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CLAIRE
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TEARS OF
MYHU

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Tears of Myhu

Claire Michaels

Dedication

To all the people who made Tears a reality:

Moira, for giving me the time and space to finish this. Jessica, for your love, care and belief in this project.

Vanessa, Karen, Wendy, Maria, Tonya and Corri for your honest assessments and cheerleading throughout the whole process and for standing by me no matter what.

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Last but never least to my husband Keith I cannot begin to list all the reasons why I should thank you. If I had to name one it would be for making me believe in happily ever afters again.

I love you all. This could go on forever if wrote just how much! Thank you for always being there for me!

Prologue

The Final Communiqué of the Solemn Keeper of the Word

In the year twenty-three hundred and seven, during the passing of the Comet Myhu, a great and foul storm descended upon the inhabitants of the Blue Planet; a harbinger of the centuries of disease and pollution that would follow its fall. The rain itself was tainted an angry red and many were caught in its unmerciful downpour. Most of those who had been exposed died almost instantaneously, convulsing and screaming in horror as the acid made contact with their skin.

This horrific rain would forever be linked to the passing of the volatile comet. From that moment on, the event would be deemed the Tears of Myhu.

Some remained alive long enough to move indoors, only to expose those who had been sheltered from the rain's fumes. All too soon, sickness came. Within days, the number of people on Earth dwindled to a mere few million.

Those who were left to rebuild ran scared in the shadows. They were desperate for something to hold onto, some sense of normalcy amid the sudden chaos. It was then the Order was created.

The Great Emperor Kin'dar was elected into office—uniting the world under one central government. With his rule came eight short years of peace and rebuilding. The benevolent Kin'dar exhibited wisdom and knowledge beyond those of normal men, and much good came out of his reign. Before his passing, the Great Emperor confessed to the source of his great gifts.

He was Awakened.

As in all great and turbulent times, as humanity faced despair and destruction, the spirits that move within had found a way to restore balance in darkness.

A chosen few were not ill-affected by the great storm. A handful of people survived the deadly fever brought on by Myhu's Tears. As their bodies were wracked with sickness, something within them stirred. When they recovered, these survivors saw the world through different eyes. Their senses heightened and their knowledge of the subconscious mind became more acute. Some could move things with a thought; others could slip into a person's mind. Some disappeared during times of distress, only to mysteriously reappear later. The many talents and abilities brought on by the Tears of Myhu made the catastrophic event even more mysterious. These few blessed ones came to be known as the Awakened, or the Children of Myhu.

The Order welcomed the knowledge of the Awakened. They gratefully accepted all the help and wisdom the Children of Myhu could provide. However, once the Great Emperor passed away, all that changed.

His successor, the Great Emperor Pienu, had a different agenda. His goals were born of domination and strength, and he used the Order's power to carry out his strictly defined rule. He decreed that every new being created would better serve the Earth and its people by having an assigned role. Every person had a designated trade and every being a specific purpose. Unions between man and woman no longer had anything to do with want, desire or love, but were carried out in the name of efficiency and function.

The Awakened protested and tried pleading to all who would listen. However, the Order's grip had taken root. The world listened and did as it was told, too afraid that life as they knew it would revert to the times of darkness and despair that had followed the Tears of Myhu.

Angered by the outcry of the Awakened, Emperor Pienu had every Child of Myhu gathered and sequestered into small camps. In the land that had once been called North America, they were watched, controlled and kept segregated from the citizens of the Order. Before long, the camps formed into tribes. Each struggled to keep their identities and

teachings alive in the face of an unjust imprisonment. The Awakened kept their spirits up by doing what little they could to form some kind of normalcy in their day-to-day lives.

Some of the more rebellious Awakened longed for the days of forgotten society. They wed in secret, had children—their emotional ties hidden from the Order.

The two societies successfully stayed out of each other's paths until one Awakened betrayed their own kind and told the Order of the secret rebirth of passionate unions. Many began to question the wisdom of the Emperor, wondering if the way of the Awakened should be re-examined.

The Emperor was enraged. He sent the horrible army of the Order into the camps to slaughter all Awakened and their children, commanding them to leave nothing but death and destruction in their wake.

Now, ten years later, we are at the end of the Dark War. The Order's Army was too powerful. Even with our enhanced abilities, we could not stop their deadly attack. By morrow, the number of Children of Myhu will be next to nothing.

These words will see fire. They are written only to soothe a man's soul. Within them, a whisper of a prayer will be laid and a secret will be revealed.

I pray to the Forces that the children we have hidden will survive...

Chapter One

“Da’yel. Da’yel!” a gleeful voice screamed. A young boy sitting in front of a small fire turned toward the closed flap on the tent and looked at his mother with hopeful eyes.

“It is Emi’le,” he said quietly.

His mother shook her head, trying in vain to hide her growing mirth.

“You two were quarreling just yesterday. You said you never wish to lay eyes on Emi’le again,” she gently pointed out.

“We have since called a truce.”

Da’yel’s mother looked deep into her son’s soft emerald gaze and ruffled the platinum blond locks that curled atop his head, the way she always did when she set out to tease him. She smiled down at Da’yel, then turned to the opening of the tent and lifted the flap, letting a small ray of sunlight into their abode.

“You may go and play but be careful, do not venture past the outer hill.”

The boy’s eyes lit up. He jumped to his feet, hugging his mother until she let out a gasping, helpless chuckle.

