

The book cover features a shirtless man with a serious expression, his skin glistening with sweat. He is positioned on the left side of the frame. The background is a dramatic, fiery orange and yellow, suggesting a sunset or a celestial event, with a dark, starry space scene visible in the upper right. The title 'the phoenix rebellion' is written in a white, stylized font at the top. The main title 'Gaining Ground' is in a large, green, outlined font across the center. The author's name 'Gail R. Delaney' is at the bottom in a similar green, outlined font.

the phoenix rebellion

Gaining Ground

Gail R. Delaney

The Phoenix Rebellion

Book III

Gaining Ground

By

Gail R. Delaney

Triskelion Publishing

www.triskelionpublishing.net

Triskelion Publishing
15327 W. Becker Lane
Surprise, AZ 85379

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Dedication

To- Gail N. For your infinite patience and support

To- The writers, creators and actors of all the classic (and not so classic) Science Fiction television shows, movies and books that have inspired so many generations of children to grow up and wonder just what might be out there. Whether they imagined flying the USS Enterprise, Serenity, Andromeda, Moya, the Jupiter 2, the Millennium Falcon, Galactica, a Tel'tak or the TARDIS - without dreams, the future isn't nearly as exciting as it could be.

“Out of ashes, humanity will rise again”

Prologue

Tuesday, July 16, 2052

Twenty miles Southwest of Montgomery, Alabama

Former United States of America

Lieutenant Jason Quinn coughed and sputtered, half the water in his mouth spewing out to wet his blanket and grimy shirt. Droplets clung to the rough beard that hid his chin and jaw. Heaving for breath, his head fell back to the rolled jacket that served as a pillow.

"Damn it," Jackie cursed through clenched teeth.

She set the bottle aside, giving up on the attempt at getting fluids into him as she wiping his face with the corner of his blanket. She hadn't gotten more than a bottle of water in him over the last five days. The Alabaman heat was brutal, and he was on the verge of severe dehydration, if he wasn't already there.

Dehydration wasn't the worst of his problems. A doctor would probably have a fit when he saw the emaciated, weak shell that had once been Lieutenant Jason Quinn.

She sat back on the ground, resting her arm on one raised knee. The air was heavy and thick, making her tank top stick to her back and her hair curl in sweaty tendrils along her face and neck. She shook her head with a frustrated sigh.

"I hope to hell you're listening, Lieutenant, because this just ain't working and there's no way I'm arriving in Tennessee with you in a body bag."

He slowly rolled his head on the jacket, murmuring low in his chest as he hovered on the edge of delirium. He had been like this since she dragged him like a lead weight out of the Areth compound.

His body shook beneath the blanket, his features tense in the firelight. She wouldn't have built a fire at all, but he had been shivering since the day before, and the blankets weren't fending off the chill even though it had hit ninety-six degrees that day. A twig snapped beyond the ring of light, and Jackie spun around to balance her weight on her knee as she pulled her pulse charge weapon from her thigh holster.

"Ease up," Jenifer said as she left the darkness for the firelight. "It's just me."

Jackie sat again with a grunt, re-holstering her weapon. With the oppressive heat, the amount of energy it took to draw nearly wasted her. If the weather tomorrow was anywhere as miserable and draining as it had been today, just the idea of carrying the Lieutenant made her tired. She unscrewed the cap from the water bottle and swallowed several warm mouthfuls as Jenifer sat on a nearby log. Wiping her hand across her lips, Jackie glanced at her.

"Eli's doing better," she stated.

Jenifer nodded, poking at the fire with the end of a dead branch. "I give him a week and he'll back to near-full strength. Whatever they did to Lieutenant Quinn had to be a hundred times worse than what they did to Elijah."

Jackie shifted her gaze to the Lieutenant's, watching the sweat bead on his forehead even as the chills shook his body. If they kept traveling the way they were, mostly by foot, it was going to take days to reach the nearest known Phoenix base.

Jace Quinn didn't have a couple days.

She had wanted to make it to Tennessee, and the new base there, but right now she'd take what she could get. Stealing a transport would draw too much attention, and they had to ditch their own ground vehicle the night they pulled Jace and Eli out of the Areth holding cells.

If they only had Eli to take care of, Jackie wouldn't mind finding some forgotten room in some small town along the river to hold up in. All he needed was a couple solid days of rest and some decent food and he'd be good. That had been the plan: get into the Areth compound, extract Eli Kerrigan, get the hell out and back to home base.

Lieutenant Jace Quinn had been the unknown factor: a prize and a burden at the same time. Jackie rolled her shoulders against the sore stiffness that tied them in knots, the result of a long day carrying his makeshift stretcher through the rougher terrain of Alabama.

He moaned, shifting slightly beneath the blanket, and Jackie knelt beside him. The flickering light of the fire reflected in his eyes when he blinked them open, squinting as he looked at her. He hadn't opened his eyes once since the first time he rolled over and looked at her in his cell. Jackie did her best not to look too excited, even though she figured it had to be a good sign.

"Good to see you, Lieutenant."

His eyes creased at the corners and his gaze shifted to Jenifer, who now stood near his feet. He looked back to Jackie, coughing before he spoke.

"Who are you?"

She leaned forward more, so he could see her face in the firelight. "It's Jackie Anderson. You're safe now, Jace, and we're taking you home."

He rolled his head on the jacket. "I don't know you."

A heavy dread sank into Jackie's gut, but she pushed it aside. He had been delirious for days, and she had no idea what state he had been in before they found him. Who could blame him for not knowing her right away?

"Don't worry about it. You'll be fine soon enough, Jace."

"I'm not—" He paused to cough, the sound rattling through his chest, wet and heavy. "My name isn't Jace."

Jackie slid a glance to Jenifer, who stood with her arms crossed and an unmasked look of concern on her face.

"What *is* your name, soldier," Jackie asked.

He stared at her, his eyelids sitting heavy over his eyes. "I-I don't know." His voice slid away as his eyes closed and his head rolled to the side.

Crap!

Jackie rolled back onto the balls of her feet and stood. "I'm calling for extraction," she said as she stepped over Jace Quinn's prone form. "Screw this."

"Did you think I'd argue?"

"Watch him for a minute." Jackie went to the blanket and lumpy backpack that constituted her bedroll, fishing in the front pocket for the small emergency call radio she had yet to use in her decade of active service.

But this wasn't for her.

She walked into the darkness, the light of the fire behind her, as she turned on the palm-sized device and the digital screen glowed blue. Punching in her private code to activate the link, she waited.

The screen morphed from blue to red, and she knew she had a connection. Jackie held the communicator close to her lips, knowing she wouldn't hear any verbal confirmation of who was on the other end.

"Flight, this is Echo Four request landing instructions," she spoke clearly, falling back on the 'chatter' code established for wayward Phoenix operatives.

She waited, counting to five in her head, and released her pent up breath when the red light faded to green. Jackie switched the radio off, killing the signal. Phoenix had what they needed. The brief connection relayed her global position, and her message told them she had four people to bring home.

Now, they just had to wait.

Here comes the cavalry.

Chapter One

*Sunday, July 28, 2052
Phoenix Tennessee Complex
Colorado Base relocation site
Smokey Mountains, Tennessee
Former United States of America*

"I trust 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, sunlight streaming 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?"

"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."

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? Who?"

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 bassinet 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."

The buzz of voices hummed around him in the darkness, jumbled words that didn't connect to make coherent thought. He rolled his head, trying to sense which direction they came from. With groggy awareness, he realized he wasn't in the black hellhole that haunted his dreams, or the damp cold he remembered from before. Days before? Hours before? He wasn't sure.

He blinked and wincing at the bright light that burned his sensitive retinas. Needles and tubes clung to his hand and arm, hindering his ability to shield his eyes from the glare. It didn't matter, his arm felt like a log and his muscles shook with the effort of moving. Cold apprehension crept over his skin as he struggled for something familiar. Anything.

"He's waking up," came another voice, clearer now as he fought through his muzzy, fogged thoughts.

Shadows moved in the bright light, blurred flashes of color and motion. Slowly, the masses took shape and three men dressed in white lab coats walked toward him. He blinked, trying to pull them into focus. Glancing around, he realized he was in a hospital room, everything white, gleaming, and clean. The oxygen mask over his mouth suffocated him and he fought to lift his heavy arms.

A white-haired man, about sixty, eased away his hand to assist with the mask. One final puff of oxygen hit his face before the mask was pulled free. He took his first breath of real air and coughed.

"Take it easy, Lieutenant. Don't try too hard right out of the gate."

Lieutenant. It was something...

A vague flash of a black-haired woman leaning over him, holding a bottle to his lips, skittered through his mind too fast for him to grab onto and remember.

"I hope to hell you're listening, Lieutenant, because this just ain't working and there's no way I'm arriving in Tennessee with you in a body bag."

"Can you hear me, Lieutenant?"

He nodded, his eyes flicked to the embroidered name on the man's lab coat. "Doctor Monroe," he said, testing his throat. His voice was scratchy, hollow and the sound difficult to push out from his chest. It was unfamiliar, as if he hadn't heard himself speak in a long time.

"Yes. This is Doctor Carson and Doctor Adams. How are you feeling?"

He squinted, taking in the other two men. Both older, about Doctor Monroe's age. Doctor Carson sported a short-trimmed ring of gray around the perimeter of his skull, while Doctor Adams had an almost unnatural looking bush of salt-and-pepper hair.

"Where am I?"

"You're at the Mississippi base for Phoenix Operations."

He tried to move. A dull grumble rolled through his stomach and the room tilted as his temples throbbed. "Phoenix?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

His body was heavy, his eyelids lead. No matter how he tried, he couldn't move his legs and could barely lift his arms. A thrust of panic shot through him and he looked down the length of his body. The blankets formed around two legs, his feet making small tent shapes at the end of the bed.

Doctor Monroe touched his shoulder. "Relax, Lieutenant. Your body is weak. You came to us malnourished to the edge of starvation, weak, and exhausted. It's going to take some time before your muscles want to respond. Don't worry. There's nothing that some time won't cure."

He let his head fall back onto the pillow. At the mention of food, his stomach grumbled again. When was the last time he ate real food? Another flash—something not quite substantial enough to be a memory—slammed through his head with the force of a fist. *His own hands, filthy and shaking, holding half a roll of bread, molded and maggoty.* Doctor Monroe motioned a nurse into the room; a thin redhead with wide eyes and a freckled nose.

"Becky, head down to the cafeteria and get this soldier some solid food. Something light. Broth or clear soup, some toast. And milk."

She nodded and left. He managed to slide his hand from the bed to rest on his stomach. Another grumble rolled through him.

"How long have I been here?"

"Twelve days. Do you remember what happened?"

"Hey, soldier. We're getting you out of here."

He shook his head. "Not really."

"Well, that will come with time. Your lunch will be here soon. Don't eat too fast, and don't force yourself to eat it all. It's going to take some time for your stomach to become acquainted again with eating good, solid food."

He nodded.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Lieutenant?"

He looked from Doctor Monroe to the other three men, reaching back into the dark edges of his mind. Swallowing hard, he nodded again. "Yeah. Tell me who I am."

The doctor's shoulders dropped slightly and he frowned, his eyes shifting to look at the other doctors. Then his features relaxed, and he smiled. Not a big smile, but the kind Jace recognize as uneasy. The kind you give someone when you didn't know what else to do.

"You're First Lieutenant Jason Quinn."

Lilly shifted Jamie on her shoulder, adjusting the light blanket to protect her arms and legs from the cooler evening air. Darkness had settled over the compound, the stars twinkling bright in the navy-black sky. Warm light shined through the large bank of windows along the front of Command Hall, and the sound of base personnel gathered in the common room wafted through the open door.

She opened the door and walked inside, scanning the room for any sign of Michael, Beverly, CJ or General Castleton. Michael would be leaving soon. The need to speak with him

before he left pulsed in her temples to the same beat of her heart. None of them were in sight, but she spotted Victor sitting alone on one of the many couches with a book open in his lap.

His presence on base was tolerated by some, accepted by many, but most still preferred to keep their distance from the Areth-come-Phoenix-Informant. His revelation weeks before of the true nature of the Areth race had answered a plethora of questions, and created even more. Despite the indifference to him harbored by many, Lilly found she actually like Victor and had a hard time equating his gentle, subdued nature with the monsters they all considered the Areth race to be.

She crossed the room, bouncing Jamie on her shoulder as the newborn cooed soft noised to let her mother know she was awake, but not in any dire need of anything. Lilly knew that wherever Victor was, Beverly would soon follow. In a way Lilly had yet to understand, Beverly was a lifeline to Victor, somehow helping him maintain his tenacious control.

"Good evening, Victor," she said as she reached him, and he looked up from his book with a smile. She sat down beside him, shifting Jamie into a better position. "How are you? We haven't talked in awhile."

Victor reached out to touch Jamie, his smile so wide a deep dimple formed in his cheek, and Lilly wondered if she had ever seen him smile like that. "I'm well," he answered absently, engrossed in the wide-eyed smile Jamie returned.

"I'm hoping to find Beverly. Do you know where she is?"

Victor shifted his gaze to look at her. "Yes. She is in a meeting with Michael and your General. I believe Doctor Montgomery is with them as well."

"Good. I should be able to catch them all together."

"Is something wrong?"

A bubbling euphoria shifted through her chest, wrapping around her heart, and Lilly tried to keep it in check. It was too early to be ecstatic, too early to let herself be caught up in the joy of having Jace home again. She had to see him... had to touch him to know it all was real.

It wouldn't be real until he knew who she was. *Until he knew he had a daughter.*

The euphoria died as quickly as it hit. "Wrong? No. I just need to speak to Michael before he leaves."

A deep 'v' formed between Victor's eyes. "Where is he going?"

Jamie released a long, low sigh and Lilly instinctively bounced her to soothe her. "It's not a secret, but I don't know yet how General Castleton is going to spread the news."

"I understand. You needn't explain."

"Oh, believe me, Victor. This kind of news I would shout from the treetops if I could. I just need to talk to Michael first."

Almost in answer, Victor turned and looked toward the back of the large room where a hall entrance led to Central Command. Meeting rooms, computer bases and communication arrays were set up as best they could in the makeshift base.

"They're coming," Victor said just moments before the four people Lilly sought emerged from the hallway.

Lilly only spared Victor a glance, her curiosity seriously piqued. She shifted Jamie into Victor's surprised hold. "Could you watch her for a few minutes?"

"Lilly, I—"

"She'll be fine."

Before he could protest any further, Lilly stood and rounded the edge of the couch to catch the three of them before they could disburse. "General," she said loudly, drawing their attention.

"Lilly," he said as she reached them. "Damn good news we got today. You must be tickled pink."

"Of course, sir," she said, glancing around. "Could I speak with the four of you before Michael leaves?"

"Sure thing." With a hitch of his head, he indicated that they all head back down the hall.

"Where is Jamie?" Beverly asked.

"I left her with Victor. He looked a little panicked," Lilly said with a grin and a chuckle.

Beverly smiled. "I'm sure."

They reached General Castleton's office and he closed the door behind them. "What's your trouble, Lilly?"

"Sir, I want to discuss what's going to happen when Michael brings Jace back here." Saying his name sent a rush of gooseflesh over her skin. She forced herself to ignore it and continue. "I've been thinking about this since Michael told me Doctor Monroe's diagnosis."

CJ laid her hand on Lilly's arm. "Don't worry, Lilly. We'll do whatever we need to. We'll help him remember."

"That's what I want to talk about."

Chapter Two

*Tuesday, July 30, 2052
Phoenix Tennessee Complex
Colorado Base relocation site
Smokey Mountains, Tennessee
Former United States of America*

Pain... Pain... Nothing but black, blinding pain!

He pushed against the darkness, fighting the leather straps that bound his wrists, pulling his arms high and away from his body. A crack shot through the darkness seconds before the sharp tip of some unseen tool of torture sliced across him, forcing a scream from his throat.

"Where is Phoenix?"

"Check a map," he hissed, biting against the pain. "I'm pretty sure it's still in Arizona." The darkness shifted around him. Another crack and raging pain ripped through him.

"Tell us and the pain stops."

"Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name!" he screamed through the burning, tearing agony.

"Where are they?"

"Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done!"

CRACK!

He screamed, his knees giving way beneath him. All his body weight pulled at the tight thongs binding his wrists; he felt the flesh and bones giving beneath the strain as his shoulders dislocated. His eyes burned, his throat burned, his lungs... burned.

This was hell.

"Where are they?"

"I don't know!"

"Tell me and the pain stops!"

"I don't know! I don't know!"

Jace jerked awake, his breath short and his heart fluttering in his chest. His head immediately fell back into the pillows and he blinked, looking around the small room that was his new home. He swallowed hard and ran a palm over his sweat-dampened face.

He flicked his gaze around the room. It wasn't a hospital, he knew that much, and nothing like the Mississippi base he had left the day before. He remembered very little of the trip, and nothing about arriving here.

A doc had come to get him... *Michael... that was it.* Bits and pieces of moments fragmented together to form the last week. Jackie Anderson being in his room every time he opened his eyes, the doc mumbling and hovering, pretty nurses feeding him milk and lukewarm soup.

His memories were like an albatross that had met up with the wrong end of an O2 booster-chopped up and scattered with no resemblance to what it had been.

Jace swallowed against the rough dryness in his throat and looked around. Pale wooden planks, sanded and polished until they appeared smooth, made the walls glow almost

white. A multiple-print quilt covered him, and the IV poles beside it seemed in contrast to the rustic appearance of the room. A large window banked the wall across from him, bathing the room in silver moonlight.

"How are you feeling?"

The soft voice was barely a whisper in the darkness, but Jace's entire body tensed painfully. He reached for a weapon he knew wasn't there, but barely made it off the pillow before his abused body crumpled with fatigue. Jace squinted, looking into the shadows of the room at the figure dressed in white and bathed in silver moonlight. Her hair looked white, falling to her shoulders and her skin pale and creamy.

She stepped directly into the shaft of moonlight coming through the window, a soft smile bowing her lips, and Jace realized he was smiling back. His head felt heavy and his eyes as if they were ricocheting in his sockets. *What kind of drugs are they giving me?*

"How are you feeling?" she asked again.

Either the drugs were fuddling with his head, or she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen... or, at least, could remember seeing.

Nope.

Definitely the most beautiful... memory or not.

Her eyes were a pale blue, so pale they looked like pools of mercury in the moonlight. She wore a white doctor's lab coat, but enough of her shape peeked out through the open front that he found himself wishing she'd take it off and let him get a good view.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant?" she said, leaning over a little bit.

He blinked, running the tip of his tongue over his lower lip. "What?"

"You said something... I think about my jacket."

Jace shook his head. "Um, nothing. I feel like I've been dropped from a glider at Mach two-hundred."

She took a handheld reader from the large pocket of her jacket, flipping it on with a musical twitter. Jace stayed still, fighting the surge of anxiety that burned in his throat and pumped adrenaline into his blood, as she moved the device over his head and chest. His head told him it was just a handheld. He'd probably seen then a hundred times in his life. But the pathetic, beaten-up and screwed-up part of his brain kept throwing him back to dark places and faceless voices he couldn't pin down or chase away.

"Your heart rate is accelerated. Were you dreaming?"

Yes. "Maybe it's you, Angel."

Her lips turned up in a small, almost unnoticeable smile.

"You gonna tell me your name?"

She swallowed visibly, pushing her hands into her jacket pocket before looking down at him again. "Lilly. Franklin. I'm your doctor."

"I thought that other guy was the doc. Michael."

"He helps me, but I'm the base doctor. I'll be in charge of your recovery and physical therapy."

Jace grinned. "I like the sound of that, Angel."

Her gaze locked with his, and for several beats of his heart, she stared at him before she blinked and turned away. "When you're feeling stronger, we'll talk seriously about your recovery plan. I would love to see you on your feet before winter."

Jace squinted, tipping his head into the pillow to glance at the window above him. "Winter... what month is it now?"

"Day after tomorrow is August first."

"You're ambitious," he said absently, settling into the bed again to look at her.

Her lips pressed together in a thin line, a firm determination in her eyes. "I don't do anything half-way, Lieutenant."

Jace wanted to come back with another comment, but his brain was fuzzy and he couldn't string the words together in his head, let alone out his lips. He tried to keep his eyes open, but it grew harder and harder to open his lead-lined lids after each blink. Doc Franklin leaned over, her fingers brushing over his forehead.

"Sleep, Lieutenant. Right now, it's the only think you need to do."

Soft silver light of the half-moon cast a glow over the infirmary room. Walls that shined with a blonde luster in the daylight, and the quilt that covered the wood frame bed, were monochromatic in shades of gray and white in the dim illumination.

Lilly sat in the corner of the room, her legs tucked beneath her, watching Jace sleep. The sleeping aid in his IV, along with the heavy-duty analgesics and neural inhibitors, had pulled him back into sleep after only a few minutes of conversation. What she told him, just before he drifted off again, had been right. He needed to sleep and rejuvenate his body before the rigors of physical therapy tapped every bit of strength he had. Tomorrow, she'd begin him on a heartier diet. He needed to regain some much-needed weight. From her vantage point, she saw the tense lines around his eyes and the gaunt stretch of his skin over his cheekbones.

But it was him.

Part of her heart had harbored the slightest whisper of doubt. Maybe Jackie was wrong. Maybe he was just someone who looked like her Jace. Maybe it had all been a cruel trick of fate to make her hope.

The moment she saw him, the doubt was gone. Thin, pale and weak—it didn't matter. He was Jace. Her Jace.

He groaned softly, words she couldn't make out filling the silence of the room. The quilt shifted over him as his legs slid beneath them and he rolled his head in the pillow. With a jolt, he arched his neck and curled his head back, his hands fisting at his side.

Lilly was on her feet in a moment, and crossed the room to sit on the edge of the bed. She wanted to wake him and pull him from the dream that haunted him, but knew it would be the worst thing to do. Her heart pounding like a frightened bird in a cage, and she leaned over him, gently laying her hand on his chest. Tears burned her eyes at the first touch, first contact, and in that moment she *knew* he was real. Warm. Solid. *Real*. His eyelids shifted, his lips turned down in a deep frown as he huffed a breath.

"Jace," she whispered softly, just enough for his subconscious to know someone was there. "Jace, you're safe." Her voice cracked as the emotions she had kept in check for two days choked her.

His hands curled into tight fists, bunching the quilt in his grip, and sweat glistened on his brow. Lilly leaned over more, her lips near his ear.

"Jace, you're safe."

A strangled “no” passed through his clenched teeth. Lilly closed her eyes, tears rolling down her cheeks. Forcing herself to swallow against the lump, she cleared her throat and blinked through the haze. She couldn’t sing, couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket if she wanted to, but it was the only thing she could think to do.

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,” she whispered near his ear. *“I once was lost, but now I’m found—”* The words hit her with the force of a speeding train in the center of her chest. *“Was blind, but now I see.”*

The tension slipped from his body, his fingers loosening their grip on the quilt, and he released a shaky breath.

“Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come. T’was Grace that brought me safe thus far, and Grace will lead me home.”

His breathing slowed, steadied, and she knew he had slipped back into peaceful sleep. Fighting the flood of drowning emotion, Lilly laid her cheek against his and focused on his breath as it stirred her hair and warmed her skin. She wanted to lie down beside him, rest her head on his chest, and listen to the beat of his heart, but she knew she couldn’t. Not yet.

Wiping her tears from her cheeks, she sat up and studied his face in the moonlight. The tight lines that had bracketed his lips were gone, his features relaxed in sleep. The tingling heaviness in her breasts warned her it was time to head back to her cabin. Jamie could wake up any time for her night feeding, and Lilly had to be there. Torn between staying with her husband and going to her child, she finally stood and walked reluctantly to the door. With her hand on the jamb, she looked back.

Minutes later, she found herself on her own front porch, unable to remember the short walk from the infirmary. She stared down at her hand, resting on the doorknob, and drew a shaky breath. It was important that her own tumultuous emotions didn’t affect Jamie, and even though she was only a few weeks old, she would be able to feel it. Pushing her fingers through her hair, she turned the knob and stepped inside.

The house was dark except for the soft glow that spilled down the stairwell from the room above. Walking on light feet, she climbed the steps, her nerves calming with each stair. At the landing, she stepped carefully down the hall, her hand skimming the banister as she neared the open bedroom door. A soft glow from the newly powered lamp on her bedside table illuminated the pair inside. Michael sat in the rocking chair, his attention on the open book in his hands, as the bassinet beside him slowly swayed to a soothing rhythm. Lilly watched them for a few minutes, no sound in the room except for the creak of the rocking bed and the crinkle of old paper when Michael turned the page.

A small sound came from the bassinet and Michael looked up from his book. He reached his hand inside, and the rocking stopped.

“You’re getting better at that,” Lilly said as she stepped into the room. Michael looked up as he lifted Jamie to his shoulder, his expression tightening. But she continued, making it clear that his ability didn’t bother her. *“Have you been practicing?”*

Michael stood, handing her quickly awakening daughter to her. *“She’s been asleep since you left.”*

Lilly sat in the chair Michael had just left, and he helped her drape a blanket around her shoulders. He sat on the end of her bed as she rocked and fed Jamie. Silence stretched, but Lilly had long-since stopped being uncomfortable with Michael’s silence. He said little,

pondered a lot, and whatever he did say usually held more meaning than three-times the words could properly express.

Sometimes, his silence said the most of all.

"He had some kind of a nightmare," she finally said. Michael raised his head and looked at her. "He didn't wake up, but whatever it was, I could tell it was pretty bad."

"We can expect to see that for awhile."

Lilly nodded, rocking slowly.

"What did you do?"

"I didn't know what to do," she admitted, her voice catching again. She swallowed hard and focused instead on switching breasts, settling Jamie in her arms again. "I wanted to wake him up and tell him I was here for him. Tell him who I was. Tell him everything so we could go back to being a family. But I didn't."

"Good."

Lilly nodded. They both stayed quiet as Jamie finished eating and fell back to sleep. Lilly adjusted her shirt beneath the blanket and stood to return Jamie to her bed. Michael stood on the other side, watching her as she tucked her daughter in.

"Don't feel you need to hide your gift," she said, not looking up at him.

"It's not—"

"Yes, it is." She raised her head and met his stormy gaze. "However you came to have it, your telekinesis saved mine and Jamie's life before she was ever born. Please, Michael. Don't be ashamed of it."

Michael crossed his arms, staring down at Jamie. She was a grounding focal point and Lilly understood that. Whenever she felt things going out of control, she found the purpose she needed in her baby's face.

"I'll let you get some sleep," he finally said.

Lilly almost sighed, but held it back. Michael was a master at avoidance, always managing to swing conversations away from himself, and whatever topic he felt uncomfortable with; sometimes, because he didn't know how to deal with it and sometimes because he knew his answers would cause pain or discomfort. It had taken her a while to realize that about him, but now that she saw it, she knew it was part of who he was. It would take much more than a few months for him to deal with all the demons he harbored.

"Thank you for watching her."

He met her gaze, a small smile ticking up his lips. "No thanks necessary."

Lilly stayed beside Jamie's bassinette until she heard the front door close. She turned out the light and changed for bed. As she slipped between the worn sheets, she reached across the space and laid her hand on the empty side of the bed. How long would it be until she shared her bed, and her life, with her husband again?

Only God knew, and tonight, He wasn't talking.

Beverly opened her eyes, blinking slowly half asleep, trying to focus on the semi-darkness of the room. Moonlight from the window behind her cast a soft silver glow over everything, leaving long shadows across the floor. She drew in a long breath through her nose and rolled onto her back, stretching her limbs. The night air was heavy with lingering summer heat, leaving her feeling languid.

Despite the heat, a cold chill danced over her skin and propelled her from sleep. She sat up, bracing her weight on her elbows, to look quickly around the room.

Victor sat on the edge of the bed, his back to her, hunching forward with his head held in his hands. She gave her eyes a moment to adjust, and saw the tremor shift through his body, the muscles along his spine and shoulders bunching with the strain. The whispering demon fought to snatch control, Beverly felt the battle as if it were her own. She reached for him, but before her hand could touch his skin he shifted away and twisted to face her.

"No," she read on his lips. "Don't touch me, *Cusbibil*."

Beverly rose to her knees and switched on the light beside the bed, casting away the shadows in the soft glow. Victor immediately looked away, but not before she saw the restrained turmoil in his eyes. His knuckles were white as he clenched his fists, a light sheen of sweat dampened his brow.

"*Why didn't you wake me?*" she asked, keeping her signs small to abide his request and not touch him, even though her chest ached with the need to help him.

He shook his head, his body trembling as he looked into her face.

"It burns." His lips stretched so tight and so straight across his clenched teeth it was hard for her to read his words. He curled his fingers against his chest like a claw, his arm shaking with the strain. The air around them both crackled and hissed against her skin with the mental battle Victor waged to keep his mind and body his own. "I'm on fire from the inside out."

Beverly inched forward on her knees, moving as close to him as he would allow before he flinched away.

"No, *Cusbibil*."

She nodded and slowly raised her hand until her palm hovered over his heart. Heat emanated from his body, and he closed his eyes, hanging his head. His hands fell heavy to his lap. He looked so tired, so worn down, Beverly's eyes burned with tears as the ache in her chest grew for him. Victor fought so hard to beat the demons that haunted him, to be whole... when the burden grew too heavy for him, she wished more than anything that she could free him.

Watching his face, Beverly pressed her palm to his skin. The initial wave of darkness always stole her breath, but she kept her gaze on Victor, focusing on him and not the malice that tormented him. His spine straightened and his head fell back, his body tensing beneath her touch. Beverly leaned toward him, wrapping her other arm around his shoulders, and pressed her lips against the heated skin of his upper arm.

Please... don't let me do this to you again.

His voice resonated through her mind, in the only way she was allowed to hear it. Each time they touched, every moment they spent together, the connection grew stronger and their ability to communicate on a level greater than words increased. She pushed out with her thoughts—with her love—and immediately felt the shadow retreat. Victor's breaths came in short, harsh gasps that pressed his chest against her hand. Pushing deeper, Beverly moved closer to him until her knees pressed against his thigh, only the sheet and the light gown she wore between them.

Feel my love.

Beverly whispered with her thoughts, gently rubbing her cheek against his shoulder, inhaling his scent. She moved one hand over his smooth chest and torso, the other caressing his back and shoulders until the tension slowly eased away.

Victor's arm circled her waist, pulling her closer, and Beverly rose on her knees so she looked down at him when she opened her eyes. She touched his cheek, ran her thumb along his lips, and smoothed away the moisture from his brow as his hands shifted her gown over her back with each caress.

It shouldn't be this way for you.

She laid her fingers over his lips, even though he hadn't spoken the words. Beverly smiled, and leaned down to lay her parted lips against his. Victor's fingers curled into her gown and he pulled her closer, urging her to straddle his lap and rest her knees on each side of his hips. His tongue slipped past her lips, surging electricity and heat through her as she settled her weight onto his thighs.

I want it no other way.

The darkness scurried away, hiding deep in the corners of Victor's mind, forever afraid of the intensity of emotion that swelled and grew between them when they touched. That was the key. Once she accepted that it was her touch that gave him peace, and their love for each other that drove the demon back, she swore to him that he would never be without her. She was his sanity at times, and at times, he was hers. Her gift was a gift she was more than willing to give, a healing from her soul she could offer no one else.

She held his head in her hands, feeling the purr in her throat as he worked her gown up her thighs and his thumbs trailed along the skin he exposed. Beverly pressed her lips to his forehead, tasting the salt of his skin, and closed her eyes as his fingers curled around her hips. Their need swirled together, encompassing them both, stealing her breath.

Victor's hands shifted along her sides, taking the gown with them until she lifted her arms and he slid the soft cotton over her head, baring her completely to him. He immediately pressed his hands to her back and pulled her against his chest, his lips hot against the curve of her breast.

You are beautiful.

Beverly nudged his chin until he looked up at her, and as she stared into the almost black darkness of his eyes, her heartbeat jumped. She felt his love, she heard it, and she saw it all in the same moment and it stole her breath. Victor reached up to lace his fingers into her loose hair, holding her head still as he kissed her deep and long, searing her to her soul.

Carefully, he turned her and lowered her to the bed, rising over her as he tugged away the blankets that separated them. Victor supported his weight on his arms as he aligned their bodies, each point of contact hot and branding.

His lips sought the curve of her throat as he slipped inside her, the ultimate contact shooting fire and energy through her until she arched off the bed, gasping for air.

Cusibil...

The darkness was gone.

CJ heard Dog's barking before she reached the top of the path that curled around to their cabin. Darkness had fallen hours before, and most of the encampment was silent and dark, except for the small house she shared with Michael.

He sat on the front steps, one leg stretched straight on the stairs, the other braced on the riser beneath him to rest his elbow on it. The porch light was on, and half a dozen moths danced in the light. Dog stood at the bottom of the steps, prancing in circles waiting for Michael to toss bits of his sandwich to him.

"He's going to wake up half the camp," she said as she approached.

"I wasn't fast enough with the next bite."

CJ smiled and climbed the steps, sitting down beside him. Michael tossed the final bite, and Dog caught it mid-air, his mass of fluffy fur bouncing as he jumped for it. She sighed heavily, brushing her blonde hair back from her face. Fatigue pulled at her limbs and made her eyelids heavy. It had been one hell of a day.

"This is late for you," Michael said as she tried to stifle a yawn.

"Amber came to the clinic." Michael's head snapped around to face her. CJ raised a hand, waving it slightly. "It's all right. Nothing you need to deal with tonight. I have her sleeping in the clinic."

"What's wrong?"

"Her vitals are all out of whack. Can't pinpoint why. And I don't dare do too much for the sake of the pregnancy."

Michael stared into the darkness, bouncing several small pebbles inside the curve of his hand. CJ watched him, saw the apprehension and tension strain his features and she knew what thoughts troubled him so much. Amber was one of the prisoners that had come out of New Mexico with him. When she became pregnant just a few months later, it was a ray of hope for all the people who had come out of the facility alive. It meant they could live real lives... they could be happy like everyone else.

But it didn't take long before one problem after another tormented her, and since coming to Tennessee they had nearly lost the child twice. Michael had switched much of his medical training focus to Obstetrics and Pediatrics, and considered Amber *his* case. He looked to Lilly for guidance, but CJ knew whenever there was a step back in her care, he took it to heart.

Because he wondered if her problems were the result of something the Areth had done to her.

And made him question his own identity. His past and his future.

What long term effects would he face for their brutality?

She wondered as much as he did.

CJ reached out and curled her fingers around his arm. He dropped the pebbles and laid his hand over hers, but still stared into the dark. She drew a long breath and looked up, staring at the stars through the gaps in the trees. It was beautiful here. She had never been to this part of the continent before, and never imagined her first visit to Tennessee would be to take over an abandoned mountain resort.

"How is Lilly?" she asked.

"She tries to be strong."

"Is she succeeding?"

He jerked his head slightly, not a nod and not a shake. "I know this hurts her, but she doesn't want to be weak."

"A lot like someone else I know," CJ said, keeping her gaze out into the night.

"I worry for her," Michael said, avoiding her statement.

CJ looked at him, their stares meeting briefly. "I know you do. You are a good friend to her, Michael. She is going to need you more now than she ever has."

He nodded, his eyes sliding away. "I wish I knew the right thing to do."

CJ tilted her head. "You're doing exactly the right things, Michael."

He said nothing, his chin dipping as he stared into the darkness outside the circle of light from the porch lamp. CJ let the conversation go, and looked to the sky again.

"Do you know any astronomy, Michael?" she asked after several moments of quiet between them.

"Very little."

She pointed toward the eastern horizon. "Do you see that line of brighter stars there? They form a jagged line that curves to the south..."

Michael leaned toward her so he followed the angle of her arm. "Yes. I see it."

"That's Perseus. If you look straight above it, do you see the bright star?"

"Yes."

"That is Cassiopeia." She pointed out several other clusters out to him, including Andromeda and Cepheus. "Perseus killed Medusa, the mother of Pegasus, and rescued Andromeda, the daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopeia from a sea monster named Cetus."

"You must love astronomy."

CJ smiled and linked her hands in her lap. A slow ache filled her chest, one that usually only haunted her late at night. "Your father loves astronomy. He taught me to love it, too."

Dog came bounding toward them from the darkness, and sat down at the foot of the steps, his bushy tail stirring up pine needles and fallen leaves as he wagged it. CJ laughed and shook her head.

"I think he's ready for bed."

Michael stood, and offered his hand to pull her to her feet. As she dusted her jeans off, he opened the door to the cottage and Dog ran inside. CJ stepped through the open door to the sitting room beyond. It wasn't fancy, sometimes the electricity went out and the water didn't run, but she still preferred it over the stuffy, dark quarters of the Colorado base. Living in the Mountain, she hadn't realized how much she missed fresh air and sunshine.

"Open your windows," she said as she took the first step to go upstairs. "There might be a breeze later."

Michael waved a hand behind him, and the porch light went out.

Chapter Three

Jace poked at the bowl of oatmeal the nurse had brought to him ten minutes before. It was lumpy and gray and despite the gnawing hole in his gut, he hadn't forced down more than three or four bites. He hated the ache in his arms when he lifted the spoon and the tightness in his throat when he tried to swallow; like living and functioning was a mystery to his body.

"Are you going to make me be the mean doctor?"

Jace looked up, and smiled at his angel visitor from the night before. She stood in the doorway of his room, looking as much like an angel now as she had in the moonlight. A simple ponytail held her hair back with wispy bits falling around her cheeks and neck, and she wore a snug-fitting tank top in a peachy color and a pair of shorts.

And she shall be called Woman...

One thing he knew for sure; his libido was still alive and well. The tank top hugged her full breasts and accentuated her form... and dang, didn't she have *form*. It should be a sin for a doctor of the female persuasion to look that good. His gut stirred and he had to swallow hard before he spoke.

"Darlin', you don't look like you have a mean bone in your body."

She smiled, the kind of slow smile that dared a man to say something even cockier just to get a response.

"If you don't eat your oatmeal, you will force me to get mean. Shots and all kinds of nastiness to get your nutrition into you."

Jace poked at the oatmeal. "Who made the rule that hospital food had to taste so lousy? When do I graduate to bacon and eggs?"

She stepped away from the doorway and walked to the side of the bed. "When I know absolutely that your system can take it. Making you sick counteracts my plans for you, Lieutenant."

Jace let his head rest on the stack of pillows behind him so he could look at her. Either he was still delirious, or she was flirting. Was he that out of it? What would a hot woman like her want with a beaten, broken shell like him? He drew a slow breath through his nose.

"Speaking of plans, what's on the agenda for today, Angel?"

"You. Finishing breakfast." She picked up the bowl, stirring the spoon through the gloppy mess. "Let me see what I can do about making this edible. I'll be right back." As she walked away, she glanced back at him over her shoulder. "Drink your milk."

Jace lifted his glass in a silent toast before she left the room. He set it down without taking a sip as soon as she was through the door. The morning sun coming through his window warmed the room, making him lethargic and weighing his limbs down. He considered closing his eyes, but didn't want to be asleep when she returned. Minutes later, she came back through the open door carrying the same bowl.

"I thought you were going to get me something better," he said with a groan.

"No, I said I was going to make *this* more edible." Without missing a beat, she set the bowl on his bed table and sat on the small space available between his thigh and the edge of the bed.

Jace's heartbeat jumped and he had a hard time tearing his eyes away from the inside curve of her knee to look at the bowl. The oatmeal was steaming warm again, with a hearty pat of butter melting in the middle of it. It was darker, and he could still see some grains of brown sugar she had stirred in. It even smelled more appetizing. Jace leaned over the bowl and inhaled deeply.

"Better?"

Jace grinned and scooped a spoonful of the oatmeal into his mouth. "Oh, yeah," he mumbled around the food and rolled the sweetened cereal over his tongue before swallowing. The heat and steam spread out through his chest, warming him from the inside out.

"It would be better with some cream, but all we have is dehydrated milk on base," she said with a shrug.

"No, this is fine." He managed to eat over half the bowl before his stomach proclaimed loud and long that he had eaten enough. Jace dropped the spoon on the tray and leaned back, rubbing his stomach. "You have a way of persuading people, don't you, Angel."

She tipped her head, her eyes shifting down briefly before she met his gaze again. "Why do you call me Angel?"

"Does it bother you?"

Lilly set her hand on the mattress behind her and leaned back, crossing her legs. Jace could feel the heat of her skin through the light blanket. "No, it doesn't bother me. I just wondered."

"Well, it's about time you joined us among the living."

Jace smiled and looked toward the door where Jackie stood. "I wondered when you were going to visit."

