night. You showed up half an hour late and I have to be across the city in an hour."

"Fine," he said, leaning close enough to her that she could smell the scotch on his breath plus whatever alcohol he had consumed before showing up. "One of those prisoners you took... they want 'em back. Bad. Seems he's *special* somehow."

"Special."

Bruce nodded, grinning stupidly. Jackie rolled her eyes.

"How is he special, Bruce," she ground out.

"How the hell should I know?"

Jackie huffed and yanked her payment card from her bag, waving it for hot-hunka-bartender to come retrieve. "Thank you for your help. My people couldn't survive without it."

Bruce's hand, cold from the damp chill outside, curled around her bare knee and slid an inch up her thigh. "Aw, come on, sweet cheeks. What's the rush? Share another drink with me."

The distinctive click and hum of a personal pulse charge pistol emanated from her bag, and Bruce's gaze slid sideways to focus his bleary eyes on her hand buried inside. Jackie pushed him away with her free hand and slid to the floor.

"Don't call us. We'll call you," she said as she took her payment card and stepped around Bruce's stool, her stiletto's clicking on the polished wood floor.

She was halfway to the door when it opened and three Alliance Enforcement officers burst in, pulse rifles braced against their shoulders and trained on the patrons of the bar.

"No one move!"

Jackie dropped to her knees and rolled before the first blast echoed over her head.

## Chapter One

*Wednesday, March 13, 2052 06:32  
Phoenix Compound  
Outside Colorado Springs, Colorado  
Former United States of America*

Doctor Lilly Quinn flipped the infirmary's main overhead light on as she stifled a yawn behind her hand. If she had a hard time getting out of bed now, she wondered what she would do in a few months when she had a newborn. Running a hand habitually over her expanding waistline, Lilly picked up her handheld data recorder and headed for her first check of the day.

Victor.

Four months had passed with very little fluctuation in his condition. Since his vitals had stabilized, he had remained comatose with no indication of waking any time in the near future. Higher than usual brainwave activity in the hypothalamus had her confused, but other than that, the Areth scientist-come-Phoenix-guest was a typical coma patient. No movement, no reaction to stimuli... nothing.

Michael sat inside the glass isolation enclosure, in his normal chair at Victor's bedside. In his lap was an open book, and as she reached for the door handle, Lilly saw his lips moving as he read aloud to Victor-his daily ritual.

*"Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of, many the pains he suffered in his spirit in the wide sea, struggling for his own life and the homecoming of his companions..."* Michael's voice was steady and sure as he read, his voice carrying to her as she opened the door. He looked up, pausing, as she stepped inside. "Good morning."

"Good morning. You're here early."

"Yes," he said in answer.

Lilly smiled and moved to the monitors that kept a constant record of Victor's every vital sign. "What are you reading to him?"

*"The Odyssey of Homer."*

"I read that when I was young. It's very fitting..." Lilly trailed off as she scanned the record from the night.

She heard the slap as the book closed and the squeak of the chair's leather before Michael stood behind her. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure. It could be nothing. But look here," she said, pointing to the cardiograph from several hours before. "What do you see?"

"Tachycardia."

"Almost, yes. His heartbeat didn't accelerate enough to set off the alarms, but it *did* accelerate. His respiration increased right around the same time, and again around 04:47 this morning."

"Could he be dreaming?"

"Coma patients don't dream," Lilly said, her voice dropping as she turned and looked at Victor. His head was turned away, his chin dipped toward his chest, and a niggling feeling tickled at the back of Lilly's mind. *That wasn't the position I left him in last night.* "Michael, did you touch him at all?"

"No."

Lilly yanked open a supply drawer in the bedside table and dug around until she found a small penlight. Michael watched her with avid interest as she turned Victor's head to face her, and gently slid back his eyelid, flashing the light across his iris.

"Is there a response?"

She repeated the process with the other eye, then flicked the light off and sighed. Lilly looked at Michael, but even before she spoke she saw in his eyes he knew her answer. "No." He stepped back from the bed and walked away with his hands pushed into his pockets. "I'm sorry, I thought maybe there was a ray of hope for a minute there, but his pupils are fixed and dilated. I'll keep a close eye on his readings, to see if—" Her voice froze in her throat when she looked down again to see Victor's dark eyes staring at her. Lilly blinked, making sure she actually *saw* what she thought she saw and then raised her hand to lay it across his forehead. "Hello, Victor."

His lips parted, shifting as if he wanted to form words but they wouldn't quite come to him and deep lines furrowed his brow. Lilly smiled and slid her fingers to his wrist, checking his pulse. It was slightly elevated, but not overly so. Good and strong.

"Michael, come here," she said softly, just loud enough for Michael to hear her across the room but not loud enough to startle her newly awakened patient. "How are you feeling, Victor?"

He shook his head, his warm skin rubbing across her palm. *Good. No sign of shock. Skin isn't clammy, temperature isn't elevated or dropping.*

"I don't know," he finally said, his voice rough as dried leaves.

Michael stepped behind her and Lilly stepped back. He set his hand on Victor's shoulder, leaning forward so Victor could see his face. "It's all right, Vic. They're going to help you."

Victor rolled his head on the pillow, his eyes squinting slightly. "Michael..."

"Yes. It's me," Michael said with a wide grin.

Victor's features twisted and he winced, a hiss whistling through his clenched teeth. Michael looked at her over his shoulder and she reached past him to lay her fingertips against Victor's carotid artery. With a guttural howl, Victor snapped his arms out and viced his fists around Michael's throat. Michael jerked back, pulling Victor off the bed with him when he wouldn't give up his hold. Both men fell back, Michael's shoulder slamming Lilly back into the thick tempered glass wall of the enclosure. Equipment and monitors clattered and fell as the wires and cords connecting ripped off Victor or pulled the machinery in his wake.

"Michael!" Lilly shouted, but both men were oblivious as Victor slammed his body into Michael and sent them both into the wall.

Lilly yanked open a drawer of the supply cabinet in the corner of the room and removed a pre-loaded sedative syringe.

Michael gripped the front of Victor's scrubs, pinning him against the wall even as Victor fought to find leverage and get his hands around Michael's throat again. "Victor! Stop this!"

Victor howled again and fought with everything he had against Michael, even though Lilly could see his struggling to stay on his feet. With a new surge of fury, Victor shoved away from the wall and Lilly barely managed to get out of the way before the two men tumbled into the monitors along the side of the bed.

She was outside the isolation room in seconds. Her next decision made in a split moment as she shut the vacuum-sealed door behind her. No one else had reported to work yet, and it would take far too long for security to reach the infirmary. Lilly punched her private code into the keypad beside the door as Michael and Victor slammed against the glass in a physical battle for dominance. Seconds later, she heard a hiss and white fog filtered into the airtight chamber.

Victor fought until the Neurophynal gas finally overtook his neurological systems and both he and Michael slumped to the floor. Lilly entered another command to reverse the air filters and suck the room clean, leaning her forehead on the glass as she tried to calm her suddenly frazzled nerves.

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"How long do we have before we have to go outside the Mountain for supplies?" Beverly Surimoto asked, scanning the food supply report on the PAC in front of her. She glanced up to read Damian's answer on his lips.

Only a few other people sat in the cafeteria with them, scattered around at various tables. The majority of the breakfast shift had come and gone, leaving those who had worked through the night and only now managed to come eat, or those who enjoyed the pleasure of sleeping in. Or, like the small group gathered at their table, chose to hold their morning meetings over coffee and muffins. She sat beside General Castleton, and Damian was on the other side of him. Major Yun, Chief of Security on the base, and Lieutenant Major Reichek, Operations Officer, sat on the other side of the table.

"Based on the current compliment, and the level of consumption, we can go another seven weeks comfortably. After that, we're going to have to start either rationing or get in some supplies. The Farm is producing plenty of fruits and vegetables, but we need the staples. And meat."

Beverly nodded. She could get the details from the report, Damian was always very thorough, but she was able to get a better feel for the situation by talking to him. She walked away knowing whether things were dire or just tight, surplus or just fine.

"How about medical supplies? Especially with the addition of the New Mexico residents."

"That's much tighter. Doctor Quinn reported she has sufficient supplies of the staples: bandages, sutures, analgesics. However, she is running low on antibiotics and some less commonly used medications she says she has had to use in gaining frequency in the last four months. I've provided a full list."

"And these are necessary medications for the new patients?"

"Yes."

Beverly nodded. "Then, we will have to see about getting her more, won't we." She smiled as she projected the thought, hoping the words rang with confidence. Confidence she didn't necessarily feel.

It grew harder and harder to keep the base supplied with everything they needed. Five years ago, even two years ago, the base ran with a surplus of supplies ninety-five percent of the time. They came and went as they pleased, and were able to obtain what they needed as they needed from a variety of sources. With the increased focus from Alliance Forces, they didn't dare go too far and try to obtain too much.

"Get me a list of our most recent sources for medical supplies, as well as a viability report for their use now," General Castleton said. "We will need to organize a mission outside the Mountain and I want to minimize the risk by contacting only the best possible resources."

"Of course. I'll have it to you this afternoon," Damian said with a smile, his teeth a flash of white against the rich, dark brown of his skin.

"Is there anything to discuss from Operations or Security?" General Castleton asked, already closing his own PAC. There usually wasn't, and like the General, Beverly expected the pat answer of 'all is clear'.

"We had an incident this morning, sir," Major Yun said. "Nothing of concern at this point, but Neurophynal gas was implemented to subdue an individual."

"Explain," General Castleton ordered.

"It seems the Areth in the infirmary woke up this morning and became violent. Doctor Quinn had no choice but to use the gas to sedate him."

The hairs on Beverly's arms bristled and her skin tingled. Her eyes darted from Major Yun to the General. She quickly slid her hands beneath the table to hide the sudden tremble that seized them, and she had to tamp down the urge to jump to her feet.

"Michael Tanner was also involved in the situation, but we've received notice that he is recovering."

"And what of Victor?" Damian asked.

"Sir?" Major Yun responded.

"The Areth."

"He appears to have suffered no ill effects from the gas, sir."

Her heart pounded against her ribs like a caged bird. "If you'll excuse me, General, I'll go to the infirmary myself and get the details from Lilly."

General Castleton's aged eyes settled on her for several moments and Beverly felt the traitorous heat rise in her cheeks. Finally, he hitched his chin in a curt nod. "Fine. Report to me this afternoon. We'll go over these numbers then."

"Yes, sir."

She pushed back from the table and managed to walk out of the cafeteria. It was a struggle to keep herself from running to the elevator or cursing when the doors didn't open immediately. Beverly contemplated the stairs, but before she turned for the stairwell door the elevator arrived. The trip to the infirmary floor was excruciatingly slow and she paced the small car. Four months... four long months... what would bring him out of the coma so suddenly now?

Three service men stood in the hall waiting to board the elevator when the doors open, and Beverly brushed past them with an apology. She rushed through the open doorway into the infirmary, finally pausing long enough to process what she saw.

CJ and Michael sat on the edge of one of the beds; worry and concern strained CJ's expression as her hand nervously fluttered over Michael's bare shoulder and tousled brown hair. CJ looked up as Beverly walked to them.

"I just heard what happened," Beverly said, shifting her gaze between CJ and Michael, noting the deep bruises that circled Michael's throat and the purple shading over his left shoulder. "Is everyone all right?"

"We're all fine," Lilly answered, looking up from her examination. "Surprised. But fine."

Beverly crossed her arms to disguise the nervous fidgeting. "I didn't get much detail from Major Unshed just said Victor woke up suddenly. And that he was..." Her gaze shifted again to the bruises around Michael's neck. "Violent."

"That's one way to put it," CJ said, a scowl twisting her features. "He was trying to kill Michael."

"He wouldn't have killed me," Michael said, looking at CJ.

CJ and Lilly exchanged glances, and Beverly got the sense that she was coming in late on a conversation that had been going on for a while. Michael closed his eyes, the muscle along his jaw bunching.

"Is the headache back?" Lilly asked. He just nodded, raising his hand to rub his fingers across his forehead. "I'll get an analgesic. You should lie down. It's going to take some time for the effects of the Neurophynal to completely wear off."

Michael didn't argue and CJ stood so he could swing his body onto the bed and recline onto the pillows. He draped one arm across his eyes, his other hanging limp off the side of the bed. CJ moved to stand beside Beverly, her lips pulled taut in a deep frown as she shook her head.

"I swear, Bev, my heart was in my throat when Lilly called me and told me Michael was unconscious. I haven't been that frightened in a long time. I didn't even know he was gone."

Beverly's gaze shifted to Michael, her eyes unmistakably drawn to the scars that marred his body. As a link in the chain of command, she had read all the detailed reports made on the people they had taken out of New Mexico, Michael among them. She had seen the categorized list of abuses and tortures—at least the ones they knew about—that had been inflicted on him. She had sat with CJ talking about the nightmares that still haunted the young man. She couldn't understand a mentality that could justify the treatment of a human being in that way.

CJ touched her arm, drawing her attention back. "I don't care what Michael says, Victor was trying to kill him. I saw the security tapes."

"But why would Victor attack Michael? It doesn't make sense."

"None of it makes sense, Bev," CJ said, a deep 'v' forming between her brows as she scowled. "Come here. You need to see."

With one last glance towards Michael's sleeping form, CJ motioned for Beverly to follow her to the back of the infirmary. They walked past the glass isolation room where Victor had lain dormant for the last four months, and Beverly couldn't help but stare as she passed at the destruction within the sealed walls. Monitors and equipment were shattered

and broken on the floor, cables and wires strewn like multi-colored spaghetti. A crimson stain smeared the floor and she wondered whose blood it was.

They walked down the hall in the furthest back corner of the infirmary. Doors lined each side; some storage rooms, some cold lockers. The cell where Victor had spent his first few days in the Mountain sat barren and cold as they passed. CJ turned her head to look at Beverly as they walked.

"Lilly said this room hasn't been used in probably forty years, maybe longer. Well before the original military base was decommissioned. Victor was too violent to strap to a bed. She was afraid he'd hurt himself."

A heavy pressure squeezed around Beverly's chest, making it hard to breathe. She crossed her arms and pressed her clenched fists against her sides, drawing in a tight breath. They reached the end of the hall, where an armed security officer stood outside a closed door, his hands behind his back with a pulse charge sidearm strapped to his thigh. He stepped aside when CJ and Beverly reached him so CJ could look inside the two-foot-by-two-foot window in the door.

"What is this room?" Beverly asked.

"A padded cell."

CJ stepped aside so Beverly could look inside.

Her heart froze in her chest and her hand flew to cover her mouth. Victor was in the corner of the small room, every surface covered with thick padding that may have once been white but had aged to a dingy gray. His back was wedged into the corner, his knees drawn to his chest and his face curled into the circle of his arms. He rocked a steady rhythm, his spine slamming against the wall with each backward movement.

"Why doesn't Lilly help him?" she asked, looking to CJ.

"She's tried. He's sedated right now. You didn't see him before, Bev. I've never seen anyone like that. He was..." CJ shook her head, her gaze shifting to look at Victor through the glass. "I knew Victor in New Mexico. He was always so calm, so pleasant. Not like the other Areth. This is like... like Jekyll and Hyde."

Beverly touched her fingers to the steel enforced glass and watched him, her throat suddenly dry and her temples throbbing with the beat of her heart. Victor raised his head, his face cast towards the ceiling, and her chest seized when she saw the heavy trail of tears on his cheeks.

## Chapter Two

Michael blinked and rubbed his hand across his aching eyes, realizing he had just scooped a fourth spoonful of sugar into his coffee. The dull throb at the base of his skull had forced him to hover on the edge of sleep most of the night, and kept him from focusing clearly as he tried to wake up. He took a sip of the hot coffee, hoping the caffeine would kick in quickly and give him the awareness he needed to head to the infirmary.

It hurt to swallow the hot liquid, the bruised muscles around his larynx protesting at the action. Despite his mental push to keep them back, memories bombarded him of thick leather thongs choking him and cutting off his oxygen until black spots danced in his vision. He clenched his jaw and closed his eyes, willing away the thoughts.

Dog whined at Michael's feet, his bushy tail thumping on the floor. A wet nose bumped his hand, and Michael looked down at the mass of brown and white fur. Stifling a yawn, Michael reached down and rubbed Dog's head. "Just a quick walk."

Draining the last of his coffee, the final swallow so sweet it made him cringe, he stood. The other bedroom door opened and Caitlin came out, her blonde hair rumpled. "I thought I heard you up," she said, her voice tired.

"I'm taking Dog for a walk, and then I'm going to the infirmary."

As he walked past her, Caitlin touched his arm and he paused. She looked up at him, the blariness of moments before gone. "You look tired. Michael, how much did you sleep last night?"

"Enough."

"Didn't the pain killers help?"

"I don't like taking them."

"But you need rest. You went through a lot yesterday. I'm worried the Neurophynal gas might trigger your headaches again, and if you're not sleeping—"

"Will you come to the infirmary later?" he asked, gently cutting her off with his question as he slid his arms into the sleeves of his father's leather jacket.

Caitlin smiled and shook her head. "You know, that tactic won't work forever."

"Is it working now?"

She laughed. "I have a meeting with General Castleton this morning, and will come to the infirmary to help Lilly this afternoon. Will you be free for lunch?"

"I'll try to be." Michael zipped the jacket up half way. "Victor may need me."

Caitlin frowned, reaching out to lay her hand on the soft leather of Nick's jacket. Her fingers traced the collar, pulling it back slightly, and he knew she examined the marks on his neck.

"He wouldn't have killed me."

"You keep saying that," she said in a low voice.

"I mean it."

"I know what I see."

Dog whined again and paced between Michael and the door. He squeezed Caitlin's shoulder and smiled. "You worry too much."

"It's my job. Your father left me in charge as Chief Worrier Ad Nauseum."

"I'll be back soon."

Caitlin waved him off as he left their quarters and made the trip to the top of the Mountain. The air outside was brisk and biting, whipping down off the mountain, twirling snow in small whirlwinds of white. Michael zipped the jacket to the collar and tucked his chin into the smooth leather, enjoying the scent as he huddled in the shelter of the mountainside while Dog did his business. The snow was beautiful, but today he was too cold and tired to appreciate it.

When Dog came running back to him from his wanderings, nuzzling Michael's hand with his wet nose, Michael pushed away from the wall with a tired moan. Back inside the Mountain, as he and Dog waited for the elevator to reach them, he heard his name called and turned to see Jacob jogging toward him from the service bay further down the hall.

"I've been trying to find you alone for days," Jacob said as he reached Michael, glancing around.

"I've been very busy," Michael said, knowing why Jacob wanted to speak to him, and irritated that he hadn't been able to avoid it longer.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. Michael and Dog stepped inside, Jacob following. Michael had hoped other base personnel might be in the elevator; the presence of others would have Jacob holding his tongue, but the car was empty. Michael pushed the button for the quarters' level and pinched the bridge of his nose. The same headache that had refused to let up since Lilly's forced use of the Neurophynal gas, throbbed harder in a thick band across the back of his skull pulling tight at his eyes. He hadn't suffered from one of his *bad* headaches in weeks, and hoped the throb wasn't a precursor.

"I heard what that Areth bastard did to you yesterday. Perhaps now you'll see your loyalty has been mislaid."

Anger curled in Michael's gut and he tightened his jaw. On one level, he understood Jacob's rage. Though they had both spent their entire lives in the Alliance facility, Jacob was a handful of years older than Michael. While in New Mexico, he had suffered through the experiments and lived in sub-human conditions, as had they all. Like many of the newly freed humans, Jacob was unable to let go of the anger and resentment that gnawed at him. Michael hadn't let go, but he knew where the fault lay.

It wasn't with Victor.

"Be careful, Jacob."

Jacob pulled his lips tight across his teeth and clenched his fists at his side. "We can't just let them get away with what they did. Can't you see that? Why won't you listen? The Areth will continue to do as they always have while we do nothing!"

"No, they won't. That is why we are here, Jacob. That is why Phoenix exists."

"*Phoenix* isn't doing enough!" Jacob shouted, his voice echoing off the walls.

Dog barked, the sound dropping into a low growl as he moved into position between Michael and Jacob. Michael lowered his hand and laid it on Dog's head, but didn't tell him to back off from his protective stance.

"What you propose will undermine everything Phoenix has been doing for the last three decades." He was careful to keep his voice level, firm.

"I can't just sit on my hands and let this go on. I don't understand how you can, either. We heard the rumors for years, Michael. We all knew what they did to you. The hell they put you through for their entertainment. You lived through much worse than any of us. We all heard about Renae. We knew why she disappeared. How can you just let them get away with it?"

"I am helping any way I can... *here*."

"The world needs to know!"

Dog growled again.

"And the world will, when the time is right and when we have the truth."

"When will that be? When your father returns from his suicide mission that son of a bitch sent him on? How many people you care about have to die before you stand up and fight?"

Michael closed his eyes, clenching his fists within the pockets of the jacket, his own heartbeat pounding in his ears. His stomach twisted with rage and nausea from the ever tightening vice squeezing his skull.

"If you think he's ever coming back you're an idiot and a fool. Your father is dead, and Phoenix could give a rat's ass —"

Michael lunged, slamming Jacob against the elevator wall with his forearm pressed firmly against the man's throat. Jacob's wide eyes stared at him, his nails leaving long claw marks in the leather sleeve of the jacket.

"Be. Careful. Jacob," Michael hissed through clenched teeth.

He stepped back, dropping his arm, and Jacob crumpled to his knees on the elevator floor. He looked up at Michael as he gasped for air, gripping his throat.

"You will not speak of this again," Michael said, making it clear with his tone Jacob shouldn't question him. "You will keep silent and you will enjoy the freedom that has been given to you. The next time you walk from your quarters by your own free will, and you eat a meal you've chosen yourself, and you lay with your lover, *remember* you would have *none* of it without Phoenix."

The elevator bumped to a stop and the doors opened. Michael ignored the stunned glances of the three men waiting to board as they glanced between Michael and Jacob, who still knelt on the floor.

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Acid burned in his blood and through his skull, crawling and slithering like insects scurrying beneath his skin. He wanted to claw through his flesh and rip them out, but even through the frantic chaos that pounded and screamed in his mind, some part of him knew and understood the futility of the action. Instead, he clenched his teeth until pain shot down his neck and curled his fists until his nails dug bloody crescents into his palms and pushed back against the burning fury.

It would not win.

He refused to let it win.

He had come this far, fought this long, he wouldn't give in and take the chance that the demon in his head would hurt someone else.

Victor bowed his head, hissing at the memory of his own hands wrapped around Michael's throat; the feel of his friend's windpipe collapsing beneath his fingers. His own

name on Michael's lips as Michael yelled for him to stop. But he couldn't. He had lost control. He had slipped.

He was so tired.

*Stop fighting! Give up! I belong here! You don't! You weak-minded idiot!*

Victor flung his head back, his skull bouncing off the cushioned wall with enough force to rattle his teeth and send stars floating in his vision. His limbs trembled with lack of nourishment and the exertion of keeping himself contained. His demon had made it almost impossible to eat, despite the deep, painful rumbling in his gut. His throat was parched, his lips dry.

Almost in answer to his pain, the lock clicked and the door slid open. Three men stepped inside, two dressed in dark green with weapons drawn at the ready. The third wore an off-white uniform much like the ones his own people had worn at the Alliance Center in New Mexico. He carried a tray of food, and Victor's stomach growled loudly when the smell of fresh bread and fruit hit his nose. He curled his hands and panted against the need to lunge forward and devour the meal.

Doctor Quinn stood near the door, leaving her route of escape open. He understood her trepidation; in her shoes, he would do the same. Her advancing state of pregnancy was obvious to him, and her need to protect her unborn child against an apparent raging lunatic was instinctual.

To her, he would seem like nothing less.

Victor raised his head and looked to her, his body shaking as he struggled to connect the thoughts in his mind to his tongue without his thoughts short-circuiting and coming out as little more than animalistic screams.

"Thank you," he ground out.

She nodded and motioned to the medical aide, who set the tray of food on the padded floor near Victor. He noted everything was 'finger food', requiring no utensils to eat. *Why give the madman a weapon?* Victor picked up a piece of cut fruit and bit into it, groaning at the pleasure of the taste as the juice filled his mouth and moistened his throat. It felt like an eternity since he had last eaten.

Doctor Quinn stepped further into the room, and Victor caught the worried glance from her assistant. She nodded, raising a hand, and continued to keep her distance even though she had closed some of the space between them. The big man could still easily take Victor down before he had a chance to get to her-if he tried-and even if he didn't, the two big men with weapons would make sure his hands never touched her.

He may be on the brink of insanity, but he wasn't stupid.

Victor hissed; liquid fire spread out from the base of his skull, wrapping around his neck like a noose. He dropped his food and rubbed viciously at his skin.

"I need you to talk to me, Victor." She spoke so softly, he almost didn't hear her through the pounding in his ears. "Can you tell me what you're feeling? You're a doctor yourself. Help me help you."

He shook his head, the intensity of the action rocking his body. Medicine was science and science was logic. Patterns. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. How could he qualify, quantify and justify when all he could see was chaos and madness? He pounded the side of his head with his fist.

*They think you're insane. There's no reason to keep you alive. They're going to kill you. Kill them first. Kill them first! Kill them first!*

"N-n-n-n-n-O-O-O-O!" Victor shouted and flung himself away from Doctor Quinn, slamming his body against the wall.

The armed men raised their weapons and Victor braced himself for the blue fire that would end his torture.

"Stop!" Doctor Quinn ordered, her hand shooting up to still them.

Victor realized, with a cold chill that swiftly washed over his sweat-dampened skin, he wished she hadn't.

"Doctor Quinn," said a voice from the doorway, spoken softly to not disturb the violent patient-he knew and understood his position in the tableau-and yet, the voice was like a thousand pounding hammers inside his skull. "Ms. Surimoto is here and would like to come down. She hopes to help."

Doctor Quinn sighed. "I'll take any help I can get right now. Send her down."

*They all want you dead.*

"No, they don't," he hissed beneath his breath.

Pain shot through his skull like a hundred nails firing outward from the center of his brain, and images flashed in his vision he was helpless to escape.

*"We have a forty-two percent success rate, but we assume that if the first generation is suitable, the clones will be suitable as well."*

*A woman lay naked on the metal table on the other side of the transparent observation window. The thick protective barrier muffled her cries, in one of the many dialects they had come to know, as she fought hard against the energy straps that held her limbs and torso. Terror rounded her eyes, making her appear wild and feral.*

*His own hand reached for the controls on the panel before him. Her screams were loud enough to reverberate through the window as she arched off the table; blue-white light encasing her entire head from a beam in the ceiling. Moments later, her body went limp, blood running in crimson trails from her eyes, nose and ears.*

*"Another failure. Bring in the next one."*

Victor screamed, felt the cry rip from his throat as he clawed at the wall and slammed his forehead against the padding. Grief choked him as he saw his own hands kill another human, and another; a macabre parade through his memories he could no more stop than he could wash from his mind. He sobbed, unable to hold back the drowning rush, and pressed his eyes closed.

*When they know what you did, they'll kill you. Kill them first. You've done it before, do it again. Killer. Killer!*

"Beverly, stay back."

The doctor's voice barely registered on the edges of his consciousness, the agony that ripped him apart so loud it drowned out everything else. Then he stilled, his lungs frozen, as he felt an unfamiliar 'nudge' whisper over his skin. It wasn't a touch. Not skin to skin. A cool touch skimmed over him; an awareness that for just a brief moment soothed the ragged edges of his existence.

Victor raised his head, panting for breath, and blinked against the hot moisture that blurred his vision. Kneeling just a few feet away was a woman. She was familiar to him, but almost like the fluttering apparition from a dream. Golden-red hair framed her face in small,

tight curls with most of the length pulled in a long braid down her back and her skin was so fair it was nearly translucent. Verdant green eyes studied him, her head tilted to the side. He squinted, staring at her, searching for a name through the murk of his mind.

*"I'm not sure I can tell you what you want to hear."*

*He heard Nick's sigh as he pushed his blankets away, his shirt already plastered to his chest with sweat. Victor wanted to move, to escape the fire that branded his skin, but he was too tired and too weak to sit up or even roll off the bed.*

*"Our translators are working on the file. You helped by giving it to us. Help by translating it."*

*"I'll tell you what it says."*

*Nick looked sideways at the woman who stood at the head of the bed. Victor hadn't even realized she had moved to stand there, but the shift in Nick's stare made him look. She gazed down at him, her forehead knit together above the arch of her nose, her lips turned down in a frown. Her arms laced over her stomach, long fingers clutching her own elbows.*

*A tingling sensation danced up the back of Victor's neck as their gazes connected. The hairs at the base of his skull stood on end and an unseen hand fluttered over his skin. Goosebumps raised on his arms despite the heat that boiled beneath the surface.*

*She looked to Nick, one golden red eyebrow arching.*

*"He's not lying." Her head tilted and her expression tightened. "But he's in pain. Somehow, all this causes him pain."*

Victor swallowed, shifting away from the wall to move a fraction closer to her. Doctor Quinn flinched from the other side of the room, and the security guards leveled their weapons, but the woman beside him didn't try to move away.

"It's all right, Victor." She spoke to him, but her voice floated in the air between them from somewhere other than her lips, and Victor stared hard at her. He remembered-just the fleeting shard of a memory-that he had thought himself already over the edge when he saw her before. Her voice was hers, but it wasn't. He ran his fingers across his forehead. "May I sit with you for awhile?"

"I know you," he said, his voice low. "I remember you, but I don't know your name."

"My name is Beverly."

"Beverly," he repeated, the name battling with his heavy tongue.

She nodded. "Yes." She scooted just a little closer, still keeping an arm's length between them.

Victor nodded slowly and pulled his knees to his chest, leaning into the wall. The crackling on his skin wasn't as severe, and the pounding in his ears wasn't as loud. He wondered, just for a few minutes, if he might actually be able to sleep. He was so tired. So very tired.

He slid his gaze to Doctor Quinn where she stood cautiously near the door, her arms crossed above her swelling stomach. "The child..." he mumbled, blinking slowly.

Beverly looked from him to the doctor, her bright green eyes coming back to him again. "What about her baby?"

"It's unharmed?"

She turned back to the doctor. "I think he means from when he woke up. When he and Michael fought. He's worried he may have hurt you or the baby."

The small echo of Doctor Quinn clearing her throat carried across the small space. "No, he didn't. The baby is fine. I'm fine. Just a couple bruises."

Beverly was smiling when she looked to him again, her eyes shining as she leaned closer. But she didn't touch him, didn't come close enough for contact. "Everyone is fine, Victor. Rest. I'll be here with you and make sure everything is all right."

His eyelids slid heavily over his eyes, sleep tugging at his limbs, and he realized he actually believed her.

## Chapter Three

"He had to have been exhausted. It's been a hard twenty-nine hours for him."

Beverly stood near the door of Victor's 'room', nodding at Lilly's words. As long as Victor remained docile and slept, Lilly hadn't felt the need to step out and seal him in his isolation again. Within the room, Beverly felt a subtle hum in the air, much as she had that first night she saw him in his cell, and during many of her visits to him during his coma. It was different now. The steady purr on her skin she had come to recognize around Victor coupled with an almost angry crackle. Victor's mind was in such turmoil, even when he slept, it didn't. She glanced towards Victor as he sat curled in on himself in the far corner of the room, his head tucked into his arms with his knees pulled to his chest.

His tall form seemed diminutive in the open, empty space of the special room designed to keep him from injuring himself. The pale blue scrubs he wore only enhanced the weight he had lost during his coma, leaving him looking not quite gaunt, but not the lithe, healthy man he had been when he first came to the Mountain. His black hair was mussed and spiked, now dry from the perspiration that had plastered it to his skull earlier. Beverly drew a slow, deep breath through her nostrils before focusing again on Lilly.

"I feel the same emotions from him now as I did before he slipped into the coma," Beverly said, looking to Lilly to make eye contact and read her response. "But magnified at least tenfold. He's afraid and confused."

Lilly frowned. "I don't understand his fear. We haven't done anything to make him worried for his safety here. We haven't threatened him, and we *wouldn't*. We haven't harmed him. We've tried to help him. Why would he be afraid?"

"We're not who he's afraid of. He's afraid of whatever is happening to him."

Lilly looked over her shoulder down the hall, and Beverly followed her gaze to see Michael Tanner approach. Michael reached them to stand beside Lilly, looking past them both to Victor.

"How is he today?" he asked.

"He just fell asleep a little while ago. But it was a rough night."

As Lilly filled Michael in, Beverly's focus shifted back to Victor. She had to fight the urge to reach out and touch him the entire time she sat beside him, and had to clench her fists in her lap to keep herself from doing it. His dark eyes bore a hole through her, seeking without asking, broadcasting the emotions that hung heavy in the air around him. She wanted to run her fingertips along his furrowed brow until the deep lines eased away, wanted to lay his head in her lap and comb her nails through his hair until the tension eased in his body and he relaxed. Even now, he wasn't relaxed. His body's exhaustion had taken over, but he wasn't relaxed.

She studied his features from across the room, his face only partially visible from behind the screen of his arms. His eyes snapped open, staring at her, and Beverly's breath caught in her chest. The underlying crackle in the air surged, burning beneath the nerves of her skin and a cold rush shot down her spine. Victor didn't move, just watched from behind

his folded arms. The cold, deliberate gaze held Beverly in her place for several beats of her suddenly pounding heart.

"Get out," she said.

Lilly didn't move; whether she didn't hear Beverly or was questioning her command, Beverly didn't know. Beverly watched Victor slowly uncurl his body like a lanky cat waking from a nap, and move effortlessly to his feet as if the last twenty-plus hours of physical strain had never happened. Gooseflesh danced over her skin and she swallowed against the sudden dryness in her throat as he stared her down. One corner of his lips ticked up in a quick, lopsided smirk that quickly disappeared when his gaze shifted past her.

To Michael.

"Get out." She didn't wait for Lilly to move, grabbing the woman's arm and propelling her out the door. "Get out!"

Victor lunged, stumbling when the blue strands of a pulse discharge encased his body, but kept coming at a full run. Michael's arm circled Lilly's shoulder and got her into the hall, taking Beverly with her, and put his body between them and Victor as another blue blast lit the room. Victor finally fell to his knees, collapsing sideways in the doorway of the cell.

Beverly stood on the other side of the hallway, braced against the wall to keep herself standing, staring at his prone form. Michael approached her, one hand still protectively firm at the small of Lilly's back so she would walk with him. Even when he stood between her and the door, blocking her view, it took Beverly several moments to actually look up and meet his gaze.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded as she smoothed a trembling hand over her hair. "Yes, I'm fine."

Lilly shook her head, leaning into Michael's side. "I don't understand, and I'm so *sick* of saying that! He showed no signs of hostility before he fell asleep. What would spur him into attacking like that?"

Michael looked over his shoulder to the two medical attendants who now worked on carrying Victor back onto the cell. The security guards' weapons were set on stun, and even two shots wouldn't kill, but one shot should have taken him down. Beverly wasn't a medical doctor, but she knew many healthy, strong men who couldn't stand up after one shot of a pulse charge weapon set on stun.

"Victor isn't a violent man," Michael said, his expression strained and tight. "I've known him almost my entire life."

"Victor isn't," Beverly said, her gaze shifting past Michael again to the cell door as the security guard pulled it closed. "But that wasn't Victor."

Matching puzzled expressions stared at her. "I don't understand, Bev."

A cold chill along the back of her neck made Beverly shake, and she clenched her teeth against the assault. "I looked into his eyes, and they weren't Victor's. I felt the change. That. Wasn't. Victor."

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"Has anyone considered the fact that he's simply insane?"

Beverly fought off the urge to close her eyes at the suggestion, but forced herself to continue the tedious job of keeping up with the multi-person conversation around Lilly's desk in the infirmary.

"The changes in personality... the way he seems to be *reacting* to someone who isn't there... it seems like a severe case of schizophrenia or multiple personality syndrome," CJ offered in addition to her question.

"There are some anti-psychotic drugs I can attempt, but the supply I have is short, and we have absolutely no idea how these drugs would react in an Areth."

CJ shook her head. "They've been telling us for forty years how we are the same, physiologically and genetically. We can take that as it appears, because at least on the exterior, they don't seem to be lying, and assume administering such a drug would cause the same reactions as in any other human being. If they're lying, well..." She trailed off, not finishing as her eyes shifted to Michael, who sat silent. "Michael, I'm sorry. I know that sounds cold."

"Victor hasn't lied," he said, his expression even, giving away nothing.

"And he's not insane." All attention turned to Beverly when she spoke, and she shifted forward in her chair to lean her arms on the table. "I've touched madness before, and I hope to never touch it again. It's..." She paused, trying to find the right way to explain something with no substance. "Chaos. Victor isn't lost to chaos. He's frightened, confused and alone. But he's not mad."

"You said before he attacked, that you felt *he* wasn't Victor. How can you explain that other than schizophrenia or some other split-personality disorder?" Lilly asked.

"I can't explain it. I only know it's the truth."

Lilly leaned into her hand, shaking her head. Fatigue darkened her eyes and pulled at her expression, and Beverly worried that she pushed too hard. She had since Jace's death, and Beverly imagined the only thing that would slow her down now would be the birth of her baby. She would have to stop for a while then.

"I need to think on this for awhile-do some research. Maybe I can find something in the old medical archives that might help. We had some minor cases of mental illness at the hospital in Florida where I worked, but we only had cases that could be safely medicated and mixed with the general public. We were there to ease the older generation *out*, as my supervisor said. There still might be something in the files I brought with me that could help."

"It's getting late," CJ said, pushing back from the table. "Victor is resting now. The sedative will keep him asleep for the night, and perhaps if he is rested-and *we* are rested-we can all come to some conclusion tomorrow."

Beverly hated leaving. She wanted to make everyone stay until the mystery was solved, and Victor could be given some peace. Realistically, she knew the answers wouldn't come tonight even if they *did* sit there until the early hours of the morning. As everyone walked away from Lilly's desk, going their separate ways, Beverly walked down the dimly lit hall to Victor's small room.

A guard stood outside, and nodded in greeting as she reached him. Beverly leaned her folded arms into the cold steel of the door and peered through the enforced glass to watch Victor sleep.

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Lilly sat in the semi-darkness of her quarters, her feet drawn up beside her on the lounge, a glass of milk with ice in her hand, the ice diluting the milk as it melted. Soft strains of music played from the hidden speakers Jace had installed, tucked away in the walls and ceiling to surround her with the soft melodies.

Usually, music soothed her and calmed her frazzled nerves after a particularly rough day. Today had been rough... barely beating out the day before.

She was drained; physically and emotionally. Between battles with Victor, Michael's injuries, Alexander's failing health, she wasn't sure what else she could take. Then the *piece de resistance*...

She had felt the baby move.

It should have overjoyed her and filled her with giddy pleasure. Instead, for the first time in four months, she finally *accepted* that she had no one with whom to share her joy. Whether she had been so deep in denial since November, or the truth was too much for her brain to process, it finally hit her full force.

Lilly leaned her head into the cushion behind her, aimlessly rubbing her hand over the soft swell beneath her shirt.

"Voice Command On," she spoke aloud. "Music pause."

A soft twitter preceded the silencing of the concerto playing. She sighed, knowing she tortured herself, but tonight she needed to hear Jace's voice. Even if it tore her apart.

"Play track one, personal files."

The twitter sounded again, and her heart tightened in her chest when Jace's rough laughter flowed around her, the soft strumming of his fingers across the strings of his guitar filling in the background.

"What do you want to hear, darlin'?"

"Anything you want to play."

Her tears left the room in a haze, and Lilly closed her eyes, squeezing the moisture free to run down her cheeks. She saw him sitting on the corner of their bed, his flattop Gibson resting on his thigh as his expert fingers danced over the strings. Once, she had tried to focus on his hands, to match each note to a shift of his fingertips on the neck and a pluck of the strings, but eventually gave up to enjoy his gift.

Then his voice flowed from the speakers, wrapped around her, choked her and filled her with a tentative peace at the same time.

*"It's amazing how you can speak right to my heart. Without saying a word you can light up the dark. Try as I may I could never explain what I hear when you don't say a thing."*

She wrapped her arms over her body and drew her knees up, curling in on herself. The ferocity of her sob ripped through her, stealing her breath. If she heard the knock at her door, it didn't connect far enough into her grieving soul for her to respond.

*"The smile on your face let's me know that you need me. There's a truth in your eyes saying you'll never leave me. The touch of your hand says you'll catch me whenever I fall. You say it best when you say nothing at all."*

A hand touched her shoulder and she snapped her eyes open, sucking in against the jag that tore through her. Michael sat on the couch beside her, deep frown lines bracketing his mouth as he studied her. Lilly sucked in another ragged breath and fell into him, the onslaught of grief too much for her to bear.

He wrapped her in his arms and held her until she could breathe again.

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"Ouch, damn it," CJ cursed as the match she held burned the tips of her fingers. She shook it off and lit another, lighting the final candles on the small chocolate cake on the kitchen counter of the quarters she shared with Michael.

She glanced at the clock hanging near the door. Michael had stayed behind to check on Lilly, promising he wouldn't be long.

Her heart practically fluttered in her chest with her giddy excitement. She had been planning this evening for weeks, and had thought for a while that it wouldn't happen with Victor waking up and the confusion around his condition. Deep down, CJ knew they could celebrate another day, but she was so happy it was today.

She heard the lock disengage and the door opened. CJ held her breath, watching his face when he realized the room was in darkness and looked around, his gaze falling on the burning candles of the cake.

"Surprise!" she cried, and in three seconds Michael's expression shifted from confusion to surprise to confusion again.

CJ walked around the counter and opened her arms to embrace him. Michael hugged her back, but said softly "I don't understand" as his arms came around her. She pulled back and touched his cheeks.

"It's your birthday, Michael."

He stared at her for a moment, then his eyes flicked away to the cake, deep lines furrowing his brow. "It is?"

She nodded, and pulled on his hand to bring him to the cake, the soft glow of twenty-six candles creating a small circle of light. Michael stared at the candles, his eyes shifting over the flames as the light played over his features.

"Close your eyes and make a wish—for anything you want—then blow out the candles," CJ said softly, feeling the need to keep her voice low.

She watched, mesmerized, as his eyelids slid down with almost painful slowness and he swallowed. CJ held her breath until he opened his eyes again and leaned forward with one mighty huff to blow out all the candles.

He blinked at the curls of smoke from the extinguished candles, and looked at her. "Now what do we do?"

CJ laughed, swiping at the errant moisture that streaked her cheeks from tears she didn't remember letting fall. "Well, we cut the cake and enjoy. And you open your gifts."

"Gifts?"

CJ brushed his mussed hair with her fingertips, her chest aching at the innocence lost in his dark eyes. He should know about birthday parties and presents, and probably did from books and things he had heard, but never in his own life. Never intimately enough to understand.

"Yes, gifts. But first, cake."

She slid the two plates across the counter she had set out earlier. Michael watched her intently as she cut the cake and managed to remove the pieces out without the whole thing toppling over. CJ licked chocolate icing from her fingertips as she handed him his plate. "Eat up."

"Did you make this?" he asked around his first cheekful of cake.

She nodded. "Yes. I had help. It has been a *very* long time since I baked a cake, or really cooked much of anything."

"It's delicious."

"I'm glad you like it."

Michael set the fork in his plate, looking at her. CJ paused, another bite halfway to her mouth when she realized he was staring.

"What?"

"I didn't know."

CJ set her own fork down. "I've always known your birthday. Even before I knew you were alive."

His only response was a slight tilt of his head, but CJ recognized the spark in his eyes that told her he wanted—*needed*—to hear more.

"Your father told me about you not long after we met. He told me about his wife and son that he had lost, and the empty hole it had left in his heart. This was before he knew what your—what *Kathleen*—had really done. But I knew your name, your birthday... and all the dreams he had for you he never thought would come true."

"What kind of dreams?"

"Of teaching you to fish," she said with a smile as she remembered the night on Nick's dock in Maine when he had told her all his lost dreams. "And to read, and play ball and everything a father teaches his son. He told me he knew you would have been someone amazing, he felt it."

Michael looked away, staring down at the half-eaten piece of cake. CJ curled her hand around his wrist, and he looked up again. "He was right," she said softly. Before the strong wave of emotion had a chance to grab hold of her again, she sucked in a sharp breath. "You stay right here. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"To get your gifts."

By the time she returned from the bedroom, she had swallowed the thick lump in her throat and felt under control. While she was happy to give Michael something he had never had before, the lack of Nick sat like a heavy weight on her chest. Some days she missed him so much she couldn't breathe.

Today was one of those days.

Michael was scraping his fork across his empty plate to capture every morsel of cake and frosting when she climbed back into the tall chair beside him. He smiled at her as she sat down again.

"This one is from me," she said, handing him the largest package.

Michael took the gift, holding it several moments as if studying it before he tore at the edges. The book inside, with its bright red cover, was worn and well used, many of the pages dog-eared and marked. Michael set the paper aside and ran his fingers over the gold lettering on the cover; *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*.

"I used it in medical school," she explained. "And I've taken it with me for every position I've ever held. I know it's beaten up, but I hope—"

"Thank you," he said, gently cutting her off.

CJ smiled. "You're welcome."

He opened to the middle of the book, the binding protesting with a loud creak as the thin pages fluttered apart. The page he settled on had writing in the margins in red, blue and black and some of the text was highlighted in yellow and pink; a testament to her late nights of studying to finish school at a young age.

CJ looked down at the envelope she held in her hands. She didn't know what was inside, only that Nick had asked she do this—give Michael this gift on this day. She held it out, and Michael's gaze shifted from the book to the envelope.

"This is from your father," she said, her voice suddenly weak and she cleared her throat. "He gave it to me the day he left and made me promise to give it to you."

"What is it?"

She shook her head and shrugged. "Open it."

Michael took the envelope and loosened the clasp at the top, pulling from inside a folded stack of papers. On the top was a hand-written letter in Nick's slanted script. Michael flattened the letter. "Should I read it aloud?"

"If you'd like to. But it's to you, and you don't have to share it with me."

He licked his lips, and began. *"Michael. I knew planning this trip that I would once again miss your birthday, and this one is important. I don't intend to miss another, not if there is anything I can do about it. Know that. Either way, I wanted to make sure you had this. It was always yours. I was just taking care of it for you. Your Dad."*

With a slight tremble in his hand, Michael set the letter aside and unfurled the tri-folded papers on the counter. Two photographs fell from within the folds; both of which CJ immediately recognized. One was of the cabin in Maine from the front. Nick stood on the porch, with the door open behind him and his shoulder leaned against the doorjamb with his hands pushed into his pockets. Dog sat at his feet, so she knew the photograph wasn't that old, taken within the last few years.

The other was a view of Moosehead Lake from the end of Nick's dock. The water shifted from black to blue to silver depending on how the sun hit it, and the leaves on the trees that surrounded the lake were just beginning to turn with the autumn season change. The sky variegated from deep to pale blue, with wispy white clouds strewn behind the tree line like long strips of cotton candy.

"Those are of your father's cabin," she explained briefly as Michael studied them.

He set the photos down with the letter and picked up the pile of papers attached at the top to make a bundle. CJ watched as his eyes quickly skimmed the first page, and he flipped through the others, reading what the document told him—and she had figured out as soon as she saw the photos.