“Go, I will call to you for supper.” She placed her fingers gently on his temples before bestowing a tender kiss on his forehead.

Da’yel opened the flap of his family’s tent and leaped out into the sunshine.

As always, the sight of the pixie-like, blue-eyed girl made his heart thump out of his chest, but he would never reveal that to his pint-sized enchantress.

"It took you long enough," she said in a huff, squaring her tiny shoulders and trying to shake the long, ebony strands of hair that had fallen in front of her face.

"Not that long. You are impatient," Da'yel challenged.

"Not impatient. Excited." Emi'le beamed.

"Why?"

Emi'le opened her mouth, ready to tell him the cause of her great excitement.

Da'yel waited, hanging in the empty silence.

"No."

"No?" Da'yel asked in sudden surprise, his smile falling in disappointment.

"No. You'll have to catch me to find out," Emi'le screamed, taking off into the wind.

Damn her. She was fast, too fast. Her ability to move with the wind was much greater than his.

"Emi'le wait," he yelled.

Emi'le laughed, casting a glance over her shoulder as she ran into a small field.

"Come catch me, Da'yell!"

Daniel Barrows jackknifed from his prone position, once again violently jerked from his slumber by images of his past. He turned quickly to make sure he had not woken his companion. The girl beside him stirred for a moment before rolling over on her stomach.

Cautiously, he slipped out of bed and walked into the kitchen.

He hated that he dreamed; he hated that he thought of his mother, the camps and beautiful, innocent Emi'le.

Tomorrow, after debriefing, he would go see Dr. Chopin again. It was time to get a stronger dose of Entaxia, enough to suppress these damn dreams.

Dreams bring passion. Passion births lust. Lust feeds violence. Violence brings chaos. Chaos stands against the Order.

He repeated the learned mantra in his head, trying to calm the emotions rising within. His world, his function, had no place for emotions.

Daniel yawned and stretched a bit, squinting as he looked at the clock.

4:15 a.m.

He would have to be down at the Centre in a few short hours. He might as well just stay up and get ahead on a few reports. Daniel stood in front of the steel counter in his kitchen, thinking for a long moment. Finally, he spoke quietly into the silence of early morning, his head cocked toward the ceiling.

“Coffee, one hundred and forty degrees, cream two inches, four teaspoons of sugar.”

A small light emitted from a clear plastic container. In an instant, a mug of coffee appeared.

“Thank you, Daniel. Will you be remaining to receive a cup of tea for Ms. Cala Stone?”

Daniel glanced back at the sleeping form in his bed and shook his head. “No, she will announce her own.”

“Thank you, Daniel. May your day bring you great function.”

Daniel took the mug of coffee and walked over to his workspace. The plastic cylinder slid up into a hidden chamber above the counter.

He sat in his chair, flipped on his monitor and skimmed over the Centre’s reports. More raids, more rebellion. The news of insurrection grew more and more by the day.

“Idiots,” Daniel spat out into the silence.

What did they think they would gain by going against the Order? What did they know about living free from rule and structure?

Daniel knew all too well what kind of things came from such irresponsibility. It was not his choice to be the child of an Awakened one.

Mercifully, he was one of the few who did not inherit his parent's abilities. Some were not as lucky. Some like Emi'le.

Daniel squeezed his eyes shut, trying to bite back the pain that lanced through him every time he thought of his young friend. He could still see her there, lying on the altar. The tribal elders had chanted over her frightened form and sacrificed her like she was an animal... Why did he still dream of her?

Taking a sip of his coffee, he returned his attention to one of the attack reports.

Sometimes he wished he could talk to the misguided tribal leaders. If they only knew what life was truly like without the Order's structure. He still remembered the taunting and teasing, the poverty and despair of eking out a tribal living.

Again, he had been fortunate. The army general responsible for sweeping his camp had taken mercy on Daniel. He had tried to hide the young boy and his mother away once the more violent fighting began. Daniel's mother had been caught in the crossfire of battle and met her demise at the hands of one of her own tribal members.

General Barrows took young Da'yel away from the thick of fighting. After the smoke cleared, his tribe was no more. Barrows brought Da'yel to the Centre.

Once it was decided he would cause no harm to himself or those around him, the General took him home and adopted him. He gave him his last name and a new first name: Daniel Barrows.

Growing up among the Order's society was hard at first. Daniel had to fight the stigma of being born a "tribal." He had to work four times as hard as anyone else—prove himself better and tougher than all the others if he was to survive. Eventually the years were merciful, and the talk of him being anything other than the son of General Barrows died down.

Once he gained entry into the Order's Army, the talk all but dissipated. Daniel had a knack for leading men. He kept one step ahead of his opponents and, as a result, his military career was a distinguished

one. So distinguished that his function in society shifted, something only the truly elite accomplished. Most humans only served one function throughout their entire life. Daniel was given the opportunity to fulfill two.

Officer Elite to the Centre. This meant he was one of the chosen few sent out to sweep the streets of any disruption caused by agitated or passionate society. His job was simple—patrol the streets, lead his men and participate in the occasional raid. He enjoyed his job, enjoyed his position. It made his father proud. If these rebels could just see how much better life could be with the Order.

He heard footsteps behind him. Two small arms encircled his neck.

Daniel gasped at the heat rolling off Cala's body. She was letting her emotions control her actions. Daniel had an affinity for knowing when such instances occurred. He could sense emotions in other people. He used it to his advantage, used it in battles and raids to set his opponents off balance. From what Daniel could sense, Cala was feeling needy, insecure and aroused.