She walked across the room and squatted at the foot of his bed, resting her arms on the footboard. "I had some stuff to do in Mississippi. Jenifer wanted to make sure Eli could travel before she headed out, and I stuck around to file my report on you," she said with a wink. "How ya been, Doc?"

Lilly smiled brightly as she looked at Jackie. "I've been good. Actually..." She stood and Jace immediately felt the loss of her proximity. "Could I talk to you outside for a minute?"

"Sure thing. I'll be back. Don't run off on me, 'kay?"

Jace saluted and settled back into his pillows to watch the two women walk out together. He shook his head, his eyes on Lilly Franklin. *Lord help him if he remembered tomorrow that he was celibate...*

As soon as Lilly had the door closed behind her, she turned to Jackie and pulled her into a firm hug. She felt Jackie's momentary tension, but didn't let go until she knew she had control of her own emotions. Pulling back, she wiped at the flash of tears that she had fought since Jackie Anderson walked into Jace's room.

"What was that for?" Jackie asked, flipped her dark hair behind her ears.

"To thank you," Lilly said, keeping her voice low enough that it wouldn't carry back to Jace. "Jackie, do you have any idea the gift you've given to Jamie and me?"

A momentary flash of confusion tightened Jackie's features, but then she arched her eyebrows and whispered "Oh...she your baby?"

Lilly nodded, glancing back at the open door even though she knew Jace wasn't going to come through it. She hitched her chin down the hall and Jackie followed her to her small office. Michael sat on the couch, Jamie in his arms. She was awake and alert and attentively watching the brightly colored toy Michael held in front of her face. He looked up and smiled, his eyes quickly darting to Jackie and back to Lilly.

Lilly crouched beside Michael and ran her finger along Jamie's cheek. She saw more and more of Jace in her daughter's face every day. The darkness of her hair, the line of her nose. She may be a girl, but Lilly felt in her heart that Jamie would grow up to be the spitting image of her father. And because of Jackie, she would know him.

"Amanda went for coffee," Michael said, his voice tight and low.

"No problem. I know Jamie loves being with you." She looked over her shoulder, seeking out Jackie who still hovered by the door. "Come here, Jackie. I want you to meet my daughter."

She stood as Jackie approached, and Michael came off the couch to slide Jamie into her arms. Lilly turned to Jackie, bouncing Jamie softly. "This is Jamie Elise Quinn."

Michael laid his hand on her shoulder as he slipped behind her. "I need to check on Amber."

He was gone before Lilly could say thank you. Jackie's gaze shifted away from Jamie to watch Michael leave, her lips pressed together in a small frown as her eyebrows pulled together.

"You'd think his pants were on fire, or something," she mumbled. With a shake of her head, she looked back to Lilly and Jamie. "She's beautiful, Doc."

Tears burned again in Lilly's eyes and she swallowed hard against the rush. The physician in her knew she was still riding the wave of hormones after delivering Jamie, but she knew it was more than that. The hormones just made it harder for her to keep everything on an even keel. She was a new mother who thought she would be raising her baby alone. She was a widow who was a widow no more. Most of the time, she held a tight fist around it all, but sometimes the intensity wore her down and she slipped. Staring down at her daughter's face, Lilly sank down onto the couch cushions and sucked in a ragged sob.

"Hey, you okay?"

Lilly just shook her head and laid her cheek against Jamie's, rocking slowly on the edge of the cushion.

"Do you want me to get someone?"

"No," Lilly managed to choke out. "No, I'll be all right." She looked up, trying to smile through the tears. "I'm sorry, Jackie. I didn't... I just wanted you to know how much what you did means to me."

Jackie grabbed the nearby straight-backed chair that sat at the corner of Lilly's desk and spun it around to straddle it, sitting with her arms draped on the ladder back. She reached out and patted Lilly's shoulder with a smile. "Hey, I would have done it for any of our boys. I am glad, though, that he's back. You've always been great, Doc. You deserve to get him back."

Lilly drew in a shuddered breath. "I don't have him back yet, Jackie. And that's what scares me most of all."

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were avoiding me, handsome."

Michael spun on his heels, his brown eyes widening when he caught sight of her standing near the window.

"Jacqueline..."

"That's me," she said, pushing away from the wall to walk toward him. It was probably wrong of her to enjoy the deer-in-the-headlights look in his eyes he adopted whenever she was around, but some deep down 'girlie' part of her liked the reaction. She was used to unapologetic leers and crude sexual innuendo from the soldiers she worked with, and Michael's pensive hesitation was... *refreshing*. "I thought maybe you forgot."

"Forgot?" His head tipped down in slight degrees the closer she walked to him, holding eye contact.

"You haven't said more than ten words to me since you showed up in Mississippi. And the way you tore out of the Doc's office makes me wonder what you were trying to escape." She stepped so close to him that she had to hitch up her chin to keep her eyes locked with his. "If I remember right, we had a conversation to finish."

Michael stared at her, his eyes squinted slightly at the corner. He had looked at her that way before, but she still felt like he was studying her. "Things are different." His voice held a tangible weight, sliding over her.

"Different..."

"I didn't want to make you uncomfortable."

Jackie chuckled. "Now, there's a new one...what would make me uncomfortable?"

He shifted his gaze away, rubbing the pad of his thumb across his lower lip. The first tickle of uncertainty that Jackie had felt in a very long time danced under her skin.

"Oh."

Someone dumping a cold bucket of ice water right on her beating heart wouldn't have affected her much more than the realization of his words. It surprised her... and pissed her off... just a little bit. Since when did she put so much stock in one man? Especially a man she had to work so hard at. Jackie pushed her hands into her pockets and shifted her weight, drawing back from him in small degrees.

"Hey, no problem. Handsome guy like you was bound to hook up with someone eventually. Good for you." She was damn proud of the steady level she maintained in her voice. *Don't let them see...*

He tilted his head, confusion pulling at his brow. "Hook up?"

"Sure." She stepped back and turned partially away from him. "It's not like we had an *understanding* or anything. I mean, when someone special comes along you've got to grab on with both hands."

Michael stayed silent, which only grated on her suddenly frazzled nerves and made her itch to bolt from the room. She would have bet money he felt the same zing she did, but what the hell did she expect? Hell, she barely knew him.

Jackie took a step toward the door, making her graceful exit. Before she took her second step, Michael reached out and gripped the inside of her elbow moving to her even as he pulled her back. She glared at him, biting down hard.

"What?" she managed to grind out.

"There's no one else, Jacqueline." His voice settled on her skin like a touch.

Relief collided with frustration, and Jackie huffed. "Then what the hell is wrong?"

He clenched his jaw, a muscle along his cheek jerking, and looked away. Taking a step back, he set one hand on the edge of a nearby table as he shoved the other into the pocket of his jeans. Jackie watched him, finally admitting to herself that something had definitely gotten under his skin. Something more than another woman. As young as he was, deep lines fanned from the corners of his eyes as he stared at the floor.

There's no one else, Jacqueline.

Maybe his words meant what she thought, maybe he just meant... She mentally shook her head and focused on the tension that pulled at his expression. Jackie drew a slow breath in through her nose and crossed her arms over her body. Her bare arms brushed his shirt, shifting it over his stomach. His gaze was still locked on some non-descript spot on the floor and she ducked into his line of sight, his brown eyes shifted to look at her.

"What's this about?" He looked away again, and Jackie pressed her palm to his chest, bringing his attention back to her immediately. She felt his heart pound in a steady rhythm beneath her hand. "Look, Michael, I know we don't know each other very well but that doesn't mean you can't talk to me. What's up?"

His eyebrows pulled together as he stared at her, his lips pressed into thin lines. "It doesn't bother you?" he finally asked.

"I could answer if I knew what you were talking about..."

"What you saw." Michael's voice held an edge she hadn't heard from him before, not even when he was ticked about her stupid-ass Areth comment. It wasn't anger, but whatever emotion simmered beneath the surface of his words was very raw and very real. "What I did to Damian."

"Michael, what are you-ooooh." She trailed off, the moment that she had stormed the infirmary coming back in vivid detail. *Jumpin' Jehosephat!* It hadn't even registered before!

She remembered running side-by-side with CJ, the sound of fighting echoing through the wooden hall of the infirmary. They rounded the corner to see Captain Ali slam back against the wall with the force of a battering ram. Michael stood on the other side of the cramped space, his hand raised in the air, shaking with the strain.

She had shouted, ordering Damian to stand down. Instead, Michael's arm dropped and Damian lurched toward him. Jackie pulled her pulse weapon and fired at the same moment Michael swung his arm wide and Damian flew across the room, crashing hard against the wall.

"Damn..." she mumbled, her hand sliding from his chest.

Michael stepped away from her and walked across the room, his hands pushed deep into his pockets. Jackie watched him walk away, her brain still processing the memory. That night, weeks before, her concern hadn't been how Michael beat Damian. It had only been if he was okay. She hadn't even thought about...

"You're telekinetic?" she asked, raising her head to stare at him.

Michael didn't turn around, staring out the window.

"Damn..."

"You said that." His voice was rough, barely reaching her, but it immediately snapped her out of her daze.

"Michael," she said, stepping quickly toward him. "Why didn't you —"

"Why didn't he tell you?"

Both Jackie and Michael turned to see CJ Montgomery standing in the doorway, her shoulder braced against the jamb with her arms crossed. She stared at Michael with her eyebrows arched.

"Are you going to tell her?"

Michael frowned and looked back out the window as CJ walked toward them, still watching him. Jackie shifted her glance between them. It didn't take a theoretical geneticist to figure out something *major* was going unsaid, she just didn't know what.

"He didn't tell you," CJ began, finally looking at Jackie. "Because he's stubborn and thick-skulled. *Just* like his father."

"I don't get it."

CJ moved to Michael, stepping in front of him to get his attention just as Jackie had a few minutes before. "She's not going to think any less of you."

"Caitlin —"

"Think less of you?" Jackie cut in. "Hell, I think it's amazing! You're like... Obi Wan... or something."

"I'm not —!" he started to shout, but immediately snapped off his words and bounced the heel of his hand off the windowsill, dropping his chin. "I don't want this," he said more calmly.

"Why not?"

Michael looked up, staring at her, and Jackie waited for him to answer. Tension emanated from him like a force field and his hand curled into a tight ball. With a huff of breath through his nose, he turned and walked out of the room. Jackie crossed her arms and shook her head, staring at the empty doorway through which he had disappeared. CJ called after him, but he didn't stop.

"Does he do that a lot?"

"Aggravate me until I'm ready to scream?" CJ asked.

"I meant the storming out thing, but... that, too."

CJ sighed and sat on the edge of the window, her hands braced on the sill. "Michael is an expert avoider. If he doesn't want to talk about something, he either finds a way to change the subject or..." She waved a hand toward the door. "He removes himself."

"Annoying as hell. This is the second time he's used that maneuver on me."

CJ snorted a chuckle. "Tell me about it."

"Did he really think I'd freak out over this?" Jackie asked, looking sideways at CJ.

She nodded. "He hid it for a long time."

"Damn. If I could do something like that, I'd be tossing Areth ass from here to Toledo. What's his problem with it?"

CJ lowered her gaze, staring at the tips of her shoes. "That's a very long, very personal story, Jackie. One he's going to have to tell." She looked up, then softly added. "When he's ready."

"You know him pretty well."

She shrugged. "I'm learning. Like I said, he's his father's son..."

Jackie turned to the sound of a soft rapping at the doorway. Beverly Surimoto, Second In Command for the base even though she held no form of military rank, stood in the open doorway. Jackie wondered how a woman who held so much responsibility, and gleaned so much respect from those around her, could always look so...*feminine*. Her red hair was braided down her back and she wore a yellow sundress, a bright smile on her face. She held her hands in front of her, making small fluid gestures, and Jackie recalled that she had lost the use of her voice synthesizer months before.

CJ pushed away from the window. "Okay," she said in answer to whatever Beverly said. "I'll walk with you."

Beverly nodded and waved to Jackie with a smile before she moved down the hall.

"We have a meeting in Command Hall. Don't give up on Michael, Jackie. Someday, when you know the whole story, you'll understand. Until then, just... don't give up on him."

"You think he wants me to stick around?"

CJ smiled. "Absolutely."

She walked out of the room, leaving Jackie staring at the empty doorway. "Damn it," Jackie mumbled to herself. "Getting a straight answer out of either of them is like trying to grab smoke."

CJ stepped into the warmth of the afternoon, shading her eyes with her hand. The air was heavy and thick, making her miss the climate control of the Mountain in Colorado. But, not enough to wish their base was still there. Sticky and hot, the air here was fresh and laden with the scents of Earth and life. It was worth the discomfort.

Beverly stood at the top of the steps leading off the infirmary porch, looking down at Victor with a smile on her face. He was one step down, bringing them closer to eye level and spoke to her in low tones that only resonated enough for CJ to know they talked. Beverly's hands moved in small, graceful motions in the space between them and CJ diverted her eyes to keep from interpreting the signs. She didn't need to hear what they said to sense the feelings behind the words. The spark and glow that lit Beverly's face whenever she looked at Victor was enough to declare loud and clear the intensity between them.

Both Beverly and Victor looked to CJ as the screen door slapped shut behind her. She tipped her head back, shaking her hair to lift it temporarily off her sticky neck. "What is this meeting about?" she asked.

"Some reports we've received regarding atmospheric and geological studies done recently." Beverly signed. *"I haven't seen any of the numbers yet. Lilly has been reviewing them since this morning."*

CJ shook her head. "She should be with Jace."

Beverly shrugged. *"You know Lilly. She spreads herself thin. She started doing it after Jace disappeared, and I don't think she knows how to stop."*

"Tell your General I'd be happy to look over the reports," Victor said, his eyes shifting between CJ and Beverly. "I know I'm a geneticist, but I may have some insight that would prove useful."

"I'll tell him."

"Is Jackie all right?" Beverly tipped her head toward the door CJ had exited, one eyebrow arched as she asked her question.

"As far as I know. I'm pretty sure she was just here to see Michael. He's the one I'm worried about."

"Why?" Victor asked immediately, taking the final step to join them under the shade of the porch.

CJ pushed her hands into her pockets, studying Victor. She didn't pretend to understand the relationship Victor and Michael shared. It was deep and intense, born from years of knowing each other, and yet it was far more than just friendship. She had gleaned enough to know that Victor had watched Michael grow up. If an Areth were capable of feeling a sense of paternity, perhaps that was what Victor felt. Whether that was the case, or not, she couldn't know.

"He probably feels like we backed him into a corner," CJ said on a sigh. "It wasn't my intention, but..." She shook her head. "I overheard Jackie and Michael talking. You both know how strongly Michael feels about his telekinesis. He hates it, hates the thought of where it came from and why he has this ability. He hates even more that Jackie saw him use it, and when I came in she was asking him why he hadn't said anything. I probably pushed more than I should have, but he is *just* like his father. Stubborn. Once he sets his mind to something, changing it is as easy as pushing a log against a mud slide."

"Do you think there is something between Michael and Jackie?"

"There might be... if he'd ..." CJ bit off her frustration and pressed her lips together. "He's just like his father," she said again, ignoring the heaviness in her chest. Nick had been on her mind and in her heart more than usual the last few days. She woke up during the night in tears from dreams of him, and found herself looking skyward more than she looked ahead. "We should go."

Beverly nodded and looked up at Victor. Something silent passed between them and both smiled. CJ felt guilty, like some voyeur watching them. Beverly laid her hand against Victor's chest and slid her fingers away as she stepped past. They didn't share a kiss, and yet the intimacy between them was just as tangible. In fact, they had never kissed in public and their physical contact hardly ever exceeded the touch of their hands. It was better that way, especially for the base personnel who were uncomfortable with and didn't understand their relationship. Beverly and CJ left the shade of the porch and walked down the slight incline toward Command Hall.

CJ caught an amused grin on Beverly's face as they walked together. "What are you thinking?"

"Michael and Jacqueline. It's a very interesting combination." She arched an eyebrow. "Unexpected."

"Any more unexpected than the Second In Command of a rebel base falling in love with an enemy defector?"

Beverly's smile brightened and she shook her head with a shrug. "No, I suppose not."

In the distance, a lone whippoorwill called out, its twittering sound echoing through the heavy air. Michael raised his head and looked off toward the trees, waiting to see if the lonely bird's mate returned his call. He cried again, and Michael held his breath. Moments later, the answering call whispered through the air and Michael smiled.

He wiggled his toes in the cool spring water as it flowed over the tops of his bare feet. His sneakers sat beside him on the shore, neatly untied. He couldn't count the number of days he sat in the blistering New Mexico heat and dreamed of being able to do this; dangle his feet in a natural spring as a breeze—full of life and vibrancy—brushed over his skin.

He heard Victor's footsteps through the undergrowth long before his friend broke the tree line, stopping at the top of the slope to look down at Michael. Victor stood beside an ancient birch, his hand resting on the white, paper-like bark.

"Hello, my friend."

"Hello, Vic."

Michael tossed a small twig into the water, watching it swirl and twist around the stones beneath the surface, as Victor continued down the slope to sit on the cool grass beside him. Both men sat silent for several minutes, Michael watching the reflection of the sun on the water as Victor twirled a dead and grayed branch between his fingers. Time passed, and Michael finally drew a slow breath as he shifted back and rested on his elbows against the slope.

"It's beautiful here," he finally said. "I found this stream a couple weeks ago. I know it's not a lake, not like the one at my father's cabin, but it's as close as I can get."

"I heard it's *your* cabin now."

Michael squinted against the sunlight, tipping his head back. Caitlin had mentioned that morning over breakfast that his hair was in desperate need of a cut. At the time, he hadn't thought much of it. Now, the humidity in the air made his head feel like a cake baking in an oven.

"It's hard for me to imagine anything being *mine*."

Victor poked at the soft earth with his stick, a slight wince playing over his features. "In some degree, I can understand that. I didn't have anything taken away, not like you did, but I never had anything I wanted to claim."

Michael smiled and lifted a foot from the water to shove Victor's shoulder, leaving a wet circle on his shirt. "Until Beverly," he said with a chuckle.

Victor smiled, laughing himself.

"She's good for you."

"She is," Victor agreed, nodding as he looked out over the water. "Too good."

Michael studied his friend, recognizing the suppressed tension that framed his eyes and bracketed his mouth. He didn't look more than a few years older than Michael, but Michael knew he carried the weight of several centuries on his shoulders. Weeks before, Victor had revealed to General Castleton the truth behind Areth existence. The entire Areth race was nothing more than human bodies hijacked and overridden by the forced consciousness of an alien race whose bodies had given out on them several centuries before. He wondered, looking at Victor, what his 'true' face would be... but could imagine nothing further than the

man he saw. Black hair, dark eyes and olive skin; he could have been born as easily in Guatemala as cloned on a ship traveling the galaxy.

"How are you doing?" Michael asked, his question immediately drawing Victor's gaze. "It's been weeks since you lost control."

Victor winced, nodding slowly as he stared at the water. "It's still always there, Michael. Just below the surface. Sometimes, it's a battle to keep my sanity and sometimes I actually feel... Can I use the word *normal*? Do I have that right?"

"Yes."

Victor smiled, but it held no humor. "You have more faith in me than I will ever have in myself, my friend. Perhaps someday I will have the courage to tell you *all* the reasons I don't deserve the hospitality of your people, your friendship, or Beverly's love."

"Love."

"Don't worry, Michael. It's as confusing to me as it is to you."

Michael tipped his head back to the sky and closed his eyes. The twigs and stones beneath his arms dug into his skin, but not enough to make him want to move. As silence settled around them, he let himself go back to thinking about Jacqueline. Before Victor came, he had been trying to sort it out in his head. Without much luck.

Caitlin told him again and again not to be ashamed of the telekinesis—or 'the gift', as Lilly called it. Lilly did the same. He couldn't make them understand how deep he hated it, hated the thought that this was some bizarre by-product of Kathleen's sadistic hatred and twisted mind. Every time he looked at Amber struggling with her own manipulated body to try and bring her child into the world, he burned inside. He hated all of it.

Michael looked to Victor again, who now swirled the end of his stick in the shallow water at the edge of the stream. Drawing a slow breath, he forced himself to ask the question he never thought he would ask of Victor. Never planned to ask.

"Did you know what she was doing?"

Victor rubbed his hand across the back of his neck and lowered his head. Michael waited, watching, wondering if he wanted to know.

"I didn't know the details of her experiments, no. Seeing the results was enough to turn my stomach." He looked at Michael over his shoulder. "You don't know how many times I wished I could stop her."

Michael didn't need to ask why he didn't. He had no support, no power behind him. Victor was a single voice among a race bent on destruction, even if their true faces hadn't yet been revealed.

"Do you know about Amber?"

Victor nodded. "Beverly told me. If there is anything I can do—"

"Tell me how to bring that baby to term."

Victor chuckled, a wry sound that fell flat. "Obstetrics isn't a science most Areth are familiar with, Michael. But I'm still a doctor—"

"Tell me what was done to her," he demanded, sitting up. "If I know what was done, I can find a way to—"

"Fix it? Michael, what was done is far beyond anything than can be 'fixed' here."

"Tell me."

"I don't know. I don't know what she did." He stared at Michael, his jaw clenched hard. "I wish I did. I wish I knew how to fix it and take it all back. But I can't." Victor's hand shook as he rubbed his palm over his face. He dropped his hands away, his fingers curling into fists. "I can't."

"Okay, Vic," Michael said softly. The struggle in Victor was tangible, buffering the air around him, and Michael understood it wasn't the time to push. "We all do what we can."

Victor snapped his head around to look at Michael, his eyes intense and his lips pulled tight. "I know what I *can* do. I can tell you I don't think Kathleen gave you the telekinesis."

"Yes, she did."

"No!" Victor snapped, immediately pressing his eyes closed. Michael sensed his struggle to keep his inner turmoil contained.

"Vic, it's okay —"

"Just *listen* to me, Michael. My job was to eliminate certain genetic markers in humans. Disease... defects... and *psychic abilities*."

Michael sat forward, resting his elbows on his raised knees. "Why?"

"I don't know." Victor shook his head as he spoke, a self-deprecating smile pulling at his mouth. "You have to understand. Even before I did what I did, I wasn't held in the highest confidence by my peers. I questioned too much. I hesitated to do the worst of what they needed, and usually found a way around it. I wasn't told the reasonings, just the task."

"If they were trying to eliminate psychic abilities, why would they —"

"Yes! Exactly!" Victor said adamantly, pointing at Michael. "Do you see now?"

Michael didn't answer, just looked out over the water.

Chapter Five

The night was lit up with residual flame bursts from glider canons, molten projectiles leaving long trails through the black. Jace's alarms blared, his radar flashing red warnings as he banked hard left to avoid a blast that skimmed along his right wing. The controls shook in his hand as he fought to maintain control.

"Anakin, two bogies flying hard at your belly!"

"Oh, shit!" He cranked the joystick and the foreign glider twisted into a five-hundred-forty degree barrel. His helmet slammed hard into the canopy, pain shooting through his skull. "Do you see him?"

"No, they killed their burners. All I see is black."

Jace's radar flared again, two red dots coming hard and fast from behind. "They're on my six, Zeus! Get 'em! Get 'em!"

"Bank left, Anakin. I've got the bandit in my sights."

The glider shook violently, spinning hard as it nose-dived to the earth. Jace pulled back on the controls, his arms shaking with the strain as the craft plummeted headlong to the desert below.

"Eject, damn it!" shouted a voice in his ear. "Eject!"

Jace slammed his fist against the red eject button. The cockpit jerked but the canopy only parted a few inches, filling the inside with driving rain. "I can't! The canopy is jammed! It's stuck! Ah, damn! It's stuck! Zeus!"

G-forces stole his voice, pressing him hard against his seat until he couldn't suck air into his compressed lungs. He stared down the nose of his glider as the earth rushed up to crush him.

Jace jerked from sleep at the light touch on his cheek, his breath short and his body aching at the sudden movement.

"It's okay."

He blinked against the stinging sweat in his eyes, snapping his hand out to wrap it around Lilly's wrist. The bright sunlight burned his eyes and he couldn't focus. Panic was a bitter bile in the back of his throat and he swallowed hard against it, fighting the nausea in his gut and the near-overwhelming need to bolt from his chair.

"Jace, look at me."

Her hands cupped his face, gentle and soothing, but the pounding fear and rage in his chest wouldn't back off, wouldn't release its hold. Someone was shouting, and not until she laid her thumbs over his open lips did he realize it was his own voice he heard. He sucked in air until his lungs protested painfully.

"Jason Patrick Quinn," she shouted firmly. "Look at me!"

Something in him snapped, rushing through his body like cold water from a broken balloon. His jaw worked, trying to form words that wouldn't come as he stared up at Lilly through hazed eyes. Her fingers stroked his skin and she slowly knelt in front of him, her gaze never breaking with his.

"Do you see me?" she asked, her voice softer.

Jace nodded within her hold. He released the tight grip he realized he had on her wrists and slid his palms along her bare arms until he reached her shoulders. She leaned forward, meeting him as he shifted toward her.

"Lilly?" he choked out, curling his fingers into the fabric of her shirt.

Her blue eyes shifted as she nodded slowly. "Yes, Jace."

He drew one more shaky breath, falling back into the chair as his hands fell away from her shoulders. Lilly straightened, her hand moving from his cheek to rest on his shoulder. Jace scrubbed his damp face with his palms, groaning. The world came into focus again. He sat in his damn wheelchair on the balcony of the infirmary building looking out over the mountainscape. The air was thick and warm, smelling green with life. Slowly, he remembered the day and where he was. Tennessee... not the black hole of his nightmares... not the burning inferno... not rushing death. Tennessee.

"I'm sorry," he said against his hands before letting them drop in his lap. He looked up at Lilly, wishing for all the world he could stand up from his chair and look her straight in the eye.

She skimmed the tips of her fingers through his freshly cut hair, sending a rush along his skin, before resting her hand on his shoulder again. "For what?"

He glanced sideways at the red marks on her arm, where he had gripped hard in his blind panic. His gut twisted. "Did I hurt you?"

"No. I'll be fine. Do you remember the dream?"

He shook his head. "Just... panic. Blackness." He squinted his eyes, focusing only partially on the snap at the front of her shorts. "I think... I think maybe I remember a name."

Her fingers applied slightly more pressure, and he shifted his gaze back to her face. "What name?"

"Anakin."

She smiled, the expression lighting up her face and making her eyes shine. "That's you."

"Me?"

"Your call sign."

Like a puzzle piece he thought he had lost, the information slid into place. He nodded. "Yeah," he said slowly. "Yeah."

"I'll get you a drink," Lilly said softly, and Jace almost thought he heard a quiver in her voice.

He reached across his body and laid his hand over hers, holding it against his shoulder. "Wait..."

She smiled, a different one from the one that challenged him and flirted with him. It barely touched her lips, but the effect was intense spreading heat and calm through him. "You're okay, Jace." Lilly turned her hand beneath his so their palms brushed across each other and gently squeezed. "We're never going to let anything like that happen to you again."

This time he knew he heard the crack in her voice, and saw the moisture well in her eyes. When she pulled away, he didn't stop her. She disappeared through the wide doors that opened onto the balcony and Jace released a long breath. He rested his elbows on the arms of the wheelchair and looked out again on the mountainside as it stretched away from the camp.

Whoever picked this place for a military base, they couldn't have chosen a more spectacular view. A low mist shifted just below the tops of the trees, blanketing the valley at the bottom of the slope in a smoky fog. For the first few days after he woke up, especially when he was still at the Mississippi base, he hadn't been able to chase away the cold. It was

imbedded to his bones. Finally, he had gotten past the constant chill and could sit outside in the sun in a tee shirt and the light infirmity pants without wishing for a blanket. His body didn't fight him with every move, although it was far from working *with* him. Only a few days had passed, and he logically understood it would take time, but impatient gnawed at him.

Lilly returned with a glass of iced tea in her hand and a refreshed smile on her lips. She held out the glass and he took it, drinking deep of the cold liquid. The brew was sweet, with the slightest grit of sugar still floating in the tea.

"Sweet tea," he said, resting the bottom of the glass on the arm of the chair. "I love sweet tea."

Lilly sat down on the patio beside his chair, extending her legs out in front of her with her ankles crossed. She leaned back on her hands and shook her head slightly, her blonde hair lifting off her shoulders to be caught in the breeze. Jace wondered if she realized the seductive form she created with her tee shirt pulled tight across her full breasts and her legs stretch out.

"I have something to tell you," she said with her head still tipped back and her eyes closed.

"Why don't I like the sounds of that?"

Lilly shifted her weight onto one arm to bring the other hand up to shield her eyes. "Tomorrow, Doctor Stephen Calbraith is coming here to see you."

"Another doctor? Y'all can't handle me between the three of you?"

She smiled. "He's a doctor of psychology."

Jace leaned his forehead into his hand, bracing his elbow on the chair arm. "You think I need a head shrinker?"

Lilly sat forward, pulling her ankles toward her to fold her legs. She rested a hand on the chair arm near his elbow. "Jace, I can heal your body. But some of this is beyond me. I don't know how to help you."

"And this guy will?"

She shrugged her shoulder. "He's one of the best. CJ heard of his work before she joined Phoenix and knows his reputation is excellent. He's been with Phoenix for over twenty years, and he'll do anything to help you be whole again."

Jace stared down at her, clenching his jaw. He drew a deep breath in through his nostrils, trying to release some of the anger and frustration eating away at him from the inside as he pushed the air back out from his lungs. "Is that possible? Is it possible for me to be *whole* again?"

"Of course it is."

"What if I don't believe you?"

She pressed her lips together for a moment, tilting her head slightly. "Then, Jace Quinn, I'm going to have to *make* you believe."

"We appreciate you making the trip here, Steven," General Castleton said as he reached across the expanse of his desk to shake the hand of Doctor Steven Calbraith. "We could use any advice you can offer."

Lilly sat in her chair, watching the exchange as her insides twisted and knotted in nervous anticipation. The physician in her was thankful for the expertise Doctor Calbraith

could bring to Jace's recovery. He was a psychologist, and could provide her with the insight she needed to break past the blocks in Jace's mind. He could help Jace, too. Maybe convince him it was *okay* to remember. The wife in her, however, knew Jace didn't like all the attention he was getting now and would resent one more doctor-especially a 'head shrinker'-poking around at him. If she had wondered about how he'd feel, his reaction the day before pushed aside all doubt.

Doctor Calbraith took his seat, his elbows resting on the arm of the chair as he linked his fingers over his lap. "I'm glad to help, General. There hasn't been much call for my particular expertise in the last few years. Not until the attacks, of course. I've been busier than ever."

"Which is why we appreciate you taking the time to come," Lilly said quickly.

"Oh, I certainly didn't intend to imply this was an inconvenience," he said, quickly raising his hand in defense. "Any time I can help one of our boys, I'm glad to do it. I understand this young man is one of yours, General?"

"Yes. Lieutenant Jace Quinn. He went missing-assumed dead-last year."

"New Mexico?"

General Castleton nodded. "We just learned he was alive a few days ago."

Doctor Calbraith's gaze shifted to Lilly, deep lines fanning from the corners of his eyes. Lilly nodded, drawing in a steeling breath. "Yes, Doctor Calbraith. He's my husband."

"Well, that puts a twist on things. Does he know?"

She shook her head. "No. We made the decision before he arrived home that no one would say anything specific to him. He doesn't even know that this is, in essence, his home base."

"Do you have any experience with this type of case?"

"I worked in a rehabilitation facility before permanently coming underground with Phoenix. While Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was not a common ailment we dealt with, the occasional case came through for our older patients who had known global wars before the Areth came. I'd heard about Mnestic Shock, and knew enough that the facts shouldn't be forced on Jace."

"I'm glad you were proactive about his treatment. I can only imagine how difficult it must be for you."

Lilly swallowed, curling her hands into fists against the digital clipboard in her lap. "I'll do whatever I have to."

Doctor Calbraith nodded with a sympathetic smile; whether it was truly sympathetic or well practiced, Lilly didn't know. She didn't care if he could bring Jace back.

"What is his physical state?"

"Poor," she answered, forcing herself to focus. She kept her voice clinical as she listed off the litany of physical abuse and torture they had confirmed based on the evidence left behind on his broken body. She detailed his meager yet promising improvements since being found, and since coming to Tennessee two days before. Her throat tightened as she told Doctor Calbraith of the nightmares that haunted Jace at night; sometimes waking him, sometimes leaving him trapped in the throws of his own terror.

When she looked up from her notes, Doctor Calbraith watched her with his fingers steepled in front of his mouth. He tapped his lips, his eyes pinched in thought. "How extensive is the memory loss? Is it complete?"

"No, this is why we diagnosed it as MSS rather than full-blown amnesia. The loss is complete from approximately five years ago forward, after he went AWOL but before joining General Castleton in Colorado. Prior to that, his memory is fragmented. He knows he was a pilot and has progressed enough to remember his call sign. He remembers staying in Nepal before joining Phoenix... but specifics of himself like his name, his family... they're gone."

"Have you attempted any *specific* stimulation?"

Lilly blinked, a flash of heat overwhelming her as she fought the intense images of Jace over her, his breath mingling with hers in rapid huffs as his skin slid along hers and her fingers felt the bunch and give of his back with each movement. *I love you, Lilly.*

She sucked in a sharp breath and jerked her head. "Nothing specific. I wanted to make sure our approach was correct before proceeding."

"You've done very well, Doctor Quinn. I think I should speak with him as soon as possible."

"Michael, I'm frightened."

Michael set down his bio-scan reader and sat in the chair beside Amber's bed. She lay on her left side, her hand tucked beneath her pale cheek. A long braid kept her hair neat, and despite the warmth of the day, a patchwork quilt covered her to her chin. Michael leaned forward to rest his elbows on his thighs, his hands linked in the space between his knees.

"Don't be," he said in a soft voice. "We're taking care of you."

She sighed, a shudder moving through her slight frame, and her brown eyes filled with tears. "I don't want to lose this baby. It's all I have of Jacob."

"I'm not going to let that happen."

Amber slid her arm from beneath the blanket and reached out to squeeze Michael's hand. "Do you know what's wrong? I know this isn't right... it just doesn't *feel* right."

Michael clenched his jaw until pain shot down his neck. Weeks before, he had seen Lilly grow more and more frustrated as she tried to help Victor and couldn't find the answers. She tore herself up inside when she couldn't give him relief. Now, Michael understood her frustration. He wanted, more than anything, to give Amber the peace she needed to complete her pregnancy without worry. But something *was* wrong, and none of them knew what. Not Lilly. Not Caitlin. Not him.

They had scoured every medical reference library they could access, and ran every test their limited facility would allow. Everything contradicted, and nothing made sense. Her blood pressure was dangerously high one day, only to plummet the next. Other than the varying blood pressure, she had no diagnosable signs of any known pregnancy-related ailment. She was so weak, she couldn't rise from her bed and walk on her own yet her blood work showed no abnormalities. Sleep eluded her except in short bursts, draining her body of the rest it needed.

At six months gestation, Michael had real concerns that she would make it full term. He fought each day to replenish her body and provide her with the nutrition she needed for

both herself and the baby. It was a constant battle, one that drained him and gnawed at his gut.

Michael hung his head, focusing on her cold fingers as they squeezed his hand. He rubbed his lips together before drawing a breath. "We're doing everything we can, Amber. You need to do your part by resting and letting your baby grow."

"They did this, didn't they?"

He shifted his gaze, looking into her face. Until then, he and Lilly had avoided putting a name to the perpetrators they knew held the guilt. At least, in front of Amber. Michael had known the moment they first acknowledged the pregnancy was in trouble. Even free, Kathleen and her immoral rape of science haunted those among them that had escaped—Michael included.

"We don't know for sure," he said, trying to tamp down the anger that burned in his throat. "But, we suspect."

The tears that glistened in her eyes rolled free, dropping in dark spots on her pillowcase. Michael ran his thumb along her cheek to wipe away the damp trail.

"Will it be like this for everyone?"

"Time is the only thing that will tell us that."

She squeezed his hand tighter, sniffing a short breath. "I want her to live."

"We all do."

"Michael?" called Lilly from the doorway and he raised his head to see her. "Doctor Calbraith is here to see Jace. Can you come?"

He nodded. "I'll be right there."

Lilly moved down the hall again and Michael squeezed Amber's hand. "I'll be back later. Dog, come here, boy." Dog jumped up from his post by the door, his brown and white fluff of fur bouncing as he hopped onto the bed at her feet. "Dog will stay with you."

Amber smiled as she extended her hand and Dog scooted along the edge of the mattress until he was easily within her reach. Michael fluffed the long fur that covered Dog's eyes as he stood.

Jace sat as close to the window as his wheelchair would allow, staring out into the gray morning. Dark thunderheads rolled across the sky, and every few minutes a jagged bolt of lightning would slash through the clouds. Moments later, the deep, chest-rumbling roll of thunder followed. With each clap, Jace's body tenses and his heart jumped at every bolt of blue-white light.

He feared it, but he didn't know why.

Another bolt tore at the sky, and his hands curled into tight fists. He forced himself to watch, to keep his eyes open each time the sky lit up.

"This will end if you tell me what I want to know," she said, her voice low and almost seductive as she picked up a three-pronged silver device from the table beside him. Blue light arched between the prongs.

Jace bit down, bracing himself. Forcing words through his clenched jaw. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..."

His body arched against the restraints and his words turned into screams.

He saw her face. For the first time since waking up, Jace saw the face of the woman who had tormented him for so many months. Dark brown hair, always worn in intricate twists and bound close to her head. Tall and thin, she would have been attractive if it weren't for the cold malevolence in her eyes and the sneer of pleasure that twisted her lips whenever she inflicted the greatest pains.

He saw her... saw her choosing her implements of torture with care and reverence.

Saw her ... staring at him through the blue-white glow of her tools.

"This will end if you tell me what I want to know."

He could remember what she wanted, the question long ago burned from his mind.

"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?"

Lightning flashed, lighting up the entire sky and Jace flinched. The following boom vibrated through his feet and the chair, echoing in his chest. Pain shot down his neck as he ground his teeth together, but he refused to look away.

Then a soft sound floated through the room, wrapping around him, and Jace blinked against the hot tears in his eyes. He didn't turn, staring out into the storm, but focused on the melody of the song. Jace didn't need to look to know it was Lilly. She moved around the room, probably preparing for whatever task awaited him. But her humming... her humming crept through to the dark places in his mind and he heard a voice singing. A sweet soprano, rustling with age but kind.

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

He closed his eyes, praying he could hold on to image that flittered on the edge of his mind, a great cathedral of wood and giant stained glass windows that reached from floor to ceiling. Everything was larger than life from the pews to the organ to the great wooden cross that sat against the wall behind the pulpit. A man stood in the center of the platform, a wide smile on his lips with his face turned toward Heaven. Beside him was an elderly woman dressed in a pale pink suit, a scarf of pastels wrapped around her neck. Her hair was white as snow and perfectly curled, streaks of rouge on her cheeks.

"T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear, and Grace my fears relieved. How precious did that Grace appear the hour I first believed."

Something nameless and powerful pressed out from the center of his chest, squeezing his lungs and energizing his heart. She looked down at him, the wrinkles in her cheeks deepening with the smile on her face. She held out a weathered hand with painted nails and motioned to him. He stood up from the pew, his feet hitting the floor because his legs weren't long enough to touch when he sat. The steps leading to her were high for him, but he climbed them and took her hand.

"Through many dangers toils and snares I have already come; T'was Grace that brought me safe thus far, and Grace will lead me home."

"Grandma."

"Did you say something, Jace?"

Her hand touched his shoulder, and Jace swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. He sensed her moving around the wheelchair to stand beside him, but couldn't bring himself to open his eyes—not yet.

"Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail, and mortal life shall cease, I shall possess within the veil a life of joy and peace."

"Jace, what is it?"

The tight concern that turned her voice into a whisper made Jace blink open his eyes, tears freed to run down his cheeks. He looked up, meeting Lilly's gaze, and smiled.

"I remember her," he said through the fist that gripped his throat.

"Who?"

Jace raised a hand and wiped at the dampness on his face, snuffling his thumb against his nose. "My grandmother. I remember her singing in church. I couldn't have been more than seven or eight years old."

Lilly smiled. "What made you remember?"

Jace took her hand from his shoulder and turned it to press his lips against her palm. "You."

"How did —"

"Lilly, Doctor Calbraith is here."

Jace released her hand and looked back to the window. He heard her clear her throat as she stepped away from his chair. "Hello again, Doctor."

Chapter Six

Lilly managed to take the few steps to reach Doctor Calbraith without her legs giving out beneath her. Her insides shook, whether from joy or terror she wasn't sure. Every once in awhile, when he looked at her, she was sure Jace would *see* her and know who she was. Bits of his life were coming back, she knew that much. But nothing... nothing about her.