"He gave me the cabin."

His voice was heavy with what CJ could only describe as awe, his brown eyes wide as he stared at the last page. She shifted closer, rubbing her hand across his back as she rested her cheek on his shoulder and read the papers he held.

"He gave you what's yours. That's what he said in the letter."

"But his great-grandfather built it."

"His great-grandfather. Your great-great-grandfather. The cabin has been passed from father to son for four generations. You are the fifth generation. It's yours."

Michael didn't speak, just sat staring at the deed and the photographs. CJ smoothed her hand over his hair and sighed.

"Happy birthday, Michael."

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"Space... the final frontier."

Colonel Nick Tanner tipped his head and looked through the tempered glass canopy of his O2-powered glider into the smothering, endless blackness of space. Left. Right. Above and below. Nothing but ... nothing.

"I know that's from *something*, I just can't think of what. You'd probably know, Michael."

He wondered for a moment how long he'd have to talk to his son, even though Michael was twenty-three-thousand light years behind him, to consider himself crazy. If he knew he was crazy, was he crazy? Nick shook his head as he engaged the system diagnostic in preparation for wormhole navigation.

*What he wouldn't do for a chocolate chip cookie.*

After eight or nine jumps, he wasn't even sure now, he had started talking to Michael and Caitlin in his voice logs. It was a hell of a lot more interesting than rambling on about gauge readings and how black space was... *Just as black today as yesterday... just as cold... blah blah blah.*

"So, it's Day One-Hundred-Ten, Earth date March 14, 2052. Nothing exciting to speak of. Haven't seen a gas station or McDonald's in ten-thousand light years. Someone should really look into the development potential out here. All this open space... could put up condos or something."

The green status bar on the diagnostic program slowly edged left to right, and the Wormhole Initiation Program engaged, warming up for the jump. Nick shifted in his seat, wishing like hell he could stretch his legs. Gliders were built to best accommodate pilots five-foot-eleven or shorter. His four extra inches were just enough to make the space damn uncomfortable after twenty-two jumps.

The familiar low hum and vibration of the Solid O2 burners churning the tanks shifted through the craft. On Earth, he had never felt the pulsations when his ship came to life, but out here there was nothing to dampen the effect. He closed his eyes for a moment and listened. Another half-dozen jumps and he wouldn't need the systems to tell him the engine status; he'd be able to feel it.

He opened his eyes again, his gaze shifting to the photograph wedged into the window edge of his canopy. Nick pulled it free, the edges already showing wear, a crescent-shaped crease where his thumb settled automatically. *Not quite typical... not quite whole... but his family, nonetheless.* In the snapshot, he stood with Caitlin and Michael on each side of him, his arm draped over each of their shoulders. His son... his wife—as soon as he got his ass back to Earth—and if she'd still take an old man like him.

Nick stroked over Caitlin's face and blonde hair with the pad of his thumb. Then he focused on his son, the younger image of himself down to height, build, even the same unruly hair that never cared what a comb told it to do.

"So, today is your birthday, Michael. After all that crap and I'm still not there."

The diagnostic run was complete, and no red lights flashed warning him he was now dead in space. Nick pulled the oxygen mask across his nose and mouth, fastening it into place on the other side of his helmet, and retrieved the leather gloves from the crevice beside his seat that he shoved them in after every jump. With two sharp tugs, the gloves sheathed his hands and he flipped the final initiation switch that would plot his course and open a wormhole through space.

The immense black, broken only by distant white stars, shimmered and twisted clockwise, like paint on a canvas blurred by an invading brush. Once solid points of light now left long trails as the swirling anomaly drew energy and power from the empty vacuum around it. With a flash of blue-white light, the blackness opened into a gaping mouth of swirling light and arching energy.

"I miss you guys," he said to the empty cockpit.

Nick gripped the two-fisted joystick that would allow him to guide his ship to the other side of the one-thousand light year tunnel, and slowly closed his eyes. His thumbs rested on the red booster buttons. He drew a long, deep breath.

"Time to rock and roll."

## Chapter Four

Beverly turned a corner in one of the lower levels of the Mountain base, and saw CJ walking just a few feet ahead. She called her friend's name, and CJ turned, waiting for her to catch up. "Are you on your way to Command?"

They continued towards the elevator further down the hall. CJ nodded, holding eye contact with Beverly. "General Castleton just paged me. Do you know what happened?"

Beverly shook her head. "Not fully. I only know a Phoenix operative has been taken into custody by Alliance forces." Even as she relayed the information, a tight knot twisted in her stomach at the thought of one of their own being in Areth hands. Since the rescue from New Mexico, everyone within Phoenix had a much clearer understanding of the brutality the Areth were capable of, and the thought of one of their own facing that brutality was almost enough to make her ill. "Someone came to the infirmary to let me know the General needed to assemble the command staff."

They reached the elevator and CJ pressed the call button. "This is the fourth one we've lost since the New World Congress was initiated and since New Mexico. I wonder which one spurred the arrests on more."

"Probably a combination of both," Beverly said as they stepped onto the elevator. "The Areth High Council is wielding more power all the time, even though they claim the whole purpose of the New World Congress was to make us all equal."

As the elevator crawled upward to the Command level, CJ leaned back against the wall, her arms crossed over her body. Her expression was tight and worried, and Beverly understood the feelings she knew CJ felt. They all felt it. After so many years of passive, covert aggression against the Areth, when their subversive intelligence gathering and minor acts of sabotage had been enough to throw blocks in the road, the possibility of actual conflict loomed in the near future. It was frightening.

"We haven't had much time to talk lately." It was a minor distraction, but true nonetheless. Beverly couldn't remember the last time she and CJ were alone together.

CJ raised her head, a weary smile on her lips. "We've all been very busy. It seems there is always more to do than people to do it."

"I'm glad to see Michael has found his place here. Medicine seems very natural for him."

CJ smiled more genuinely this time, a glimmer of pride in her eyes. "He has changed so much in the last few months, Bev. It's amazing. Nick won't recognize him when he comes home."

The elevator stopped and the doors opened again. Side-by-side, the women exited and turned toward Base Command. General Castleton and Damian sat around the holo-vid table in the center of the room as CJ and Beverly took their seats.

"What happened?" Beverly asked as she turned her attention to the General.

General Castleton's expression was grim as he shifted his gaze between all of them. "We just got a report in from one of our people in Washington."

"Kerrigan?" Beverly knew of only half a dozen Phoenix people in the Washington area, and of those six, only three reported directly to the General. Eli Kerrigan had been in the field the longest.

"Anderson sent in the report. Kerrigan was arrested."

Damian tapped his console, motioning to all of them. "Engage your monitor."

Beverly did, and within seconds a video of Eli Kerrigan being removed from a restaurant in downtown Arlington by Alliance Security personnel played on her screen. He wasn't fighting them, yet Beverly saw them shove and pull him along; making it appear that he was. Her heart pounded harder in her chest. She had met Eli shortly after he joined Phoenix, and remembered him as being charismatic and steadfast in his convictions.

"Jackie Anderson was supposed to be with him when he was arrested, but she was caught in a raid gone bad on the other side of town. Otherwise, we might be down two people instead of one."

"What were the charges? Kerrigan has always flown well under the radar. No one has ever suspected him of anything to our knowledge," CJ said.

"He was arrested for Deviant Behavior and Conspiracy to Undermine Alliance Authority," Damian provided.

CJ shook her head. "What the *hell* is going on? Four months ago, the President creates the New World Congress and now we have Alliance Security walking the streets of every major city of the World arresting anyone who speaks out against the Earth-Areth Alliance!"

"I have to wonder if President Hargrave knew what he was doing, or..." Beverly's thoughts tapered off as she let her hand fall heavily on the table.

"We cannot expect to remain outside their search pattern for long," Damian said. "We drew attention to ourselves when we infiltrated the New Mexico facility. There have already been reports that the Administrators of the lab are anxious to discover who we are and to seek restitution, even though they have made no public announcements regarding what we actually did there."

"And they won't. Of course. The Areth are *not* about to admit they were holding two-dozen human guinea pigs in one of their top genetics facilities," CJ said, her brow furrowed deep with frustration. "Do we know where they took Eli?"

Damian shook his head. "No. We've engaged the communications network—sending out some feelers—to see what we can find out. Anderson is on her way back here. We'll get a more detailed report when she arrives."

"The news that's coming back isn't good," General Castleton said, rapping his knuckles on the table. "We're hearing about more and more people being arrested for these bullshit charges. More often than not, it has been an average citizen rather than one of our operatives. If this continues, we're going to have to tell everyone to get their heads down and grab their asses."

"There's no way we can reach every operative. Some are buried so deep undercover, their only contact with us is when they initiate it." The knot in Beverly's stomach tightened at the thought of all their people they might not be able to warn, might not be able to reach.

Castleton shook his head. "Let's hope they pick up some of the news wires and use their heads."

"Have you spoken with General Bennett at the Sarajevo base?" CJ asked.

"The same crap is going on everywhere," the General said with a nod. He ran his hand over his thick, white hair. "Damn it, how blind and stupid did people have to be not to see this coming twenty years ago?"

No one spoke for several moments. The General's anger was a projection, on some level, of what they all felt. They knew this was coming. It was the very reason they had all joined Phoenix. They had all hoped to stop it before it came this far. Now, they would be playing catch up, but no one was giving up yet.

"How secure are we in the Mountain?" Beverly asked, breaking the weight that had settled over the table.

Damian rubbed the back of his shaved head. "We have our shields to mask any EM resonance the electronics would throw off, and all entries and exits are completely camouflaged. I locked down the glider bay this morning, and the shield is in place. As long as nothing draws their attention *here*, we should be good for quite awhile."

"And if the worst happens, we're working on a plan B," General Castleton added. "We will begin drills for evacuation within the week. Hollenbeck and Phelps are scouting viable Beta sites, and Guillette and Dr. Byrne are already working on a kill switch for the entire computer data base."

"I also suggest we restrict any movement outside the Mountain as much as possible," Beverly added. "Excluding the upcoming mission. We should move immediately on the supply excursion. If we wait too long, our chances of acting without garnering notice will be slim to none."

"Agreed," General Castleton said with a nod. "Captain, gather your team and be prepared to leave in twenty-four hours."

"Yes, sir."

Beverly drew in a long, deep breath through her nose. It all sounded so morbid and final. "We always knew this day would come, but I don't think knowing makes it any easier."

"We didn't want it," the General said. "But the Areth are damn well gonna get a fight. I just hope Nick gets his ass back here pronto, and brings us good news."

"We all do, General," Beverly said, and looked at CJ across the table. "We all do."

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*Tall stalks of maize swayed in the warm breeze, undulating like golden ocean waves. They rustled together, the sound barely a whisper. The sky was an almost impossible shade of blue, with large clouds sparsely scattered above the horizon. Hillsides gave way to thick jungle-like forests, and the heady fragrance of earth and sunlight hung heavy in the air.*

*He walked through the stalks, brushing his hands along their thready crowns, as the sun warmed his shoulders and made him squint against the brightness. The harvest had been good this year. Father had told him how proud he was and he smiled now as his chest swelled with pride. There would be more than enough maize to feed the people of Tikal, and pay tribute to Quetzalcatl, God of All.*

*Far in the distance a small group from the village gathered; some carrying baskets of fruit and vegetables while others worked to prepare a freshly killed boar for roasting. The great stone temple of Quetzalcatl rose from the edge of the jungle, its sun-bleached stones reaching above the treetops and at the top an eternal fire burned. Black smoke curled and billowed, only to be caught in the breeze and blown away.*

*A young woman walked into his line of site, a bundle of green fronds held against her hip. She set them down near an elder woman, and as she stood, the smooth length of her black hair swayed across*

*her back. Even from this distance, he knew her form and grace, the sight of her young body stirring a surge of heat in his chest.*

*Ukatim'u.*

*His betrothed.*

*She turned and saw him, raising her hand to wave and urge him closer. Mekel drew a slow breath and smiled before he jogged towards her.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Beverly curled on her side, her hands tucked beneath her cheek, staring into the semi-darkness of her bedroom. Sleep eluded her, leaving her achy from tossing and turning, and even more awake than when she had first gone to bed. She rolled onto her back to look at the ceiling.

It was pointless to look at the clock. She had watched the minutes tick away for the last two hours, and knew it was close to midnight. With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and tried to will herself to sleep.

Immediately, colliding emotions that had assaulted her that afternoon when she stopped at the infirmary to check on Victor's progress filled her thoughts. Victor had been out of control, thrashing and fighting against the attendants who tried to hold him down long enough for Lilly to administer a sedative and a super-shot of vitamins and nutrients to try and counteract his forced starvation. She hadn't heard his screams, but she saw the twisted anguish in his expression as he arched his body and tried to be free.

Fear had permeated the room. Cold, paralyzing, and black.

Beverly had stood in the doorway, unable to do anything but watch helplessly as Victor not only battled against those who only wanted to help him but against the liar in his mind. She understood that now, because she had heard it whisper... and the slithering, evil voice had been enough to stop her in her place.

*They're killing you for what you've done!*

To have such a thing in his mind, haunted and tormented day and night... the thought drove sleep away into the dark shadows of her bedroom. The duality was obvious, there was no question in Beverly's mind that the voice she heard wasn't Victor's but the fear absolutely was.

This wasn't madness, not in the sense that CJ and Lilly defined it. Of that, Beverly was sure. That was the only thing she knew for sure.

No... she was sure she needed to help him. She didn't know how to heal his mind any more than Lilly knew how to heal his body, but she couldn't let him go on like this.

Her mind made up, Beverly threw back the blankets and rolled out of bed. She dressed quickly and pulled her long hair into a cursory braid down her back. The halls of the base were empty at this hour, except for the occasional night serviceman or programmer who couldn't force himself to sleep. Everyone worked hard here. Sometimes, because they were so secluded from the world and so self-sufficient, it was easy to forget the battle. Eli Kerrigan's arrest was a harsh reminder.

The leader in her knew that Victor could be a huge asset in the battle they inevitably faced. If he had been willing to walk away from his brethren four months ago, perhaps he would be willing to give more. The information he could provide might be the leg up they needed to win, or at least give them a chance at surviving until Nick Tanner returned.

Dim light shined from a small light over Lilly's desk, the only other light at one of the beds for a patient that must have come in during the day. She looked familiar; possibly one of the new residents from New Mexico, but Beverly couldn't put a name to her face. As she crossed the space, one of the attendants working the night shift came out of the back storage area and smiled when she saw Beverly approaching.

"Good evening, Ms. Surimoto. What can I do for you?"

"I came to check on Victor. How is he doing?"

Amanda's smile faded slightly and she tilted her head, her eyes shifting towards the hall that led to his special cell. "He's been despondent and unresponsive to anyone for several hours, completely quiet and docile. He refuses to eat or drink, and just sits there." She shook her head. "Doctor Quinn had to finally get some rest, or I think she would have stayed up all night trying."

"We can't let her do that," Beverly said, agreeing with Amanda's unspoken argument that Lilly pushed herself too hard. Amanda had been Lilly's head medical assistant for several years, and knew Lilly's tendency to push herself hard. With a baby on the way, now was not the time for her to fall into old habits. "Is he asleep now?"

"He wasn't a few minutes ago when I went back to check on him. There are two security guards posted outside his cell, so if you would like to go back, you'll be safe."

"Thank you."

Amanda nodded and went back to her duties as Beverly walked down the dim hallway. Lieutenant Solomon, one of the guards posted to watch over Victor, opened the door for her and smiled as she passed by him.

Victor's sorrow was smothering, sucking the air from the room and squeezing Beverly's chest until she had to take a step back and re-gather her defenses. Swallowing against the onslaught, Beverly walked into the dark room.

Victor sat on the floor with his back against the wall and his knees drawn up, his head buried in the bend of his folded arms. Hot tears burned Beverly's eyes as she knelt beside him, his sadness was so tangible. It raised the hairs on her arms and made her heart ache. She had to fight the urge to reach out and touch his hair, smooth her fingers through it, and comfort him. If the intensity of his emotion was this great just by proximity, Beverly was afraid what she would feel if she touched him. Instead, she knelt as close as she dared without making contact and clenched her hands in her lap.

Before she could say his name, he raised his head, his black eyes seeking her out in the dim light. The soft glow of hydrogen gel from the hallway lit his features, highlighting the damp streaks on his cheeks.

"Beverly," he said, his lips moist from his tears.

She nodded.

His body shook and his expression twisted with agony as new tears filled his eyes and he looked towards the ceiling. Victor laid a hand across his brow, bracing his head as another wave of anguish slammed through him, and through her. Beverly curled her fists, her nails digging into her palms, and she felt her own tears fall.

"Victor, please. Tell me. What is breaking your heart?"

She could barely read his lips, but his repeated words finally registered. "I killed her."

"Who?" she asked.

He shook his head, rolling it against the grayed padding behind him. Like a creeping shadow, Beverly felt the cold presence slide over Victor and push against her. Not like the day before when 'Victor' had snapped out of sleep to attack Michael. Then, she had only felt the other mind that was not Victor. Now, she felt them both; the tormented sadness that smothered Victor, and the cold, calculated darkness that reinforced it.

Victor shook his head more violently, pressing the heels of his hands against his temples. "No!" A violent tremor shook his body. "No!"

He started to roll away, and before she could tell herself to stop, Beverly reached for him and wrapped her fingers around his wrists. She gasped at the jolt, but it wasn't the drowning wave she had expected. An echoing scream resounded through her mind, and she felt the dual entity retreat. Victor stiffened and arched, then slumped as his gaze shifted to her again, wide and confused.

Beverly panted several breaths, trying to push past the shock and uncertainty that collided in her mind. If she had been confused before by the mysteries of Victor's haunting, that confusion multiplied exponentially. Victor turned his hands to loosen them from her grasp, but didn't move from her touch. He ran his fingers along her skin and the back of her knuckles, deep lines furrowing his brow as his gaze followed the point of contact. Beverly smiled and did what she had wanted to do since she came into the small cell; stroking her fingers through his short, black hair and cupping his head in her palm.

Victor's eyes closed, and the jumbled chaos that had surrounded him since his awakening quieted to a muffled whisper as he released a shuddered breath. Beverly didn't resist as his arms wrapped around her and pulled her closer. She embraced him, rising on her knees to move closer and let him hold her as tightly as he needed.

## Chapter Five

Victor was warm. The kind of warm that sank deep to the bone and permeated every cell. The kind of warm he hadn't felt in over a hundred years. The kind of warm he had given up on since being trapped in the hell of his own demon's haunting.

He drew a deep breath, his senses aware first of the heady aromas surrounding him; floral, feminine and warm. Warm. Everything was warm and it felt wonderful.

"I don't quite understand what happened," came a muffled voice through the haze of sleep that still hung on to his consciousness. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he registered the voice as Doctor Quinn, but he silently wished she would go away and leave him to his peace.

"I'm not sure myself."

*Beverly.* Her voice was unmistakable; the slight lilt and soft tone, despite the underlying synthetic quality.

Each of his senses slowly engaged as he edged from sleep, and he oriented himself without opening his eyes. He was lying down, his back against the padded wall of his newest cell, his head cradled in the soft, feminine warmth of Beverly's body. It was her subtle scent that first awakened his senses, and the smooth brush of her clothing was delicate and comforting against his cheek. Her fingers stroked his hair, gently combing back from the temple, a touch so simple and yet so foreign to anything he had ever known.

"I don't know what you did, Bev, but I'm glad you did it. He needed rest. Real rest. Now, if we could just get him to eat."

Victor drew a slow breath through his nose and blinked, squinting against the low light that burned through his skull. At the suggestion of food, his stomach twisted and growled loudly. Beverly's hand moved from his hair to rest gently on his shoulder. Heat emanated from the touch, and in that brief moment, Victor understood why humans enjoyed and even craved physical contact. He rolled onto his back, keeping his head in Beverly's lap, and shielded his eyes.

She smiled down at him, and Victor could only stare. This had to be some strange dream. The nightmare of the last few days didn't end like this. Why would he have a dream about waking in the embrace of a human woman? How could he dream in such detail?

"Good morning," she said, although the smile never left her lips. "How do you feel, Victor?"

With a groan as every joint and muscle in his body protested the movement, Victor sat up and shifted to brace his back against the wall, bending his legs enough to rub his hands over his face and rest his elbows on his knees.

"Like I've been freed from a nightmare," he answered, dropping his hands.

Doctor Quinn knelt on the floor on the other side of Beverly, a wide, genuine smile on her face. "You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear you say that. Would you like something to eat?"

Once again, his stomach rolled loudly and he pressed his hand against the pain that shot through it from several days without nourishment. "Yes, thank you."

"I'll be right back."

She rose slowly to her feet and left him alone with Beverly, if he ignored the armed guard who still stood at the door watching him cautiously. Victor rubbed the back of his neck, wincing against the dull ache that throbbed between his shoulder blades. His entire body hurt and invisible lead weights pulled at his wrists. Despite his restful sleep, he was exhausted.

Beverly sat beside him, her legs extended straight out with her ankles crossed and her hands in her lap, her shoulder brushing his as she watched him. "You had us all very frightened," she said.

Victor looked at her, finally seeing her without the red haze that had clouded his vision for so long. Her features were delicate, her eyes almond-shaped and slightly angled hinting at a distant heritage very different from the one that gifted her with jade green eyes, golden-red hair and fair skin. Several curls had escaped the braid that trailed down her back, framing her face and elongating the column of her neck. Even as an Areth, he understood the essence of human beauty.

He had been trained to seek it out and duplicate it.

Victor bit down, wincing as he looked away. Beverly immediately rested her hand on his arm.

"What is it, Victor?"

He looked down at her hand as it curled around his forearm, her skin light and creamy against the darker tone of his own. Her skin was warm. Victor already felt the cold of isolation drifting back into his bones, and her touch held it off for just a moment longer.

"The remnants of a nightmare," he finally answered.

She tilted her head, her hand moving down his arm to slide her palm across his own and lace her fingers through his. A gentle, undeniable surge shifted up Victor's arm and he stared at their hands. It almost seemed as if he were seeing someone else's hand holding hers.

"It's over," she said, pulling him from his thoughts.

Doctor Quinn returned with a tray of food, a wide smile still on her face as she set it down. "I had Amanda grab a little bit of everything without overloading you. You haven't had much solid food since waking up, and you need to ease back into it."

He nodded, understanding perfectly. More than once, he had gone through the arduous task of re-acclimating a human subject back to a solid diet. Victor tamped down the black memories and focused on the fruit and muffin the doctor had brought him, reluctantly releasing Beverly's hand to pick up the steaming cup of coffee on the corner of the tray.

"Can you tell me how you feel? Physically," Doctor Quinn asked.

"Weak," he said, adding a plentiful amount of sugar to the coffee. "Lethargic and fatigued. Tension headache. Dull pain in the joints, weakness and muscle aches everywhere."

"Good. I'll see what we can do about the general discomfort. Is there anything I need to know?"

Her tone drew his gaze and Victor looked into her face. The question hung in the air as clearly as if it had been asked. *Is there something I need to know because you're Areth...*

"No, Doctor. I would greatly appreciate a general analgesic."

She nodded. "Okay. Once you've eaten, we'll see what we can do about finding you better accommodations."

As she neared the door, Victor called after her and she stopped, turning back to face him. "I understand the need for security, Doctor," he said simply.

She nodded and left. Victor picked up the plate of fruit and sat back, holding it out to Beverly. She silently took a piece, and he took his first bite. He remembered vaguely eating something similar days before, but the memory was fleeting and wouldn't stay long enough for him to grab hold of and visualize. Everything was a twisted, chaotic nightmare of shattered, disproportioned moments that found no connection to each other through the black fear he could still taste in the back of his throat.

The only clear memory he had was of the night before. Of Beverly grasping his wrists and the cold heat that rushed his body and the screaming echo that reverberated through his head as his demon retreated from her touch... and then the flow of peace that enveloped him. Then sleep. Peaceful sleep.

"May I ask you something, Beverly?" he asked, looking up from his plate of food.

"Of course."

"How long ago did I come here?"

"Do you mean from New Mexico?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Over four months."

"Have I been in this room all that time?"

A wave of something-sadness, perhaps—skimmed over her features and she shook her head. "No. You were very ill when you first came and none of us knew how to help you. You slipped into a coma a few days after arriving here with Michael and the other humans you helped Colonel Tanner free."

Victor's stomach twisted and he set the food aside, raising his knees again to support his arms. When he closed his eyes, and pushed hard against the wall that blocked his thoughts, he saw flashes... bits and pieces that he knew somehow formed the larger picture. How, he didn't know yet.

*"I can get you to the glider bay. Can you fly?"*

*The younger man snorted and Michael's father threw him a hard glance. "Yeah, I can manage," he answered, not even attempting to hide the sarcasm.*

*"Perhaps that will distract the security force long enough to allow the others to escape?"*

*The two men exchanged glances. "It just might work," the younger said.*

*"On one condition."*

*Michael's father shook his head, grimacing. "What?"*

*"Take me with you."*

Pain shot through his temples and Victor grit his teeth against it.

*"Victor, what's wrong?"*

*He suddenly gripped her arms, his fingers digging in painfully. "Leave me here, Caitlin. I—" His body shook, his eyes squinting shut. Victor slammed his head back against the wall, the impact echoing through the room and drawing everyone's attention. Michael was immediately beside them, unmasked concern on his face. Victor opened his eyes again, his lips pulled back tight in obvious pain. "I'll tell you the security codes."*

*"Vic? What's wrong?" Michael asked.*

Victor just shook his head, slamming it back against the wall once again, hissing through his clenched teeth. "You need to go, Michael. I don't want to hold you back."

Beverly moved to her knees beside him, one hand sliding along his shoulders as she shifted herself into his line of sight. "Victor, look at me. I can feel the tension building in you like a dam."

*Victor released Michael's hands to clutch the fabric of his sleeves, pulling Michael partially off his chair. "Do you remember...?" He paused, pushing back a wave of pain to speak. "Do you remember, Michael, when you asked if being your friend was allowed?"*

*Michael nodded. "I remember, Vic. You brought me coffee."*

*Victor laughed, but the humor was lost in another deep hiss through his teeth. "Perhaps... perhaps this is what happens..."*

"Michael," Victor finally said, swallowing as he blinked to bring her face into focus again. "He's safe."

Beverly nodded, her jade eyes shifting as she studied him. "Yes. Michael and all the other humans we brought from the facility. Do you remember him coming here to see you, Victor?"

He shook his head. "No."

She smiled, but it was a smile of consolation. "You will, I'm sure. He has come every day, both when you were asleep and since you've awakened."

*Michael gripped the front of Victor's scrubs, pinning him against the wall even as Victor still fought to find leverage and get his hands around Michael's throat again. "Victor! Stop this!"*

*Victor howled again and fought with everything he had against Michael. With a new surge of fury, Victor shoved away from the wall and the two men tumbled into the monitors along the side of the bed.*

Victor gasped, lunging forward. "No," he choked out. "What did I do? Beverly, what did I do?" He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes until spots floated in his vision, and yet the image of his hands around Michael's throat remained.

"Victor!" she shouted, her hands cupping his face to force him to look at her. "Michael is fine, I *promise* you. When he hears you are doing better, I'm sure he will be here and you will see for yourself. He has worked for months to help you, and has said again and again he knew you would win this fight."

Victor nodded within the hold of her hands, the panic that had begun to curl in his chest subsiding as he sank back against the wall. She continued to stroke the hair at his temples, and Victor rolled his head on the padding to look at her.

"Thank you."

"For what?" she asked, sitting back on her heels with her hands folded in her lap.

"The one clear memory I have is of last night," he said, swallowing against the dry roughness in his throat. He would drink more when he had the strength to reach for the tray, but just moving around had tapped him. "You're an empath."

She nodded slowly, her eyes diverting for a moment before coming back to him.

"I've never met an empath." His last words disappeared into a dry cough, and she handed him a glass of orange juice from the tray, helping him hold the cup to his lips when his weak arms trembled at the simple act. After quenching his parched throat, he leaned his head back on the grayed padding on the wall and studied her. "What did you do to me?"

She shook her head. "I didn't do anything."

"I felt something when you touched me." With each word, he felt the heavy weights of sleep pull at him again, and the effort to open his eyes after each blink was enough to exhaust him.

Beverly shifted on her knees to sit beside him again, her back against the wall. Her hand skimmed over his hair and gently nudged his shoulder. Victor didn't realize how easily he responded to her silent offer until his cheek rested again on her thigh and her fingers stroked his hair as they had when he woke up.

The gentle heaviness of sleep blanketed him and his senses slipped into the quiet peace. Beverly's soft lips brushed across his and her breath warmed his skin. Her fingertips smoothed over his forehead, and she said softly "Sleep, Victor. I'll be here when you wake up."

For a brief moment, he fought the urge to fall into the stillness, to reach out to the warmth that spread through him, but the demand for sleep was too strong and he sighed, letting it take him.

## Chapter Six

Jacqueline Anderson leaned into the corner of the elevator, the back of her head against the wall, as the car carried her down into the lower levels of the Colorado base. She tried to stifle her yawn, but it seemed to come all the way from her toes, draining just a little bit more of her energy as she sucked in oxygen. Her limbs felt like lead weights, and her left shoulder ached.

No, it more than ached... *it throbbed... pulsed...* screamed *loudly* against the wound that dug into the muscles around her shoulder socket.

She tried to roll her arm, to alleviate some of the stiffness, but the movement shot pain completely across her back and down her spin. Jacqueline winced and glanced at the red numbers over the door that ticked off each level as she descended. Soon enough, she'd see Doc Quinn and get the pulse charge wound dealt with. Two days ago, with an Alliance Security Detail hot on her ass, she hadn't exactly had time to swing by a 'participating Phoenix physician' for a proper dressing and cleaning.

Right now, she wanted to see the Doc, take a long, hot shower and fall into the nearest available bed.

The elevator bumped to a stop, and she pushed away from the wall with a moan, walking with heavy feet down the hall toward the infirmary. It was quiet, with just one young brunette in a bed. A tall man dressed in civvies with brown hair that hung in sexy disarray over his forehead stood beside her with a medical reader in his hand. Jackie glanced around, hoping to see Doc Quinn. As she walked further into the infirmary, now supporting her left arm with her right hand as a new sizzling tingle added itself to the aching throb, the man standing beside the bed turned and saw her.

And her step slowed...

*Just a little...*

"Are you injured?" he asked, his dark eyes shifting to look at her arm as she held it against her side.

Jacqueline smirked as she let her gaze roam over him from head to toe. He certainly didn't look like a doc dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt. "Not that I wouldn't mind you nursing me back to health, handsome, but is Doc Quinn here?"

"She's occupied with a patient."

Another stab of stinging pain shot straight from the wound to the base of her skull, sucking all the teasing from her voice. "Could I wait for her?" she said through clenched teeth.

He didn't answer; gently but firmly placing his hand at the small of her back to lead her toward one of the exam tables.

"Hey, honey!" she said, planting her feet firmly. "I said you were handsome, but..."

He stared at her, his head tilted just slightly as if he were actually waiting for her to finish. "Never mind..." she said, begrudgingly, and let him lead the way.

"I take it you work here?" she asked as he pulled the white cotton curtain around the table for privacy. He looked at her over his shoulder, giving the curtain a final tug.

"How are you hurt?" he asked, reaching for the zipper of her uniform jacket.

Jacqueline tried not to notice how long his fingers were, but it was kind of hard to miss as he unzipped her clothes and gently worked at sliding the heavy material off her arm without causing her more pain. His touch was cautious, practiced.

"Pulse charge weapon blast two days ago."

His eyebrows shot up. "Not here."

"No. I was in DC and the Alliance baddies wanted a piece of me, I guess. I mean, who *wouldn't*, right?" His eyes only shifted to her for a moment before he went back to the job of removing the jacket. "Ye-ah," she said, dragging out the word. "I got away, obviously, but not without them leaving a mark."

She shrugged her good arm free of the jacket as he slid the sleeve of the other side slowly over her hand until the garment was off. Beneath she wore a basic issue black tank top, the wide straps that went over her shoulder a constant irritation to the burn that covered her entire shoulder blade. He stepped close, invading what she normally considered her personal space, but when the subtle scent of his soap—or whatever he used—filled her senses, she didn't really care.

"It looks like a second-degree burn," he said, his voice low as he examined her skin with slight touches of his fingertips. He brushed her long, brown hair aside to get a better look, and she hissed as his hand brushed some of the tenderest areas. "I'm sorry," he said, the sincerity ringing clear in his voice.

"No problem. Just fix it, 'kay?"

He nodded and turned to a small cart of supplies tucked into the corner of the exam area. "Do you think you can slip the shirt off?"

Heat rushed her entire body, settling firmly in her cheeks. "On the first date? Don't I get to know your name first?"

His hands stilled short of setting the medical supplies on the table, turning his head just enough to look at her. His brow pulled in deep furrows. "Was this a date?"

Jacqueline shook her head, almost laughing. "I was *joking*."

*Geez, Jackie... where the hell did you leave your mojo!*

He stepped back to her, setting several items on the bed beside her, ripping open a large pad coated with a green gel. "Michael."

"Um, well, hello, Michael. I'm Jacqueline... Jackie."

He set the pad aside and picked up a pair of flat edged scissors, and Jacqueline tried very hard not to think about what he would be doing with them. She knew the burn was bad, but *that* bad?

Michael pinned her with a studying gaze, his eyes shifting the slightest degree as he stared. Jacqueline had the sudden urge to squirm, wondering what the hell he was looking at. "Is it Jacqueline or Jackie?"

"Both... you know... Jackie is short..." *Where did they get this guy!* "Doesn't anyone call you Mike, or anything?"

"Not yet," he said with a slightly lopsided grin.

He wrapped his long fingers around the wrist of her good arm and lifted her hand, pressing her own palm over her heart. Just as she was about to ask him what the heck he was doing, he snipped through the tank and the strap fell forward over her hand. Some of the pain was instantly relieved as the irritation pulled away from the raw edges of the area.

"I need to clean the wound. It will hurt."

Jacqueline chuckled wryly. "At least you're honest. Ah, shit!" The pain magnified ten times as he ran a cotton pad saturated with medication over her skin. It was a bizarre contrast of soothing coolness and biting pain as the antiseptic took hold. She closed her eyes and grit her teeth, her head suddenly swimming. "Oh, God that hurts," she hissed.

She jumped when he curled his hand around her far shoulder, supporting her with his arm in front of her as she tried to keep her physical reaction to the pain in check. Jacqueline realized she was actually leaning into his chest and pulled back.

"Do you need to lie down while I finish?" he asked, looking directly into her eyes.

She shook her head. "No. I'm good."

His hand slid down her arm as he moved away, his fingertips a sparking brush on her skin, and she wondered how often he'd practiced that move. He picked up the large white pad he had opened earlier, and with the same gentle, easy touch, applied the green side directly to her shoulder. Jacqueline braced herself for another onslaught of pain, but this time none came. Instead, a tingling numbness stretched out from her shoulder, down her arm and along her spine.

"Oh, that's nice," she said with a sigh.

He threw away the wrappings left from the treatment. "I'm going to get a Stratum Basale Stimulator. This next step will take a few minutes. You look tired. Lie down."

"How rude," she mumbled as she shifted on the short exam table to lie on her uninjured side, still holding the cut top against her breast. "Ever heard of complimenting a lady even when she looks like crap?" A small pillow was at the head of the table and she snagged it to curl beneath her cheek. Even though Michael—*didn't doctors usually use their last names?*—was only gone a few minutes, sleep already tugged at her by the time he returned. She heard the curtain slide back and close again, but couldn't manage to open her eyes.

He touched her side, near her waist, as he stepped behind her, and she almost shivered when he leaned over to speak to her. It had to be something he put in that damn gel because a guy's voice never made her feel hot and flushed before. "I'm going to use the stimulator for a few minutes. You'll need to come back twice a day for the next couple of days for treatment."

Jacqueline nodded against the pillow, enjoying the tingle emanating from the medicated pad as the hum of the stimulator shifted over her skin. "You gonna do the treatments, Doc?"

"I'm not a doctor."

A part of her... some small, little part in the back of her head that was too damn tired to shout too loud... told her she should say something right about then, but heavy sleep took precedent and she let herself drift away to the soft hum of the stimulator.

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Beverly sat on the floor of the padded cell, her back against the wall, with her legs curled beside her to tilt her lap. She was tired, but knew she could wait until later in the day to find her own rest. For now, Victor slept and she knew it was what he needed most of all.

He was on his back, his head nestled on her thighs, his features relaxed in slumber. She absently ran her fingers through his short hair, feeling the slightly coarse texture tickle over her skin. Her other hand sat on his chest so she could feel the steady beat of his heart against her palm, the rise and fall of his ribcage with each breath.

She stared down at him, studying his features. Thick, black lashes curled against his cheek and his defined features were more prominent now from the weight he had lost. His deep, black hair complimented the olive of his skin and he looked at ease for the first time in what seemed an eternity.

The Areth were so much like humans, it was almost impossible to tell them apart from the people with whom they now inhabited the planet. If she had met Victor under any other circumstance, she wondered if she would have even known he wasn't born on this planet. Lilly told her minor biological anomalies between Areth and Humans were detectable with certain tests, but even with a cursory physical exam, the differences weren't obvious.

Beverly sighed and leaned her head back against the wall, momentarily closing her eyes. For the first time in many years, she let her thoughts linger on her parents and she wondered what they would think of her comforting an Areth.

They founded Phoenix to stop the Areth.

They struggled for years to build up the organization, and only saw a shadow of what it had become. They hid their daughter from the world because in the New World Order, she was an outcast. Something to be scorned and shut away from society. They shut her away, but they did it for love, and with people who loved her.

They raised her to question every word the Areth said, and hang on to the belief that the Earth would belong to Humans again someday.

The Areth murdered them for it.

She blinked against hot tears, only allowing one to fall before she reined in her emotions again. Beverly looked down, her attention drawn to Victor as he drew a deep breath, his chest pressing against her hand. He shifted his head against her thighs, his cheek brushing her stomach, but his eyes didn't open. She felt the heat of his body through her clothes and sensed the calm of sleep.

In his face, she couldn't see a murderer. She couldn't connect the horrific acts she knew the Areth had perpetrated on Mankind to his handsome countenance. She had felt his grief, and she knew how much his friendship meant to Michael. He was no monster. He wasn't...

Beverly swallowed hard and forced back the dark memories that often came when she thought about her parents for too long. Instead, she began again to run her fingers through his hair and found peace in the small measure of comfort she believed it allowed him.

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"Michael?"

Lilly's voice carried through the infirmary, and Michael glanced down at the sleeping woman on the bed. She didn't stir, her dark hair fanned out on the pillow and her hand still pressed against her breast to hold her shirt in place, even in sleep. He set the SB stimulator in his hand aside and draped a blanket over her torso before stepping from behind the privacy curtain, pulling it closed behind him. "I'm here."

Caitlin, Lilly and Damian Ali stood together near the doorway of the infirmary and as Michael approached, he heard Damian speaking to Lilly.

"Once you're ready to move him, call Yun and we'll come down to offer escort."

"Thank you." She turned to Michael. "General Castleton has given clearance for Victor to be moved to a single room outside the infirmary."

Michael nodded. "He's still asleep. Beverly is with him."

"Good. He needed the rest. The coma and the last couple of days drained him. I'm just glad it's over, even if I had nothing to do with it."

"Ladies, if you will excuse me, I have things to take care of before our mission tomorrow," Damian said, nodding his head and bowing slightly to Caitlin and Lilly. He smiled and threw an off-handed salute in Michael's direction. "Michael."

"I'll send two attendants to the room we're giving him to prepare it, just cleaning it up and whatnot," Lilly said as she turned to walk further into the infirmary. Michael fell into step beside her with Caitlin on the other side. "Oh! How is Amber?"

"Restless. She wants to leave, but I've advised her of the danger it might cause to her pregnancy."

"Pregnancy?" Caitlin asked.

"Amber came in yesterday complaining of a headache and cramping. She's very early in her first trimester, and had no idea."

"I'm sorry. I don't know Amber..." Caitlin trailed off, looking between Michael and Lilly.

"She came here with me," Michael answered, and understanding crossed Caitlin's face. "Lilly has concerns because the extent of the genetic manipulations forced on the human population in New Mexico isn't fully understood, and the ramifications of a pregnancy could be extensive."

"Or... there could be nothing at all wrong." Lilly sighed and stopped mid-stride. "Michael, I don't want you to believe I see you-or the others that came with you-as clinical studies. I don't."

"Am I mistaken in my understanding of your concerns?"

"No... but..." She shook her head. "Never mind. I know you understand, I'm just-Did we get another patient?"

Michael looked over his shoulder at her sudden switch in topic, glancing towards the closed curtain. "Yes. A pulse charge burn. She's resting now."

"She? Who is it?"

"Jacqueline."

Lilly and Caitlin exchanged glances. "I didn't think she'd be here until later tonight," Caitlin said.

"You know Jackie," Lilly said, leaving the statement hanging. "She's fine now?"

"She will be with further treatments. The burn was several days old."

"Should I check on her?"

"No," Michael said, shaking his head. "I will. You need to see to Victor."

Lilly and Caitlin left to check on Victor, and as much as Michael wanted to go down the hall again and see once more that his friend was indeed awake and lucid, he drew a slow breath and walked to the closed curtain. Sliding it back, he stepped through as Jacqueline lifted her head from the pillow. Her lids slid heavily over her dark eyes, sleep not quite letting her go.

Michael picked up a medical recorder from the table beside the bed, spanning it over her body. "How are you feeling now?" he asked, shifting his gaze from her sleepy face to the data reading on the recorder screen.

"Groggy. What the hell is in that stuff you put on me?"

"Nothing to make you sleep." He set the recorder aside and laid the back of his hand against her cheek. Her skin was warm, but not enough to worry him. "Perhaps you were just tired."

She smirked. "Smart ass."

He arched one eyebrow, but didn't say anything as he leaned over her to examine the exposed edges of the burn not covered by the large Dermaseal patch. The SB Stimulator had already knitted the lesser marks and the area had just a slightly pinker tone than the healthy skin around it.

"The patch is waterproof," he explained. "Return in the morning. Lilly will replace it and give you another treatment."

"So, you're not a doctor..."

"No. Would you like to sit up?" He offered her his hand, and with her gaze locked on him, she slipped her palm across his and sat up. Her other hand still held the cut material over her heart.

"You sure as hell don't *look* like any doc I've ever seen, but you seem to know what you're doing."

"Thank you."

She smiled, twin dimples digging into her cheeks. "Okay. I don't suppose you have a spare shirt lying around?"

Michael shook his head, shucking off the flannel shirt he wore over his blue tee shirt. He tossed the flannel on the bed, and tugged the cotton shirt free of his waistband.

"Whoa, handsome! Whatcha doin'?" Jacqueline asked, raising the hand not holding up her shirt.

"You need a shirt," he said, pulling his off over his head.

She stared at him, wide-eyed, as he put it beside her and picked up the discarded flannel shirt, pushing his arms into the sleeves. He quickly fastened the buttons, but left the shirttails hanging loose around his hips.

"Who'd you piss off?" she asked as he worked on the last button mid-chest. He tipped his head enough to look at her, and she pointed at her own throat then to him. "The nice black and blue collar you got going."

Michael looked down again, tugging his shirt into place, then picked up the tee shirt he had just stripped off. "I can help you —"

"No! Just... help me get it on over this one and I'll be good to go," she said quickly. Michael helped her slide the tee shirt over her injured arm and over her head, where she could easily slide her other arm into the remaining sleeve. The shirt was large on her, hanging loose from her shoulders, the hem pooling around her hips.

Michael watched her as she slid her hand along the back of her neck and freed her long hair from the collar. "I apologize if I made you uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable? Nah," she said. "I guess you take that old saying 'give you the shirt off his back' literally."

Michael heard voices on the other side of the curtain accompanied by multiple footfalls. Among the voices, he discerned Lilly, Beverly's synthesizer, and Victor. He drew a breath, feeling some of the tension that had still harbored there all day release to some small degree.

"You need to go? 'Cause I'm good here."

"No," he answered. "Do you have quarters on base?"

"Yeah, they keep a rack open for me. Right now, I don't think I'd care where they stick me as long as I can get a hot shower in first. I'd sleep on a pile of potato sacks in the kitchen."

Michael did his best to hide his look of amusement as the image of Jacqueline sprawled over a pile of potatoes filled his head. He picked up a small bottle he had brought back with him when he had retrieved the other supplies earlier.

"This is an antibiotic. Twice a day when you eat."

Jacqueline saluted as she took the medication. "Yes, sir." She shifted to slide off the bed, and Michael steadied her with his hands at her hips. "Thanks, doc."

"I'm not—"

"Yeah, I know." She winked as she picked up the jacket Michael had draped on a nearby chair. "I'll see you around."

## Chapter Seven

His dreams were assaulted by flashing images; disconnected and dizzying.

*A field of golden corn swaying in the sun. A young girl with long, black hair running away from him with a smile on her lips. Two hands—his own—slamming against the clear lid of a coffin. Walking down a slowly curving hallway with black walls and small globes of light to lead the way. A young boy staring at him with wide brown eyes. Voices whispered around him, all different, all slamming together.*

*"My father says you will be a fine husband..."*

*"Nearly every husk from this harvest has been a failure..."*

*"We will have our revenge."*

*"I'm frightened, Victor."*

*"Kathleen needs her amusements."*

*"He's not lying. But he's in pain."*

*Liar! Liar! Liar! They'll kill you when they know the truth! Murderer!*

Victor jerked out of his fitful sleep, panting as he tried to orientate himself with the unfamiliar darkness. He sat up, the blankets bunching around his hips, as he rubbed his face. The fog cleared in his mind, and he remembered walking from the padded cell in the infirmary to the quarters where he now slept. He remembered waking before that, his head in Beverly's lap, as she told him it was time to go.

"Lights. Dim," he said, his voice rough with the dry air. The ambient lighting of hydrogen gel lamps increased to a soft glow.

Sparse furniture decorated the room, with only the bed and a desk with chair, but it was spacious and felt less like a cell, even though he knew an armed guard stood outside. A door to his left led to the attached facilities, and Victor rose from the bed, taking a moment to splash cool water on his face. As he lifted his head, he caught his reflection in the mirror hanging over the sink.

Victor barely recognized the man looking back at him. Black stubble peppered his jaw and his hair was mussed from sleep. Shadows darkened the skin beneath his eyes and his cheeks were thin. The last few months had taken their toll.

He dropped his head and clenched his teeth, gripping the edge of the sink.

With painful clarity, he remembered every moment of his hellish nightmare, even the feverish and scattered memories from his first days at the human base before the coma had claimed him. The day's reprieve of blessed ignorance was gone. He saw himself as if through the eyes of another, screaming like a lunatic and beating himself against the wall in a vain attempt to free his mind.

Victor closed his eyes, but the visions were just as clear and just as haunting.

Even the clear recollection of Beverly's kindness couldn't push away the darkness.