"Forgive me, Daniel. I sense something strange happening to me."

Daniel turned and looked at the woman standing above him. "You are riled. You must calm yourself."

Taking a deep breath, Cala stepped back and concentrated. Soon, she was distant again.

"Thank you, Daniel."

Daniel smiled and patted her arm.

"Perhaps it is because I will be cycling soon," she announced.

Daniel nodded. "Yes, I received the certification last Tuesday. We are to start making attempts."

Cala's lips turned up slightly. "Your father will be proud—a child to follow in his son's footsteps."

Daniel stood up and held out his arms. Cala quickly stepped into his embrace.

"Why do you accept affection?" Cala asked.

“Because it is appropriate. We will bring a new function to the Order soon. That is cause for celebration.”

Cala nodded, snuggling further across Daniel’s chest. Daniel gulped hard. Something icy festered in him. This was wrong, all wrong. Cala’s embrace left him uncomfortably cold. This was not due to his practiced aversion of emotion or the act of sudden intimacy. It was her.

Cala.

She felt wrong.

She felt foreign in his arms. His heart thudded for a brief moment before a tiny, familiar ache settled in the center of his chest. He fought it with every fiber of his being.

He was an Officer Elite. He had prestigious function. He had been given the certificate to bring new function to the Order with his chosen partner. He would do as commanded.

Forget his mother, forget his dead friend Emi’le, forget his dreams.

Dreams bring passion. Passion births lust. Lust feeds violence. Violence brings chaos. Chaos stands against the Order.

Chapter Two

“Come see Da’yel!” Emi’le squealed, as she climbed to the top of the hill.

Da’yel followed his fearless friend a bit more slowly. Emi’le had so much courage. Her bravery sometimes shamed him, yet he nursed his wounded pride in silence. Was he not a man? Should he not be the one with daredevil inclinations? Instead, he constantly followed the lead of this impish little girl.

Emi’le smiled and reached down for Da’yel. His heart did that funny thing again. Flutter a bit, pound for a moment and then calm. It only did that when she was around him. A part of him wanted it to go away—tear it from his body out of sheer embarrassment. Another part wanted to revel in it. Reaching for his companion, Da’yel clambered to the top and peered at the view in front of him.

“What are we looking at, Emi’le?”

She rolled her eyes, once again impatient. “Can you not see? Look over there.”

Da’yel concentrated. Setting his sights onto where Emi’le was pointing. He squinted before his eyes widened in surprise.

In the distance, he saw a small patch of green had begun to grow near the lake he and Emi’le had visited a few weeks ago.

The lake lay beyond tribal territory. The two of them had dared to cross the border, again at Emi’le’s urging. They had been found a short while later by Da’yel’s mother. Both children had been homebound for two weeks as a result of that adventure.

“Do you think it will survive?” Da’yel asked, transfixed by the newly grown patch of grass.

He had never seen foliage growing naturally on land. The Tears of Myhu had burnt most of it away. Things like this were the stuff of myth. Even now, seeing the emerald hue firsthand, Da’yel wondered if it was truly real.

“As long as it is not disturbed. That is what the Keeper of the Word said.”

Da’yel blinked and gawked at Emi’le.

“You have seen the Keeper again? That is three times in one week.”

Emi’le nodded slowly.

“He asks about my dreams,” she whispered softly.

Da’yel sat down, patting the ground next to him.

Emi’le settled next to her friend suddenly silent. She looked up at the sky.

He watched her out of the corner of his eye. She looked tired, as if she was not resting well. He knew his friend’s dreams tortured her at times. He’d heard her cries echo across the camp at night when her visions were terror-filled. He hated those nights. He always felt helpless as he lay awake and listened until she again found rest.

“Do they still frighten you?” he asked.

Emi’le sighed. “Yes, sometimes. Last night I dreamed badly. I hate those dreams. I like the dreams I have of us better.”

Da’yel felt his cheeks flame. “You...think of us?”

Emi’le bit her lip shyly, then looked back up at the gray clouds, avoiding his gaze.

“Yes, and you do too.”

“No, I do not,” Da’yel denied, too quickly to be believed.

Emi’le jumped to her feet. “Yes, you do. Why do you deny it?”

The shade of her eyes changed. Indigo—a sure sign of her frustration.

Da'yel turned away. He couldn't look in her eyes. They were too expressive. They changed when her emotions ran too high. Like now, she was angry at him, they went from sapphire to indigo. When she was happy, when he made her laugh, they turned as light as the beryl stone that graced his mother's wedding clasp. Would he one day encircle Emi'le's wrist with that same jeweled clasp?

This was madness. He needed to stop thinking of her as if she was his. They were only children.

"Stop acting like a child and sit down."

"I am a child," Emi'le bit back lamely.

Emi'le plopped down next to him. She groaned, throwing herself backwards into the sand dramatically before turning her gaze back to Da'yel.

"Just because you are three cycles older than me doesn't make you wiser, Da'yel. You keep denying what you are. What you feel, what you dream. You long to be like those outside of the tribe. But you never will be. We're blessed."

"How can you say that?" Da'yel snapped. "Look around you, Emi'le. We're trapped like prisoners. All I want is to get out of here. Have a normal life, go to a normal school, grow up and see places, do things that everyone else does. Wouldn't it be nice, Emi'le? We could..."

"We?" the pixie-like girl squeaked.