Michael stood with Doctor Calbraith and when Lilly glanced to him, he tilted his head. Deep worry lines creased his brow. Lilly nodded her head slightly to the unasked question that sat between them.

Are you all right?

"Is this our young man?" Doctor Calbraith asked as he stepped past Lilly toward Jace.

"Yes," Lilly answered, forcing herself to rein in the raging emotions that twisted around her heart. She turned and beat Doctor Calbraith to Jace, stepping to his side to place her hand on his shoulder. The contact reinforced her resolve. "Jace, this is Doctor Stephen Calbraith. Doctor, Lieutenant Jason Quinn."

Jace drew a long, deep breath before raising his head and extending his hand to Doctor Calbraith. His features were tight and set, and just as she had seen more than once in their years together, Lilly saw the stoic wall that Jace resurrected whenever he needed to guard himself; either physically or emotionally. It hadn't happened often, and never with her, but she saw it and recognized it.

"Good to meet you, Jason," Doctor Calbraith said, grabbing a nearby chair to sit facing Jace. "I've heard a great deal about you."

"Anything you're willing to share?" Jace asked, his face expressionless.

Lilly pressed her lips together and closing her eyes for one brief, fortifying moment before she crouched beside Jace and reached over the arm to lay her hand over his. "Jace, please. I know you don't like this," she said softly so the words were only between the two of them. "I wish I could do it all for you, but I can't. Please..."

He turned his head slightly, his gaze connecting with hers. She stared back, waiting, holding her breath. Jace swallowed, his eyes shifting down before he turned back to Doctor Calbraith.

"Where do we start?"

"Well, we begin with what you've remembered. Doctor Franklin informed me that you have vague recollections of being a pilot and your initial defection from Earth Force to join Phoenix. She also told me you recently recalled your call sign."

"Anakin."

Doctor Calbraith nodded, crossing his legs to lace his fingers around his raised knee. "This is all wonderful progress, Jason. Have you remembered anything else?"

His stare darted back to her for a brief moment. "My grandmother. Singing in church."

"Excellent—"

"And the woman who tortured me."

Lilly sucked in a sharp breath before she could think about schooling her reaction. She looked quickly from Jace to Michael, who stood several feet away. In Michael's face, Lilly saw recognition and immediate rage.

Doctor Calbraith shifted and sat forward, leaning his elbows on his knees. "When did this happen, Jason?"

"Today. Just a while ago."

"I see. What do you remember?"

Jace clenched his jaw, a muscle in his cheek jerking. Lilly saw the slow motion of him curling his hands into fists on his lap. "I remember torture. I remember her asking questions, demanding answers... and torture."

"What did she want to know?"

"She was looking for something. Someone."

"And you say it was a woman?"

"Yes. Tall brunette. I don't know her name but I'll never forget her face."

Lilly kept her hand on Jace's arm, but watched Michael. His lips pinched and tightened to thin white lines and he curled one hand along the back of his neck, turning partially away. The more Jace spoke, detailing the specifics of the torture sessions he remembered, Lilly's throat tightened until she could barely breathe or swallow. Her blood boiled for the pain this bitch inflicted on Jace, and her heart ached for Michael as she saw him reliving his own life in each word Jace said. Finally, she had to turn away from them all, quickly brushing away an escaped tear.

When she turned back, Michael was gone.

Michael's lungs burned by the time he reached the crest of the hill that overlooked the camp. He was past all the homes, all the outbuildings, beyond the touch of people. The trees opened, giving him a small cleared area where he could turn his face to the rain and gasped for cleansing, pure air.

The water beat on his face, warm and sharp as the wind gave it force and velocity. Electricity charged the air, making the hair on his arms stand on end and the back of his neck tingle. Lightning struck on the other side of the valley, cracking the sky with its bolt. Almost instantly, the following boom of thunder pounded against his chest and made him sway with the power.

His clothes clung to him, rain drenching him to the skin. His hair plastered to his head, falling across his eyes in long strands as he blinked against the driving rain.

He wanted to scream... to let his voice echo through the trees and back to him off the mountainside.

"Michael..."

He spun around, sucking air into his lungs. Jacqueline stood beneath the meager shelter of a nearby tree, her arms wrapped over her body as the rain soaked through just as it did him. Her dark hair hung straight down her shoulders in an ebony sheet and the military-green tank top she wore clung to her, emphasizing the curves he always knew had been there but tried not to see.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"I could ask you the same thing, handsome," she said, stepping away from the tree even though the rain beat harder on her skin as she neared him. "I saw you take off away from the infirmary, and I called after you, but you didn't stop."

"I needed to run."

"Obviously."

Lightning cracked and the air vibrated again with a thunderclap. Jacqueline jerked, her eyes darting to the sky. Michael gripped her elbow and pulled her back into the canopy of trees. "Come on."

"Now where are we going?"

"Out of the rain."

He slid his hand down the slick surface of her arm to lace his fingers through hers. The wind picked up as they descended the path and Michael led her to the front porch of the cottage he shared with Caitlin. The inside was dark and as soon as they stepped into the dry interior, the wind grabbed the door and slammed it closed behind them.

"Nice digs," Jacqueline mumbled and he glanced at her to see her chin tremble with a shiver. Once the wind hit, the air had dropped several degrees turning the warm summer rain into a chilling downpour.

"I'll be back," he said, bounding up the stairs two steps at a time, yanking his wet tee shirt over his head with a sucking sound as it pulled away from his skin.

He paused in the doorway of his bedroom to pull one saturated sneaker off his foot, tossing it against the front wall. His second shoe was gone when he hit the foot of the bed. The sopping wet denim of his jeans reluctantly shucked away from his legs, joining the sneakers on the floor. Michael just pulled a new pair over his hips, buttoning the front, when he heard a sound in the hall.

"You gonna leave a girl to freeze to death?" Jacqueline asked through chattering teeth at the doorway of his room.

Michael spun around to his bed and yanked the worn quilt off the top, meeting Jacqueline half way across the room to drape it around her shoulders. "You shouldn't have followed me," he said, rubbing his hands over the quilt to warm her skin beneath.

"I wanted to know what kind of hellcat you had on your heels to take off like that."

He turned back to the small, mirrored bureau that held the few items of clothing he owned. Most of his things were left behind in Colorado, including the first change of clothes his father had given him. He knew it was illogical to mourn the loss of something so basic as clothing, but they had been the first gift Nick Tanner gave him, and the fact that they had been Nick's own clothing had always pulled at Michael deep inside. He yanked open a drawer and removed a long-sleeved flannel shirt.

"Here," he said, handing her the shirt. "Change from your wet clothes."

He stepped past her to turn his back. Standing at the window, he stared outside as he heard her lay the quilt back on the bed and remove her clothes. The familiar sound of wet material sucking away from damp skin kept his eyes on the thunder clouds outside. Moments later, she cleared her throat.

"Okay, you can turn around now."

As he did, he saw a glance of her long legs before she once again wrapped herself in the quilt. "Come downstairs," he said, his voice tense. "I'll make you some hot tea."

Michael headed for the door, but Jacqueline grabbed his arm and he turned back to face her.

"Not until we clear the air."

He eased back, relaxing beneath her touch even though his chest was tight and anger still simmered beneath the surface of his skin. It wasn't anger at Jacqueline, and he tried hard to keep her from feeling it. She tugged at the edge of the blanket, clenching it in her fist as she stepped closer.

"You walked out on me before we finished our last conversation."

Michael dropped his chin toward his chest, closing his eyes for a moment. "You don't understand —"

"You're right. I don't. And I won't unless you enlighten me, Michael."

He wondered how he could explain it all to her, when he didn't understand most of the twisting, gnawing rage in his gut. His logical mind told him to find peace and happiness in his new life, but the angry prisoner in him wanted to lash out. To seek vengeance. To tear from his soul all trace of what his mother did to him.

"CJ told me you'd have to explain it to me. I'm asking you to explain."

Michael bit down hard and met her demanding stare. "I don't know how."

"Is it really that bad?" she asked, her fingers gently squeezing his arm where her hand still rested. "Look, I know you don't owe me anything... and frankly, I'm confused as hell why I'm pushing so hard to find out... but I mean it when I say I want to know. And I mean it when I say I'm not going to run out screaming." A small smile ticked at the corner of her lips and her eyes sparked with the challenge.

Michael stepped away and rounded the foot of the bed to stand on the side parallel to the front windows. He sank onto the edge of the mattress, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. Moments later, she followed him and sat in the space between him and the foot of the bed. Michael drew a fortifying breath.

"Will it be enough if I tell you some, but not all?"

"Yeah," she said softly. "Sure. Tell me what you want."

He turned his face to the window, watching as the storm broke and the sun slowly overtook the gray sky. "You know my mother was Areth."

"Yeah."

"It's more than that. She..." He choked on the words, remembering the way Jace Quinn described his torture and the rush of memories that had hit him. "I spent my life in a research facility in New Mexico."

"Christ," Jacqueline whispered. "Last year... the extraction from the Areth labs. You were there? You lived there?"

"My entire life."

He hadn't realized she had let the quilt fall back until her hand skimmed across his shoulders, over the bare skin he had yet to cover with a shirt. Michael didn't need to imagine what she saw. He knew each mark and scar that tattooed his body. Visual evidence. Permanent reminders.

Jacqueline slid her arm across his back, the loose sleeves of the shirt she wore skimming his skin. She leaned sideways and rested her cheek against his shoulder, her skin and breath warm. Michael bowed his head, closing his eyes, and focused on each whisper of a touch and livening of his blood her simple touch created.

She wrapped her arms around his body, her cheek resting on the back of his shoulder, and they sat silent while the sun chased away the final traces of the storm.

"Why do *you* think you can't remember, Jason?"

"I'm not the doc," Jace said, tapping his fingers against his knee. "Aren't you the one who is supposed to tell me?"

Doctor Calbraith shifted on the bench adjacent to Jace's chair, crossing his legs with his fingers laced around his knee. He had sat like that the first time they met, and for a reason Jace couldn't pinpoint, it bugged him. Maybe it was because he couldn't manage the simple act of lifting his leg on his own, let alone cross them. Maybe it was the doc in general.

Not that he hated doctors... he liked doctors... especially blonde doctors with a body that made him hum and a smile that made him laugh... he just had a problem with head shrinkers.

"I'll admit to you, Jason, that your pattern of memory loss and remembrance is a puzzle. You've recalled people and events from your childhood, and you even have some vague recollections of being a pilot with Earth Force before leaving to join Phoenix. Your knowledge of Phoenix is strong, if not whole. And you have begun remembering some of the events of the last few months. Yet, we have this roughly four year window after you joined Phoenix that you have *no* memory of."

"Thanks for the run down."

Jace was pretty sure that someone along the way told him to 'drop the sarcasm' and show respect to his elders, but he also figured whoever that was would forgive him given the current circumstances.

Doctor Calbraith sighed. "Jason, I understand you aren't thrilled with me being here. Most of my patients feel the same way. That's a hazard of the job. But, I want to help you. And Doctor Franklin wouldn't have let me be involved if she didn't feel it was in your best interest."

"The only thing I need right now is to get out of this chair, and you're not going to help me there, Doc. For that I need Lilly... Doctor Franklin."

Doctor Calbraith's mouth jerked into a tight, quick smile before he braced his hands on his knees and stood up. "You may believe that's all you need, Jason, but in time you'll wish more for your past than your present. By then, perhaps you'll be willing to work with me. That doesn't mean I'm giving up, so you're going to have to get used to me being here. In your face. Every day."

Jace raised his hand to his temple in an off-handed salute as Doctor Calbraith walked out of the makeshift gym. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back when he heard the door close. Since Lilly—because he liked Lilly much better than Doc Franklin, whether Calbraith liked it or not—and Doc Tanner had brought that head shrinker to see him the day before, his nerves had been raw and anger boiled just below the surface of his skin. The guy had asked a bunch of leading questions, nodded his head several times and hummed after each answer like it was some amazing revelation or absolute proof that Jace was insane.

He wasn't insane. He was... what the hell was he? Broken. Feeble. But not insane.

The door opened, but Jace waited until he heard the soft footfalls almost reach him before he opened his eyes.

Like a whisper through the trees outside, the gnawing rage in his gut let go.

Hallelujah!

He didn't know if he was a religious man, or if he believed in angels, but if he did his kind of angel didn't wear wings, but she *did* wear light tan shorts. And a white tank top that accentuated the soft swells of her impressive breasts and the spattering of freckles across her shoulders. A ponytail on the back of her head held her blonde hair, with curly wisps escaping to tease her temples and the back of her neck.

He wondered what the back of her neck tasted like.

Jace knew he was staring, but had no desire to make himself look away. As she walked toward him, her blue eyes shifted to meet his gaze and a smile edged up the corners of her soft-pink lips.

"Hey, there." She sat on the bench and scooted along the padded surface until her legs slid into the narrow space between his chair wheel and the bench, bringing her as close to him as the barrier would allow. With an innocent grin, she set her elbow on the chair arm and rested her chin on her hand. "Are you ready for some *real* fun now?"

Jace leaned sideways, closing some of the space between them. Lilly's pale blue eyes shifted to keep her gaze locked with his, her lips parting slightly in the sexy, do-you-have-the-guts grin.

"Angel, I'm not ready for the *real* fun yet. That's where you come in."

She bolted off the bench, quickly striding across the wide-open room to retrieve some weights and cushions that sat on the floor not far away. Jace knew that if she could read his mind, she'd call him a lecherous voyeur, but he couldn't keep his eyes off the graceful, easy way her hips swayed when she walked or the way her shorts tightened across her backside when she crouched down to pick up a pillow. He forced his eyes upward when she turned back toward him.

Lilly sank to the floor beside his wheelchair to sit and look up at him. "I'm not going to work you very hard today," she explained as she shifted to fold her legs in front of her. "I want to talk to you a little bit, let you know what I plan to do, and see what you're comfortable with."

"I'm comfortable with whatever gets me out of this chair," he said, his voice flat.

She stared up at him, and Jason swore for a moment she saw straight to his soul. Her blue eyes shifted as her gaze skimmed his face, dropping for a moment to his chest. Warmth stirred again where her stare fell. Then she looked up again.

"Then that will be our first priority." Her voice was heavy, throaty, just above a whisper. She cleared her throat. "For now, would you like to come sit with me?"

"On the floor?"

Lilly smiled and patted her hand on the padded mat. "Yes, on the floor."

"I might be able to get down there, but I don't know if I'll be able to get back up."

She rose on her knees, kneeling in front of him in the space between his footrests. Her hands settled on the armrests of his chair, bringing them eye level. *Glory, glory hallelujah.*

"I'll get you back up. I promise."

"Now, there's an offer I'd have to be insane to refuse. And as far as I know, I'm not insane."

Lilly's gaze dropped away and she worked to move aside the footrests of the chair, letting his feet rest on the cushioned gym floor. She reached for a nearby cushion and dropped it on the floor between them. As she leaned over, for a painfully short moment, Jace was

gifted with the sight of the sweet valley between her breasts. Lilly was curvy and feminine, natural and beautiful, and Jace's blood pumped a few beats faster.

Once she had the pillows and cushions situated the way she wanted she turned back to him. "Okay, you ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

She motioned with her hands for him to shift forward, and as he edged to the end of the seat, her seemingly small hands reached to touch his sides. Jace groaned, no matter how he tried to keep the deep rumble in his chest. Lilly pulled back to look into his face.

"Are you all right?"

"Absolutely."

Another smile whispered on her lips. She knew what he was thinking. And moreover, she knew *he* knew. He saw the fact of it in the sparkle of her eyes.

"Just come forward onto your knees."

Getting down to the floor was easier than he expected, but as he looked back at the offensive wheelchair, he had serious doubts getting back in would be the same. No matter what Lilly said.

She helped him get his legs out from beneath him, giving him cushions to lean on if he needed to rest his position. Once he sat with his feet out in front of him, she knelt at his side.

"Do you find that doing just about anything wears you out?" she asked.

Jason nodded. "It pisses me off," he started, and then cleared his voice. "I apologize. I'm sure someone along the way has taught me not to speak that way around a lady."

Lilly smiled, dimples forming in each cheek. "It's alright. If that's the way you feel, I want you to tell me. If something we're doing hurts like hell, you need to tell me."

"You sound like Calbraith."

Lilly shook her head. "I'm not here to pick your brain, or overanalyze anything. I just want to make you strong again."

He found himself staring at her, the way her blonde hair tucked behind her shell-shaped ears, the long column of her throat, and the circular neckline of her tank. A soft scent reached him, and it reminded him of flowers and summer sunshine. Clean linens.

Why the hell could he remember what clean linens smelled like, and couldn't remember his own damn life?

Her gentle hand touched his shoulder. "Jace, what is it?"

"Nothing," he answered automatically.

Lilly tilted her head and sat back on her ankles. "Don't tell me it's nothing. I saw it in your face."

"I've been here less than a week, and you think you know me?"

She blinked, and this time he was the one who saw the change. Her smile never left her lips, but her expression tensed and she swallowed as her gaze shifted away. Mentally kicking himself, Jace shifted his weight and cleared his throat.

"So, what's first, doc?"

Lilly looked at him again and lifted a visibly trembling hand to push back a short lock of blonde hair. She reached beneath the bench and produced a small neoprene-wrapped dumbbell, the number three on the end, and held it out to him. "I just want to get a sense of your muscle strength. Can you do some curls for me?"

Jace grimaced before taking the weight. Part of him wanted to be offended. Three pounds? She needed to ask if he was capable of curling three pounds? Course, in the same moment, he accepted the possibility that he might not be able to. And that was worse.

She set the weight in his palm, his hand resting on his thigh. The tips of her short fingernails gently scraped the thin cotton of his pants, and he fisted his hand around the dumbbell in defense of the currents that shot up his arm. Lilly scooted closer, and when she laid her hands on his biceps, he darted a look at her.

Lilly didn't look back. Her cheeks were dusky and Jace could almost feel the heat emanating from her. Her delicate hands curled around his arm.

"I'm just going to feel your muscles work while you lift the weight."

Jace gritted his teeth and curled his arm up toward his chest. Every muscle from his wrist to his shoulder protested, but it wasn't the sharp, debilitating pain of days before. It almost felt like day two after a serious workout. Aching to move, yet eager to feel the burn. He curled his arm five more times before his wrist showed the first signs of a quake.

As he lowered the sixth repetition, his entire arm trembled and he huffed through his teeth. Lilly held his wrist in support with one hand, taking the dumbbell with the other.

"Damn it," Jace cursed under his breath.

"Are you in pain?"

Jace couldn't look at her now, not wanting to see the pity in her eyes. He shook his head sharply. "No, just pissed."

Her hand touched his shoulder, just a whisper on the cotton of his tee shirt, but it was enough to force him to look up, to meet her blue gaze.

"I'll help you heal," she said, her voice heavy yet intensely feminine. "Jace, I promise you."

He clenched his jaw and swallowed hard, his stare shifting to her lips for one fleeting moment. *Damn, but if she wasn't the sexiest woman he had ever seen...*

She let her hand slide from his shoulder, her fingertips brushing his sleeve as it dropped. Jace watched her as she set the weights aside. The sunlight overhead lit her hair in golden strands, and her cheeks were flushed from the heat in the room. At least, he assumed it was the warm air. It was definitely warm, and he enjoyed it, but imagined it would be uncomfortable for her.

"Why do you call me Jace?"

Her head snapped up and she stared at him with wide blue eyes. "Excuse me?"

The fact that he had asked the question had him as surprised as Lilly. "Just about everyone else calls me 'lieutenant' or Quinn or whatever. You call me Jace."

She blinked rapidly and looked away, flipping an escaped bit of hair behind her ear. "If you don't want me using—"

Jace reached out, purely on instinct because he hadn't wanted to *touch* anyone since he came out of his nightmare-ridden daze, and laid his hand over hers. She sucked in a sharp breath and raised her chin to look at him.

"I don't *mind* you calling me Jace," he said, leaning sideways toward her. "I just wonder why you use Jace... and not Jason."

Lilly ran her tongue over her lips, pulling her lower lip through her teeth before answering. "I-I don't know. I guess it seems to fit you. Do you prefer Jason?"

Jace linked his hands in his lap, squinting as he considered her question. Probably another topic Calbraith would enjoy discussing in great detail. He didn't know his own past, but in his head, he knew he was Jace Quinn. The first few days in Mississippi, he insisted to anyone who would listen that his name wasn't Jason. Eventually, he was able to accept that he was the Lieutenant Jason Quinn they said he was... but something didn't feel right. Didn't sound right. Then, Jackie came to see him and she called him Jace. It clicked, and for the first time he didn't feel the instant need to correct someone.

She told him that she knew him from before.

Here and there, bits and pieces slid together for him. Never a whole picture. Never enough for him to focus on. But enough that he didn't feel like a hollow husk with no part of himself to fill it.

"Jace?"

He shook his head slightly, focusing on the faint dusting of freckles that spattered across the bridge of her nose. "No. Jace is good."

"Okay," she said, her lips curling up in a slow smile. "I'm glad."

"So," Jace said with an exaggerated sigh. "When do I get to see the rest of this beautiful encampment? I've seen enough of this infirmary to know I'm bored, and enough of the mountains outside to know it's beautiful."

"I think a few trips can be managed. I warn you, though. There isn't much to see. We're a small compliment, and the base is only a few months old. We're still getting things livable, and trying to prepare for winter."

"How many people are here?"

"Less than a hundred, including the children."

Jace arched an eyebrow. "Children?"

Lilly nodded. "Many of them are without parents at the moment. When the Areth attacked the Colorado base, and we were forced to evacuate and split up. Because most of the children were together in school at the time, they were all evacuated together. We've contacted most of the parents through our internal channels, and those that have been able to, have come for their children. Those that can't for whatever reason, know that we'll care for them until they can."

"Wait... wait... hold on a second." Jace waived his hand and shook his head. "When the Areth attacked? What happened?" he demanded.

Lilly's eyes rounded and she covered her mouth with the fingertips of one hand. "Oh, God. I didn't even... That's not how you should have heard."

"Heard *what*?"

Lilly huffed and folded her hands in her lap. "Doctor Calbraith will probably be furious that I've told you, but what happened has no direct relation to your lost memories. You'll hear eventually." She swallowed hard and dropped her chin, but not before Jace caught the slight shimmer gathering in her eyes. She licked her lips, and he tried to think past the tight knot in his gut. "A great deal has happened in just a few months, Jace. We've learned the truth behind the intent of the Areth, we've learned about their true existence, and... very soon, we're going to be in an all out war or slaves. Right now, the leaders of the world are struggling to find a way to stay alive."

"The Areth attacked... who did they attack?"

"Almost every major city in the world. New York. Los Angeles. Paris. London. Beijing. All of them. They're gone." Her voice cracked and her words faded.

Lilly shifted to sit beside him, using the bench behind them as a back brace, just as Jace did. Her shoulder touched his as she drew a shaky breath, staring straight ahead. Jace watched her, trying to imagine the atrocities she described.

"Millions are dead. Mortality statistics are still being generated as those that managed to survive die off from injuries they could never have lived through. The Areth have declared, under no certain terms, that they intend to do with the planet Earth and the human race whatever they so choose."

"We were right... they're not human at all. They're not our ancestors. They lied."

Lilly nodded. "Yes. And we know the truth."

"Which is?"

She turned to look at him. The pain in her eyes made his chest hurt, and he reached for her hand. The action was intended to offer comfort, but he found he took as much comfort from it as he gave.

"It's hard to explain, because some of it is beyond human technology. The Areth..." She squinted, seeming to search for the way to explain. "Apparently, the Areth came to Earth hundred and hundreds of years ago and culled humans from the world population. Their physical forms were dying; a result of their own cloning process. They needed new physical bodies."

"Sweet Jesus..." Jace said beneath his breath, more a prayer than a curse.

"They had the technology to remove the consciousness of their own people from their dying bodies, and place the consciousness into a human. The process over-writes the human, leaving no trace behind. Or, that's the way it's supposed to work."

Jace couldn't swallow, couldn't see through the red haze of fury that made his skin flush and his nerves crawl. "How do we know this? How do we know this isn't another lie?"

She drew a slow, deep breath that made her shoulders rise and fall. Silence stretched for several beats of his pounding heart before she answered.

"We were told by an Areth."

"And we believed him?"

"He had proven himself trustworthy before this, and all evidence backs up his revelation."

"You know this for a fact?"

She nodded and looked him again. "I know him, and I believe him."

Jace clenched his jaw, speaking through his teeth. "Is he *here*?"

"Yes," she said, dipping her chin. She swallowed, her eyes shifting as she studied his reaction. "It's Victor. You met in a couple days ago."

Jace remembered the man; dark complexion with short black hair. He was tall man, thin. Jace had noted to himself the restrained tightness of Victor's expression, but the guy had been friendly and helpful, telling Jace he was a doctor 'of sorts' and wanted to help if he could.

"Son of a bitch..."

"Jace, don't judge him until you know him."

"He's an *Areth*. The Areth did *this* to me," he shouted, slamming the side of his fist against his weak, useless legs.

Lilly twisted sideways, her thighs brushing his, and laid her hand on the center of his chest. "Jace, there's so much you don't know right now. So much you can't understand. Some of it we don't understand ourselves. But if you trust me at all, trust me when I say Victor is *not* the evil Areth you imagine. He's tormented by what his race has done. That's why he helped us. Why he's here now."

Jace looked down at her hand, focusing on the heat it spread through him. "You're asking a lot."

"I know," she said, her voice heavy between them. "And I'll ask more of you as time goes. Get used to it."

He smiled and drew a breath. "Okay. Any other revelations I need to know about?"

"I think that's enough for today."

Lilly reached behind her and braced her hands on the edge of the bench for leverage to push herself up. As she came to her feet, Jace heard her gasp slightly and she stumbled back to sit on the bench, her hand pressed to her forehead.

"You okay?" he asked, raising his hands in what he knew to be a useless attempt to help.

"Yeah," she said, almost breathless. "I guess I stood up to fast. I'm going to go get Michael to help get you back in the chair, okay?"

Jace nodded, watching with a tight wince as she walked slowly from the room.

Chapter Seven

Lilly closed the door behind her, and leaned her back against the wall to try and give her equilibrium the few moments it needed to recover. The edges of her vision were hazy, and her heartbeat pounded at a staccato rate in her temples.

I knew I shouldn't have skipped lunch...

"Doctor Quinn, I'm wondering if I might have a word with you."

Lilly's head snapped up, and she lunged away from the wall to meet Doctor Calbraith half way between the entrance door and the closed door to the gym. He must have realized what he said by the look on her face, because his eyes darted quickly to the gym door. Lilly grabbed his arm and propelled him down the short hall to her office door. Michael was inside, talking to Amanda as she finished changing Jamie.

"Michael, could you go to the gym and help Jace into his chair? If I'm not back in a few minutes, can you take him back to his room?"

Michael nodded and left, his gaze firm on her until he stepped into the hall. Lilly took Jamie from Amanda, balancing her daughter against her shoulder, and turned back to Doctor Calbraith as Amanda left them alone as well. Lilly laid her cheek against Jamie's downy head, doing her best to calm her temper.

"You-of *all* people-should know better than to walk into this building and call me by that name," she hissed through clenched teeth to keep herself from shouting. "You could have ruined *everything*."

"I apologize. But it's Lieutenant Quinn that I need to speak to you..." His voice trailed off as his attention settled on Jamie. Realization widened his eyes and his mouth fell open.

"Yes, Doctor," Lilly said, easing Jamie into the bend of her arm. "This is Jamie. Jace's daughter. Now, do you understand *how* important it is that I get my husband back? It's not just about me. It's about her. Giving her the father I never thought she would have."

Doctor Calbraith sighed and linked his hands in front of him. "This is precisely what I came to speak to you about, Doctor Quinn. It is my opinion that you should remove yourself from the case. You may even consider moving the Lieutenant to another facility."

Lilly's mouth hung open and she snapped it shut with a crack of her teeth. "Why?"

"You're too close to his case. You aren't allowing yourself to be objective."

"Of course I'm close to this case. He's my husband!"

"Doctor Franklin, if he becomes too comfortable with you and with his surroundings, his mind isn't going to fight to release the suppressed memories. He'll have no reason to remember his past because he enjoys the present."

Lilly shook her head, unable to believe what this *damn quack* was saying. "And *maybe* he'll remember his life sooner because he's with the people who cared for him before he was captured. *Maybe* the familiarity will open the doors for him."

"You have to face the reality that he may never remember."

"And if he doesn't, I'd rather he be *here* where maybe he and I can build a life from what's left."

"So, you're willing to do anything to keep him, even if it's not the best thing?"

"I know what's best."

"Do you?"

"Yes," she shouted.

Doctor Calbraith bowed his head and sighed. "I'm making a recommendation to General Castleton to have Lieutenant Quinn relocated," he said as he raised his head.

"His care is ultimately my decision, as his doctor and his *wife*."

He said nothing more as he turned and walked out of the office. Lilly released a shuddered breath when he was gone, sinking down onto her couch, holding Jamie close. Sliding back into the leather cushions, she shifted Jamie to her chest so they looked eye to eye as her daughter practiced the fine art of holding her head up. Looking into her daughter's eyes, Lilly tried to tamp down the fear that bubbled in her blood.

General Castleton wouldn't let him take Jace... he wouldn't... he couldn't!

"Don't you worry, baby girl. I'm not going to go down without a fight."

She heard Michael and Jace in the hall, and her heart jumped into her throat as she snapped her head to look at the open doorway. Lilly only managed to sit up, Jamie clutched to her chest, when they passed at the door and Jace turned his head, his eyes locking on her.

All air sucked from her lungs.

Jace's arm snapped out and his hand hit the doorjamb, stopping their progress. Michael looked to her, his eyes wide as he realized what Jace saw. Lilly could only stare, speechless, as Jace's gaze shifted from her to Jamie, and back to her face.

Dear God, give me strength.

Swallowing hard, Lilly shifted to the edge of the cushion and lowered Jamie into her lap. "Come on in," she managed to say. Her heart sat at the base of her throat, pounding like the wings of a caged bird, panicked and desperate. She shifted her gaze to Michael, and with the slightest nod, he backed Jace's wheelchair up and guided him into the room.

"I suppose it's time you meet the youngest member of Phoenix," Lilly said, hoping the quiver in her voice wasn't as obvious as it sounded to her own ears. Jace had remained silent since seeing them, and the silence terrified her. His eyes stayed on Jamie, and Lilly shifted closer to him, hiding the shake in her hands by cradling the back of Jamie's head. "This is Jamie Elise. My daughter."

Jace's chin hitched up only the slightest degree, his dark eyes boring a hole into her. Summoning her strength, Lilly looked up at Michael.

"Could you go check on Captain Hampton? He came in earlier today with a sprained ankle and I put ice on it. He's in the last exam room."

Michael just nodded and left her alone with Jace.

Her husband. Jamie's father.

Jamie found her fist and sucked heartily at it, the tiny slurping sounds wrapping tight around Lilly's heart. She swallowed hard, hoping she would have the strength to do this without ruining everything. It would be so easy just to tell him. To put his daughter in his arms and tell him.

"How old is she?"

His voice was rough and thick, barely loud enough to reach her.

"Almost four weeks."

Jace's stare shifted to her. "You had her four weeks ago?"

Lilly nodded. "Yes."

He shook his head, his attention shifting slowly between her and the baby. She wasn't sure what he was denying, and he didn't speak to clarify. She watched his Adam's apple bob and the muscle along his jaw jerk. Finally, he licked his lips and raised his head to look her in the eye.

"Your husband must be proud."

Everything inside her shook. "My husband doesn't know about her."

"Why?"

Dear Lord, help me. "He—" She had to stop to clear her throat. "He disappeared before I had a chance to tell him he was going to be a father."

"Disappeared..."

She nodded. "During a fight with the Areth." Lilly had to look away from him, and focused on the heavy-lidded face of her daughter as she drifted to sleep.

"I'm sorry."

Despite her efforts, a tear escaped and ran down her cheek, falling from her chin to spot the front of her tee shirt. "Would you like to hold her?"

Jace didn't speak his answer, but his upturned hands immediately left his lap, reaching for Jamie. Lilly stood off the couch and carefully slipped Jamie's sleeping form into Jace's large hands. He immediately drew her to his body, cradling her head in his palm. He lifted her and bent forward so his face was only inches from her tiny, cherubic one.

Lilly's heart broke into a thousand pieces.

As vain to raise a voice as a sigh

In the tumult of free leaves on high.

What are you in the shadow of trees

Engaged up there with the light and breeze?

"Jason..."

The sun was intense outside the window. It chased away all shade and left everything in a soft, yellow glow like an aura. The sky variegated between deep cobalt blue and a pale azure, without a cloud to dilute the perfect flow of color. A single bird swirled and swooped in spiraling flight above the trees on the other side of the double doors Jace saw across the room.

"Jason, you seem very distracted today."

Jace pulled his gaze from the scene through the window behind Doctor Calbraith's head and tried to focus on him again.

"Where were you just now?"

Nothing immediate came to mind, so he didn't answer. Jace figured no matter what he said, the doc would find a way to flip it around, make it into whatever he wanted it to be. Better to just keep it to himself.

"Why do you think you find what's outside more intriguing than what we're talking about?"

"Probably because I'm not sure what we're really talking about."

"That's fair. I want to know how things are for you here. Are you happy? Comfortable? Do you need anything?"

Jace clenched his jaw together, the familiar frustration and anger churning in his gut. "I need my life back."

"That's why I'm here, Jason. I'm here to help you get your life back. Your memories. Everything."

"Then tell me something. *Anything.*"

He removed his thin, copper-rimmed glasses and set them upside-down on the frayed fabric on the arm of his chair. They sat in the corner of the common room in what Jace knew everyone called Command Hall. He never would have imagined a military facility—renegade or not—in an abandoned vacation resort. *Probably why they were here. Areth were pretty thick when it came to human nature.*

"Jason, I told you before that we don't want to bombard you with information you're not ready to accept yet."

"When do I get to be a judge of that?"

"I'm sensing some anger. Are you angry at *me*, Jason? Or are you angry at the situation."

"You're the shrink. You tell me."

The doctor's ever-present smile never wavered, never gave any sign that Jace ticked him off... pushed the limits.

"This is not an easy time in your life, and I understand that coping with everything is an emotional strain. But you need to trust me, Jason. I am doing what is best for you, and I will continue to do what is best for you until the situation changes."

Jace leaned his elbow onto the armrest of his wheelchair and pinched his lower lip between his thumb and finger, looking away from Doctor Calbraith to a painting on the wall over the giant fieldstone hearth. A Mexican woman, dressed in white gauze edged in embroidery, danced in a street, her arms held above her head. Behind her, a Mexican man sat with a guitar in his lap, his mouth open in unheard singing. He stared at the guitar, his eyes focusing on each string.

E - A - D - G - B - E

He sat up straighter, staring at the painting. *He's playing a C-Chord.*

"Jason, you disappeared on me again."

He reluctantly pulled his gaze from the painting and back to Doctor Calbraith. The doc looked from him, to the painting, and back to him again.

"What is it about the painting that caught your attention?"

So many damn questions!

He bit off the curse before it escaped and clenched his fists in his lap. Ninety-eight percent of the time he wanted to put his fist through a wall, for no good reason than that it might release the curling anger he couldn't shake. Frustration. The not knowing. He knew everything he wanted to know flirted with the edge of his mind, dancing like faeries in the moonlight, but when he turned to look, they flittered off into the forest again.

"The string," Jace said, pointing at the faded painting. "E-A-D-G-B-E. And he's playing a C-Chord."

He glanced again at the painting. "Do you remember playing an instrument like the guitar?"

Jace shook his head. "No. I just know what he's doing."

He nodded and wrote on the flat, silver screen of his digital notebook. Jace leaned forward in his chair, trying to read some of the things he wrote, but he couldn't make out the angled penmanship. Doctor Calbraith glanced at him, and slid the notebook between his thigh and the side of the chair.

"That's a great start, Jason. As I told you the first time we spoke, most likely your memory is going to come back to you in stages. That process has already begun, and those moments of clarity will increase with time. With the *right* stimulations. Just a little bit at a time, not in one great rush. When that begins to happen with more frequency, as you remember more and more details, we can look at opening up your past more to you."

"I feel like the thick dolt who doesn't get the joke."

"No one is making jokes, Jason. Do you feel like people are?"

Jace huffed; cursing himself for thinking over every possible angle and interpretation the head shrinker could come up with before he opened his mouth. It was the stupid slips of the tongue that doctors like Calbraith made their money from.

"No," he answered through clenched teeth. "I just meant I'm frustrated. That's all, doc. Just frustrated."

"How is your physical therapy progressing?"

Instead of recalling the sessions he and Lilly had already worked through, the image that came to mind was of seeing Lilly sitting on the couch in her office, her daughter in her lap. The image had hit him as real and powerful as a physical force. If she had a child, she had a man... a man she loved. Who loved her. And that dug deeper than he wanted to admit.

Who was he kidding? He was broken. Weak. To think that...

He mentally shook off the thought. It did no good. Instead, he tried to remember the indescribable emotions that hit him when she set her daughter in his arms. He looked into her sleeping face and saw unadulterated peace. She was loved, and she slept still and quiet in the knowledge that she was loved.

"Jason, when we meet tomorrow I want to talk about your continuing drifts away from reality. Either my conversation is so boring it can't hold your attention, or there is something else going on."

Jace heard the slight laugh in his words, but assumed there was very little humor involved. Jace wondered if he'd be riled if he told him it *was* the conversation. Instead, he said nothing and let his thoughts drift back to Lilly as the doctor stood and walked across the room.

Lilly stood just inside the door of the Common Room, watching as Doctor Calbraith stood from his chair with a resigned look on his face. Jace sat in his wheelchair, his back to her, slouching down with his fingers curled over his lips. She didn't have to hear the end of the conversation to know Doctor Calbraith was less than pleased with the course of the session.

Of course, he had told her as much the day before, when he threatened to take Jace away.

The thought tied her stomach in knots and made her temples pound. She had slept little the night before, and nausea rolled so black and thick in her gut that she hadn't been able to eat more than a few bites since the confrontation with Calbraith. She only forced the food

down because she knew Jamie needed her to be nourished. Her nourishment was her daughter's nourishment.

Now, she waited for General Castleton to return from seeing Jackie Anderson off base to her next destination. Where it was, Lilly had no idea. Most likely, no one did but Jackie and Castleton.

She waited until Doctor Calbraith disappeared through the entrance to the hallway at the back of the room, no doubt going in search of General Castleton. He reported to the General practically every word Jace spoke, and no without doubt every word Lilly spoke, too. At least with the General away from Command, she might have a chance to speak to him first. Before Calbraith convinced him to send Jace away.

She was definitely sliding toward hating the man.

Running a soothing hand over her tee shirt and shorts, she started across the room. Even now, after seeing him each day, her heart jumped whenever she knew she would be with him. It was the same giddy excitement that had fueled her insides when they first met. She stepped up behind his wheelchair and laid her hand on his shoulder. He jerked slightly, raising his head, his hand immediately coming across his body to cover her own. A charge shot up her arm at the warm touch.

She missed his touch more than she dared try to quantify.

"Hi." He smiled wide; familiar, deep dimples appearing in his cheeks.

"Hi." Wishing she could capture and calm the butterflies in her stomach, Lilly slid her hand from beneath his and sat in the chair Doctor Calbraith had vacated. She scooted to the edge, leaning forward to rest her elbows on her thighs and to shorten the distance between them. "How did it go?"

Jace blew out a breath, his cheeks puffing, and he waved his hand. "He picked, he shrank, and he left."

Lilly smiled. "I'm sorry you have to deal with him. I know you don't like psychologists."

"Is it that obvious?" he said with a chuckle.

A cold flash of nervousness washed over Lilly as she realized how close her words were to revealing too much. At least he thought it was just an observation and nothing more. She smiled and nodded. "Just a little."

Jace settled back in his chair, slouching slightly, and Lilly mimicked his relaxed position by leaning back in her chair, crossing her legs. She hadn't seen him since the afternoon before, when he discovered her with Jamie. No matter how her heart fluttered in her chest, she understood the importance of keeping that event as low-key as possible. If he sensed how seeing him hold Jamie tore her apart, he might wonder why. She only prayed that he would remember soon.

And maybe... maybe he would remember her and this nightmare would be over.

"Oh, hey! I remembered something."

"You did?" Her heart pounded so hard in her chest, it hurt. "What?"