Something had opened the barriers in his mind, and hundreds of memories-frozen moments from the last several centuries battled for dominance. Victor saw every human he had ever assisted in the 'study' of, the terrified faces as they screamed for help, their voices echoing in his mind. He saw his own hands delivering drugs into trembling arms, coldly

turning away as they took hold. Revulsion twisted his gut and he fell to his knees on the cold concrete floor, the remains of his last meal ripping their way from his body.

Like a killer in the shadows, the familiar haunting cold of his demon slid up his spine and curled in his mind; a cobra prepared to strike. Victor slumped to the floor, his shoulder slamming into the glass enclosure of the shower.

"No," he said to the silent, empty room.

*Murderer. Liar. Killer.*

"No!" he shouted, clutching his head in his hands. "No! No!"

*Traitor!*

"No!"

He slammed his head back against the glass behind him, desperate to silence the whispering demon. Again and again, he pounded, and with each impact the voice grew louder until the deafening crescendo drove him mad. With a resounding crack, the glass shattered and showered down on him in sharp, slicing shards. Victor collapsed back as darkness overtook him.

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CJ sipped her tea, absently weaving her blonde hair into a tight braid along her scalp as she read the mission status report on her PAC interface. As she finished the plait and tucked the end at the nape of her neck, she glanced across the table and paused to shake her head.

Michael had his four-dish breakfast spread out on the table with just enough space cleared to rest his book, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. He had a strange fascination for old science fiction novels, which CJ found amusing considering the lives they lived were stranger than anything a Twentieth Century novelist could have thought up. He had read every book he could get his hands on, digging through abandoned storage rooms and through library archives on the database. He loved reading novels almost as much as he loved the medical journals and textbooks Lilly made sure he always had.

Beside his left hand was his plate full of pancakes and bacon, smothered in butter and syrup. Whenever she tried to even imply he might want to back off on the syrup and butter, his only response was "This is how Nick eats them", which apparently justified any artery-clogging effects the rich meal might have. Set aside for consumption when he was finished with the pancakes were two scrambled eggs with ketchup, a small bowl of cantaloupe and pineapple chunks, and finally two slices of whole wheat toast with orange marmalade.

Michael alone could wipe out their entire food supply within weeks.

Michael looked up, a bite of pancakes half way to his mouth, and caught her watching him. "Is something wrong?"

CJ shook her head, resting her chin on the heel of her hand. "No. I'm just wondering how long you're going to be able to keep up this diet."

He smiled, shoving the dripping food past his lips. "I like breakfast," he mumbled.

"No kidding."

Michael went back to his book and his breakfast, finishing the pancakes and bacon to move on to the eggs and toast. CJ went back to her report, making notes of points she wanted to bring up before the final strategy meeting in an hour. Damian was taking his team out of the base that night, and she wanted to make sure every detail was covered.

"Caitlin?"

She looked up, lifting her tea to her lips. "Yeah?"

"Am I rude?"

CJ froze, her open mouth hovering at the rim of the cup. She set the mug down and folded her hands in front of her on the table. "Are you *rude*?"

Michael nodded, twirling a chunk of pineapple in the juices at the bottom of his bowl. He shifted his eyes to look at her, then looked back to the fruit.

She cleared her throat and shook her head. "No. You're just... direct."

"And that's rude?"

Again, she shook her head. "Not once people *know* that about you."

"And if they don't know this about me?"

CJ winced. "Ah... where is this coming from?"

"In other words, I'm rude."

She tried once again to talk her way around his question, but the wry smirk on his lips pulled her up short. His shoulders shifted with a silent laugh and CJ shook her head, smiling wide.

"Brat."

Michael didn't say anything, popping the last piece of cantaloupe in his mouth.

"I'm going to head back to the quarters for a bit," she said, switching off her interface. "I have some things to do for Lilly, and then I have a meeting with General Castleton. We're finalizing the details of the mission and he wants Jackie Anderson to sit in with us before she leaves again."

"Should my ears be burning?"

Michael turned toward the new voice, looking up to see Jacqueline standing at the end of their table. He smiled slowly, shifting in his chair to face her better. She glanced at him, and their gaze locked for a few seconds. Her expressive, large brown eyes sparked with challenge and fire and Michael felt a warm shift spread out from his chest.

"Hey, Jackie," Caitlin said. "Nothing worth burning over. I just told Michael we had a meeting later."

"Will you be there, handsome?" she asked, hitching her chin towards him, keeping her gaze leveled with his.

"No," he said, shaking his head slightly.

She arched an eyebrow, a slender slash above her eye that accentuated the almond shape. "Too bad."

Caitlin cleared her throat and stood. "I'm going to go take care of those things, Michael. Dog is probably anxious to get some exercise, so if you need me and can't find me, I'll be in The Farm."

Michael nodded. "I'll see you later."

Caitlin nodded to Jacqueline and walked away with her tray and PAC interface. Jacqueline slid into her empty seat, combing her fingers through her straight brown hair to pull it off her forehead, revealing more of her face. Her skin was a light olive, giving her fine features depth and accentuating the full curve of her lips. She was beautiful in a way Michael had never seen before.

"You have a dog on base?" she asked after several moments, and Michael realized he had been staring.

He cleared his throat and slid his gaze off only long enough to justify saying he had looked away. "Yes."

Jacqueline laughed. "You're not exactly Mr. Conversation, are you?"

"How is your shoulder?" he asked, shifting the topic.

"Good. Doc Quinn said one more treatment with that thing and the deep tissue damage will be healed," she said, rolling her shoulder. "She said you did a good job taking care of me."

"You're leaving soon?"

"Disappointed?" she asked, a small, slow grin on her lips.

Michael drew a slow breath through his nostrils, studying her. He didn't know how to define Jacqueline. She had a spark he found he enjoyed, but he didn't know how to interact with her. She threw him off balance, more than anyone he had met since coming to the Mountain.

"Be careful," he said instead.

She pursed her lips and shook her head. "Nicely done. Very smooth."

He tilted his head, squinting slightly as he studied her. "Smooth?"

Jacqueline laughed, the light sound dancing over his skin until the hairs on his arms stood up. "Where the heck did they find you?"

"New Mexico," he said without pause.

She tipped her head toward one shoulder, her tongue sliding along her lower lip before she smiled again. This time, the challenging smirk was gone, replaced by a soft bowing of her lips. Jacqueline drew a slow breath setting her chin in her hand.

"I like you, Michael. I don't know why, but I do."

"Even if I'm rude?" he asked, arching one eyebrow.

"Yes," she said, laughing through the word. "Even if you're rude. I'm on my way to the infirmary for my last treatment."

"I'll walk with you," he said, gathering his various plates.

Jacqueline smiled and stood, and Michael tried not to notice how graceful the movement seemed despite the persona she clearly exuded as a soldier and a fighter. She walked around the table and stood beside him, picking up his book as he finished cleaning up. She stood in the same spot when he came back, her eyes shifting side to side as she read the first page.

He pushed his hands into his pockets, silently waiting for her to look up. When she did, deep color flashed in her cheeks and she closed the book, holding it out to him.

"Sorry. It looks interesting."

Michael folded his hand around hers that held the book, pushing it back towards her. "Take it."

"Don't you want to finish it?"

"I've read it twice."

"No, I can't take it."

"Is there a reason you can't?"

Jacqueline shrugged. "No reason, I guess." Together, they walked to the mess hall door and the nearest elevator. As the doors closed, Jacqueline leaned against the railing with the book held against her torso. "First, your shirt. Now, your book. What's next, handsome?"

Michael studied her features and silently wondered what heritage gave her such richly toned skin and dark hair. She stared back, her lips tilting in a lop-sided smile.

"What do you need?" Michael finally asked.

Her smile widened, the dimples he had seen in the infirmary appearing again on each side of her lips. "Wow. Did someone teach you that or does it just come naturally?"

"I don't know what you mean."

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. Jacqueline brushed past him, her shoulder shifting the material of his shirt over his chest. "Sure you don't," she said in a deep, soft voice that surprised Michael with the jolt that shot up his spine.

He heard the commotion in the infirmary before he took two steps away from the elevator, and took off in a dead run for the door. Lilly and three of her assistants stood around one of the exam tables, holding down a patient as he groaned and struggled against them. Michael's chest tightened and his gut clenched.

*Victor.*

"What the hell..." Jacqueline said behind him.

Lilly turned when she heard them, her expression set and intense as she tried to inject a hypo-syringe into Victor's arm. Michael didn't wait for her request, and immediately moved to her side to try to hold Victor still long enough for her to administer what he assumed was a sedative. He tried not to focus on the bloody streaks on Victor's face and the gashes on his arms.

"Filthy bastard," Victor hissed out when his crazed gaze fell on Michael. "Abomination! Your existence is a disgrace to the Areth who gave her honor to spawn your disgusting filth!"

"Hold him still!" Lilly snapped at the male attendant pressing down on Victor's chest. "If he jerks like this, I could snap the infusion needle beneath the skin."

Victor lunged forward, coming several inches up off the bed. "He knew. You stupid fool, do you think he didn't know he had fathered a disgrace like you? He knew."

Michael diverted his eyes from the vicious scowl that twisted Victor's features and clenched his jaw until pain shot down his neck. Lilly finally plunged the hypo-syringe against his arm and the mega-dose of sedatives hit his blood stream in one intense shot. Victor slumped, his eyes rolling back into his head as his head landed on the pillow. When his body stilled completely, the attendants slowly moved back and Lilly took a deep breath.

"Ron, get me what I need to treat these wounds, please."

Ron nodded and left. Lilly brushed a lock of blonde hair off her forehead and looked at Michael. He felt her gaze on him, but couldn't pull his eyes away from Victor's bloody face, now relaxed. No sign of the hurtful, vicious man from moments before remained.

"Michael, are you —"

"What happened?" he asked.

"We found him this morning on the floor of his bathroom. The shower door shattered, and by the looks of it, fell pretty much on top of him. I don't know if he fell, or what happened. He has a minor concussion and several cuts and abrasions, but nothing life threatening. It looks a lot worse than it is."

"Have you called Beverly?"

"Beverly?"

Michael finally lifted his head and met her gaze, drawing a slow breath through his nostrils. "She was able to comfort and calm him before. Perhaps she can again."

Lilly shook her head. "No."

"I will."

He turned to walk away, but Lilly caught his arm and he stopped. On the other side of the room, Jacqueline stood and watched the scene well out of earshot. What she saw had to be enough.

"Michael, I don't know why he said what he did, but your father didn't know."

He nodded, swallowing hard against the thick lump that threatened to choke him. With one final glance over his shoulder to Victor, Michael walked to Lilly's desk and tapped the internal communication box on the wall. After locating Beverly, and having the message passed to her to come to the infirmary, he leaned his forearm against the wall and rested his forehead on the back of his hand.

"Is that the Areth they brought back from New Mexico?"

Michael turned toward Jacqueline's voice, doing his best to ignore the throbbing tension building along the back of his skull. "His name is Victor."

"But he's the Areth, right?"

"Yes, he's Areth."

"Damn. So much for that 'calm, non-emotional' face they put on, huh?"

"Victor isn't himself right now," Michael said softly and stepped away from her, heading towards the door. "Please, excuse me."

The pain that wrapped his skull had taken on its own rhythm by the time he reached his quarters, and he sank heavily onto his bed commanding the lights to lower to an almost imperceptible level. Dog jumped onto the bed beside him, curling against the back of his legs when he lay down and bunched his pillow beneath his cheek.

He heard the outer door open half an hour later, and Caitlin's hurried steps crossing the common room to his bedroom door. By then, the headache had taken a firm hold on his senses and tapped his strength and he couldn't roll over to see her. He just wanted to keep his eyes closed in the silent darkness. Caitlin sat on the bed behind his back, her fingers gently combing through his hair and he focused on the comforting touch.

Michael knew she would want to talk later, but for now she said nothing and sat with him until merciful sleep surpassed the headache and he drifted off.

## Chapter Eight

"He's more lucid than before, but he's still not calm. I've had to restrain him for his own safety," Lilly explained to Beverly as they stood in the hall outside the infirmary. "He's agitated, but he seems to be fighting whatever this is more than he was before. He's more aware."

Beverly looked past Lilly into the room beyond, and could see Victor lying on one of the infirmary beds. His hands were strapped near his thighs, and he constantly curled and uncurled his fists, his legs shifting beneath the blanket. His face turned towards the ceiling, despite the inclined head of the bed.

She shifted her gaze back to Lilly. "Do you really think I helped him before?"

Lilly shrugged. "Bev, I have no idea what is really helping and what isn't. All I know is that when you were with him before, he was calm, lucid and to put it bluntly, *sane*. Whether it was you, your empathic touch, or what... I don't know."

Beverly shook her head. "But I don't transfer emotions *to* others. I only feel it from them. I don't see how the two are connected."

"Does *anything* about this whole situation make sense?" Lilly pressed her hand against the small of her back. "I need to go sit down. But I'll be right at my desk if you need me."

They walked into the infirmary and went their separate ways; Lilly to the left to her desk and Beverly to Victor's bed. His eyes were closed when she stepped to his bedside, the muscles along his jaw jerking and bunching as he clenched his teeth. The air around him crackled with frustration and anger, but not an anger she felt she needed to fear. She laid her hand on the pillow near his head, but hesitated to touch him. He was caught up in his struggle to control his own mind, she didn't want to startle him with her touch.

"Victor," she said, consciously projecting her voice to be low and calm.

His eyes snapped open and he huffed a breath through his clenched teeth. Pink remnants of the cuts left behind by the broken shower door peeked from the edge of his hair and sweat glistened on his brow. She felt the struggle in him, his overwhelming desire to be in control again, felt his emotion like she had never felt emotion from anyone she had met. Beverly raised her hand from his pillow and moved to rest it on his hair.

Victor jerked away as much as his position and the restraints would allow. "No! Don't touch me."

Beverly paused, her hand hovering over his brow. Slowly, she withdrew and clasped her hands in front of her, holding eye contact with him. "All right. I won't touch you. How do you —"

"Please," he ground out through lips pulled so tight, she almost couldn't make out his words. "Don't ask me how I feel."

She shifted her eyes away and swallowed against the frustration building in her chest. *Just what was she to do?* The crackle in the air shifted, taking on a wave of sadness that stole her breath and she looked back to Victor. He stared at the ceiling again, tears rolling from his eyes. Beverly tamped down the urge to touch him, and curled her fingers around the bed's railing.

"Will you do something for me, Beverly?" he asked, his eyes glistening as he looked at her.

"Of course."

"Tell him nothing I said was true."

"Michael..." she confirmed.

He nodded against his pillow. "Please."

"I will. I promise."

His arms jerked up against the restraints, making the bed shake. "You've felt it, haven't you?"

Beverly tried to hide her flinch, gripping harder on the railing. "Felt what?"

His lips curled against his teeth and his body trembled. "The Demon."

She shook her head. "I don't know what I've felt, but yes, I've felt something in you that doesn't belong. It's in you but it isn't part of you. It isn't you."

"It might as well be."

She leaned forward, careful to leave the distance between them she knew he wanted. "Victor, do you know what this is? We don't understand what's happening to you."

"No," he forced through clenched teeth, rolling his head on the pillow. His glazed eyes shifted to look at her again. "I want to thank you."

"For what?"

"For giving me a few hours of peace."

Her hand left the railing before she could think to restrain herself, but she stopped short of touching him when she saw the flash in his eyes that warned her not to. "Let me help you, Victor. If I can, let me."

"No. I won't let this blackness touch you again."

"But, it's killing you. You can't continue like this."

"Then I die."

Panic slammed into Beverly's chest, a cold sweat flashing over her skin. Victor's body arched off the bed, his neck snapping back as his fingers curled into the blankets. As cold as a February wind off the Mountain, Beverly felt the darkness-his 'demon'-overpower his consciousness and abuse his body. The shock stole her breath and forced her to step back. He collapsed, limp and pale, soaked in his own sweat. Beverly didn't think for a moment what he would do when he woke up, only about what she had to do.

She pressed the release for the side rails and dropped it clear, pushing aside the blankets that covered him to mid-chest. Needing as much contact as possible, she pushed up the hem of the pale blue scrubs he wore to touch his chest. His skin was hot and slick, his body rigid, even unconscious.

Lilly appeared at the head of the bed on the other side, reaching out to grasp Beverly's wrist. "What are you doing? Bev! What are you doing?"

Beverly pulled her hand away, shoving it beneath the hem of the shirt to feel him. "I have to do this."

She glanced at his face to make sure he truly was unable to argue before she laid her hands over his heart and opened up her mind.

The pain was a tidal wave, nearly shoving her back, but she curled her body over his and laid her cheek over his heart, panting for breath. Darkness and anger swirled around her,

and she pushed against it. She sought out the source of his pain, blindly searching, not knowing what she would find. A shrill shriek pierced her head, and she gasped, but curled her fingers against his fevered skin. The demon retreated, pulling away from her into the darkest recesses of Victor's mind.

Beneath her touch, she sensed the slight release in his body, the easing of tension in his muscles. The labored rasp of his breathing evened and the rhythm of his heartbeat against her cheek lost its erratic cadence. Beverly raised her head and looked into his face. His features were relaxed, the deep lines around his mouth and eyes faded, and his lips parted as he drew a slow breath.

She stroked his jaw and touched his lip, then laid her cheek against his chest again to feel the reassuring beat of his heart.

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Beverly wandered the halls of the base for a good hour after Lilly scooted her out of the infirmary, insisting she go get some rest. Her mind and body were both too restless to think of sleep, despite the exhaustion that weighed her down, and the heavy ache in her chest pulled at her like a magnet to go back. She knew, at least for a while, Lilly would be insistent that she stay away so Victor could rest.

Michael was asleep when she went to his quarters, sequestered in the dark silence of his bedroom with what CJ described as 'one of his headaches'. She was almost thankful, because she wasn't sure what to say to him or if she could adequately express the guilt she had felt from Victor. Ultimately, she realized hours later as she sat beside his bed watching him sleep, that Victor had intended his plea as a final request.

She had felt him give up.

Even now, the heavy realization pushed on her shoulders and made it hard to breathe. Each time another serviceman passed her in the hall, she dipped her head in a polite nod, and when one of the newest residents of the mountain stopped her for directions, she gladly helped. Anxiety stirred in her chest, and a need to just *be somewhere else* niggled at her.

She tried a snack in the cafeteria, but after a few bites of the watery pudding left behind from dinner, her stomach protested and she left. The hydroponics lab, a place she knew CJ often found some level of respite, seemed cold and lonely and she soon found herself walking the halls again.

Eventually, she found herself in Command. Only a couple of lights near the security monitors cast any glow in the dark room, and two guards sat at their posts watching the base perimeter. Beverly walked past with a small wave to the narrow hall that branched off the main room, and smiled when she saw the glow of hydrogen-gel lighting from General Castleton's office. His door was slightly ajar, as it usually was, and she pushed on it as she rapped her knuckles against the jamb.

He looked up from his computer screen, smiling immediately when he saw her.

"Beverly, what on earth are you doing up at this hour?"

"I'm just... restless."

His shoulders dropped a degree as he sighed. "I've had far too many of those nights to know exactly what you mean. Come on in and sit down. Keep me company for a bit."

Beverly folded herself into the large chair on the opposite side of his. Beverly had memories of playing in the corner while her parents and he made plans and talked strategy, and it had been here that she hid in the days after their death. She felt safe here.

"Did Damian's team get off okay?"

He nodded. "They left at 19:30. Jackie is going with them as far as DC, and they're moving on to Boston on their own."

"She's returning to DC already? She was hurt when she arrived."

"She said she was ready. We can't hear what's happening *out there* if we're not out there."

Beverly smoothed a hand over her hair, absently pulling the elasticized band from the end of her braid, working her fingers through the curls until her hair was loose and her scalp tingled from the release of tension after a long, tiring day. She caught him staring at her from the corner of her eye, and lifted her chin to meet his stare.

"I read the report on what happened," he said, leveling his gaze on her beneath his thick, white eyebrows. "Victor is in the infirmary again."

"He's recovering."

He ran a finger over his upper lip. "I have a feeling Doctor Quinn glossed over your involvement."

Beverly sighed, swallowing against the tightening of her throat, and tucked a curl behind her ear. "Are you going to lecture me without knowing why?"

"Is that why you're here? To tell me why you did it?"

"I did it because I had to."

"Had to?" he asked, his forehead wrinkling as he arched his eyebrows.

"Was it so terrible? I knew I could help him, and if I hadn't he would have died."

He linked his hands together on the desk and lowered his gaze for a minute before looking at her again. "I doubt you could have done anything less once you thought you could help. That's just who you are."

"I'm glad you understand."

He pointed a finger at her, bobbing it in the air. "Now, that doesn't mean I agree. You could have been putting yourself in serious danger."

"I know. I'm not asking you, or anyone else, to agree. It's just nice to know you understand."

"I've watched you grow up, Lee-lee. You've put your heart and soul into this mission and this organization. I'm not sure I do understand why you're willing to put your life on the line for—" He winced at the final words, his knuckles tapping on the desk.

"For an Areth?"

His only answer was a silent stare.

"Can't you believe that, just as there are different types of people—good, bad, indifferent—there can be different types of Areth? We already know there are some Areth that are worse than others; the woman who tortured Michael being the worst I've ever known of. If that can be accepted as truth, why can't we also accept the opposite?" she asked, holding out her hand, asking for his consideration.

"You really believe he's trustworthy?"

"If you didn't trust my opinion, you wouldn't have sent Nick Tanner into the universe based on Victor's word." Beverly could only hope her voice synthesizer could carry the weight of conviction she felt.

The General drew a slow breath, shaking his head. "You got me there, Lee-lee. But please, leave the doctorin' to the doc."

Beverly stood from her chair and walked around his desk, pressing a kiss to his forehead before silently leaving the room. A promise never spoken was a promise she couldn't be accused of breaking.

## Chapter Nine

"It hurffts, Miffel."

Michael sat on the edge of the king size platform pallet, Dog on Alexander's other side with his head resting on the big man's leg. Every few minutes, Dog whimpered and shifted his eyes between Michael and Alexander. The giant bed had been built especially for Alexander. At over seven feet tall and four-hundred-fifty pounds, there had been no bed on base capable of handling his massive size.

Alexander had been bed-ridden for a week, too sick to stand and in too much pain to move. Michael was exhausted from going between the infirmary and Alex's room, the need to be in both placing almost overwhelming. Alex needed him—asked for him—and Victor...

Victor couldn't be in the same room with Michael without snapping into a rage.

Michael tamped down the dark moments of the last few days, and focused on Alexander. "I know it hurts, Alex. I'm sorry."

Fat, cloudy tears rolled from Alexander's puffed eyes, and he sniffled loudly. Michael laid his hand on the thick shoulder nearest him, feeling like a dwarf beside the big man with the mind of a child. No matter what Lilly did, Alexander's periods of relief were brief and scarce. The mutilation and genetic torture that had been inflicted on his body by their Areth captors was so severe, it was beyond the realm of any science to cure and any medicine to ease.

Alexander was dying.

Every organ in his body was deteriorating at an accelerated speed, his muscles and connective tissues lost strength each day. His bones were becoming porous, no longer able to support him and his lungs labored for each breath. It was as if some time-released bomb had gone off in his body and every major system was triggered to shut down at the same time.

For years, Alexander had suffered; both from the pain of his hulking, twisted form and from the tortures the Areth performed to study the effects of their experiments.

Alexander sighed; a deep breath that shuddered through his body and sent a jolt of panic through Michael. He jerked his head up and stared at Alexander's face, watching for some sign that the breath he heard wasn't his last. A flush of relief hit him when Alexander swallowed and rolled his head on the pillow.

The door to Alexander's room opened and Lilly stuck her head inside. Michael looked towards her, and she tilted her head for him to step into the hall. He nodded and patted Alexander's shoulder.

"Would you like some ice cream, Alex?" he asked.

Despite the pain Michael knew wracked his body, Alexander smiled. The grin twisted his lopsided features. "Yeff, pleeff."

"Chocolate?"

Alexander nodded, his crooked teeth flashing. Michael patted his shoulder gently and stood, glancing over his shoulder to Alex as he walked to the door. He didn't want to leave Alexander alone.

The cold presence of death hovered in the dark corners of the room.

Michael stepped into the hall, motioning with his hand for Dog to stay where he was, and pulled the door shut behind him. Lilly turned at the sound, the strained expression on her face gripping his chest like a fist.

"It's worse than you expected," he said, pushing his hands into his pockets.

She nodded, her gaze shifting to the closed door. "The progress of the deterioration is moving faster every day. At this rate..." Lilly took a deep breath, looking down at the floor before she lifted her chin to meet his stare. "At this rate, I would be amazed if Alexander is with us another day. All we can do now is help him be as comfortable as possible."

Michael clenched his jaw until pain shot down the back of his neck and curled his hands into fists within the confines of the pockets. "Did you go through the records Victor gave us?"

"I'm still reading the minute details of Alexander's records. Michael, I won't find anything in those files that will help me save him. He was dying before he came here. Maybe... *maybe*... if something had been done years ago, he could have been saved. His body has been slowly shutting down for a long, long time. It just couldn't live anymore." Her shoulders slumped as she crossed her arms over her growing stomach. "If I had one major organ to deal with, I might have been able to replace it with a synthetic. *No* doctor has ever been successful with replacing more than two organs with synthetics. And those were doctors far more skilled than I."

"I know," Michael said, reining in the burning anger that had simmered beneath his skin for days. Anger at Alexander's pain. Anger at his inadequacy to help, both Alexander *and* Victor. Anger he couldn't name. "What can we do now?"

"I'm going to the infirmary for a massive dose of Morphezine. It will calm him and ease his pain. It's all I can do."

"I need to get him some ice cream," Michael said, his voice sounding flat even to him. "He loves ice cream."

"Who doesn't?" She smiled, but Michael knew she didn't feel it any more than he did. Lilly turned to walk away, then paused and turned on the balls of her feet. "I've been practicing medicine since I was twenty-one years old. I thought I had seen it all working at the convalescent center." She shook her head, her eyes distant as she looked past him to some non-descript point. "I feel like a rookie intern again. All these people around me need help, and I have done nothing to help them. I feel ignorant, untrained and useless."

Michael stared at her for several moments, slowly drawing a breath through his nose before speaking. "You have done more in four months for those of us who came from New Mexico than the Areth did in decades."

"I wish I could do more."

"We all wish we could do more."

Lilly nodded and walked away. With a heavy weight sitting on his shoulders, Michael took a quick trip to the mess hall for a dish of ice cream, and returned to Alexander's room. As soon as he opened the door, he heard the change in Alexander's breathing, each intake of air a labored, rattling shudder that sent chills over Michael's skin. Dog had moved to Alexander's side, furry chin set on his chest with Alex's substantial hand resting on Dog's head. Dog whimpered and edged closer to Alex as Michael sat beside him.

"Alexander," he said softly, swallowing against the rough dryness in his throat.

Alexander rolled his head on the pillow, distant eyes settling on Michael. He fought to draw in another breath, the milky-pale skin of his cheeks dusky from the effort. An uneven grin warped his features, and Michael did his best to smile back. Setting the ice cream aside, Michael pressed his finger against the side of Alexander's throat, attempting to feel his carotid artery. The thick muscles and size didn't allow him to feel anything, and he tried to keep a calm, reassuring look on his face.

"I like ith here, Miffi," Alexander said, spittle running from the corner of his lips as he tried to form the words.

Michael wiped his cheek with a napkin and nodded. "I do, too."

"Can we play later?"

An invisible fist squeezed Michael's heart. "Sure. Ball?"

Dog whined and Alexander's eyes slid closed. Michael bowed his head and laid his hand on the center of Alexander's chest. Moments later, one final wheezing rasp escaped Alexander's weary lungs and he was silent.

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Lilly took a precious bottle of Morphezine from her supply cabinet, mentally calculating how many cc's it would take to provide a man the size of Alexander any kind of relief. She carefully loaded the dose into a hypo-syringe and capped the infusion needle, slipping it into her pocket.

As she walked back to the nearest elevator to return to Alexander's room, she ran half a dozen new scenarios in her mind; possible approaches and treatments she could have tried with Alexander or that she hadn't attempted yet with Victor. Her head knew nothing she could have done would have saved Alexander. All she might have done was prolong his painful life. Her heart wished she could have done more.

She remembered the prophetic words of her professor and mentor, Doctor Andrea Podlodowski. *"You have a gifted mind for medicine, Ms. Franklin, but hands-on medicine is not where you belong. You care too much. In this field of study, you will be working with people with no hope and no future. Why do that to yourself?"*

Lilly shook her head and sighed. She couldn't believe that working in a sterile lab could be more rewarding than this. Yes, she was frustrated but she knew she did some good.

As she neared Alexander's door, she slid her hand into her pocket and removed the hypo-syringe. The syringe, loaded with the nerve-block drug, was heavy in her palm and she paused with her other hand wrapped around the handle.

Something niggled at the back of her mind. A possibility she would have to pursue later. She opened the door, and immediately knew something wasn't right.

Michael sat on the edge of the bed, facing away from Alexander with his elbows resting on his knees and his body hunched forward. Dog raised his head from Alexander's chest, but didn't move from his spot. As she stepped into the room, Michael looked up, grief so apparent on his face it stole her breath.

"He's gone."

Lilly crossed the room, taking her bio-scan reader from her pocket as she moved. It only took a second to verify Michael's words, even though her gut had told her the same thing when she stepped into the room. Every reading was flatlined.

She stood beside Michael facing the bed, and rested her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Michael," she said softly.

He lunged to his feet, stepping clear of her touch. Lilly watched him stalk to the other side of the room, his hands habitually pushed into his pants pockets. "What did they do to him?"

His question surprised her, and Lilly turned. Before she could ask what he meant, Michael was back to the bed in three long strides, pointing a shaking hand at Alexander's still body.

"What did they *do* to him?" he asked again.

"I've only scratched the surface in my research," she finally said. "I know only a portion of his deformities were present at birth. Everything else came later, and while I don't know the purpose or implementation of the experiments, I know things were done to him."

"Find out."

"Michael—"

"Please," he ground out, cutting her off. "I want to know *exactly* what they did to him." His clenched hands shook as he glared past her to Alexander. "And to me."

"Alexander was an extreme case. We haven't seen signs of this kind of mutation in any of the others."

"I need to know." His gaze snapped to her, his lips tight, straight lines.

Lilly nodded. "Okay. I'll keep digging and determine everything."

"Thank you."

She laid her hand on his arm, and rubbed her palm along the soft flannel, but felt the tension in his body like a bowstring ready to snap. Michael closed his eyes, a tight muscle bunching along his jaw as he clenched his teeth.

"What will be done with him?"

"We'll have a service for him, just as we would for any other fallen Phoenix member. Many people on base have gotten to know Alexander, and he will be missed. He was a very special person."

He raised his chin, his gaze hard on her as his eyes flinched at the corners. His lips parted, as if he wanted to say something, but hesitated.

"What is it, Michael?"

"I don't want to hurt you with my questions."

Lilly smiled, shaking her head. "You won't. Ask me."

"Will it be like the service for Jace?"

"Yes," she answered softly. "Very much like it. Because we didn't have Jace here, we didn't cremate or inter him into the Hall of Heroes. Alexander will be."

"Hall of Heroes..."

"A special place deep inside the Mountain where the remains of all Phoenix members who have fallen are laid to rest."

Michael nodded, his lips tightening, but he didn't speak. He sniffed loudly and brushed his nose with his fingers, and Lilly knew he kept a tight rein on his emotions. In her moments of grief, he had offered her comfort, and she wanted to do the same for him. Lilly opened her arms and he let her hold him.

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*Sunday, March 24, 2052  
World Alliance Headquarters  
Northeast Hemisphere  
Washington, District of Columbia  
Former United States of America*

He was cold.

The kind of cold that sank to his bones and refused to let go, making him ache and shiver until his muscles hurt and the act of moving his own head sent throbbing pain through his temples. Darkness surrounded him, pitch black and heavy. So heavy it pressed in on him, making it hard to breathe at times.

The stench of his own body assaulted him, and the rotten smell of cold slop they had left... when? Yesterday? The day before? Days were nights and nights were days, and time had no consistency.

*"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see."*

His voice was barely a whisper, his throat dry and hoarse from three days without water, but he needed to hear something other than the beat of his own heart thumping in his ears. The loud clank of the door lock disengaging echoed through his cell, and unadulterated fear seized in his chest. He pressed his back against the cold, hard wall behind him and shielded his eyes against the glaring light flooding in from the hall.

Two sets of strong hands pulled him to his feet and kept him walking even though his weak legs buckled beneath him with each step. By the time they reached the room he knew now only as the torture chamber, he could do nothing more than let them drag him limply between them. He didn't possess the strength to protest as they strapped him into the steel chair he now knew so well.

She came in, and as he blinked against the intense light aimed directly into his face, he searched his mind for a name to put to her. But like so many other lost names, none came.

She wrinkled her nose as she approached, turning away. "What foul creatures you humans are. You disgust me."

He tried to move his head, but the rough leather straps across his forehead and throat prevented any movement. From the corner of his eye, he watched as she prepared her interrogation tools.

"Now," she said as she lifted an instrument and pressed a button, blue energy arcing between four prongs. "Lieutenant Quinn, let's hope today doesn't become as *unpleasant* as our last talk. Hmmm?"

He swallowed, trying to reconcile the name she said in her singsong voice with himself. She spoke of a stranger. When was the last time he had known his own name? *Known* it beyond the shadow of a doubt?

"Your insolent friends stole my personal experiment, Lieutenant. Until I get it back, I'm going to have to keep myself busy with you." She held the arcing device near his cheek, and he felt the air vibrate with its energy. "Tell me where I can find them, and you can rest. Doesn't that sound good?"

He closed his eyes, trying futilely to shake his head. "I don't know."

“Are we going to do this again?”

“I don’t know. I swear to you, I don’t know!”

His world disappeared in a red haze of pain as she pounded her weapon of torture into his chest. Screams echoed in his ears before blissful blackness overtook him.

## Chapter Ten

"How accurate do the levels have to be?" Beverly asked, watching with rapt attention as CJ and Lilly hunched together over a data analyzer and several test tubes of chemicals. "I mean, if you get the combination wrong, could this hurt him?"

Lilly straightened, sliding the safety glasses she wore off her eyes to sit on top of her head. "We're mixing three neurological-inhibiting drugs that have never been used in conjunction before. I won't lie and say there's no risk, but I'm trying to minimize it as much as possible. I mean, given in mass quantities any one of these drugs could kill a person. But we're talking overdose levels which are three and four times the quantity I'm using."

"What do you think might go wrong?"

"Like I said, to my knowledge these drugs have never been used simultaneously and never been delivered in the method I'm considering. That's why we're running all possible scenarios before we try this on Victor."

"But what could go *wrong*?"

"If it doesn't work the way I suspect, the best case scenario would be that it doesn't work at all."

"And worst case scenario?"

"We do more damage than what has already been done. I'm injecting this directly into the spinal column. There's always the possibility of damaging the nerve bundles within the cord. The combination may not work the way I think it will. He could revert to the condition he was in when he first woke up. Or worse." Lilly smiled, and Beverly knew it was an attempt at reassurance. "But everything is looking good right now based on the scenarios. We're not trying to cure what's wrong. We don't know what's wrong. But I honestly believe this cocktail might staunch some of the effects."

Beverly snapped her thumbnail between her teeth as she watched the two women work, alternating between carefully combining three different drugs a drop at a time, and entering data into the computer set up on the lab table. She silently prayed Lilly's plan would work, and would give Victor back some of his control and his sanity.

"Have you talked to Victor about this yet?"

Lilly shook her head. "I wanted to make sure I had something to work with before I said anything to him. I didn't want to present a possibility that might eventually fail to be anything we could work with."

"I'll talk to him."

CJ and Lilly exchanged glances before Lilly looked back to Beverly. "Sure. Do you think you understand what the drugs will do enough to explain it?"

"Victor is a doctor. Once I tell him what you want to do, I'm sure he'll understand completely."

"Okay. Go ahead."

Beverly nodded and turned away, leaving the lab that was adjacent to the infirmary. An armed guard stood outside Victor's room and nodded as she approached. Without a word, he turned and entered the code for the lock, opening the door so she could enter.

The interior of the room was dimly lit, hydrogen gel lamps glowing from the ceiling only. As the guard pulled the door closed, Victor raised his head and stared at Beverly with bloodshot eyes. His body shook with the almost constant struggle he endured to stay cogent and lucid, and a day's growth darkened his jaw. Beverly walked to the foot of the bed with her arms crossed.

"Beverly, please," he said through clenched teeth, making it hard for her to read his words. "I've asked you not to come."

"Then you don't want to hear Lilly found a way to help you," she said, turning partially away until Victor's head snapped up and he stared at her, long and hard. Beverly turned back. "Are you willing to listen now?"

In a steady rhythm, he clenched and released his fists. A fine sheen of perspiration glistened on his brow, and standing this close, Beverly felt the war waging inside him. The demon was pushing, but Victor was pushing back harder. "Tell me."

The familiar annoyance that had plagued her for the past week made the hair on the back of her neck prickle. Victor was being adamantly stubborn, insisting she stay away from him, not letting her get too close. She didn't know *what* she did to help him, but she knew she could, and for him not to *let* her drove her crazy.

With her gaze on him, Beverly walked around the bed to the small desk and chair beside it. Victor flinched and winced almost painfully. She bit the inside of her cheek and drew a slow breath as she pulled the chair away from the desk so she could sit to face him, but several feet separated them. *Ridiculous!*

"Doctor Quinn is working on something that will help you."

His dark gaze leveled on her. "What?"

"A combination of neurological inhibitors. She believes most of your..." She paused, trying to find the right words. "When you lose control, the activity in your hypothalamus is elevated. She hypothesizes the use of a neurological inhibitor specifically created to suppress the hypothalamus, delivered almost directly *to* the hypothalamus, might have a chance to give you more control."

"When did she begin working on this?"

"Last night. She started working on it after..." She debated whether Victor needed to know about the previous evening's events. She squared her shoulders and met his stare. "Victor, Alexander died last night."

A knotted muscle jumped along his jaw and his eyes slowly slid closed. She waited, feeling the surge of sorrow push out from him. Victor rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, finally lifting his head to look at her again. "How is Michael?"

"He's okay. He was with Alexander when he died. I think he'll be all right."

Victor nodded, drawing a deep breath as he scrubbed his face with his hands. He was almost always in motion, his fists clenching, his feet bouncing. She had seen him pace the floor of his room for hours without stopping. He lowered his hands, letting them hang limp near his knees. Fatigue shadowed his eyes and tightened his features.

"What drugs did she use?"

Beverly gave him the names of the three components, hoping her voice synthesizer came close to pronouncing them correctly. Without hearing them, going only by lip reading,

she wasn't positive she could properly translate them. He seemed to both understand and recognize the names.

"Did she tell you there would be risks?"

Beverly nodded. She felt the tension emanating from him and the immense amount of effort he put forth to keep the tenacious grip on his control. It was a constant battle, and one she knew he had lost several times in the last few days. Her entire life, she had purposefully kept herself at a literal arm's length from people, fearing the possible results of physical contact. Only a handful of times had she opened herself up willingly to another, and each time she had regretted it later. Right now, she practically itched to reach out and take his hand... or, smack some sense into him. She wasn't sure which.

"She has run multiple scenarios and simulations," Beverly said. "She told me the chance is there, but she honestly thinks this might be a solution."

He turned his head towards the door, and Beverly followed his gaze to see Lilly and CJ enter with two medical attendants.

"Hello, Victor," Lilly said, stepping further into the room.

Victor sat straighter, and Beverly had to crane her neck to see his lips as he spoke. "Beverly has told me what you would like to try. I commend you, Doctor Quinn. It's a drastic, yet viable, approach."

"I'm thankful for your opinion, Victor. Having a patient understand what I'm doing and why is a change for me." Lilly stepped closer, and motioned for another attendant to come beside her. The third attendant carried a stainless steel tray with several long infusion needle hypo-syringes. "Do you understand the risk?"

"I do." For a brief moment, Victor's gaze slid to Beverly and held for several moments, and she took a step closer to him. "Are you injecting directly into the spinal column?" he asked Lilly, his eyes still trained on Beverly. He crossed his arms over his chest, a flash of pain pinching his features.

*It knew...*

*And It was angry...*

Beverly turned to read Lilly's answer, silently urging them all to hurry, but she didn't step back from Victor's side. He wouldn't allow her to touch him, but she wanted to offer what strength she could just by her presence.

"Yes. At the base of your skull. It's the most direct method of affecting the hypothalamus. We can do it right here, if you're ready."

Victor nodded, a quick jerk of his chin. He lowered his arms, his knuckles white with the force he gripped in his fists. Beverly reluctantly stepped back so the attendants could approach Victor. In a flash, she felt it... the cold thrust and heavy malevolence... and she spun on her heels as Victor swung around and slammed his elbow into the nose of the closest attendant.

"Look out!"

Before the guard could draw his weapon, Victor twisted around and grabbed Beverly, yanking her hard against his chest and putting her between him and the weapon that would bring him down. She gasped as he gripped her chin with one rough hand and forced her to look into his cold eyes. All trace of Victor was gone, overcome by the demon inside. Rage-

unadulterated and vicious-smothered her and she pushed back with all her defenses. She felt the cold, like a wall of ice, and refused to let him through.

He slapped her cheek, her head snapping painfully to the side as her barricades shattered. Hard fingers pinched her chin as he wrenched her back to face him.

"Look at me, bitch," he spoke through curled lips, the grimace twisting his features making her ill. "You want to touch this? You want to feel what it's like to be inside the mind of a killer?"

In her peripheral vision, she saw the others moving around, but couldn't take her eyes from Victor. Her skin stung and her jaw hurt from his brutal grip. Worse than that, the wickedness that devoured Victor slowly crept through the touch, chilling her blood and making her heart pound against her chest like a caged bird.

"No," she said. She blinked rapidly, forcing herself to look into the black depths of his unfamiliar eyes. "I want to feel Victor. You aren't Victor."

He hissed, his breath stirring her hair. "That's where you're wrong, you little human slut. You have no fuckin' clue what you're dealing with." Spittle hit her face as he threw the words at her.

The arm that held her firm against his chest released her only long enough to vice her head between both hands, and Beverly fought to breathe. The darkness was suffocating and she struggled to pull away, but his hold was too strong.

Her vision darkened, overtaken by flashes of red light. A steady, low buzz curled out from the base of her skull and every nerve in her body was suddenly on fire. Blood pounded in her ears.

"You keep telling him all those lies about giving a damn, he might start believing them. You're too stupid to see the truth standing right in front of you."

She barely read his words through the miasma of pain invading her skull. Fire skimmed over the surface of her mind and she screamed, feeling the sound rip from her throat.

Anything else the demon inside Victor said was lost. Beverly fought desperately to be free, to escape the searing pain, but he wouldn't release her. Then a new, tingling surge enveloped her body as the security guard shot them both. She felt his hands slip from her face as she collapsed, falling into blissful darkness.

## Chapter Eleven

Victor's eyes were already open before his conscious mind acknowledged he was awake. He blinked and squinted, trying to focus, trying to hear beyond the echoing beat of his own heart in his ears. It sounded like he was in a steel barrel, every lub-dub vibrating around him.

He rolled his head on the pillow and tentatively tried to raise his arms, realizing immediately that he was once again strapped to an infirmary bed.

Gradually, the barrel effect eased and he heard the usual sounds of the infirmary; people speaking, equipment being moved, and in the mix he picked out familiar voices.

There was one voice he didn't hear.

The Demon...

Tentatively, Victor closed his eyes and let his mind drift. It was still there, ensconced in the depths of his thoughts, but it no longer slithered and whispered. After so long, could it be this simple? Had the treatment worked?

He felt... control.

He let the tension ease from his limbs and settled against the bed. In time, they would release him even if it were just to return to his room. For now, he could rest. Just when the heavy tendrils of sleep almost had him, he remembered-with a jolt that sucked the air from his lungs like a vacuum-the last few minutes in his room.

*His hands... his voice... Beverly's wide eyes.*

Victor scanned the infirmary as best he could from the angle the bed held him in, and finally saw Doctor Quinn and Doctor Montgomery standing on the other side of the room. His heart pounded painfully, and he jerked against the bonds.

"Doctor Quinn!" he shouted. "Doctor Quinn! Doctor Montgomery!"

Both women immediately set down what they were doing and hurried to his bedside, but the panic expanded in him so viciously an eternity passed before they reached him. He jerked again as Doctor Quinn approached, and her eyes dropped to his wrists before she met his gaze.

"What is it, Victor? How do you —"

"Beverly!"

"Victor, you need to calm down."

He curled forward, sitting up as best he could with his arms strapped along his side, sucking in oxygen to try to calm his frantic nerves. "Please. Where is she?" Another partial memory broke through the haze created by the drugs, and he felt his fingers pressing into her soft skin, her rapid breath warming his cheek as he looked down at her. His voice-words he never would have spoken-echoed in his mind.

*Bitch.*

*Slut.*

Victor collapsed back on the bed with a load moan. "Dear God, what have I done? Please, please tell me I didn't—" He couldn't bring himself to say the words. His chest hurt, sharp pains pulsing around his heart.

Lilly's eyes slid to the monitors beside the bed and her fingers pressed against the exposed pulse point at his wrist. Her voice was level and stern as she spoke. "Victor, if you don't calm down *right now*, I'm going to be forced to sedate you and I don't know what kind of counteractive effects a sedative will have on the neural block. Calm down, and we will tell you."

Finding the strength to calm the warring terror was nearly as hard as the battle he had fought for dominance the last two weeks. Victor clenched his fists and closed his eyes, tamping down the panic in hopes that his worst fear was not a reality.

"Please," he said in a quieter voice. "Tell me if she is all right."

"You remember what happened," Doctor Montgomery stated from the other side of the bed.

Victor nodded and swallowed. "I always remember."

The two women exchanged glances, and Doctor Quinn dipped her chin in a small nod. She looked down at Victor, and the fingers reading his pulse wrapped around his wrist in what he knew she thought was a comforting touch. He felt no comfort in it, only more dread.

"Beverly is fine..." she paused. "For the most part."

"What does that mean?"

"She's bruised and sore, and was unconscious for nearly two hours. But she woke up cognizant and aware."

"What aren't you telling me?"

Doctor Quinn drew a slow breath through her nose, releasing it just as slowly. "We don't know how it happened-how *you* did it-but the neural link to her voice synthesizer has been completely severed. She can't speak."

Victor looked to the ceiling, his body shaking with the long breath he dragged into heavy lungs. "Is she in pain?"

"No, not now. She told me she felt intense pain when it happened, but nothing residual." As Doctor Quinn spoke, she released the straps at his wrist. "I'm going to trust you to stay calm, Victor."

Her tone left no room for argument. He nodded as Doctor Montgomery released his other hand, raising the head of his bed so he could sit up. Clenching his teeth until it hurt, Victor looked down at his hands, turning them over in his lap.

How could he do it? How could he let the Demon hurt her? Her! She had been kind and patient, gentle and... forgiving. He allowed this to happen. His hands hurt her, whether he had made the choice or not. Surely, after this, her benevolence would end. What he had done was unforgivable. Unredeemable.