Da'yel looked away, feeling foolish. She was only of eight cycles while he was of eleven. They were merely children. Still, something about his young friend stirred him. Ever since they were babes, he'd felt connected to Emi'le—as if he knew she would be around for the rest of his existence. He tried not to think of it.

"Something's going to happen," Emi'le whispered, looking back up into the sky.

As if her words had summoned it, the ground beneath them began to pulse and shake. Dust swirled in the air like a storm was coming and a strange crackling sound filled the air. Emi'le's terror-filled screams echoed in Da'yel's ears.

Huge tanks came toward them, floating just above the ground as they dropped troops across the dusty landscape. The children froze, hypnotized by the scene unfolding below.

“The Order’s Army,” Da’yel whispered.

Legions of steel bodies marched through the sand. The small scrap of green grass the two children had marveled over was uncaringly trampled and torn asunder as the units advanced.

“Why are they here?” Da’yel questioned.

He saw a small tear course down Emi’le’s cheek. “To end us.”

Da’yel opened his mouth to ask what she meant. Before the words left his lips, his mother appeared below them.

“Da’yel! Emi’le!” she screamed, frantically climbing toward them.

“Mama!”

They ran into his mother’s outstretched arms. She gathered the children in her embrace and struggled to keep her footing as the rumbling increased.

“We must hurry.”

Da’yel’s mother covered both the children within the folds of her cloak, shielding them from the gritty sand swirling all around them. The Order’s Army advanced closer each moment, as his mother doggedly continued her retreat through the encampment.

From behind them, Da’yel heard the sound of laser fire. Screams from their fellow tribal members filled the air. Sickening thuds echoed from every direction. Suddenly, Da’yel’s mother stopped her headlong rush.

He peeked out of the folds of his mother’s cloak and saw the Keeper of the Word standing before them. Instead of aiding their flight, the Keeper snatched Emi’le and lifted her into his arms. She wailed, reaching for Da’yel.

“Emi’le,” he cried.

“Please, let her stay with us,” Da’yel’s mother begged.

"You know what must be done," the Keeper shouted, his words nearly drowned out by the conflict growing around them.

Emi'le continued to cry, kicking and screaming in the Keeper's hold.

"Da'yel!"

"Emi'le!"

A laser shot flew by the Keeper's shoulder. He jerked away, shielding Emi'le from the blast. The air crackled with the heat of the laser's passage, the sharp smell of crisped wool burned Da'yel's nose.

"Hide the boy," the Keeper commanded before turning and darting away.

Da'yel watched helplessly as Emi'le was taken farther and farther from him. He felt ripped in two. Emi'le continued to shriek. She climbed the old man's shoulder, fingers outstretched to Da'yel imploringly.

Daniel bolted out of bed, his face drenched in sweat. He gasped for air, scanning the room, trying to focus on his surroundings. Slowly, his breathing resumed its normal pace and his grip on the bed sheets loosened. He buried his face in his hands. His eyes felt like they were coated with sandpaper when he forced them open again.

"You screamed her name again," he heard from over his shoulder.

Daniel turned and saw Cala lying in bed next to him. Her expression was curious yet detached, as if she did not really care what his response was.

"Emi'le. That name. Sometimes you scream it when you have your episodes."

Daniel got up and walked to the window. He stared through the glass, numbly watching the dust dance in the wind.

"It is nothing, Cala, merely an adjustment needed with my Entaxia. All will be sorted out by tomorrow."

"She meant something to you, this Emi'le?"

The question belied her studied indifference. Daniel squeezed his eyes shut, shielding his rage from Cala. *She should not speak of Emi'le.*

Not with him, not here in their bedroom. Not while Emi'le's image was so fresh in his mind.

"She was a child. Killed during the Dark War...it is nothing to cause distress."

The very words were a betrayal to her memory. Daniel felt sick to his stomach.

Mercifully, an automated voice filled the air.

"Greetings, Daniel Barrows. A call is waiting for you. The Centre—Priority one."

Daniel turned and walked out of the bedroom. All the unsettling emotions faded away as he made his way to his office. Years of practice and training took over. He sat down at his desk and turned on his monitor.

"Ready to receive."

"Thank you, Daniel Barrows. May your day bring you great function."

Daniel pressed a silver button on his desk. "Barrows."

"Good morning, Daniel, we have a situation in Section Twenty—Mod/Baker area. There is a report of an unauthorized gathering within a small compound in that vicinity. We would like you to check it out. If need be, eliminate the threat."

"Of course. I will be there shortly."

"Of course," the man on the other end replied.

Daniel released the small button and got to his feet. This is just what he needed. Something to focus on, something that brought him great pride and function. Something that chased away Emi'le's screams. He had a job to do.

This was his world now. Everything before the Order was nothing but a bad dream. Somehow, he would make sure the disturbing dreams never appeared again.

With new conviction, he turned off the light and made his way to his dressing room. He had a duty, he had function. Anything else was inconsequential.

Chapter Three

She stood in the darkness just before dawn, absently running her fingers along the raised skin on the inside of her wrist. Strange how the pain of searing flesh later brought solace in its wake. The pain had soon faded, yet the brand remained as a constant reminder of home.

She felt another presence behind her, hovering in silent expectation.

“Are you all right, my child?” the man asked.

The girl peered up at him, her eyebrows furrowing. Staring at him wordlessly, she blinked and tilted her head to the side, as if she was listening for something.