Jace pointed to the wall over the hearth, to a painting that Lilly hadn't ever noticed before. It was a folk art painting, much of the colors faded from decades of sun exposure in the bright room. A woman danced as a man played the guitar. Lilly arched an eyebrow.

"You remember the artist?"

"No." His smile was so wide it was contagious. "He's playing a C-Chord. I don't know where I was a year ago, but I know he's playing a C-Chord."

"Jace, that's wonderful." Lilly had to speak softly to hide the sudden tightening of her throat. Had it only been three months ago that they had fled the Areth attack in Colorado, and she had to leave Jace's beautiful guitar behind?

"We don't have time for anything else."

She pulled free of Michael's 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.

"It's something, right?"

"Absolutely." Lilly sat forward, a new rush hitting her as she remembered something Captain Eddie Hampton had said in passing in the weeks after they came to the Tennessee base. Things had been chaos then, and she hadn't thought twice about it until now. "I'll be right back, Jace."

"Is everything all right?" he asked as she stood.

Lilly laid her hand over his, squeezing gently. She had intended it to be a quick touch, but he turned his hand beneath hers so their palms slid together and his fingers curled around hers to hold her. She looked down at their joined hands, and welcomed the awakening that curled in her center like smoke from a flame.

"Yes," she said through the hoarse thickness in her throat. "I want to get you something. Maybe it will help you remember." *I hope, Dear God.*

The tension in his fingers slowly released, but his eyes didn't look away from her face. Lilly smiled and pulled her hand away, letting her fingertips brush across his palm before she let the contact break. Turning away, she hoped her legs would carry her to the other side of the room. As she reached the back of the Common Room, Captain Hampton stepped in through the back entrance from the patio outside, a computer interface in his hands.

"Captain!" she called out, and the six-foot-two soldier with strawberry blonde hair and more freckles than stars in the sky stopped short.

"Yes, ma'am," he said with his slow accent that bespoke of his mid-west family roots. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, you can. Oh, how is the ankle?"

"Good, ma'am. Michael taped it up for me and I'm walking just fine."

"If it bothers you more, come back to see me."

"Yes, ma'am. How can I help you?"

"I seem to recall you mentioning, several weeks ago, that you found a storage room full of games and whatnot. I know many of the games and books have been brought out for the base compliment to use."

"Yes, ma'am."

Lilly smiled, the fluttering excitement in her chest making her dizzy. She clenched her hands in front of her in an effort to keep herself from looking like a kid hyped up on a month's worth of sugar. "Did you say you also found some musical instruments?"

"Yes, ma'am. I don't know much about such things, so I can't attest to the shape they're in, but there were several instruments stored away."

She drew a quick breath. "Was there a guitar, by chance?"

Eddie nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Would you like me to get it for you?"

Lilly could only manage a thrilled nod, and paced the floor in front of the large double doors leading outside while she waited for Eddie to return. She glanced toward where Jace sat, and saw him speaking with Michael. His gaze shifted, and their eyes met across the span of the room. Whatever he was saying to Michael, he paused, his mouth tipping up in a slow smile that made Lilly's skin flush in the afternoon heat. *Oh, if he knew what that smile did to her!*

"Here you are, ma'am."

Lilly spun around at Eddie's voice, her breath catching in her throat. He held in his hands a dusty, forgotten flat top guitar. One copper-bound string curled away from the neck, loose from the keys that once held it in place and a long, jagged scratch marred the upper curve of the body. But it was whole and her quick assessment told her all the strings were there, and still useable. She had learned enough about the instrument from Jace in their few years together.

Tears burned her eyes and she blinked them away as she took the guitar from him. Jace's guitar had been a golden-blond wood; polished and carefully cared for. This one was dark wood with a marbled pick guard beneath the strings. It wasn't the same. Wasn't nearly the beautiful instrument he had so skillfully played for her time and again. But maybe, just maybe, it would be enough.

"Thank you, Captain," she said softly, not trusting her voice to be any louder.

"Of course, ma'am."

Michael had left by the time she turned to walk back to Jace. She watched his face, waiting for his reaction when he saw what she held. His gaze shifted to the guitar, his eyes widening slightly. Lilly moved to the chair across from him and sat, resting the lower curve of the guitar body on her thigh. She ran her fingers over the dusty wood, her fingertips revealing the beautiful grain of the wood beneath.

"Maybe," she said, still fighting the thick lump in her throat. At least now, she could blame it on the dust on the instrument. "Maybe you played. That's why you remember the cord."

Jace didn't say anything, holding his hands out in a silent request. Lilly handed him the guitar and watched him with a pleasant tightness in her chest as he flipped it to face the right way. He stared down at the curled and loose strings, his fingers rubbing the smooth edge of the neck.

"I know this..." he said softly. "I know the feel of holding this."

"Good."

He looked up, the first true spark of life she had seen since his arrival gleaming in his dark eyes. "Thank you."

Lilly smiled, pushing herself up from the chair again. "I'm going to go see what I can do about finding cloths to clean it."

Jace snatched her hand before she was out of reach. Lilly stepped back, her leg brushing his as she looked down at him.

"I mean it, Angel. Thank you."

She squeezed his hand. "You can thank me by fixing it... and singing me a song."

He chuckled, releasing her hand. "Maybe I can't sing."

Yes, you can. Beautifully. "Doesn't matter. Sing for me and that will be all the thanks I need."

The soft ping of his first attempts at tuning the neglected guitar followed her as she walked away.

Chapter Eight

The bright morning sun shining on her face woke Beverly from her deep, content sleep. She drew in the scents of the morning, and stretched, arching her back off the bed. The low purr of a moan vibrated in her throat. Brushing her hair from her face, she slid her hand across the bed beside her, blinking her eyes open when she felt nothing but cold sheets.

Sitting up, she glanced around the bedroom, smiling when she saw Victor's form near the window as he worked at unfolding a shirt. His long, lean form never failed to stir heat in her blood and she enjoyed watching him. Languid and almost graceful, he moved with efficiency and carefully school strength; never wasting an ounce of energy. Beverly sat up and drew her knees to her chest beneath the light blanket.

He saw her watching him as his head popped through the neck of his tee shirt. A smile broke the somber expression he wore when he didn't know she watched, and he crossed the room to return to the bed. With his folded fists pressed on the mattress, he climbed onto the bed and leaned forward on his hands and knees to press a long kiss to her mouth. Beverly smiled against his lips and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him back onto the bed with her. Victor followed willingly, his weight a delicious pleasure.

He leaned his elbows into the bed on each side of her, raising himself up so she could easily see his lips and sign in the space between them.

"I wondered how long you meant to sleep." His smile made her pulse jump, and his gaze shifted over her face and throat.

"Why didn't you wake me?" she said in small movements between them.

"You're beautiful when you sleep."

Beverly combed her fingers into his short hair, stroking his cheeks with her thumbs. She wished, every day, that she could somehow express to him how happy he made her. CJ was right. Their relationship was unusual, but she could have no more denied her love for him than she could suddenly make herself hear. Victor bowed his head and nuzzled his chin against the side of her throat, his lips making her skin tingle.

She gasped at the wave of intense need that flooded from Victor, washing over her and leaving her breathless in the wake. He pushed down the quilt that acted as a barrier between them and covered her breast with his large hand, gently kneading through the thin material of her sleeping gown.

Cusbibil.

Beverly slid her hands down his back until she found the edge of his shirt, yanking it up until her palms found the warm skin beneath. He rolled to the side only far enough and long enough to clench the collar of the shirt behind his neck and pull it over his head, tossing it aside. His hunger was devouring, and Beverly was lost in it in an instant. A hard edge skirted the gentleness of his touch, but he kept it sharply in control. She couldn't sense the reason, only the result.

He needed... he needed her.

And she gave.

Her fingers found the fastening of his jeans, his breath catching against her throat when her knuckles skimmed his stomach. Eager hands pushed clothing aside and out of the way

until Victor gripped her knee and pulled her leg to his hip, sliding hard and deep into her. Beverly felt the gasp in her throat as she tossed her head back into the pillows, digging her nails into his lower back.

Victor's hand slid up her thigh and side to her arms, silently demanding she let him push them up over her head. His fingers skimmed her skin until their hands bumped the rough surface of the iron headboard. She instinctively wrapped her fingers around the cold metal, and Victor's larger hands enveloped hers. The steady vibration of the headboard hitting the wall at the same rhythm of his hips tingled through her and Beverly closed her eyes, blinded by the tumult.

His thrusts became jaunty, deep and hard and her mind was overtaken with images of red swirling light and darkness all at once. Her lungs burned with the need for air, but she couldn't take a breath. Coiling. Twisting. Building. His grip on her hands tightened almost painfully and Beverly dug her heels into the mattress, pushing up to meet him.

His ragged breath was hot against her throat, his voice a dim shuddering on the surface. She didn't know his words, but she felt the meaning as he drove into her again, his body sweaty and shaking. Cold heat flashed over her skin, bursting from their connection, immediately tapping her strength. They both fell limp against each other, their skin slick and hot.

Victor released her hands, his fingertips grazing the skin on the underside of her arms as his body relaxed. Beverly stroked his damp hair and kissed his forehead. Without meeting her gaze, Victor turned his head and kissed her shoulder, shifting over her so his lips continued down her body in a slow tasting of her skin. The tip of his tongue ran through the valley between her breasts as his hands squeezed her hips, pulling her tighter against him as he continued down her body. She watched, trying to puzzle through the whispering doubt and restrained emotion that hovered around him, keeping him blocked from her.

He stopped at her stomach, laying his cheek over her bellybutton as he urged her to wrap him in an embrace with her bare legs. Beverly hooked her ankles together behind his back as his hands stroked her from knee to hip. Victor traced one finger along her stomach, drawing intricate designs, as she stroked his hair.

Minutes passed, and he neither raised his head nor looked at her, only caressing her skin as their breathing slowed again to a steady rhythm. Finally, Beverly cupped her palm against his exposed cheek and urged him to look at her. When his dark eyes met hers, she took her hand away to sign.

"What's wrong?" He started to shake his head, but she quickly laid her hands against his hair to stop him. *"I feel it. Don't hide from me. Please."*

Victor pushed himself up, the bed bouncing beneath them. He leaned down and kissed her, moving clear of the bed as he broke away. Before she could sit up, he pulled on his pants. She watched him, waiting for him to answer, and when he didn't she slapped her hand on the bed to get his attention.

"Victor – "

He grabbed her hands and held them together, bending enough that he looked straight into her eyes. *"There is nothing for you to worry about, Cusbibil. I promise you."* With another kiss, he swiped his shirt from the floor and rounded the end of the bed to leave the room.

Beverly stared at the empty doorway and flopped back onto the pillows again.

"You *can't* do this!"

"It's this kind of hysterical, emotionally-charged non-objective attitude that is going to prolong Lieutenant Quinn's recover. Quite possibly, halting it completely."

"That's bull."

"Lilly," General Castleton said, raising his hand. She snapped her jaw closed and slid a heated glance at Doctor Calbraith who sat in the chair beside her. "I understand how you feel about this. I don't want to see the boy go—"

"Good."

"—but we brought Stephen here for a reason. And I brought him at *your* request."

"I didn't know he was going to pull this crap."

"I was brought here in the best interest of Lieutenant Quinn. After observing him here, and in his interactions with Doctor Franklin—"

"Oh, *now* I'm Doctor Franklin—"

"I don't believe he's receiving the proper stimulation. When I try to speak with him, he's distant and removed and reluctant to speak. Almost hostile. And yet, his interactions with Doctor *Quinn* are familiar. Far too familiar for a doctor and a patient."

"He's my *husband*!"

"But he doesn't know that. You are fostering an unhealthy situation where he may no longer wish to remember his past."

Lilly snapped her attention from Calbraith to General Castleton, bracing her hands on the wooden arms of her chair. "I have done *nothing* to instigate any false reactions or emotions from Jace. Any familiarity he wishes to have with me is *his* choice. It's natural. And doesn't that make sense? Somewhere in the back of his mind, buried deep behind the wall, is his *truth* that I am his wife. That he can trust me. That—"

"It is a proven fact that Lieutenant Quinn has no recollection of you, or his involvement with you, despite the other random events he has recalled."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Calbraith set his elbows on the arm of his chair and steepled his fingers. "Perhaps there's a reason he's regressed memories specific to you, Doctor Quinn. Perhaps he's forgotten you intentionally."

Lilly sucked in a sharp breath, her throat restricting so tight she couldn't force words past her lips even if her mind could have formulated a viable argument. She fell back in her chair, staring hard at the man.

"I knew him before this happened, Stephen," General Castleton said. His voice was like an echo in a barrel to Lilly, muffled and barely penetrating her ears. "If you're implying that Jace has forgotten Lilly because he doesn't want..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "No, that's not the case."

"We don't know that. We *won't* know that until he remembers. And it is my professional opinion that he won't here. The people here are too comfortable. They're too close to the situation."

"May I say something, General?"

Michael's words pulled Lilly slightly from her stupor and she turned her head to stare at him.

"I hardly think you are in a position to comment on the situation," Doctor Calbraith said. "I don't understand why you are involved in this *medical* discussion at all. I've researched you, and up to a few months ago you don't exist. You certainly aren't a doctor."

Michael pressed his lips together, dropping his chin down for a moment before he raised his head and turned his attention to General Castleton. "I'm not a doctor. That's no secret. But I do bring a unique perspective to the situation."

General Castleton sat back in his chair, running a fingertip across his lower lip. "What's that, Michael?"

"I'm a survivor."

"Survivor of what?" Calbraith demanded.

General Castleton arched one white eyebrow, and slowly nodded his head. "I see. And what is your opinion?"

"Taking Jace away from the people that care about him the most will be like taking away his legs. He'll have nothing to work toward achieving. Nothing and no one to support him."

"Survivor of what?" Calbraith demanded again.

Lilly slowly stood and walked behind his chair to stand beside Michael, laying her hand on his shoulder. He looked down at her, a tight pulling of his lips the only glimpse of an approving smile. Standing with him, she turned to Doctor Calbraith.

"The woman who tortured Jace, who nearly killed him, spent the last twenty-five years doing the same thing to Michael."

Doctor Calbraith's eyes rounded and he stared at Michael, who turned away to speak again to the General.

"I do realize I hold no license, and probably never will, but I do understand. Don't take his support from him."

General Castleton huffed a quick breath, tapping his fingertips on the top of his desk. "This isn't a decision I'm going to reach quickly or easily. Or without a great deal of consideration. Give me the night. I'll tell you my decision tomorrow."

Lilly's stomach twisted in a tight knot, but she felt some small bit of relief that Calbraith would not be able to take Jace away immediately. She trusted General Castleton, and could only pray he would come to the decision she wanted.

Victor stood at the top of the stairs leading into the wine cellar of Command Hall, and for now, the only confinement facility Phoenix-Tennessee had. He tried not to let the memories of his brief stay in the darkness linger too long in his mind. When he allowed the darkest thoughts in was when he felt the strongest push from his Demon.

And that was what he would always call the barely-suppressed consciousness that hovered in the back of his mind, waiting for the day it could snatch back control.

"Do you require an escort, sir?" asked the armed soldier standing guard at the door.

Victor shook his head. "No." It was ironic that upon their arrival in Tennessee, the soldier who now offered his protection had been charged with the duty of protecting the base from Victor.

A single light bulb hung from a beam in the center of the open space at the bottom of the stairs. Shadows stretched out to disappear behind storage crates and wall slots filled with dusty wine bottles. The air was cool compared to upstairs and outside, but it was thick with dust and musky dampness. Victor's shoe crunched on the dirty concrete and he paused at the bottom of the steps, his hand on the rickety railing.

"Come to watch the animal in the cage, you filthy traitorous coward?"

The voice from the darkness nearly hissed with contempt, any trace of the former Captain Damian Ali gone. Victor stepped toward the wrought iron gate that kept the now-Areth-possessed man trapped, and kept the base safe. He stood back three or four feet, well outside the reach of the big man should he attempt to come through the bars.

"I've come to ask you a question."

Damian rushed forward, his large body slamming into the gate with enough force to make the iron rattle, his fists curled around the bars. The whites of his eyes gleamed bright against the ebony of his skin, making him part of the darkness. He drew his lips and spat at Victor, the spittle falling short to dampen a spot on the concrete.

Victor didn't move, only stared at the man. "What is your name?"

He smirked, his teeth flashing. "Damian Ali," he said with a self-contented chuckle.

"No," Victor said, taking a single step forward. "Your *real* name."

"Why?"

Victor bit down, feeling the first acid rush at the base of his skull. He refused to give the bastard in the cell or the demon in his mind any power over him. He dropped his chin a slight degree and leveled his gaze on the man in the cell.

"Your name."

"Where's your little whore? Does it make you feel like less of a monster to fuck her?"

Victor lunged forward and had his arms through the bars before Damian could react. He linked his fingers behind Damian's head and jerked back, slamming his forehead into the wrought iron. As Damian collapsed to his knees, blood streaming into his eyes, Victor released him and stepped back out of his reach.

"Your name," he ground through clenched teeth.

"Ralnek Chok Ro'nek. But, you knew that already, didn't you... traitor." He dabbed at the blood oozing from his forehead. With a sinister grin, he touched the bloody tip of his finger to his tongue. "Maybe it's time you remembered your own name."

With his fists clenched at his side, Victor turned with slow determination and ascended the stairs out of the darkness.

Chapter Nine

"You sure this is a good idea, Angel?"

Lilly aligned Jace's wheelchair with one end of the parallel bars that stretched eight feet away from them. She locked the chair brakes and stepped around to slide under one bar and stand in front of him. "Of course it is. You're muscles aren't going to strengthen until we work them. And that's all we need to do, work them. You're not paralyzed."

"Okay, what if I fall flat on my face?"

"Then I'll just have to pick you up," she said quickly, flipped her hair behind her ears. "All you have to do is plant your feet solidly on the floor and move into me. You're body will remember how to do the rest. And once you're on your feet, you'll be climbing mountains in no time."

"Lilly –"

"Ready?" she asked, setting her hands on the arms of the chair. His hand came down over hers, and she snapped her head up, looking him in the face. "What?"

"You tell me. You've been talking at the speed of heat, warp one and unless you get your boards out, I'm going to need speed-jeans to keep up."

In a split second, the gnawing tension that had her wound up tighter than a drum, let go. She straightened and set her hands at her waist, laughing. Jace shook his head, staring at her like she'd lost her mind. *If not lost... certainly losing.*

"What are you laughing at?"

Lilly leaned down again and laid her hands on his cheek. "You *almost* sound like a pilot." Jace smiled back, and she set her hands on the chair arms again. "Now, are we ready for this?"

He huffed out a breath, tilting his head. "No guts, no glory, right?"

Lilly told him how to set his hands, and how to shift his weight once he had his feet flat on the matted floor and the footrests were out of his way. She laid her hands on his sides, bringing their faces so close she felt his breath stir her hair. A chill danced along her spine and her body tingled in places she had chosen to ignore for months. She swallowed hard and focused on the task at hand.

"Okay, go..."

Jace did just as she told him, and in one fluid motion he was on his feet, his arms straight and braced against the parallel bars that flanked them. His arms shook under the strain, his face pulled tight as he hissed through his teeth. Lilly kept her hands on his sides, standing as close as she could without being more of a hindrance than a help.

"Damn, that hurts," he hissed.

"It's okay," she said reassuringly. "It won't soon. But look! You're on your feet!" She hitched up her chin to look at him, and her breath caught in her throat at the dark intensity of his gaze as he stared down at her.

"I must be crazy." His voice was heavy, deep, like honey on gravel.

Lilly swallowed hard, shifting closer when she felt the slightest sway in his stance.

"Why?"

His gaze roamed over her face, settling on her lips, and Lilly's pulse jumped. "I want to kiss you. And that has to be crazy, because I don't even know who I am. I want to kiss you, but I won't, and that makes me even more insane."

Lilly closed her eyes for one brief moment. *Strength. God, give me strength!*

"I'm sorry," he said.

She opened her eyes and looked at him again, feeling heat burn in her cheeks. "For what?"

"Two days ago you let me hold your baby, and told me about the husband you lost. I have no right. Hell, I could be married with ten kids for all I know."

No, just one.

"I shouldn't have said I wanted to kiss you, whether it's true or not."

His voice was like velvet, deep blue and soothing, wrapping around her fiery body. His head dipped, just the slightest degree, and his breath shifted over her cheeks. Lilly involuntarily curled her fingers into his loose tee shirt; a low groan rumbled through his chest and his eyes slid partially closed. Then his arms buckled, and it took all the strength she had to catch him and ease him back into the chair. By the time he was seated, her temples pounded and spots floated in her vision. She couldn't catch her breath and knelt on the floor in front of him to rest.

"Well, that was a workout and a half," she said between deep intakes of air.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his hand sliding over hers on the chair arm. "You're white as a ghost."

Lilly nodded. "Yeah. I just need to go get a drink. Do you want something?"

"Whatever you find is fine."

She nodded, and used the parallel bars to pull herself to her feet. By the time she reached the hall and her office, her legs weren't quite as shaky. After taking an orange juice from the small refrigerator she kept in the corner of the room, she leaned against the edge of her desk and took a few minutes to watch Jamie sleeping in her bassinette. Leaning her head back, she sighed heavily and tried to mentally force her pounding pulse to calm.

I want to kiss you. And that has to be crazy, because I don't even know who I am. I want to kiss you, but I won't, and that makes me even more insane.

Tears burned her eyes. They couldn't take him away... they just couldn't.

A soft knock at door had Lilly snapping her head down and wiping away any trace of the tears. She turned to see Beverly standing in the doorway, a smile on her face. "Hey," she said, motioning for her friend to come in. "What are you doing here? You okay?"

"I'm looking for Victor. He's supposed to be helping Michael with something."

"I haven't seen him, but I've been in the gym with Jace. If I see him, I'll tell him."

Beverly walked to the side of the bassinette, her smile softening as she looked down at Jamie. Jamie's ability to sleep through just about anything was the one saving grace that kept their little arrangement of rotating care running smoothly. Between Lilly, Amanda and Michael, Jamie always had someone to take care of her. Lilly had begun pumping her milk so that anyone could feed her daughter, which gave her the freedom she needed to be where she needed when she needed to be there without a feeding schedule dictating her time. She missed the one-on-one time, but knew in the end it would all be worth it.

"She's beautiful," Beverly said, twirling her hand in front of her face for the sign. *"I see both of you in her."*

"Thank you."

"May I talk to you about something?"

"Of course. Is it medical?"

Beverly shrugged one shoulder. *"I suppose it is. It's about..."* Her hands stilled and her eyes shifted to Jamie.

Lilly arched her eyebrows and crossed her arms as she leaned into the desk. *"Babies?"* Beverly nodded, dusky color rising in her cheeks. *"Bev, do you think you're pregnant?"*

She shook her head, her eyes widening as her hands signed an emphatic *"No."*

"Are you thinking of having a baby?"

"The thought has crossed my mind."

Clearing her throat, Lilly sat down beside Beverly, linking her hands together with her arms resting on her thighs. *"Bev, beyond the list of obvious concerns that come to mind at the thought of you having a child with—and forgive me if this comes across as close-minded and biased—an Areth, you do realize that Victor can't have children."*

"Are you positive?"

Lilly nodded. *"Yes. I've seen the studies. They've cloned their bodies so many times that the ability to reproduce sexually has been lost. Before the revelation about their true origins, studies were being done to find ways to resolve their cloning breakdowns. I've talked to Victor about this, and he said the whole reason they helped us with improving our genetic make-up was to create better husks for future Areth generations. They need us to reproduce because they can't."*

Beverly's gaze shifted down and then to Jamie. Lilly touched her leg to draw her attention back.

"Do you want me to test Victor? To see if it's possible?"

Beverly shook her head, her eyes widening slightly. *"No. Don't say anything."*

"You haven't talked to him about this?"

"No. I don't want to..." She dropped her hands into her lap in a sign of frustration. *"Don't say anything,"* she reiterated.

"I won't. I assume you want to continue on the Ovarian Block?"

Her only answer was a nod and a weak smile. Voices in the hall drew Lilly's attention and she saw Michael and Victor passing her door. She called out and they both backtracked. Victor smiled immediately when he saw Beverly sitting beside her. Lilly watched with a smile as Beverly stood and moved to Victor for a brief, easy kiss. A brief conversation ensued and everyone moved toward the door. Lilly grabbed another orange juice from her refrigerator, ignoring the slight swimming of her vision when she bent forward.

You're just a cocky flyboy pilot who thinks the wings on his collar act as golden leg spreaders. I'm not interested, Lieutenant.

Words whispered in the back of Jace's head, and he closed his eyes, cradling his forehead in his hand. He tried to listen, tried to hear something he could hold on to, but it all skittered away like smoke on the wind.

I'm not trying to get into your pants, Darlin'.

He saw hands. Delicate, gentle hands smoothing over his chest. Felt the surge of sexual energy rush his blood. His fingers pushed into soft, silky hair. His own name whispered in the husky purr that only came from a woman being worshipped in the truest fashion. His fingers curled around the arms of the chair and his heart pounded harder.

"I want you to stay," she said, her voice raspy. "But I don't want to sleep."

"Are you sure?"

She moaned as he gently sucked her earlobe between his lips. Her voice was a husky whisper as she spoke, sliding her hand over his to guide it up to her breast. "You know, it has been medically proven that lovemaking has many beneficial side effects. Other than the obvious..."

Jace found the hem of her top and slipped his hand inside, finding the soft skin of her stomach. She moaned softly as he skimmed his fingers around her bellybutton. "Yeah? Like what?" He flattened his palm against her skin and slid it beneath the waistband of the loose shorts she wore.

She arched against him, drawing in a sharp breath, releasing it on a long hum. "Um, during sexual arousal the body releases histamine that can relieve congestion and the natural increase in blood flow can lessen headaches."

Jace smiled against her hair. "I love it when you talk biology. What else?"

Fragmented images, hazy and blurred, crashed and splintered together. Jace leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees and holding his head in his hands as he tried desperately to take them apart and piece them together like a giant jigsaw puzzle.

Do you, Jason Patrick Quinn, take this woman to be your lawfully married wife? To have and to hold, from this day forward. To love, honor and cherish. To seek no other, cleaving only unto her. In good times and in bad. In sickness and in health. Do you swear to be her strength, and to seek strength only in her? To protect her heart above all else, and hold her in the greatest regard. If this be your solemn oath and pledge, do so confirm it by speaking 'I do'.

A cold sweat flashed over his body and an invisible band tightened around his chest. It was there, taunting and teasing. He heard the door open, and looked up, fighting to draw a breath.

"I brought you orange juice. Is that all right?"

Jace pushed himself up, staring at her as she walked to him. "Lilly," he managed to force through the fist around his throat.

Her expression shifted, and she crossed the room at a run, falling to her knees in front of him. "What is it? Tell me."

"I-It's all there. It's... damn it!" He couldn't speak, shaking his head.

"I'm getting Michael," she said, rolling to her feet. "We'll—" Her words died, her body swaying and hitting one of the bars as she collapsed to the floor.

"Lilly!"

Jace propelled himself from the chair, landing on his hands and knees beside her. He rolled her from her side onto her back. Her skin was ashen, a dusky blue haze forming around her lips. When he touched her cheek, she didn't respond, her face lax.

"Lilly!" he shouted again. "Michael! Someone, help!"

He leaned over her, bracketing her body with his arms, trying to find some sign that she was still breathing, still alive. Pain pierced his skull, making him scream out, and a new flood of images crashed together in chaotic frenzy.

I, Lilly Marie Franklin, give you this ring as a symbol of our love. A never-ending circle. Wear it as a declaration to all that I am yours, and you are mine.

He couldn't breathe. Couldn't see. Couldn't move. His eyes burned, his body burned.
Promise me you'll be careful. There's something I want to talk about when you come home.

Then it all came together. The fog cleared. His body jerked as the memories of nearly five years crashed together in one massive rush. He sucked in air, his lungs finally released. A tearing sob ripped its way from his throat as his vision cleared, and he saw Lilly again, lying still on the floor beneath him.

"Oh, God. Oh, God... Lilly... Lilly!" He sat down hard and pulled her against his chest, stroking her hair away from her clammy forehead. "Come on, baby. Lilly, honey. Someone help me!"

The door crashed open and Michael Tanner ran across the mat toward them. In a flash, Jace knew it all. Who Michael was... how he knew him... *New Mexico...*

"What happened?" Michael demanded, his fingers pressing to her carotid artery and his ear near her lips.

"She collapsed. She just collapsed."

"Amanda! Caitlin!" Michael shouted over his shoulder.

Jace couldn't see anymore through the hot tears. Michael was a haze and Lilly—*his Lilly, his wife*—a cold, still form in his arms. He pressed his lips to her forehead, rocking with her against his chest.

"You need to let go." Michael tried to pry his arms from her. "Jace, you need to let me have her!"

"She's my wife!"

Michael's hands stilled and his head snapped up.

"She's my wife," Jace said softer, the words sinking in deeper into the madness.

"I know." Michael laid his hand on Jace's shoulder. "I know she is. Let me take her and, I swear, we'll take care of her."

Amanda and CJ came through the door, their faces immediately registering shock. With a pain in his chest as an unseen fist crushed his heart, Jace relaxed his hold on Lilly and Michael swept her into his arms, disappearing from the room. Amanda followed Michael and CJ knelt beside Jace.

"She'll be okay," she said gently. "Michael will take care of her." But Jace heard the shake in her voice. She didn't know. She didn't know any more than he did.

"She's my wife." He didn't realize he had spoken again until he heard his own ragged voice. "She's my wife."

Chapter Ten

"Stay right here and I'll go check with Michael."

Jace stared at the closed door leading to the room where he knew they had taken Lilly. He ran his hand over his mouth, chafing his lips. Moisture slicked his skin from the tears that hadn't stopped.

"Jace..." CJ said softly, touching his shoulder.

He nodded in answer, unable to force words through his tight throat. She smiled and stepped away, but Jace snapped out his hand and grabbed her wrist. CJ folded the fingers of her other hand around his.

"She'll be okay," she said before stepping free. When she opened the door, Michael's voice reached him in the hall.

"Set the oxygen at sixty percent."

Then the hall fell silent again when the door closed behind her. Jace folded himself forward, jamming his elbows on his knees as he held his head in his hands. A ragged breath ripped through him and a drop of moisture fell from his cheek, darkening a spot on his pants.

"Dear God," he whispered, swallowing hard. "I don't pretend to understand why all of this has happened, or why I'm even here. But please, *please*, don't let me lose her now."

He sat like that until he heard the door open again, the sounds from inside the room much quieter. Jace raised his head and sat back, looking up at Michael Tanner.

As if it were yesterday, he remembered finding Michael in one of the many cells in the Areth facilities. He had been with a big man, deformed and crying, and Michael had been barefoot and watching them all with deep speculation. His hair was longer, and he wore jeans and a tee shirt, looking as much like a man that had grown up free as any of them. And he was his father's son, through and through. Michael saw the stamp of Nick Tanner distinctly in his son's face.

Michael crouched beside the wheelchair, bringing his eye level lower than Jace's and laid his hand on the armrest. "She's going to be fine," he said, but Jace still heard the tight strain in his voice.

"What happened. What's wrong?"

Michael pressed his lips together and shook his head. "I should have been watching her more closely. I knew she was working herself hard, but I didn't see how hard. She's exhausted and anemic. Nothing that plenty of rest and intense folate therapy won't cure."

"She's never had trouble with anemia before."

"It's the baby," Michael said slowly. "She hasn't let herself recover from giving birth."

Jace pressed his hand against the center of his chest as the realization hit him with the force of a battering ram. *Jamie... her baby... his baby...*

Michael moved his hand to Jace's shoulder. "You need to calm down, too, Jace."

"How the hell am I supposed to calm down?" he snapped out, curling his fingers into his shirt. His lungs hurt and his heart wanted to burst wide open. "I forgot her... how could I *forget* her? How could I... " New tears burned his eyes, and he looked to the ceiling, praying for the answers to fall into his lap. But they didn't come. "A baby..." he whispered, tasting the salt on his lips. "A baby..."

"You'll be able to see her in a few minutes. We're just letting her rest here for a bit, and I've given her a Folate Infusion IV. She'll be feeling stronger in a few hours. Then I'm sending her home and barring her from coming near this infirmary for at least two weeks."

"She's really going to be okay?"

Michael nodded, standing straight. He took a couple steps back and leaned his shoulders into the wall, his ankles crossed with his hands pushed into his pockets. Jace tipped his head over the back of the wheelchairs and rubbed his face with his hands, moaning loudly to release some of the pent up, devouring tension so he could think. Letting his hands drop into his lap, he looked at Michael again.

"You look just like your father. I don't think I had enough time to realize it before..." He swirled his hand in the air. "Before."

"Thank you," Michael said with a quick jerk of his lips that resembled a smile.

Jace drew a long breath. "A lot has happened."

"Don't doubt how much she still loves you," Michael said, contradicting the thoughts that had already begun to creep into Jace's head. "Everything else, we'll get to."

Jace nodded, trying to accept Michael's statement. "Where is Nick?" Another wave of panic hit him. "He made it back, didn't he?"

"Yes. He's... he's not here. Something else we'll get to in time."

A gentle touch, barely a whisper on her cheek, stirred Lilly from the groggy, heavy sleep that pulled at her limbs and made her head float at the same time. She turned into the touch, her dreamy mind clinging to the warmth of skin against hers.

Do you know how much I love waking up with you? Almost as much as I love falling asleep with you.

Jace's voice whispered through her dreams, and she smiled at the memory as it wrapped around her and pushed away the consuming doubt. Her throat was dry and she swallowed hard, willing herself to stay in the dream world where she could imagine his touch so intently she felt it. A slightly rough thumb stroked her lower lip, and she felt her own breath reflected back to warm her cheeks.

Lilly blinked her eyes open, and looked into Jace's dark gaze as his face hovered only inches over hers. She blinked again, sure she must still be trapped in the peculiar plane between sleep and awake.

He turned the hand that laid against her cheek to brush his knuckles across her skin. His gaze shifted, skimming over her face, and Lilly held her breath. She looked down only long enough to determine that he sat beside her on the bed, his chair parallel to the side. His free hand pressed into the mattress beside her, helping him stay at an angle over her and look into her face.

"Jace," she said softly, almost afraid he would disappear if she spoke too loud.

He ran his fingers along the bridge of her nose to the slope of her cheek beneath her eye. A small smile tilted his lips, drawing an instant reactive smile from her.

"You are so beautiful."

She wanted to lift her hand and lay it on his chest, but didn't dare. What if it was just another moment like the one in the gym? Futile... untouchable... until he knew who he really spoke to. Who he really touched.

"Are you all right?" she asked, remembering his distress when she came back to the gym.

His smile hitched again. "I haven't been this good in a long time."

Lilly tilted her head, her hair rustling against the pillowcase. "I don't remember what happened."

"You scared the life out of me... or, back into me."

His eyelids slid lower, and Lilly's heart pounded furiously in her chest as he leaned in, his chest brushing her breasts as his mouth moved closer. Lilly snapped up her arm and held him back, her hand on his shirt. Beneath her palm, she felt the elevated beat of his heart.

"Jace, I thought you weren't going to kiss me —"

His thumb slid over her lips and she stopped. He looked down at the point of contact, his gaze lingering there.

"What I'm *going* to do is kiss my wife."

Jace moved his thumb and covered her mouth with his own, sucking in a sharp breath through his nose as they made contact. Lilly's eyes fluttered closed and her stomach tumbled, desire awakening in her from where it had lain dormant for months. His kiss wasn't hesitant, or testing, like a first kiss between near-strangers; but a claiming kiss that pulsed with familiarity and understanding. She gasped beneath it, caught in the wave, and her fingers curled into his shirt.

His lips parted and she followed his lead, his tongue sliding full and slow into her mouth to glide along her own. Electricity surged in her blood as their mouths hovered over each other, breathing the same air, soft sighs mingling with deep-throated moans. Her hands fluttered to his cheeks, holding him, afraid he might melt away into her dreams.

Then Lilly gasped, jerking her head back into the pillow, her eyes wide as she stared at him.

"What did you say?"

"I said I'm kissing my wife." His voice was rough and rasping, dancing over her nerves until they tingled.

She couldn't take a breath, a fiery cold sensation washing over her. Lilly knew her jaw was moving, but no words would come. Jace ran his thumb over her damp lips, shifting his position so his body provided just enough sweet weight to press her into the bed. She felt the heat of his body, the underlying strength that would someday return.

"I remembered. It was there before you came back to the gym, but I couldn't make sense of it. Everything was jumbled and crazy. But when you collapsed..." His voice cracked and he stopped to swallow. Lilly stroked his skin, letting her fingertips tease the short hair at his temples. "It all came back. All of it. Every moment."

He leaned in again, his kiss more fervent and needful and his arms slipped beneath her to lift her slightly off the bed. Lilly wrapped him in her embrace when he broke the kiss and pressed his face into the curve of her throat. Tears rolled from her eyes, but for the first time in a long, long time they weren't bitter from the past.

"God, Lilly. How could I possibly forget you?" he asked against her skin.

She was the one now to shush him with soft sounds, smoothing her hand over his hair as they held each other. Her tears mixed with laughter, the full significance of the moment

hitting her. He covered her throat with little kisses, moving along her jaw to her cheeks and temples, kissing away the drops until his lips found hers again tasting of salt.

"Do you really remember?" she asked, breathless.

Jace pushed up, looking down at her. And she saw it; the simmering spark in his eyes that always made her pulse jump and her body hum. The look meant only for her; the look she knew she created.

"Everything." His voice was still rough, strained, and heavy-laden with the thick emotion that filled the air around them. "I remember marrying you, making love to you. Missing you. Needing you." Jace swallowed, his hands framing her face as his eyes shifted over her features again. "Lilly, I love you."

Tears ran from her eyes unabated, and she wrapped him in her arms again, crying as she held him. "Oh, I love you, Jace. I've missed you so much."

His whispered words were too muffled against her skin for her to understand, but she didn't need to hear the words to feel them. Only a soft rapping at the closed door and Jamie's hungry whimpers when the door opened broke the glory of the moment. Jace sat up, looking over his shoulder and Lilly looked past him to see CJ carrying their daughter.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," she said with a wide, knowing smile as she looked between Lilly and Jace. "But someone refuses to wait any longer to eat. Do you feel up to it?"

Lilly nodded, wiping at her cheeks as she pushed herself into a sitting position. By the time CJ slid Jamie into her holds, the little girl's arms were flailing angrily and her soft whimpers had turned into full-fledged wails. Jace watched with intense interest, shifting slightly on the bed so he leaned across her legs, bracing his straight arm against the mattress on the other side of her. CJ didn't stay. As soon as Jamie was in Lilly's arms, she retreated from the room, closing the door behind her.

Lilly automatically reached for the strap of her tank top, but froze before lowering it from her shoulder. She looked to Jace, who shifted his gaze from her hand to her face. He held her stare and raised his hand, laying his palm over her shoulder, his skin warm. A shiver danced over her spine as he hooked his thumb beneath the strap and slid it down her arm, exposing her breast. His hand stayed on her as she shifted Jamie in her hold and the baby eagerly latched onto her breast.

"I think she looks like you," Lilly said softly, raising her eyes from Jamie to look at Jace.

"I always liked the name Jamie."

She smiled, taking the hand that didn't support Jamie to touch Jace's cheek. "I know."

"I heard that Doctor Quinn's husband remembered who he was and everything."

Michael rolled the make-shift ultrasound wand over Amber's growing abdomen. It wasn't the most delicate or detailed tool, but it did what he needed it to do; confirm that her baby was still growing and thriving despite Amber's waning health.

"Earlier today. Hold still for me, okay?"

She pillowed her head with a bent arm and watched the monitor feed on the computer beside them. A hazy image of black, green, yellow and red appeared, shifting and moving as he rotated the wand near her bellybutton. As primitive as the ultrasound was, he was glad he had managed to work out a thermal reader.

"Is that my baby?" she asked.

"Yes." He squeezed her hand with his free one, smiling at her. "She's growing. I'd estimate her weight at close to four pounds."

"Is that good?"

"It's a little small for her gestation, but it doesn't concern me. You're petite, she probably will be, too."

"So, it's a girl?"

"As far as I am able to tell, yes."

Amber smiled, tears rolling from her eyes into her hair. Her shuddered cry drew Michael's attention and he set the wand down, moving closer to the head of the bed to lay his hand on her hair. The last few days had been hard; her health was failing fast. Michael hadn't told her how bad it was, and how he feared they could lose her and the baby, but he suspected she already knew. He saw the acceptance heavier and sadder in her eyes each day. She knew that she would probably never see the end of her baby's first day of life.