Victor drew up his legs and rested his elbows on his knees, the blankets and sheets whispering softly with the movement. "How long have I been unconscious?" he asked, running his hand over his hair.

"Just over thirteen hours," Doctor Quinn answered. "You haven't answered me yet, Victor. How do you feel? The fact that we are having a conversation like this tells me the inhibitors have worked in some degree, but I need you to tell me how completely."

Victor raised his head to meet her curious gaze. "It's not one-hundred-percent, Doctor. I can still feel the presence that has haunted me."

One dark blonde eyebrow arched and she glanced toward Doctor Montgomery.

"I know it makes no scientific sense when I explain it as such," Victor said, understanding their trepidation. "I can only qualify it the way I feel it."

"After what you've been through, Victor, I don't care if you call it a case of the Flibberdegibit Flu as long as we have it under control." Doctor Quinn motioned to one of her medical staff, and made a movement to her lips as if she were holding an imaginary cup. The attendant nodded and headed to the back of the infirmary. "We'll get you something to eat and drink."

"It seems whenever I open my eyes, you are giving me food, Doctor Quinn."

She smiled as she turned back to him. "I'm trying desperately to fend off malnutrition."

"How long will each treatment last?" he asked.

"Anywhere from twelve to twenty-four hours. At first, we are going to rely heavily on you, Victor, to relay absolutely any change you feel *when* you feel it. If you feel your control slipping, you need to let me know immediately."

He nodded. "I understand."

The redheaded attendant came back with a dish of simple foods; a sandwich, fruit and water. She set the tray on his bedside table, smiled politely, and went back to her work. Victor watched her walk away, and found himself comparing the deep, dark red of her short hair to Beverly's gold-spun red curls.

"What can be done?" he asked, still staring past the two doctors that flanked him. He drew a quick breath and met Doctor Quinn's gaze. "For Beverly."

Doctor Quinn shook her head. "Nothing. The surgeon who created the voice synthesizer technology died over a decade ago, and there is no one among us who has anywhere near the knowledge necessary to either understand or fix the link device."

"Michael."

Doctor Montgomery tilted her head. "Michael? What do you mean?"

"Haven't you seen his brilliance yet?" he asked, holding out his hand. "Give him everything you know about the neural transmitter and he *will* be able to fix it. I guarantee you."

"I'll admit, I thought of the same thing," Doctor Quinn said. "We *do* recognize Michael's intelligence. In four months he has absorbed more medical knowledge than most second year general-medicine students." Victor caught the familiar, pleased smile that passed between the two women. "But even if he could fix it, there is no one skilled enough to re-establish the neural link. That kind of knowledge and skill comes from decades of study as a brain surgeon. The man who gave Beverly her link was one of two surgeons in the World capable of it. Both men are dead, and because deafness has been, for all intents and purposes, removed from the human gene pool there is no one who can do it."

"Has she used the voice synthesizer her entire life?"

Doctor Montgomery nodded. "Yes. It was implanted when she was a child."

Victor ran his hand along the back of his neck, his skin itching around what he assumed was the injection site. The muscles along his spine pulled painfully against each other, making it hard to move without his body protesting. He closed his eyes, but immediately saw Beverly again, staring at him as he gripped her jaw, her green eyes sparking with both fear and defiance. And faith?

*"I want to feel Victor..."*

"Will you tell her..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "Never mind. *I'm sorry* would never be enough."

\*\*\*\*\*

Michael was lost in his own thoughts, sitting on the black leather lounge in the apartment, staring unseeing at the unfolded deed on the glass table in front of him. What had drawn him to take the deed and photos from the box on his desk, he wasn't sure, but having the papers, letter and photos spread out in front of him eased some of the ache in his chest.

He didn't hear the knock the first time. Dog came bounding from his bedroom, tail wagging as he yapped in the general direction of the door. Michael looked from him to the door just as the knock came again, sending Dog into a frenzied spin. He yapped with such ferocity, his front legs bounced up off the floor.

Michael stood and shushed Dog, who immediately backed down and returned to his nap on Michael's bed. He opened the door, surprised to see the young woman standing in the hall. Pretty brown hair was pulled back from her face in a simple ribbon, and her blue eyes were bright against the paleness of her skin. Nervousness emanated from her as tangible as the air he breathed, her arms crossed over her thin body with her elbows cupped in her hands. As soon as the door opened, her eyes welled with tears.

"Amber? Is something wrong?" he asked, opening the door further to usher her into the apartment. "Are you feeling all right?"

As soon as he shut the door, she turned into him and buried her face against his chest, a racking sob shaking her slight frame. Unable to do anything else, he wrapped his arms around her and held her until her crying slowed to jerking snuffles.

"I'm sorry, Michael," she whispered hoarsely, rocking her forehead against his chest. "I didn't know where else to go."

Michael left her standing in the same spot long enough to find her a handkerchief, although his shirt felt like it had caught most of her tears. He returned to the main room and gave it to her, standing a few feet away as she wiped her cheeks and composed herself. Finally, with a watery smile, she looked up and shrugged.

"I guess it's the pregnancy hormones, right? Don't they say women cry more when they're pregnant?"

He nodded, pushing his hands deep into his pockets. "Yes. Can you tell me what's wrong? It's not the baby..."

Amber shook her head. "No. I've felt fine for two weeks. Just sick to my stomach, but Doctor Quinn told me that would happen. She called it... um..."

"Morning sickness," Michael offered.

"Yes. Except for me, it could happen just about any time."

"What is it, then?"

Amber nervously folded and unfolded the damp handkerchief, avoiding eye contact as she took another shuttered breath. "He told me not to say anything. He said no one at Phoenix would ever notice he's gone."

Michael straightened, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. "Jacob."

She nodded, sniffing again as a new wave of tears rolled down her cheek, twisting her delicate features into a sad grimace. "He said he had to do something to make things better."

He couldn't let our baby grow up in a world like this, where the Areth could do to humans what they did to *us*."

Michael bit down and swallowed, sliding his eyes closed for a moment. "How long ago did he leave, Amber?"

"Yesterday morning."

He stepped to her, slowly reaching out to grip her shoulders. "Amber, this is important. What did he plan on doing?"

She shook her head, more tears rolling down her cheeks. "He didn't tell me. Only that he was going to make sure it stopped. Michael, what if he doesn't come back? What am I going to do?"

He pulled her into his arms again, resting his chin on her hair. "Don't worry, Amber. You won't have to do this alone."

\*\*\*\*\*

The subtle flicker of her bedroom lights told Beverly someone was at her door, and she rose wearily from her bed. She avoided glancing at the mirror over her dresser, not wanting to see the deep bruises shaped like fingertips along her jaw.

She padded barefoot across the floor, the cold of the concrete creeping into the soles of her feet. CJ stood at the door, a smile on her face.

"Is it too late? Were you sleeping?"

Beverly shook her head and motioned for CJ to follow her into the apartment. An electronic notebook sat on her kitchenette counter, and the screen engaged at her touch when she picked it up. She took the attached stylus and scribbled across the smooth screen, her handwriting appearing in digital form.

*I've been trying to sleep, but can't.*

CJ tilted her head to read the script. "Do you want something to help?"

Beverly shook her head, pressing a button to clear the screen. *I don't think it would help at this point. Too much going on in my head.* She finished writing and swirled her fingers near her temple to accentuate the point. *Has he woken up?* she wrote at the bottom of the screen.

CJ nodded. "A few hours ago."

Beverly nodded her head and motioned for CJ to continue.

"It worked. He was calm, coherent and clear-headed. He did admit it isn't a one-hundred-percent suppression, but the inhibitors are effective enough to allow him to function."

Beverly pressed her hand to her chest and sighed before clearing the screen and writing *Thank God*.

"He woke up very upset," CJ continued to explain, her features tightening. She pulled herself up into one of the tall chairs at the counter. "Lilly had to threaten sedation if he didn't calm down. And he was able to, but he was obviously distressed."

Beverly shook her head and held out her hand, palm up, hoping the movements implied *Why*.

"He remembers what happened, apparently in very clear detail."

Beverly gripped the edge of the counter, an overwhelming wave of sorrow making her sway on her feet. She closed her eyes, trying to push aside the memory of Victor-No! *Not*

*Victor!*—hurting her as he held her in his grip. The burning surge of pain that had encased her and severed the neural interface with her voice synthesizer.

How the Demon did it, she didn't know. How he could turn her own psychic empathy back on herself... it was beyond her understanding.

In her life, she had only met two other people with any type of psychic gift. Just like 'genetic abnormalities' such as deafness and blindness, the most dominant genes for psychic tendencies had been filtered from the newest generations of natural-born humans. Her understanding of her own abilities had been severely limited until she was in her teens and finally had the chance to meet a woman with the gift of telekinesis. Ida Marie had spent her life fostering and developing her gift, and the mentoring she gave to Beverly had helped her finally open up to her empathy.

Ida Marie had told Beverly of many things, many variations, and many ways others had used their skills. But nothing... nothing Ida Marie told her explained the way the Demon had reversed her mental push back against her.

If the Demon could do it... could Victor? Did he know?

CJ's gentle touch on her arm brought Beverly back from her deep musings. She raised her head and tried to smile. Instinctively, she projected her words, but remembered they would only be in her mind from now on. With a sigh, she turned the electronic notebook to write.

*Does he understand I don't blame him?*

CJ shrugged and shook her head. "I don't know. I doubt it. I know he's putting a lot of blame on himself. I don't have to be an empath to understand that. I saw the guilt and anguish in his face. He hates what happened."

Beverly scribbled quickly across the table. *I should go to him.*

CJ stilled her hand. "No. Not yet. Let us regulate the neural inhibitor doses, and let him have some time. Bev, I'm not sure he'd see you right now. That's how upset he was."

Beverly nodded. *I'll give him time.*

CJ slid down from the stool, stifling a yawn. "I didn't realize how late it was. I hope Michael didn't wait up."

*Thank you for telling me.*

CJ smiled as she read. "Of course. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Get some rest."

Beverly waited until the door closed behind CJ before she turned to the counter and braced her head in her hands, letting the tears come.

## Chapter Twelve

"Damian, you did a wonderful job," CJ said as she stacked the new supply of Dermaseal bandages on the shelves in the back of the infirmary. "How did you manage to get so much?"

Damian ripped open one of the top boxes on the pallet between them. "Anderson deserves the credit. She knew who we needed to see."

"Next time I see her, I will thank her. Still, you and your team worked hard. You brought back enough to keep the Mountain running for a few months if we're frugal. You should be commended."

Damian said nothing as he set rows of infusion syringes on the shelves. They worked silently together for several minutes, filing the inventory and carefully storing the new supplies for the infirmary. Since their first meeting, CJ had always felt comfortable with Damian Ali and silence between them was nothing that bothered her. She did note the slight tension around his eyes, and wondered at the cause, but assumed he was tired from the long mission. He and his team had been gone nearly two weeks and had traveled several hundred miles to procure the stock the base needed.

Based on his preliminary report, it hadn't been easy. Alliance Forces were on high alert in many of the major cities. They could most easily obtain the supplies in the quantities they required in more highly populated areas, but they faced a higher Alliance presence. They had exchanged fire twice, with everyone on the team escaping unharmed, but General Castleton called the mission short when he felt things were getting too 'hairy'.

"I heard Victor is improving," Damian said, carefully lining several vials of antibiotic serum on the top shelf. "How improved is improving?"

"You'd be amazed. What a difference from when he first woke up," she said, shaking her head as she started on a box of basic analgesics. "Lilly started a new treatment on him five days ago. A neurological inhibitor. It's not a cure, and it's not one-hundred percent, but he's in control. He's more like the man I knew in New Mexico."

"And that's a good thing?"

"I always got a sense that Victor was *different* than his counterparts, even before he stepped in to help us. So, yes, I would say that's a good thing."

"Has he offered up any useful information?"

The cold edge to Damian's voice made CJ look up, but Damian was engrossed in entering the contents of the next box into his handheld PAC interface. CJ flipped a blonde bit of hair behind her ear and bent to pick up the next box.

"No. He's still weak. And General Castleton doesn't want him to feel like he's being interrogated."

"Castleton said that?"

"Well, not in those words, but the same essence. Victor isn't a prisoner of war. He came here of his own free will. He helped us bring the humans out of New Mexico by his own free will. And he offered the information on the Umani willingly."

"So, we just let him live here, among us, while we try to take down his entire race." Damian finally looked up, his dark brown eyes trained on her.

"Have you felt like this all along, Damian?"

"Don't tell me the thought hasn't crossed your mind."

CJ tilted her head, glancing at him. "I'm not saying it hasn't."

"He's gone after Michael *how many* times since he came around? And we don't know if the whole Umani thing is a load of crap, or —"

"Damian, please," CJ said sternly.

He raised a large hand in concession. "Okay. I'm sorry. He's here and I guess we'll just deal with it, right? Until he proves to be a liability," Damian said in a low voice as he tore into another box.

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Beverly's insides jumped nervously as she walked the short distance from the infirmary to the nearby room where Victor stayed. She pressed her hand against her stomach and took a slow breath, releasing it through pursed lips.

She had waited, just as CJ suggested. Five whole days. Five amazingly long days. Lilly confirmed that the neural inhibitors were a success, and he had been incident free since the initial dose. They were on a strict schedule for injections, and while he was still honest enough to say it wasn't perfect, he had regained his control.

She was anxious to finally *know* Victor. The Victor who wasn't struggling for a moment of peace, the Victor who could sit with her, the Victor who might once again let her near him without fear.

A guard stood outside Victor's door, by order of the General. Whether personally she liked it or not, as a member of the chain of command she understood and supported the decision. It only made sense. The guard smiled and nodded when she reached him.

"Good afternoon, Ma'am."

She cradled her digital notepad in the bend of her arm and wrote across the smooth surface. *Good afternoon, Riley. Could you please knock for me?*

"Of course, Ma'am."

Riley knocked on the door, and after a brief pause, opened it wide so she could walk past him into the room, hugging the notepad to her chest. Victor sat at his desk, hunched forward over the open PAC in front of him. The computer had been set up with limited parameters and access only to the entertainment and some basic history databases—also under the General's orders. He looked up as she walked towards the bed, feeling the swish of air around her calves as the door closed behind her. Immediately, his eyes widened slightly and he shot up from his chair with such force it rolled back and bounced off the wall behind him.

"Beverly," she read on his lips. "What are... I didn't expect to see you."

She closed the space between them, shifting the notepad in her hold to write as she walked. *I wanted to give you time to feel stronger.* When she looked up to turn the notepad towards him, she caught her breath at the deep intensity of his expression as he stared down at her, his gaze shifting over her face. He realized she held the notebook out, and curled one hand around the edge to read her words.

He visibly swallowed, taking much longer than needed. Once again, he trapped her in the intensity behind his eyes when he looked at her. "I didn't think you would come at all. Not after..."

His lips snapped shut and a knotted muscle along his jaw jerked. Beverly smiled, trying to express everything she could no longer say. She cleared the screen and wrote again. *I needed to see you.*

Victor took a step back then spun away, his hands clenched tight at his side as he walked stiffly to his desk. He leaned forward, his palms flat on the surface, with his head hung low. Beverly watched, waiting for him to turn back to her, and as she took a step towards him, he pushed away from the desk with a sharp jerk.

"I'm sorry, Beverly." His lips tightened, twisting in an anguished grimace as he spoke. "I'm so sorry." Victor lifted his hands, palms up, and stared at them as he shook his head. "I can't stand that I hurt you."

She shook her head as she quickly wrote *You didn't.*

"Didn't I? I saw it happening and I didn't stop it." His tense features relaxed into anguish as he stared at her, his gaze shifting along her jaw and throat to the bruises she knew he saw there. He drew a deep breath that pulled at his shoulders and made his body shake.

Beverly set the notepad on the bed and stepped closer to him. The tension in his body was as palpable as a force field, his spine going rigid when she slid her palms up his arms to his shoulders. Moving slowly, she came against him and rested her cheek against the side of his neck, closing her eyes. Victor's arms stayed at his side, his body stiff. Drawing a deep breath that filled her senses with his clean, masculine scent, she curled her fingers into the short hair along the back of his head.

Guilt sat on Victor's shoulders like a wet blanket, clinging and chilling, not letting him breathe. She felt it choking him. Beverly gently rubbed her cheek against his, and turned her head just enough to press a kiss to his warm skin.

Hesitantly, his arms rose and she held her breath when his hands tentatively touched her sides, his fingertips skimming over her sweater. She stroked his hair and pulled herself closer to him, standing on her tiptoes.

With a groan she felt vibrate through his chest, Victor hauled her against him in a rough, needful embrace. One hand held her firmly against him at the small of her back while the other trailed up her spine to curl, warm and electric, around the curve of her neck at her shoulder. He bent his neck and buried his face to her throat, the slightly rough whiskers on his jaw gently abrading her skin. Beverly's breath hitched when his breath shifted her hair and his lips brushed her skin.

His hold tightened, nearly stealing her breath, and she tipped her head back, her hair spilling over his hand. Victor slid his cheek up the side of her throat until his mouth hovered near her ear. His lips rested against her cheek and she clung to his shoulders, her stomach dancing as she fought to breathe. Her body came alive.

Pulling back, his own breath ragged, Victor brought his hand to her face and laid his palm against her cheek. His skin was warm, the sparking undertone she had felt in the past gone. Now, all she felt was Victor... his hesitance, his uncertainty... and his desire. It shocked and invigorated her. Beverly closed her eyes and smiled, turning into his hand. His thumb stroked her cheek and the corner of her lips, his long fingers caressed her ear and the side of

her throat. She opened her eyes again, her lids heavy, as his other hand mirrored the first and he held her face in the cradle of his touch.

Deep furrows marred his brow, his lips thin lines. For the first time, the loss of her voice was more than an inconvenience. She wished more than anything she could tell him she was all right without stepping away from his touch to write on the notepad.

"I'm so—"

She brought up her hand and pressed her fingertips to his lips, halting his words, and shook her head within his hold. His breath was hot against her skin, his lips firm beneath her touch. Her heart pounded, her blood hummed, and she leaned into him until her body pressed against his and she felt his sharp intake of air. The logical half of her brain told her to step back, to distance herself despite the languid warmth spreading out through her limbs. Despite it all, Victor was Areth.

Areth didn't feel arousal, didn't feel the need for physical contact, and more than that, they shunned humans for their *primitive desires*.

She remembered her moment of weakness in his cell, when she had leaned over to brush his lips with a kiss as he drifted to sleep. A flutter shifted through her stomach.

"Beverly," he said, his lips moving against her fingers, heavy lids hooding his eyes.

He emanated heat, rolling and liquid, pouring over her. Every breath hitched, every heartbeat pounded in her ears, and she realized she felt not only her own heart—her own need—but also Victor's. She looked into his eyes and slid her hand from his mouth to rest it over his heart. It pounded a staccato rhythm against her palm. His thumb brushed her mouth, gently tugging her lips apart, and a soft vibration stirred in the back of her throat.

A sharp, quick burst of uncertainty curled with the thick desire radiating from him. Beverly curled her fingers into his shirt, daring him with her eyes not to pull back. She slid her hand along his side to his back, bringing them closer.

*Was this wrong? Was she crazy?*

She realized she didn't care.

His eyes locked with hers as he moved closer, and Beverly thought she would go insane before he completed the act. His lips brushed across hers, a cautious kiss that made her senses reel and her equilibrium tilt, ending far too soon when he broke contact.

Disappointment burst in her chest, and she blinked as she stared at him. Each breath he took was ragged and rough, his lips moist from the brief contact. Beverly wanted more, so much more, and believed he did, too.

Why did he hold back?

His uncertainty danced over her nerves.

Victor's hold relaxed, but before he could pull away, Beverly raised her arms and laid her hands along the back of his neck, bringing him back to her. She knew he wanted to be near her. They both needed this. Beverly parted her lips, pressing them firmly to his. Victor stilled, and again she felt the wave of insecurity in him.

She only wished he could hear her thoughts now. *Just feel, Victor... just feel.*

His hands left her face and he pulled her hard against him, wrapping her in his arms again. His fingertips were firm against her back, his hand sliding up her spine to cup the back of her head beneath her hair as he opened himself to the kiss.

The flood nearly drowned her, yet she hadn't felt so alive in years. Victor held her so tight, she could barely breathe, but she welcomed the heady desire. His fingers combed into her hair, holding her tight as he deepened the kiss even more. The tips of their tongues made contact, and she arched against him as pure electricity shot through her body.

Unable to go any more without taking a deep breath, Beverly tipped her head back, supported by his hand, and closed her eyes as the tidal wave slowly ebbed back. Victor bent his neck and laid his forehead on her shoulder within the curve of her throat, his ribs expanding rapidly beneath her hands as he tried to fill his oxygen-deprived lungs.

When her chest no longer burned and her heartbeat had slowed to a reasonable rate, Victor raised his head and looked into her eyes, a small smile edging up the corners of his usually-tightly-drawn lips.

"I had no idea."

Beverly smiled and winked.

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Michael sat alone in the first pew of the small Mountain chapel. Today the window shutters had remained closed; the beautiful glass portraits now shadowed images of the dazzling spectacles he remembered from Jace Quinn's memorial service.

The service for Alexander was over, everyone in attendance already gone. He slouched down on the hard wooden bench and linked his hands in his lap, staring at the simple receptacle set center stage on the Offerings table. Pure white silk draped the table, and crosses of gold sat on either side of the earthenware jar.

Alexander wouldn't have understood the significance of any of the symbols and relics adorning the small chapel. His simple mind would have thought it beautiful, but the significance of a being greater than creation would have been too much for him to conceive.

Sometimes, it was too much for Michael to conceive.

He had read the Bible, memorized scripture and verse, but it hadn't been until he left New Mexico that the depth and immensity of faith became clear to him. So many people in the Mountain clung to their beliefs as their strength, their guide.

Perhaps it was because the Areth denounced any form of religion, of faith in a greater power, that his curiosity had been piqued. Why would the Areth so adamantly want people to forget God, Allah, Buddha, Jehovah, whatever name He took on in whatever faith He represented? Why did they want forgotten the stories and morals that had driven the human race for thousands of years?

Michael remembered his father bowing his head during prayers in the name and memory of Jace Quinn. He knew Caitlin asked for God's Hands to protect and guide Nick back home, and heard in her voice her conviction. Sitting in the silent chapel, he felt peace and wondered if it were the omnipotent presence believers put their faith in.

If it were all true, then Alexander's soul now existed in a place more beautiful and perfect than Michael could begin to comprehend.

He smiled.

That thought alone was enough to make him want to believe.

"What are you smiling at?"

Lilly slid into the space beside him, her gaze tracking his to the beautiful stained glass windows behind the pulpit. Even in shadows, the images were stunning and stirred something in his chest he didn't fully understand.

"Beauty," he answered simply.

She shifted beside him, her shoulder touching his, and sighed. "I've always loved it here. There are so few churches left, I'm glad we have this one to come to."

They sat in silence for several minutes, Michael enjoying her presence and the stillness of the chapel. On the wall behind the pulpit was a banner in deep purple, gold fringe adorning the bottom and golden trim around the edges. On the banner was a scripture painted in gold.

*Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you: Not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. – John 14:27*

"I never went into a church before I met Jace."

Her voice was soft and low and he wondered if she really intended for him to hear. Michael turned to study her profile, her eyes cast upward to the windows that stretched to the ceiling.

"You told me he had a scripture for every occasion."

She smiled. "He even managed to find a way to slip scripture into the conversation as he tried to convince me we belonged together. A time for every purpose, and for every purpose the Wisdom of God." Lilly finally looked at him, her blue eyes shining. There was no shadow of sadness, just a soft shimmer of remembrance.

"His father was a chaplain in Earth Force. One of the last commissioned chaplains. His grandfather was an ordained minister in Florida. His mother's father was a Marine. He came from a long line of religious men and soldiers. God and Country, as they used to say."

"I wish I had known him."

Lilly smiled, a tear escaping to run down her cheek. Michael reached out and ran his thumb over the wet trail. "I wish you had, too." She drew in a shuddered breath and looked back to the front of the chapel. "It's been hard the last few weeks. The further I go in this pregnancy, the more I think about our baby not knowing their father. He wanted so much to be a father."

Michael stretched his arm along the back of the pew and nudged her shoulder. She leaned into him, resting her head back on his arm. He was no stranger to loss, but he knew it didn't compare to Lilly's grief. A husband, a father... Jace Quinn was an incredibly lucky man.

"When I feel like I'm drowning, and I don't even want to get out of bed, I remember his favorite quote. It's not scripture, but it was close enough."

"What is it?" he asked, resting his cheek on her hair.

"If He brought you to it, He'll bring you through it."

Michael smiled. It was 'faith' in the most simplest of terms.

"The service for Alexander was beautiful," she said after several moments of easy silence passed. "You did a wonderful job, Michael."

"Thank you for helping me. I didn't know what to do."

Lilly sat up, moving away from his side. "Why don't you and I go get something to eat? I have chocolate cupcakes in my quarters."

With a chuckle, Michael stood and offered her his hand to help her to her feet. "I think you have someone smuggling all chocolate directly to you."

"I have connections," she said with a grin, slipping her hand into the bend of his elbow. "Stick with me, and you'll never go without sweets."

## Chapter Thirteen

*Thursday, April 4, 2052  
Washington, District of Columbia  
Former United States of America*

"I'm not in the mood for any cock and bull stories this time, Bruce," Jackie said as she picked at her plate of sesame-glazed tofu cubes. They were nasty, and she didn't understand how Ali ever tolerated the slimy stuff, but she needed to project a persona and her blonde-haired, blue-eyed 'good citizen' persona ate crap cubes and asparagus.

"No bull, Jackie, but I can provide the—"

She shot him a glare that would have stopped a dozen charging Alliance Security officers in their tracks. He cleared his throat and took a sip of his synthesized Pinot Grigio. Yet another wonder of Areth technology; wine with all the benefits of wine but none of the alcohol. No wine. No sex. No wonder the Areth were a bunch tight-asses.

"Just tell me what you want to tell me. I haven't exactly been Miss Popularity around town lately, and I'd prefer to ditch this wig before it drives me insane."

"I don't know. I kind of like it."

She picked up the serrated knife beside her plate, curling her fingers around the wooden handle. "You're going to be eating certain parts of your anatomy in about three seconds," she said in a low voice, keeping a deceptively charming smile on her lips.

Bruce shifted in his chair. "Anderson, you seriously need to release some of that pent up tension. Fine. You want the details. I'll give you details. Word in town is that there is some big-mouthed mental patient escaped from his padded room trying to get in to see Hargrave. He's telling anyone and everyone who will listen that he has information that will blow the top off the Areth's *lies and deceit*. He claims he was a prisoner of the Areth his entire life."

"It's possible," she said, forcing down a glob of slime. "He could be one of the escapees from the bunch Castleton's people brought out of New Mexico." Jackie took a long drink of her ice water, trying to rid her mouth of the aftertaste from her lunch. "If he is, Castleton is probably wondering where the hell he disappeared to. If he isn't, he might blab just enough to stir up a bee's nest and get people wondering."

"Problem is, we don't know if he's crazy or if he's pissed."

"When was the last time you heard anything?"

"Yesterday afternoon. He called my office wanting to speak with the Congresswoman."

"Can you get him in? Screen him or something?"

"The message bypassed me and went right to Santos. She slammed him down, and told her secretary not to take any more of his calls. I don't even have the contact information."

"You know, Bruce, for a mole you suck."

"Hey, I'm useful when it counts. I got you out of that bar last month, didn't I?"

Jackie nearly choked on her food, and it wasn't because of the taste. "You believe whatever helps you sleep at night. Beside that, it's because of you I had that brigade on my ass for a week."

"You don't look any the worse for wear."

"Phoenix has a good medical plan." Her thoughts drifted briefly, because that was all the time she could allow, to Michael. *Michael what exactly?* She'd have to find out next time she saw him.

Bruce fished in the breast pocket of his jacket and removed his payment card, waving down a waiter. "Put both these on me," he told the man.

"Wow, picking up the tab? Did I bruise your manhood that bad?"

"You know, Jackie, with an attitude like that you're never going to snag a man."

She flipped back her synthetic blonde hair. "Oh, what a shame. You've shattered my dreams of being genetically matched with a compatible sperm donor and spitting out two perfectly engineered offspring. Whatever shall I do?"

The waiter came back, handing Bruce his payment card. Tucking it away, he pushed back from the table. "I'll be in touch."

"You do that," she mumbled.

As soon as he was gone, she pushed away her plate and left the restaurant, slipping on her sunglasses against the bright spring day. Now, just a couple stops around town to make sure no one trailed her and it was back to her flat to make a call to Colorado.

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*Wednesday, April 10, 2052*

*Phoenix Compound*

*Outside Colorado Springs, Colorado*

"Just how unstable is Jacob?" General Castleton asked, seated at the head of the holo-vid table in Command.

Michael leaned forward, resting his linked hands on the tabletop. "He isn't unstable as much as he's adamant. He was frustrated here, and felt like nothing was being done to stop the Areth. I tried, on several occasions, to convince him there was much he didn't know."

"I wish we had known about his volatility a bit sooner, son."

Michael dipped his head in a small nod, sliding his gaze briefly to Caitlin beside him and back to the General. "I wish I had said something sooner. I didn't foresee him taking this kind of action. I believe it was Amber's pregnancy that pushed him to leave."

"Impending fatherhood."

"Yes, sir."

General Castleton huffed, tapping his fingertips on the tabletop. "Well, we're just going to have to deal with what we've got. Jackie has a lead on him, and is trying to track down where he's staying in Washington. Maybe she can get to him and convince him what he's doing is more likely going to screw us seven ways to Sunday before it helps anyone."

"Is there anyone else among your people who feel this way? Anyone we should be concerned with?" Damian asked.

Michael shook his head. "No. None that have spoken to me."

Beverly tapped the tabletop to draw everyone attention. She typed her question into her terminal, and the words appeared for all of them to read. *Have we hypothesized what kind of fall out there would be if Jacob actually did speak with the President?*

"I seriously doubt it'll happen," Damian said. "Right now, this guy is a rambling lunatic as far as Hargrave's people are concerned. They're not going to give him the time of day. Even if he did get into Hargrave, I'm willing to bet Warwick would be able to talk himself out of it. Convince Hargrave that what went on in New Mexico was for the benefit of humankind. The pain of the few enhances the lives of the many."

"I don't think it's wise to just sit on our hands." Caitlin looked between Damian and the General as she spoke, and Michael recognized the tight frustration that pulled at her brow.

"Jacob has no credibility. Hell, he doesn't even have a last name, who is going to listen to him?" Damian ground out.

His tone snapped Michael's attention him, and he stared at Damian, carefully masking his surprise. He had only known Damian a matter of months, but his attitude surprised Michael. By the tension of Caitlin's posture, he assumed she was as put off by Damian's attitude as he was.

"Captain, bashing the man's character does us no good," General Castleton said, his voice sharp-edged. "And I agree with CJ. Sitting with our hands under our asses isn't going to fix anything, and it's not going to have us prepared for the fallout should it come. Jackie is on it, and I'm advising the other heads of command of the situation. I'm sure she'll have more support than she wants... or needs."

"Of course, sir," Damian said with a nod.

"Meanwhile, we plan for all contingencies. Michael, thank you for coming."

That ended the meeting, and everyone slid back their chairs to leave. Caitlin and Michael stood together and she offered him a small smile. He had come to the meeting with concerns, and blamed himself for letting the situation go this far. Despite Caitlin's assurances, the weight still sat on his shoulders. Beverly came around the table and joined them; her digital notebook nestled in the crook of her arm.

*Michael, could I speak with you a minute?*

Caitlin said her good-byes, heading towards one of the side hallways, and Michael turned his attention on Beverly.

"I'm glad you stopped me," he said. "There's something I would like to discuss with you."

She cleared the screen and dipped her head as she wrote. *I only have a moment. I want to talk to you about Victor.*

Tension pulled his shoulders back and he drew a slow breath through his nose. For over two weeks, he had studiously and intentionally avoided Victor, since the day Lilly administered the first inhibitor treatment. Not out of personal preference, he was eager to speak with his oldest-and for years-only friend. His hesitance was for Victor's sake.

Beverly cleared the screen again when he didn't say anything, her hand gracefully sliding the stylus over the surface. *He misses you.*

Michael arched an eyebrow and pushed his hands into his pockets. "I won't be the reason he loses control."

She wrote beneath her previous words. *You won't be. He wants to see you.*

He shook his head slowly. "Beverly..."

She laid her hand on his arm and smiled. Michael felt the soft spread of her mental touch as much as he felt her physical contact. When she pulled back, the feeling lingered. *Think about it.*

Michael nodded. "I will."

She hugged the notebook to her chest and smiled again before turning to leave. As she disappeared into an adjacent hall, Michael realized he hadn't even mentioned the book he had found in the dusty library storage room on level twenty-five. He huffed and rubbed his fingertips across his forehead. A mild headache, nothing to the level of the ones that had plagued him in the last weeks, thumped behind his eyes.

Perhaps she was right. A long talk with an old friend might do him good.

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She smelled like lilacs.

Victor drew a slow breath through his nostrils, letting her heady scent fill his senses. They sat side by side in a room full of people, many of which didn't try to hide their overt stares and curious conversations, but all Victor wanted to see was her. Each time she took a bite of her meal, her arm brushed his and tingling waves of awareness made his hairs stand on end.

Vivid memory of their kiss still hummed beneath his skin, even days later, and he knew if he closed his eyes, he could relive it in minute detail. The softness of her cheek, the warmth of her body when he gave in to his undeniable urge to hold her, the surge that had slammed through him when her lips parted and her tongue traced along his own.

In what had felt like a single heartbeat, he had been convinced he could continue to keep her at arms length and then... he wanted nothing more than to be as close to her as possible.

To convince himself she was real, and there beside him, Victor glanced sideways and watched her profile as she shifted her fork through her meal. Her skin was creamy white, her cheeks flushed slightly pink. Today, she wore her hair loose except for a small amount pinned back at her crown. Twisted ringlets of gold-spun red fell around her shoulders and down her back. She raised a bite of leafy salad to her mouth, the oil dressing slicking her lips, and he forced himself to look away.

Victor took a bite of the steak she had all but insisted he take, silently admitting to himself it was delicious, and rather than focus too much on Beverly's lips and skin, he slid his gaze to the large armed guard standing not far off. Lieutenant Riley, or his peers, would be Victor's constant companions whenever he left his room. *At least for now*, Beverly said.

He understood. In their position, he would do the same. How could he expect the men and women of the base to trust him, when he wasn't one-hundred-percent sure he trusted himself?

Beverly ran a napkin over her lips and sat back in her chair, laying the digital notebook in her lap to write. Victor shifted to face her, but instead of paying attention to what she may be writing, he found his gaze drifting to her lips again. *How fascinating they could be!* She pulled her lower lip through her teeth and tilted her head as she slid the stylus across the tableau. For a brief moment, her eyes shifted and she caught him staring. A slow, faint smile brightened her expression all the way to her eyes.

Holding his gaze, she turned the notepad in her lap to face him. Victor reluctantly looked away from her face to read her words. *How long do you have before you need to return to the infirmary?*

"Plenty of time," he answered. "I received my last injection not long before you came. I have hours."

She smiled and nodded, her teeth flashing. Clearing the screen, she wrote again. *Good. I have a couple hours before I need to be somewhere. We have time together.*

"Hello, Victor."

Victor jerked his head up at the familiar voice, and saw Michael standing between Lieutenant Riley and the end of the table, his hands pushed into his pockets and his expression wary. Beverly turned as well, and her hand slid into Victor's as she saw who it was. Like a whisper, a sense of calm ease skimmed across his shoulders.

"Michael," he said, smiling when he realized he didn't feel the dreaded burn of acid up his spine or the bitter tang of panic in the back of his throat. "It's good to see you."

Michael watched him, studying in the way Victor had seen him do countless times since he was a child. He waited... watching for a sign the Demon had control.

"You have nothing to fear from me, my friend."

Michael dipped his chin, not much more than a jerk. He wasn't ready yet to believe Victor; and just as he understood the need for guards, and the restrictions placed on him, he understood Michael's reluctance. Michael, more than anyone, had reason to refrain from trusting too soon. He knew Victor, knew the man on the edge of insanity was not *him*, but separating the two would be hard. They stood silent for several moments, the tension in Michael's body a tangible presence in the air. Beverly squeezed Victor's hand, tugging slightly, and he glanced down at her. She motioned towards one of the empty chairs near them.

"Would you sit with us, Michael?" Victor asked for her.

"Actually, I came to find Beverly," Michael answered as he pulled out the chair beside Beverly, sitting down. "You left Command before I could tell you what I found. I want to show you something," he said directly to her.

She raised her eyebrows, tilting her head. Victor took his seat again, holding her hand against his thigh. It occurred to him that the act of holding her hand, in such an intimate way, should feel foreign and uncomfortable to him. Instead, he thought of what fools his brethren were.

"This is American Sign Language," Michael said, but as he spoke, he moved his hands in the space between him and Beverly in very concise, specific motions. "It was developed almost three-hundred years ago to help the deaf and hearing-impaired communicate. Before voice synthesizers and cochlear implants, and before the genetic predisposition for deafness was filtered from the gene pool."

She watched him with wide eyes, her attention shifting rapidly from Michael's hands to his lips so she could catch every word. Victor was just as intrigued, leaning forward as Michael explained.

"I know we can't fix the synthesizer interface," Michael continued, tapping the back of his skull to represent the placement of her internal device. "But, perhaps we can get rid of this." He pointed to the notepad in her lap.

Beverly released Victor's hand to write, the stylus flying across the panel. She flipped the notepad around and Michael read aloud. *"How do I learn this...? I found a book in the old base library. It's a dictionary of sorts, and will teach you enough that you can communicate on your own."*

A small sound escaped Beverly's throat, little more than a hiccupped gasp, and she pressed her hand to her chest.

"Others will need to learn it as well?" Victor asked. "To understand."

Michael nodded. "Yes. I'm already learning. Both Lilly and Caitlin have promised to learn, as well. Even the General."

Beverly cleared her screen. *Will you help me, Michael?*

"Of course."

Then she looked at Victor, and the moment her jade eyes locked with his, his chest expanded and he had to take a long, slow breath to quiet the rush. She reached out to touch his chest with just her fingertips, her lips parted slightly as she arched her eyebrows. Victor nodded.

"Yes, I'll learn, too."

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Beverly sat cross-legged on the floor of her quarters, the book Michael gave her open on her lap as she quickly turned through the pages. Victor sat facing her, the bend of his knees against hers, watching her with a smile on his face at her giddy enthusiasm. She hadn't stopped searching the book for over two hours, and together they had learned enough of the signs to communicate on some level without her digital notepad.

He found he enjoyed the lightness in his chest and the tingling awareness he felt whenever she was near him. They were feelings so foreign to him he hadn't ever realized he wanted them, until now. Until he experienced them. In the back of his thoughts, he knew the only reason she needed to learn this new form of communication was because of him, because of what he had allowed to happen. Yet, each time she practiced a new sign he found himself captured by the graceful flow of her hands and the expressive smile in her eyes.

She slapped her hand down on the page, raising her head to look at him with a spark in her green eyes. *"New sign."*

"Okay."

With her smile still wide-and Victor noticed for the first time the double dimple in her right cheek when she grinned with such pure pleasure-she raised her hand with her fingers and thumb pressed together. She touched her fingertips to her lips, then arched them back to tap her cheek near her ear.

"What is that?"

She arched her eyebrows and tilted her head. *"Guess."*

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees to shorten the space between them. "Do it again," he said.

With his gaze intent on each movement, he watched her touch her lips, parting them slightly at the contact. A warm curl shifted through his gut, and he swallowed. With teasing slowness, she tapped her cheek. Victor shifted onto his knees, bracing his hands on each side of her body as he leaned in closer. With his face just inches from hers, close enough to feel her breath but far enough that she could see his lips, he whispered his guess.

“Kiss?”

Beverly nodded, and he covered her mouth with his. Her fingers slid around the back of his neck, lacing into his hair as her lips parted. His blood flashed hot and fast beneath his skin, but before he went too far and acted on the instinctive thought to lay her back on the floor, Victor pulled away. She smiled, her fingers still playing along his neck and her breath as rapid and hitched as his own.

“Was I right?”

She lowered her hands to sign. *“You’re a quick study.”*

“It’s the positive reinforcement.”

A soft laugh purred from her throat, and Victor realized it was the first time he had heard her make any sound at all. He kissed her again, but kept the contact brief, and sat on the floor.

“What other interesting signs do you have in there?”

She grinned and flipped the pages.

## Chapter Fourteen

*Sunday, May 5, 2052  
Phoenix Compound  
Outside Colorado Springs, Colorado  
Former United States of America*

*"How old are you?"*

Victor sipped his wine, enjoying the one glass allowed him under strict orders from Doctor Quinn, and set it down on Beverly's table beside his nearly empty plate. He slide his hand across the surface to wrap his fingers around hers, smiling.

*"Michael once asked me that question, and I'm not sure he believed my answer."*

Beverly smiled and leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs. The long, flowing skirt she wore fluttered around her calves and shaped to the curve of her body, and Victor found it hard to focus on her hands. *"I know your race lives much longer than humans, sometimes five to six times longer. That is something we've always known."*

Victor tried to hide his grimace when the hot slap of guilt hit his chest. He hated these conversations, when Beverly wanted to know about his past and his life. He walked a careful line, never outright lying, but never quite sharing the truth.

If she knew the truth, evenings like this-hours spent in each other's company, sometimes doing little else than talking or studying her sign language-would stop short. The truth would have him once again in a cell, or dead.

*"I'm two-hundred-and-eight Earth years old."*

One fair eyebrow arched. *"You look good for a man of your advanced years."*

Victor laughed. *"Michael said something very similar."*

She smiled, her shoulders shaking with a silent laugh. *"We must seem like children to you. Generations of my family have lived and died in your lifetime."*

*"Children? No. I envy you."*

*"Envy us? How?"* she asked, tilting her head. The movement let her unbound hair slide forward off her shoulder, the curls ending at her breasts.

Victor stared at her for several moments. More times than he could number, he had wondered how the bizarre twists of fortune in the last few months could have somehow brought him to this point. He lived among humans, and not just any humans, men and women intent on fighting his entire race. He wasn't a prisoner, wasn't an ally, and yet he never felt freer. Most amazing of all was Beverly. She was beautiful and kindhearted, and had made him feel things he thought impossible. In their quest for perfection, Victor once believed all Areth had long lost the ability to feel anything more than disgust, hate and the need for power.

He drew a slow breath and stood, reaching for her hand to pull her to her feet with him. She came willingly, an open smile on her lips as he brought her against him. Her arms wrapped around his side and her hands pressed against his back, tilting her chin to look into his face. Victor held her cheeks in his palms, stroking her skin with his thumbs.

"I envy you," he said, enjoying the curling heat in his gut that ignited whenever he held her close. "For understanding that being alive isn't living. This is living."

He leaned down and skimmed his lips across hers, her mouth opening at the touch. Her breath hitched, the soft sound bursting through him like wildfire. Barely touching, he slid his tongue past her lips. Her fingers curled into his shirt, pulling the material tight across his back.

He covered her mouth, diving fully into the kiss. Beverly moaned, the vibration humming through him and he pushed his fingers into her hair to deepen the contact. Images filled his mind; thoughts of them together in ways he had never let himself acknowledge before her touch. He was no naïve simpleton; the rudimentary details of sex weren't a mystery. To the Areth, sexuality was crude, vile and primitive. How could this be vile? The burning, rushing frenzy that bubbled in his blood and made him light and heavy at the same time? His body responded to her in ways he understood as a doctor and a student of human physiology, yet, the rush of hot blood and the hard lengthening of his penis were sweet sensations he couldn't have imagined with all the textbooks in the Areth library to help him.

He wanted to know her, to taste more than her lips and to feel more than...

*Yes, Victor...*

Like a man who had been underwater too long, Victor pulled back and sucked in a deep lungful of air. Her lips glistened, her cheeks flushed a deep pink. It wasn't the first time he thought he had heard her mind whisper in his, her presence so different from the darkness they had finally suppressed. Yet, he couldn't bring himself to trust that it truly was her.

Holding his gaze, Beverly's hands lowered to his waist and slipped beneath the hem of his heavy shirt. Her warm, gentle hands pressed to his skin and Victor closed his eyes, the burning thrust of desire almost overwhelming. Beverly rose on her toes, yanking him from his fight for control with a demanding kiss.

*Yes, Victor... Feel...*

His control snapped, and he wrapped her in his arms, swinging them both around to press her against the wall. This loss of control was so different, although he was swept into it, he felt the power of it and accepted the force that took over. Victor lifted her slight frame, her legs wrapping around his waist as he cupped his hand around the back of her knees. The hem of her skirt slid up her thighs, exposing the smooth skin to his fingertips. He pushed his body against her, his temples pounding and his thoughts lost except for his blind desire. She gasped, but only paused in the kiss long enough to take a breath. Pressing his body against her, he felt each breath she took as her ribs expanded beneath his hands and he finally tore his mouth from hers to taste the column of her throat. Her pulse throbbed against his lips almost as fast as the needy throb in his own body.

She raised her arms to wrap them around his neck, elegant fingers fisting in his short hair. Victor slid his hands up her legs, digging his grip into her hips as he pulled her tighter to him.

With Herculean effort, Victor pulled back enough to see her face so she could read his lips. His chest burned with lack of air, and his body burned for lack of Beverly. The air crackled with need. He moved his hands to the wall on either side of her shoulders, her body supported between him and the wall, and pressed his palm hard against the unforgiving surface even as his body demanded he push hard against her.

"Beverly, I—" He couldn't think, couldn't focus on anything but the demand of his pounding heart and combusting blood. A hiss whispered through his teeth when she pushed her hands beneath his shirt again. "Ah, *Cusbibil*..."

She tipped her head, her eyes squinting as she stared at his lips. The moment broke when the lights overhead flashed, indicating for Beverly that someone was at her door. Her eyes fluttered closed, and Victor understood without question. Beverly slipped her hands from his skin and signed in the space between them.

*"I'm sorry."*

Victor leaned in to kiss her again, pulling tightly on his own reins of control. He eased her to her feet and stepped back so she could walk past him, sinking into his nearby chair. His body throbbed painfully, hard with need.

As she walked across the room, she ran a hand over her clothing and smoothed her hair. When she reached the door, she glanced over her shoulder at him before opening it, winking. Victor smiled and drained the warm remains of his wine.

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Her heart still pounded in her chest like a frightened bird when she reached for the doorknob. Her blood hummed and she thought she might spontaneously combust. The fiery glance from Victor did nothing to calm her raging distraction.

Beverly opened the door with one quick, fortifying breath. The General stood in the hallway, and immediate dread replaced her exhilaration.

"General," she signed, motioning for him to come into the apartment. *"I'm surprised to see you. Is something wrong?"*

He stepped inside and opened his mouth to speak, but saw Victor sitting at the table. His expression shifted, deep rows furrowing his brow. "Victor," he said with a sharp nod of his head.

Victor stood, picking up their dishes from the table. "Good evening, General." With a calmer veneer than Beverly thought she wore, Victor carried the dishes to her small sink and set them inside, standing on the other side of the counter.