“It’s time, isn’t it, child?”

She took a deep breath and nodded.

The man looked up at the sky, echoing her indrawn breath. He turned slowly and reached for her hand, steeling himself for what was to come.

“Very well then...”

Daniel put on a pair of black, wire-rimmed glasses and pressed a tiny switch on the left arm of the frames. A series of numbers and a few directional settings flashed across the lenses, and the image of a small warehouse appeared, as if he were standing directly in front of it.

He could see people outside the dark, crumbling building, laughing and talking amongst themselves. A large, bald man sat precariously on a rickety wooden barrel, ushering people through the doors. Daniel knew the portly doorkeeper wasn’t there to control the small crowd; he was

stationed at his post to ensure no unwanted spectators or visitors were near the building.

Daniel continued to watch the activity surrounding the warehouse, fighting off annoyance and restlessness. Why was he here? He was an Officer Elite. Things like this were usually left to his Senior Commanders.

"This seems like a routine citation. What is the draw to this particular gathering?"

A heavily armored man stepped in front of Daniel to hand him a small disk and a handheld viewing device.

Daniel took the viewer and slid the disk inside. His eyebrow cocked in surprise. Several names of the wanted fugitives and images of unregistered tribals the Order had tailed for months appeared on the screen in front of him.

"Interesting. Which of our targets are thought to be here?"

"All of them," the man stated matter-of-factly.

"All of them?" Daniel repeated, completely shocked.

"Yes, Officer Barrows. Including this one."

The man took the viewer from Daniel, flipped to an image and handed it back.

Daniel looked down. He tore the magnifying frames off his face and scrutinized the image before him.

It couldn't be.

"Is your intelligence sound?" Daniel tried to contain his rising emotions.

"Yes, sir."

Daniel stared at the picture. Anger stirred within him. This was a rage he had not felt in years, not since the General took him in, made him feel safe and gave him function. No longer dormant, it now simmered underneath the surface, threatening to overtake him at any moment.

The man on the viewing screen was Hido'ni.

The Solemn Keeper of the Word.

The man who had taken Emi'le away. The same man he had watched sacrifice his young friend to the tribe's primitive gods in a last-ditch effort to stop the raid on their village; the same man who had run like a coward when Daniel's mother did everything in her power to protect them from those that had wished them harm.

Daniel thoughts spun frantically. Everything around him shifted violently as fury flooded his senses. He stepped away from his unit and their backup forces, trying to calm himself. Chaos would not serve him now. Not when he was so close to Hido'ni. Finally, he could put an end to that chapter of his existence.

"Sir, what are your orders?"

Daniel took one last deep breath, feeling his heartbeat slow its frantic pace as he remembered his years of training, the discipline instilled within him. He turned sharply on his heel and regarded the man in front of him gravely.

"This situation is delicate at best. However, if we succeed, the stability it will bring to the Order will be worth it. We must resort to more...archaic tactics."

"I understand, sir. We thought that might be the case. Infiltration gear was brought in. I can go in myself. Perhaps Senior Commander Collin..."

Daniel put his hand out to halt his associate's suggestions. "No, that won't be necessary."

* * *

Daniel adjusted the gray cloak and pulled the hood over his head. He tugged the ties around his shoulders, feeling the hood bunch up, obscuring the angles of his face in shadow. He scowled in disgust as he looked down at himself.

Daniel hated dressing like this...like one of them. The soft cloth against his skin reminded him too much of his youth. His mother had woven all his clothing as a child. Although this ensemble lacked the

touch of her skilled craftsmanship, it still looked like something she would have made.

His uniform, the clothing he was accustomed to, made him feel more comfortable. It was stiff, black and mass-manufactured for function and practicality. It reminded him he was just a nameless face in the crowd; he was part of a society that had brought stability and peace to Earth after years of misplaced trust and foolish ideals.

The Order had already prevailed. Capturing these fugitives only brought comfort and pride to him.

Looking down at his clothing once more, Daniel smoothed the folds of his cloak and nodded at the man in front of him. He pulled a small transmitter from his tunic and showed it to his fellow officer.

“When I get visual confirmation the fugitives are on the premises, units five and seven should advance through the front and rear entrances. Unit eight should await my orders. I will secure the roof if necessary. Have the hover unit stand by.”

The man bowed slightly as Daniel turned to walk away.

“Officer, what is our course of action if they do not let you pass?” he asked Daniel’s retreating form.

Daniel stopped dead in his tracks. He closed his eyes and took yet another deep breath. “They will let me pass,” he said simply.

The officer knew better than to question this.

They would let Daniel in, they always did. That was why he was sent for. The Order violators were primal, simple and foolishly loyal. When they saw Daniel approaching, they would not see a member of the Order’s Elite. They would only see one of their own.

Daniel entered the building with ease. The guard in front did not give him a second look. Confidence radiated from him as he walked in, a sense of conformability. It was as if being here was natural, as if he belonged. The scariest part was that on some level, he felt he truly did. Whatever else he tried to valiantly fight, one truth remained. He was a tribal, born and raised. He’d been taught their ways and traditions.

He had participated in gatherings like this when he was younger—celebrations and events that went against the Order's initiatives. Standing in the shadows, he watched the scene in front of him. Small children ran around like wild animals, women laughed, men huddled together telling stories, drinking confiscated alcohol. From what Daniel could assess, it was a party of sorts.

What they were celebrating was still unclear.