"You're doing a good job, Amber," he said softly. "She's growing and thriving and that's the only thing you can do for her right now."

"What will happen to her?"

"You don't need to worry about that, Amber."

"I just need to know she'll be loved."

"She will be."

"Promise me you'll make sure she's taken care of."

He stroked her hair away from her forehead. "I promise you."

Her eyelids slid slowly, heavily over her eyes as she shifted her gaze to look again at the monitor. "I'm tired, Michael. So tired."

"Rest. I'll be here when you wake up."

Amber's eyes closed and she drew a shaky breath. Michael glanced toward the life sign vitals on the machine continuously connected to her now, and released a relieved breath. She was only asleep. But it wouldn't be long before she slipped away, and he would have to act. When it became obvious that her body wasn't surviving the pregnancy, she made both him and Lilly swear that they would do nothing to put the baby at risk. Including taking measures that would save her life. As long as the baby continued to grow, she insisted nothing be done to change that. Even if it meant she slowly wasted away.

This baby would be the first new life to come from the hells of New Mexico. The first that wasn't engineered, manipulated or forced. The first to be born of love. And neither of her parents would ever see her.

Michael saved the data gleaned from the ultrasound and set the wand aside. With a gentle touch, he wiped the gel from Amber's abdomen, pausing to lay his hand on her *Linea Nigra*, the dark line that ran from her bellybutton to disappear beneath the sheet that covered her lap. A small nudge bumped the palm of his hand, and he smiled.

He pulled the blanket over her sleeping form and with a snap of his fingers, called Dog from the patch of sun he had found to sleep in. Caitlin stood in the hall; her shoulders leaned against the wall and her expression distant as she stared at some indiscernible point down the hall. Michael stepped behind her and laid his hand on her shoulder. She jumped beneath the touch and looked up at him, a strained smile bowing her lips.

"How is she?" she asked.

"Failing."

Caitlin swallowed and shook her head. "It breaks my heart. I've never seen anyone who wanted a child so desperately."

Michael pulled her against his side and she laid her head against the front of his shoulder. "Are you ready to tell me?" he asked against her hair. "Before you act like I don't know what I'm talking about, I will remind you I live with you."

She chuckled softly. "It's just me being melancholy, I suppose."

"You miss him."

"So much it smothers me."

He tightened his arm around her shoulders and she turned into him. "Jace came back from the dead. Dad is just on the other side of the galaxy."

Chapter Eleven

*Wednesday October 2, 2052
Phoenix Tennessee Complex
Colorado Base relocation site
Smokey Mountains, Tennessee
Former United States of America*

"You simpering, useless, stupid human... how long do you think you can fight me? You're weak, wasted, disgusting. You'll break. You'll tell me where they are, and when I soak the ground with their blood, it will be on your head."

He fought against the nightmare, but was trapped in it as truly as he had been trapped in the hell Kathleen created. His lungs burned, his heart pounding hard in his chest. So hard it hurt. Blue light blinded his vision, searing pain turned it red. His own screams echoed in his ears even though his jaw was clenched hard in sleep.

"I will hunt them down and rip their hearts from their chests. I will find those closest and most dear to you and I will take my vengeance out on their souls."

Her voice had slithered near his ear like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, trying to tempt him to sin. He had cried and bit his tongue until the metallic tang of blood flooded his mouth, but he refused her wishes. Refused to give in.

"You are a fool if you think you will win. I will beat you down and rip your soul from this shell. When you have finally betrayed them, I will smother you in your own mind. I will take your body and my brethren will kill them with your own hands. Your fingers will crush their throats and the last thing they see will be your face."

He felt the leather thong around his throat, the cold metal vice that held his head in place. Blue-white light engulfed him, making his mind burn. His blood was acid in his veins, bubbling and trying to escape through his skin. His eyes were searing lumps of molten stone staring into the machine over him.

"More power! More power! Fry his brain if you need to!"

He screamed to God to let him die. His strength was gone, his will crumbling.

"Speak, you idiot! Save your own insignificant life! Speak!"

Jace jerked awake, his arms spread wide as he sucked air into his lungs. Sweat coated his skin and his legs tangled with the bedding. He kicked himself free and sat up, scrubbing his palms over his face. The bedroom was still dark, with the fresh light of dawn just touching the window.

Lilly sat in the rocking chair that faced out over the path outside. Her cheek rested on the blanket that covered their daughter, sleeping in her arms. Jace took a deep breath and swallowed hard, tamping down the rage and panic that always left a bitter taste in the back of his throat. With the deep ache in his bones that always seemed to accompany the worst nightmares, he slid from the bed and walked across the cool floor.

He stood with his back to the window, staring down at his wife and daughter.

They were beautiful.

Every time he looked at them, his heart lodged in his throat.

With hands that still shook, he gently eased Jamie from Lilly's hold and held her against his shoulder. Her skin was warm and she sighed softly. Jace pressed his lips to her downy hair before laying her down in the bassinette that sat in the corner of their bedroom. He tucked the blanket around her, feeling clumsy and oafish compared to her tiny delicateness.

When he turned, he found Lilly watching him with a small smile on her face. She blinked slowly, still held captive by the tendrils of sleep. "You're so good with her," she said softly.

Jace held his hand out to her, and when she took it, he pulled her to her feet. "Come on. Back to bed."

She slid her hand behind his back, her fingers skimming over his skin. Heat coiled in his stomach but he bit down, forcing himself to push it aside. Lilly slipped beneath the covers without argument, sighing softly as she settled against the pillow. Jace stepped back, but she quickly reached out and gripped his wrist.

"Where are you going?"

"Downstairs to let you sleep."

"I'll sleep better if you're here."

He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I don't think I'd get any more rest. I'll see you when you get up."

She brought her other hand behind his neck and held him down, pressing her lips to his. "Who says we have to sleep?"

He pursed his lips for one more quick kiss, then stood, her hand sliding down his chest as he moved back. Jace kept from looking into her eyes and pulled the blanket over her. She didn't answer when he said 'sleep well' from the doorway. Downstairs, he went onto the front porch and sank into one of the creaky chairs that faced out over the main path. Jace set his elbows on his knees and covered his face with his hands, trying to push back the nightmare that still tingled beneath the surface of his skin.

"Good morning, Jace."

With a jerk that tightened every muscle through his neck and shoulders, Jace raised his head. Michael stood in the path, a few feet from the house, with his hands pushed into his pockets. A flannel shirt hung loose around his wrists and his breath fogged the air slightly. Jace hadn't even realized the cold chill in the air. It bit at his bare skin and he silently cursed for not grabbing a shirt on his way out.

"Hey," he said, leaning back in his chair. "You're up early."

"I haven't gone to bed yet."

"Why?"

Michael looked back down the hill to the infirmary building. "Amber. She doesn't like being alone at night. Caitlin and I alternate staying with her."

Jace nodded. He knew all about Amber; their care was both a life watch and a death watch. Her baby would come, but she would die in the process. They all knew it, even Amber. But she refused to let them do anything that might save her on the off chance the baby would be harmed. She was making the ultimate sacrifice for her child.

She was brave as hell, that's what she was.

Michael walked to the bottom step leading to the porch, setting one foot on the lowest plank of wood. Jace avoided looking at him, staring up the trail as it curved into the woods. A few moments passed in silence, and Michael turned his back to Jace to sit on the top step.

"I still have nightmares," he finally said.

Jace swallowed, squinting hard to keep from looking at Michael.

"It was worse when I first left. Caitlin called them Night Terrors. I was so deep in the dream I couldn't escape, couldn't make myself wake up, caught in the moment."

He clenched his jaw until pain shot down his neck.

"I didn't believe it was over," Michael continued. "I was convinced Kathleen would find me and my hell would begin again, just worse for escaping in the first place."

"I can't believe—" Jace started, but stopped when his voice cracked. He cleared it, low in his throat, before speaking again. "I can't believe that *thing* is somehow your mother."

"Her body birthed me. Her stolen body."

Jace nodded, trying to push past the image of her cold eyes floating in front of his face.

Lilly laid Jamie in the middle of the master bed, pulling the pillows down from the head to bracket her. She wasn't rolling yet, but Lilly didn't want to take the chance that the one day she looked away for a moment would be the day Jamie decided to take off. Jamie pulled at the front of her outfit, lips open, trying to get a fistful in her mouth, and Lilly smiled.

She was so precious. Lilly saw so much of Jace in her, from her coloring to the glint in her eyes.

She hadn't seen that glint in Jace's eyes in a long time. Not since before he left her nearly a year before. Even though his memories had returned, the spark that made him Jace Quinn still lay cold and lifeless somewhere deep down. In the first few days after his life came back to him, she thought she saw the spark, glowing and filling him. But then it went out.

Lilly didn't know this Jace.

She knew his body, knew every ridge and slope of him. Even the scars that now marred his flesh. Knew his face. But the man that looked at her wasn't Jace. He was a hollow shell.

Pulling off his tee shirt that she used to sleep in, Lilly moved mechanically around the room, dressing for the day. As she tugged her blue sweater over her head, her gaze fell on the forgotten and dusty item in the corner of the bedroom.

Jace's guitar.

The guitar Lilly had given him before his memory returned. He had touched it that day with reverence, smoothing his hands over the wood like an artist with a sculpture, brushing away the dust and bits that didn't belong. He had polished and repaired it, replaced the strings and tuned it. And then his life came back to him and the guitar had sat untouched. A thin layer of dust fogged the rich color and grain of the wood his careful ministrations had brought out.

Lilly walked to the instrument and ran her fingertips through the dust, leaving three long lines along the slope of the body. Tears ran down her cheeks. She didn't have the strength this morning to fight them. She would. As soon as she stepped out the door, she'd tamp it all down and face the new day. If she could make it through nine months of thinking he was dead, she'd be damned if she'd let this crush her. He was back and he was alive.

Her chest ached as her heart broke all over again.

Thwap! Thump-thwap!

His ragged breathing thundered in his ears, sweat dripping from his nose. With each hard push of air from his lungs, he swung out, his gloved fists slapping against the leather punching bag. Tired muscles protested and burned with each jolting impact, but his body functioned under its own power, assaulting the inanimate object as he focused on the rhythm.

Thwap! Thump-thwap! Thwap-thwap-thwap!

Sounds were muffled and echoing, nothing existing but the bag and his fists.

Nothing.

No dreams. No pain. No memories he wished he could once again forget.

Nothing.

Thwap! Thump-thump-thwap!

His back tightened with each swing. Sweat ran in his eyes, but he didn't pause long enough to wipe it away. Pain was meaningless. This was nothing. It would ease with a hot shower. It would go away; the funk of exertion washed away with the water. Easy as that. Gone.

Thump! Thump-thump-thump-thwap-thwap!

Something touched his back, and he spun around, the punching bag swinging to hit him. His fists came up, but his conscious mind kicked in with a jolt and he sprang back.

"Lilly, geez! *Don't* come up behind me like that!"

His wife stepped back, but only to push her hands into the pockets of her jeans and scowl slightly. "I said your name five times."

Jace hung his head and worked to steady his breathing again, tucking one gloved hand under the other arm to remove the glove. With his hand free, he ran his thumb across his brow to stop the lines of sweat that stung his eyes.

"I'm sorry. Where's Jamie?"

"Amanda claimed her as soon as I came through the door," Lilly said with a smile. "I thought maybe I'd steal you for lunch."

Jace shook his head, moving around her to retrieve the bottle of water he had set aside earlier. He drained half the bottle, huffing in several deep breaths as he took it from his lips. "I'm not hungry, and I want to get a run in."

Lilly crossed her arms beneath her breasts, lowering her head for a moment before looking at him again. "You've been here since nine."

"And two months ago, I couldn't be here more than fifteen minutes without needing a nap."

She pulled her lower lip through her teeth, nodding. "Okay. I'm going to be with General Castleton most of the afternoon. I'll leave Jamie here. Can you take her home when you're done?"

"Of course."

"Okay. I love you."

Jace leaned across the space between them and kissed her cheek. "I love you, too."

He was at the weight bench, curling twenty-pound dumbbells to his shoulder before Lilly reached the door again. She paused in the doorway, her hand on the jamb, and watched him silently for several moments. With his back to her, and his torso bare, she watched the bunching and tightening of the muscles in his back and shoulders.

Her stomach fluttered, heat flashing over her skin. Physically, no one would have guessed that just weeks before he was unable to walk on his own power and was at least thirty pounds lighter. She knew his body, intimately, and despite the months of ravaging torture she knew he was probably in the best shape of his life. Or near to it. Jace dove into his physical therapy after his memories returned, pushing his body hard. Some night he was asleep almost before he could lay down.

But he didn't slow down.

Even toned, strong and well again... he didn't slow down.

Lilly walked into the hall, picking her jacket up off a nearby chair as she headed for the infirmary door. It wasn't really cold yet, not as cold as she knew it would be in a few weeks, but it was cold enough for a sweater and a jacket. She stepped out into the mid-day sun and inhaled deeply. Michael always drew a deep breath whenever he stepped outside, always followed by a smile no matter the weather, and his habit had worn off on her.

The main room of Command Hall was nearly empty; only three or four servicemen scattered either on couches or at tables. Sounds drifted from the back side door from the large room that had been designated the dining hall. It was just after noon, and most of the base's compliment gathered to eat their mid-day meal. She thought about going in, looking for Michael or CJ, but changed her mind before she reached the back of the room.

General Castleton sat in his office, his fingers tapping out on the flat keyboard in front of him. Her physician's mind noted the tired lines around his eyes and the strain in his expression. The last few months had been hard on him; watching his people die in battle, the remainders left to scavenge out a home and existence while the world collapsed beneath the Areth terror. Lilly rapped her knuckles against the doorjamb, and he raised his head.

"Lilly, you're early," he said with a wide, open smile.

"Do you need to finish what you're doing? I can come back in a little while."

"No, no. Come on in."

She shrugged off her coat and draped it on the back of her chair before sitting. In the last few weeks and months, she had been less and less a part of the daily operations on the base and a part of her missed it. Missed the connections, missed feeling as if she contributed something.

"This is good," he said, steepling his hands over the keyboard. "Gives me a chance to talk to you. I want your professional opinion on something."

"Of course, General. What is it?"

"Jace."

She drew a slow breath and leaned back, crossing her legs. "Michael has been his physician since I stepped back."

"I know that, and he's kept me well informed. According to the report he gave me this morning, Jace is in peak physical shape. He's recovered from the torture, and shows no sign of residual physical limitations. He also told me Jace wants to return to active duty."

Lilly swallowed and looked down at her hands. "I wasn't aware he had made a formal request."

"He hasn't. Not yet. But before he does, I want to know where he stands."

"I have no doubt of Michael's thoroughness, General."

General Castleton ran his fingers over his chin, the rough scratch of two-day stubble mingling with his thoughtful hum. "It's not Jace's body I'm worried about."

"Sir?"

"Where's his head at, Lilly."

She raised her chin and looked in straight in the General's eyes. "General, I'm not sure I'm the best person to ask whether he should go back on patrols, no matter how routine. You may want to consider where *my* head is... and my heart."

"You're the best person for me to ask."

Lilly shook her head. "No, sir. I don't think I am. I don't *know* where his head is. I wish I did."

His eyebrows knitted together and he stared at her for several moments. Lilly realized she was holding her breath, and let it out slowly, swallowing. "Is everything okay between you two?"

Michael, CJ and Beverly came through the door before she even attempted to form an answer. Beverly took the empty chair beside Lilly and CJ leaned against the wall. Michael stepped behind Lilly's chair, squeezing her shoulder before setting his hands on the back and leaning into his arms. They were joined almost immediately by Doctor Patricia Byrne and Major Adam MacKenzik; their computer expert and military heads on base. Major MacKenzik had transferred recently from one of their European Continent bases as a replacement for Captain Damian Ali after his possession by an Areth. Major Yun was the last to arrive, closing the door behind him as they all found places to either sit or lean.

General Castleton stood, chuckling as he glanced around the room. "We probably should move these meetings to a bigger room. But, I figured this is going to be quick. Doctor Byrne..."

Lilly leaned back in her chair, feeling Michael's knuckles against her shoulders, and listened to each individual as they ran down the status of the base. This was her first base-check meeting since before Jamie's birth. After her collapse, she had taken three huge steps back and focused only on her health, and doing what she could for Jace. Enough time had passed, and both her body and mind were ready to return to daily operations. There was too much to do as it was, and not enough hands. Scattered from coast to coast and overseas, with communications abilities severely hampered, each base functioned more and more like their own island rather than the well-organized network Phoenix had been before the attacks. They maintained, they held on, and they made progress but it was a slow journey. Especially with the Areth threat so real and so close.

"We've managed to get the communications net fully functioning, as well as the signal scramblers. I still recommend minimal use. It's rudimentary and our systems can only camouflage to a point," Doctor Byrne explained. "Could really do with a molecular transphase inscriptor, but until then I can make due with what we have."

"We're going to need to, Doctor."

Neither Major Yun nor Major MacKenzik had specifics to report. Security was little more than surveillance and the round-the-clock monitoring of their sole prisoner; the Areth entity inhabiting the body of Damian Ali. Military actions focused on training, preparing the base for the coming winter, and an occasional trip off the mountain for whatever supplies they could glean.

Lilly listened as CJ and Michael reported on the condition of their medical supplies and the health of base personnel. They were hurting. Medicines were sparse, with drugs like pain killers and antibiotics that had once been in sufficient supply were now only doled out when the need was too great to be ignored. Bandaging came from whatever they could find and once every day items like Stratum Basale Stimulators and Sonic Binders were replaced with rough stitches and long-term casts. She thanked God they had made it out of Colorado with the two handheld diagnosis interfaces. Those, with what they had managed to either make or repair, encompassed her entire diagnostic ability. She felt barbaric, like some twentieth-century hack.

"Currently, our only active patients are Sergeant Goldberg who cracked his head when he fell out of the barn loft yesterday," CJ said, finishing up the medical report. "And Amber."

"Is there any hope?" General Castleton looked past Lilly to Michael behind her.

"No, sir."

She heard the heaviness and regret in his voice, and looked over her shoulder to see his face.

"We've done everything we can with what we have," CJ added. "To be honest, even if we had a full infirmary with every obstetric advancement available, I don't think it would have done any good. There is more wrong than we know how to fix."

The General shook his head, his fingers tapping on the desktop. "Damn shame."

A firm knock at the door drew the attention of everyone in the office, and it opened so Captain Hampton could stick his head in. "I'm sorry to interrupt, General. But we just received a communiqué over secured lines."

Beverly held out her hand and the Captain gave her a digital interface board, stepping back to leave the room again. Her eyes shifted as she read the material, and widened the further she went. *"It's from Eli Kerrigan, one of our field men. He discovered an encampment of refugees outside of the Chicago ruins. He's requesting immediate medical and military back up to evacuate them."*

"How do you feel about doing this mission?"

Michael looked sideways to Caitlin as they walked up the hill toward the infirmary building. He laid his hand over hers where it rested in the bend of his arm. "Should I feel a certain way?"

"No. You feel the way you feel."

"I feel restless."

"Restless?"

"They need to come home."

Caitlin's steps slowed and he turned with her, facing each other. She shielded her eyes from the sun with her hand, and Michael shifted to put it at his back to block it for her. "Their homes are gone."

"They need to know we're here. This isn't the end."

She smiled, sliding her hand around his elbow again. "I should have known."

He didn't know how to respond, so kept silent as they walked. Michael felt the heaviness shift over her. He had come to recognize it more and more over the last few weeks. Outwardly, she was the same Caitlin. The same strong woman that General Castleton and the entire Tennessee base depended on. But the shadows hung around her when no one was looking, or when it was just them. She still tried to hide it, but he saw it. He knew her.

He understood more than anyone else could.

"If Eli is there..." Caitlin said with a smile in her voice that had him glancing down at her. She winked. "Maybe Jackie will be there. Wasn't she meeting up with him and Jenifer when she left?"

Michael did his best to control the grin that immediately pulled at his cheek. Caitlin only laughed and nudged him with her shoulder. They reached the porch for the infirmary and he held the door open for her. They found Lilly in the blessedly empty exam room, stacks of their meager supplies spread out on top of a self-fashioned examination table.

"I'm packing heavily on the bandaging, skin graft kits and antibiotics," she said, barely looking up. "Everything is so short, but if they're injured we need to stave off any infection as soon as possible. Once they're here, we'll catalogue and determine courses of treatment."

"Triage and little more, I understand." Michael stepped beside her and scanned the inventory, giving himself an understanding of what he had—and what he didn't have.

"I'll get a pack for it," Caitlin said as she left the room again.

"Where is Jamie?" He glanced around the room and saw no sign of the little girl.

"Jace took her home while we were in the meeting," Lilly answered, her voice tight and strained.

"Things aren't better," he stated, seeing the truth in her face when she looked at him.

She shook her head. "No." The word was barely loud enough for him to hear. "I keep thinking either two things; either he just has no idea what he's doing to me, or he does and he doesn't care."

"He cares, Lilly."

"No, he doesn't. If he did, he'd—" Her voice cracked and she slapped a stack of bandages down on the table. "Damn it."

Michael drew a slow breath and laid his hand against her back, offering a simple touch. A shudder moved through her and she tipped her head back with her eyes closed. He hated seeing the pain that pulled Lilly apart. He didn't know the Jace Quinn of before, didn't know what kind of relationship they had, but he knew what they had now was barely a shadow of the past. Jace functioned in a shell, and it tore Lilly apart.

In the weeks following Michael's emancipation, he had grown to know Jace through Lilly. Through the stories she told him, and sometimes in the quiet moments they shared when all she needed was for someone to be near. To hold her when the tears were too heavy, and the sadness stifling. He wished he could be that for her again, but the longer Jace kept himself walled up the more she pulled into herself as well.

Michael reached across to curl his hands around Lilly's arms and turned her to face him. She avoided looking up as tears rolled down her cheeks. He wiped away a trail with his thumb and nudged her chin until she finally met his gaze.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

Deep furrows dug into her forehead as confusion crossed her face. "What kind of question is that, Michael?"

"Do you trust me?" he asked again.

"Of course, I do."

"I'm taking Jace with me."

Her eyes widened and she stepped out of his hold. "No."

"Lilly –"

"No!" He reached for her again, but she shoved his hand away. "How can you even say that? Last time he left, he didn't come back!"

"Yes, he did."

"No, he *didn't*."

"I'll bring him back to you. I swear that."

Her lips pulled tight and her body shook as she clenched her hands at her side. "Your father promised me the same thing."

Michael swallowed, tamping down the instant rush of gut-wrenching guilt that hit him. From the day he arrived in Colorado, and knew Lieutenant Jace Quinn had died in the operation that freed him, the guilt had sat in his chest like a slow-burning ball of acid. The closer he became with Lilly, the more corporeal the guilt became. He sought redemption, every day, but since Jace's shallow return the bitter bile of culpability ate at him all the time.

He needed to make it right. For Lilly, and in turn, for himself.

"Lilly, he needs to find who he was before. What Kathleen did to him—it changed him. It took something from him, and he needs to get it back."

"It didn't change you," she said, her voice broken as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"No, it didn't." He paused, his gaze locked on the fathomless depths of sadness in her blue eyes. "It made me."

A sob ripped its way through her, and she covered her mouth with a trembling hand. Michael stepped to her, and this time she let him wrap his arms around her, pulling her to his chest. He rested his chin on the top of her head as she cried, deep-wracking sobs that sounded like they would tear her apart from the inside out.

"I'll bring him back, I swear," he said against her hair. *And God help me, maybe I can bring him home whole.*

Chapter Twelve

Jace sat with his shoulders wedged into the back corner of the hovercraft, one foot set on the bench seat with his arm set on his raised knee. He watched as Michael went through the medical bag Lilly and CJ had packed for him, the fifth time he had done it since they left Tennessee. At this point, Jace knew the inventory of the bag as well as Michael.

He slid his sidearm from the black holster strapped to his thigh. The handle of the weapon was worn, the edges shiny where the black finish had rubbed away from years of use and battle. The Magnum SP-21 stun bolt pistol was light in his palm, and he bounced his hand to redistribute the weight. It had been a very long time since he held a weapon.

"Your father carried a Glock," he said absently, shifting his attention back to Michael, who had finally given up on the bag and leaned back on the wall. "I had a debate with him over the Glock 100 and the Magnum SP-21 just before the operation to New Mexico."

Michael rolled his head on the padded surface of the wall, his eyes shifting to the weapon. He held out his hand and Jace laid the pistol in it. Like a man who had been handling sidearms his whole life, Michael checked the charge cartridge, popped it free, straightened his arm to test the site, and re-inserted the cartridge before handing it back to Jace.

"It's light," he said. "The Glock has substance. And it's self-charging. No magazine to change."

Jace laughed and slipped the pistol back in the holster. "You sound just like him."

"Thank you."

"Lilly told me he left just a couple weeks after the mission." Michael only nodded in answer. Jace cleared his throat and lowered his leg from the bench, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "I know why he went. I read the project reports on the glider modifications, and I know what he is doing isn't easy. Manual wormhole flight is hard on a good day. I wish I had been here. I could have gone instead. I'm not Nick Tanner, but I'm close."

"No." Michael's voice was low, but stern and heavy with conviction. "He wouldn't have let you go. Lilly was pregnant. He wouldn't have let you leave that."

"He had you. He could have stayed."

"He'll be back."

Warning! Warning! Unidentified vessels approaching! Warning! Warning! Unidentified vessels approaching!

Nick shot awake as the bio-medical functions of his glider injected his body with a burst of neurological stimulators, yanking him without ceremony from his cryogenic stasis. He shook his head, clearing the final muzzy cobwebs and focused on the display panel in front of him.

Warning! Warning! Unidentified vessels approaching! Warning! Warning! Unidentified vessels approaching!

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." He hit the command to stop the voice warning protocol and re-engaged all inactive systems including his limited weapons array. Just in case. He turned on

the cabin voice recorder and watched the two moving blips on his long-range scanners move closer. A cold chill shifted over his skin and the bitter tang of adrenaline hit the back of his throat.

"Well, Michael, now is where we find out if your friend was telling the truth. I've got two bogies approaching at Mach 1000. Scanners picked them up..." He glanced at the readout to his right. "Two-minutes-four-seconds ago. At that speed, they should reach me in..." Nick ran the figures in his head. He blew threw his lips, making a dismissive sound. "Oh, we got plenty of time. It'll take 'em a good hour and a half to—*ah, crap.*"

As he spoke, the two blips disappeared, only to appear on the other side of the screen as two points of light swirled off his starboard wing and the crafts catapulted into his space. They were sleek in appearance; one flowing shape from nose to tailfin with wings that stretched out and curled under at the tips. The surface was polished black, and Nick could see no windows or canopy, no hint of the pilots within.

He cleared his throat, eyeing up the ships. "Things just got interesting..." He continued to speak, even though he knew the ships data-recorders registered everything. In nine months, talking to his cabin voice recorder was about the only touch with reality he had anymore. "I've made first contact with two ships of unknown origin. They don't look like any Areth ship I've ever seen, not even the prototypes. Probably a good sign, right?"

Nick half hoped someone would answer him.

With a fortifying huff, Nick flipped a switch on his communications board and opened all frequencies. "Hey, guys..." he said, trying to sound unthreatening. "I'm Colonel Nick Tanner, Earth Force. As in... Earth. You guys know Earth by any stretch of the imagination?"

He waited, realizing after several moments that he was holding his breath, and released it slowly. *So, blow me up or say hello... one or the other.*

A garble of syntacs and sounds came back to him on one of the basic radio waves.

Nick squinted, shaking his head. *Definitely wasn't Areth.* But what the hell was it? "None of you ever though of *that*, did you?" he demanded of the unseen recording device, and cursed long and low beneath his breath. "Send me fifty-damn-light-years across space and *nobody* thinks that maybe—just *maybe*—these guys don't speaka de English? What the hell did you people think this was, a damn science fiction movie?"

Once again, what sounded like the same command, came over the radio, most definitely spoken with more authority.

"Ahhhh... I come in peace?" he said, raising his hands palms up. He couldn't see them, but he knew nothing hid him from their view.

Silence met his answer. He sat, hovering in space, staring at the two black ships. If it weren't for their highly glossed exterior and the lack of stars where they sat, they almost blended into space. Nick waited, tapping his fingers on the glider's dash. He figured it was a good sign that they hadn't turned and fired without asking again whatever the hell it was they were asking.

When the command came again—*okay, maybe not the same command*—Nick shrugged, shook his head and leaned forward toward his canopy. He tapped his helmet near the top of his head. "I'm sorry. I don't understand. I don't—"

"Wartezeit."

"Huh?"

They went on again. It was gibberish to him. A slightly guttural language, rough and abbreviated tones, but beyond that—useless.

He huffed. “Look, this is going to get old fast. I don’t know how we’re going to fix it, but—”

“Wartezeit. Wartezeit.”

Nick raised his hands. “Okay! Okay... I’ll wait.”

“We’re approaching the landing site now,” Sergeant Babb said from the navigation chair of the hover.

Michael felt the slow deceleration of the craft from somewhere near one-hundred miles per hour to a cruising speed. They would find a place to leave the hovers within easy running distance hidden in the shadows of the decimated buildings, then move in to the survivor camp. He stood and joined Babb at the front, leaning over to enter some commands into the on-board computer. The screen shifted to a multi-colored image, ranging from pale yellow to deep red. Life sign statistics ran across the bottom of the screen, and he read them quickly.

“There’s a cluster of life signs just on the other side of that large building there,” he said, hitching his chin toward the shielded front window. “The sensors aren’t delicate enough to give me medical status.”

“Let’s go find out.” With a slap of his palm on the hydraulic switch, Jace opened the side door of the hover popped and the vacuum seal released. With a hiss, the door raised and the cold evening air flowed in.

Michael followed, picking up his medical bag as he went. The other two hovers were nearby, and the small group of military back up gathered together. Stars shined bright in a pitch black sky and the stench of death was masked only by the smell of existence burning slowly away. The jagged and collapsed remains of the city of Chicago surrounded them on all sides. Some of the buildings still glowed red from their core, the fires and destruction so intense it burned three months later.

Jace spun around, his weapon in hand and trained on the night.

“Hold your fire,” came a voice from the darkness. “It’s Kerrigan.”

Jace pointed the nose of his gun to the sky and re-engaged the safety before replacing it in his thigh holster. The sounds of footsteps preceded Eli as he stepped into the glow provided by the interior lights of the hover. A man walked with him, and as they approached his eyes darted toward Michael. He was tall, over six feet, with dark hair and angled features, at least three days worth of stubble darkening his sharp jaw line. The dark sweater he wore was torn and stained and hung on his lanky frame but Michael knew instantly he wasn’t just a homeless survivor.

A strange sensation tickled across the back of his neck and made the hair on his arms stand on end. He instinctively raised his hand and rubbed it across the back of his neck.

“Jason Quinn, I’ll be a son of a gun.” Eli shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest. “You look a hell of a lot better than the last time I saw you.”

“Thanks in part to you.”

Michael adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder, and looked at the stranger again who blatantly stared back. “Michael Tanner,” he said, extending his hand to the other man.

He didn't respond at first, studying Michael with a clenched jaw and guarded look. Then he took one step forward and took Michael's hand in a firm shake. "John Smith." Michael recognized the clipped consonants and elongated vowels as a European Isle accent.

"John Smith..." Jace repeated. "That's original."

The man shifted his concentrated gaze to Jace. "Family name," he said simply.

"John is a leader of sorts," Eli explained, turning to look into the darkness and the cluster of hovels the hovercraft sensors had picked up. "He's been helping prepare for the evac."

"Has there been any Areth activity?" Jace asked. He turned his head up and squinted into the night sky.

Mr. Smith's features pinched, his lips pressing into a tight line before he answered. "None."

"Problem is," Eli elaborated, "Slum City is growing. When it was just half a dozen in an abandoned building, there wasn't much to attract attention. We've got four dozen people down there. Getting hard to hide."

Michael focused on the distant fires that burned in small clusters. As he stared, he saw the flicker of shadows move through his line of sight when people walked around the flames. He wondered how these people survived, and what kinds of injuries they had to have sustained. Once a thriving city with a population of thousands, they had been reduced to a handful. Faintly, he heard the cry of a child.

"Come with me," John said, turning without waiting for an answer. "I'll show you the worst."

Nick crossed his arms over his chest and relaxed in his seat; if it were possible to relax in the same chair he had flown and slept in for the last nine months without stretching, while staring down the nose of what could be allies or new enemies. Nick was bone tired, and had been forced to stay in stasis longer and longer between jumps. The last few jumps, he had slept for ten solid days between. The purity of his oxygen supply was deteriorating, making it harder to recuperate effectively, or perform at one-hundred percent. He felt it wearing him down. With a glance at his digital 'Earth time' clock and calendar, he saw he had only been in stasis two days since the last jump.

No wonder he was friggin' exhausted.

Sleep actually pulled at his eyes, and he felt himself drifting when the radio crackled in his ear again. Nick sat up straighter, banging his head on the canopy.

"Ow, damn it."

"Greetings to Colonel Nick Tanner Earth Force. My apologies for the long wait," came a softer, more feminine voice.

Nick stared at the radio console. *Holy crap! They do speak English everywhere!*

"Uh, no problem," he managed to say after several moments.

"What is the capacity of your craft?"

"I can keep up with what your buddies were doing before they... did whatever it was they did."

"The sentries will guide you back to Raxo and Castaneda."

Raxo. Castaneda... nothing about Umani yet... "Gotcha."

Nick powered down the weapons array, leaving the basic pulse chargers on the wingtips on auxiliary. There didn't seem to be any sense in letting his guard fully down, but he didn't want to piss them off either.

"After you," he said, holding up his hand for the other crafts to see, and motioned in the direction they had come.

Gracefully, and with a smooth finesse Nick found impressive, the ships rotated one-hundred-eighty degrees to face the opposite direction. With less finesse and grace, Nick maneuvered his glider between and slightly behind them.

The same language he heard before came over the communications link, followed by the feminine voice. "*The sentries are prepared to lead.*"

"Off we go."

With no sign of exterior propulsion, not even a wavering heat signature, the two crafts shot forward. Nick gripped his console and pressed the O2 igniters, using their dots on the scanners to keep track as the black ships sliced unseen through space. Flying at Mach 1000 felt like riding on the back of a tortoise in comparison to the wormhole flights he'd maneuvered since leaving Earth. But the wormhole engines were overkill, or so he figured, for wherever they were going.

"I'd tell you to cross your fingers, Michael, but somehow I don't think that's going to do me any good. I just hope this is the answer we're looking for."

Jace swallowed against the greasy churning in his gut. The air was thick with a combination of smoke, ash and death. Even though the majority of Chicago was a black crater, and anyone unlucky enough to be in the path of destruction had been obliterated in seconds, he could only imagine the horrors that hid behind charred walls and collapsed buildings.

He clenched his fists at his sides as he followed Eli, Michael and the so-called 'leader' of the survivors. The man had the presence of a leader; he walked with purpose and confidence despite the desolation and destruction around him. John Smith looked back over his shoulder, his eyes sharp, and a faint tingle danced beneath the surface of Jace's skin like a cold breeze. He twisted his head, cracking his neck, and continued to follow.

Three people sat around the first fire they reached, dressed in sooty and stained clothing, their ragged hair tucked beneath hats and blankets and their cheeks smudged as they looked up with beaten eyes. They didn't even react to a troop of armed men and women walking into their camps.

Why bother? They have nothing left...

"We don't have much," John said, his voice rough as if he had been shouting for hours. "What little has been scrounged is doled out to those who need it the most first; the wounded, the elderly and the young. It may not appear so, but we haven't given up."

They walked along empty streets, litter drifting in the stale wind. Blackened personal hovercrafts sat empty, their interiors gutted by the blasts. As they passed the shattered window of a small shop, Jace glanced inside to see the floor littered with food in clear cellophane wrappers. The smell of soured milk made him wince and cough.

"Most of the food we find is unsafe to consume. We're left only with canned goods when we can find them." Smith pointed to an open doorway a few feet ahead. "The sick and wounded are here."

"Stay here," Jace said to the three men that still walked with them. The others had stayed back and fanned out as they approached the slum.

Grit and debris crunched beneath his boots as they stepped into the dark interior of the building. A variety of candles and kerosene or oil lamps cast a minimal light through the room, making long shadows on the walls. Four beds sat near each other, each with a patient. Jace's chest tightened when he saw the smallest patient; a little girl who couldn't be more than four or five years old, curled on her side with a ragged blanket hugged to her chest and her thumb in her mouth. He saw no outward injuries, but knew that was no indication of what might really be wrong. She was probably an orphan.

Suffer the little children unto me...

Jace bit down hard. John Smith looked at him, and for the first time, Jace caught a waver in the stern authoritative mask he'd worn since they arrived.

Sweat and filth made his nose tingle and he stayed a few feet in from the door, watching as Michael followed Mr. Smith to the bedside of an elderly woman. Her left leg was gone from just above the knee, a blood and dirty bandage wrapped around the stump. She cried out softly in her sleep, her head rolling in the pillow with beads of moisture glistening on her forehead.

"She is the worst, I fear," John said. "We've lost far more than we've saved, and Deanne has been lost to fever for two weeks. We amputated the leg in an attempt to save her, but without the proper medications—"

Michael nodded his head and laid his hand on the woman's head, stroking back the matted hair that clung to her wet skin. He set his bag on the floor and found his handheld bioscan. Jace glanced back over his shoulder into the dark night. The sound of running feet drifted through the streets, but they were light—probably a child—and alone.

"I want to try and stabilize her," Michael said, coming to his feet. "If we don't, she won't make it back to Tennessee."

Jace unclipped his short-wave radio from his belt. "Babb."

A click of static preceded the response. "Yes, sir."

"We're going to be here awhile."

His body tensed when the cry of a young boy echoed through the streets outside. "Papa!"

The first time Nick ever saw Earth from Space, the devastating beauty of it had stilled his hands on his glider controls, and quickly earned him a harsh reprimand from his flight trainer. He had been a kid, barely nineteen, and on his first flight to space.

A lot of years, miles, and *life* had happened since that flight. The new awe of space flight quickly wore off, and Nick moved on to bigger, better forms of excitement. Women and Wormholes.

After he thought he lost his wife and son, he lived to fly wormholes. He flew them faster, farther and better than any pilot ever had. Even now. It was as if he could read them, felt their energy like a second skin. The sizzling surge that energized his blood whenever he came out the other side was like nothing he could ever adequately describe to anyone.

Except maybe Jace Quinn.

Jace got it.

So, Jace probably would have understood why Nick pulled back on his boosters and hovered in space when the Umani... or, at least, that's who Nick bet they were... planet came into view. The dark continents lost in giant seas of deep blue, blurred by swirled white cloud masses, were obviously not the same as Earth, but the achingly-close similarity tightened Nick's chest and choked him.

For one brief moment, he let himself fantasize he was fifty-thousand light years away. That the planet beneath him was Earth.

That he was home.

His momentary daydream was broken by the crackle of the radio, and the foreign tongue they apparently didn't get might as well been Greek to him.

"You guys are going to catch on eventually that I don't understand, right?" Nick answered into his radio mouthpiece.

"The sentries will guide you to our capital, where we may meet and speak more easily" came the woman's voice.

If they had women...

Nick shook his head and tried to forget every bad science fiction movie he ever saw as a kid where the aliens were purple with spikes on their heads, or nothing more than reptiles that walked upright. Maybe they just *sounded* male and female. *Could be anything... right?*

They broke the atmosphere and quickly dropped to cruising altitude over one of the northern continents, and as his altimeter readings dropped, the landscape below began to form. Mountain ranges stretched for hundreds of miles, with wide, silver rivers running through. It was day on this side of the planet. Lower and lower they dropped, and small clusters of buildings... or, at least from this altitude, they appeared small, sprang up from the green.

The ships he followed cut through the planet's atmosphere as easily as they had the space beyond. He switched on his atmospheric scanners. The air had a thirty percent higher concentration of oxygen, a moisture saturation rate of ninety-six percent and an ambient temperature of ninety-three degrees Fahrenheit. Gravity was point-nine-four-six-seven of Earth's. All readings were within human-capacity, although the thought of a ninety-three degree day with that kind of air saturation didn't thrill him. Kinda like being on the lake in Maine on a hot, humid August day. The sort of day he spent not doing much of anything at all.

They flew at barely Angels Fifteen, hugging the contours of the geography and Nick wished like hell he could take in some details rather than worry about knocking his glider off the side of a mountain crag. His guides banked hard right, hugging the crest of a particularly high peak, and as the next valley came into view, Nick couldn't help his reaction.