"I didn't realize you had a guest," the General said to her, his eyes shifting to Victor again. "What I came to discuss is a matter of base security."

Beverly nodded. *"Of course."*

"With your permission, General," Victor said, walking around the counter to stand beside her, leaving enough space between them that they didn't quite touch. It didn't matter; she felt the same desire wrapped around him that had her shifting her weight from foot to foot and adamantly avoiding eye contact with General Castleton. "I'll return to my quarters and leave you to speak."

*"Thank you, Victor."*

With a nod, Victor walked behind her to leave, and she barely hid her gasp when his knuckles slid across her backside as he passed. He glanced back as he opened the door and slipped into the hall. Security stipulations for his movement had been loosened, and because his new quarters were on the same level as Beverly's, he was free to return to them without escort. When the door closed behind him, Beverly turned back to the General.

*"What's wrong? What do you need to speak to me about?"*

"I hope like hell you're using your head, Lee-Lee." His expression was stern and he shook his head as he spoke. "What the hell are you doing?"

Beverly took a step back and walked to the table, where only their glasses remained. Victor's was empty now, and hers held only a swallow of wine, which she drank in hopes of calming her dancing nerves. The General's reaction didn't surprise her, which was precisely the reason she had chosen not to tell him of the attraction between her and Victor. Many times she didn't understand it herself, and questioned her own sensibilities.

*"We had dinner,"* she signed.

He marched to the table and sat down, pushing Victor's glass further away. "You want me to believe this was just dinner? I may be old, but I'm no fool."

*"And I'm no child."*

"No, you're not. But you are a commanding authority on this base."

*"Whatever it is you think is going on here... are you actually ordering me to stop?"*

He huffed, running a hand over his white hair. "Christ, Lee-Lee."

Beverly raised her hand and turned her head away, indicating she didn't want him to say another word. Drawing a slow breath, she looked back to him. *"What do you need to speak to me about?"*

"This is the first time I've ever questioned the wisdom of bringing anything to you," he said, shaking his head. His words were the final deathblow to the warm glow Victor's kiss and touch had created. "There have been four questionable instances in the last six weeks, and some have voiced an opinion that Victor may be involved."

Beverly sat up straighter. *"Like what?"*

"A broken security camera in the hallway outside his quarters, two attempts to breach encrypted files from a source within the Mountain, and last night a security guard was knocked unconscious by an unseen attacker near the hanger bay."

Beverly shook her head, signing with sharp, quick motions. *"And you naturally assume it is Victor?"*

"None of this crap started happening before Lilly got his head back on straight. Doesn't this concern you?"

*"Of course it does! But I'm not willing to accuse a man because –"*

*"Because he happens to be Areth?"*

Beverly bit down hard and closed her eyes to regain her equilibrium. With a cold flash of reality, she knew he was right. She wasn't viewing the situation like a leader, but the lover of the accused. Nodding her head, she opened her eyes again.

*"You're right. One logical conclusion is that Victor is to blame. But I don't agree that he should be punished until there is solid, irrefutable proof. You would do no less for anyone else."*

He tapped his knuckles on the tabletop. "Fine. Major Yun is heading the investigation, and Damian is assisting him. I won't lock him up, but after tonight, he doesn't move through the base at *any* time without an escort and a timed lock will be installed on his door tomorrow. From 20:00 hours until 06:00 hours, he will not be able to leave his quarters without someone unlocking his door."

The decision twisted her gut, but she knew her first priority had to be the security of the base. Beverly nodded. *"I'll tell him tomorrow."*

*"For tonight, a guard has been posted in the hall."*

She nodded again. *"Please keep me informed of the investigation."*

He stood, glancing one last time at the two glasses on the table. "Don't get in so deep you can't get out if you have to, Lee-Lee."

She didn't stand as he walked to the door, resting her forehead in her hand as she leaned on the table. Alone again, she ran the conversation through her mind and thought of the incidents he detailed. *Why would Victor ...?*

She left the question unasked in her mind. There were a multitude of reasons why an Areth would attempt computer breaches and attack security guards, but she had a difficult time reconciling Victor with the knowledge of the Areth she had harbored her entire life.

He was different.

Perhaps it was a cop-out. Perhaps it was her desire-driven body overriding her logical mind. When she touched him, when she felt his thoughts and emotions, she felt no deceit. She was convinced he would be unable to hide such a thing from her, even if he tried.

If it wasn't Victor, then who? Who would do these things? Would someone commit these acts to try to shine a bad light on Victor? It was no secret that not everyone within the Mountain was thrilled about Victor's presence, or the way he was treated. Many felt he should be little more than a prisoner of war, provided with care but with no courtesies. He should be interrogated endlessly until every bit of useful information was forced from him. Some, specifically a small handful of men and women brought to the base from New Mexico, wanted to see much worse happen to an Areth they blamed for their years of torture and cruelty.

Michael had assured her, with enough honest conviction, she felt the intensity of his emotions pushing out from him, that Victor had never been a part of the cruelty. Not for himself or any other resident. Although he never shared details, Michael told her that Victor often found ways to keep him alive when his torturer left him to die.

Her mind told her to be wary, to view him with skeptical eyes, but her body and her heart screamed another message. Never had the touch of a man... she couldn't find the words to describe what Victor's touch did to her, within her. He opened himself to her when they touched, and she felt his desire as completely as she felt her own. Her lovers were few, and always short-lived, because there had always been walls. Not her walls. Theirs.

Beverly sighed and stood, fatigue suddenly draining her strength and leaving her limbs heavy. The answers weren't forthcoming, not tonight. Somehow, she needed to find a way to sleep with her mind filled by the memory of Victor's touch.

## Chapter Fifteen

Lilly stared at the newly discovered files on her computer monitor, a cold sweat chilling her skin as she read the words. Rolling nausea twisted her stomach.

She had found the records by mistake while going over Alexander's medical history. Michael asked to know everything that had been done to Alexander, and she had promised him she would find out.

She never expected to find this.

Leaning forward as best she could with the beach ball she now called a stomach, Lilly rested her elbows on her desk and held her head in her hands.

*Dear God.*

What did she do now?

"Good morning."

Lilly jerked her head from her hands and looked up, seeing Michael cross the room towards her. He carried a plate with a blueberry muffin and a glass of milk, setting them on the table in front of her. The unusually wide smile on his face made the dread in her chest even more suffocating. Michael slouched down in the chair across from her, resting one ankle on the other knee with his fingers linked over his stomach.

She wanted to say something, anything, but after reading what she just had 'Good morning' seemed inadequate and inappropriate. Michael's smile slid away and he sat up, reaching across the table to touch her hand with just his fingertips.

"Lilly. Are you all right?"

She shook her head slowly, blinking against the stinging tears she refused to let fall. If Michael knew how much the revealing information disturbed her, he would refuse to speak of it. Swallowing, she forced a calm expression.

"I finished examining Alexander's files," she finally said, her voice only cracking slightly. "I'm sorry it took so long."

Michael dipped his chin. "What did you find?"

Lilly forced herself to focus on the details of Alexander's file. Perhaps, after a few minutes, she would be able to speak of the other records without choking. "Alexander is what happens when the human genome is filtered beyond recognition. The Areth purposefully 'bred' two highly-genetically-flawed humans, and then attempted to remove all genetic flaws, both during gestation and after birth." Her hand instinctively moved to her stomach and she rubbed a hard spot, probably a foot or hand.

"They failed."

"In a way, yes. They removed the genetic abnormalities, but in the process, the DNA strains were destroyed beyond recognition. He wasn't able to develop normally. He was actually *missing* DNA material. If I were to create a 3-D Double Helix, there would be huge gaps in the chain.

"If Alexander had been left to develop naturally, he would have suffered some minor physical ailments in comparison to what he lived with. What they did destroyed what he had. They kept trying, even after he was born. Michael, it's a miracle Alexander lived past

adolescence. He was nearly forty years old and had to be one of their earliest experiments, before genetic filtering was public. What kept him alive, I don't know."

"What could they have done to him after he was born?"

With a trembling hand, Lilly hit an access key on her keyboard and the report she had compiled on Alexander came to the forefront of her screen. "The Areth scientist who performed the experiments called the process Microbic Genome Manipulation. She literally tried to reconfigure his entire genetic make up on a sub-cellular level."

Michael worked his jaw, his lips pressed tight together as he listened. "It was Kathleen." It wasn't a question.

Lilly nodded. No matter how she tried, she couldn't reconcile the vicious cruelty spawned by this woman with someone who could have in any way contributed to the creation of a man like Michael. She had found a photograph of Kathleen, and there wasn't even a physical resemblance, thank the Lord. Michael was his father's son, body and soul.

He slid his hand back from hers, his fingertips tapping on the desktop with his gaze cast down. "Are there details on the procedure?"

"Yes. She documents every step, including Alexander's reactions and pain tolerance. Not just Alexander, either. She did this on several humans, and questioned many of them in explicit detail."

Michael laid his hand on the back of his neck, rubbing slowly across the base of his skull. His eyes squinted slightly at the corners. "Their nerves crackled like being encased in static electricity. Their skin burned, not just like with a fever." His voice heavy and distant. "Imagine being cooked alive. Blindness. Vertigo. No strength."

Lilly blinked hard, swallowing the lump in her throat. "Yes."

His eyes darted up, locking on her. "What did she do to him? Exactly."

"She *attempted* to repair his DNA post-gestation. She failed. Nothing worked. She created the deformed, pain-ridden man we all knew."

"Did it ever work?"

"I haven't found any documented successes, but, there are dozens of files and patients. We're still weeding through it all, CJ and I."

"Read my files."

His explanation of the pain each victim suffered left no question in her mind that Michael had suffered the same, but if she had wondered, the intent command in his eyes would have wiped away any doubt. "I have been, Michael. I'll find it. I'll find what she did, or what she tried to do."

He closed his eyes, rubbing harder on the back of his neck.

Lilly took a slow, steadying breath that did little to calm the unnerving flutter in her chest. "Michael..." she said softly.

He opened his eyes and raised his head enough to look at her.

"I found a record... a type of diary. It's not a medical file, or an experiment log."

"What is it?" His gaze shifted briefly to the computer monitor and back to her.

"It's about a woman named Renae."

His shoulders jerked back and he sucked in a sharp breath, pulling away from the desk as if it were on fire. Michael stood, taking three long strides away from her before turning back, his hands set at his waist.

"What does it say?"

Lilly stood, using the edge of the desk for leverage. "I haven't read it all yet. I just found it an hour ago. But, I've read enough..."

His face twisted into an anguished mask and he looked to the ceiling, pulling air into his lungs disguise the strangled cry in his throat. A fist tightened around Lilly's heart and she moved to him, but he stepped back before she could touch him, shaking his head.

"What did it say?"

"You were being watched," she said, trying to find the gentlest words to tell him what she knew he needed, but didn't want to hear. "Kathleen was aware of your relationship. In some entries she seemed almost obsessed."

"What did it say about Renae? What did they do to her?" His words were almost lost in the space between them.

"Michael, you don't want to hear this. Please, believe me. Let it be."

"No!" he snapped. "What did they do to her?"

"She died during a Gestational Screening procedure."

"Oh, God..." Michael pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes and dropped to a crouch. "Oh, God."

"No, Michael," Lilly said quickly, laying her hands on his shoulders. "It wasn't-the baby wasn't yours. It was forced fertilization."

Michael's legs gave way beneath the deep crouch and he sat on the floor, drawing his knees up and cradling his head in his hands. Lilly wanted to kneel beside him, but her cumbersome body wouldn't allow it. He bowed his head and laced his finger behind his neck, his back curved forward.

"Michael..." she said softly, laying her hand on his hair, because she didn't know what else to say or do.

Across the infirmary, a tray of equipment crashed loudly to the floor and Lilly spun around to see who had dropped it. No one was there, only stainless steel and glass strewn across the floor. Before she could turn back to him, Michael rolled to his feet and ran from the room.

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"Is this the wisest thing?" Victor asked as he held open the swinging door to the community recreation room.

Beverly walked past him, smiling as she signed. "*Why wouldn't it be wise?*"

"*My presence is not appreciated by many men and women on base. I understand this, and don't wish to make anyone uncomfortable,*" he said, resorting to sign to keep the conversation between them in the crowded room.

"*You are here with me, as my guest. No one will say or do anything.*"

"*It isn't a matter of avoiding conflict.*"

Beverly resisted the urge to lay her hand on his chest, just to make contact. Since her discussion with the General two days before, she decided it was best to keep any sign of her relationship with Victor even more subdued than they already did. He was right, there were many on base who didn't want him here, and didn't believe he should be anywhere but in a cell. He was the enemy simply because he was Areth.

*"Trust me. I just want to spend some time with you outside the mess hall and our quarters. There is much more to this base."*

"I like spending time in your quarters," he said, his lips tipping in a subtle smirk.

A warm flush washed over her, sending tingles beneath her skin. She couldn't tell him the very feelings that made the privacy of her apartment more appealing were the reason she decided to stay away. She was on the edge of letting go, and was trying desperately to hang on to her final threads of control. The thought of making love to Victor made her heart race and her breath catch, both with anticipation... and fear.

*"Have you ever played chess?"* she signed as she moved away from him.

Victor fell in step beside her, his hands linked behind his back. "Yes. I taught Michael to play when he was young."

*"You've known Michael for a long time."* It wasn't so much a question, as a confirmation of something she already knew.

Victor nodded, his lips straightening to something less than a smile but not quite a frown. "Since he was a child."

*"He means a great deal to you,"* she said as they sat down at one of the game tables set up throughout the room. The chessmen were already in position ready for a new game, and Beverly took the black side of the board. *"And you mean a great deal to him. We all saw that."*

Victor said nothing, moving Queen's Pawn to Queen's Pawn Four.

Beverly countered with King's Knight to King's Knight Four and his lips curled into a grin. They said nothing else for the next several minutes, focusing solely on the game and their next move. In a daring strategy, Victor took her queen and won the game. She stared at the board, shocked that she could have missed his tactic and let him take her so easily. She had been playing Chess since she was five, and had learned tricks from some great players, General Castleton being one of them.

*"Where did you learn that?"* she asked, sweeping her hands over the board.

Victor smiled. "Michael."

*"Remind me never to play with Michael. I have a feeling he would be no good for my shattered ego."* She pushed her chair back, standing. *"Would you like a drink?"*

He shook his head, still grinning in obvious satisfaction. Beverly sighed and walked to the back of the room to the cooler of cold beverages for the servicemen using the facility. She poured a glass of water, and nearly dropped the carafe when her senses when a frighteningly familiar and malicious darkness assaulted her senses. Her heart suddenly pounded fiercely in her chest and she spun around, her gaze locking on Victor where he sat. He was still there, twirling a rook in a slow circle on its base.

She leaned back against the counter behind her, bracing her hands on the edge. Gooseflesh rose on her arms and her chest tightened. The shadow tickled at the edges of her mind, slithering like a snake through the grass, unseen yet heard all the same. All the while, she watched Victor.

He raised his head, his gaze meeting hers across the room. She gasped as the malice sucked at her like a vacuum, then disappeared so brutally she nearly fell to her knees. Her grip on the counter was the only thing that kept her on her feet. Beverly closed her eyes, panting hitched breaths to try to find her balance again.

Two strong hands curled around her arms, and the sucking void released her. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked up into Victor's concerned face.

"Beverly," she read on his lips. "Are you all right? What's wrong?"

She shook her head, afraid to let go of the counter long enough to sign. She stared at him, studying his expression, his eyes. There was no darkness, no hiding Demon ready to pounce. There was only Victor. Beverly trembled and let go of the counter, only to curl her fingers into the sleeves of his shirt.

Damian stepped up beside Victor, a deep 'v' etching his brow as he looked between them. "Everything okay, Beverly?" His gaze lingered on Victor, and she saw the flash of question in his eyes.

She nodded and forced herself to let go of Victor long enough to sign. "*I'm fine. I just...*" She shrugged, dropping her hands, not knowing how to continue.

"She said she's fine, but I'm not convinced," Victor said, translating for her. She could only communicate with a handful of people on base, and with everyone else, she needed either her digital notepad or someone to interpret.

"Is that true?" Damian asked her.

Beverly nodded and took her first step forward. "*I'll be fine.*"

Damian apparently recognized the sign as a repeat of her first statement, and gave a curt nod. Past him, she saw the eyes of everyone in the room turned on them. "*I need to go,*" she said, looking up at Victor. "*Please, let's just go.*"

Victor nodded and, despite all the attention they had already drawn, circled his arm behind her to walk to the door with his hand pressed against her back. With each step, she felt her balance return and the chilling sensation of shadows and whispers slipped away. They walked to the elevator without speaking, and Beverly was relieved to see the car empty when the doors opened.

They stepped inside and Victor pushed the living quarter's level. He turned to face her, laying his hand against her cheek, concern tightening his expression. "What happened? I looked up and you were so pale, you looked frightened."

The panic that had seized her in the Rec Room was all but gone, disappearing as soon as Victor laid his hands on her. It had to have been something else, not the Demon. It couldn't be. She would have felt it when he touched her.

"Beverly..." he said again, prying her for an answer.

She reached up and curled her hand behind his neck, pulling him down for a breath-stealing kiss. He pulled her close, giving in to the kiss without hesitation.

The elevator bumped to a stop, and Victor pulled back just before the doors opened. Two servicemen stood in the hall, waiting to board. Pulling her tingling lower lip through her teeth, Beverly smiled and walked into the hall.

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Michael wasn't surprised to see Caitlin. He knew as soon as he left the infirmary that Lilly would find her, and in turn, she would find him.

She walked over the artificially maintained lawn in the playground chamber. After the General had closed the Mountain down, not allowing anyone to venture outside the safety of the security-blanketed interior, Michael had begun to come here. It was the closest he could get to being outside. If he closed his eyes, and shut out the sound of the air circulators several

hundred feet overhead, he could almost imagine he was outside. Despite the filters and regenerators, the air smelled green.

Without a word, she sat down on the log beside him that framed the large sand pit where several children played. They all knew him, so none of them seemed to mind his presence as he watched them. Caitlin rested her elbows on her knees and set her chin in her hand, watching the children with him for several minutes.

Michael finally drew a long breath and looked to her. "She told you."

"She told me she found something in the files, and that it upset you. You don't have to tell me any more than that if you don't want to," she answered, watching him. "But you know you can. I'll listen."

He pushed his bare feet into the sand and wiggled his toes. Since his first visit to the playground, when his father was still on Earth and his freedom was brand new, he had loved the feeling of cool sand encasing his feet. The sand and soil in New Mexico had always been hard and unforgiving. This sand was like sugar.

"Her name was Renae," he finally said.

Caitlin waited, and he knew she expected more, but he didn't know how to explain—how to put into words—what had happened.

"Was she your age?"

"As best we knew, yes. I didn't know how old I was until I came here. Time was distorted. I think this was about ten years ago."

"You were young."

He nodded. "We both were. And stupid. We knew what we were doing was forbidden."

"You loved her?"

"I didn't know what I felt. I didn't understand. I know now that I did. Then, I only knew I wanted to be with her. She made me feel alive, made me think there was a chance at something good."

"What happened?" Her voice was heavy, straining to be heard, and Michael knew Caitlin had probably already figured out the truth whether Lilly told her, or not.

"I never knew for sure. Only that one day she was gone, and Kathleen was angry. It was the first time she brought me to the edge of death, and the first time Victor intervened."

Caitlin sat silent for several minutes, trailing her fingers through the white sand. "What did Lilly find?" she finally asked.

Michael shook his head. "I don't know for sure, but I know now what I suspected all along. Renae is dead."

"They killed her?"

"She died during a Gestational Screening procedure."

Caitlin gasped.

"Lilly said according to the file, the child wasn't mine." He almost choked on the words, doubling his hand within the mound of sand beside his feet. The small grains sifted through his fingers like air.

"Could it have been?"

"Are you asking if Renae and I had sex?"

Caitlin nodded, her blue eyes watching him so intently he had to look away. He focused on the children as they shoveled sand from one bucket to another in a seemingly pointless game. They laughed and talked together, sharing the buckets and shovels needed to complete their tasks. Sabrina, a beautiful child with golden ringlets and bright blue eyes, looked up from her pile and smiled at him. She had been one of his first friends after he arrived, even though he was twenty-five and she was 'seven and three-quarters'.

"Once. It was rushed and clumsy. Neither of us had any idea what we were doing, only that we *needed*. That probably doesn't make sense —"

"Yes," she said, cutting him off. "It makes perfect sense."

Michael swallowed, forcing down the lump that had choked him since leaving the infirmary. "I'm responsible for her death."

"No!"

"Yes, I am. I knew... even then... I knew I tempted Kathleen's wrath with each day I was still alive. I pulled Renae into it. She would be alive if it weren't for me."

Caitlin shifted closer and slid her hand across his shoulders, leaning her cheek against his upper arm. "Michael, you can't do this. You can't carry the burden for what Kathleen did. You were little more than a child."

Michael lowered his head and closed his eyes.

## Chapter Sixteen

Most of the Mountain was still asleep, but Beverly already sat at the holo-vid table in Command, reviewing a litany of reports that had come in during the night. There were communiqués from every major Phoenix base around the world.

Something had happened.

No one had been able to find out the details yet, and every available operative with any connection or source they could tap into was doing their best to dig up some meaningful Intel. Whatever it was, it was big.

Which probably meant it wasn't good.

The news agencies announced that President Hargrave would hold a press conference at 13:00 Washington time. Until then, he and his entire cabinet remained behind closed doors. Warwick, the leader of the Areth, was excluded from the preceding and reports indicated he was not pleased.

Beverly read the reports again, tapping a finger absently against her lips as she tried to find some clue in the broken puzzle.

Major Yun entered Command from one of the side corridors and scanned the room, spotted Beverly, and approached her. She watched him stride towards her, his long steps and rigid stance exuding confidence. When he reached her, he locked his hands behind his back and assumed a stiff military stance.

Beverly waited for him to say something, but he just stood there, waiting. Finally, she dipped her chin and waved with her hand for him to proceed.

"Your presence is requested in the infirmary, ma'am. General Castleton is waiting for you."

Beverly grabbed the digital notebook sitting on the table near her elbow, and quickly wrote *What's wrong? Has someone been hurt?* She handed the tableau to him as she stood and he read, shaking his head.

"No one is injured. It would be best if you come see for yourself, ma'am."

She nodded and shut down her terminal, following him from the room. He said nothing further to her as they waited, boarded and rode the elevator to the infirmary level. Such had it been with much of the base personnel since the loss of her speech synthesizer. Fewer people tried to speak to her, and when they did, they talked to her as if they thought she couldn't understand. It was an adjustment, for everyone, but it left her feeling isolated and frustrated.

The elevator doors opened and she marched into the hall, leaving Major Yun in her wake. By the time she was half way to the infirmary entrance, she was jogging. The Major had said no one was injured, but why else would she need to be here?

General Castleton, CJ, Lilly and two other members of security stood near the back of the room huddled in conversation. Lilly made eye contact with her as she crossed the room and said something to the General, who turned to watch her walk to them.

"*What's going on?*" she asked.

"You didn't inform her of the situation?" the General said, looking past her to Major Yun, who now stood behind her.

Beverly turned to see his answer. "I thought it best to wait until we arrived, sir."

General Castleton scowled and focused again on Beverly. "Someone broke into the infirmary supplies last night."

Her eyes widened and she turned to Lilly. *"Did they steal supplies?"* As soon as she saw Lilly's face, the hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Lilly's expression was grim, and she shook her head slightly. *"Then what?"*

"They destroyed every vial I had of the three inhibitors."

She didn't have to explain what three, or the significance of the loss. Beverly turned on Major Yun, jerking her hands in rough, angry movements. *"Who did this?"*

His gaze shifted to someone else, who must have offered a translation. When he answered, he spoke to them and not Beverly, but she stubbornly refused to read his lips. She thumped his chest with the back of her hand, and the Major's head snapped back to her with shock.

*"Speak to me. I'm the one who asked the question, Major."*

His eyes only shifted for a brief second, and he adopted his military stance, inclining his head in a respectful bow. "My apologies, ma'am. At this time, we don't know who is responsible. Security logs and video surveillance within the infirmary as well as surrounding area are being reviewed now."

*"Who do you suspect?"*

Major Yun's eyes narrowed before he answered. "Only one name comes to mind, ma'am."

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Through the heavy blanket of sleep, the shrill buzz of Victor's watch alarm ripped through his head like a live wire. He groaned as he rolled onto his side and fumbled to turn it off before forcing his eyes open. A painful spasm rippled up his back, banishing any final remnants of sleep.

He opened his eyes, and immediately bolted upright.

The room tilted sharply and he closed his eyes until the wave of dizziness passed.

He was in darkness except for some light from the open door. Victor was on the floor, surrounded by shelves of weapons. Cold dread turned his stomach and he slowly moved to his feet, his head swimming and his temples pounding with each shift. He reached for a nearby shelf to pull himself up, and jerked back at the pain that shot up his arm from his palm. Finally standing, Victor stepped towards the light and held out his hand.

Dried blood crusted his fingernails and left crimson, flaking trails along his palm. Several deep gashes split his skin, pulling painfully when he tried to open his hand. He stepped further into the light, wincing when the glow sliced through his head.

Looking down at his rumpled and bloodstained night clothing, he tried desperately to remember what might have happened and how he came here. No matter how hard he tried, the only memory that came to him was sharing a goodnight kiss with Beverly before returning to his own quarters, under guard, and going to bed.

His watch alarm went off again, and he squinted to look at it as his eyes felt like they would explode out the back of his head. He had fifteen minutes to reach the infirmary for his

daily inhibitor dose. Barefoot, with the cold of the concrete floor seeping through the soles of his feet, he stumbled into the hall and used his uninjured hand to brace himself against the wall.

The further he walked, the heavier his feet felt and dark shadows slowly crept into his vision, blocking all but a narrow path in front of him. By some miracle, he found an elevator near the room he woke in, and pressed the call button. Leaning his back against the wall as he waited, he panted for air. The short walk had drained him. He hadn't felt this exhausted and spent in weeks. *Not since...*

He closed his eyes and tried to push past the terrifying possibility.

The elevator doors opened and Victor managed to get inside before they automatically closed again. He pushed the infirmary level and noted he was on sublevel twenty-six, the lowest in the Mountain. The elevator jerked into motion, and it was enough to buckle his knees, dropping him to the floor. Victor knelt on all fours, fighting the rolling wave of nausea that twisted his insides and sent a cold sweat flushing over his skin. As the car ascended, Victor sat down hard.

His head felt like a lead ball, and his heartbeat pounded in his own ears. This couldn't be. *It just couldn't be!* He hadn't felt the burning rage of the Demon in weeks. It always hovered on the outer edges of his consciousness, but the neural inhibitors had neutered its power.

Heat curled around the base of his skull, and he bit down against it, cursing the slow speed of the elevator. Finally, the elevator stopped and the doors opened, but his legs refused to let him stand. He gripped the arm rail over his head, and tried to pull himself up, but his trembling muscles gave way beneath the strain.

"Holy shit," he heard shouted from the hall and before the elevator doors closed again, a large hand slid between them and pushed them apart. "Major! I've got the Areth in the elevator!"

Victor released the railing and fell sideways to the elevator floor, his vision swimming in a field of black and red spots.

"Get him up."

"He's injured."

"I don't give a crap. Get him to his feet."

Two uniformed servicemen grabbed his arms, one on each side, and pulled him to a standing position. His knees buckled again, but they dragged him forward from the car. Another soldier moved ahead of them to the infirmary entrance. Victor could no longer support his own head, and it fell forward as he tried to hang on to consciousness.

"We found him in the elevator," the lead man said as the other two dragged him into the infirmary.

"Dear God, what the hell are you doing?"

Somewhere in the back of his slipping consciousness, he recognized Doctor Quinn's voice. All sense of balance and perspective was lost as they dropped him onto one of the beds, the lights overhead searing through to his brain.

"Victor, can you hear me?"

He nodded and tried to move his arm to shade his eyes. "Yes, Doctor Quinn."

"What happened?"

His stomach sat heavy at the base of his throat, and he swallowed to try to quell the queasiness. "I don't know."

"I would say I was just proven right," said the man who had led them into infirmary.

Doctor Quinn turned on him. "Get out and let me take care of him."

"With all due respect, Doctor Quinn, this Areth is the suspect in a crime and I'm not going anywhere."

"General..."

"He's not going anywhere either, Major."

"Yes, sir," the Major replied.

The voices swirled around Victor, assaulting his pounding skull like battering rams as the burning acid spread through his brain. "Doctor," he said through clenched teeth. "The inhibitor, please."

"He knows nothing about it..." Doctor Montgomery's disembodied voice said from somewhere in the miasma. "What do we do?"

"I have one dose set aside, prepared for this morning. Perhaps it wasn't destroyed."

Panic burned in the back of his throat as he felt the steady increase in the Demon's strength. It had a window of opportunity, and it was fighting to be free of the weak chains the remaining inhibitor had on it.

*Why wasn't she administering the dose?*

He flailed out in the churning, suffocating darkness as he felt his grip on control slipping from him. Then a hand grabbed his, and he knew the touch by the surge of pleasant warmth-not the searing burn of his Demon-that spread from the contact and pushed back against the confusion.

"Beverly," he whispered through clenched teeth.

Her fingers smoothed over his forehead, brushing back his hair and he drew in a slow breath as he felt the darkness retreat. His equilibrium was still out of control and his head pounded incessantly. Victor rolled towards her touch, desperation for any means to fend off the malevolence that clawed through his head.

The familiar prick of Doctor Quinn's infusion needle hit the base of his skull and he released the breath he hadn't realized he held. He blinked to focus, and without the overhead lights blinding him, was finally able to gain some sense of position and orientation. Beverly stood beside the bed, her beautiful face marred with confusion and concern as she leaned close. Her green eyes were the last things he saw before he slipped into unconsciousness.

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Beverly stood in the back of the mission briefing room with her arms folded, tapping her fingers against her sleeves. The room filled quickly with individuals from all over the base, all here to view President Hargrave's speech that would begin in the next few minutes. Reporters gave their pre-speech commentary on the vid wall, but she didn't try to keep up with what they said. Not yet.

Most likely their reports would be little more than assumptions, and nothing Phoenix didn't already know.

She drew a slow breath and tried to quell the nervous energy that had her shifting from foot to foot in anticipation of what the President would say, coupled with her desire to return

to the infirmary. Victor hadn't awakened when she had to leave, her duties in Command demanding her presence.

Not for the first time, she questioned herself and the intelligence behind allowing herself to feel so much for Victor. She knew, were it someone else within the chain of command becoming involved with one considered 'the enemy', she would council them to step back and regain their perspective.

Yet, she couldn't force herself to do the same.

Victor was so vastly different from any man she had ever known, human or Areth. Her direct experience with the Areth was limited, but based on what she knew of them, she knew Victor was unique. CJ had said as much when Victor first fell ill. Working with him in New Mexico, she said even then he set himself apart from the other Areth, whether consciously or not.

By everything Phoenix knew about the Areth, nothing between them should be happening. The Areth were, in comparison to Humans, emotionless although they all had witnessed the results of Areth anger and vengeance. Desire, affection... these were supposedly no longer part of the Areth psyche.

Either the Areth lied, which wouldn't be outside the realm of possibility, or Victor was playing her for a much larger fool than she wanted to admit. Every time he touched her, kissed her, held her close with an almost fierce desperation, she felt from him everything she felt herself. If it wasn't real, he was an amazing actor.

Her thoughts continually drifted back to the cold presence she had sensed in the Recreation Hall less than twenty-four hours before.

A hand touched her arm, sending a slight jolt straight up her spine and she jumped, jerking away from the contact. Michael dropped his hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

*"I was lost in thought,"* she signed as the heat rose in her cheeks.

*"I just came from the infirmary."*

She turned to face him fully. *"Is he awake?"*

Michael nodded. "Yes."

*"Is he all right? Did he tell you what happened to him?"*

He shook his head. "He couldn't. He doesn't remember."

Gooseflesh rose over Beverly's skin and she rubbed her arms through the heavy knit of her sweater. *"He couldn't tell you anything?"*

*"Only that he woke up this morning in a storage room on one of the lowest sub-levels of the base. His hand was injured and he was disoriented, and immediately headed for the infirmary knowing he needed the inhibitor."*

*"Does he know?"*

Michael's expression tensed and he nodded with one short, curt dip of his chin. "He knows about the inhibitors."

She saw in Michael's face the same dread that tightened her chest. Neither of them wanted to see Victor revert to the tortured man he had been just weeks before. Beverly could only imagine the thoughts Victor dealt with right then, and he was doing it alone.

*"I'll go to him as soon as I can."*

"Good. He wants to see you."

The people mulling around the room moved to take their seats, and the images on the vid wall changed to a podium bearing the Seal of the World President. The Chairman of the New World Congress gave a brief introduction, explaining that President Hargrave would be speaking on camera only, and would not answer any questions from the press. When the President stepped to the podium, Beverly immediately took note of the strained lines around his eyes and the deep frown lines bracketing his mouth. He wasn't a young man, somewhere in his mid-sixties, but today he looked much older.

Whatever he had to say had worn him down.

Beverly crossed her arms, and focused on his lips as he spoke.

"Citizens of Earth, I speak to you today with a heavy heart and an angry soul," he began, curling his hands around the edge of the podium as he leaned into it. "I have battled with myself for the last several days, trying to find some way to say what I need to say. I've concluded there is no good way, no way to ease the shock."

He raised his head and looked directly into the camera and the intensity in his expression made Beverly hold her breath in anticipation.

"For the last forty-four years, we have been lied to. We were all so eager to embrace the possibilities: health, peace, immortality, that we willingly devoured the lies and turned our backs on what should have been obvious to us all.

"We are all to blame, but as leader of our World, I shoulder the responsibility and swear to you I will find a way to rectify the wrong done."

President Hargrave straightened, squaring his shoulders. "Irrefutable proof has been brought to my attention that the Areth, with whom we have shared our world and our lives for four decades, have been using our people in the most atrocious and sickening fashion. They have imprisoned men and women, and have spawned children for the sole purpose of experimentation. They seek not a harmonious existence with Humans. They intend to use us to advance themselves, and when they are through, I have no doubt that all Humans would become expendable."

Heads turned throughout the room, but Beverly couldn't pull her focus from the screen. Her heart pounded viciously in her chest.

"All alliances with the Areth are hereby null and void. I reject all negotiations and cooperative institutions. I call upon all Humans to rally together and present a solid front to our enemy. We will once again return to the convictions of our forefathers. We will stand together. Strong against a common enemy!" He slammed his fist on the podium, his face reddening with the power of his words. "Our numbers are many, their numbers few. We hold the power. We will rid our planet of their kind and return them to the stars from whence they came!"

Beverly reached out blindly in the darkness, her hand closing around Michael's arm as he stood beside her. *Dear God!*

President Hargrave paused, running his hand over his sweat-glistened upper lip. "Stay strong, People of Earth, and show no fear. We will prevail."

He stepped back from the podium and turned to leave the conference room. The door in the back of the room opened to allow him to leave, and suddenly Michael stepped forward, pointing at the screen as he said something. In the semi-darkness, Beverly couldn't see his

words, only the conviction with which he said them. The image on the screen paused and the lights came up slowly.

Beverly reached for Michael, touching his arm. "*Michael, what is it?*"

He motioned for her to follow him to the front of the room, waving to both CJ and the General to join them as well. Standing before the vid wall, Michael tapped the picture of the open doorway and the men visible beyond.

"It's Jacob," he said, turning to face them, tapping again.

Major Yun appeared at General Castleton's elbow, and handed an interface to the base leader. General Castleton took it, his face darkening and his frown deepening as he read it.

"*What is it?*" she asked when he looked up.

"At 01:37 this morning, an encrypted message was sent from inside the base."

Beverly took the interface when the General offered it and read over the security file. A coded message of unknown content was broadcasted from the Mountain, origination from a network terminal on sublevel twenty-six. A review of the security cameras in the area revealed nothing, but it had been determined that the vandalism in the infirmary occurred at 01:02.

A dreadful cold sank straight to her bones.

She looked up, carefully schooling her expression as she shifted the handheld into the crook of her arm to sign. "*Have you located Lieutenant Riley?*" Riley had been on duty the night before outside Victor's quarters.

Major Yun lips tightened until the edges were white, and he nodded. "Yes, ma'am. We did. He's dead, ma'am."

"*Dead?*"

"He was murdered."

General Castleton stared at her, his gaze hard and set. She had known him her whole life, and immediately understood without words the results of the investigation. Or, at the least, the assumptions. The General nodded to Major Yun.

"Lock him up."

She stood straight and tall, tapping into her years of discipline to keep herself emotionless and in command. Her lungs burned from holding her breath, and her heart beat a staccato rhythm. Not trusting anything she might say, Beverly crossed her arms and tucked her hands against her body.

The room cleared of base personnel, leaving the command structure standing in front of the vid wall. Michael remained, waiting for everyone to leave. When they were the only ones remaining, he spoke.

"You assume Victor did this."

"Michael," CJ said, laying her hand on his arm.

"All evidence points to the Areth. He was unaccounted for from his locked room, his guard is dead, drugs used solely to keep him in line were destroyed, and now we have messages being sent to who the hell knows. I say he's been playing us for the fools for weeks," Major Yun said, his gaze sliding only momentarily to Beverly when he spoke of fools.

She clenched her jaw and stayed silent.

"Why would he do this?" Michael demanded. "Why would he help us be free only to turn on us now?"

"To find out where we were. To find out all he could before reporting back to his superiors," Major Yun answered without pause.

"He was in a coma for months," Michael shouted as he thrust his hand into the air. "Was that part of the plan?"

"We can only imagine the depths of deception the Areth with resort to."

## Chapter Seventeen

The clank of a heavy steel door yanked Victor from the dark place his thoughts had trapped him in for the last hour. He had sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the pink scars that remained on his palm, the only remnants of the gashes that had laced his skin, and tried to remember something. Anything.

The night was a blank, without even the broken images of a dream.

Dual footsteps approached his cell, one so heavy it almost masked the second. Victor stared at the door, waiting for it to open. Part of him hoped to see Beverly, and an equal part of him hoped she didn't come. He couldn't look her in the eyes and tell her he didn't do what they said, not because he'd be lying, but because he just didn't know.

The lock disengaged and the door opened, the security guard holding it as Beverly brushed past him. She slid her glance to him for just the briefest of moments, and when she looked away, heavy dread sank into his gut. With her arms crossed, she nodded to the guard and he closed the door, leaving them alone. Victor ran his palms down his thigh and stood as she walked towards him.

*"Are you all right?"* she signed, still avoiding eye contact.

Victor swallowed, his throat suddenly dry, and nodded. *"I'm fine. I feel like a man waiting for his death sentence, but physically I'm fine."*

Her eyes darted up to meet his gaze, holding it this time, and he knew she understood. The inhibitors were gone, and within hours, he would once again be engaged in a battle for control. Victor looked at his hand again, rubbing his thumb over the marks, easing the slight itch of healing. He could almost see the blood that had dried and stained his hands when he woke up, and greasy nausea rolled in his stomach when he thought that some of it might not have been his.

*"Did Lieutenant Riley have a family?"* he asked, forcing himself to look into her eyes when he spoke.

She shook her head. *"Not living in the Mountain. His mother is in Dublin."*

Victor shoved his hands into his pockets to stop himself from seeing the blood, but the subconscious odor still burned his nostrils and the copper tang sat in the back of his throat. *"What will happen now?"*

*"Normally, the investigation would continue until you were either proven guilty or dismissed as innocent,"* she signed.

Victor caught the slightest tremble in her hand, and fought the urge to reach for her. For weeks, he had battled with the reality that he didn't deserve a gift as precious as Beverly's friendship, let alone the pleasure of her touch. After the crimes of the night, which he could neither deny nor confess, something as simple as a touch of hands was more than he could ask for.

*"Normally?"*

*"Things have changed. I'm sorry, but you have to understand I can't speak of it. Not with..."*

*"Not with me."*

She nodded, finally consenting to look into his eyes. Half a dozen emotions and questions whispered to him from those green gems. Her gaze shifted to the camera slightly behind her in the corner of the cell. She took one sideways step and put her back to the lens. *"Do you remember anything from last night?"*

"No," he said, his voice barely loud enough to pass his lips. "From the time I left you last night, until I woke in that room this morning, I remember nothing. Not even dreaming."

*"Has anything like this happened before?"*

He automatically started to answer 'no', but stopped short. Beverly took a step towards him, but kept the distance between them well over arm's length.

*"What? Has it?"*

Victor nodded. "Once, yes. Not long before your people broke into the labs. But, it wasn't quite the same."

*"Tell me."*

He ran his fingers over his mouth, trying to remember what seemed like another lifetime. A humorless laugh rumbled in his chest, and he slowly shook his head. "I've been in denial for a very long time about the truth, about this darkness in my soul. Only now, looking back, can I see it." He drew a slow breath through his nose and closed his eyes briefly before explaining. "Kathleen had nearly killed Michael. He hovered at the edge of death for two days, and I could do nothing. I pilfered some medication, and snuck into his cell late at night, giving him water and treating him as best I could without going too far. If he recovered too quickly, I knew someone would question it."

The same rage that had overcome him that night, months before, surged in his blood and he curled his lips against his teeth. "It's ironic," he forced past a clenched jaw. "Michael asked me that night about his father. If I knew who he was. He had seen so much cruelty at the hands of his mother..."

*"Victor, please. Tell me what happened to you."* She pointed to him, her expression enough to make him push past the memories. He nodded, setting his hands at his hips.

"I was angry. Furious because I wanted to do more, wanted to stop her, and yet I did nothing. I left the facility that night in a haze, and when I arrived at my living quarters, I was in such a deep rage I punched the wall. Put my fist right through the material. And I remember pain... not just from my hand... but this burning surge through my mind and I passed out."

*"What is the next thing you remember? Where did you wake up?"*

Victor shrugged. "In my living quarters, two days later, on the floor where I had fallen. My hand was broken and swollen, dried with blood. I went into work and Doctor Montgomery assisted me in treating the wounds."

*"You were in the same place you lost consciousness?"*

Victor nodded.

Beverly turned away and paced in a small circle. *"You believe this affliction began well before you came here?"*

*"Yes."*

She shook her head, as if arguing silently with herself. Victor watched and waited as she continued to pace. Finally, she returned to her spot with her back to the camera. She hitched her chin and looked into his face, taking two steps closer than she had dared since

coming into the room, bringing herself within arm reach and Victor pushed his hands back into his pockets to avoid temptation. Beverly stared at him with such intense study, he wondered how deep into his soul she could see.

And wondered for a moment if he had a soul left at all.

*"Areth don't feel passion. Longing. Desire,"* she signed, her motions kept small and between them, hidden from watching eyes through the camera. *"Love."*

Victor slowly licked his lips, meeting her gaze, almost lost in it. "That is what I've always believed."

*"It can be faked. Kathleen fooled Nick Tanner into believing she loved him, that she was human, and she somehow managed to fake it long enough to conceive Michael."*

He didn't move towards her, but bent forward just slightly, bringing their faces a few inches closer. Not so close she couldn't read his words on his lips, or see the truth in his eyes. There was much he didn't know, but this truth he knew absolutely.

"I have not faked a single moment with you, Beverly. Everything you have felt from me, every kiss and touch has been real. I swear that to you. I know that may not mean anything right now, but it's the truth."

A soft pink stained her cheeks and she slid her gaze away, bringing it back a heartbeat later. Victor held his breath when she almost reached out and touched his chest, but she curled her fingers into her palm and withdrew with a soft sigh.

*"I wish I could do something more, but my word is not enough. My impartiality is already under question."*

"Does someone know about us?"

The shake of her head was almost imperceptible. *"Only assumptions, but that is enough to undermine any argument I can offer. The only thing I can do is make sure the investigation is fair, and no one else's prejudices come into play."*

Victor nodded. "I understand."

*"Do you?"*

"Yes," he said slowly. "Beverly, I can't ask for leniency when I can't say-beyond a shadow of doubt-that I didn't do what I am accused of. My heart and soul didn't do it, but I can't say *these hands* didn't do it." He pulled his hands from his pockets and held them between them. "To my knowledge, I have never acted outside my own consciousness. I remember everything my Demon has done when in control. I have watched helplessly as he had tried to choke the life from a friend, as he tried to hurt you, as he said and did things that sicken me. All I claim with absolute certainty is that I do *not* remember destroying those vials and I do *not* remember killing Lieutenant Riley."

Tears shined bright in her eyes, but he saw just as clearly her battle to keep them from falling. *"Do you remember being at a computer last night?"*

He took a moment to try, once again, to remember anything, and once again the night was blank. He shook his head. "No. I remember you coming into my quarters, and I remember kissing you one final time before you left, and I remember going to bed some time later." Victor decided to leave out the icy cold shower he had resorted to in order to cool his heated blood. "And then, I woke in that room. That. Is. All."

She swallowed hard, pulling her lower lip through her teeth. *"Please don't be lying to me, Victor."*

Before he could speak, the shrill of a general alarm echoed through the halls, snapping his attention to the door. Beverly gripped his arm until he looked back to her.

"An alarm is going off."

She spun around to the door, but it opened before she was even close to it. The guard in the hall stepped inside, weapon in his hand and he leveled it immediately on Victor.

"Ma'am, you need to come with me."

She motioned Victor to her side, and he knew she needed him to interpret. "She wants to know what's going on," Victor said as her hands moved gracefully, yet urgently.

The guard glared at him for a moment, most likely trying to decide whether he should even speak to Victor.

"I don't know everything, ma'am. All I know is General Castleton needs you now."

She spun around to Victor. *"I have to go. I'll be back."*

Victor only nodded as she bolted from the cell and the guard pulled the door closed again. The buzz of the lock engaging was almost lost in the ear-piercing alarm.

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Beverly ran into Command, seeing General Castleton, Damian and CJ already standing within the security center watching a video playing with deep intent. She panted for breath as she reached them, touching CJ's arm to catch her attention.

*"What is it? What's going on?"*

CJ's devastated expression immediately made Beverly's blood run cold. She glanced between CJ and the General, then to the screen. All she saw was fire and billowing smoke from the collapsed remains of several buildings, destroyed beyond recognition. She looked to the General again.

"It's Washington," he finally said, his own face as sullen and distraught as CJ's. "The damn bastards blew up every major structure. Reports are coming in from all over the place. As far as we know, almost every World Alliance leader is dead."

*"Including President Hargrave?"*

He nodded. "He was killed in the first blast, as far as we know. The bastards knew exactly when and where to hit for the most collateral damage. Hundreds of civilians are dead. Entire sections of the city are in flames."

CJ wiped away a tear, and Beverly felt the sting of her own. *Dear God!*

*"How?"*

*"Imagine a pulse cannon multiplied by one-hundred."*

She held her hand to her mouth, staring at the carnage on the screen.

A serviceman ran up to them, speaking so quickly Beverly couldn't catch any of what he said.

"Damn it!" He grabbed the nearest base communication interface and held it near his lips. "Attention all personnel. Attention all personnel. This is General Castleton. In approximately two minutes, this base will be under attack. Repeat. This base will be under attack by Areth forces. Evacuation Plan Alpha is now ordered. Repeat. Evacuation Plan Alpha is now ordered."