A few different scenarios popped into his head. An unsanctioned wedding, a birthday party—all things the Order had done away with. Setting aside such days only bred sadness and animosity in those who did not have good fortune. To make it fair to all citizens, celebrations were restricted unless function was the direct result of the event.

The union of marriage had been abolished as well. Although monogamy was encouraged, at times donors were needed for more than one bearer. Marriage had too many emotional ties. For humanity to grow, emotions must be laid aside.

Suddenly, the group of children groaned. Some of the woman had gathered them together and were beginning to usher them into another room. Daniel fiddled with the transmitter in his hand, afraid they were all dispersing. To his relief, it seemed as if the woman were just herding the children away, most likely getting them ready for bed.

A woman took a small boy in her arms and cuddled him close. For a brief instant, Daniel saw his mother standing there, holding him. A lump formed unbidden in his throat. Leaning against the wall, he tried to compose himself, only to be bested by fate yet again.

As the children left, several people came rushing into the room. The music got louder and louder, pounding against the fragile walls. Everyone ran out to the center of the room and began moving about, flesh sliding against flesh, feet and hands moving to the rhythmic beat.

Daniel tightened his grip on the transmitter.

They were dancing.

Another blatant violation of the Order's directive. It took every ounce of strength to not run into the center of the crowd and round up reckless

violators. These people mocked the Order and gave it no respect. They cast aside years of balance and function to rut around a dirty floor, pressing their bodies against each other like beasts and savages.

Daniel pushed off the wall, suddenly remembering his purpose. He needed to see if the fugitives were here, make sure the Order's intelligence was correct. Walking through the shadows, he scanned the room carefully. He caught sight of one fugitive, then another, and yet another. Daniel felt a tug within him and, as if drawn by some unseen force, his gaze moved upward. His throat went dry.

Hido'ni.

The man stood above him, looking down at Daniel, as if he'd been expecting him all along. The two men regarded each other carefully. Hido'ni held the long staff of the Keeper in his hand, as if taunting the troops gathered outside the walls.

Daniel moved his thumb over the button of his transmitter, ready to call his forces into the small space. That moment of hesitation cost him.

Out of nowhere, a small child slammed into his legs. The young boy bounced backwards, wailing in surprise. Quickly, the toddler was handed off to a nearby woman, most likely his mother, judging by how the young boy's cries subsided. The girl who had rescued the boy stood in front of Daniel, staring at him in confusion. Her intensely curious gaze made Daniel even more uncomfortable than he already was.

She was young, close to his own age, with red hair and dark eyes. She held his harsh stare with her head cocked to the side, as if searching for something unseen. Could she see past his deception? Did she know why he was here?

Panicking, Daniel pressed the button of his transmitter to alert his troops. Sirens screeched in the air, drowning out the heavy, pulsing music. The girl grabbed her ears, trying to will the awful sound away. He watched her shake and cry out in agony, pressing her hands over her ears. For the first time in Daniel's life, he regretted his sudden action. He didn't understand why, but he felt himself inexplicably drawn to her.

Quickly, he swallowed his feelings. He had a job to do. She knew better, she violated the Order's directive just by being inside the building.

Everyone who'd gathered for the celebration scattered across the warehouse and slipped through escape hatches. The girl simply fell to her knees in front of him, clutching her ears, her pale face a mask of agony.

Daniel's units rushed inside, ready to round up the violators, expecting them to take flight at the first sign of Elite forces. However, the opposite occurred. Instead of running, the gathered violators pulled out concealed weapons.

Daniel realized what was happening a moment too late.

A set up...

"Ambush! Guard your firearms!" he screamed, pulling the girl up into his arms.

The violators weren't celebrating. They wanted weapons, supplies, and uniforms to infiltrate the Order's society. Ambushes were not unheard of. He berated himself for making the mistake of a new recruit. He had endangered his unit simply because he allowed himself to be ruled by emotions. He'd wanted Hido'ni and he'd waltzed right into this trap with eyes closed.

This was different though. The violators were not your run-of-the-mill rebels. He could tell by the way they stood, the way they fought. They had been trained.

Daniel yanked the girl closer and she went pliable in his arms. She stiffened a moment before her elbow crashed into his ribs. Doubling over in pain, he loosened his grip on the young woman. She yanked out of his grasp. Instead of turning toward an escape route, she headed straight for the officers filling the room.

Daniel watched in amazement as she flipped over one of his men and landed on her feet. With a vicious sweeping kick, she took out a man's knees and began eliminating many of his better soldiers, despite their efforts to disable her. She was a whirling dervish—always a step ahead of them, faster and better trained. It was not until his Senior Commander

aimed his blaster at the Keeper's head that Daniel realized what she truly was.

He watched as the girl scanned the room frantically. Her gaze locked onto a chair; a split second later it shuddered, launched through the air and hit his Senior Commander in the back of the head. The commander's body crumpled to the floor, blaster fire ricocheting harmlessly off the wall.

It was not possible. It couldn't be. All of her kind had been killed, eliminated or sent away...

A Child of Myhu.

"Grab her!" one of his men yelled.

The girl froze in alarm. She obviously had not planned to reveal herself so soon. She ran to a corner of the room and jumped high in the air. Grabbing a pipe hanging from the ceiling, she kicked at the dilapidated plaster above her head. It gave away, sending a rain of dust and debris to the floor below. In a few seconds, she'd shimmied into the ceiling's crawl space and disappeared.