"Holy crap."

A shining city stretched out in the valley beneath them. The buildings looked like steel and malachite, reflecting the sun with each angle and plane. Spires and towers rose in intervals from the lower buildings, with the greatest concentration of buildings in the center of the valley.

Nick flipped on the internal recorder, his eyes never leaving the glimmering city as he flew nearer. "Michael, you're never going to believe this place! It's like that floating city-what

the hell was the name of it—you know, in *The Empire Strikes Back*—ah, hell. You know what I mean.”

The ships decreased their speed, and Nick backed off on his boosters to Mach 0.25. They approached the hovering structure as it floated effortlessly over the city that spread out beneath it. Nick scanned the horizon for heat signatures or any indication of the propulsion systems used to keep the massive edifice in the hair. As they approached, the landing bay doors open to allow them access. Adrenaline pumped hard and hot in his veins, and he reached into the space beside his seat for the Glock that hadn’t been touched in fifty jumps.

As he waited his turn to set down his ship, he slid the pistol into the holster on his thigh.

John bolted to his feet and rounded the foot of the bed as soon as the call for “Papa!” rang out. Michael twisted on the balls of his feet to watch as a young boy, no older than seven or eight years old, ran through the door. John swept the boy into his arms, holding him close as the child wrapped his thin arms around his neck.

“I saw men with weapons,” he cried, his face buried in John’s shoulder.

John sank to his knees so the boy could stand again and be eye-level with him. He ran his hand over the tight, dark curls that sprang from the boy’s head. His eyes were such a deep brown the seemed to melt into his dark skin, and his tattered clothing hung on his thin frame.

“It’s all right, son. These men are here to help us.” The child stayed close to John, but looked skeptically at Michael and Jace. John stood, and the boy wrapped his hands around John’s thigh, the top of his head barely ready his stomach. “Gentlemen, this is my son, Silas.”

Michael stood and walked away from the bed. “Hello, Silas,” he said, keeping his tone low.

Silas turned his face into John’s leg and refused to speak. John laid his hand on Silas’ head, rubbing gently.

“He’s seen a great deal for a boy so young.”

“How many more children are there?” Jace asked.

“Four others. The youngest is barely a year. We found her three days after the attacks, crying beside her dead mother’s body.”

Michael swallowed hard and went back to Deanne. He took from the back an infusion syringe of antibiotics and injected directly into her thigh above the bandaging. For a moment, he contemplated administering Morphine but he worried the pain killer would diminish her body’s willingness to fight until they returned to Tennessee.

“Do you have children, Lieutenant?”

“Yeah.” Michael heard the weight and roughness in Jace’s tone, and knew the sight and thought of the children—those that had survived and the countless more that had died—dug deep into his heart. “She’s just a couple months old,” Jace added.

“Congratulations. In these days, you are blessed to have your family with you.”

Michael looked over his shoulder, and his eyes connected with Jace’s briefly. He checked Deanne’s readings again, standing. “It will be awhile before I know if we can move her. I’ll check on the others.”

John excused himself to take the boy into a connected room, returning a few minutes later. Michael sat on the edge of the littlest patient’s bed, studying the information on his

scanner. John sat on the empty bed across from him, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, watching Michael. He felt the man's stare on him, intent and studying, but continued with his work.

"She's malnourished," he said about the little girl. "Her name is Becky."

"Many here are."

"You've done well, considering the conditions, in caring for these people."

"I only did what had to be done. Which is all any of us can do."

"Were you here visiting when the attacks came?" Michael asked, glancing up from his reader.

"You could say that," he said with a quick grin.

"Silas. Not your biological son."

Another quick grin. "Wha'? You don't see the family resemblance?"

Michael laughed and tapped a note into the handheld. He had no hyper-vitamin shots, so the little girl would have to wait until they got back. She wasn't in danger, just tired and weak. She would be fine. "We have at least two dozen children at the base, either orphaned or separated temporarily from their parents. We're working on getting them back to their families, or finding new ones when needed. The face of the human family has changed drastically in the last few months."

"Nothin' wrong with that. Family is good, however it comes."

Michael looked up, nodding his chin. "I know."

John drew a breath through his nose, glancing toward the door he had just taken Silas through. "I knew his mum. She died in the blast."

"You loved her?"

"No," he said, his eyes distant. "Barely knew her, but she was a fine woman."

"You were good to take him in."

"No. Not good. Call it restitution."

"For all I know, Michael, this could be my last recording."

For the first time in almost three-hundred Earth days, the glider engines idled down and the O2 boosters were completely dormant. Nick found the stillness of the craft unnerving; he had grown so accustomed to the subtle hum that reverberated through the machine even when it hovered in space.

The two black ships that had brought him in sat off his nose at a slight angle toward each other. But as of yet, no one had shown their 'faces' and the ships hadn't opened. Nick worked on disengaging himself from the assortment of medical attachments and appendages it had taken the medical staff an hour and a half to attach. There were tubes in places he didn't like to think about, but he'd have to deal with those later... he hoped.

If he wasn't dead.

Which could still be a very real possibility.

"*We desire to approach your craft. Is this acceptable?*" came the now familiar female voice.

"Yeah, I'm just... taking care of a couple things. Long flight."

A wide door on the opposite side of the hanger split and slid open, and Nick's hands froze half way through the process of ripping off his bio-scanners. He stared out through the canopy shield, squinting for the first glimpse of the aliens.

Wait... wouldn't he be the alien?

Five figures entered the hanger, walking side by side, but the shining black crafts blocked his view. He only knew they walked upright and appeared humanoid... *that was the right word, wasn't it? Humanoid biped something or other?* Nick craned his neck, trying to get a better view as they approached.

They walked fluidly, the long clothing they wore shifting around their legs. A tall male, Nick assumed, walked in the center of the five. Course, they all looked tall. If he had to guess from his currently position, he'd put them all well over six feet tall, with the lead walker closer to six-foot-seven. As they rounded the tail end of the nearest craft, he got his first solid look at them. And he blinked twice to make sure he wasn't seeing things.

They were human.

Well, kind of.

The rich bronze of their skin reminded Nick of Jacob Spotted Horse, a pilot he had flown with on Earth Force, somewhere between dark and light. He couldn't tell what color their hair was, if they had hair, because each of them wore elaborate scarf-type things over their heads to match the colors of their robes. Except for the leader—the man in the middle. His hair was pure white, hanging long, straight and uncovered down his back from his slightly receding hairline. They all had high, sloping foreheads and their bodies were lanky and almost... delicate.

"Well, Michael... I don't see any horns or other bizarre protrusions. I guess that's good, right? Their heads look... *weird...* though. Kinda... big. *They're kinda big.*"

The group of five stared at him with almond shaped eyes from their position beside his ship, and Nick realized he had stopped removing the attachments that kept him in place.

He flipped a switch and the canopy lock released with a sharp hiss. With a hesitant jerk, the hydraulics engaged and lifted the hood, the first brush of fresh air hitting Nick's exposed skin. He fumbled to find the latch on his helmet that would detach it from his suit, and with an audible click, the entire suit shifted away from his body as the airlock released.

As he pulled the helmet from his head, he sucked in deep lungfuls of oxygen-rich air. Breathing regurgitated, recycled, reused air for so long made the cool burst in his throat and lungs feel like a refreshing drink from a mountain stream. His vision swam for a moment, but with the next deep inhale, the fuzziness faded. His scalp tingled beneath the stiff hair that clung to his skin. The air was thick and warm, reminding him how thirsty he was for a long, cold drink.

A real drink... that would be next.

Nick took a few precious seconds to close his eyes as the rich air refreshed him, leaving his head feeling light and heavy at the same moment. He swallowed and looked to the five individuals watching him with curious, dark eyes. Except for the one woman. Assuming women on this planet had the same physical forms. Her eyes were icy blue and startling against the dark hue of her skin.

The leader extending his hand to Nick as he bowed his head to speak in a booming voice that echoed through the hanger bay.

"Ah..." Nick started as the woman stepped forward.

"Our Chancellor extends his welcome to you, Colonel Nick Tanner Earth Force. Welcome to Castaneda. He looks forward to speaking with you, as your craft is of an unknown design. Single pilot crafts aren't often suited for your journey."

"You're telling me..."

Nick balanced his helmet on the control panel and finished removing the final umbilical cords that held him to the cockpit. With the last connection, a red light flashed on the database screen and a countdown began. 71:59:59. With any luck, he'd be back before the clock ran down and the system wiped clean. With any luck, these were the people he came looking for.

With any luck...

"Thanks for the welcome. Nice place you've got here."

He shifted to stand, bracing his hands on the edge of the open canopy hatch, and made it about three inches out of the seat before his legs gave and he fell back down. No matter what kind of muscle stimulators Doc Quinn had in the suit, apparently it hadn't been enough to keep his muscles from approaching total atrophy. Nick cleared his throat and rubbed his hands vigorously up and down his thighs in hopes of waking them up enough to get him out of the glider.

He cleared his throat and looked out to his watchful hosts. "Maybe we could get one thing out of the way real quick? I came a long way, and I'm looking for someone specific. You all wouldn't happen to be the Umani, would you?"

The woman smiled and tilted her head, and Nick was relieved not to see any extended bicuspid teeth or extra rows of razor sharp teeth. Just plain old... teeth. "Yes, we are Umani."

Nick released a heavy breath. One problem down, now he could only hope Victor was the friend Michael believed him to be. "Good. You're just the people I'm looking for."

With shaking arms as they bore most of his weight, Nick managed to stand, his knees wobbling like gelatin. He leaned into the dash, bracing himself with one hand as he ran a hand through his sweat-damp and mussed hair. Spots floated through his vision and he shook his head, the effect like bouncing his brain inside a barrel of ball bearings. His temples throbbed and he pressed the heel of his hand against the side of his head.

"Are you ill? Do you need assistance?"

Nick didn't have a chance to answer. The hanger tilted sharply before everything went black.

Chapter Thirteen

"Nutrition bar?"

Michael opened his eyes and reached for the bar. As he tore it open, Jace crossed his ankles and sat on the floor beside him, leaning back against the wall. It was somewhere around three in the morning and a chilly silence had settled over the remains of Chicago only an hour or so before. The desolate and lost had wandered into the hovels and gutted buildings they called home.

Jace tore open his bar, biting off a chunk. It was like eating honey-coated cardboard with just about as much flavor. They'd brought a small box of the field rations, and all but the one or two each soldier carried, the box was empty. He chewed until his jaw hurt and swallowed with the help of a mouthful of water.

John Smith stood in the open doorway, looking out into the night. From here, Jace saw the tight control and strain in his features and figured he was a haunted man. They all were haunted by something.

"What do you make of him?" he asked Michael, pointing toward Smith with the bitten end of his midnight snack.

"He's dedicated to these people," Michael answered around the food in his cheek.

"Yeah, but..." He shook his head, shifting bend his legs and rest his extended arms on his knees. "There's something *off* about him."

Michael turned his head. "You felt it."

"Weird kind of tingling on the back of your neck?"

Michael nodded.

"Glad it wasn't just me," Jace said with a chuckle as he took another bite. "Reminds me of when I met Beverly Surimoto. She shook my hand, and I swear every hair on my body stood on end." He squinted to watch the man in question. "You suppose he's empathic like her?"

"Ask him."

Jace laughed. "I'm not going to ask him. You ask him."

"I'm not going to ask him."

"Chicken."

Michael finished his bar and crumpled the wrapping, shifting to stuff it in his pocket. The two men sat in silence for several minutes, Michael with his head leaned back on the wall and his eyes closed and Jace listening to the sound of dead silence. His blood chilled every time he looked past the broken windows and missing doors. So much death in one place, it had to be cursed ground.

He thought about the history lessons he had as a kid, about the terrorist attacks on New York City early in the century. Nearly three-thousand people had died that day. Jace wondered if anyone had attempted a death toll from the Areth attacks. He had forced himself to watch the archive films, and it had nearly made him ill. It took all the control he had not to contact his family in Florida, just to know they were alive. They didn't live in any of the cities hit, but his father and grandfather still traveled for the church and they could have been anywhere.

But he didn't dare. What if she found out?

"I will hunt them down and rip their hearts from their chests. I will find those closest and most dear to you and I will take my vengeance out on their souls."

Jace swallowed hard and worked his fingers into the tight knot that sat between his shoulder blades. This morning, he had been itching to get out of camp. Now, he was itching to get home. He followed Michael's lead and rested his head back on the wall, closing his eyes. The heavy weight of sleep pulled at him, letting his restless mind relax a few small degrees.

The floor shook beneath him, crumbling debris from the ceiling overhead jolted him from the edge of his dream, and he was standing before his eyes opened. Another blast hit the building across the street and the heat of the flames flashed across his face through the open window. Chaos erupted in two heartbeats. The screams of the few survivors echoed through the night, mingling with the cries of the children in the building with them.

Jace pushed past the few people who had wandered into their sanctuary for the night, Michael behind him, and joined John Smith at the door. "Speak to me, Babb," Jace shouted into his radio.

"They dropped out of atmosphere right on top of the city, sir!" Babb's voice crackled over the link, muffled by the firing that had to be on top of the hovers.

"Are the hovers cloaked?"

"Yes, sir. As far as I can tell they don't know we're sitting here. But, sir, they're using a bio-reduction beam. Everyone in the city is vulnerable."

"No kidding," Jace mumbled. "Every, get back from the windows and doors!"

Everyone moved but John Smith.

"Give me a gun," he demanded, holding out his hand.

Jace tore his spare handgun from his boot holster and tossed it to John. The sharp whine of a sonic beam filled the air, making Jace's teeth hurt and his ears hum. The building shook and more debris fell down around them.

Eli Kerrigan jogged down the sidewalk to them, pushing in between Jace and John. He dusted ash and debris from his face, panting as he leaned forward with his hands on his knees. "We've got half a dozen foot soldiers moving in from two streets over. Reynolds engaged two blocks down with Kaflan and Yao, but they're determined to get down here. We need to either take them head on or find another way back to the hovers."

"The children..." John said simply.

Jace nodded. A wide blue beam lit up the sky and hit the street outside like a giant spotlight. It lit the ground as bright as mid-day, swinging back and forth. Jace motioned everyone back from the doorway, keeping his gaze on the sway of the beam. A vice squeezed around his chest when a movement in the street caught his eye. One of the survivors, bundled in so many layers Jace didn't know if they were a man or woman, stumbled from the doorway where they had probably been sleeping, their face turned up to the light in the sky.

"Get back!" Jace shouted through the broken window front. "Get back!" The beam caught the person in its light. "No!"

A horrific crackle filled the air, skittering over his skin like static electricity. In a burst of light, the street was empty again, except for a smoking pile of white ash. Jace grabbed a fistful of John's sweater and pulled him back from the doorway.

"Michael, we need to find a way to move her," Jace said, motioning toward Deanne with a jut of his chin.

Michael rose to his feet from his crouched position beside her bed. "She's gone."

A momentary snap of regret hit Jace, but he quickly tamped it down. There would be time to think about the ones lost later. Right now, they needed to get everyone out that they could.

The other patients were helped from their beds by the handful of survivors who still remained in the room, and Jace swept Becky off her bed, balancing her thin, little body against his left hip with his pistol in his right. The blue beam hit the front of the building, filling the doorway and window with light. It flooded half the room and Jace pushed everyone toward the back door. One touch of the light, and they would be reduced to ash.

John lifted Silas, whose cries were nearly lost in the crackling whine of the beam, and they all weaved through the black, shadowed rooms to come out the back side of the building.

"Where do we go?" Jace asked.

John pointed with one hand and took the lead down a narrow alley between buildings the walls were singed and the tight space reeked with the stench of death and waste. Jace looked up, and saw a glimpse of the Areth craft a few hundred feet over the city. It moved slowly, leaving little area untouched. If they were lucky, they could skirt the scan and be at the hovers again before the ship doubled back.

They reached the end of the alley and Jace leaned back against the brick wall, keeping Becky tight against his chest as he eased his head around to scan the street. She whimpered softly, and in the ambient light of the beam, Jace saw the glisten of tears on her cheeks.

"It's okay, sweetheart," he whispered against her hair. "Just a few more minutes, 'kay?"

She nodded and whimpered, her arms circling his neck. She was so tiny and frail. Jace figured she didn't weigh much more than Jamie, and Becky was years older. He motioned for one of the men to come forward, and handed Becky to him.

"Keep close to the walls," he instructed. "Move fast. You'll be moving away from the beam, but don't drag your ass getting them to the—" He stopped mid-sentence when a sound down the empty street snapped his attention around again. "Damn."

Six Areth, long-range pulse charge rifles in their hands, jogged down the street toward them. With a quick jerk of his hand, Jace ushered everyone back down the alley. He handed Becky off to one of his men and moved toward Michael.

"Take everyone behind these buildings and head south. Keep as close to the walls as possible and *out* of sight."

"What are you doing?"

"I'll keep them held off."

"No."

Jace pushed the others past him, urging them to move as quickly as possible away from the approaching Areth. "I don't have time to debate this, Michael."

Michael grabbed the front of his shirt and before Jace could even process the attack, his back slammed against the brick wall and knocked the air out of him. "What the hell are you doing?" he hissed, maintaining enough control to keep himself from shouting.

"I *promised* her I'd bring you home."

Jace pushed back, shoving Michael a few feet away. They stared at each other, adrenaline pumping hard and hot in Jace's blood. He swallowed against the bitter tang and shook his head. "Don't do this right now."

"I'm not leaving."

The sound of rapid footfalls echoed down the street and Jace grabbed a fistful of Michael's sleeve, hauling him with him down the alley to duck into a blown out doorway. Five of the Areth jogged past, the sixth pausing at the end of the alley. He spoke into a communication device that ran along his cheek to his ear and walked slowly into the darkness of the alley, his pulse charge weapon held at the ready. The two men stood together, watching as he approached. He wore a helmet, a dark visor covering half his face with a flashing red light in the vicinity of his right ear.

He moved closer and they pushed further back into the doorway, using a scorched trash receptacle as additional coverage. When the Areth was within fifteen feet, Jace's radio clicked.

"We're taking heavy fire! Mallet is down!"

The Areth spun to the sound, and simultaneously both men raised their weapons snapping off one shot each. Blue lightning engulfed him and he arched, his weapon falling to the pavement as he screamed.

"They're going to be down our throats in thirty seconds," Jace said, standing over the Areth, nudging him with the toe of his boot.

"Then let's go."

This time, Jace didn't argue about who would go and who would stay, jogging in the direction the others had gone with Michael beside him. The echo of pulse blasts, dozens in quick succession on top of each other, echoed to them through the streets. They found Eli and the others, huddled with the survivors they had gathered along the way, behind another burned out building. The hovers were one more block over, but the Areth had either doubled back or had brought reinforcements. Blue-white balls of pure energy volleyed back and forth across the space between them, tearing chunks of brick and mortar off the crumbling buildings to rain down on them.

Becky cried loudly now, curled in a tight ball on the ground. John stood near her, Silas protected by his body, as he returned enemy fire. Jace slammed his back against the wall, crouching down to catch his breath. He clicked his radio.

"Babb, what's your status."

Only silence answered him. He double clicked the mic. "Babb!" *Damn it.*

"Sir, we need to move. This position can't be held."

"I know that!" Jace snapped, scanning the area. They were beside what had once been a parking facility for personal hovers. Hundreds of burned out husks lined the open floors that rose above them.

Jace pushed away from the wall, running close to the ground. He heard Michael's footfalls behind him but didn't stop to argue. Together they moved from pile of junk to crumbled wall to edge further and further away from the fighting. With the cover of darkness, they crossed the street and entered the lower level of the garage. Wordless, they moved upward and back toward the fighting, putting them high and over the enemy.

With a nod at Michael, they both leveled their weapons and fired at will. Two of the Areth were down before they realized where the shots originated. The alley lit up with the deadly bio-reduction beam as it moved along in its deadly search.

"Get down! Get back!" they shouted down to their comrades.

Jace and Michael covered their retreat with more blasts, and Jace let a small ounce of relief hit him as he watched them all slip away and continue their journey to the hovers. Then he lunged forward, practically plunging over the edge into the street below.

"No!"

Reynolds followed the pack, Becky in his arms, and in one heart wrenching moment both of them were trapped in the blue light. Reynolds looked up, and fell to his knees, hiding Becky's face in his chest two seconds before the sickening crackle and whine of the genocide machine rang out and they disappeared.

"No!" Jace shouted again.

Jamie! Jamie!

Michael yanked him back from the edge and they both slammed into the black shell of a hover. Jace realized tears burned his eyes and he couldn't breathe, his chest squeezing in an unseen vice.

"I will hunt them down and rip their hearts from their chests. I will find those closest and most dear to you and I will take my vengeance out on their souls."

Michael pulled at him, calling his name until he snapped out of the nightmare flash. "Come on, Jace. Come on!"

They ran until his lungs burned. The air in the garage was thick with ash and dust that their boots kicked up as they went. Death was thick in the air and it filled his chest, suffocating him, but he kept going. They found the hovers just as the last two survivors were dragged inside. A smoldering pile of ash marred the streets just feet away and Jace's gut instinctively knew it was Babb, protecting the cloaked ships until the end. The beam would have found him, but it wasn't designed to find a cloaked ship.

The other hover was already humming, ready to blast into the night. The door closed behind them and both Michael and Jace moved to the cockpit, in unison bringing the craft to light.

"Go! Go! Go!" came over the radio.

Seconds later, both Phoenix hovers blasted into the night, the engines pressed to maximum. They headed west, avoiding the most direct path home just in case the Areth somehow followed.

Jace stared into the night as the landscape flashed by them at nearly one-hundred miles an hour. He saw none of it, only the terrified face of little Becky the moment before the Areth snuffed out her life like garbage in an incinerator. She was someone's daughter. Someone loved her once. They were gone. Now, she was gone.

He swallowed hard against the choking lump in his throat.

Michael navigated the ship, setting in their evasive maneuvers route, and once the long-range sensors indicated no one trailed them and the path was smooth sailing, he released the controls and leaned back.

Jace sat silent beside him, had been since they left. Blood ran down his face from a cut over his eye and a dark bruise had already begun to form on his cheek. Michael assumed he didn't even realize he was crying, trails of moisture streaking the ash and soot on his cheeks.

He didn't say anything, leaving Jace to his silent demons and the battle warring in his heart. He only hoped that the events of the night didn't shove Jace deeper into his self-inflicted dungeon. Lilly couldn't take much more.

"How long until we get home?" Jace asked after nearly an hour of silence, his voice cracked and rough.

Michael glanced at the readouts on the dash. "We've doubled back. Less than two hours."

Jace nodded, blinking rapidly. "How many did we lose?"

"Three of ours and fifteen survivors, total. We brought out more than we lost."

He nodded again. Another forty-five minutes passed before Jace spoke again.

"Do you think she'll forgive me?"

Michael looked across the cockpit to Jace Quinn. "She'd say there's nothing to forgive."

A small, quick smile jerked Jace's lips. "Yeah, she would."

"She will, though. She'll forgive you. Just ask."

Jace sucked in a shaky breath and wiped at his nose with a dirty hand. "I made myself forget her. It killed me, but I made myself do it."

Michael remained quiet, letting him say whatever he needed to say in whatever way he needed to say it.

"She... that sadistic bitch... she kept taunting me with threats that she'd find Lilly. She'd find whoever I loved, whoever I cared about. Every time it was a new form of hell she planned on doling out. I was afraid. Afraid that I'd crack, I'd somehow give her something and she'd find Lilly."

"You didn't."

"No." Jace snapped his head around to look hard at Michael. "She tried to overwrite my brain. Tried to make me Areth. At least half a dozen times. The pain—the pain was—I can't even explain."

"You don't need to."

Jace winced, slowly nodding his head as he looked back out the window. "I'd know if it worked, right? I'd know if there were an Areth floating around in my head somehow, right?"

"No, you wouldn't know because you wouldn't be you."

Jace swallowed. "So, how do you know I'm me?"

"We just know."

"Okay." He kept nodding, affirming himself. "Okay."

Michael glanced at the clock on the dash. "We'll be home in an hour." He flipped on the long-range radio and relayed their position and ETA as Jace Quinn broke through the final shackles that had kept him prisoner.

Chapter Fourteen

Lilly collapsed on the small couch in her office, exhausting pulling at her with one-hundred pound lead weights. She tossed her handheld interface on the cushion beside her stretched her legs out to ease the steady throb in her heels. Almost afraid to look, she raised her arm and stared at the watch on her wrist until the face came into focus. Not quite six in the morning.

She hadn't pulled an all-nighter like this one in years. Not since the early part of her residency. The return of the soldiers to base-minus the three that had died in the fight-with the former inhabitants of the Chicago ruins had been a surprise. Following so close on the heels of last night's tragedy, exhausted was a painfully inadequate word.

Lilly closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of the couch. Emotions battled in her chest for dominance. The loss and pain she saw in the last few hours tore at her heart and left her feeling raw and beaten. The devastation reaped on the innocent survivors angered her, no, *infuriated* her. The sadness and soul-stripping loneliness she saw in the eyes of the children choked her. And mingled with it all was relief.

Jace came home.

Michael promised he would bring Jace home again, and he did.

Lilly had only seen him for a few moments in the chaos that had erupted during their arrival back on the base. She met his gaze across the room, and released a shuddered breath knowing he was okay. And then she was lost in bloody bandages, infusion syringes and electrolyte IV's.

The cushions of the couch shifted beside her, and Lilly forced her eyes open. She tried to smile as her tired eyes brought Jace's face into focus. He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her temple.

"You look exhausted."

"I *am* exhausted," she said, just the act of speaking a task. She stared at him, partially because she was too tired to look away. Two thin, white strips of bandage covered a gash over his left eye and a bruise darkened his cheekbone. Lilly raised her hand and brushed her fingers over the shadow, scowling. "You're hurt."

Jace wrapped his hand around her wrist and turned his lips into her palm, kissing her. Despite her fatigue, a pleasant shiver warmed her blood and danced up her arm. He closed his eyes, holding her hand against his cheek, and drew a slow breath. When he looked at her again, her breath caught at the sheen in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "Darlin, I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"For not coming home. For not being here when you needed me. For not being here when Jamie was born. For —"

She pressed finger over his lips, shaking her head. "Stop."

"I'm sorry," he continued, his lips moving against her finger. "That I —"

He couldn't finish, turning away. But not before Lilly saw the tears fall down his cheeks. "Jace," she said softly. When he didn't look at her, she touched his chin and turned him back. "I love you."

Holding her gaze, Jace shifted to press his knee into the cushion beside her and bracketed his arms on either side of her. Lilly held her breath, all traces of exhaustion gone, as her husband leaned in and covered her mouth with his own. He stayed there, still and close, and Lilly reveled in the missed joy of her husband's kiss.

Then his hands cupped her face and his mouth opened, his tongue touching her lips. She opened for him and moaned softly as he deepened the kiss and stole her breath. Lilly curled her fingers into the sleeves of his shirt, daring him not to leave her. She gasped against his mouth when he slid an arm behind her shoulders and another behind her knees, sweeping her off the couch as he stood.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking you home," he said, his voice rough and heavy. It curled in her stomach, sweet tendrils of arousal stretching out to vanquish any thought of sleep.

He carried her out of the office, and she helped by turning the knob for the infirmary door leading outside. The first faint sign of dawn peeked over the ridge, giving the base an ethereal, soft glow. Fog hovered near the ground.

Jace smiled and paused in his stride up the hill to kiss her again. He took the two steps onto their porch and set her on her feet, putting her back against the wall as he kissed her deep. Lilly hung on, combing her fingers into his hair as his hands skimmed her sides and hips, jerking her hard against him. She moaned, a carnal-almost primitive-pleasure filling her when she felt just how much he wanted her. His mouth moved from her lips to her throat, and her eyelids fluttered at the spike of pleasure that shot straight to her center.

"Who has Jamie?" he asked against her skin.

"Ummmmmm..." She tried to think, but her higher brain functions were lost to the need quickly overwhelming her. "Sh-she's with B-Beverly and Victor..." she managed to say.

"Good."

He yanked the door open and pulled her inside. As soon as the door closed, he pulled her sweater over her head with Lilly barely having enough time to raise her arms. With the sweater tossed across the room, his hands covered her breasts, kneading and caressing through her bra. Lilly's head fell back and her hand shot out to brace herself against the wall. Her body was so hungry for his touch... so needful... pulsing with an energy it hadn't felt in so long.

Jace pressed his face into the curve of her shoulder, his lips and tongue dancing over her skin. "Hang on," he said roughly, and before she could react, he lifted her off the ground and wrapped her legs around his waist.

Lilly dug her fingertips into his shoulders as he carried her up the stairs and kicked open the door of their bedroom. The bed creaked and bounced when he flopped them both down, his delicious weight pressing her into the mattress. They were both in a fury, pulling at clothing and grunting with annoyance when the barriers between them didn't disappear fast enough. Finally, Jace pulled her against him and skin met skin.

"Jace!" She screamed out his name, desperation taking over need.

She wrapped her legs around him again, digging her heels into the small of his back and he rolled on top of her, bearing his weight on his arms as he looked down at her. With their eyes locked, and her body humming so hard she wondered why he couldn't hear it, her husband filled her and the cry that erupted from her throat was born of pure ecstasy.

Jace curled his hands beneath her back, his fingers cupping her shoulders and drove himself inside her again and again. The rhythm and force had the headboard slamming against the wall and her breasts bounced with each thrust. Heat flushed her skin, and cold fire coiled where they joined. Jace bent his head and held his face against her shoulder, her name mingling with his soft groans.

A tension bomb built in her center, pulling in tighter and tighter each time he buried himself inside. Her world spun and went black, her own heartbeat pounding in her ears. Jace tipped his head back, a trail of sweat sliding from his temple, as his rhythm shattered and sped up again. A cataclysm of ecstasy drowned her as her orgasm shook her body. Her legs tightened around him as everything inside her surged and gripped Jace. He drove himself inside again, deeper and harder than before, and cried out her name as his own release overtook him.

The aged and abused bed frame creaked as Jace slumped beside her, his rasping breath warm against her shoulder. Lilly stared at the ceiling, enjoying the small electrified jolts that coursed through her body in the wake of her orgasm. Before she realized it bubbled inside her, a soft laugh escaped and she closed her eyes against the tears in her eyes.

Jace rolled against her, his heavy arm draping across her stomach as he kissed her shoulder. "Laughing usually isn't the reaction I aim for." His voice was low and rough, dancing in small sparks over her skin.

Lilly turned into his chest, burying her face against his warm skin. She felt the solid beat of his heart against her cheek and held on tighter. "I've missed you."

His solid, strong and painfully missed hands slid over her back and he rubbed his stubbled cheek against her hair. "I'm home now." His embrace tightened and she held on as tight as possible. "I'm home."

Michael stood beside the small crib that had been set up in the corner of what had been Amber's room. Her bed was empty now, the only inhabitant the tiny little girl sleeping peacefully despite the pandemonium that had taken over the infirmary just hours before.

She was beautiful with a slight fuzz of light brown hair covering her tiny head and bright red lips that formed a heart whenever she suckled instinctively in her sleep. Weighing in at barely six and a half pounds, she looked so delicate and breakable.

He hadn't heard about Amber until after the chaos had died down and most of the new Tennessee Base residents had been tended to or sent to bed. Then, with tears in her eyes, Amanda had told him Amber was gone. She had tried to make it through the delivery, and in the end Lilly had opted for a forced surgery birth. It was too much for Amber's weak and failing body, and she had slipped away before her daughter's first cries broke the night.

Michael cupped his hand over the top of the child's head, carefully stroking the downy hair. She drew a shuddered breath, but didn't wake up. He swallowed hard against the lump that choked him and pushed his hands into his pockets. Another orphan... another life shattered by the Areth. Anger curled in his chest like smoke from a fire, but he quickly tamped it down. He found things tended to fly across the room when he didn't keep himself in a tight rein. Although he had mastered a certain level of control on his telekinesis, much of it was still a mystery to him.

The door opened, and Amanda came in looking as exhausted as he felt. She smiled softly and walked to his side to look down at the newborn. "I'm going to catch some sleep in here before the day gets crazy again," she whispered. "I'll be right here if she needs anything."

"Sleep as long as you need. I'll be back in a couple hours."

"You need rest, too."

"We all do."

Amanda laid her hand on his arm and squeezed gently before moving to the newly-made bed and lying down. With one final glance at Amber's baby, he walked to the door with heavy feet. He stopped, the door partially open, to look back at Amanda.

"Did Amber give her a name?"

Amanda raised her head from the pillow. "No. She never found out if she had a boy or a girl."

Michael nodded and stepped into the hall, closing the door behind him. He walked with light steps through the infirmary, peeking through various doors on all the new inhabitants. For tonight, everyone slept somewhere in the infirmary and housing would be determined for those who were well enough some time later in the day. Michael stopped at the last door, and slowly opened it to look inside.

John Smith was on the floor, a pillow curled beneath his head and a blanket draped over both him and his son. Michael hadn't figured the man out yet, but whoever he was and whatever it was about him that set him apart, Michael respected him. He had worked tirelessly to help the survivors of the attacks. He had committed himself to the care of a boy he barely knew, and called the boy his son. As he had said before all hell had erupted in Chicago; the face of the family had changed. John Smith was proof of that.

Michael pulled the door closed. He knew that most didn't understand the relationship Michael had with Caitlin, and knew that many assumed they both betrayed his father in his absence. To those people, Michael refused to offer an explanation. Partially because he wasn't sure he could. He only knew that Caitlin was an inseparable part of his life, and that she loved his father very much. Those two things voided out whatever others thought.

He left the infirmary and paused on the porch to draw in a slow, deep breath. The fresh dew of morning hung heavy in the air, mingled with the sweet smell of autumn and earth. Silence sat on the base like a blanket, and he walked carefully up the path to his home, trying not to disturb the peace. Michael smiled at the crunch of dried pine needles beneath his feet as he stepped onto their porch and gingerly opened the door.

The downstairs was silent, the scent of burning wood pleasantly heavy in the air. He paused at the small potbelly stove in the front room to put another log on the low-burning flame. The house would be warm when Caitlin got up. A deep, draining yawn pulled at him as he climbed the stairs and his eyelids grew heavy in anticipation of sleep. He slipped off his shoes, and reached for the hem of his shirt, then stopped. Holding his breath, Michael listened again.

Crying.

In his stocking feet, Michael went back into the hall and went straight to Caitlin's door. Without knocking, he eased it open. She was in her bed, sleeping close to one edge with her

back to the door. Her shoulders shook with the cries she had tried to muffle. Dog lay beside her and raised his head when Michael stepped in, whining his distress.

"Caitlin..." Michael said softly.

Her cries faltered, but just as quickly overtook her again. Michael crossed the space and moved to her bedside, crouching down to see her face. Tears had long since soaked the pillowcase and she curled in on herself beneath the covers, the grief palpable in the air around her.

Michael moved to his knees and reached out to stroke her damp hair back from her cheek. She didn't open her eyes, didn't react, too far lost in whatever had torn her heart out and broken it.

He didn't need to ask. He knew what ripped her apart.

Not knowing what else to do, he curled his hand around hers. At first, her hand remained limp in his, then a jagged sob shook her body and her fingers tightened.

He stayed there, holding her hand and stroking her hair until the rough cries eased and she slipped into an exhausted sleep.

"Promise me you'll come back to me," she said softly, her voice almost lost in the small space between them. "Michael and I need you."

He held her closer, his hand cupping the back of her head to hold her against the curve of his neck. One hot tear escaped to seal the contact between her cheek and his shoulder.

"I promise you...that I won't give up."

Nick rolled onto his right side, sliding his palm across the cool sheets, seeking. His hand found nothing, and with a low moan he pushed up from the pillow and opened his eyes. The bed was empty, the room dark.

"Lights," he mumbled, "Dim." Nothing changed, and he flopped onto his back. "Lights," he said again, firmer this time. Nothing changed.

The cold rush of realization hit him as his mind cleared from sleep, and he sat up. Every muscle in his body tensed and he reached blindly for a weapon his logical mind knew he wouldn't find. He quickly scanned the large room, his eyes adjusting to the dim glow coming from recessed panels in the walls.

He was alone.

Somehow, that didn't make him feel any better.

Nick slid from the bed to stand on legs that felt much stronger than the last time he tried to stand. "Holy crap!" he cursed, yanking the light blanket off the bed to wrap around his bare waist.

A panel door slid open with a whoosh on the other side of the room, and Nick jerked around with one hand firmly gripping the edge of the blanket.

"Geez, lady. Ever heard of knocking?"

The tall, blue-eyed woman he remembered from the hanger bay stepped further into the room, bowing her head. At least, he thought she was the same woman. For all he knew, they all looked alike.

"My apologies, Colonel Nick Tanner. Your chamber's life scanners indicated you had awoken and I wished to speak with you as soon as possible."

She spoke, in the language he didn't understand, and they immediately brightened to a daylight level. Nick glanced down at his bare torso and tugged the blanket a little higher above his waist.

He held up a single finger. "Okay, one... It's Nick. Just Nick. And two..." He raised a second. "Could I get some clothes?"

She smiled, dipping her head in a slow nod. "Of course, Nick. I will acquire suitable clothing and return shortly."

The door behind her opened before she turned, and she disappeared into the hallway behind. Nick tried to get a quick glance, but saw nothing but white walls before the door closed again. He grimaced, taking the opportunity to adjust the blanket again. Maybe this was some twisted way of keeping him put... keep him naked. Campy clips from half a dozen old sci-fi films, with prisoners dressed in skimpy silver loincloths, assaulted him and he shook his head.

"I'm not wearing a silver loincloth," he mumbled as he stepped away from the bed.

For all intents and purposes, the room looked relatively normal. *Earth* kind of normal. The large bed he had slept in sat against one wall, and looked like a pretty normal bed other than the fact that it was wider at the top by a few inches. Glowing orbs extended from the wall over it, offering another source of light. The floor was hard, but he couldn't decide if it was metal or wood or some other material. Either way, it was warm beneath his bare feet.

Some type of tall cabinet sat against the adjacent wall, and other than a wide-seated chair in a silver-lavender color, there was no other furniture in the room. One wall was open with a rounded arc that spread a good twelve feet at the widest, leading into an adjoining room. With a quick glance at the sliding door, Nick shuffled across the space. Beyond the arc was a sitting room of some sort with long cushioned seats and large bluish-purple plants in glimmering white pots in each corner. One entire wall was a glass surface, the landscape outside dark.

"Well, if I'm a prisoner, I'm a well-kept prisoner..." he said to the empty room.

He heard the sound of the panel door again, and returned to the bedroom. The woman stood at the foot of the bed, a pile of clothing already on the rumpled mattress. She smiled as he walked cautiously toward her.

"You have no reason for concern, Nick. The people of Castaneda welcome you."

"Castaneda... is that the name of this planet?"

"No. Castaneda is our sovereignty. This planet is known as Raxo."

Nick nodded, remembering now that she had said something like that before... before whatever the hell happened when he landed.

"Our physicians state you suffered from great exhaustion," she said, taking a step toward him. He had to admit to himself that it was odd to look a woman straight in the eye. She was as tall as him, if not a fraction of an inch taller. "Your body was weak from your journey, and lacking in proper nutrition and revitalization. Your physiology has adapted to the atmosphere and air of your craft, which made it difficult for you to become accustomed to our environment quickly. Were your engines damaged?"

Nick stared at her, trying to process the whole set up. It was just too... *weird*. He never actually considered what he might find when he got here, but *this* wasn't it.

"No. It was just a long trip."

She tilted her head, and although her expressions were hard to read, he thought he saw confusion. *Yeah, join the club, lady.* "Chancellor Durin is anxious to know of your journey and how you came back to Raxo."

"Back to Raxo..." he said, trailing off. A low thumping that had sat at the back of his skull when he first woke up was working its way to a full-blown pounding. Nick shook his head, raising a hand. "Okay, first things *first*. How is it that I've traveled forty-nine *thousand* miles across space and yet, you speak *English*?"

"You mean *Altenglischt*? Although it is the language of diplomacy, not many on Raxo speak it. I'm sure, as it must be for your people. Only the scholars and linguists bother to learn the language of their neighbors."

"Which are you?" he said, hitching his chin toward her.

She smiled again. Her smile was calm and friendly, and he was doing his damndest to take her at face value. But this was just... *weird*.

"I am a linguist, an interpreter for Chancellor Durin. I am known as Annora Diehl."

Nick closed his eyes and shook his head, setting his free hand at his waist. He drew a sharp breath through his nose and huffed it out before looking at her again. She still watched him with her pale blue eyes, like ice, and shallow lines crossed her high forehead.