*"They're on their way here?"*

"We have them on our long range scanners, and their trajectory brings them straight here. They'll be up our asses in *less than* two minutes," Damian said as he hunched over a terminal, madly punching in codes. "That son of a bitch led them right to us."

Beverly closed her eyes, her insides shaking and her heart pounding as the first wave of unmerciful panic slammed into her from the combined force of nearly every person on base. She gripped the back of the nearest chair, trying desperately to ward it off, but the initial onslaught was so sudden it nearly put her on her knees.

Two sets of hands held her up, and she recognized the contact of the General and CJ. She drew a quick breath, momentarily putting up enough mental walls to allow her to open her eyes again. She nodded before they could ask the question.

"I'm fine."

Command was a dervish of activity as personnel ran from station to station, completing their pre-assigned evacuation duties. Beverly stood behind Damian, watching the Areth aircrafts bear down on them in V-formation.

"Back up files have been transferred to portable devices, and Doctor Quinn reports all medical records are transferred as well, sir," Damian reported, holding his earpiece to his ear.

The General nodded. "You are go for kill."

Damian nodded and entered the commands into the base system to engage the kill switch, wiping the entire system clean with no means to recreate the information. He pushed back from the monitor, giving General Castleton access to his board. Beverly's heart pounded at a furious pace as the flurry of activity continued around them. She noted the thinning of the compliment in the room as each man or woman completed their task and left to evacuate. Evacuation procedures were well planned and everyone knew their job, and when they completed their job, they were free to go or help with the evacuation of others.

General Castleton typed in his twenty-one digit access and confirmation code, initiating the first step of the kill procedure. When the monitor flashed the message 'Alpha One Access Code Acknowledged', he stepped back and Beverly took his place. She clenched her fists for the span of a heartbeat to steady their tremble before entering her alphanumeric code. Moments later, the system acknowledged with 'Alpha Two Beta One Access Code Acknowledged'. CJ and Damian did the same, completing the steps to confirm the final command. When Damian finished, and the system acknowledged with 'Alpha Four Gamma One Access Code Acknowledged', the General typed in his final four-digit command.

Giant red letters flashed on the screen. 'System Kill in 00:60 seconds'.

Damian stood, speaking rapidly into his earpiece. Beverly tried to keep up but she had to struggle to keep back the wave of panic, fear and confusion that threatened to override her senses at any given moment. Base personnel were trained well, and understood their duty, but even the strongest of soldiers tasted fear when faced with life or death. Only a fool wouldn't.

"The first wave of personnel has left the base in the hovercrafts, scattering to the coordinates programmed into the hover navigational systems," Damian reported. "Non-military personnel, including the New Mexico survivors, went in the first wave. The school rooms and children's facilities have been confirmed empty."

A small bit of consolation eased the rough edges of Beverly's nerves. At least the children would be safe.

"The ships arrive in ten seconds."

"It's time for us to head out," the General said, his hand curling around Beverly's elbow. "CJ, feel free to get out of here and head for the infirmary."

CJ nodded and ran out of Command. Michael would be there helping Lilly.

"Captain, let's go."

Damian nodded and the three of them moved towards the nearest exit. Beverly pulled up short and turned to head in the other direction, but the General's hold on her arm stopped her.

"Where are you going?"

"Victor. He's in his cell."

"Leave the bastard. He's the one who brought them raining down on us," Damian said, his face twisted into an angry snarl.

Beverly shook her head. *"We can't just leave him. He'll either die in the attack, or the Areth will find him."*

"He brought them here!"

*"We don't know that. Not for sure. Not absolutely. Last I checked, we still believed in the concept of innocent until proven guilty."* She stressed 'proven' with a pointed sweep of her hands.

"We'll have someone bring him," the General said, nodding to Damian.

She watched intently as Damian relayed the message through his earpiece. Even when he said two servicemen had Victor and were escorting him to an escape hover, the gnawing bite of anxiety twisted her stomach.

Before she could argue any more, the ground shook beneath her feet. She collapsed to her hands and knees as dust and debris settled in the air. General Castleton pulled her to her feet, a large gash already releasing a trail of blood from his forehead. Without another word, he guided her towards the nearest door.

A drowning wave crashed into her, nearly knocking her down again with the same painful force of the pulse cannon's hitting the base. The General's strong arms and hands held her up and pulled her along through the dust and destruction.

## Chapter Eighteen

"You need to get to the hovers, now!" Michael shouted over the sirens that echoed through the disheveled remains of the base infirmary.

Lilly nodded, throwing fistfuls of bandaging and first aid medications into the one bag she knew she could take. How could she decide what was necessary and what they would have to live without? Michael gripped her arm and pulled her back from the shelf, taking the bag from her.

"Lilly, go!"

She stood stunned for a moment, staring into his determined face. Finally, she shook her head and pushed past the momentary daze. "I need to get something."

"We don't have time for anything else."

She pulled free of his hold and hurried down the hall to the entrance of her quarters. Nothing could go, there was no time or room, but there was one thing she couldn't leave behind. In the bedroom, she quickly grabbed the tri-fold crystal frame that sat on the bedside table, holding it to her chest. She paused, knowing the risk was immense, but for one brief moment, she looked around the bedroom.

Once she left, she would never be back. All the memories would have to remain solely in her mind. Her gaze fell on Jace's guitar, which she had lovingly dusted and kept clean for the last six months, resting in its stand. Tears stung her eyes and she sucked in a desperate breath.

Michael hand ran across her back to curl around her arm and bring her against his side. She tilted her head to his shoulder and sniffed, closing her eyes as the tears squeezed through.

"We need to go," he said softly, but sternly.

She nodded and wiped her cheeks as they turned and left the apartment.

\*\*\*\*\*

CJ pushed past the men and women making their way to the hover bay. She saw Amanda coming towards her, helping a serviceman with an injured leg move down the hall.

"Amanda, where are Lilly and Michael?"

"They're still in the infirmary, but they're on their way."

The Mountain shook beneath the strain of another hit, and CJ's heart jumped into her throat as she watched a wide fissure crack the wall and spread across the ceiling. The ancient braces and concrete weren't designed to withstand this kind of assault. If they didn't get out soon, those left behind would die when the infrastructure collapsed around them.

CJ braced her hands against the wall and continued away from the docks. As she rounded another corner, she saw Michael and Lilly rushing towards her, Michael's arm firmly behind her to help her along.

"Michael!"

He looked up as the Mountain shook again; the death whistle of the Areth gliders flying so close their O2 boosters vibrated the air around them. CJ pressed herself against one wall while Michael covered Lilly with his own body, protecting her as best he could from any falling rubble. When the shaking eased, CJ met him in the middle of the hall.

"Why aren't you in the hover bay?" Michael demanded, grabbing her elbow to bring her along with him and Lilly.

Before she could answer, the Mountain shook again. Somewhere, someone's scream echoed back to them. The Mountain was falling. Everything they had done was falling down around them. A terrifying realization slammed into CJ's chest and she stopped short.

"Caitlin!" Michael shouted as she broke away from his hold and headed down an adjoining hall. "Where are you going?"

She turned back, her chest burning with dust and the need for clean air. "I need to make sure Nick knows where to go. He can't come back to this and not know."

Their eyes met, and after a moment, Michael set his jaw and nodded. "Be safe."

CJ nodded and ran down the hall as the Mountain shook again.

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Beverly ran into the hover bay along side Damian and the General, and she quickly scanned the room, searching the faces for Victor. The air crackled with anxiety and fear as the final few dozen of the Mountain's staff prepared for departure.

"Come on, Beverly. The hover is waiting. We'll wait for everyone else to go, but we need to be ready," General Castleton said as he led her towards a waiting craft.

She stopped as she stepped onto the ship. The guard assigned outside Victor's cell, and who had originally sent her to Command, stood beside the ramp as he shouted commands to everyone running through the dock. Beverly doubled back, the General following. She waved at the guard to get his attention and he stopped shouting commands.

"Where is Victor?" she asked and General Castleton relayed her message.

Lieutenant Brandt's eyes quickly shifted to Damian, whom Beverly knew stood immediately behind her. "Ma'am, we needed to get people out..."

"Where is he?" she demanded again.

She didn't wait for his answer, snatching the pulse pistol from his hand. Before she made it ten feet, the General gripped her arm and spun her around. "What are you doing?"

"He doesn't deserve to die like this."

"Maybe he does."

She glared at him and pulled her arm free.

\*\*\*\*\*

Lilly panted each breath, her advanced pregnancy making it hard to hurry towards the hover bays. Michael's arm circled her back, helping her and shielding her when the floor shook and the ceiling threatened to come down around them. They rounded a corner, approaching the nearest stairwell they would need to ascend to reach the waiting evacuation crafts.

Pulse charges rang out, and a blast of energy hit the wall over their heads. Michael yanked her back into the hall. She fell hard to her knees, pain shooting up her arms as her hands jarred the floor, keeping her from landing on her stomach. Michael scrambled to his feet again, pulling her along as another blast whisked past them, singing the air.

"Michael!" she cried out.

"Come on!"

Her lungs burned and her limbs shook, but she pushed herself to follow.

"We're cut off," she shouted as they ran.

"I know."

\*\*\*\*\*

CJ stood in the center of the apartment, her head pounding with the base alarm mingled with the squeal of fighters and the rumble as the Mountain shook itself apart. She had to hurry or she wouldn't need to worry about what Nick would find when he returned.

It would be her.

She ran into her bedroom, leaving behind the message she hoped no one but Nick would understand. As she went back to the main room, the Mountain shook, and she braced herself within the doorway. The tremor passed and she took one last side trip to Michael's bedroom, leaving another message there.

Yanking open the drawer of his desk, she rescued the carefully folded document Michael kept there, and the two photographs enclosed. Tucking the deed into her back pocket, CJ ran from the small quarters and hoped she might still make it to the dock.

\*\*\*\*\*

Victor hunched forward on the edge of his bed, elbows on his legs and his hands loosely joined in the space between his knees. The walls and floor shook around him, fogging the air with dust and smoke as unseen fires burned, polluting the air. His lungs burned and his eyes stung, a hard cough ripping its way from his chest.

The guard had left long ago, just before the first wave hit. He knew the sound. Areth pulse cannons. They had a higher hum than the Earth Force crafts, and he had heard them in battle before. It had been another incarnation, another planet, another world... and he had been on the side of the aggressors... now, he understood the heavy realization of impending death.

He closed his eyes, blocking out the death glide whine, and tried to focus on the one image that would bring him peace.

Beverly.

Victor tried to relive the feel of her lips against his and the warmth that spread through his body at her touch. He wanted to experience her, in every way the Areth had denied themselves for hundreds of years.

Through the chaos, he heard the pounding at his door and jumped to his feet. As he reached it, he heard the electronic lock disengage and he pushed the steel barricade open to find Beverly standing in the hall. Dirt smudged her cheeks, her chest rising and falling with each labored breath.

She flew into his arms, and he held her impossibly close, feeling each rapid breath. Beverly pulled back and grabbed his hand, silently and urgently begging they get out. He didn't need to hear it, her plea glowed in her eyes as clear as anything she might have signed.

Smoke hung thick and low in the air, and they both hunched forward to move through the darkness. Main power was dead within the Mountain, and the subterranean hallways were nearly black except for the scattered auxiliary lights that lit the way every thirty to forty feet.

They reached a stairwell and Victor shoved the warped steel door open with his shoulder, ignoring the snap of pain. The air within the stairwell was clearer, and he sucked in a lungful.

"Up or down?" he asked as Beverly braced herself against the tubular steel railing that kept her from falling several stories straight down.

She pointed down the stairs, and Victor nodded, thankful they wouldn't have to go up. Beverly was pale, perspiration glistening on her brow, and her steps faltered as she tried to move forward. Victor took hold of her arms, turning her to face him.

"What is it? Something is wrong. Are you hurt?" He quickly shifted his gaze over her, seeking an injury he may have missed in the darkness.

"*Everyone is so afraid,*" she signed, her hands trembling so badly she could only make small motions. "*It's smothering me.*"

Victor nodded his understanding. "We'll get out."

He took her hand and led the way down the stairs, keeping his attention split between her and the steps before them in case she should stumble and fall.

\*\*\*\*\*

Searing pain ripped through Michael's body and he slammed against the wall, gripping his left arm as blood soaked immediately through his shirt. He clenched his teeth against the throb and forced himself to stumble forward.

Lilly was ahead of him, and as she turned, her eyes widened and she stopped short when she saw the bloody wound.

"Go, Lilly! Go!"

"It's him!" he heard shouted from behind them as the Areth soldiers closed in quickly. "Stop there and we'll spare your life!"

The body of a fallen Phoenix soldier lay against the wall several feet away, his pulse weapon on the floor beside his limp hand. Michael reached Lilly and shielded her body with his, reining in his concentration. Extending his hand, he reached out with his mind in a way he didn't understand, he simply knew.

The weapon shot off the floor, directly into his waiting grip. Michael spun around firing six rapid blasts. Two of the Areth fell, the other flattening themselves against the wall with the realization that he was now armed.

He stole the brief opportunity to push Lilly down the hall. Moments later, pulse discharges echoed around them once again, leaving the air electrified and thick with O2 ions. Blood ran freely down his arm, slicking his skin and dripping from the muzzle of the gun. They stumbled further, passing beneath a heavy steel arc built into the walls of the hallway. More volleys of blue-white energy blew chunks of concrete out of the walls and the ceiling overheard as the floor shook beneath them. The fighters still attacked outside even as the Areth took the base from within its own walls.

The Areth were nearly on top of them, able to move faster than either he or Lilly could. Michael's head pounded, blurring his vision and nearly destroying his equilibrium, but he kept going, kept pushing Lilly down the hallway with his body between her and the attackers.

He looked back, firing several pulses; enough to drive them back for a moment and quickly scanned the arc they had passed. With a searing pain that ripped a cry from his throat, Michael pushed out once again and with a thundering creak as the steel gave way, a two-foot-thick blast door dropped from the ceiling.

Michael collapsed against the wall, nearly all strength drained from his body. The floor shook and hallway tilted. Holding himself up with his bloody hand against the wall, Michael bent forward and violently emptied his stomach.

\*\*\*\*\*

Victor slammed back against the stairwell wall, pulling Beverly with him and knocking the air from her lungs, as a shower of pulse energy blasts rained down on them from above. Beverly tried to keep herself upright, supporting herself against the cold concrete, but the thundering pound in her head made her dizzy and blocked out almost everything else.

Victor took the weapon from her hand that she had somehow managed to keep a grip on, and fired back up the stairwell, his blasts ricocheting off railings and steel steps.

"Damn it," he cursed.

Beverly pushed away from the wall, and together they took the few moments they had while their assailant reorganized to run down another flight of stairs. They burst through the door into an empty hall, the air once again thick and black with smoke. She felt heat and knew a fire burned somewhere nearby, possibly within the walls or in the ceiling overhead.

The Mountain shook, and immediately the devouring wave of overpowering emotions slammed into her, causing her to stumble. She clung to Victor's arm, desperate to stay on her feet and make it to the hovers. They would leave soon, whether she and Victor made it or not.

\*\*\*\*\*

CJ ran up the ramp into one of the final remaining hovercrafts, and her heart immediately seized in her chest. Michael lay on the floor, his eyes closed, blood saturating almost his entire left side.

"Dear God," she whispered before falling to her knees beside him.

Lilly worked feverishly to staunch the bleeding and neutralize the tiny jolts of energy that sparked between the exposed edges of his burned flesh. She shouted orders to a blanch-faced security guard who knelt near Michael's head, handing her the implements and bandages she demanded.

CJ bent over, stroking her hand over Michael's sweat-dampened skin, and his eyes opened as pain twisted his features. He immediately gripped her arm with his other hand, hanging on tight, and she saw relief ease some of the lines that marred his expression.

"I'm here, Michael," she said softly.

Lilly worked silently, but CJ did a quick visual check of the very pregnant doctor. She appeared to have no wounds, although Michael's blood stained her clothing and smeared her cheek. Her blonde hair curled around her face in damp twists and her hands shook as she treated him, but she showed no signs of distress otherwise. She cut away the frayed and soaked shirtsleeve that partially covered his wound, exposing his skin to her full treatment.

Michael hissed, his grip on CJ's arm tightening moments before his entire body relaxed and his head fell heavily to the floor. CJ pressed her eyes closed and leaned down to kiss his hot, damp forehead.

\*\*\*\*\*

Victor's chest ached as another bout of brutal coughs tore through him, but he kept running, pulling Beverly behind him. A rumble like thunder echoed around them, and with a terrible crack, a huge chunk of the ceiling gave way. Victor pulled Beverly against him and

spun them both around to sandwich her between him and the wall. The ceiling fell at an angle, barely stopped by the floor in time to keep from crushing them.

He bracketed her body with his hands and pushed back, quickly scanning her for any injuries. She wasn't physically hurt, but her skin was a deathly pale, her lips ashen, and her eyelids heavy. Victor touched her chin and forced her to look up at him.

"We're almost there."

She nodded, her hands limp at her side, unable to sign. Victor wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her hand across the back of his neck to help her hang on, and propelled them free of the fallen rubble.

He was barely able to maintain his bearings in the thick smoke and heat, but knew the hover bay was only a few dozen feet down the hall. They were almost there. She'd be safe if he could just get them there.

He had felt the strain on her from the moment he touched her, and wished there had been a way he could take on some of the burden. The fear and panic had to be nearly crippling. Beverly fell limp in his hold, her head falling back as she slipped out of consciousness.

Not pausing, Victor slid his arm beneath her knees and swept her against his chest, running through the darkness to the flash of light he could barely see. One craft remained, the door sitting open with two armed soldiers on either side. They saw him through the haze, and immediately leveled their weapons on him.

"I'm no enemy!" he cried out.

It was enough for them to pause and allow him to get close enough that they saw Beverly limp against him. Each one gripped an arm and propelled him into the craft.

"Go! Go! Go!" General Castleton shouted to the pilot in the cockpit as the heavy door slammed and locked closed.

Victor collapsed to his knees, easing Beverly's body to the floor as he supported her back against his chest. The air inside the hover was pure and clean, filtered by internal scrubbers, and soon the burn in his lungs eased. The hover held very few, and he assumed most of the others had escaped in other crafts.

General Castleton eased himself onto the floor as the hover lifted off and bolted free from the Mountain base. Even with the inertial dampeners, Victor felt his body press against the bench behind him. The General slid a tense glare at Victor as he reached for her wrist to feel her pulse.

"She'll be okay," Victor said between gasps of air. "She couldn't..." His balance tilted as the hovercraft shook under a blast from pursuing Areth.

General Castleton hung on to the edge of a nearby bench, nodding his head. "I know." He leveled his aged gaze on Victor, studying him. "Thank you," he finally said.

Victor looked down at Beverly's still features and shifted her within his hold. The hover crafter fled through the night, bouncing and shifting through the rough Colorado terrain, the passengers still and silent with the weight of the journey. With his lungs once again revived by pure air and his limbs spasming with the effort of the escape, Victor shifted to sit and held Beverly against him, unwilling to release her until he knew she would be completely safe.

## Chapter Nineteen

The subtle, low crackle of his own nerves crawling beneath his skin like broken, live wires was the first sensation Michael was aware of as he pushed through the thick haze in his head. He tried to shift, but his left arm refused to move, sending jolts of pain through his shoulder to his spine.

The vicious slap of a buried memory jolted him awake, and he panted as adrenaline surged through his blood stream and he tried to sit up. He cried out at the searing burn that encased his entire left side. Muted darkness surrounded him, and he searched his surroundings for some sign of where he was.

"It's all right, Michael," came a soft voice from the darkness, barely audible over the pounding in his ears. He turned sharply towards the sound, and saw the soft glow of blonde hair in the silver moonlight that bathed a portion of the room.

He squinted, his chest hurting with the panic that tightened around his heart. "Caitlin?" he whispered, praying he wasn't hallucinating. An overwhelming fear that he was somehow back in his cell, back in New Mexico, pounding through him with every beat of his heart.

The snap of a match preceded the flare of a small flame, the yellow glow highlighting her features as she leaned over and lit a candle on the table beside his bed. The small stick of wax didn't cast much of a glow, but it pushed away the shadows haunting his fuddled mind. He relaxed back onto the pillows, noticing the slight musty smell that hung in the air.

Caitlin gently ran her hand along his forehead, smoothing back his hair. Michael swallowed against the dry roughness in his throat and looked around. He was in a small room with pale, golden hued wood walls that reflected back the candlelight. A window over the head of his bed allowed moonlight to stream in, giving the room a soft, silver haze. The bed he lay in was wooden, and faded blanket of geometric shapes and varying prints covered him.

"Where are we?"

"Our new base of operation. We're safe, Michael. As far as we know, nearly everyone made it out of the Mountain safe and alive."

*"Nearly everyone..."*

She nodded, the candlelight highlighting the tired strain around her eyes. "One hovercraft was shot down, and it exploded on impact. We had to assume everyone was lost. Other than that, we've accounted for everyone but about a dozen base personnel between this location and the beta site some of the other crafts went to."

He raised his right hand, realizing as his mind cleared that his left arm was wrapped firmly against his side, his lower arm curled across his stomach, and rubbed his forehead. He remembered everything until the bulkhead slammed down, cutting the attacking Areth off from him and Lilly. From that point, his memories were broken and hazed. He knew they had made it to the bay.

"Is Lilly all right?"

Caitlin nodded, her hand resting lightly on his chest over the blanket. "She's fine. Exhausted. The escape took a great deal out of her, but both she and the baby are just fine. You saved her, Michael."

The soft hitch of her voice drew his attention back to her, and in the glow of the candlelight, he saw the shine in her eyes. Michael laid his hand over hers, squeezing gently. "I'm all right."

"No, you're not," she snapped, hitching her breath as the tears rolled down her cheeks. She looked towards the window, wiping away the trails with her fingertips. "You were shot. You could have died."

Michael wanted to say more, to do more to assure her he was fine, but the throbbing ache in his arm and the heavy fatigue that pulled at him wouldn't let him think. He reached across his body and laid his hand on the thick bandages covering the wound. Heat emanated through the bandaging, and the slight pressure of his own touch multiplied the pain until he hissed through his teeth and pulled his hand back.

"We wrapped it in a Dermaseal patch, but the SB Stimulator was damaged in flight. The skin will have to heal on its own until we can repair them."

Michael nodded. It wasn't the first time his body had to heal without the assistance of technology, but he knew now was not the time to mention it.

"Do you need something for the pain?"

"No," he answered quickly. "Leave what medicine we have for those who need it."

"You need to rest," she said, sniffing softly. "It's late." She shifted to stand, but Michael reached for her hand, stopping her. Caitlin sank onto the bed. "What is it?"

"Did Beverly make it out? And the General?"

She nodded, a tentative smile edging her lips. "General Castleton is here, already organizing our resources and personnel. So is Beverly." Caitlin drew a slow breath, her shoulders dipping slightly at the release. "By what I understand, Victor is responsible for her escape."

"Then he is safe?"

Her blue eyes focused on him in the candle's glow. "He is. Michael, he's still under guard. We don't know the truth yet. We don't know what part he played in all this. But he *is* alive." She looked down at their hands. "The inhibitor's effect wore off earlier today."

"How bad is it?"

"Right now, he maintains a weak control most of the time. But I've seen him slip, and seen the violence flash out like a whip."

Michael closed his eyes, swallowing hard. He hated the thought of his friend sliding back onto the darkness he had managed to escape for the last few weeks. A guilty rush hit his chest, and his eyes popped open again as he curled up off the pillows.

"Dog!"

Caitlin smiled, gently pushing him back down. "Dog was with the children, remember? He was out of the Mountain before the first blast hit."

Michael released a heavy breath. "Good."

She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "Sleep. As soon as you're able, we have a new home to pick out."

He smiled, arching one eyebrow. "Where are we?"

"I'm going to leave that for when you can see for yourself. Michael, if you thought the Mountain in Colorado was beautiful, I can't wait to see your face when you step outside. Oh!" She reached over to the table, and Michael immediately recognized the paper in her hand.

"The deed."

Caitlin nodded. "I knew you would want it."

"You shouldn't have risked your life for it."

She smiled. "I went back to leave your father a message, and I couldn't leave without getting this for you. Someday, Michael, we'll get to Parson's Point and you'll really see beauty then."

He took the folded papers and held them against his chest, the heavy weight of exhaustion pushing him down. Caitlin stood, adjusting the worn blanket around him and blew out the candle. Before she reached the door, he was asleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

The cool nip of oxygen-rich, unfiltered, untouched air filled Beverly's lungs and she drew in through her nose, relishing every scent that tickled her senses. She held the ends of a small blanket around her shoulders against the damp morning chill as the energy of the dew-laden air filled her and revived her.

She had spent more mornings looking out over the ridges of the Colorado Mountains than she could ever count. Most of her life had been spent within the safe walls of the Mountain base, never venturing into a world that would mark her as incomplete and worthless. Only in her imagination, enhanced by the images she found on the computer databases, could she conjure a place as beautiful as the one spread out before her.

A heavy fog shifted through the treetops in the valley below her, the vantage point she held on the balcony of a long forgotten building giving her a nearly one-hundred-eighty degree view of the Smokey Mountains. Her heart was heavy for all the reasons that brought the small group of Phoenix people here, but the beauty eased some of the heartache.

She had spoken with the General that morning and heard all the vital statistics. In total, forty-seven souls had been lost, either in the battle within the Mountain or in the shot-down hovercraft. The only saving grace was that none of the children had been hurt. They had escaped before the first wave, and were now here. By noon, she would meet with several other coordinators for the evacuation plan and begin determining how to bring the separated children back together with their parents. The entire compliment of the Mountain had scattered to three different locations, and inevitably, children were separated from their parents.

Beverly drew another breath, feeling some of her strength returning with each moment. She had only woken that morning from a thirty-nine hour sleep.

The slight vibration through the soles of her shoes told her someone had stepped onto the balcony with her, and she turned to see General Castleton. He smiled, closing the glass framed door behind him. It was a different world here; steel, concrete and windowless rooms replaced with the earthy scent of wooden structures, the soft give of leaves and pine needles beneath your feet, and sunlight.

"Somehow I thought I'd find you out here."

Beverly smiled and tucked the edges of her blanket against her side so she could sign. *"I can't seem to walk away from it. It takes my breath away."*

He leaned into the railing, and in the morning sun, Beverly saw the fatigue and strain in his expression even though he hid it behind his smile. The last two days had been hard for him, as a leader and a man. He brought his people out safely, as best he could, and he would continue to guide and lead, but it would be with a heavy heart for the ones lost.

"I was born not far from here in Arkansas. I never appreciated how beautiful it was until I wasn't here every day. My generation was stupid and selfish. We wanted it all, expected the world to hand it to us. Back then, we thought the worst thing that would ever happen was going to war across the ocean. No one would have imagined the World the way it is now. Not in a hundred-million years."

Beverly touched his arm, rubbing the soft leather of the jacket he wore. He seemed to shake off the distant memories and stepped away from the rail. "We have a lot to do, Lee-Lee. You up for it?"

She nodded and smiled, holding up one finger. Then she signed, *"There is one thing I need to do first."*

Resignation passed over his expression. "I figured you would."

*"Where is he?"*

He tilted his head towards the door, indicating the main building of all the ones that sat along the ridge. "Major Yun put him in a locked wine cellar in the basement. This place isn't equipped or designed to hold a prisoner."

Beverly scowled at his words, but said nothing in response. After all Victor did to bring her safely out of the Mountain, she could not believe he was responsible for any of the things of which he was accused. Not Victor. His Demon, perhaps. But not him.

*"I will meet you in the main hall in an hour,"* she signed.

The General watched her hands closely, his skills at sign not as advanced as Victor's or any of the others that had decided to learn with her. Beverly did her best not to rush with him, or to use signs that were too complicated. She loved him for attempting to learn at all.

He nodded. "Fine. I'll have the full report from Damian by then with inventory, supplies and what needs to be done around here to make this place a viable operation."

Beverly went back into the main building-what she had learned was the 'lodge' when the facility had been a thriving vacation spot. The room was huge, with wide plank floors and a stone hearth that filled half the center wall. Servicemen and women worked diligently to clean and check everything, making their new living arrangements as pleasant as possible.

They could leave it just as it was and Beverly would be happy. She felt like she had stepped back in time a hundred years.

Wandering through the connected rooms, she finally found a security guard standing outside a single door in what appeared to be an old pantry. She pulled from her pocket the small paper notepad and stubby pencil she had found in a drawer. Scribbling her question, the guard read it and nodded.

"Yes, ma'am. He's right down these stairs," he answered, opening the door. "Would you like me to come with you?"

She shook her head and smiled, silently assuring him she would be fine. Armed with a tall, tapered candle set in a brass base, she walked down the stairs into the darkness. The air

was colder here than outside, heavy and thick with age and time. The aroma of earth and fermented wine tingled in her nose, not unpleasantly. She had to orientate herself when she reached the bottom of the stairs and saw the steel gate that closed the wine cellar off from the rest of the basement.

Holding the candle out in front of her, she curled her fingers around the cold metal and wished she could call out Victor's name. She only had to wait a moment before he stepped free of the shadows, the flickering light of the candle playing across the angles of his face. When he saw it was her, he crossed the space of the makeshift cell in two quick strides.

"Beverly," she read on his lips, his gaze scanning her face. She immediately saw the strain in his eyes and the tight lines around his lips, recognizing the signs of his struggle. The Demon battled him, even now. "No one would tell me anything."

She reached through the bar to touch his cheek, and he covered her hand, holding her palm against his skin. A jolt, like she hadn't felt in weeks through his touch, shot up her arm and Victor released a long breath. He turned his lips into the contact and pleasant warmth pushed aside the initial shock.

Reluctantly, she had to pull her hand back. With one hand holding her candle and the other touching Victor, she had no way to speak. She set the candle down on a nearby barrel, casting enough light for them to see each other.

*"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner."*

He shook his head, wrapping his hands around the steel door to stand flush against it. "I'm just happy to see you're all right. When they took you from my arms—" He closed his eyes, clenching his jaw, and even without contact, she felt the struggle surge up again. Instinctively, she covered one of his hands with her own, pressing a kiss to his knuckles.

*"Thank you, Victor,"* she signed, adapting the movements to one hand. *"I know you carried me to the hover. You saved me."*

He shook his head. "You would have been safe if you hadn't come back for me."

*"And I wouldn't have had to come back for you if you hadn't been left there. We can do this all morning, or we can enjoy the few moments I have before I need to go."*

Victor smiled, although it was tight and restrained. His body trembled, sweat glistening on his brow as he closed his eyes for a few brief moments. Beverly knew, beyond any doubt and any argument, she could help him if she could only be closer to him but the bars wouldn't allow it. Until she knew some way to prove his innocents, until she could make everyone see that Victor and the Demon inside him were two separate minds and souls, she could offer no more than she was.

"Is Michael all right?" he asked. "Was anyone lost?"

*"Michael was wounded, but he is recovering quickly. The attack was too brutal to expect no one would be lost."*

Victor swallowed hard, shaking his head. "And I did this."

"No!" she signed sharply. "No, Victor. You didn't do this." She reached through the bars to lay her hand on his chest. His heart pounded furiously against her palm, heat radiating from his body like a furnace.

He leaned his temple against the cold metal bars that kept them apart, holding her hand over his heart with his other. The battle was fierce for control, and Victor was giving every

ounce of strength he had to maintain the tentative hold. A wry, humorless grin curled his lips and the soft rumble of a laugh vibrated against her touch.

"What did I do?" he asked.

She shook her head, not understanding his question but unwilling to take her hands back to sign.

"I am the vilest creature in existence in the eyes of everyone around you. My brethren are responsible for nameless, countless acts of cruelty and I can't claim innocents. I hate what I see when I look in the mirror. Yet, you look at me with kindness and your touch heals me. What did I do to deserve your grace?"

Tears stung her eyes and she reluctantly pulled back her hand to sign. *"I see a good man."*

Victor shook his head, his lips forming tight, white lines as he fought the war in his own mind. She ached to open the door and take him in her arms.

His other hand snapped up to grip the bars, his knuckles white as he bowed his head. "Beverly, go, please. I'm so tired I can't fight much more. Please," he said through clenched teeth.

Tears blurred her vision as she pressed a kiss to her fingertips and reached through the bar to touch his lips. He trembled beneath her touch, and she knew the battle was too fierce for him right now. Stepping back, she retrieved her candle and climbed the stairs back into the sunlight.

## Chapter Twenty

“Lean on me if you need to.”

Michael just nodded, his jaw clenched tight and his face pale. CJ wrapped her arm around his torso and steadied him as he stood, his arm firmly gripping her shoulder. Standing upright, he sucked in a sharp breath closing his eyes against the pain she knew had to be ripping his entire left side apart.

“If you’re not ready for this, we can wait.”

He shook his head. “I’m fine now.”

CJ bit back her reply, knowing it was pointless to argue with him. As much as he inherited his father’s unruly hair and deep brown eyes, he also inherited Nick Tanner’s deep stubborn streak. It had taken over ten minutes to maneuver a shirt over his bandaged arm and then over his head, only to bind the arm to his side again. No matter how hard he bit down, or how white his lips turned, he never said a word about the pain.

“We’ll come back if you get too tired.”

He didn’t answer, and she finally accepted there was no way he would admit he couldn’t go or do whatever needed to be done. Hell, if she didn’t watch him, he’d probably try to climb a roof and start in on the repairs.

Once they started walking, he did seem to regain some of his equilibrium and strength. The hardest part had been getting up from the bed. After nearly three days in bed, he was fidgeting and generally driving crazy the drastically reduced medical staff. Lilly practically begged her to get him outside into the sunshine.

She guided him out of the building they had begun converting into a crude, rudimentary hospital. With meager medical supplies, and none of the equipment from the base infirmary, medical treatment had instantly digressed back several decades. With no Stratum Basale Stimulators or Osteoskeletal Binders, equipment most doctors considered basic to first aid, they had resorted to stitching broken skin with needles-and-thread and encasing broken bones in archaic casts. Things would be tight for a very long time, and they would have to find a way to make due, but at least they were alive, and for the time being, safe.

When they reached the door leading into the common yard of the complex, CJ paused and looked up at Michael. He was already squinting to see past the torn screen that blocked his view from the bright sunlight outside. She smiled, knowing that if there was anyone in their small group who would appreciate the beauty that surrounded them, it would be Michael.

Pulling the door open, she led him onto the long wooden porch that ran the front of the building. The air outside was warmer, the noon sun chasing away the early morning chill they had woken up to since their arrival. Michael slid his arm from her shoulder and stepped to the edge of the porch, leaning his hand into a worn and weathered post beside the steps. The echo of hammering carried across the yard as everyone who was able worked to repair the structures and bring them to livable conditions.

“Where are we?” he asked, his voice low in contrast to the loud banging. “What is this place?”

CJ joined him, taking a step down and squinted against the bright sunlight. After living so deep under ground for so long, the sun was a glorious heat that sank straight to her bones and she loved it. "Tennessee," she finally answered. "Fifty years ago, this was a family vacation resort."

"Vacation?"

She nodded, raising her hand to shield her eyes as she stepped further down. "For one week each year, people would pack up their lives and leave the world behind to come here and escape."

"How did we know to come here? To find this?"

CJ stepped to the earth and turned to see him, still standing beneath the shade of the porch. His gaze was far beyond her to the line of giant trees on the other side of the yard. They were halfway up the particular ridge where the compound sat, and the side of the mountain ascended away from them, rich and verdant with trees so thick they created a pure, green blanket. The air was crisp and fresh, a soft breeze blowing down from the crest carrying the scent of leaves and earth.

"General Castleton grew up in this part of the country. Do you want to see it?"

Michael nodded, the wonder evident in his expression. She hadn't been with him and Nick the first time he had seen snow falling in Colorado, but she imagined his face would have held the same amazement. Living his entire life in a cell, with sand and dust his only 'outside' world, he drank up the outside like a dying man in a desert.

Yet one more way he was his father's son.

She sighed deeply, and Michael's gaze shifted to her. "What are you thinking about?" he asked without skipping a beat.

CJ smiled. "Your father," she answered honestly.

Deep dimples dug into his cheeks as he grinned, stepping down to stand with her. "Show me around." He held out his right arm, and she slid her hand into the bend of his elbow.

They walked slowly around the grounds, CJ watching him carefully to make sure he didn't push too hard. He would have to heal slowly, letting his body do most of the work rather than technology, and she hated seeing the strain it put on him. She wasn't fully convinced he had recovered from his years with the Areth and their tortures, even though he had been free for nearly six months.

She pointed towards the largest of all the buildings; a two-story structure with a wide porch that wrapped around three sides and extended past the ridge to hang over the edge of the mountain, supported by a dozen thick, sturdy beams. "That is basically our new Command, among other functions. We're working on creating some source of power to run the computers, and then we'll move on to general power for all the buildings including the homes."

"Homes?"

"We'll get to that," she said, skimming past his question. "You saw the hospital. We have no supplies to speak of, only survival rations and whatnot that were already stored in the hovers, but we have facilities to hold supplies as we get them. The hovers are in those buildings over there."

Two large buildings, apparently once called 'barns', sat side by side at the far end of the complex. They were half again as high as the main building with huge doors wide enough for the hovers to maneuver through easily.

"We've found some ancient equipment that some of the engineers are working on, to see if they will work. They're gasoline-powered for the most part, and that is going to be hard to come by. Production of petroleum-based products stopped twenty-five or thirty years ago."

They doubled back, heading up the slight incline on a wide, packed-dirt path that wound into the trees to disappear in the shadows. "And up here..." she said, watching him from the corner of her eye as they moved away from the main complex. "Are the homes."

Peeking through the thick copse of trees and brush were roofs and porches spreading out along the path until it curved so deep into the trees nothing else could be seen. They reached the first small house. A two story building with the second story being little more than the space beneath the peaked room. The white paint on the outside had chipped away to reveal aged, gray wood beneath and brown pine needles coated the roof of the porch.

Michael remained quiet as they continued their walk. The cabins were spaced out to make the walk between them pleasant, but not too long. As they walked past one, they saw the hints of the next.

"They all need work. They've sat empty and neglected for decades. Some are beyond repair, but we believe there are enough to house everyone with some room to spare for anyone who may choose to come to this base, versus wherever they ended up. As we reunite the children with their parents, more will come."

"Which is ours?"

She smiled, silently chastising herself for the giddy rush that hit her chest. Some small part of her was afraid he'd choose to live alone. CJ drew a slow breath to steady herself before answering. "Whichever one we pick. Things are pretty wide open right now. There is no power up here, so the homes are lit by candle and burning oil."

They walked further, and CJ did her best to disguise her smile as Michael scrutinized each building they passed. They followed the curve of the path, and another house came into view. Butter yellow paint had once coated the outside, the remnants a fading testimony to the color. The house was on their right, facing across the path to a slight space between the trees. Unlike most of the path they had followed, they could see the mountain ridges spreading away from them.

Michael paused in the path, looking right at the house and left at the view. He shifted his arm and took her hand, leading her towards the shaded porch. His footfalls echoed on the wooden steps, and he used his sneaker to brush away the heavy pile of pine needles and dead leaves that littered the wooden floor. He released her hand to try the tarnished brass doorknob, smiling when the door opened easily.

They stepped into a small front room with a black potbelly stove sitting in the corner. Dirt and leaves covered the wide wooden plank floor, and the debris crunched under their feet. A staircase immediately to their right led to the second floor, but Michael walked past it to the room tucked in the back of the house.

It was an archaic kitchen by the standards of the last several decades. If CJ understood the purpose of these resorts, they were supposed to simplify the lives of those who came here. Another stove sat in the back corner, and a large glass door opened onto a deck. A heavy

wooden table sat against the wall, years of dust covering it. Michael walked the perimeter of the room, gently touching each surface and scanning the walls and ceiling. CJ stood in the doorway, her shoulder leaned against the jamb, and watched.

He found a door off the kitchen leading to a tiny bathroom that would need hours of work and cleaning before it was useable. With a grimace, he closed the door again, his eyes sparking with his grin when he looked back to her.

"Do you like this one?" she asked.

"Let's look upstairs."

He brushed past her to the front room again, heading for the staircase.

"Be careful, Michael," she said quickly, noticing how he had to brace his hand against the wall to climb the steep steps.

He continued up the stairs, and she followed. The landing opened into a hallway that ran from the front to the back of the house with four doors, two on each side. One led to an equally derelict bathroom to the one downstairs, but this had a giant tub that looked to CJ like she could slide into it and be lost for a long time. The other three rooms were bedrooms, with the beds still lying made and ready for use, although coated with dirt, dust and probably some things left behind by the animals of the forest that she preferred not to dwell on too much.

Michael walked to the front window, pushing aside the threadbare and sun-bleached curtains to look at the landscape. CJ stepped beside him and looked herself, seeing the break in the trees that revealed the mountainside beyond.

"Yes," Michael said. "I like this one."

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"We believe we can use the O2 converters from a couple of the hovers to power the electricity generators and at least give us minimal power. It would be enough to fully power the command post as well as all computer systems and communications arrays," Captain Romano, the base's new head of engineering, explained. "If we scavenge two or three converters, I'm pretty sure we can MacGyver a system to power the whole compound with limited resources."

Beverly squinted at her, tilting her head. She looked to CJ. "*What does he mean? MacGyver?*"

CJ relayed Beverly's question and dark color rose in the Captain's cheeks. "I'm sorry, ma'am. That just kind of slipped out. It means figure out a way to do it. It's from an old television series in the late twentieth century. You see, this guy, MacGyver could fix anything with..." She trailed off and shook her head. "Never mind. We'll get it done, ma'am."

Beverly smiled and looked to Doctor Byrne, who wore a wide grin on her face and Beverly caught the slight nudge the petite doctor gave the Captain. Apparently, *she* got the joke.

"How are the computer systems coming?" CJ asked.

Doctor Byrne sat forward, adjusting her glasses on her nose to read her notes. "The mainframe has been set up in the Command Hall and is running on auxiliary back up for the time being. We can go another three or four days on that, but then we'll have to have an alternative source of power or it'll shut down. A files check has shown that we saved approximately seventy-eight-point-nine percent of the previous data from the original database. We're in good shape."

*"What about staples?"* Beverly asked, directing her question to CJ and the General for interpretation. *"Food. Clothing."*

*"If we're thrifty, the rations from the hovercrafts will feed us six or seven days. That's keeping everyone to two meals a day. If we cut back more, we'll go longer, but with the amount of work that's being done, I don't think it's wise to hold back,"* Lilly answered.

*"Then I'd say it's time to take a more detailed look around,"* General Castleton said, tapping his fingertips on the rough-hone tabletop. *"Damian, see who you have to take with you and be ready to go by sunset tomorrow."*

*"Yes, sir."*

Beverly absorbed the information from the rest of the status meeting, asking questions and making notes of the answers as they went, but she couldn't shake the tingling sense of unease that sat heavy on her chest. She felt like she was waiting for something to happen, but she didn't know what. The hairs on the back of her neck bristled, sending a shiver down her spine, and she tried to ignore the unease.

She knew it had to be a reaction to the chaos of the last couple of days. So much had happened she wasn't sure she had quite processed it all yet; the destruction in the infirmary, Victor's arrest, the President's announcement, the Areth attack. Everything collided together to leave her ill at ease.

They ended the meeting of the new command structure, which varied little from the Colorado chain, and went their separate ways. As Lilly headed for the door to return to the hospital, Beverly caught up with her and touched her arm for her attention.

Lilly turned, fatigue and strain evident in the dark circles beneath her eyes. She had been pushing herself hard since their arrival at the new camp, and it was beginning to show. Absently, she ran her hand over her burgeoning stomach and smiled at Beverly.

*"How are you feeling?"* Beverly asked.

*"Tired,"* she said with a sigh and a drop of her shoulders. *"Very, very tired."*

*"Promise me you'll be careful, and not push too hard. You have both CJ and Michael to help you."*

Lilly nodded. *"I know. I am. It just doesn't take as much as it used to before I'm wiped out and need a nap."*

*"How are your patients?"*

*"Most are recovering well, if not slowly. I feel like I've been thrust back in time a hundred years."* Lilly met her gaze for several moments, tilting her head before she spoke again. *"He's having a hard time."*

*"Tell me."*

They walked together outside, the sun slowly setting behind the trees. Long trails of pink and orange swirled together to brighten the sky. It was beautiful. As they moved away from Command Hall, Lilly continued.

*"He fights until he's physically drained and mentally exhausted, and that seems to be when the other side of him emerges. He's not eating well, and not resting. I think if he could do both, he would have the strength to fight harder."*

Beverly started to comment when she stopped short, an icy chill sweeping up her spine. Lilly gripped her arm, immediately breaking the spell, and Beverly blinked shaking it off.

*"Are you all right?"*

Beverly nodded. *"I think the cool evening air gave me a chill."*

Lilly smiled. "I know what you mean. But cold or not, I love it."

Pushing aside the sense of dread that still sat on her shoulders, Beverly focused on Lilly's detailing of the infirmary patients.

## Chapter Twenty-One

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Michael looked up from his notes to see Lilly carefully maneuvering herself to sit across the table from him. At nearly six months pregnant, her stomach was a serious obstacle for sliding into a bench-style seat. He waited until she sat before setting his pencil down.

"Of course," he answered.

Lilly stared at him for several moments before she linked her hands on the table and took a deep breath. "I want to talk about what happened in Colorado."

He diverted his eyes and looked back down at the notes. He had hoped, however fleeting the chance, Lilly would forget what happened in the chaos of their escape. It was something he wanted to bury, to ignore, and never let happen again.

"Michael..." she said softly, and he reluctantly raised his head to look at her. "How long have—" She raised a hand, and let it fall back to the table, shaking her head. "How long have you been able to do that?"

Setting his pencil down, he slid his hands beneath the table and linked his fingers together. "Since about nine weeks after I left New Mexico."

Her lips parted and she stared at him, wide eyes, until he felt heat crawl up the back of his neck. "Why didn't you say something? Why didn't you tell someone?" she asked, her sentences running together in her rush to speak.

Michael clenched his fists where she couldn't see and bit down against the surge of anger he had grown accustomed to quelling. "Because they did this to me."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. How else do you explain it?"

She laid her hand on the table, palm up. "You could have been born with this ability, and never known it. Never realized it."

He shook his head again. "No. I would have known before now."

Lilly shifted her gaze away for a moment, drawing a slow breath, before looking back to him. "Is this why you were so adamant I go over your file?"

Michael curled his fingers around the edge of the table and pushed himself up, moving across the room to the bank of low windows that let in the afternoon sunlight. By the time she rose from her seat and reached him, he had tamped down some of the anger smoldering beneath his skin. He stood at the window, arms crossed, staring into the sunlit forest that spread away as far as he could see.

"Is there anything else I need to know?" she asked, her voice gentle despite the undeniable command that lay beneath it. "Anything else that has changed?"

He avoided looking at her, focusing on a bird in the distance that swooped in and out of the trees, barely a black smudge on the blue sky. "I believe the headaches are connected to... this. They started getting worse just before the first time."