Daniel looked at Hido'ni, then back at the small hole the girl had fled through. It was time to make another choice. The man responsible for his mother's death stood mere feet away. His own selfish need told him to go after Hido'ni, avenge his mother and Emi'le, and bring the coward to justice.

The logical part of him told him to go after the girl. She was a Child of Myhu who had been clearly witnessed using illegal abilities. The Order's first directive was the capture and elimination of such threats.

He knew what must be done; he knew what he wanted to do. He also knew none of his men had the skill to defeat Hido'ni's forces. But the girl...

With a growl, Daniel ran up the stairs and launched off one of the rails, grabbing the same pipe the girl had used to break through the ceiling. He swung into the hole, landed on all fours and began to search the small, dark space. The sounds of the battle below intensified. The

tide was changing as the violators gained the upper hand. The only way to redeem this botched mission would be to capture the girl.

Daniel closed his eyes and steadied his breath, concentrating. Listening carefully, soon he heard it, a sound just behind his exhale. He heard her breath, her heartbeat. Zeroing in on the sound, he reached and caught her arm. She shrieked, struggling against him like a wildcat. He held onto her tightly, feeling her determination weaken against his brute strength. The floor beneath him cracked and shifted as they struggled.

Too late, he felt himself falling downward. His body slammed against the steel parapet and broke their fall to the floor below, knocking the air out of his lungs and sending splinters of pain through his spine. The girl continued to kick and punch at him, raining a shower of blows wherever she could reach. Muscles aching, Daniel grabbed her wrist. In an effort to counter his sudden advantage, she tried to wrest free.

Daniel saw the brand under his fingers. The mark on the inside of her wrist was unmistakable. Taking advantage of his sudden pause, the girl grabbed his other hand, surprise flickering across her features.

The battle lay forgotten as both of them stared numbly at the inside of each other's wrists. Their heavy breathing slowed, neither aware of the other as their pulses stilled.

He wasn't sure who moved first. They leaped away, as if their brief touch had burned their skin like acid, yet neither seemed willing to pick up the struggle. The pause seemed to last forever as they stared at one another warily. Finally, the girl cocked her head and held up her wrist. Her dark eyes were filled with confusion, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

Daniel looked at his own branded wrist, opened his mouth to speak words he hadn't dared speak aloud in years. Just as he was going to utter them, two arms encircled the girl, dragged her off the parapet and threw her over a pair of cloak-wrapped shoulders. Instinctively, he rose to chase after them, frustrated at this new development and his momentary distraction. The sound of a heavy object hitting solid mass

echoed loudly through his head, pain rolling behind it in great waves. The highly revered Officer Elite Barrows's world went black.

Chapter Four

Daniel opened his eyes. Emi'le stared down at him. He sat up slowly, afraid to move too fast for fear of scaring her away. This was a dream, yet, unlike many of his dreams, it did not seem like a memory from their youth.

The child took his hand in hers and pulled him to his feet. Daniel stared in shock. His hands were the hands of a man, not an untried youth. He had aged; Emi'le still appeared as the child he remembered.

Daniel stood unsure of what to say. Emi'le covered her mouth coyly with her fingers and giggled mischievously, scampering away into the darkness.

"Emi'le!" he yelled, running after her.

Even the dream-child Emi'le was faster than he was. He chased her down the corridor, just managing to catch small glimpses of her woven frock as she turned corners ahead of him.

He did his best to keep up, but his pace slowed as if he were running in mud. His feet dragged with every step. Daniel knew if he looked away, he'd lose Emile, but sheer exhaustion wore down his resolve. When he finally lowered his gaze, he was treading through deep sand.

Daniel stopped his chase and looked around. He was in the middle of a desert. Fine grains of red sand blew everywhere, pooled around his ankles and choked his gasping breaths. Daniel reached down and scooped up a handful. Its warm weight spilled from his grip and left a strange, red tinge in his palms with its passing.

Emi'le giggled again. He whirled in surprise. She stood at the edge of a large pond. Daniel walked hesitantly toward her and Emi'le's face grew

solemn. Wordlessly, she pointed across the water. He followed the path of her outstretched hand. He gasped, rocking on his feet.

In the middle of the steamy water stood the girl he had tried to capture in the raid. She was waist deep, her back to them. Wisps of steam rolled off her naked form as she hugged herself tightly. As if she'd heard his approach, she turned to gaze at Daniel thoughtfully, dark eyes wide and fathomless. She and Emi'le shared a knowing look before she sank deeper into the water.

She stretched out her arms to Daniel invitingly. He walked into the water, entranced, wanting nothing more than to be in the strange woman's embrace. The closer he got, the farther she seemed to move away. As much as he was drawn to the girl, he turned to glance back at Emi'le, unwilling to lose sight of her. The child still stood at the water's edge, her expression unreadable.

"Da'yel," he heard a husky voice say.

He turned to find himself face-to-face with the mysterious woman.

"Da'yel." Her voice was barely a whisper as she stepped into his arms.

Before he could react, she kissed him, her lips soft and giving under his. He moaned against her open mouth.

"Da'yel..."

"Daniel?" a voice said.

Daniel opened his eyes and saw Cala hovering above him. His head pounded and his eyes burned as if he were on fire.

Cala smiled down at him. "General, your son is awake."

Daniel tried to sit up, only to be stopped by a strong, heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Do not exert yourself, son," the General ordered.

Daniel complied, feeling great comfort at his father's presence.