"You are confused. And in turn, so am I. Nick, you speak as if you knew not what you would find. Is this your first visitation to Raxo?"

"Well, yeah... but I didn't exactly know what I'd find. I was expecting... damn it." He clenched his teeth and waved his hand across the room, encompassing her with it. "I don't know *what* I was expecting, but I *wasn't* expecting to find another *Earth*."

Her eyes widened and she gasped, taking a step back. "Earth?"

Nick nodded. He thought momentarily about reaching to steady her, but decided it wasn't worth the risk if touching or something was taboo. "It's where I came from. My planet."

"You are not Areth?"

"Hell, no!"

"You are from Earth?" she asked again.

"Yeah. You know it?"

Her eyes filled with tears, and before Nick could react, she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into an intense hug. He struggled to keep his blanket in place as she pulled back, her hands on his arms.

"I must go immediately and inform Chancellor Durin. We will leave for Rome immediately. The Council of Seven must know," she declared as she bundle her skirt in her hands as headed for the door.

"Hang on. What'd I say?" Nick stopped short. "Did you say *Rome*?"

But she was already gone, the door sliding closed behind her.

Chapter Fifteen

Jace didn't know how long he watched her sleep. He knew the sun had come up and slowly crept its way over the bed until it lit her face and brought a sleepy smile to her lips. The actually time, in hours and minutes, was unimportant.

He had finally woken up.

And laying there beside her, studying the relaxed expression on her face and how peaceful she looked in sleep, he wondered what the hell had taken him so long. He had been given a gift thousands of people all over the globe would give the rest of their lives for... a second chance. A few more hours with the ones they loved, the touch of a woman, the glimmer in their eyes when they looked at you, the soft cry of a baby.

He slid his hand beneath the blanket and found the warm skin of her stomach, soft and smooth. Jace caressed her, studying the new shape of her body. It wasn't so different that he didn't know her as *his Lilly*, but the birth of their baby had given her more curves and softness. She was more beautiful to him than she had ever been.

And he had wasted weeks... weeks he should never have gotten back.

She drew a long breath in through her nose and arched her back off the mattress as she stretched. Jace shifted closer, draping his arm across her waist. As her eyes fluttered open, he leaned in and covered her mouth for a kiss. Her arms circled his shoulders and she rolled toward them, aligning their bodies from chest to knee.

"Good morning, darlin'," he said, stroking her hair back from her cheek with his fingertips.

Lilly nuzzled her nose against his chest, sending powerful messages south like tiny bolts of lightning. She pursed her lips and kissed his skin. "Good morning."

"How long do we have until we need to get Jamie?" He spoke against the curve of her shoulder, running his tongue along her skin.

She shuddered and sighed, her hands pressing harder into his back. "We have time."

Jace rolled them together, her legs slipping around his hips as he settled against her. He rested his elbows on the bed, bracketing her shoulders. Holding her gaze, Jace slid inside her and her breath hitched as her eyelids fluttered. Last night had been a culmination of months of separation, a night that should have happened weeks before. It had consumed them and driven them to a frenzy. But now, he wanted to enjoy his wife.

He slid his hands down her naked sides, cupping his palm around her hips to pull her closer. Lilly's moan shimmied through her and into him, sparking every nerve in his body. Slowly, memorizing every beat of her heart and every breath that brushed her breasts against him, he moved inside her. He bowed his neck, resting his forehead on the pillow by her cheek, and let the waves of ecstasy drown him. Lilly whispered his name, holding him close. Her breath caught rapidly, and because he knew her and knew her body, he knew her orgasm was close. His own pounded and twisted in him, and he fought to keep it in check, wanting to live the moment when she seized around him.

"Jace," she gasped. "Oh, God. Jace!"

Lilly arched beneath him, using her legs as leverage to change the angle and hold him inside. He pushed deep, holding his breath as her release shook her and she groaned deep in

the back of her throat. Only when he felt the tremors subside did he dare move again, quickly driving himself over the edge. He came inside her, feeling like it tore his soul from his body. Jace collapsed and rested his head on her full breasts as they both struggled to breathe normally again.

The infirmary was already full of activity when Michael stepped through the front door the next morning. Half a dozen men and women sat on the floor and various pieces of furniture in the front hallway, eating breakfast. They had washed and been given clean clothes, Michael barely recognized them. Each one looked up as he came in, and many smiled.

The echo of an infant's cry carried down the hall, and Michael followed the sound. He found Amanda in the room that had been Amber's, trying to cajole and feed a screaming newborn. John Smith, also in clean jeans and a sweater, stood over her with a strained expression as he obviously attempted to offer some help. Silas sat on the floor a few feet away, playing with some blocks and apparently oblivious to the baby's discomfort.

"What's wrong?"

Amanda looked up, offering a plaintive grin as she bounced the baby. "She's miserable, that's what's wrong."

"Poppet's got a set of lungs, and we right well know it," John said with a chuckle.

"Can I try?"

Amanda stood and slid the baby into Michael's arms without an argument. "Be. My. Guest."

Instead of cradling her the way Amanda had, Michael switched the little bundle of fury to his shoulder, laying her cheek near his. He walked away from John and Amanda to the nearest window, stroking the back of her downy head as he added a small bounce to each step.

"You're making a lot of noise for a little thing," he said softly against her cheek. "Wouldn't you rather have some breakfast?"

Her last wail ended mid-hiccup and her flailing fists bounced off his shoulder. Michael rubbed his cheek against her tear-dampened skin and looked out into the bright morning. The leaves on the mountainside had changed from bright green to a palate of oranges, reds and yellows mingled with the verdant pines and fir trees. He stroked his hand over her back, slowly circling over the tiny little pearls of her spine.

"Shush, now." He continued to sway, rubbing his cheek against her hair and rubbing her back.

She drew one last shuddered breath before turning her face into his and he felt the eager seeking of her mouth for anything to suckle. He moved away from the window to go back to the rocker and saw Caitlin standing beside it. Her gaze shifted from him to the baby and back to him, smiling.

"Wow," she said, almost reverently. "She must love you best."

Something warm and sweet, like smooth honey, spread out from his chest and tightened his throat. Michael sat down, shifting the little girl into the bend of his arm. She swayed her head, lips parted, seeking breakfast. He held out his hand and John gave him the bottle he had been holding for Amanda. As soon as the nipple touched her lips, she latched on and sucked loudly.

Amanda said she needed to check on some things and ducked from the room, leaving Michael with Caitlin and John. He rocked the chair slowly, watching the baby as she ate her breakfast. Silas' tower of blocks tumbled, and it snapped Michael from the trance he had slipped into and he looked up.

"Caitlin, this is John Smith and his son, Silas," Michael said, tilting his head toward John. "John, this is Doctor Caitlin Montgomery."

"Pleasure to meet you, Doctor."

He took Caitlin's hand, holding it for a moment rather than the typical 'shake'. Michael watched her face, waiting to see if he saw any reaction from her. Did she have the same odd response to John that he and Jace had? But he saw nothing change. John dropped her hand and crossed his arms over his chest.

"She's a precious little bit, isn't she?" John said, looking down at the baby. "Wha' happened to her mum?"

"Amber died giving birth," Caitlin answered. "She was sick through most of the pregnancy, but there was nothing we could do for her."

"Why not?"

"That is a very long story."

"Well, I *am* a very busy man," he said, with an arch of his eyebrows and a tilt of his head. "My agenda is quite full, but I don't mind makin' time."

Caitlin laughed, and Michael smiled at the sound. It had been a long time since he saw a true, genuine smile on her face. She offered a brief history of Amber, and the others who were rescued from New Mexico. Michael noticed she was careful not to specifically point out that he had been among them. He preferred it that way, choosing to avoid the usual string of questions and strange stares that accompanied the realization of his origins. He listened, watching as the baby's eyelids slid heavily over her eyes. Popping the bottle from her mouth, he shifted her to his shoulder and worked a burp from her before she drifted away to sleep completely.

"You have no idea what was done to her?" he asked when Caitlin was done, his expression pinched and strained.

"No, unfortunately. The medical records that were retrieved with the evacuees were lost when our other base was attacked by the Areth at the same time they attacked cities like Chicago."

"We know very little of their actual intentions," Michael added, rocking slowly with the baby on his chest, the top of her head tucked beneath his chin. "Genetic manipulation on a cellular level. They took the genetic screening process that had been introduced to the public and took it one-hundred steps further. They attempted DNA filtering both prior to and post conception, and even post birth."

"How is that possible?"

"It's not," Caitlin said with a sigh. "The one case we know of that the process was attempted on is now dead. His body was so mutilated and deformed, it was a miracle he lived at all. He was in constant pain and had the mind of a child. Do you have a medical background, Mr. Smith?"

He nodded, but his gaze was distant as he looked past both of them to some indiscernible point. He seemed to shake it off, turning to Caitlin. "Basic, really. Nothing near your training, I assume."

"What do you do? Or, what *did* you do," Michael corrected.

"A little bit of everything."

Silas stood from his blocks and ran to them, tugging on the edge of John's sweater. "Papa, I'm hungry."

"I'll take you both to Command Hall. I haven't had breakfast yet, myself."

"I left you a muffin."

Caitlin met his gaze, a small smile nudging her lips. "I saw it. Thank you. I wasn't hungry when I woke up." Michael nodded, absently rubbing his hand in small circles on the baby's back. "I'll be back in a little while." She leaned over and squeezed Michael's hand before tilting her head toward the door and leading John and Silas out of the room.

Minutes later, Amanda stuck her head in the door. "Do you need me to take her?"

Michael shook his head, glancing down at the tiny little human asleep on his chest, her bright red lips parted as she snored softly. "No. We're doing just fine."

"The leaders of the Seven Sovereignities of Raxo are sojourning in Rome tomorrow at sunset. They are most anxious to share council with you."

Annora set the tray she carried down on the small table in the corner of Nick's chambers. Nick finished running his fingers through his damp hair and walked across the floor in his bare feet. The shoes she had brought him were too small, but the clothes were simple and comfortable, if not too long in the arms and legs. Cuffs that dragged on the floor and sleeves that kept slipping past his wrists weren't his usual problem when it came to a good fit.

When she returned from her startled flight, she had brought with her another set of clothing, but Nick preferred the first set. She had insisted that a guest of his exalted status should wear finer robes. For a guy that preferred jeans and flannel, puffed up robes of heavy blue fabric with golden thread wasn't cutting it.

"Seven Sovereignities... is that like seven different countries?"

"Yes. We have become a united world since the Dynasty Wars. Each sovereign is separate from the other, but we have found a balance of peace in the Council of Seven: Castaneda, Rome, Eire, Giz'Karnak, Edzna, Siamalia and Bagdaghir."

Nick shook his head as he sat in one of the empty chairs at the table. The tray she had set down was draped with a white napkin, but the smells that wafted up to him made his stomach clench and growl. It had been *way* too long since he'd eaten real food.

With fingers that were obviously longer and more delicate than most human hands, Annora pinched the center of the fabric. Beneath was a triangular plate laden with food. Round, white balls with a rice-like texture filled one-third of the triangle, with a buttery-yellow sauce poured over them. Another third held small, brown chunks that looked suspiciously like the marinated steak tips Nick's mother used to make. The last section had round slices of *something* in mixed colors of yellow, orange and green. A frosted-blue cup sat at the peak of the triangle and a tined utensil paralleled the angle of the plate.

"We knew not what forms of nourishment you would prefer. This is my favorite meal. I hope it is to your liking."

Nick picked up the fork-like-thingie and jabbed the meat-looking chunks. He had to admit, everything *looked* appetizing. Of course, he had just spent months flying through space with all his meals coming from a tube in his arm. About then, his grandmother's liver and onions special would look good. Even with the Brussels sprouts.

"What is it?" he asked, trying to sniff the food without looking like a stupid ass. She started to answer, but he shook his head. "You know what? Don't tell me. I might be better off not knowing."

With one final, wary pause, Nick popped the food in his mouth. He hummed around the meat as it practically melted in his mouth. Maybe it was the lack of real food, or maybe it was just that good... and he wasn't about to question any of it.

"Is it to your liking?"

Nick nodded. "Oh, yeah," he mumbled around the cheekful of food. With the end of his fork-thingie he motioned for her to sit down in the other chair. With a look of reluctance, she dipped her chin and sat. He dug into the other items on the plate, and relished in every mouthful. The colorful circles reminded him of his mother's buttered squash and the final choice could have been fluffy balls of regular old Earth rice dipped in a creamy white sauce. The glass held only water; but it was cold and it was wet and next to a beer, it was the best thing going.

When he hit the point of explosion, he set the fork-thingie down and took one more drink of water that had somehow managed to stay cold through the whole meal. Leaning back in the chair, he sighed deeply.

"That was great, thank you."

"You are most welcome, Nick."

"So," he said, shifting forward to rest his arms on the table. He had to admit, he liked the furniture here. Everything was built to a slightly higher scale than back home. It accommodated his height well. If everyone on the planet were as tall as Annora and the others he had seen, he figured everything was built a bit bigger. "When do we leave for Rome?" Just saying it made him want to shake his head.

"We have already left. We are traveling intra-atmosphere, so we must proceed at a slower pace."

"Already left?" Nick stood and crossed the room to the window. He squinted to see outside, but the glass was tinted and the exterior was too dark.

"Do you wish to see?" she asked, stepping beside him.

"Yeah, can I?"

She passed her hand over a panel on the wall and the shading lightened as the outside took shape. They were high, but not so high he couldn't see the topography of the land below. Mountain ranges moved past at a leisurely pace and every few moments a white cloud dissipated against the glass. Nick closed his eyes, concentrating for a moment. The hum of propulsion was low, but it was there. Its tone and rhythm was close to his glider. He never felt it because he had become so accustomed to the feel, it didn't register.

Nick opened his eyes again and looked through the glass.

"We will reach Rome by the height of the day. It will give you time to rest further before greeting the Council."

Nick set his hands at his waist and turned to her. "There's something I don't get."

She tilted her head. "I am unsure of your words. What is it you wish to obtain?"

"Understanding, Annora. Look... back on Earth, we wouldn't welcome a stranger from the stars quite so... openly. I mean... we *didn't*. When the bastard Areth showed up, we didn't exactly roll out the red carpet."

"You speak of the Areth as an enemy."

A cold chill ran up Nick's spine. He straightened, leaning back in his chair. *Looks like Victor bit my ass on this one.* Nick silently thanked God, or whoever else was listening, that he hadn't disengaged the safety kill switch on the glider database yet. At least he wouldn't be leading Earth to the Umani like lambs to the slaughter.

"They are," he said, keeping his voice level and calm. "I take it you don't."

"A very long time ago, yes, but we long since resolved our conflict with them when we faced a mutual enemy over two millennia ago. The Areth people are our allies. As they are, assuredly, yours."

"If they're our allies, I'd hate to know what they'd do to their enemies."

Annora shook her head. "I don't understand. Why would they attack their own people?"

"Are you going to start on that *brethren and ancestor* crap?" Nick said, pushing away from the table to stand. "I've taken about all I can stomach of that rhetoric. There is no way in *hell* you, or anyone else, is going to convince me that I descended somehow from those bastards!" He finished with a shout, pointing at her.

"What have they done to make you hate them so?"

"What *haven't* they done? They've stopped just short of genocide, Annora. They turned us into lab rats. They took my *son*." His words choked him, and Nick stopped, bowing his head with his hands at his hips to tamp down the sudden surge of rage.

She stood and walked to him, her pale blue eyes locked on him as she stepped close. "I sense no deception in you, Nick, but I cannot comprehend the Areth being so cruel. The atrocities you speak of would be expected of the Sorracchi, perhaps, but not the Areth. They are a cultured people, advanced in science, and a people of great faith."

"All I know is what they've done on Earth. And if you're telling me they're your allies, I'd appreciate it if you let me get back in my ship and I'll be on my way."

"You aren't a prisoner," she said, still looking confused. "May I ask that you stay to speak with the Council of Seven? Perhaps, with their wisdom, we can find an answer."

"Yeah, I'll go."

She bowed her head and turned, picking the empty tray as she went. Before she reached the door, Nick called after her again.

"Yes, Nick?"

"My glider. Did we... bring it with us?"

She nodded slowly. "It remains in the bay where you landed, which is part of this craft."

"What are we flying in, a freakin' TARDIS?"

Annora frowned, shaking her head. "Your words confuse me."

He waved her off. "Never mind. It would take *way* too long to explain."

She bowed her head again and walked to the door, disappearing into the hall before the door closed again with a whoosh. Nick bowed his neck and shook his head, releasing a long and frustrated breath.

"Danger, Will Robinson," he muttered. "Danger."

Chapter Sixteen

"Do you have family you need to return to?" CJ asked, poking at her plate of scrambled eggs.

John Smith shook his head, scooping up a bit of oatmeal. "No, it's just me." He nudged Silas with his elbow. "Eat up."

"My stomach hurts," the young boy said, a whine in his voice.

"He may need to take it easy for a while if he hasn't been eating well. Let his system adjust," CJ offered. She looked across the table at the boy and smiled. "I'm sure it won't be long before you're eating cookies and ice cream."

Silas smiled, revealing crooked teeth with two missing.

"Were your people in London?"

His eyes darted to her, and then he looked away. "No. It's just me and Silas." He smiled and rubbed his hand on the young boy's curly hair.

"I'm not sure if I'm sad for you, or happy. Not having anyone is sad, but at least you didn't lose anyone in the attacks."

He leaned his elbows on the table, stirring his oatmeal. "Sounds like you did."

"Almost everyone has in some way. My family lived in Paris."

"I'm sorry."

CJ smiled and set her fork down. "We all are. That's why we're here. What will you do now?"

John looked down, pausing before he answered. "If there's room, I'd like to stay. Help"

She smiled at the soft lilt of his accent. It reminded her of her younger days living on the British Isle and other places on the European continent. "There's always room, and we're always willing to accept help when offered. We've been a very secret group for decades, and now it seems we've been shoved into the light. We're Enemy Number One. This could be a dangerous place to be."

"Any more dangerous than out there?"

"No, I suppose not."

CJ couldn't put her finger on the reason, but she felt comfortable around John Smith, although she did wonder about the name. It was so generic. But, she figured it wasn't one of the most common names on the planet if no one had it. She yawned behind her hand and blinked against the rough sandpaper that seemed to be lodged behind her lids. When she woke that morning, she had been alone but she remembered crying until she thought her chest would collapse into a black hole, and Michael sitting with her holding her hand. That was all he needed to do, hold her hand.

Even now, the heaviness built in her chest.

"You've lost someone else?" he asked, pulling her from the shadows around her heart.

CJ looked up. "What?"

"If you'll pardon my bluntness, you seem like a woman who has lost more."

She stared at him for a moment, studying him. He looked about Nick's age, perhaps a little younger, although Nick wore his age better. Not that John didn't, he just seemed...

worn. Worry lines marred the corners of his eyes and the evidence of long hours of contemplation marked his brow. But when he looked at Silas, she saw a spark in his eyes that told her he cared deeply for the boy. She didn't need to be a geneticist to know the boy wasn't his. Not biologically. But he loved the boy, and that was the only important thing as far as she was concerned.

"I did," she finally answered. "But not forever."

"Who?"

She licked her lips, drawing a fortifying breath. "Michael's father."

His eyebrows shot up. "Oh. You mean... you and Michael... you aren't..."

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"You're his step-mum?"

"Something like that, yes."

He nodded. "What happened?"

CJ laughed, leaning forward on the table. "Why is it, *John Smith*, that I just met you half an hour ago and I'm telling you my life story?"

"I've got that kind of face," he said with a huge grin that flashed his teeth and changed the entire demeanor of his expression. "People trust me."

She shrugged, figuring she had no argument. "Nick is trying to find us help. When he does, he'll be back." He may have a face people trusted, but she didn't dare give him more than that. Not until she knew for sure.

"I wish him luck," he said, picking up his cup of coffee. "And a speedy return."

"Thank you." She drank the last of her coffee, now lukewarm, and stacked her dishes. "If you'd like, I'd be happy to introduce you to General Castleton. I know he wants to meet all the Chicago survivors, but based on what I've heard about your efforts to take care of everyone, the General will want to talk with you personally."

"It would be an honor."

"Beverly Surimoto—she's Second in Command at this base—should be here shortly. We have a meeting with the General. I'll mention it to him then."

"Thank you, Caitlin."

"You can call me CJ," she said. "Most everyone does. It's just Michael and Nick who don't."

He smiled, and the genuine warmth of it made her smile back. She heard the door to the small mess hall close behind her and turned in her chair to look. Beverly and Victor walked side-by-side and hand-in-hand, smiling as they spoke to each other, Beverly signing with her free hand. CJ waved and they walked toward her.

She heard the legs of John's chair scrape back before she turned, and the cold expression on his face when she looked at him caught her breath.

"John?"

"*Kosh Sorracchi satshi*," he said in such a low voice it was more a growl than spoken word.

CJ stared at him and followed his gaze to Victor. She ran the words through her head, trying to remember enough Areth—because she was pretty sure it was Areth—to translate. *Filthy something bastard*. She didn't know the second word. Slowly, she stood. The air crackled with tension.

"Who are—" Victor started to ask, but mid-sentence he choked on his words and lunged forward to grip the back of a nearby chair. He screamed before falling to his knees, shaking with his hands at his temples.

"What are you doing?" CJ demanded, rounding the table to stand in front of John, trying to block his view of Victor. "What the *hell* are you doing?"

"Do you know what he is?" he demanded, pointing past her to Victor's crumpled form.

Beverly was on the floor beside him, her hands on his back as he continued to scream, his hands tight fists along side his head. People from all through the mess hall moved from their seats and toward the small crowd.

"Yes!" CJ shouted. "We know he's Areth, but he's not what you think. He's with us, helping us."

"He's not an *Areth*!"

"Of course he is."

John pushed past her, leaning over the table edge, his knuckles white with his grip. "Tell them what you are, liar! Tell them. Tell them, *Sorracchi*!"

Victor raised his head, sweat already soaking his brow, and he leveled his gaze on John. CJ's heat seized at the cold darkness that flashed in his eyes. Beverly stumbled back, scurrying across the floor away from him. Her hands flew out, but CJ didn't need to know what she said—or what she felt—to shout her command.

"Security, now!"

Victor—or the dark demon that had once again seized his body—lunged from the floor with a primal yell that echoed off the walls. He hit John, his hands clamping around the man's throat, and they both fell backwards. Three men came from the crowd and tried to pull them apart, but the rage that exploded from each of them made it nearly impossible. Beverly ran forward, and CJ barely managed to grab hold of her arm and keep her from jumping into the melee in an attempt to help Victor.

"No, Bev!" she shouted, even though she knew Beverly didn't hear her. But she would feel her. "Don't!"

Finally, when another man joined in, John and Victor were pulled apart, both panting for breath. Blood ran from a cut over John's eye and the corner of Victor's lips. Another serviceman pulled back his fist and cold-cocked Victor, knocking him out. He slumped in the hold of his captors and Beverly cried out, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Do you need the same?" CJ demanded of the newcomer.

John shook his head, relaxing in the grip of the men holding him. "No."

"Take them both to the infirmary. If you fight, you *will* be put in a cell. Am I clear?"

"Absolutely."

"Papa!"

The cry his son yanked CJ from the tension of the moment and she spun around to see Silas watching, wide-eyed, with tears streaming down his cheeks. Her heart immediately hurt for him.

"It's all right, Silas. Everything will be fine."

"Take them," CJ ordered quietly.

The room quieted as the men were taken away. Beverly sank into a chair, trembling with a distant look in her eye. Taking a steadying breath, CJ moved to Silas and tried to put

her arm around his shoulders, but he jerked away and bolted from the hall, the door leading outside slamming behind him.

"Well, this day just went to hell in a hand basket."

"Does someone want to tell me what the *hell* is going on here?"

Victor's screams echoed from the room down the hall, forcing every muscle in Lilly's body to tighten like the string of a bow. It had been weeks-months-since he had lost control like this. He'd fought so long and hard, and she wanted to know what the hell set him off.

Amanda stood beside an exam table dabbing antiseptic on a jagged cut over John Smith's eye. He looked ready to either bolt or put his fist through a wall at any moment. White lined his lips and a muscle clenched along his jaw, his fingers curled around the edge of the table.

"I'm going to ask again. What happened?"

Amanda shook her head. "I don't know. I just know five men dragged him and Victor in. Victor was unconscious, but they said he..." She paused, her hand hovering over the wound in John's head, and looked to Lilly with a small wince. "He lost control."

"Damn it. Do we have *any* neural inhibitors? Anything?"

Amanda shook her head.

"Sedatives? Pain killers?"

"There are three doses of Morphezine left."

Lilly spun around when she heard Michael's voice. He stood in the doorway, his expression even darker than Mr. Smith's. She swallowed, laying her hand across her forehead, trying to think.

"It isn't going to neutralize the entity, but it might calm him enough that he can battle back himself. Where is Beverly?"

"She's with CJ. They're on their way, but CJ had to find someone to stay with his son."

Lilly slid another hot glance at John Smith. "You sure have an odd way of making friends, Mr. Smith."

"I have no intentions of *making friends* with that murdering monster," he hissed through clenched teeth.

Michael lunged, flying past Lilly to grab fistfuls of John's sweater, hauling him off the table. "What did you do to him?" he shouted, "What did you do?"

"Why do you protect him? His kind killed millions across the galaxy! They wiped out entire races! Entire *planets*! They killed thousands upon thousands of my people, of *your* people!"

"He didn't!" Michael shouted back, shoving John into the edge of the table.

An empty chair flew across the room, slamming so hard against the wall it splintered and shattered. Amanda screamed and stumbled back. The air tingled on Lilly's skin and a glass-panel cabinet in the corner shook, threatening to fly apart.

Lilly pushed her arm between them. "Stop! Michael, stop!"

Michael shoved against his chest once more before releasing and stepping back. He sucked sharp breaths in through his nostrils, his hand clenched tight at his waist. Lilly took a step with him, leaving her hand on his chest with just enough pressure to keep him back. His

heart pounded viciously against her hand and she swore she could feel a barrier of charged air around him. Sliding her gaze from Michael to John, she cleared her throat.

"Amanda, could you please go to Victor and administer the Morphezine?" Amanda nodded, visibly shaken, and walked out of the room. "What you don't know, Mr. Smith—what you failed to find out before you attacked a member of this base—is that Victor is an ally and a friend."

"He's a liar." His voice dropped to a dangerously low husk and he ran a knuckle over the new stream of blood running from his temple. "I'm telling you, he's a liar."

"I'm sorry, but you're going to have to do better than that."

John closed his eyes and drew a quick, sharp breath. When he opened them again, he maintained a thin veneer of calm. "I had no idea until now just who did all this. I had my suspicions but until I was near enough to one of *them* to know, I couldn't be sure. He's a *Sorracchi*. They're a race of blood-thirsty conquerors—highly advanced in science and technology—and driven to war. We thought they had been all but wiped out. There has been no sign of them, short of a few small skirmishes here and there, for hundreds of years."

Lilly shook her head. "They're Areth. He's Areth."

"No!" His shout echoed through the room, and just as quickly as the rage flared he pulled it back in again, clenching his jaw. "No, he's not."

"How do you know this?" Michael demanded.

"I know *he's* not an Areth because *I am*."

Another scream echoed down the hall.

His mind was on fire, acid scorching his spin and wrapping around his skull to shadow his vision in a red haze. Victor clenched his teeth and twisted his wrists until he gripped the leather straps that held his arms at his side. He arched his back off the bed as another wave of vicious, merciless pain slammed through him.

Voices pushed through the pounding in his ears, but they were more than muffled sounds spoken through water and he couldn't make out the words. Engulfed in unseen flames, Victor forced his eyes open and tried desperately to find some fragment, some edge of control. Panting each breath through clenched teeth, he finally managed to make out Amanda's blurred face. On each side of the bed stood an armed guard, and Amanda leaned over to say something to him, her eyes wide. He sensed her fear—her fear of him.

He thought this was over.

Fool!

Her lips moved, but he only heard garbled sounds. She held up an infusion syringe, letting him see what she intended to do. Victor focused hard on her lips, swallowing against the hot, dryness in his throat. *Morpheazine*.

"No!" he shouted, yanking hard against the restraints. "No, please!"

She shook her head, speaking again.

Stupid idiot! They know you lied. They know you're a liar. They'll kill you now.

The whispered hiss made his skin crawl and tears burned his eyes.

"No, please. Don't. I can't—I can't fight—I can't—" The words stuck in his throat, his ability to think quickly fading into the miasma of pain and panic. A bitter, metallic tinge filled his mouth and he swallowed his own blood. "I need to fight. I can't—"

I'll kill them all. I'll snap their necks like dry twigs and I'll choke the life from them until their eyes pop and their black tongues fall out of their stupid little mouths. I'll do it and you'll watch! You've lost! You've lost!

"No! Oh, God, no!"

Fire and ice collided in the back of his mind, drowning him a wave of salvation. He felt her, and as much as the thought of her pure beauty touching the darkness sickened him, he welcomed her healing touch. Beverly was there, filling the void and pushing away the darkness. Victor cried, hating himself for allowing her to be tainted by his demon but unable to fight. He needed her.

I'm here. I'm here. I'm here.

Beverly took one hand from the side of Victor's sweat-drenched face and motioned to Amanda. She signed quickly, motioning to the restraints that had already chafed and tore at his skin. Amanda shook her head.

"I can't free him."

Beverly signed more urgently, but Amanda hadn't learned the silent language. Victor shook, a deep shudder vibrating through him. His hot tears slicked the contact of her skin to his, his eyes pressed tightly closed. He twisted on the bed, and Beverly's heart sat thick in her throat. Her skin burned and crawled, the evil was so raw and close to the surface.

Swallowing hard, she forced her forgotten and paralyzed vocal cords to work as she struggled to remember the brief time as a child when she had used her voice. "Michael."

Amanda's eyes rounded and she nodded, rushing from the room. Beverly pushed herself as close as she could to Victor with his restraints keeping her back. She stroked his hair and pushed out with her mind into the darkest crevices where she knew the Demon hid. It was viciously fighting her, lashing out, and her blood chilled at the memory of the last time the Demon had fought this hard. This time—this time she was prepared and it wouldn't win. *It would not win!*

A hand touched her back and she was flooded with Michael's deep, intense concern and fear for Victor. She motioned to the wrist restraints again with a hitch of her chin, unwilling to take her hands from Victor long enough to sign. Victor rolled his head in her hold, his body shaking. The Demon had retreated, but only slightly. It no longer hovered at the raw surface, but it hadn't scurried away to the darkness either.

"Are you sure?" she read on Michael's lips.

Beverly nodded fervently, and released a pent-up breath when Michael reached around her to unbuckle the closest restraint. As soon as his wrist was free, Victor's arm circled her waist, his fingers digging into the small of her back, pulling her against the edge of the bed. Michael jogged around to the other side and freed the other hand. Victor immediately turned into her, embracing her as best he could. Not waiting for approval from Michael, she climbed onto the bed and wrapped Victor in her arms. He buried his head against her stomach, a violent shudder wracking his body. She curled around him, entwining their bodies, stroking his damp hair. Michael stood beside the bed, watching, not attempting to stop her or caution her. Beverly knew he understood.

This was Victor, and she would do anything.

She laid her cheek against his hair and closed her eyes, rocking him slowly like a terrified child.

I'm here. Don't be afraid. I'm here.

She pushed hard against the darkness, demanding it retreat. Demanding it release Victor from his torture. Exhaustion quickly drained her, but she refused to back down. Beverly raised her head and looked to Michael, who still watched with dark, intense eyes. She took one hand from Victor's hair to sign single-handed.

"Help me, Michael."

He immediately stepped closer. "What can I do?"

She held out her hand, and he took it. An immediate surge of Michael's strength filled her senses; his strength and his concern for Victor. Of anyone, Michael was the one who could give Victor the additional help he needed. Beverly squeezed his hand and closed her eyes, using her body and her mind as a conduit.

Eternity passed, or so it seemed, before the tension in Victor's body eased and his breathing deepened. His hard hold on her relaxed and she felt him slip into an exhausted sleep. She opened her eyes and offered Michael a small, tired smile. Confident that they had won for now, Beverly closed her eyes and let her head rest on the pillow.

John looked into the faces of the humans gathered in the great room of Command Hall; a ragtag group of freedom-fighters determined to right the wrongs and fight the good fight. Unfortunately, they were grotesquely misinformed and had no idea the true enemy they fought. Now that he knew—now that he understood—his blood ran cold at the potential death and destruction that could still await them.

He looked toward Michael Tanner, who stood silent and stoic against the wall with his arms crossed and one foot set against the polished wood. Of all the humans here, John felt the strongest connection to Michael. He had felt it the moment they met. The link. The power. And he had witnessed the potential of it when Michael attacked him in the infirmary.

The door in the back of the room opened, and everyone seated immediately took to their feet. An older man, with thick white hair and wise eyes, strode toward them with intent and purpose. John stood straighter, immediately sensing the intense respect everyone there felt for him. This had to be General Robert Castleton.

He waved his hand and people resumed their seats. The General leveled his gaze on John, scrutinizing him. The air sparked, but only weakly, and John recognized the distant Touch in the man's blood. He probably didn't even realize it.

"You've stirred up one hell of a hornet's nest, Mr. Smith," he said finally, leaning back in his chair. "You attacked one of my people and threw out some pretty hefty accusations. You ready to back them up?"

"I shall do my best, General," he said, weighing his words. "I can offer you no absolute proof. I'm one man. But, I hope that you will see the logic and truth in my words. The only way to beat the Sorracchi is with truth. You can't win if you don't understand the depth of deception and depravity they will stoop to."

"We have a damn good idea," he said, and John noted the quick jerk of his gaze to Michael and back again. "Why don't you tell us what we *don't* know? You told Michael and Doctor Montgomery that *you* are Areth, and not Victor or any of his people."

John nodded, stepping toward the table where the General sat. He caught the quick but subtle movements of the guards posted around the room and stilled his feet. "In my months here, I've garnered an understanding of what they initially wanted you to believe; that humans are descendents of the Areth and thus you were brethren. Do I understand correctly that you now know the forms you see are not their true faces?"

The General looked to Michael, who stepped away from the wall. "Victor explained. The natural form of the Areth had deteriorated beyond survival. They came here, culled mankind, and used the harvested bodies as hosts for their minds."

"In their lies there is a grain of truth. What you see is *not* their natural forms, which is why they went undetected by us for so long. But, they are not Areth."

"You are," Michael bit out.

"Yes. I am."

"And why should we trust you?"

"I'm not saying you should trust me. I would think you a very naïve people to take me at my word so readily, especially after all the lies you've been told. That this organization exists attests to the fact that you are unwilling to follow blindly."

"Are there more of you?" General Castleton asked.

John shook his head. "No. Not here. Not on Earth."

"So, either you're the sole savior come to rescue us from our own stupidity, or you're just insane." Jace Quinn said from the back of the room.

His mind whispered in the air much like the General's; subtle and sublime. John wondered if he, as so many like him, had yet to realize the gift he carried deep in his DNA. Of the humans John had encountered on the base, only half a dozen had the whisper. And of those, only two possessed any level of understanding; Michael and Beverly Surimoto.

"I'm incapable of offering you anything but the truth. I came here several months ago when reports came to Aretu that someone was masquerading as Areth. My ship, and any proof I may have been able to offer, was destroyed in the attack. I am stranded here."

"For the sake of argument, if the Areth aren't *the Areth*, then who are they?" General Castleton asked, tapping his fingertips on the tabletop.

"They are the Sorracchi; a vicious and demented race who have been ravaging the galaxy for thousands of years. They destroyed their own world, sucked its resources dry, and moved on to try and conquer everyone else. We fought them with our allies, the Umani -"

When he spoke the name, he saw the General look quickly to Michael. John looked between the two men, focusing on Michael. "You know of the Umani?"

Michael nodded slowly. "We do. Victor told us of them. Told us they may be able to help us."

The first nudge of doubt about the Sorracchi they called Victor tingled at the base of John's skull. A Sorracchi might have been able to hide his dark face long enough to infiltrate the enemy, but why would he reveal the existence of a race capable of defeating his brethren? John ran his thumb along his lower lip, squinting as he contemplated the information.

"I think it's safe to say, John Smith, that you just got our attention. No one outside of Phoenix knows of the existence of the Umani. Until right now, we weren't one-hundred percent sure they existed. We were going on Victor's word. The fact that you brought them

up gives us a small grain of hope.” General Castleton stood, coming around the table to lean back on the edge. “Why don’t you tell us what you know about them?”

“So you can compare my story to that of the Sorracchi.”

“Victor,” Michael said sharply. “His *name* is Victor.”

John dipped his head in a slow nod. “Fair ‘nough. The Umani are an advanced race of space travelers. Their home planet is on the other side of the universe, approximately fifty-thousand light years from here.”

Michael’s eyes darted to the General and back to him.

“They are also your ancestors. Just as the Areth are. And just as the original humans to inhabit this planet are. The people you are today come from a merging of our races generations upon generation ago. I can see it. I can see bits of all of us in each of you. You are the culmination of a dream.”

Michael sat in the dark, letting the evening shadows take over the room, watching Amber’s daughter sleep. Peaceful now, she had been frantically crying an hour before. She was opinionated, as Caitlin said. She knew who she wanted when she wanted them, and that person was Michael.

“She reminds me of your father. Opinionated and stubborn to the core,” Caitlin had said with a laugh.

He had welcomed the few moments of respite when he could forget everything but the little girl in his arms. Feeding her, he could step back from the chaos of the day. And now, watching her sleep, he attempted to process it all.

John Smith.

From the moment he met the man in Chicago, he had known there was something different. *Alien* wasn’t what he expected.

“Thousands of years ago, the Areth and the Umani fought a war against the Sorracchi. We ourselves had once been enemies, but we joined together when the threat of the Sorracchi became greater than our feud. We won, but at a terrible cost. So many of us died. It took centuries for us to rebuild our worlds and our cultures.”

Michael closed his eyes, remembering the details of the forced meeting with John Smith and General Castleton. He hadn’t wanted to believe John’s words, didn’t want to believe that Victor had lied to them. But the more John spoke, the more he both verified things Victor had said and cast shadows of doubt on others.

“There were some among us who wanted to escape the ravages of the war—to find peace again. The rivalry between Umani and Areth still existed, and despite our need to move forward, there were others who couldn’t let go. Determined to create a shared future, these pilgrims left our part of the galaxy in search of a new home. They found it here. Your world was young compared to ours. Your people were few and scattered, the remaining survivors of a catastrophic natural disaster that had ruptured your eco-systems and flooded your world.”

He told a story that read more like a fairy tale. Generations passed and neither Aretu nor Raxo, the home worlds of the Areth and Umani, knew the destiny of their wandering children. Eventually, word traveled to them via other races that had been here and gone, sometimes mingled hidden among us and sometimes just passing within a few thousand light years of Earth. They knew we survived, we lived and we thrived. The decision was made by

the leaders of Aretu and Raxo to leave the Earth alone. To let humans grow and survive on their own paths. They had chosen to leave, to remain separate, and their wishes would be honored.

Until Aretu learned of the deception.

John Smith claimed to be a soldier, commissioned to come to Earth and discover the truth. His duty was to garner whatever information he could and return to Aretu. He had only been on Earth a few months when the attacks came. No one on Aretu knew.

Michael tried to focus on one fact. The Umani existed. His father had not launched himself into the darkness of space with no home for a final destination. Raxo waited for him. And if John Smith's words were true, Nick Tanner would find allies and not enemies.

"Michael." He raised his head and looked toward the door where Caitlin stood. "Victor's awake."

A mix of relief and anxiety slammed together in his chest and he pushed out of the chair. Michael glanced back at Amber's baby one last time before pulling the door closed, following Caitlin down the hall to Victor's room. Victor was on his feet, his back to everyone with his arms crossed as he stared into the dark night through the window. Lilly stood beside him, her eyes cast down as she circled a handheld diagnostic device near Victor's chest. Beverly sat on the edge of the bed, her hands folded in her lap and her head down. The tension in the air was palpable.

"Everything is normal, although the brain activity in your hypothalamus is slightly elevated. Considering the situation, that's to be expected."

Victor jerked his head in an abbreviated nod. "Thank you, Doctor."

"General Castleton is on his way," Caitlin said behind Michael.

Victor bowed his head and turned to face them. When he raised his chin again, he locked his stare with Michael and Michael saw the regret sharp and clear in his dark eyes and the tight set of his jaw. He stepped to the bed, standing near Beverly without touching her.