Lilly nodded. "Does CJ know?"

"No," he snapped out. "She doesn't need to."

"Michael, this isn't something to be ashamed of. Why do you want to hide it?"

"I told you."

"No one is going to ostracize you for being telekinetic." He winced when she put an actual name to what he had done. "Maybe... why don't you talk to Beverly? If there is anyone here that can understand how you feel, it would be her."

Michael shook his head. "She was born with a gift. I was..." His lips curled back on his teeth and he drew a sharp breath through his nostrils. "I was created. Like Frankenstein's Monster."

"No!" Lilly said sharply, snapping his attention to her. "Michael, no. You are far, far from a monster. You could no more be a monster than I could be ..." She shrugged her shoulders and chuckled. "A man."

He smiled, looking down at her rounded stomach. Lilly reached for his hand and laid it on the highest point of her abdomen. He immediately felt the slow, gentle roll of her baby beneath his touch as he or she shifted to find a more comfortable position. The bubbling elation he always felt when Lilly allowed him to feel her child, moved up his spine and spread out through his limbs. It was beautiful.

"Regardless of how it happened, I'm thankful for it," she said softly, looking up at him. "I'm thankful for you. You saved us, Michael. You got us out of Colorado alive; you, me and my baby."

Lilly squeezed his hand and smiled, turning away. Michael looked back out the window until she said his name.

"The next time you have one of those headaches, come see me."

He nodded.

"Promise me, Michael."

"I promise."

She smiled and dipped her chin before leaving him alone again. Michael pushed his right hand into his pocket, the painful throb in his left arm forcing him to keep it as still as possible. He leaned his good shoulder into the window frame and stared out into the bright afternoon, the sunlight streaming through the window warming him. He hadn't realized how cold it had been in the Mountain until he was here, where he could feel the warm sun on his back. It was different here than in New Mexico. Here, everything was vibrant and lush, not dried up and dead.

"Hey, handsome. You look like you've got something pretty heavy on your mind."

He was smiling before she finished talking, and turned his head to see Jacqueline Anderson standing a few feet away with her hands set at her hips. Her standard issue green uniform pants hung low on her hips, exposing a thin strip of stomach between her shirt and waistband, a pulse pistol strapped to her thigh. She was an interesting combination of beautiful woman and trained soldier. It intrigued him.

"Jacqueline," he said, enjoying the way her name rolled off his tongue. It tied him up, yet flowed easily at the same time. "I'm glad to see you."

"Yeah?" she said, tilting her head. "Why's that?"

Michael turned to lean back onto the window ledge, his back against the warm glass with his ankles crossed. "I thought of you when we heard about Washington."

She joined him at the window, matching his position on what remained of the wide ledge. Her shoulder brushed against his and she braced her hands on the sill. "Well, aren't you sweet?"

"Just concerned."

She looked across her shoulder at him, her long hair sliding forward to lay straight and smooth along her cheek. Michael met her gaze, smooth warmth spreading out from his chest when one corner of her full lips tipped up in a slight smile. "I was about four blocks from one of the blasts." Her voice dropped to a low husk.

"You weren't hurt."

Jacqueline shook her head. "Nothing worth mentioning. I save all my big injuries for you."

"How is your shoulder?" He shifted his gaze from her face to the bare skin of her arm and the back of her shoulder where the tank curved in towards her spine. The skin appeared smooth and he raised his hand to trace his thumb over the texture.

She drew a deep breath. "Fine."

"Good." He pulled his hand back from her shoulder. Michael settled against the window again, resting his hand on the sill between them. She sat close enough that he felt the warmth of her body against the bare skin of his arm, her fingers just close enough to his to brush together. "How long will you be here?"

"Until tomorrow. I'm heading to Florida for a bit. Pressure is too high around Washington. I've got some connections down there that might help us out."

Michael nodded and looked to see Caitlin come through the doorway. She saw them and raised her hand in a wave before crossing the room.

"Hey, Jackie. Good to see you."

"Hey, doc."

"Michael, could you help me in the other room for a few minutes? I'd ask Lilly but she's gone to the main hall to check on Victor."

"Of course," Michael answered, standing away from the window.

"Victor..." Jacqueline said. "He the Areth prisoner?"

"He's not really a prisoner," Caitlin explained.

"You got him locked in an old wine cellar. Sounds like a prisoner to me. By what I hear, he should be someplace a hell of a lot worse than a wine cellar."

Caitlin's gaze shifted to Michael, but he didn't look at her, glancing down to hold in the argument that was almost immediately on his lips.

"We don't know anything for sure," Caitlin said.

"What the hell is there to know? That son of a bitch brought his *brethren* down on our heads, and now he's trying to play some kind of damn sympathy card. It's bullshit. All Areth are nothing but murdering, lying bastards."

Michael raised his head and looked straight at Jacqueline. "All Areth?"

"Damn straight. I've never met an Areth I'd trust half as far as I could throw him."

"Michael," Caitlin said softly, almost so low he didn't hear her. She laid her hand on his arm, but he took a step back, breaking the contact.

"Just look at what they did to Washington. They just took forty-five years of bullshit and deceit and threw it in our faces. Called us ignorant humans. Their plan was to take over

the whole damn planet from the get-go. We know what they've been doing, except they're not even trying to hide it anymore. 'Cept I don't think we really *do* know what they've done; not Phoenix, not anyone."

"We're getting a good idea," Caitlin said. "But you're right, Jackie. We don't know the whole truth. I'm just not sure we're any better than the Areth if we lump them all together and see every Areth as evil."

"You show me an Areth that doesn't have some hidden agenda; I'll sell you a park bench along the Potomac." Jacqueline said, standing with her arms crossed. "Oh, that's right. The Potomac is nothing but a mud puddle now."

Michael ground his teeth together before he trusted himself to speak. "What about a half-human half-Areth?"

"I thought they couldn't procreate."

He snapped his eyes to her. "What if they did?"

"Half-Areth. Whole Areth. All the same to me," she said with a shrug.

"Jacqueline," Caitlin began.

"No, Caitlin," Michael said just beneath his breath and she looked at him, the 'v' forming between her eyes as she studied him. Before she could say anything more, he brushed between her and Jacqueline and left them behind.

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His skin crawled, sweat running down the middle of his back despite the dank coolness surrounding him. As he bit down, pain shot in sharp jabs from his jaw down his neck, finding the means of control in whatever he could.

"You aren't eating again, Victor. You're going to lose all the weight you gained back in the last few weeks."

"I can't keep it down," he said through clenched teeth.

Doctor Quinn stood beside him as he sat on the edge of his cot bed, circling a bioscan reader over his back, apparently one of the few medical devices that had made it out of Colorado. He heard her heavy sigh as she switched the scan off.

"You've got fluid forming in your lungs. The dampness down here isn't good for you, especially after all the smoke you took in during the attack."

Victor chuckled wryly. "I asked for a better room, but this was all they had available." A sharp pain stabbed him from temple to temple and he groaned, holding his head in his hands. A series of hacking coughs pulled at his chest and made his ribs hurt.

"I'm going to bring you some antibiotics to try and ward off whatever is brewing in your lungs."

He shook his head. "No. Save what you have for someone who needs it more."

"I have it for all my patients. You're my patient, Victor."

He looked up at her. "No, Doctor Quinn."

"Next to Michael, you have to be the most stubborn patient I've ever had," she said as she packaged up her meager equipment. "Beverly is waiting to see you."

A rush of sweet anticipation collided head-on with his desire to keep her as far away from the twisted war he fought as possible.

"Can I send her down?"

Victor closed his eyes against his own weakness, and nodded. As much as he wanted to keep his distance to make sure she didn't get hurt, he yearned to be near her and his ravaged soul begged for just a few moments of her touch. He was selfish and thoughtless, but it was easier to fight the Demon inside than deny how much he wanted Beverly near him.

Doctor Quinn left the cell, and the security officer that had stood at the ready during the examination closed the gate behind her with a clank that echoed through the cellar. Victor stayed in his place, his back hunched and his head bowed, listening to Doctor Quinn's ascending footsteps on the stairs and the door opening. Moments later, the door closed and Beverly came, her steps so soft and graceful he barely heard her.

But he felt her.

Felt her presence filling the dark space and chasing away the chill that had settled into his bones. She came to the gate and stood, waiting for him to look up. Chastising himself again for his weakness, Victor stood and went to her, taking the hand she pushed through the openings before he ever reached the steel. Her fingers wrapped around his, squeezing gently and he immediately felt the darkness edge back.

Just her touch eased his battle.

He wanted to hold on forever.

He knew eventually the darkness would poison her, or he wouldn't be strong enough to hold it back and she would be hurt again. He had done enough damage when he stole her voice. What else could he take before it was too much for her to forgive or for him to live with?

"I miss you," she signed with her free hand, reaching through to brush his chest with her fingertips.

Victor caught her fingers and raised them to his lips, tasting her with a brief kiss. "I've missed you."

*"I've been speaking with General Castleton. We are preparing something better for you. It's not right to keep you down here, and Lilly says you're ill."*

He shook his head. "Your people need to focus on other things."

She smiled, but it was without the spark that usually reached her green eyes. *"Yes, much needs to be done. You need to be somewhere else before you grow too sick for Lilly to treat. She told me you refused the medicine."*

Victor stilled her hands by sandwiching them between his. "I don't want to talk about that. Just let me enjoy being with you."

She slid her hand free to lay it against his cheek, sweet warmth spreading over his scalp and down his neck from the point of contact. More and more, he felt his strength recover and his control take dominance. He leaned as close as he could to the bars, pulling her near until they stood together, the bars pressed between them.

"I want to kiss you," he said softly so his voice wouldn't carry up the stairs to the guard he knew stood post, listening even if he wasn't watching. "I want to touch you." Victor curled his fingers into the fabric of her top at her waist. "You are like water to me; I need you more than I ever knew until I couldn't have you."

*"You will again. This isn't permanent."*

Victor hitched back his chin and studied the structure of the steel door imbedded in the roofing overhead. He looked back to her. "It looks very permanent to me, *Cusbibil*."

*"You said that once before," she signed, keeping her motions small, staying within his restrained hold. "What does it mean? Is it your native language? I can read Areth, but this word is unfamiliar to me."*

Victor shook his head. "No, it's not Areth. Would it sound strange if I told you I don't know the language, only the meaning?"

*"What does it mean?"*

He raised his hand and laid his palm to her cheek, stroking his thumb across her lower lip, watching intently as her lips parted and her breath warmed his skin. Oh, for just a few moments of her in his arms and he knew he would feel peace for at least a little while!

*"Beloved."*

Tears welled in her bright green eyes. She pressed herself to the gate, and through the cold steel, they managed one brief, bittersweet kiss. His body demanded more, his soul yearned for it, but he knew on some deeper level he would never know the pleasure of holding Beverly fully in his arms again.

Humans had no idea the gift they held when they held each other.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Beverly's heart was in her throat as she stood behind the chair of the base communications officer and watched the horrific images play on the screen. Reports were coming in from Phoenix contacts all over the globe, and the news reports confirmed it all in gory renditions. The Areth were taking over, and they intended to make it clear they would tolerate no opposition.

The same devastating weapons that had obliterated most of Washington had been turned on some of the major cities of the world.

London. Geneva. New York. Los Angeles. Montreal.

Thousands of lives snuffed out in fire and fury of apocalyptic proportions.

It was hard to reconcile the current reality of death and destruction with the relatively quiet lives they had lived just days before. Yes, they had a mission and intended to expose the Areth for what they were; murderous, deceiving threats to humans across the globe, but Beverly wasn't sure anyone had conceived this kind of one-hundred-eighty degree turn.

She couldn't let it show, but doubt sat heavy in her heart that neither Phoenix-nor anyone else-could save them now.

CJ stepped beside her and Beverly glanced sideways, catching the look of shock and grief that immediately washed over her expression. She understood it and recognized it because she felt it, her own emotions overriding the mutual feelings from those around her. Within moments, Michael joined them to stand on the other side of CJ.

"Are there any reports from Paris?" CJ asked.

Lieutenant Carlson, the communications officer, glanced between CJ, Beverly and General Castleton. "We're just receiving reports now, ma'am. They hit Paris approximately two hours ago. The city is engulfed in flames and has been leveled from the Arc de Triomphe to Bastille."

CJ swayed, and both Beverly and Michael moved to support her. In the two years since CJ had joined Phoenix, she and Beverly had spoken many times about their families and their pasts. She knew CJ had been born in Paris, and her family-at least her parents-lived there still. Their relationship had never been close, and she hadn't spoken to them more than an annual letter in years. The estrangement would do little to ease the shock of losing them so violently. If anything, it could make it worse for her.

General Castleton shook his head, the lines around his eyes deep. "The damn bastards are killing just to kill. They've proven their point."

"Do we dare send our people out now?" Beverly asked.

"We have no choice. We're down to less than two days rations, and we have children and injured people to take care of." He ran his hand over his white hair. "I want all available personnel in the common room in half an hour. Everyone deserves to know exactly what we're facing."

A nearby serviceman nodded in acknowledgement and left them to deliver the message to the remaining compliment of the new Tennessee base, numbering less than seven dozen. For the moment, there was nothing to do but wait for all personnel to gather. Walking

together, Beverly and Michael moved CJ to a nearby table and she sank down heavily. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears and she drew a long, shaky breath.

"This is insanity," Beverly read on her lips. "I don't understand why they are doing this. We always suspected they had the power to destroy us if they wanted to, but why carry on the façade for nearly five decades? They could have had all the power from the day they arrived. Why play the games? And why kill us in such mass numbers?"

*"Until we know their motives, we're all in the dark."*

"Are you all right?" Michael asked, his arm still protectively around CJ's shoulders.

CJ nodded, her cheeks still pale and her eyes shining. "I will be. I had hoped that someday this would end and I could see them again."

Beverly nodded her understanding and squeezed CJ's hand. A few more moments passed before they left Command Hall for the adjacent common room. The room was the largest in the main building, with several tables, couches and chairs scattered around the room. The center wall hosted a large fieldstone fireplace, the hearth alone over six feet wide with a chimney that disappeared through the vaulted wood ceiling. Today, the hearth sat cold and black.

Phoenix personnel were already filtering into the room, finding seats at tables and on couches. Beverly left CJ and Michael at one of the small tables and made her way through the maze of furniture and people to the hearth where General Castleton now stood, speaking with Damian Ali.

When she reached them, Damian nodded and smiled, stepping back to take his seat in a nearby chair. The General turned to her, looking more tired and worn than she had ever seen him. He shouldered the responsibility for the attack on the Mountain, even though the blame wasn't his. The Areth had declared war, and they were some of the first casualties. Robert Castleton didn't believe in collateral damage, he saw every one of his people as vital and important, and hated the loss of any single soul. They were scattered now, to the four winds, and it would take time to reorganize and pull together again.

Some of the former Colorado staff had relocated as far as South America, with a small handful continuing their voyage to join other Phoenix bases on other continents. Those that remained were a ragtag group of men, women and children who still held the steadfast determination they always had.

She was proud to be a part of it.

"I sure as hell hope we're doing the right thing, Lee-Lee," the General said, falling back on her nickname as he often did when he needed to step back from his resolute military persona. "Damn well doesn't feel like it."

She laid her hand on his arm and smiled softly. *"We'll do what we have to. There is still hope."*

He slowly shook his head and scanned the thickening crowd. Save for the children and those left to attend them, and the infirmed in the base hospital, it appeared that everyone had arrived. If not, the stragglers would be brought up to speed later.

"First, I want to thank every one of you for the effort and diligence you have put into bringing this new base to working capacity," General Castleton said. "I'm proud to be the commander of such a fine group of individuals."

"There's no point in sugar coating the crap that has gone down the last few days. You put a bunch of roses on a pile of dung, you've still got a pile of dung. There's no way to make any of this look good, except maybe the fact that the Areth have shown their true faces. I've never kept my people in the dark, and I'm not about to start now."

Beverly shifted her attention from the General for a brief moment, scanning the faces of everyone in attendance. The expressions ranged from solid resolve to anxious anticipation.

"The Areth have attacked several major cities globally. Paris. London. New York. And others. We've received several reports in just the last few hours. Things aren't good."

He went on to provide the details as they knew them. She felt the inundating waves of emotion as they swept through the room as each individual absorbed the news.

"I know most of you are too young to remember what things were like before the Areth, but I'm not. I remember when the ground we stand on now was part of the United States of America. We were a strong, proud nation who believed in freedom and the cost required to fight for it. I believe that spirit still exists, and now that we are a united world we can all tap into that strength and become one force against these bastards."

Like a cold January wind, a deathly chill skimmed over Beverly's senses and the hairs on her arms stood on end. She stifled her gasp and took a step back from the General until her calves bumped the raised ledge of the hearth, bracing her hands behind her against the cool stone.

"These sons of bitches think they've won, but we're far from defeat. We didn't come this far to lay belly up and die. I don't know about you, but if I go down, I damn well plan on taking as many of those murdering bastards with me as I can."

She watched as nearly everyone in the room clapped their hands, some standing to their feet. The combined emotions shifted to something warmer, determined; and with the swing, the malevolence surged again, stealing her breath. Beverly scanned the room, expecting to see Victor hiding in some corner even though her rational mind knew he was locked away in the damp cellar beneath them.

Could the darkness in his mind reach so far?

Damian rose from his chair to join the General, and Beverly realized she had missed part of his speech. She swallowed against the taste of bitter adrenaline in the back of her throat and stepped away from the hearth, clenching her fists behind her as she once again stood beside the General.

"I was a Marine before this whole planet had a lobotomy and went to hell," the General continued. "A soldier for the United States. We had a prayer we said when we prepared for battle. The Areth have convinced a hell of a lot of people that faith and God are stupid notions for the weak minded, but every time I hear crap like that I remember something my grandmother said to me. Seven days without prayer makes one weak. We need strength now, we need faith in a power greater and stronger than any of us."

"This prayer was for the Marines, but today I say we all need it just as much as we did forty years ago."

Heads bowed through the large room; some clenched their hands before them as others laid their palms over their hearts.

*"Almighty Father, whose command is over all and whose love never fails, make me aware of Thy presence and obedient to Thy will. Keep me true to my best self, guarding me against dishonesty in*

*purpose and deed and helping me to live so that I can face my fellow Marines, my loved ones, and Thee without shame or fear. Protect my family. Give me the will to do the work of a Marine and to accept my share of responsibilities with vigor and enthusiasm. Grant me the courage to be proficient in my daily performance. Keep me loyal and faithful to my superiors and to the duties my country and the Marine Corps have entrusted to me. Make me considerate of those committed to my leadership. Help me to wear my uniform with dignity and let it remind me daily of the traditions which I must uphold. If I am inclined to doubt, steady my faith. If I am tempted, make me strong to resist. If I should miss the mark, give me courage to try again. Guide me with the light of truth and grant me wisdom by which I may understand the answer to my prayer."*

The vicious punch of anger that slammed into her nearly knocked Beverly back but she instinctively reached out to grip the General's hand. He squeezed her fingers and raised his head, the strength of his resolve fortifying her enough to allow her the moment she needed to recover. She blinked her eyes, trying to draw a breath through the tight band that tightened around her lungs.

The antagonism and rage was palpable.

The crowd slowly dissipated, returning to their tasks but the heavy weight didn't decrease. Beverly scanned the faces of everyone as they passed her by, wondering how none of them could feel the malicious presence.

"My people will be ready to leave at sundown," Damian was saying to the General and Beverly forced herself to focus.

She couldn't be feeling what she was. It made no sense. Unless the darkness in Victor's mind had become so powerful, it could reach her even here. Her heart pounded in her chest, desperate to break away. Even though she knew he didn't want her to see him in his lost moments, she had to know.

As General Castleton and Damian spoke of final arrangements, she released his hand and tried to slip from the room as inconspicuously as possible. Lilly reached her first, deep lines of concern marring her brow beneath her blonde hair.

"Bev, you okay?" she asked, blocking Beverly's escape route.

Beverly swallowed and half-nodded half-shook her head, her own mind not knowing the answer.

"You look like you've seen a ghost. What's up?"

"I need to go. I'm sorry."

"Hold on," Lilly said, touching her arm. "Talk to me. Beverly..."

"I will. I'll be back soon. Stay here."

Lilly nodded and let her go. CJ and Michael joined her and Beverly felt their combined stares on her as she tried not to run from the room. She hurried down the hall that joined the kitchen to the common room, stopping short when she burst into the large cooking area. Several people glanced in her direction and she paused near the cellar door, drawing a steadying breath. With a shaky smile, she raised her hand in a small wave and the workers waved back, returning to their duties.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Beverly leaned her shoulder into the wall and realized the heavy presence had eased, no longer smothering her. She only hoped Victor had regained his control before she ventured down the stairs. With a forced smile and a nod, she greeted the guard who stood at the cellar door. He released the lock and opened it for her. She took

the stairs carefully, thankful for the power that had been routed at least for the main building that allowed her to see without candles and took Victor out of the darkness.

She navigated the narrow stairs, bending to glance towards his cell as soon as her head cleared the low ceiling. Victor saw her and stood off his cot, waiting for her at the metal gate until she reached the landing. Despite her overwhelming desire to rush to him, to lay her hands on him as best she could and feel his presence as much as she felt his touch, she stayed back to study him.

"Beverly," he said, his dark eyes squinting as he watched her watch him. "Is there something wrong?"

She felt the battle that always warred within him, the Demon that continually beat at his defenses to be free, but Victor was absolutely in control no matter how hard it was. The suffocating cold that had slammed into her in the common room was not here. Victor extended his arm through the grate, holding his hand out palm up to her.

*"Cusbibil, come to me. Please."*

A cold wave of realization hit her and her heart pounded furiously as she tried to accept it. She crossed the space in two strides, gripping his hand as she stood against the bars that kept them apart. Beverly stared into his eyes, shadowed with concern as his gaze shifted over her face.

"What is wrong?" he asked again.

*"Victor, I need your honesty."*

He nodded. "You have it."

*"Have you held control today? I know the battle is fierce, and I need the truth."*

Victor swallowed, running the tip of his tongue across his lower lip as his gaze shifted down. "I've struggled, but I've been in control. The more you come to me, the more I see you, the easier the fight."

*"Even just now? Before I came?"*

He nodded. "Yes. Beverly, why do you need to know this?"

*"I felt it, the darkness, not ten minutes ago when I was upstairs. It was as real and as near as when I've seen it take you."*

"Where were you?"

She pointed upward towards the ceiling that made the floor of the common room above. *"The entire base was gathered for General Castleton."*

Victor gripped her shoulders, pressing himself against the bars, the intensity of his expression sending a new chill over her skin. "Have you felt this before when you weren't with me?"

Beverly nodded, bringing her hands up to sign in the small space between her chest and the gate. *"Yes. Once when we were in Colorado, the evening before everything happened. And once since coming to Tennessee, but I thought I was just sensing the unease of everyone, or perhaps I still sensed you even though we were apart."*

Victor jerked back and stalked away from the gate, one hand on his hip as he laid the other across the back of his neck. He shook his head as he paced and Beverly curled her hand around the bars, trying to see him in the dim light. Finally, she slammed her hand against the bars several times to get his attention.

When he turned back to face her, she signed quickly. *"What is it? Victor, tell me what is going on?"*

He came back to her, wrapping his hand around hers that still held the gate. "Beverly, I need to speak to you and your General. Immediately."

*"Why? Victor..."*

"Don't question me on this. I will explain when I am with your General."

He winced and sucked in a sharp breath as Beverly felt the angry thrust of his Demon. Victor laid his forehead against the cold bar, huffing each breath as he fought to maintain his dominance. Beverly instinctively reached for him and laid her hand against his cheek. He held it there, his lips to her palm as his breath warmed her skin.

"I have sworn I would not ask this of you." His mouth brushed against her palm as he spoke. "But I need you to help me, Beverly. I need you to help me hold back the Demon, because there are truths it doesn't want me to say and it will fight to keep me silent."

Reluctantly, she slid her other hand from beneath his to sign in abbreviated motions. *"I don't understand."*

"There is another here. Another Areth."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

*They'll kill you now. You've signed your own death warrant. Fool!*

Victor gripped the iron gate, his hands cramping with the force, and hissed each breath through his teeth. He wouldn't give in. Not now. His blood burned like acid beneath his skin, every beat of his heart a cacophony pounding inside his skull.

"Please, Beverly. Hurry," he said to the empty cellar. Without her, without her touch, he felt his dominance slipping.

The cellar door opened and he lifted his head to watch the staircase. Time was running out, not just for him but for all of them. Two armed guards descended the stairs in front of Beverly, their weapons already drawn, but he kept his gaze on her. She motioned with hurried hands for one of them to unlock the gate.

"Step back," he barked.

With Herculean effort, Victor released the bars and took three steps back with his hands fisted at his side. Each breath was a struggle, each second pushing him closer to the edge.

*Dead. You'll be dead. Kill them now and escape. Do it! Do it!*

Victor closed his eyes and grit his teeth until pain shot down the side of his neck. The metal clank of the lock tumblers disengaging echoed in the small space and the hinges creaked as the guard pulled open the decades-old door. He felt her presence moments before she was there, her delicate hands pressed to his face. Immediately, the flood ebbed enough to allow him to open his eyes, his vision filled with Beverly's beautiful face.

He wanted to pull her into his arms, to bury his face in the curve of her throat and draw in the warm scent that clung to her skin; wanted it because he had needed it for days, and wanted it because he knew what he was about to do might destroy any chance of ever touching her again.

His Demon spoke truth on one thing... when the humans knew the true legacy of the Areth, their hate for him would grow exponentially. Including Beverly. Her heart was open and her soul forgiving, but everyone had their limitations.

*"General Castleton insisted on the guards,"* she signed, the silent apology in her eyes.

Victor curled his hands over hers, holding them to his chest. "I want them here."

She nodded and smiled, linking their fingers together to walk hand-in-hand. The guards, trepidation tensing their expressions, stepped aside to allow the two of them to exit the cell. Victor squinted against the bright daylight at the top of the stairs, his eyes accustomed only to the dim light of the cellar. Beverly's gentle tug guided him down a short hall, the two guards on their heels.

The hallway opened into a large room with vaulted ceilings that Victor only vaguely remembered seeing when they brought him here. The inhibitors had worn off and his Demon had assaulted him with a vengeance, making the trip just a shadow in his mind. General Castleton stood near a large fireplace, his hands pushed into the front pockets of his jacket, and he turned when they approached. His jaw was set firm, his eyes sharp and studying, and Victor knew he already had doubts about anything he might say.

*Killer! They'll know what you are!*

Pain pierced his skull like an arrow shot straight up his spine and Victor cried out, collapsing to his knees with a crack as he hit the floor. Beverly moved with him, trying to support him as best she could. The guards lunged forward, the instant snap and hum of their pulse chargers echoing through the room.

"No!" she shouted, and the sound of her rounded tone snapped Victor from his darkness.

The guards stopped, but kept their weapons trained on him. Beverly wrapped her arms around him, urging him to drape his arm across her shoulders. He leaned on her, using a nearby chair for leverage to stand. Victor looked down at her, the shock of hearing her voice distracting him for a moment. Her hand in his had been the first push his strength needed to fight the onslaught, and her arms around him fed his control.

They reached the hearth, the General's speculative eyes still on them.

"I don't like this, Victor," he said, his voice heavy with contempt. "But I'm doing it because Beverly is adamant, and I didn't make her my second in command to doubt her judgment. Not when it counts."

Victor glanced to the guards, and assumed the General considered them trustworthy. He had to allow their presence, needed them there to assure himself as much as anyone else that Beverly wouldn't get hurt if he lost his control.

"Thank you, General," he said, panting for breath. Nausea twisted his gut and his skin burned, but he didn't care if his Demon finally managed to kill him as long as they knew the truth and the danger they were in.

"Now, you want to tell me what this is all about?"

"The truth, General."

No!

He pulled Beverly closer, partially out of need and partially out of instinct, pressing his fingers into her shoulder. The pain was excruciating, tearing him apart from the inside out. He stumbled forward, pulling her with him, to find support against the end of one of the large couches. Beverly looked up at him, her eyes filled with moisture.

"Help me, please," he asked, hating the words as they passed his lips. "I'm so sorry."

She nodded, her hand sliding up his chest to rest over his heart. A small moan whispered in the back of her throat and the soothing warmth of her touch spread out from the point of contact, pushing the darkness back enough to let him think. Victor drew a slow breath and swallowed against the disgust that choked him; disgust for himself, asking her to touch the foul malevolence.

"I don't know how long I can maintain my control, and I won't ask Beverly to hold it back for long," he said, focusing on the General while his thoughts were clear and the pain was bearable. "General Castleton, I believe you have an Areth among you and if you don't find them, you all are in danger."

"Beverly told me that's what you claim, but it can't be. I know all my people."

Victor shook his head. "They may have not always been Areth."

The General took a step towards him. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? You can't *become* Areth. Either you're human or you're Areth."

"That is the truth the Areth have hidden for over forty years. More than that, they've hidden it for over two-thousand years. General, the Areth are near-biological matches to

humans not because we are your ancestors, but because we are human. Our bodies are human. It's only our minds that aren't."

Beverly tensed in his arms, and he knew she had read his confession on his lips. Even as he focused on the General, and the words he needed to say, he memorized the feel of her touch and the warmth she wrapped around him.

"Explain," the General snapped.

"The Areth come from a solar system on the other side of the galaxy approximately ten-thousand light years from the Umani home planet; the coordinates I gave Colonel Tanner. We were at war with them for hundreds of years, and ultimately the Areth lost. We were a dying race, products of our own desire to be immortal. We had spent thousands of years cloning our bodies, genetically altering ourselves in search of perfection. All we did was kill ourselves. Our bodies could no longer withstand the duplication process, and we lost the ability to procreate. If we didn't do something, we would have died off.

"Our leaders were bitter from their losses to the Umani, and in an attempt to save ourselves, and in some way find revenge against the Umani, we traveled the galaxy to Earth. That was over two-thousand of your years ago."

"What the hell are you saying? That you've been here for two-thousand years?"

Victor shook his head. "No, I'm saying we *were* here. Your planet was primitive, your people sparse and spread all over the globe. Our scientists and leaders culled the population, taking what they considered the best specimens: the strongest, the healthiest, and the most intelligent. And from those humans, we recreated ourselves."

"*Cross breeding?*" Beverly took her hand from his heart only long enough to make the sign.

"No. We had lost the ability to try anything so simple. What we did was far worse, and far more revolting."

His body seized, overcome by another wave of pain as his Demon lashed out. Beverly's fingers curled into his shirt and he slumped against the couch, his vision hazed in red as his blood pounded hard through his chest, his heart aching. Images flashed in his mind, torturing him with their gruesome detail. Men and women screaming in agony as their identities were ripped from them, some dying terrible deaths when the process didn't work. His own voice screamed at the images, echoing in his mind through the memory.

*You did this! They'll know and they'll kill you for it! Kill her! Choke the life from her! Murderer!*

"No!" he shouted, pressing his hands to his eyes until the sockets ached with the pressure.

Then they were gone, overtaken by the intense thrust of Beverly's mind.

Victor sucked in air, desperate to regain his control. Hands held him up, and when he opened his eyes, he was shocked to see General Castleton at his side. As soon as he regained his legs, the General stepped back with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Continue," he said, his voice level and firm.

"*He's too weak,*" Beverly signed with one hand. "*He can't continue like this. It will kill him.*"

Victor shook his head. "No, *Cusbibil*. I have to." He slid his hand from her shoulder to the back of her head beneath her hair, leaning into her for one brief moment of respite. "Our

scientists developed a procedure to divide the consciousness from the body, in essence creating a way to store the greatest minds of my people in an attempt to save us from extinction. When we found your world, they reversed the process."

"Holy shit."

"Our original forms look nothing like this. Vaguely humanoid, yes, but we are not your ancestors. Our people didn't come to Earth in its infancy and populate a growing world; we harvested your ancestors and took their bodies for our own." He kept talking despite the shocked expression on the General's face and the subtle tensing of Beverly in his arms. He couldn't look at her, couldn't bear to know what he might see in her eyes. "The Umani, the race I told you was imperative to contact, they are your ancestors. They came here as explorers, pilgrims. My leaders took your bodies in restitution for losing a war we had no business fighting in the first place."

General Castleton turned away to lean his hand against the wooden mantle that protruded from the fieldstone fireplace. Victor swallowed against the dry scrape in his throat and forced himself to look at Beverly. Her green eyes, glistening with the tears that slowly ran down her cheeks, stared at him but he couldn't read the emotions he saw in them. Despite the tears, her eyes gave away nothing: no contempt, no fear, no anger, and no understanding.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, thankful she didn't have to hear him. "I wish I could have told you sooner, but I was afraid."

She swallowed and wiped her fingers across her cheeks before signing. *"Why now? Are you no longer afraid?"*

"No, I'm just more afraid that something might happen to you if I didn't speak."

General Castleton spun around, marching towards them, his face flushed bright with anger. "What the hell happened to the minds of the people you took?"

Victor swallowed, meeting the man's gaze. "Overwritten. All trace of previous person; their thought, memories, all of it is wiped out. Nothing remains. Usually."

"What the hell does that mean?"

He clenched his teeth, the suppressed consciousness that he had tried to deny for so long surging out one more time to steal his control. "I believe that the affliction I have struggled with for years, that has nearly destroyed me since I left New Mexico, is a buried consciousness trying to be in control."

"You're telling me that when you lose it, when you attacked and tried to kill my people, when you destroyed the drugs in the infirmary and killed Lieutenant Riley, it was this *other* mind? Your human mind?"

Beverly sucked in a sharp breath, pulling back from him as she shook her head. Victor looked from the General to her, the grief of loss already settling into his heart.

"No," she signed. *"I understand now. I see."* She pulled her gaze from him to look at the General. *"The destruction in the infirmary, everything that happened that night... Victor didn't do it."*

"His *other* brain did —"

"No. Don't you see? I told him I felt an *Areth* mind, and I thought it was his so powerful it touched me wherever I was. But it wasn't, it's another *Areth*. Someone has been taken over just as he said... They created their own spy. They infiltrated us with our own people. Victor didn't do those things. The other *Areth* did them, set Victor up so he would appear guilty, and blamed him because they knew we would assume it was him. They hid behind him."

Victor nodded, taking pride in the fact that she saw the truth, even if the truth was worse than the lie. "General, you must find out who it is. They brought the Areth to Colorado, and if given the chance, they'll bring the Areth here."

"You expect me to believe this bullshit?"

"You have to. General, you have to."

"How the hell am I supposed to figure out which one of my people have become a traitor?"

"Beverly. She senses the unrest in the mind of the joined. If what I suspect is true, it hasn't been very long and the connection may still be weak. Or, the mind of the host is strong. The imbalance is what she feels; she feels it in me, and she feels it in the spy among you."

"Use me to find them."

"Where the hell do I begin?"

Beverly's eyes rounded, and Victor could almost feel the realization shift through her. *"Damian's team. They were the last to leave the Mountain, and to return again, before everything happened."*

"Holy shit. And they're scheduled to leave in—" He glanced at the timepiece on his wrist. "Thirty-two minutes."

"If they know you've figured them out, they're going to be ten times more dangerous. If they can't bring the Areth here, they'll do whatever they can on their own." He nodded towards the two guards who stood silent and watchful just feet away. "John, go gather Captain Ali's team and bring them back here. Tell them I need to see them once more before they leave."

"Yes, sir."

"Do I need to say how important it is none of them know...?"

"No, sir."

Exhaustion pulled at Victor, making it hard for him to remain on his feet despite Beverly's support and the couch beside him. She seemed to sense his fatigue, and helped him move around the end of the couch to sink heavily into the cushions. Despite whatever revulsion she had to feel for him now, she stayed at his side with her hands consistently remaining on him.

General Castleton sat on the edge of a nearby chair, his elbows resting on his legs as he hunched forward. He shook his head, his lips pulled so tight white lines framed his mouth. "How the hell do we undo this?"

Victor swallowed, the pounding in his head destroying his equilibrium. "I'm sorry, General. There is no way to reverse the process. Or, at least, we've never created one."

"Damn."

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"Do you take that dog everywhere with you?"

Michael looked up from the bioscan reader in his hand to see Jacqueline standing near the doorway of the small space they had converted to a patient room. Amber was asleep in one of the beds and he held his finger to his lips as he turned off the reader. With Dog on his heels, a place he hadn't strayed very far from since arriving in Tennessee, Michael motioned for Jacqueline to follow him into the hall. He pulled the door shut and finally turned his attention to her.

"Dog hasn't wanted to be very far from me since his escape from Colorado," he explained in a low voice. "The patients like his company, so unless I'm doing something he really can't be around, he's with me."

Jacqueline crouched down and held her hand out for Dog to sniff. His tail immediately went into motion and he wiggled closer to her for all the attention she was willing to impart. She scratched his head and ruffled his fur, looking up at Michael with a wide smile.

"I haven't seen a dog in forever, except for maybe the occasional unfriendly stray. He's a friendly one. Aren't you, boy?" Dog whimpered in response and licked her knuckles.

Michael set the reader on a nearby table and pushed his hands into his pockets, watching her. After a few minutes, she ruffled Dog's hair one last time and stood up, curling her hair behind her ears. Jacqueline met his eyes, staring at him for a moment, then looked away and crossed her arms beneath her breasts.

"I'm leaving in a few minutes. Figured I'd head out with Ali's team again."

He drew a slow breath through his nose before speaking. "Be safe."

She smiled, one corner of her lips ticking up slightly. Just enough to form a small dimple in her cheek. "I do my best. For some reason, the Areth don't seem to like me," she said with a tilt of her chin and a mock-puzzled look.

Michael chuckled, but focused on not letting himself enjoy her company too much. Even if it were for just a few minutes. "Are you still going to Florida?"

"Sure am. Should be nice this time of year."

"When will you be back?"

"Will you miss me?" she asked with another small smirk, tilting her chin up as she leaned towards him.

"Yes," he answered, despite his resolve of moments before.

"Even though I pissed you off yesterday?"

Michael shook his head. "You didn't."

"Yeah? You always walk away like that when you're not pissed?"

"I wasn't angry."

"If you say so, handsome." She stepped closer, until their bodies nearly touched, and tilted her head to angle her lips close to his. Michael drew a slow breath, her scent filling his senses. "I wouldn't want to leave with any hard feelings."

"Careful," he said, his voice rough and deep.

"Why?" She laid her hands on his stomach, and he could no more control the involuntary tensing of his muscles than he could stop his next heartbeat. She smiled, her breath warming his cheek. "I can trust you, Michael."

He said nothing, clenching his teeth as he met her gaze. Her scent was intoxicating, her touch spread heat through him, but her words echoed in his head. *All Areth are murdering, lying bastards. I wouldn't trust them half as far as I could throw them.*

"You sure know how to give a girl a complex," she said as she pulled back. "Might make a girl thing she's not attractive."

"You're beautiful."

She smiled, slow and sexy and heat spread out from his gut. "So... what?"

He parted his lips and slowly inhaled. "My mother was Areth."

Jacqueline stiffened, but she didn't pull back. He watched her as her gaze shifted over his face and he could all but see the battle behind her dark brown eyes. "Oh," she said as she released her breath. A tense smile pulled at her lips, but it lacked her usual spark. "And I said..." Her voice trailed off as her eyes slid up to meet his stare. She hitched up her chin. "I didn't know."

Michael swallowed. "Not many do."

She leaned into him, the tension leaving her body, and Michael fought the urge to pull his hands from his pockets and test the warmth of her skin where her shirt exposed her stomach. "Why do I get the feeling there's a lot about you that not many know?"

He couldn't answer, his mind and body flaring to life beneath her touch.

"This is definitely a conversation we're continuing."

"Are you sure?"

Jacqueline nodded. "Damn straight." She leaned into him and Michael pulled his hands free, pressing his palm to her back. Her skin emanated heat and was smooth beneath the fingertips graced with the pleasure of slipping beneath the hem of her shirt. He closed his eyes when she pressed her lips to his cheek at the corner of his mouth. She stepped back, and he reluctantly let his hands slip from her waist. "I'll see you soon," she said with a wink and walked away.

Michael stood in the same spot until she disappeared around the corner with one last glance over her shoulder. When she was out of sight, he tipped his head back and huffed, puffing his cheeks out as he released his breath. His nerves tingled and his hands still remembered the feel of her body. Scrubbing his palms over his face, he picked up the bioscan reader he had set aside and walked the short distance to the room that served as a shared office. As he put the reader away, he heard footsteps in the hall. A figure filled the doorway as he turned to look.

"I thought you had left," he said.

"I have a message to deliver first."

"Yes?"

"Mother says hello."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Beverly tried to tamp down the queasy nervousness that twisted her stomach as she sat in the common room, waiting for Damian's team to arrive. Victor was beside her, but he had drifted into an exhausted sleep, his head tipped back against the couch cushions. She focused on him, noting the thinning of his cheeks beneath the dark stubble that peppered his jaw.

The few minutes it had taken to speak with the General had drained him, and she knew the only thing keeping his Demon from emerging was the constant mental block she forced on him.

Demon.

She wondered now how wrong she had been to call it such. If Victor spoke the truth, the darkness that haunted him was the human soul he had stolen when he took this body. He explained more after John went to retrieve the team, and before sleep overtook him. Even after claiming the bodies of a few thousand humans, the Areth continued their practice of cloning. After so many years and generations of unnatural reproduction, they viewed sexual procreation as a repulsive abomination. The breakdown of their natural forms had resulted from the practice, and yet they didn't see fit to change it.

They returned to Earth when the first signs of breakdown started to appear. They were subtle, but because they knew the symptoms, they knew when it began. The Areth leaders decided to return to their 'harvest ground'. Instead of just taking more, they decided to deceive the human race and, with their deception, work to create a genetically superior human form into which they could exchange their psyches.

The medical advancements the Areth had given Earth: genetic filtering, pre-gestational manipulations, genetic mapping and optimum matching, had all been steps towards their final goals.

When he learned what had happened all over the globe, he said he could only assume the Areth no longer felt they needed Earth's cooperation to fulfill their plans.

The thought made her sick.

"You believe him," the General asked as he sat on the long table adjacent to the couch.

Beverly nodded as she looked to Victor, realizing she had been stroking her fingers through his hair. She shifted in the cushions and took his hand to keep contact with him, holding back the other consciousness.

*"I feel a great deal from him, but none of it is grounded in deceit. He wonders what we'll do now, what his fate will be. He's afraid of losing his control, but he's not lying to us."*

"It's a hell of a lot to swallow."

*"Yes, it is. But think about it all. Doesn't it make sense? Doesn't it fill in all the holes and gaps we've been struggling to decipher for years?"*

He nodded. "Sure as hell does. Maybe that's why it doesn't feel right. Too damn easy."

Beverly shook her head. *"Nothing about this is easy."*

The door from outside opened, and Beverly shifted her focus on the men coming in. It appeared to be most of Damian's team. The final person through the door was Jacqueline

Anderson, walking side-by-side with First Lieutenant Jenna Garrison. General Castleton stood, his eyes shifting to her with a slight nod as they all filed in. Beverly touched Victor's cheek and he jerked awake, his eyes focusing on her.

"*They're arriving,*" she signed.

He nodded and shifted, a wince twisting his features. They hoped that Victor's presence would force the spy to reveal himself, or his control on his host would still be weak enough that Beverly would sense it.

"Who are we missing?" the General asked.

"Lieutenant Kohlway and Captain Ali, sir," Garrison answered.

"Where are they?"

Before Garrison could answer, the door opened again and Kohlway jogged in. "Sorry, sir. I was half way under a hover when the order came."

The General nodded. "That's fine, son." He glanced towards Beverly, arching one eyebrow. She shook her head. Nothing. She felt nothing. "Where is Damian?" he asked again.

"I just saw him up at the infirmary building," Jacqueline answered, hitching her thumb towards the doors. "He was going in as I was coming out. Asked if Michael was inside."

Victor suddenly lunged forward, falling to his knees before he could make it to his feet. "No!"

Beverly felt the wave of panic overtake him as she tried to help him stand. "*What? What is it?*"

Victor gripped her arms, panting as his ravaged body tried to react. "Don't you see? Michael. If Damian is the Areth, he wants Michael. Kathleen won't stop until she has him back."

Beverly looked up, her eyes locking with General Castleton. He nodded and snapped out an order that sent everyone in the room scrambling for the door. Victor tried again to stand, but even with Beverly's help, he could only make it to the edge of the couch to sit again. She laid her hand against his chest, feeling the erratic pounding of his heart beneath her palm. His chest barely moved with each shallow, huffed breath he took.

"*Victor, please. You need to calm down. I'm afraid for you.*"

He shook his head, his lips and skin turning ashen. "No. Michael."

"They'll find Michael."

"He can't take Michael back. He can't, Beverly. She'll torture him for the rest of his life. She won't kill him. She finds pleasure in his pain." He was rambling, his eyes sliding closed as his body swayed.

Beverly motioned to the guard who still hovered near by. He came forward, his eyes shifting between her and the General. "*Find Doctor Quinn. Now!*"

After General Castleton interpreted and gave his go ahead, the guard took off in a dead run out the front door as Victor lost consciousness and slumped to the floor. Beverly tried to catch him but only managed to keep him from hitting the table, finally settling on the floor with his head cradled in her lap.

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All air whooshed from Michael's lungs as his back slammed against the hallway wall, Damian's hands clasped around his throat. He kicked out, but Damian was a big man and he

only succeeded in throwing him off balance. Dog barked in warning, lunging and nipping at Damian's legs, but he seemed oblivious.

Michael's vision blurred, red and black spots dancing in front of his eyes as Damian slowly choked off his oxygen. He felt himself slipping into unconsciousness, but knew if he passed out, he would wake up once again in Kathleen's control.

"Did you think you could hide from her?" Damian hissed, his face so close to Michael's his breath made him blink. "She's not through with you."

Michael pushed, fighting to draw air in, but his chest burned and strength drained from his limbs. He couldn't fight anymore.

Not physically.

In one powerful surge, he lashed out as pain ripped through his skull. Damian flew back, his large hands finally freeing Michael's throat as he bounced off the far wall and fell to the floor. Michael gasped for air, holding his hand to his bruised larynx as Damian came immediately to his feet again.

"Don't," Michael warned.

With a guttural yell, Damian lunged. Michael thrust out with his hand and Damian slammed against the wall, his eyes wide and wild. Michael kept his hand up, holding Damian pinned as he thrashed out with his arms in a desperate attempt to be free. Each breath Michael took burned through his chest, and his head swam with the lack of oxygen combined with the mental effort it took to keep Damian away.

"Captain, stand down!" shouted Jacqueline's voice down the hall.

It was enough to break Michael's concentration and his hand wavered. Damian lurched forward, and with one final burst of cerebral strength, Michael swung his arm and Damian hit the equipment tray down the hall as blue-white light of a pulse charge weapon engulfed him.

He finally landed on the floor, still and unconscious. Michael slid down the wall, landing on his knees as he fought to stay conscious. People rushed past him and he leaned his head back against the smooth wood.

"Michael!" Caitlin's voice pushed through the haze and he blinked slowly as her hands touched his face, feeling the tender skin around his throat. "Dear God. Michael, look at me."

He forced his eyes open, seeing both CJ and Jacqueline kneeling in front of him. "I'm fine," he tried to say, but his voice didn't want to push past his damaged throat. He shook his head and tried to raise his hand. "I'm fine."

His strength gone, he slipped into heavy darkness.

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Every muscle ached with the effort of bending over to pull on his last shoe, but Victor ignored the discomfort. He was in a bright room with a comfortable bed and sunlight streaming through his window.

Bracing his hands beside his hips on the edge of the mattress, Victor levered himself forward and stood. The physical drain of maintaining control long enough to reveal the truth had left him barely able to move for a day and a half, partially delirious and ravaged by his own nightmares. The worst had passed now, and he teetered precariously on the razor's edge. His adversary had fallen silent. For now.

Victor walked to the large window that overlooked the forest, spreading out as far as he could see and bathed in sunlight.

General Castleton had visited him that morning, and thanked him for his sacrifice and his honesty. He apologized for the wrongful accusations that had locked Victor away, and told him the Areth who now had control of Damian Ali had admitted-more accurately, boasted-to all the things he had done; killing Riley, destroying the drug supply, and ultimately framing Victor for it.

Knowing his own hands hadn't taken the man's life did little to ease the heavy guilt that sat on his chest like a boulder. He was still guilty of more atrocities than he could name, more than he could remember. That bothered him most of all.

He leaned his arm into the window frame, bracing his thumb against the center of his forehead as he watched large cotton clouds drift slowly across the pale blue sky.

Beverly hadn't come since they brought him to the infirmary.

He closed his eyes, drawing a deep breath as the sunlight warmed his face through the glass. The moment he made the decision to tell the truth, he knew he was probably giving up whatever slim chance he still had to keep her a part of his life. Even behind metal bars, and fighting for every moment of lucidity, he had clung to the hope that maybe he would hold her again-really hold her.

That hope was gone.

But... she was alive.

If he hadn't, he knew the Areth spy would have led the enemy to their doorstep. The horrors she would have endured at their hands would have been unspeakable. Especially Beverly.

"I'm glad to see you up and about. You're feeling stronger?"

Victor turned to see Doctor Quinn crossing the room towards him. She carried a digital clipboard balanced against the side of her rounded stomach, her pregnancy pulling tight the fabric of her short-sleeved shirt. In the decades since coming to Earth, Victor had seen very few pregnant women, his research a far cry from obstetrics. Pregnancy was no mystery, it simply wasn't part of who he was, who his brethren were.

*Brethren.* Just the word turned his stomach.

"Yes," he finally answered. "Thank you for your excellent care, Doctor Quinn."

She stepped closer, her light blue eyes trained on him with the studying gaze of a doctor. "You should call me Lilly. How are you otherwise?"

"Stronger, as well. Would it sound strange if I said I think the sunlight helps?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"No, it doesn't sound strange at all. Our moods are directly effected by our surroundings, and I could easily accept that if your mood is elevated your ability to fight the mental battle you need to would be better."

"Then I think I'll be spending as much time outside as I'm allowed."

Her lips tipped up in a small smile, still studying him. Victor shifted his weight and adopted a stance he had seen Michael take on many times, his hands pushed into his pockets. "I'm sure I've created more questions than I've answered in the last two days."

She chuckled softly, shaking her head. "That's an understatement if I've ever heard one. You should rest a bit longer. I don't want you pushing yourself physically. Fatigue might be a factor as much as mood."

Victor nodded. Before she walked halfway across the room, she stopped and turned back, a thoughtful expression squinting her eyes. "Am I to understand then, that the body you have now is an exact duplicate of a human who was taken from Earth thousands of years ago?"

"Yes. The only difference between this physical body and the original is that we have found ways to extend our lives. The original man would have lived for a few decades, I will live for another two-hundred years."

She shook her head slowly. "Fascinating. Sometime very soon, Victor, I would like to have a very long and very detailed conversation with you. I'm sure CJ would like to be there, as well."

"Of course. Whenever you like."

Doctor Quinn nodded, her expression already distant and he could almost hear the wheels turning in her mind. If nothing else, he had provided the medical minds of Phoenix a great deal to think about. He turned back to the window, the warmth on his chest and face making his eyelids heavy.

Her presence curled around him like long, delicate tendrils wrapping around his body and whispering up the back of his neck. Victor drew a deep breath and opened his eyes to see Beverly standing at the end of his bed, her hand resting on the wooden footboard. She was beautiful. So beautiful it made his chest hurt looking at her. The sun streaming through the window lit her hair with strands of gold woven through the red curls and made her fair skin glow. She wore a simple, pastel yellow dress that flowed over her curves and accentuated the sweet dip of her collarbones and the graceful column of her throat.

Beautiful was inadequate in comparison.

He couldn't speak; stunned even to see her. She slid her glance away and raised her hands, each motion mesmerizing him. "*You look good.*"

Victor stepped away from the window, but didn't completely close the space between them. "*You look amazing.*"

Pink flushed her cheeks and her eyes darted up to lock her gaze with his. He felt the tension, the apprehension, in her as palpable as the air around them. Victor swallowed and ran his fingers across his freshly-shaven lips.

*"When Lilly gives the okay, we've selected a cabin for you. It's near the hospital. Lilly thought it would be best if you were nearby."*

She was second-in-command now, relaying information to a 'guest' of Phoenix. Victor nodded slowly. "Thank you. I appreciate the faith you and the General have placed in me. I'm not sure I deserve it yet, but I do appreciate it."

*"You've done a great deal for our cause by being honest with us. It changes our entire outlook, but at least we know what we're up against."*

"Anything I can do, don't hesitate to ask."

She stepped away from the bed, taking two tentative steps towards him. Victor didn't dare move, because he knew if he did, he would reach for her. His hands itched to touch her cheeks, his lips hungered to taste her. It had been so long. He had gone hundreds of years and more regenerations that he could count without knowing the pleasure of holding a woman, and now he couldn't imagine going another hour without her touch. What would drive him over the edge of insanity first? The voices in his head or the need in his heart?

Her hands trembled when she held them up and she didn't look him in the face. *"I need time."*

"I know. I hold no illusions that you will ever look at me the way you did, *Cusbibil*."

Her breath hitched, her eyes darting to meet his. Victor clenched his jaw, wanting more than anything to pull her into his arms, but he knew he had no right. Beverly turned away as a single tear rolled down her cheek, and he hated himself for being the cause. She turned to go, reaching out to brush her fingers across his chest as she moved away in a fleeting touch that sucked all oxygen from his lungs.

Victor fisted his hands at his side, barely breathing. She walked to the door and paused, her hand resting on the doorjamb. Beverly looked over her shoulder at him, her lips parted. Her name whispered through his lips before he could think to stop it. Her entire body responded and she spun back.

They met half way and he pulled her against him in a hungry fury he couldn't hold back. A small sound escaped her throat as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Victor buried his face against her neck, her hair tickling his skin and her scent filling his senses as he drank her in. He pulled back and cupped her face in his hands, taking only a second to look into her eyes and affirm the answer he needed to see before he covered her mouth and moaned against her lips when jolts of sweet energy surged through him.

Her hands curled into his shirt, pulling them as close as possible, and for Victor it wasn't nearly close enough. Her lips parted beneath his, their breath mingling, and he slid his tongue past her teeth. The soft purr that reverberated from the back of her throat was nearly his undoing.

The soft fabric of her dress rustled as he slid his hands over her back and waist instinctively jerking his hips against her softness, his body hard and throbbing with the need to be as close to her as possible. Her hand slid down his body to curl into the waist of his pants, her fingertips brushing his skin beneath his shirt.

When his lungs burned for air, and his blood pounded so fiercely in his ears he could hear nothing else, Victor tipped his head back and swallowed the groan in his throat at the assault of sensation. Her other hand worked open his shirt buttons until her breath and her fingers warmed his skin and she pressed her lips to his chest.

He looked down at her again, bringing his hands up to hold her head and stroke her cheeks with his thumbs. A low moan rumbled through him as he covered her mouth again, her lips open to him before they ever touched. He wanted her more than he wanted air, and poured into the kiss everything he had to give.

Panting for air, Victor rested his forehead against hers and stroked her skin. Holding each other, they both fought to find stable ground again.

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CJ saw Michael sitting on the front steps of their home as she walked up the sunlit path. Dog bounded off the porch and ran to greet her, wagging and barking as he darted around her legs in his enthusiasm. She paused to rub his head, which was all he needed before he bolted back to Michael.

He looked up, watching her approach, his features pinched and drawn. Even from a distance, she saw the new ring of bruises that circled his throat and thick emotion threatened

to choke her. For as many people that cared for him, and only wanted to help him heal and give him peace, there always seemed to be someone trying to snatch it all away.

Michael scooted to the edge of the step to give her room to sit. The days were growing warmer, the air heavy with humidity, and Michael had finally foregone wearing the long sleeve flannel shirts to wear only the black tee shirt most common among the other personnel.

"How are you feeling?" she asked after several minutes of silence passed with only the sound of the wind in the trees, rustling the leaves.

"Good. I just needed a few hours extra sleep this morning. I hope it didn't make things difficult for you and Lilly."

"Of course not. You needed the rest." CJ shook her head slightly, drawing a slow breath. "Victor is awake and out of bed. Lilly says he'll need a bit more time to recover than you, but he'll be fine in a few days."

"I'll go see him in a little while."

She felt the wall around him as real and solid as she felt the wood steps beneath her. It was the first time, since those first few days after they found him that she felt he held back. In those first days, Nick had been the one to draw him out from behind his defenses. Perhaps because they were so much alike, their souls as similar as their eyes, his father had been able to push far enough to break through without pushing too hard.

CJ didn't know how far was too far and how far was enough.

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to see me the way I see myself."

She swallowed hard. "Michael, no matter what you told me, it wouldn't have changed how I see you or how I feel about you."

"I know, but I couldn't take the chance."

CJ reached for his hand, squeezing it gently even as he refused to look at her. "Whether Kathleen did this to you, or whether this ability is naturally part of you, it makes no difference to me or anyone else. You are you, and you are amazing."

A small smile ticked his lips and he glanced sideways at her. "You have to say things like that, don't you?"

CJ laughed. "Have to or not, it's the truth."

Michael licked his lips and looked out into the trees, their view of the mountainside slightly hazed by a low layer of fog. "What about my father?"

"What about him?" she asked, even though she understood the question.

"What will he think?"

CJ smiled, imagining Nick's reaction to his only son being telekinetic. She imagined a wide grin on his face, followed by a hearty "*No shit, huh?*"

"Don't you worry about your father. You could be green with purple polka dots when he comes home, and he'd love you. Someday, I know you'll understand that."

Michael sat back, tipping his head to look straight up at the pale blue sky. She didn't need to ask to know where his thoughts were; the same place hers went whenever she looked up at a starry night or a clear, cloudless day.

Nick.

"Come on," she said, standing and dusting herself off. "This place still needs a good cleaning. You up for it?"

"I'll get the broom."

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*Warning! Warning! Power stores at forty-eight percent. Life support functioning at eighty-one percent capacity.*

Nick switched off the squawk box, silence slamming down around him like the blank ebony of space. To the starboard side of the glider, a sparkling nebula swirled with incandescent clouds of pink, purple and orange. At least it wasn't black.

When he got home, he was never wearing black again.

Black sucked.

Being cold sucked.

The painfully obvious lack of a two-inch thick porterhouse with mashed potatoes and gravy sucked.

His whole body ached. What he wouldn't do for one of Caitlin's almond-oil scented back rubs. Nick groaned and shook his head, his helmet banging against the seat braces. No sense in going down *that* road. He did a quick read-through of the ship status reports; other than the fact that he was running out of power and life support was slowly fading, everything was good.

*Just frickin' fine and dandy.*

"Okay, time for my oh-so-stimulating status report. Space is space is space. It's day... " He paused to check how long he'd been in stasis this last time. "One-hundred-seventy-one. Earth date May 14, 2052. Springtime in Colorado. Birds chirping, buds budding. Hope you're enjoying it, Michael."

He flipped on the diagnostic program and kicked himself for the forty-sixth time for not bringing at least *one* book of crossword puzzles.

"I figure between ten and thirteen more jumps and I'll be in the general vicinity of where I want to be. It's going to be awhile yet, though. I have to stay in stasis longer between jumps. Your father is an old man."

Nick drew a long, slow breath through his nose. The pressurized oxygen in the cabin was stale, burning his nostrils and scratching his throat. He was tired, to the bone tired. Even after the equivalent of almost six days in stasis to revive his body, he was exhausted. The dreamless 'sleep' left him feeling like he no sooner closed his eyes that he was awake again.

The diagnostic finished, but he didn't need to look at the readings to know the glider was in perfect running condition. Or, at least, as perfect as it could be after thirty-seven manual wormhole jumps. Each jump beat the crap out of the boosters, and strained the engines to their limits. He felt the craft push the boundaries to give him what he needed, each and every time he engaged the wormhole initiation program.

Hell, maybe he was just going crazy. Space madness, or something. Just when did a pilot cross from being in tune with his ship to thinking it was a living, breathing entity?

Yep, space madness.

"When I get home, we're going to throw the biggest lakeside barbeque anyone in Parson's Point has ever seen, Michael. Steaks, chicken, and ribs. And beer. Ice cold and plenty of it. I know you don't like it, but let me get my hands on a good Irish ale and I bet you change your mind."

His lights flashed that the diagnostic was complete, and he flipped on the boosters. There was a strange, underlying hum to the scrubbers. Probably the reason the air was stale.

*Oh, just beautiful!* The engines were holding out just fine for him, but the O2 tanks were dying. Wouldn't that just be the cherry on the sundae: suffocating in a glider that *ran* on oxygen?

"We could have a problem," Nick said to the unseen microphone in the cabin. "Looks like I'd better make these next couple of jumps count."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

The night air on the mountain carried a chill, pushing back the pleasant warmth of the day. As soon as the sun disappeared behind the tree line, the ambient temperature dropped several degrees and had everyone reaching for jackets and sweaters. The fireplace in the common room glowed red and orange with the flames inside, filling the room with a kind of heat that sank deep to the bone and soothed away the stresses of the day.

Beverly walked casually through the large room, letting her attention shift between the small groups gathered to eat, talk, or just relax. Someone had found a box of old games and books and she smiled to see many of the base personnel enjoying the distraction.

A group of children gathered on a circular rug near the fireplace, entranced by Michael as he read to them from a large book open in his lap. Beverly stood behind the nearest couch to them, smiling as she watched the expressions of wonder and excitement play over their young faces. Michael glanced up, their gazes connecting, and he smiled widely before turning his attention back to the story.

Beverly continued her slow meandering through the room, a sense of relief and satisfaction lightening her heart. The last three weeks had been the hardest Phoenix had faced in years, if ever. They had overcome, regrouped, and come together to be strong again even if their numbers were smaller and scattered. For the first time since the day she watched London and New York burn, she felt hope again.

She wasn't delusional. She knew the road ahead was long, and would be much harder than they ever anticipated. Beverly thought back to the speech the General had given, about strength of character and the perseverance to never back down. That was who they were.

CJ came through the door from outside and smiled at Beverly as she walked towards her. "Isn't it a beautiful night?" she said. "The stars outside are so bright and the sky so black, I wish I had a telescope."

Beverly nodded. *"I'm going out now to enjoy it."*

CJ touched her arm as she continued towards the hearth, and Beverly didn't have to turn to know CJ would go listen to Michael read. She stepped through the screened doors into the dark night, drawing the crisp evening air into her lungs. It was invigorating, reviving and refreshing.

She didn't think about her final destination, just turned to walk up the trail away from Command Hall. The night wrapped around her as she moved away from the few buildings that had power for their lights. Doctor Byrne was confident they would eventually be able to power all the buildings in the complex, but for now the homes were limited to candlelight and wood stoves. The homes closest the main complex were given enough energy to run the plumbing, so at least things were clean and sanitary.

There was something so peaceful about living with so little. She had grown up with technology, never questioning why her hydrogen gel lights turned on when she walked into a room, or whether the communications array could maintain contact with their global bases. She probably should feel inconvenienced, but she didn't.

She felt free.

Only a couple of lights shined inside the hospital building, and she had no doubt Lilly Quinn was inside, busy at work despite the approaching night. She continued past, crossing her arms to ward off some of the chill as she walked the slight incline into the woods. The first small home on the lift appeared almost in darkness save for a soft glow emanating from the upstairs window. Without thinking about the choice, Beverly climbed the steps to the porch and opened the front door.

The downstairs was dark except for the silver light of the moon as it washed in through the windows. The scent of cleaning solution tickled her nose and she smiled. Running her hand along the smooth wood of the banister, she climbed the stairs to the second level. The house was simple and small, but perfect. The staircase opened to a landing with two doors leading from it, a bedroom and a bathroom. The bedroom door was partially open, candlelight falling across the floor from inside.

Beverly pressed her hand to the wood and pushed the door open, her heartbeat jumping to a pounding staccato against her ribs when she saw Victor. He stood with his back to her at the end of his bed, a beautiful brass bed with scrolled metalwork and draped in a faded quilt of red and blue. As she watched, he gripped the collar of his shirt behind his neck and pulled it forward over his head, exposing the refined muscles of his lean, trim torso. His skin glowed in the candlelight and he tossed the shirt on a nearby chair. Victor turned, reaching for the candle on the table near him, and saw her. His hand stilled as their eyes met across the room.

Beverly's body hummed, her skin tingling as his gaze shifted over her, his eyes shining in the dim light. She felt giddy and light, yet heavy and needy in the same moment. Her insides trembled as she stepped into the room, keeping her eyes on his face, her breath hitched.

Victor curled his hand around the tall footboard of the bed, a muscle jumping along his jaw as he watched her approach. In the back of her mind, Beverly thought she should be nervous at her heated thoughts. It had been a very long time since she had been with a man, and the bitter pain of the experience still lingered with her years later. Regardless, she felt no trepidation, only need.

Beverly let her gaze slide over his body, the smooth contours of his chest and abdomen. He was lean, refined, his muscles long and corded as they stretched from his chest down his arms. She reached out a slightly shaking hand to skim her fingers over his chest, feeling the warmth emanating from his skin. His muscle twitched involuntarily beneath her touch, and arousal spiked through her.

She hitched her chin to look into his eyes, thrilled by the blatant heat she saw there. Holding his gaze as long as she could, she leaned in and pressed her lips to his breastbone just as she had in the infirmary two days before. Victor released his grip on the bed and slid his hands over her back, one hand curling around the base of her neck to pull her closer. As soon as she tipped her head back to look at him again, he covered her mouth and stole her breath with the deep thrust of his tongue and the moan that shifted through his chest.

Her body ached for him, throbbing with need created just by his kiss. The evening cool was gone, replaced by a fever that shimmered just beneath her skin making her clothes restrictive and her nerves hum.

Victor broke the kiss, his chest heaving beneath her hands as his gaze shifted over her face, settling briefly at her lips. “*Cusbibil*,” he mouthed, his breath rapid against her cheek. “You make me burn.”

She kept her hands in contact with his skin, signing, “*Make love to me, Victor.*”

He shook his head, his lips shifting before he spoke. “I don’t know what to do.”

Beverly leaned up on her toes, kissing his chin and he tipped his head to kiss her again. She focused her thoughts, and hoped the connection she felt with him the first time they kissed would let him know her thoughts. *Do what you feel, Victor.*

His hands pressed harder into her back and his kiss stole her breath with the raw hunger that flowed over her. She slid her hands along his ribs to his waist, dipping her fingertips beneath the edge of his pants and felt a rush of satisfaction in the involuntary reaction of his body at her touch.

Victor’s fingers pushed into her hair, pulling it free of the simple band that had held it in a loose plait down her back. Soon, her curls were free, twined in his fingers as he tilted her head to deepen the kiss even further. She couldn’t breathe, her lungs burning, but she prayed he wouldn’t stop.

He moved from her mouth, his lips nipping and pulling at her throat as his fingers found the zipper that ran up her spine. His hands slid beneath the material as he moved the zipper down and she gasped when she felt his strong fingers against her bare back. Beverly was lost in the sensation as he shifted the dress aside to kiss her bare shoulders.

*Victor! Dear God, yes!*

She let her arms drape at her side as he pushed the sleeves down and the material pooled around her ankles. His breath was hot and ragged against the side of her throat as his hands skimmed over her and she silently begged him to take her breasts against his palms.

Victor pulled back, his gaze as real and tactile on her body as his touch.

“You’re beautiful.”

She reached out and laid her hand over his heart, closing her eyes. *Touch me, Victor.*

With excruciating care, his fingertips slid from her shoulders down along the curve of her breasts. Beverly was dizzy with the vicious pounding of her heart and the need that made her knees weak. Finally, when she thought she could take it no more, he cupped her breasts and ran his thumbs along her painfully hard nipples.

She felt the moan rip from her throat and her body swayed, only to be pulled against him again. The erratic beat of his heart pounded against her cheek and she ran her tongue along the salty tang of his skin. Pulling back enough to see his face, Beverly watched his eyes as she released the button on his pants and slid her hands inside to curl her fingers around his erection.

Victor’s head fell back and his arm flailed out to grip the bed frame. Seeing the effect her touch elicited in him filled her with a heady power, and aroused her to the point of implosion. She gasped when his hands flew to her face, holding her head firmly as his kiss devoured her again. Beverly pushed his pants past his hips, and he stepped free as they both moved around the end of the bed.

Aching with need like she had never experienced, Beverly sat on the edge of the mattress and lay back onto the pillows. Victor stood beside the bed, and she took the moment to memorize the beauty of his naked, aroused form. He curled his fingers into the edge of her

panties, and with his eyes following the trail his hands burned down her thighs, he removed the final barrier between them.

She held out her arms, beckoning him to come to her. Victor didn't hesitate, kneeling on the mattress to join her on the bed, the pure heat of his skin singing her as he covered her body with his own.

"I want to kiss every part of you, taste you," he said as he braced himself over her.

"*We have all night,*" she signed with trembling hands before sliding them along his sides to pull him closer.

He settled instinctively between her thighs, his lips playing across her throat and breasts. When he drew her nipple into his mouth, she cried out and arched off the bed, burying her fingers into his hair.

*I need you... I need you...*

His fingers dug almost painfully into her hips and she felt the tip of his erection tease the inside of her thigh. Beverly shifted beneath him, desperate for him to fill her. Victor rose over her again, his arms locked straight as his hands pushed into the mattress.

"Beverly," she read on his lips, sweat glistening on his brow.

She only nodded, pressing her fingers into his back.

Finally, he pushed inside her and icy fire swept over her, stealing her breath. Victor closed his eyes, his body trembling as he thrust into her. Everything inside her coiled and tightened and she couldn't breathe. She felt the vibrations course through his ribs as he groaned, pulling back to thrust into her again.

A thousand colliding colors and emotions collided in her mind, and she realized with a catch of her breath in her throat that Victor had completely opened himself her, holding nothing back. Their joining wasn't just their bodies, but their minds. He gave her everything.

His weight pressed her into the mattress as he buried his face against the side of her throat, the tempo of his thrusts faltering then speeding up as she felt him near his climax. She held on to him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders as sweet tears slid from her eyes.

*I love you.*

Whether the thought was her own, or Victor's, she no longer knew. The bed shifted beneath them, the force of it hitting the wall vibrating through her, mingling and dancing with the myriad of sensations bombarding her. His skin was hot and slick beneath her touch and she dug her nails into his back, desperate to hold on to some small bit of reality as everything else shattered.

In a cataclysmic crash, her body seized and her vision darkened as her orgasm overtook her. Victor groaned against her shoulder, thrusting deeper and harder, driving himself as deep as possible to hold himself there. Beverly gasped, the drowning reality of his own orgasm mingling and slamming into her.

Victor's arms gave out and he collapsed, his body pressing down on her but she would rather die than lose the contact. He trembled, his face turned away as his hands slid beneath her shoulders. Beverly struggled to breathe, the wave of emotions smothering her in the sweetest suffocation she could have ever imagined. It was beyond imagination. Beyond dreams.

As their breathing slowly steadied, the tears continued to roll from her eyes and a joy welled up in her, flowing out to her limbs and making her lightheaded. Victor slid his arms

across the quilt and pulled his elbows beneath his weight to push himself up and look into her face.

The smile on his lips vanished when he saw the tears that wet the hair at her temples, his hands immediately moving to her head as his thumbs brushed across her skin. Deep furrows marred his brow as his gaze shifted over her face.

*"Cusbibil, what have I done?"*

She shook her head within his hold and didn't have to force the smile that curved her lips. A bubbling laugh rumbled through her chest and she raised an ecstasy-weakened arm to touch his cheek before signing.

*"All you've done is made me happy."*

*"You're crying."*

She slid her thumbs across the wet trails on his cheeks. *"So are you."*

Victor turned his face into her touch, kissing her palm. *"Don't leave me tonight."*

Beverly gently urged him to lower his head to her breast, stroking her fingers through his short, black hair. *"I'm here,"* she signed with one hand. *"I'm here."*

\*\*\*\*\*

The candle had long since burned down to nothing, the only light in the bedroom the silver moonlight that streamed through the single window. It was enough to let Victor study Beverly as she slept.

He lay on his side to face her, his head supported against his fist, looking down on her. Her long, curly hair fanned out on the pillow and framed her face. Her features were soft in sleep, beautiful.

Hours had passed since they had sex. He shook his head. *Made love.* She had asked him to make love to her. He had heard other humans use the phrase when referring to the act of sex, but never understood until now why or how it could be different.

His heart swelled in his chest when he remembered the way she had touched him, the surge of energy and power that had coursed through them both. It had been so much more than an act, more than a means of procreation. It was beautiful.

Beautiful.

She was the essence of beauty, and everything she did was beautiful.

He would never understand how he could be worthy of her.

Victor rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. He realized that he hadn't even thought of the whispering entity in his mind that always haunted him for hours. Not since she came to him. Not since she touched him.

He rolled his head on the pillow to look at her again, smiling when he caught her watching him. A slow smile bowed her lips and she rolled towards him, her hand slipping beneath the blanket to shift over his stomach. Victor moaned softly, relishing in the tingling surge that flashed through him.

*"You aren't sleeping,"* he said, keeping his voice low even though he knew it didn't matter. It felt right, and he didn't want to risk the chance of anything from the outside world intruding on them.

She shook her head, arching her eyebrows as she touched his chest. *"You aren't either."*

*"I don't know if I'll ever be able to sleep again."*

Beverly pulled her lower lip through her teeth and slid her hand beneath the blanket again, awakening his body instantly with her gentle touch. When he was hard and aching, she slid her leg across his and moved over him, straddling his hips. She leaned forward and kissed his chest as he laid his hands on her thighs. Her red hair fell forward, mussed and beautiful around her shoulders, the curled ends sliding across her breasts.

Victor closed his eyes, living in the moment as she shifted over him and let his erection slide into her heat. He pressed his head back into the pillows, forcing himself to open his eyes again. She smiled at him, her palms flat on his chest as she slowly began to rock.

Her presence, beyond the physical touch that drove him to the edge of heaven, slid through him as he opened himself to the splendor.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

*Wednesday, July 10, 2052 23:48*

*Phoenix Complex*

*Tennessee Mountains Base*

*Former United States of America*

The night air was heavy and thick, pressing Michael down into his bed. He hadn't bothered throwing back the blankets, laying on top of the quilt with his hands folded behind his head as he stared at the ceiling, trying to sleep. A weak, stilted breeze barely stirred the curtains, skimming over his bare torso, not nearly enough to cool.

The heat had been oppressive for the last week, the nights hot and sticky, and the days hotter. Everything moved slower.

Giving up on sleep, Michael sat up and swung his legs off the bed. Even the wood floor felt warm beneath his feet. He retrieved his jeans from the chair beside the bed and pulled them on as he stood, foregoing the shirt. Walking barefoot, he slipped past Caitlin's bedroom door and went downstairs. Both he and Caitlin had worked hard to clean up the small cottage, and most of the minor repairs were done. They had partial power, enough to run some lights and the cooling unit in the kitchen for the food they kept on hand. He glanced back up the stairwell when he reached the bottom, making sure he hadn't woken Caitlin.

She had been in the infirmary the whole day into the evening. Lilly's delivery date approached, and she couldn't keep up the long hours no matter how she tried, so the work of three was now the work of two. Michael had spent the day with Beverly and the General, helping them plan for the winter months and working on some ways to modify the energy distribution systems, leaving Caitlin alone.

Yawning, Michael rubbed the stiff muscles behind his neck as he headed for the kitchen. He opened the small cooling unit he had finagled into working and took out a bottle of water. Some orange juice would be great right about then, but luxuries like fresh fruit and juice had been left behind in Colorado. Foregoing a glass, he held the bottle to his lips and gulped down several mouthfuls.

The pounding knock at the door had him spewing water across the countertop, spilling half the contents of the bottle down his chest. He coughed, setting the bottle down and headed back through the cottage, wiping the moisture off his skin.

The knock came again and he yanked the screen open to see Amanda on the front porch. "What's wrong?"

"It's Lilly. I think she's in labor."

Michael sprinted up the stairs and rapped his knuckles on Caitlin's door as he pushed it open. "Caitlin," he said firmly.

She sat up with a start. "What? What is it?"

"Lilly."

She was already out of the bed and snatching up her day clothes by the time he spun back into the hall. He jerked on shoes, pulling his shirt over his head as he started back down

the stairs, Caitlin right behind him. The three of them jogged back down the path to the hospital building.

"How long has she been having contractions?"

"I'm not sure. She stayed in her cottage for the first stages and only came to the infirmary when she said they were close. Then she sent me for the two of you."

They reached the porch along the front of the infirmary building, and Michael was the first through the door. He bypassed the general examination rooms and the individual rooms they kept for patients staying overnight, going straight to the room they had already prepared for this night.

Lilly sat on the edge of the delivery table, her hands pressed against her bulging stomach as she huffed each breath. Michael washed his hands at the small sink in the corner of the room before going to her, crouching down to look her in the eyes. Sweat already glistened on her forehead, making her blonde hair dark as it clung to the moisture.

"How far apart are the contractions?"

She hissed through her breath, squeezing his arm for several seconds before she could answer. "About a minute."

Michael nodded, touching her cheek. "I'd say it's time for baby Quinn to see the world."

\*\*\*\*\*

*Thursday, July 11, 2052 00:19*

*Areth Command Facility*

*Fort Lauderdale, Florida*

*Former United States of America*

Jackie squatted with her back braced against the wall as she checked the ammunition stores of her Magnum SP-21. Her partner took up the same position beside her, leaning forward to watch the quarter-hour guard patrol march by.

"Punctual bastards, aren't they?" Jenifer whispered under her breath.

Jackie smiled, nodding her head. She and Jenifer had been together in some interesting spots before, but never one quite this interesting. Course, that was before the whole planet had gone to hell in a hand basket. Even after years of working together, she only knew Jenifer as Jenifer, and had learned not to ask too many questions. There weren't many people Jackie trusted her life with, but Jenifer was one of them.

"You ready to do this?"

Jenifer nodded, and stood in one fluid motion as she leveled her weapon and fired two silent, deadly bolts of energy at the guards. They hit the floor before either could react. A slight tinge of guilt hit Jackie, now that she knew the two men lying on the floor where just unlucky bastards who had been at the wrong place at the wrong time. She immediately squelched it and followed Jenifer down the hall.

The schematics of the building indicated a stairwell a few hundred feet away, and when they found it, they followed the twisting staircase down four levels to the subterranean levels. If the Intel they had picked up was right, two of them were going in, but three were coming out. The Areth seemed to enjoy the cliché of locking their prisoners in dark dungeons.

They hugged the wall when they hit their destination floor and Jackie carefully angled herself to glance through the small window on the stairwell door. The hallway beyond was dark and empty; but she knew that didn't necessarily mean they were alone. The two women exchanged nods, and Jackie pulled the door open as Jenifer slipped into the hall. Seconds later, the muffled blast of her self-modified weapon echoed back and Jackie figured two more guards were down. She followed into the hall.

"Are you going to leave any for me?" she asked.

Jenifer smirked, her dark eyes sparking with secrets. "You're just going to have to pick up the pace, Anderson."

As they moved down the hall, Jackie watched as Jenifer adjusted the silver muzzle on the end of her pistol. "What I want to know is how I get me one of them babies."

"Custom made," Jenifer said, holding up the weapon so it balanced perfectly in the curve of her hand behind her thumb. "Not another weapon like it."

They paused at a corner and Jackie took point, watching for several moments until yet another set of guards approached several feet away. She leveled her Magnum and took them both out in a single array blast: her own little *modification*.

"Nice," Jenifer said. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"Let's get the hell out of this black hole and we'll talk."

\*\*\*\*\*

"You're doing great, Lilly," CJ said as she patted a damp washcloth across Lilly's forehead.

"Funny, it doesn't feel that way," she huffed, trying to regain some modicum of strength before another contraction seized her.

Michael laid his hand on her stomach, the contact easing her tension. "You're fully dilated. It won't be long."

Another rolling contraction seized her body, coupled with an undeniable and intense *need* to push. She curled forward, CJ supporting her, groaning through the long, hard twisting of her abdomen.

"Push, Lilly. Push!"

Lilly focused all her strength, all her energy, into bearing down. The pain was excruciating and her skin burned in places she preferred not to name. "Oh, God!" she cried out. "Oh, Gooooood!"

\*\*\*\*\*

"Okay, so we've gotten this far. Where the hell are they?" Jenifer asked, standing in the middle of a dark hallway with her hands planted at her leather-clad hips.

"They're not going to be obvious about it." Jackie tested a door handle, finding it locked just like all the others. "I don't like this, but if there's a chance in hell we have people here, I'm finding them. That report said Eli was here," she said, stressing her conviction.

"Hey, you won't get an argument from me. I want him out as much as you do."

Jackie smirked as she moved on to the next door. "A little bit more than me, I'm thinking."

Jenifer laughed. "When you find a lover as good with his hands as Eli Kerrigan, you tend to like to keep him around."

Jackie leaned her shoulder into another steel door and peered through the steel wire reinforced window. A movement in the corner of the small, dark room beyond caught her attention. "I think we've found someone."

"Step back." Jenifer slid a long device from the inside of her boot, unfolding it when it was free. She jiggled the straight metal edge into the magnetic strip lock on the door.

Jackie gave her room as she kept her attention on either end of the hall. "A lock pick? A little low tech for you."

Jenifer grinned. "You underestimate me." She flipped back a safety cover and pressed a red button on the side of the device. The lock popped and hissed, smoke curling from the strip reader. She waved the cloud away and shoved down the handle, the door opening effortlessly.

Jackie completely missed where she pulled a small flashlight from, but by the time she followed Jenifer into the room, she was scanning the space with the beam. A huddled body lay on the floor, covered with a blanket.

"Eli," Jenifer said, squatting beside him. "Elijah!"

His head popped up from the floor and he blinked, shading his hands from the light. "Jenny?"

Jackie stayed by the door, watching for unwanted visitors, as Jenifer helped Eli Kerrigan to his feet.

"Hot damn, it is you."

"Be still my heart. Your gushing is just too much for me." Jenifer pulled his arm across her shoulders to support him. "Now, let's get the hell out of here. By what I hear, the Areth don't care for party crashers."

"Wait," Eli said, hesitating at the door. "Did you find him?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Lilly screamed, her hands flailing for anything to grip. With one final push, Michael eased her child free of her body and she collapsed back on the bed, panting for breath. He turned, holding the slippery, screaming infant to his stomach until Amanda held out a sterile blanket and wrapped Baby Quinn in it.

In carefully studied precision, Michael cauterized the naval and cleared the child's air passageways, though by the screaming, lack of oxygen didn't seem to be a problem. He guided Lilly through her final task, delivering the placenta, as Amanda worked on cleaning up the baby.

Lilly gripped Caitlin's hand, still panting to steady her breathing once again. "Please, Michael..."

He turned back to Amanda, who laid the baby in his arms. As Michael looked down into the angelic face, something within his chest expanded, squeezing his heart and lungs with warmth. He walked up the side of the delivery table, his eyes on the babe, until he reached Lilly's side.

"Lilly," he said, his throat restricting around the words. "Meet your daughter."

Lilly gasped a soft sob as Michael laid the little girl on her chest. Tears rolled down Lilly's cheeks and she pressed a kiss to the damp hair that curled in dark ringlets around her daughter's head. Caitlin sniffed, and Michael glanced to her to see the tears in her eyes.

"She's beautiful," Lilly said through the small sobs that shook her. "Dear God, she's beautiful." She looked towards the ceiling. "Jace, she's beautiful."

"What's her name?" Caitlin asked, her voice rough enough to draw Michael's attention. He was glad she asked because he wasn't sure sound could escape his lips.

"Jamie Elise Quinn." The baby finally quieted, resting her cheek on her mother's chest as she drew a shaky sigh. "Jace loved the name Jamie."

Michael stroked his fingers over the downy hair that had already begun to dry and curl away from the little girl's head in a fuzzy halo of dark curls. "Welcome to the world, Jamie."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Find who?"

Eli turned his attention from Jenifer and focused on Jackie, a distant confusion pulling at his features. "The other guy. He was here when they brought me here, and I get the impression he's been through a hell of a lot worse than me."

"Where is he?"

Eli shook his head. "Somewhere on this floor, I know. They leave him alone for the most part. Whatever purpose he served, I think he outlived it."

"Can we not stand around chit-chatting?" Jenifer asked, shifting Eli's weight. "I'd really like to get out of here before we really piss someone off."

"If there's another human here, we can't leave him."

"I agree. But let's go."

They moved together into the hall, and Jackie scanned both directions. "Why don't you take Eli and head back for the surface? I'll find whoever it is we're looking for."

"You sure?"

Jackie nodded. "Yeah. It's gonna take you time to get him out of here. You can, at least, get a head start."

Jenifer didn't argue the point, turning with Eli to head in the opposite direction. Jackie waited until they were gone from view before she did another circuit of the doors in the hall. Every one of them was locked. Which one to choose? She found one, several doors down from the cell Eli had been held in, with a food slot in the door, the window painted black from the outside.

Looked as good as any.

She tried the knob, not surprised to find it locked. Of course, Jenifer had taken her techno-lock-pick. "Just have to resort to the old fashioned way," Jackie mumbled as she reduced the setting on her Magnum and aimed the barrel at the door. The blast echoed through the hall, and she figured she just cut her escape time in half.

She kicked the steel door, the mangled and destroyed lock giving way with the force. The inside of the cell was pitch black and reeked of stale body odor and other stench she dared not name. The light from the hall fell across the floor, revealing two bare feet attached to a still, emaciated body.

Jackie knelt down, laying her hand on the filthy shirt that covered him, the tattered remains of a standard-issue Phoenix field uniform. Her heart stuck in her throat, and she swallowed against it. *Poor bastard.*

"Hey, soldier," she said softly. "Come on, man. We're getting you out of here."

He rolled towards her, his pale and haggard face revealed by the light. Despite the thick beard that lined his jaw and the long, shaggy hair, recognition slammed into her chest like a battering ram.

Lieutenant Jason Quinn.

**To be continued in**  
***The Phoenix Rebellion Book III: Gaining Ground***

**Sneak Peak**  
**The Phoenix Rebellion Book III: Gaining Ground**  
**June 2006**

**Chapter One**

*Thursday, July 25, 2052*  
*Phoenix Tennessee Complex*  
*Colorado Base relocation site*  
*Smokey Mountains, Tennessee*  
*Former United States of America*

"I assume you'll want to be the one to talk to her," General Castleton said to Michael as they stepped out of Command Hall into the warm afternoon sunshine.

Michael pushed his hands into his pockets and squinted at the sun. "Yes, sir."

"Fair 'nough. I'm going to speak with Beverly and Lieutenant Kohlway now to coordinate the trip. Be ready to go at 22:00."

Michael nodded in affirmation as the General stepped back inside. He took a moment standing beneath the relative shade of the porch, scanning the common area outside Command Hall. The sun was bright, the air heavy and thick. Several men worked in the yard, carrying machinery and tools to the barn that served as a storage facility for the precious few hovercrafts that they had brought from Colorado. A small group of children sat beneath a large tree, protected from the sun by the wide branches. As he stepped down from the porch, a blonde-haired girl waved and shouted his name.

Michael waved back to Sabrina and started up the slight incline of the path as it led away from the common area, small pebbles crunched beneath his feet. The ambient heat in the air dropped several degrees as he crossed from sunlight into the heavy shade of the forest. Patches of sun dotted the ground and it took several feet before his eyes adjusted.

As he moved away from the main part of the complex, the distance grew between the cabins, but all were within earshot of the next. Half way up the hill, he turned and walked the brick path to the front porch of a small bungalow painted in dark green with white trim. Brown pine needles settled in piles along the edge of the roof, and fallen leaves scattered across the porch as a breeze came through the trees.

Michael opened the door and stepped inside, listening. The main floor was quiet, the only movement the simple curtains at the windows that blew inward with the breeze. The material was threadbare and faded from decades of abandonment, but he was sure Lilly didn't mind.

He turned at the front door and started up the stairs, ducking his head to make it beneath the low clearance at the bottom. At the top of the stairs were three doors, and Michael

stepped to the nearest. It was already partially open, and he pushed it further, stepping into the small bedroom beyond.

Lilly sat in a wooden rocking chair that had been meticulously repaired for her. Sunlight streamed through the large window that faced the front of the house, bathing her and the small bundle in her arms. She looked up as he stepped in, a smile on her lips.

"I saw you come up the hill. I would have shouted, but she just fell asleep."

Michael crouched in front of her and she stopped rocking. With a gentle touch, he peeled back the white blanket to reveal the chubby, pink face of Jamie Elise Quinn, newest recruit for Phoenix. Her bright lips puckered and her chin shifted as she continued to suckle intuitively in her sleep. He ran his fingers over her downy soft black hair and she sighed so heavily her body shook with it. Lilly chuckled.

"You have the touch," she said softly.

"Would you like her in the bassinette?" Michael asked, avoiding her statement.

"Yes, thank you."

He gingerly took Jamie from Lilly's arms and carried her to the white woven wicker bassinette in the corner of the room. One small arm with deep dimples at the elbows slipped free of the blanket as he laid her down. Michael carefully wrapped the blanket around her again.

"Did you need something?" Lilly asked from right behind him, peering past his shoulder to her sleeping child.

"Yes." He turned to face her, hoping he would somehow find the right way to tell her what he needed to. Even though it wasn't bad news, it would be a shock. Michael looked at her, allowing himself to smile at the bright shine in her eyes and the glow in her expression. Motherhood suited her. He drew a slow breath through his nose. "I need to talk to you."

Lilly arched on eyebrow. "Must be serious. You look like you've got bad news."

He shook his head. "No, not at all. Come. Sit." He brushed past her to move to the bed, sitting down on the edge.

She watched him, her expression sliding from amused confusion to concern, and followed him to the bed. Sitting down, she crossed her legs and set her elbow on her knee, resting her cheek against her fist. "Okay, so spill it."

Michael studied her face as he recalled his recent discussion with General Castleton and the video conference with Jacqueline and Doctor Monroe. There was no way he could gently impart the information, not that he could see.

He cleared his throat. "Lilly, I just spoke with General Castleton and Doctor David Monroe at our Mississippi base."

Lilly nodded. "I know him. Does he need medical back up? Is he short handed?"

"No." Michael leaned forward, resting his arms on his legs. He wasn't any good at subtlety, or at easing into the facts. He knew this. "Lilly..."

She reached out and took his hand, squeezing his fingers until he raised his head and looked at her. "Just tell me, Michael. Whatever it is, just tell me."

He sandwiched her hand between his and met her gaze. "Jacqueline broke into an Areth facility two weeks ago with another Phoenix field operative. They had Intel that said Eli Kerrigan was being held there."

"Was he?"

"Yes. They were able to extract him successfully. He made them aware of another prisoner, and Jacqueline was able to bring him out as well. He has been at the Mississippi base recovering, but Doctor Monroe wants me to go there and bring him back here. To finish his recovery."

Lilly tilted her head. "Why? Does he realize we're just a rudimentary base? I've been to the Mississippi base. Their hospital is twice what I had in Colorado, let alone here."

"He wants him here because he's one of ours."

"One of ours? Michael, who is it?"

Michael swallowed and sat up straighter, keeping her hand between his. He drew in and released a slow breath. "Lilly, it's Jace."

Her lips parted and confusion washed over her face. Michael counted in his head, waiting for the realization to hit her. *Eight... nine... ten...* She sucked in a sharp breath.

"What?"

Michael nodded. "It's Jace. Jacqueline recognized him immediately."

She shook her head slowly. "No. Jace is dead. He's..."

"He's alive. They sent an image of him, and General Castleton confirmed it. It's Jason Quinn."

Lilly stood slowly, and Michael moved with her, keeping her hands firmly between his. "I-We have to go. We have to go get him."

"I'm leaving tonight. I'll have him back here day after tomorrow."

She shook her head. "No. No. I have to go. I have to go." She tried to pull her hand free, already heading for the door. "I need to go."

Michael drew her back to him, and she looked up, her eyes shifting sporadically and he could almost hear the barrage of thoughts clashing in her head, vying for dominance. "Lilly, listen to me. *Listen to me, Lilly,*" he repeated firmly and she drew a shuddered breath. "You can't go. You need to stay here with Jamie. You can't make that kind of trip."

"He'll want to see me..."

Michael clenched his jaw, biting down until a sharp pain pulled at the side of his neck. Lilly stared at him, and he saw the shift in her expression when she recognized the truth in his eyes before he said it.

"There's more. How bad is he?"

Michael released his hold to lay his hands on her arms. "Doctor Monroe told me Jace is still very weak. By the way Jacqueline described him, and the place they found him, I believe he has been abused for a long time. Possibly tortured." She gasped, and he felt her body sway, but he held her firm and kept his gaze locked with hers. "He has a long road of physical therapy to get back to the man he was. We will do that. Here."

Lilly nodded. "What else?"

He almost smiled. She knew him well. More than anything, Michael wished he could spare her the pain he knew the truth would cause. He rubbed his hands on her arms. "Lilly, he doesn't remember."

"Doesn't remember what happened to him?"

He shook his head. "He doesn't remember the last five years or who he is. He knows he's a pilot, and he remembers going AWOL. But, he knows nothing from that point on. Nothing specific about Phoenix. Nothing about himself. Not his name. Not —"

"Me. He doesn't remember *me*."

"He has not been asked, point blank, if he remembers his wife. Doctor Monroe has been reluctant to provide him with specific facts, hoping he would remember on his own."

Lilly nodded, her eyes growing distant in a look he had learned to recognize. She was running medical facts through her mind, searching for the answer. "Mnestic Shock Syndrome..."

"Yes. That's the diagnosis Doctor Monroe made, and based on the brief history he gave me, I agree. Lilly, MSS isn't permanent. We'll —"

"We'll find him," she said, her voice almost a whisper as she looked past him to the bassinette in the corner. A soft coo filled the heaviness in the room. Lilly shifted her gaze back to Michael, nodded slowly. "We'll find him again."

Michael smiled, and wrapped his arms around her, releasing the pent-up tension that had pulled at him since he stepped into the house. He nodded against her hair. "We'll find him again."