The door opened again and General Robert Castleton's presence filled the room. Everyone stood a little straighter and Victor lowered his arms, pushing his hands into his pockets. General Castleton shut the door with a firm thud. Michael and Caitlin moved to the side so the General could walk unhindered into the room. Beverly finally turned on the bed so she could see, and Michael saw the lines of tears on her cheeks.

The silence was smothering.

"I'll hear you out," he finally said, his voice heavy with authority and the unnecessary demand for respect. "Then we'll go from there."

Victor's jaw worked side to side and he looked down, clearing his throat. "I know this will sound hollow, but I never had the intention to deceive you."

"Are you confirming what John Smith accused you of?"

"That I'm not Areth? That I'm a race called the Sorracchi?" He swallowed. "Yes."

Michael bit down and dropped his head forward, closing his eyes. The General cursed under his breath and rotated on the balls of his feet to pace along the length of the bed that sat between him and Victor. Finally, he stopped and leaned his knuckles into the raised mattress.

"I'm not angry that you managed to trick us," he ground out. "Crap like that is expected in a war, and as *so many* have pointed out to me, you are the enemy. But I'm pissed as *hell* about the people you've hurt in the process."

Victor's eyes shifted down to Beverly, who didn't look back. Then he looked at Michael, and despite the anger that simmered in his chest, Michael didn't look away.

"I assure you, General. Your emotions run no deeper than my own." Victor met the General's stare again. "I won't attempt justification, and what I say won't even qualify as an explanation because it makes no more sense to me than it will to you."

"Try me."

Victor drew a slow breath and ran his thumb along his lower lip. "My... mind... my personality for lack of a better term, is hundred upon hundreds of years old. I've long since forgotten how many times I've transferred to a new body. And in that lies my own confusion, and my deception."

Michael took a step forward. Despite the knowledge of what he *should* be feeling, he wasn't able to forget what Victor had done for *him*. He couldn't make himself turn his back. Victor looked at him, and kept his eyes on Michael as he continued.

"I don't remember my last transfer. My memories of traveling here, of the things before Earth, are broken, hazy, and incomplete. I've struggled with this Demon in my head for as long as I *can* remember, and I have assumed until lately that the failed overwrite has caused my loss of memory. Until recently, I would have denied the claims of John Smith. I would have refuted any claim that I was anything but Areth. Moreover, I would have claimed no knowledge of the Sorracchi."

"So, because you were caught, you're admitting it," the General asked.

He shook his head. "No. Because I honestly believed it to be the truth."

"You're not making any sense."

"I know, and for that I apologize."

Michael took another step, stopping at the foot of the bed. "When did you begin remembering?"

Victor looked to him again, and the momentary flash of relief in his eyes confirmed for Michael what he needed to know. He wasn't lying, and Michael's faith in him was never misplaced.

"Just before Jace Quinn was found. I didn't understand or want to believe the memories at first. They were, and still are, jagged and sometimes so jumbled I can't separate them. But the name Sorracchi came to me again and again."

"Were you going to share this information?" the General snapped.

Victor bowed his head. "I would like to say yes, without a doubt. But it wouldn't be the truth. Not the whole truth." A wry smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. "Even I understand that forgiveness and acceptance can only be stretched so far."

The General looked down at Beverly. "Did you know about any of this?"

She shook her head, her eyes brimming with tears again, but she didn't let a single one fall. "No."

"She didn't," Victor confirmed. "I hid it even from her. Of all my transgressions, *that* is the one I regret the most."

General Castleton shook his head. "I don't know what the hell to do with this."

"My wish is still to help. I will never believe in what the Sorracchi are doing. I can't stand aside and let it happen. My knowledge, however limited it may be, is still at your disposal."

"You'll have to forgive me if I don't jump for joy."

It was well after midnight before the small gathering of Phoenix leaders dissipated. Victor stood in the spot he had maintained since the General entered, watching each of them leave. Michael paused at the door, looking back at Victor, and offered a slight smile.

Victor knew it was more than he deserved.

He had a long road ahead of him to gain their trust again. Right now, there was only one person he cared about.

Beverly still sat on the bed, near him yet further away from him than she had ever been. She hadn't moved, hadn't said anything more than her simple 'no' when the General asked her if she knew.

She lied for him.

She may not have known what it was, but she knew weeks ago that something was wrong, something heavy and troubling on his mind. Again and again, she had asked him to tell her and he had denied her. He had lied and said it was nothing, that she shouldn't worry.

Nothing.

Now, it was everything. One more lie in the long line of deceptions perpetrated by his people. The Sorracchi.

Victor pushed his hands into his pockets to keep himself from reaching for her. He didn't have the right. She had pulled him back from the abyss—once again—the last thing she needed or wanted was his touch.

After what seemed like forever, she raised her chin and looked at him. Tears hovered at the edge of falling. She blinked and one rolled free, leaving a wet trail down her cheek. Victor's heart clenched painfully in his chest and he hated himself more in that moment than he ever had before.

He hurt her.

"I'm sorry."

Beverly stared at him, a small quake shifting through her. She raised her trembling hands just off her lap, and Victor dropped his gaze to watch her.

"I trusted you, and I thought you trusted me."

"I can't ask you to forgive me, and I won't. I can't make you trust me. I don't deserve that. But please, don't doubt what I feel for you."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was selfish," he admitted. "I was afraid that if I told you this, it would be more than you could take."

"Then you don't trust me."

"I do."

"No, you don't. If you did, you would have trusted my love enough to know it wouldn't have changed anything." Her hands moved fast, jerky, emphasizing her anger.

Victor swallowed, speaking what he knew had to be the truth. "This has changed everything."

Beverly slid her leg off the mattress, standing within a breath of him without letting their bodies touch. She looked up at him, the tears gone now, but the sadness was still thick and dark in her eyes.

"I love you. That hasn't changed." Her hands moved slowly now, gracefully, threatening to brush against him with each movement. *"Beyond that... I don't know."*

Victor pressed his lips together and nodded, dropping his head. She stepped away and left the room, not stopping to look back.

Chapter Seventeen

"If you tell me Earth is the Thirteenth Colony of Kobol, I'm gonna—" Nick couldn't finish, his brain in final meltdown mode.

Annora paused in her translation, looking to Nick. "I do not understand Kobol, Nick."

"It's... never mind." He launched up from the chair he had occupied, facing the semi-circle platform where the Council of Seven sat. "Look, this is a hell of a lot to swallow all at once. You've got to understand, Annora, the Areth did the same damn thing. They showed up, gave Earth this long sad story about us being their *brethren* and we're their backwoods hillbilly cousins, and expected us to just take it. It was bullshit then, and who's to say this isn't bullshit, too?"

Her high forehead wrinkled as she stared at him with the same puzzled look he usually garnered from the woman. Nick waved his hand, setting the other at his waist as he paced the open space in front of the dais.

"So, what you're telling me is that the Areth aren't Areth at all? You don't know *who* they are, but they aren't who they *say* they are."

Annora provided the translation for him, even though her expression contested that she probably didn't provide the same emphatic confusion Nick felt. The center leader, whom Annora had introduced as Constantius Dionysius Franciscus, and he never *ever* went by anything less than the full three names, nodded his head slowly and spoke. Annora didn't offer the translation immediately, saying something in return. When he responded, she nodded and turned to Nick.

"The Council of Seven has requested the presence of an esteemed guest in hopes of eradicating any remaining doubts you may have on the matter. Constantius Dionysius Franciscus proclaims that this esteemed guest has recently relayed vital information to the Council which will assuage your concerns and confirm your tale."

"Oh, how nice," Nick said, nodding. "And who is that?"

"Her Reverent Lordship, Queen Bryony the Fourteenth of Aretu, Representative of the Areth people."

The huge double doors in the back of the council chamber opened, held back by four men—four very *human* looking men—dressed in scarlet jackets embossed in gold. The Council of Seven stood to their feet and bowed their heads as a woman entered dressed in a flowing gown of deep purple embedded in shimmering precious gems of blood red, deep blue and garnet. The material swooshed around her legs as she walked, her head held high and proud. Nick winced as he watched her. Well, if first impressions mattered for anything, she sure as hell didn't *look* like the bastards he had left on Earth.

Her hair was a pale gold, braided down her back well past her waist, with tiny filigree butterflies laced along her crown, her skin fair and almost luminescent. Bright green eyes sparkled with the tiny smile she offered to Nick as she passed him, stopping within the Council circle to curtsy deeply, nearly folding herself on the floor before rising to her feet again.

"Esteemed members of the Umani Council of Seven, it is with great reverence and much enthusiasm I find myself amidst your presence. May God of All bless your sovereignties and your people, and may our shared endeavors be fruitful."

Nick listened, thankful he didn't have to wait for a translation. Queen Bryony the Fourteenth turned and held her hands out as she walked to him. Not sure what she intended, he put his arm out and when they were within reach she took his hand in both of hers and bowed again, bringing his knuckles against her forehead. Electrical sparks flashed up his arm, tingling on the back of his neck, and Nick remembered the first time he had met Beverly Surimoto. Her touch had felt almost the same. Nick winced, glancing between the bowing woman and Annora. But Annora was no help, standing nearby with her head down and her eyes partially closed.

When Queen Bryony straightened again, bright tears glistened in her eyes. "Nick Tanner of Earth, the word of your arrival has filled the Areth people with unfathomable joy."

Nick cleared his voice and slowly retracted his hand. "I'm not feeling the joy quite yet, Your Highness."

She tilted her head and smiled, folding her hands in front of her. "I have been told of your long journey, and the purpose behind it. Your arrival could not have been more opportune, as I have just recently notified our Umani allies of information important to all of us."

"Enlighten me."

Queen Bryony bowed her head and took a step back so she could address both Nick and the Council of Seven. "In months past, some of our people working with various merchants of trade heard rumors of a far away planet on which the Areth had made their presence known. A planet that we had designated as sacred, and proclaimed that no Areth or Umani should interfere lest we dishonor the wishes of our departed ancestors. It was my desire to seek verification of such claims in a discrete and non-intrusive manner. To this end, I sent my most trusted officer. I fear that the news may not bode well, for much time has passed and he has not returned nor has he sent word."

Kajahi Konkitwana, leader of the Bagdaghir Sovereign, spoke in his language which sounded softer and more lyrical than the rougher, more consonant-ridden language of Castaneda. When he finished, many of the other leaders chimed in, speaking amongst themselves.

"What are they saying?" Nick asked, leaning toward Annora.

"They are greatly troubled by the thought that an enemy may be masquerading as a friend; an enemy not just to the people of Earth but to the Umani and the Areth. There is only one such enemy who would be so insolent."

"Who is that?"

"The Sorracchi." Nick saw a flash of dread, almost fear, filter through Annora's expression. "They are a dark and vile species."

"Well, that part of the description matches." Nick watched while the Council spoke, shifting his gaze between each of them. "So, what happens now?"

"We vote," Queen Bryony said softly, pulling Nick from his conversation with Annora.

"Vote on what?"

"Whether we stay here and let your world find its own fate, or whether we finally rid the universe of the Sorracchi scourge."

"Doesn't sound like much of an argument to me, Your Highness."

She smiled, dipping her head. He coughed and nearly choked when she stuck tip of her tongue out the corner of her lips and winked at him. "Perhaps, Nick Tanner, we share more in common that appearance. My vote is for the later."

Nick stared out the tinted window of his suite onto the lush landscape of Rome. He still had a hard time getting past the name issue. Sometimes, things just seemed too Earth-like to be alien. Of course, according to Queen Bryony and the Council of Seven, there was a damn good reason for it.

He wondered if he would have been any less freaked out if the Umani ended up being little green aliens with big eyes and no noses like some Roswell throw back from the X-Files. When he was a kid, he remembered watching reruns of the show on a television channel dedicated to all things Sci Fi. Back then, he had been fascinated and convinced that Mulder had it all figured out. Course, he watched *all* the Sci Fi shows... probably where Michael got his fascination. Something buried in their DNA.

His chest tightened at the thought of Michael, which naturally led to thoughts of Caitlin. Even after all he had told them, and all they already seemed to know, the Umani were reluctant to declare any help. Queen Bryony argued on Earth's behalf, but as he learned from Annora, she was but one vote. She could act without guidance or sanction of the Council, but to do so would be to act alone. And right now, Nick wanted all the back up he could get.

He had to make a decision, and make it soon. With a glance at his watch, he confirmed how much time was left on the glider's kill switch. Less than two hours. The way they talked, Nick figured they already knew Earth's coordinates so by letting them see the information on the disk wouldn't lead them somewhere they couldn't already go. Then again, maybe they just talked a good game. Maybe the information about the Areth-or Sorracchi, whatever-would be enough to get them off their collective asses.

Maybe.

Lots of maybes.

And Nick hated maybes.

His nerves were raw and his body was antsy. Taking the Umani at their word that the ship was his to where he pleased, as their honored guest, he headed for the door. All he had seen was the landing bay, his suite, and the halls leading to the Council Chamber. When the door to his room closed behind him, he scanned the walls for some way of marking the room. There were no signs, no numbers and several other similar doors stretched down the hallway in both directions.

"I'll worry about it later," he mumbled and picked a direction.

The halls themselves were quiet and he only met a handful of Umani. They were easy to pick out of the crowd. He moved inward, figuring the hub of activity might be more centrally located. Stepping through a doorway, Nick froze.

"Holy crap," he mumbled.

The room he stood in had to be at least four stories high and circular. Open balconies wrapped around on all sides and a giant circle of glass made the ceiling. Plants of blue, green and deep purple filled the room and at least two dozen Umani and Areth mulled through the space. Some sat on benches, others walked together. As he stepped further into the room, he realized the floor was glass as well, and he saw the Roman landscape beneath his feet. His gut

twisted when he stepped out into what felt like empty space, but once he mentally convinced himself that the floor wasn't going to open beneath him, he walked further.

"This is like The Farm on steroids."

Soft music filtered through the air; a lyrical combination of chimes and what sounded like a harp. He continued into the middle of the room and stopped dead center to look up. The sky was cerulean blue without a cloud to break the color. It reminded him of home.

Nick walked to an empty bench and sat. He felt like a college kid on a bad trip. Things were familiar, yet, totally screwed up at the same time. After watching the other inhabitants of the room, none of which seemed to notice that an *Earthling* sat in the middle of them all, he started making note of the differences. They weren't cookie cutter aliens. Some had the deep copper skin of Annora and the other Umani he had seen while still in Castaneda. Others had paler skin and lighter hair, those that wore their hair exposed. Still others had even richer skin, darker eyes with tall, elaborate headdresses wrapping their heads.

He heard the whoosh of a door and glanced around until he saw a group of Areth-Damn, *that still felt so wrong*—enter the atrium. As they neared, he realized that the woman in the middle of the group was Queen Bryony dressed in a much simpler gown than the elaborate number she had worn to the Council Chambers. A young girl walked on each side of her, and based on human years, Nick put them somewhere around sixteen. Course, he hadn't bothered to ask how the aging process worked here. For all he knew they could be sixty, sixteen or six. A young child ran out from behind the Queen, bolting ahead to smell a bunch of beautiful orange flowers that grew along the path. Behind the Queen walked a man who looked to be equivalent to her age, whatever age that was. Further back were the ever-present guards who never strayed far from the Queen's presence.

Nick stayed where he was, watching them with keen interest. He learned a long time ago that you learned a hell of a lot more about a person when they thought you weren't looking.

The Queen sat down on the glass floor, taking a moment to point out something on the ground below to the child, a little girl with long blonde curls that bounced around her shoulders when she ran. The Queen's young companions sat together on a bench, speaking with their heads near each other and wide, conspiratorial smiles on their faces. The man sat near the Queen, but not too close. They spoke, and she often smiled at something he said, but they never touched.

The little girl skipped near Nick, pausing every few feet to examine a new plant in great detail. When she was within a few feet of him, she crouched down to poke at some stones in a bin of white sand. Humming softly to herself, she worked meticulously at gathering the largest of the pebbles and forming a circle of them in the sand. She could have been any little blonde-haired girl in any city on Earth. A heavy fist closed around Nick's throat and he pulled his focus away from her.

While the aliens on this planet seemed *alien*, he almost forgot how far away he was from home. He knew that didn't make sense, that being surrounded by the strange and unfamiliar should have driven home for him the necessity of his mission. Instead, their differences had kept his mind away from missing Earth. Now, looking into the eyes of a child who could have been his own, she looked that human, the reality slammed hard into his chest.

It didn't matter what he had to do, he had to convince the Umani to help. He had come too far, risked too much, to let his fate be decided for him. Nick stood and crossed the center of the atrium to where the Queen sat. Her laughter hung on the air like music, but stopped short when she looked up and saw him.

"Colonel Tanner," she said, surprise lifting her voice. "I didn't realize you were here."

"May I have a moment, Your Highness?"

The gentleman with the Queen stood and offered her his hand, bringing her to her feet. She briefly looked past Nick, a smile ticking her lips when she saw the little girl. "What can I do for you?"

"I have something I need to show you. Would you be willing to show me the way to the landing bay? My ship is there."

Queen Bryony stepped back from Nick and spoke to the man in hushed tones. He didn't look pleased with whatever she said, but bowed his head and called for the child. She skipped to him, her hand slipping into his. The girls rose from their bench and followed the man and child back toward the doors they had entered.

"This way, Colonel."

He fell into step beside her, the two guards following several feet behind. The bay was practically around the corner from the atrium, and Nick took a relieved breath when he saw his glider sitting just where he'd left it. She looked like she'd been through hell and back, and ready to fly head first into it again if he asked. Queen Bryony sighed "She's beautiful," as they crossed the open space.

"You know space crafts?"

"My father was an officer," she answered simply. "He used to take me with him."

Nick set his hand on the oxidized shell of the glider and used it as leverage to swing his legs onto the wing. Walking across the slanted surface, he popped the latch of the cockpit canopy and it slowly rose with a soft hiss. The umbilicals and scanners he had haphazardly pulled from his suit on landing lay limp and twisted on the seat and his helmet sat upturned on the floor. A musty funk wafted up from inside and he winced, wondering how he managed to live with himself for so long.

He picked up the helmet and set it on the wing before bracing his hands on either side of the cockpit frame and lowering himself inside. Queen Bryony stood near the nose, watching him.

"Don't worry, ma'am. I'm not trying to take off. Just need to take care of something."

"I have no concerns," she answered. "Only interest."

The countdown on the kill switch computer indicated nearly an hour was left on the countdown. Nick flipped open the security screen and punched in the ten digit code he had chanted in his head for weeks and flights on end. The numbers flashed three times and went blank. Nick popped the portable drive free and slipped it into his pocket.

That was it. He just handed it over and hoped it was enough.

With the drive removed, he scanned the inside of the cockpit, looking for the only other thing he couldn't live without. Tucked beneath a dangling umbilical was the one photograph that had gotten him through; Caitlin and Michael, with him between them.

This damn well better be worth it.

With the photo in hand, Nick levered himself free of the cockpit and climbed out. The Queen still stood waiting, her eyes taking in every detail of the ship. Nick tossed his helmet back inside and closed the canopy before jumping down from the wing.

"Did you find what you needed?" she asked.

He pulled the drive from his pocket and held it out to her. "Sure did."

"What is this?" She opened her hand and he set the tiny disk in her palm.

"Hopefully, it's enough to convince the Council of Seven."

She nodded, closing her hand over it. "By the God of All, I pray so."

Chapter Eighteen

CJ peeked through the open infirmary room door, smiling when she saw Michael in his usual spot over the last few days; sitting in a rocker in the sunshine with Amber's daughter in his arms. Every meal time, he was here, partially because the girl refused to eat for anyone but him. Even beyond that, CJ knew that on some level he enjoyed it. Enjoyed her.

This afternoon, the baby was asleep on his chest with her tiny fists curled beside her cheeks. He rocked in a steady rhythm that matched the slow circle of his hand on her back. His gaze was through the window, and CJ had to admit the view was stunning. The palate of autumn colors mixed with the evergreens for a brilliant show against the blue sky. A few more weeks and a white blanket of snow would cover the peaks, but for now the colors were stunning.

"Thought I'd find you here," she said softly, walking across the room. "Seems you're here more than you're at home."

"Are you all right?" he asked, his eyes pulling together in a worried frown.

CJ leaned into the edge of the windowsill, the sun warming her back through her sweater. "I'm fine. No more breakdowns, I promise."

He stared at her, studying her, and CJ knew he looked for the wrinkle in her words, the grain of truth that maybe she wasn't all right. Maybe she still lay in her bed at night and missed having someone beside her. Not just someone... Nick Tanner. A year ago, she had found him on his dock in Maine and turned both their lives upside down. And she was still dizzy from the ride.

"I just spoke with General Castleton," she said, flipping some hair behind her ear. She hadn't cut it since well before leaving Colorado and it hung just past her shoulder. "He's chosen not to take any action against Victor. Time will tell who the liar is."

Michael just nodded. The last few days had taken a toll on everyone; emotionally, physically and mentally. But in Michael's eyes she saw more than the fatigue that plagued them all. Something sat heavy on his mind.

"Talk to me."

His gaze shifted to her again, and he blinked several times and parted his lips before actually saying a word. "I want to do something. But I don't know if I can or if I should." He paused again, his eyes moving away from her to look out the window again. "If I have the right to ask."

"What is it?"

When he looked at her again, the intense determination in his dark eyes had her catching her breath. "I want her."

CJ shook her head. "Who?"

"Amber's baby. I want her. I want—" He stumbled over the words, stopping to clear his throat. "I want to care for her. I want to be her father."

"Wow," CJ managed to say after several moments. "You've really thought about this."

"I have."

"Taking on a newborn... that's no small task."

"I know. That's why I'll need *you*." Michael stopped rocking, his hand stilling on the baby's back. "This decision affects both of us."

CJ looked at the sleeping baby in his arms and a slow, painfully pleasant ache filled her chest. She moved away from the window to stand beside him, laying her hand across the little girl's downy head. A shuddered breath shook her tiny body and her lips moved to suckle on a bottle that wasn't there.

"You're sure?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Well, then." CJ chuckled, wiping away a tear that slid down her cheek. "I guess I just became a grandmother."

Michael smiled and stood, holding the baby to his chest as he wrapped his free arm around CJ's shoulders and pulled her to him. "Thank you."

The tears ran freely down and she laughed as she wiped them away. "Well, in that case. Have you picked out a name?"

Michael shifted the little girl of his chest and slid her into CJ's arms, tucking the light blanket more snugly around her. "I think so. I've never named anyone before."

"Well?"

He looked down at the baby in her arms, stroking his thumb across her forehead. "Nicole."

CJ sucked in a sharp breath, swallowing hard against the drowning wave of emotion that hit her. She laid a trembling hand on Michael's cheek and he raised his chin to meet her gaze. "It's beautiful," she managed to whisper. "He'll be proud."

The pain smothered him, distorting his senses. Up was down, dark was light, and the bitter taste of his own vomit burned in his throat. His skin crackled and burned, every touch like steel wool on an open wound. He had stopped praying for strength a long time ago, praying now for death. For relief.

"We have attempted the overwrite three times," came a garbled voice from the darkness. "He possesses the gene. It will not work. Why he hasn't died yet, I don't know."

"We will try again."

It was her... the voice of evil. Just the sound of it made his heart freeze in his chest and his blood turn cold.

"His mind resists too fiercely. Our Sorracchi brother died in the last attempt. We are too few to risk losing another."

"I said we will try again."

"Yes," came the reluctant answer. "I will prepare another download."

Jace rolled his head on the hard surface beneath him. Every muscle in his body ached and twitched, every bone stinging him like splintered steel. He sensed her, the nauseating scent of her perfume filling his nostrils and twisting his stomach. For the rest of his life, whatever was left of it, the smell of musk and orchids would remind him of her. His torturer. His captor.

Areth Evil Incarnate.

No... not Areth... not...

He blinked, the bright light over his head scorching his eyes. She leaned over him, her lips twisted in a sadistically satisfying smirk.

"I don't care how many Sorracchi die to destroy you," she hissed near his ear. "I will control you, and if I can't control you, I will fry every feeble little brain cell in that primitive head of yours until

you're a drooling idiot who pisses your pants every time you see me. Do you see? Do you see the irony of it? If you had just told me where he is, I would have stopped this oh, so long ago. Now, you are my new toy."

She walked around the head of the table, outside his line of sight. Sharp fingernails scraped over the bare skin of his arms as they stretched out from his body, bound and motionless. Every centimeter of contact tore at his nerves and he hissed through the pain.

"This is your last chance," she whispered near his ear. "Tell me now. Tell me where he is and I promise your death will be quick. Well, quicker than dying like this. Perhaps I'll only skin you alive. You'll die of blood loss long before I've removed every inch of flesh from your body."

He closed his eyes, singing as best as he could through the dehydrated sandpaper that lined his throat. "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."

Her scream echoed through the chamber. "Do it! Do it now!"

Lilly stopped half way down the stairs leading to the cottage living room and peeked around the corner, practically holding her breath as she listened. The sweetest, most beautiful sound she had ever heard carried softly in the air; the strums of Jace's fingers on the finely tuned strings of a guitar mingling with his rough baritone.

He sat on the edge of the worn couch, the guitar balanced on his knee, the room shrouded in darkness. Jamie was on the cushions beside him, her tiny fists flailing in the air and her feet kicking against the blanket that covered her.

"Goodnight, my angel. Time to close your eyes and save these questions for another day. I think I know what you've been asking me. I think you know what I've been trying to say."

Lilly's throat tightened and tears flooded her eyes as emotion swelled in her chest. She tried to keep her breathing shallow and quick, or she was sure her heart would burst through her ribs.

"I promised I would never leave you and you should know, wherever you may go, no matter where you are, I will never be far away."

She shifted, trying to get a better view of her husband and daughter, and her foot slipped down a step. The aged wood squeaked beneath her weight and she held her breath. Jace's strumming stopped and his words drifted off.

"I think Mama is spying on us, little one."

Wiping her fingers quickly over her cheeks, Lilly continued down the stairs and stepped into sight. "You caught me."

"Come sit with us."

The weight and texture of his low-spoken words skimmed over her like a feather touch. It was hard to remember the heartache and black sadness from days before when she wondered if her husband would ever truly return to her. Like magic, he had opened his heart again and Lilly couldn't remember ever being so *full*.

She walked across the dark room, sitting on the couch behind Jace so she could look over his shoulder and see Jamie on the cushion. The little girl's eyes shined bright in the moonlight, and the toothless grin on her face stated boldly and emphatically she had *no* intention of going back to sleep. Not while Daddy was there. Not while she was the center of attention. Lilly scooted closer, laying her chin on his shoulder, enjoying the heat emanating from his bare skin.

"I'm taking requests." He turned his head and pressed a kiss to her hair. "I don't think she cares *what* I sing."

"Neither do I," she said softly, rubbing her cheek against his skin. "Just as long as you sing."

His fingers slid up and down the slender neck of the guitar, the roughened pads making their own music with the vibration. Then he began to play, and the familiar music wrapped around her, stilling her heart in her chest and reviving it at the same time. So many nights... so many long and painful nights she had sat in the dark of her Colorado quarters and listened to him sing the same words. Nights she wondered if she'd ever breathe again. Nights when she welcomed the pain just to have him with her for a few minutes.

When they fled Colorado, she thought she'd never hear the song again.

"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 curled her lips between her teeth, listening to his voice reverberate through his chest with her ear pressed near his spine. Lilly slid her arms around his waist, laying her palms against his flat abdomen. The music of the guitar vibrated against the back of her hands where they were sandwiched between his body and the smooth wood.

"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."

When he finished the song, he flipped the guitar and laid it against the edge of the couch, string side down. Lilly opened her eyes and looked into his face as he turned to look at her. She knew tears covered her cheeks, but had given up trying to stop them after the first chorus of the song. They weren't sad tears, not anymore. Jace laid his palm against her damp skin, his thumb brushing along her cheekbone.

"I missed you," she managed to whisper, her voice cracking and fading. She licked her lips, tasting the salty tinge from her tears. "I missed you so much."

Jace held her face in his hands and leaned in to press his mouth over hers. The kiss was still, the purpose contact more than sexual need. A shuddered sob ricocheted through her and she threw her arms around his neck, unable to hold it back. Jace held her, wrapping her in his embrace.

"Oh, darlin'," he whispered against the side of her throat. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She shook her head. "Don't ever be sorry for coming home to me."

His lips returned to hers, and this time the kiss stole her breath and liquid heat instantly rolled through her, filling her limbs and making her ache. Jace hooked his hand beneath her knee and with one fluid motion, pulled her across his lap. His touch slid over her bare thighs, beneath the hem of her tee shirt, shifting the cotton of her panties. The hard ridge of his arousal pressed between her thighs and Lilly gasped between deep kisses.

Jace pushed the tee shirt up, cupping her breasts beneath the fabric and she gasped. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked down at Jamie, who was sound asleep.

Lilly slid off the couch to kneel on the floor, inching backwards as she urged him to follow. A quick grin tugged at one corner of his sexy mouth and as his knees hit the floor. He let her take the lead and laid down on his back, his hands tugging at her tee shirt until she rose over him and pulled it over her head. Jace kicked off the loose shorts he wore as she stood and

stripped her final remnants of clothing. With their gazes locked, Lilly straddled his hips and groaned softly as he filled her.

She bit her lower lip, trying desperately to keep her sounds of pleasure from waking Jamie again. Now was *not* a time to be interrupted by an unhappy baby. His fingertips dug into her thighs, his hips thrusting up to meet her in a steady, dizzying rhythm. Jace hissed each breath, his own low groans trapped in his throat. The coil twisted in her and around him, pulling tighter and tighter until it finally snapped and she dug her nails into his chest as her orgasm rocked through her.

Jace groaned her name, his hips thrusting up one last time, setting her nerves on fire. Depleted and sated, she collapsed on his chest and fought to breathe as the aftershocks pulsed and danced through her. He stroked her hair and kissed her forehead.

"I love you," he whispered, his chest rising and falling with each rapid breath.

She smiled against his damp skin and closed her eyes.

Chapter Nineteen

"It is with my greatest and sincere pleasure that I speak on behalf of the people of Aretu and Raxo to inform you we have unanimously voted to aid our distant brothers and sisters in their fight against a still-unnamed enemy," Queen Bryony said, her voice carrying through the Council Chamber. She smiled across the room to Nick, and he saw the familiar spark of fire in her eyes he had yet to see in any of the stodgy sovereign leaders. "It fills our hearts with joy to know we can now offer aid to those who left us so long ago, and in the end, we may gain new allies on the far side of space."

Nick bowed his head, figuring that solemnity was probably his best game plan given the situation. "I thank you, Your Highness. And I offer thanks to the Council of Seven."

Constantius Dionysius Franciscus stood from his elaborate chair, stepping to the edge of the platform. In a booming voice that Nick was intended to impress more than anything, he plunged head long into a good five-minute diatribe. Annora stood at Nick's side, softly translating each word. Great Umani race... *blah blah blah*... Strong alliances with Aretu... *blah blah blah*... Would prepare their armada... he like the sounds of that... and leave within -

"Three months?" Nick spat.

Constantius Dionysius Franciscus paused, leveling a cold glare on Nick. But Nick ignored it, bowing his head to whisper to Annora. "Did he just say *three months*?"

"I have done my best to translate our measure of time to those you observe on Earth, Nick," she answered, nervously looking to the leader of Rome and the other sovereign leaders. "Constantius Dionysius Franciscus explains that time is required to prepare for such a trip. It has been many generations since our people have sought to travel so far from home, and our ships must be carefully prepared and manned to take on such an endeavor."

Nick jerked his hand in the air, taking a step away from her but she dutifully followed as he turned his attention on the stuffed shirts in front of him. "I don't think you understand. It took me *months* in Earth time to get here. *Months*. I have no idea what's gone on. I don't know what's left. Every day counts."

The Sovereign of Giz'Karnak, who had been pretty quiet through all the debates and deliberations, spoke. Annora cleared her throat, whispering the translation.

"The inhabitants of Earth chose to turn away from the way of the Umani and Aretu long ago. Perhaps if you had shown wisdom then, the fate of your world would not be in the balance."

"Let me guess... you were the one holdout vote," Nick said with a sneer. "The way I hear the story, the pilgrims that came to Earth did it to escape the war you all brought on yourselves. *And*... if these aliens-the Sorracchi-are the ones pulling this crap, sounds like they're just doing it to get back at *you*. So, whether we like it or not, we're being dragged back into the war we wanted to escape."

Queen Bryony dipped her head, a small smirk hidden behind her delicate hand.

Constantius Dionysius Franciscus barked out an order, and everyone stood. Nick didn't need Annora's translation to know the meeting was done, as far as the All Mighty and Powerful Council of Seven were concerned. He bowed his head and huffed, setting his hands at his waist.

"Fear not, Nick. Whether their words or their faces speak of it, the Council wishes to help. They have committed an entire armada, and two scout ships will travel ahead to prepare."

The smothering weight of dread eased off his chest a little. "I want to be on one of them."

"You do not wish to travel in the comfort of the war ships?"

"No way in hell. I made it here in that damn glider; if I can *stand* on those scout ships I'll be a happy camper." Nick laid his hands on Annora's thin shoulders, looking into her pale blue eyes. "I need to go home."

She bowed her head. "I will do my best to make it so."

"No need." Nick turned to the sound of Queen Bryony's voice. She took the last few steps needed to reach them. "One of those ships will be Aretu. I give you my word, as Queen of the Areth that you shall be on it."

"Thank you."

She smiled softly. "There is obviously someone waiting for you, and for you to do anything less than *everything* to return to them would be a crime."

The two women left the chamber, leaving him alone. Nick tipped his head back and closed his eyes. This was it. He was going home. Now, he could only hope he was riding with the champions of victory and not the hounds of hell.

"I hope there is still something to come home to."

CJ sat in the corner of the lumpy couch she and Michael had covered with a blanket in the corner of their cottage living room. She lowered the tiny pink newborn outfit that Lilly had sent to them, her eyes throbbing after trying to focus on stitching a hole without her needlework looking awful. It had been a very long time since she was forced to hand sew anything, and last she did, it certainly wasn't anything this small.

Michael sat at the other end of the couch, an open book in one hand and the other lying gently on Nicole's back. She was in her usual spot, curled against her father's chest. He held back nothing in the affection he gave so willingly to the little sprite. In the last months, nearly a year, CJ had watched Michael grow from a tentative and almost fearful escapee from the depths of hell to a self-sufficient man who still looked at the world with a level of awe and studied understanding. He was different, and yet in his core, he was the same.

A year ago, he couldn't have done this. He couldn't have trusted himself enough, and couldn't have opened his heart enough to let Nicole in.

He looked up from *The Daleks* and caught her watching him. With a small smile, he slipped off the thin-framed glasses he wore now for reading, and set the book and glasses on the arm of the couch. CJ sat forward and ran her hand over Nicole's hair.

"You look very natural."

"Thank you."

CJ shifted deeper into the couch cushions and wrapped her arms across her abdomen. She drew a slow breath, enjoying the scent of the evening air wafting in through the windows.

"Come on," Michael said, shifting to stand with one hand braced against Nicole's back. He held out the other to CJ, and helped her to her feet. "It's been a long day."

Kathleen sat in the darkness of her chambers aboard the Sorracchi mother ship, staring at the video playback screen on her monitor. The image was sharp and clear, a testament to the superior technology of the Sorracchi race.

She paused the image, her blood heating and her heart pounding fiercely in her chest. The effects of rage on her human body were like a drug to her. The pounding pulse, metallic taste of adrenaline. The rush that made her tingle.

It was him.

Michael.

She found him.

Oh, he was different, his hair was longer and his body was stronger and healthier than in his years with her, but it was him. Kathleen laid her fingertip on the screen, her long nail tapping the surface.

"I hope you enjoyed your year of freedom," she hissed, leaning closer to the screen. "Because when I find you, you will learn the price you pay for leaving me."

**To be continued in
The Phoenix Rebellion Book IV: End Game
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The Phoenix Rebellion Book IV: End Game
Late Summer 2006

Chapter One

Monday, February 3, 2053 19:37
Along the Charles River
Ruins of Boston, Massachusetts
Former United States of America

Jackie's lungs burned almost as painfully as her legs, but she kept running. Behind her, echoing through the charred and crumbled remains of what had once been the Back Bay, were the steady footfalls of her pursuers. The cold air bit at her exposed skin, but there hadn't been time to grab anything to keep her warm against the winter wind.

She was lucky to be free.

And if the Areth bastards behind her had anything to say about it, she wouldn't be for much longer.

Her boots slipped on the slick, wet pavement and she fell to her knees, biting back the grunt of pain that lodged in her throat. Hearing the running steps at the other end of the street, Jackie rolled and squeezed her body against a cold steel doorway to pause and catch her breath. With any luck they'd keep going.

The door gave way behind her and she stumbled into the pitch-black cavern of the building's interior. The air was only slightly less cold here, lacking the wet heaviness and bitter wind outside. The hinges creaked as the door swung closed again and she winced, knowing even that slight sound would draw the attention of the Areth soldiers.

Wasting no time, Jackie ran into the darkness as quickly as she dared with her hands extended in front of her to keep her from running head on into a wall. That's all she needed, a broken nose on top of everything else.

Her hands hit brick and she moved along the wall, fumbling for a door or exit to let her move on before they discovered her.

The sizzling sound of a pulse charge rifle echoed through the air, accompanied by the crack of the steel door behind her flying across the open space to crash against a far wall.

"Damn it," she mumbled, moving faster.

Her hand slipped from the damp brick to a wooden door and she quickly found the knob, closing her eyes briefly in silent hope that it wasn't locked. The knob gave and she slipped through into the stairwell beyond. Dim moonlight bathed the narrow tower through the gaping hole two stories up that had once been the roof. She was thankful for the light and grabbed the icy railing to ascend the steps.

But the time she hit the second landing, she was sure her stomach was going to turn inside out and her legs were going to liquefy out from beneath her. She had run at least ten or twelve blocks before reaching the riverfront, the guards not far behind the whole time. After

two days of 'interrogation' – a fact that just plain pissed her off because she had let herself get caught in the first place – her body screamed for her to stop. She hadn't eaten in days, hadn't had water in hours. Right now, licking the sooty black moisture off the walls seemed just as viable an option as anything else.

She hit the second landing and hunched forward, her hands braced on her knees, gasping for air. Muscles twitched with painful spasms and she sucked air through a throat lined with sandpaper and cotton.

The door below crashed open and she groaned, her movement forward more a controlled fall than an actual step. "You have *got* to be kidding me," she cursed, yanking open the door in front of her.

A cold gust of wind slapped her in the face as she stepped onto the open surface that had once been an enclosed building. Half the walls were gone, blown away months before in the initial attacks. The burnt remains of three desks sat along one wall, a frozen and decaying corpse hunched over one.

Jackie ignored the macabre scene, having learned months before that it did no good to dwell. She had mourned for men and women she never knew every time she stumbled on their remains, but eventually there were just too many to mourn.

She was alive, and she intended to keep it that way.

"Go up! Go up!"

The echoed voices of her pursuers followed her and Jackie pushed forward through the deep snow that covered the surface. She was stuck, trapped, unless she found a place to hide. One look at the path she harrowed through the foot deep snow would lead them right to her.

"No way in hell you're going down this way, Anderson," she ordered herself, ignoring the wet and cold as it quickly saturated her pants. Her toes were numb and the aching chill had already hit her bones. She reached the far side of the surface and looked over the edge, hoping for the reprieve of a fire escape.

And found none.

She slapped her hand on the iced surface, tingling needles of pain shooting up her arm.

"Damn!"

She felt the crackle in the air and the hot surge of a pulse blast slice through her arm before she heard the discharge boom. Jackie spun around, pressing her hand against the bleeding wound ripped in her upper arm.

"Stay where you are!" the Areth bastard shouted as he ran towards her, pulse rifle leveled on her.

"I don't think so."

Death would be better than being a prisoner of the Areth. She had seen what they did to Jace Quinn, the way they had sucked away his humanity and his soul until all that remained was a broken shell. She couldn't do that. Couldn't let it happen.

Bracing her hand on the broken wall, Jackie set her boots in the snow and stood on the edge, looking down to the dock and the water two stories below. Her choices sucked. Either the ungiving ground or the icy water.

Another blast whizzed by her and she flailed her arms to keep her balance.

"Don't move!"

Jackie twisted to look back at the single Areth, his buddies somewhere else in the building. Raising her hand to her temple, she saluted.

"See you in hell."

With one final push of her aching body, Jackie pushed off. The rush of air filled her ears and she swallowed the scream that threatened to rip its way from her throat. At the last second, she knew where she would hit, and sucked in one final deep breath before the icy waters of the Charles River enveloped her and dragged her down.