"What occurred?" Daniel muttered, closing his eyes against the bright light of the room.

“One of the tribals hit you from behind when it looked as if you were going to contain the female target.”

Bile rose to Daniel throat. He gulped hard, attempting to hide his sudden panic.

“The girl...was the apprehension successful?”

“No,” his father replied.

Daniel sighed, doing his best to convey disappointment instead of the relief he truly felt. He knew what they would have done to her, knew that she would have undoubtedly fought until they killed her. It was the tribal way. Daniel’s heart began to pound out of his chest. Why did he care what happened to the tribal girl? She was a fugitive, a rebel, a Child of Myhu. His enemy, one who defied the Order and everything he stood for. Her death should be inconsequential.

He took a deep breath, trying his best to repeat his mantra. Yet, for some reason, his practiced words, his trained thoughts, lacked any real conviction.

“I will get something to bring you nourishment,” Cala announced.

Daniel nodded, forcing his eyes open.

Watching Cala leave the room, the General smiled. “She is a good partner, is she not?”

Daniel sat up in bed. “Yes, she is loyal and attentive.”

“I am glad I was able to use my influence to obtain her for you. I hear you have received certification,” the General said, the barest hint of pride in his voice.

Daniel felt his stomach twist again. “Yes, we are to start making attempts soon.”

“You will bring great function to the Order. Although you are not my offspring by blood, you have affirmed that my decision to rescue you was the correct one. Your diligence is worthy of praise.”

Daniel’s insides knotted. He owed this man everything. The General had saved him from being sacrificed like Emi’le. The man had fought against prejudice and nay-sayers to make Daniel a member of his family.

However, now all he longed to feel was a strange woman's embrace. All he wanted was to fall back into his dreams, see Emi'le again and feel the strange woman's lips pressed against his once more.

"Daniel, are you all right?" the General asked.

"Yes, but I believe the blow to my head is affecting my thought processes. I feel out of sorts. Perhaps some more rest is required."

The General looked at his son again and nodded. "Of course."

Cala re-entered the room, holding a silver tray with a matching cup and bowl atop its gleaming surface.

"Cala, my son wishes more rest. I believe his judgment is sound. We should grant him reprieve."

Cala smiled and placed the tray by Daniel's bedside. She sat next to him, took the small bowl from the tray and pressed it against his lips.

"Yes, you should rest. But first, here..."

Daniel glanced at the bowl in Cala's hand. He shuddered, eyeing the contents with sudden apprehension. Two shiny, amber gel pills lay there, taunting him with their promise of a restful sleep.

Entaxia. Dream suppressors.

"What is it, Daniel? You said yourself you were going to see Dr. Chopin. You must have consulted him, because he came with a stronger dosage for you," Cala said calmly.

Had he consulted Dr. Chopin? Had he made the request? He must have, how else would the good doctor have known to deliver them? Although, he could not recall informing the doctor of his intent.

Not wanting to cause his father or his mating partner concern, Daniel simply took the pills. He stared at them. Daniel wanted to revolt against taking the pills. If he didn't, there would be no sweet images, no chasing after Emi'le, no mysterious woman. No chance to make sense of his subliminal visions.

"Dreams bring passion. Passion births lust. Lust feeds violence. Violence brings chaos. Chaos stands against the Order."

Daniel's head snapped up and he looked at his father, just as the General finished the mantra. He wore a stoic expression. Daniel blinked, remembering what and who he was. Daniel Barrows, son of General Barrows. He was an Officer Elite of the Centre—a member of the renowned enforcement and intelligence agency belonging to the Order.

He cupped the pills in his hand, popped them in his mouth and took a huge gulp of water. They slid down his throat, burning through him like poison, wiping away any possibility of dreams or fantasy.

* * *

Daniel heard a strange sound, a soft whistling just at the edge of hearing. At first, he thought the wind blew through a small crack of window space. He did his best to ignore it, find sleep again. Yet, he could not ignore the persistent sound.

His eyes fluttered open. It was late. His father must have left. Cala slept next to him. Daniel rose from their bed and made his way to the bathroom.

"Cool water, forty degrees Fahrenheit."

"Warning, Daniel Barrows," an automated voice replied. "Such extreme temperature may cause bodily discomfort. Shall I continue?"

"Yes, please."

"Very well. Water, forty degrees Fahrenheit, to commence in three, two, one..."

Water flowed from a spout in the hand sink. He gathered the icy substance in his palms and lifted it to his face, wincing as the frigid liquid numbed his skin. He repeated the process, trying to will away the lethargic side effects of Entaxia. Daniel bent to scoop up one more handful and caught sight of the inside of his wrist.

"Stop water," he whispered.

The faucet ceased its downpour.

Daniel grabbed the towel by the sink and wiped off his face. He dried his hands and sat on the wide rim of the bathtub, still staring down at his wrist.

He did everything he could to hide the marking there. It had been his greatest shame for years, a mark he could never rid himself of. Most of the time he wore a thick band around his wrist. He had removed the band to gain access to the gathering last night. If he needed to prove to anyone what he was, the mark would be all that was required.

A tribal mark, a brand, one given to him as a child. Each tribe had their own markings, a way to identify themselves in the encampments. As far as he knew, his tribe was wiped out. The only two left after the raid were himself and Hido'ni. It was what he'd known to be true. Until today.

Slowly, he rubbed his thumb across the brand. A part of him still disbelieved. It could not be possible, but somehow it was. The girl's brand had been identical to his.

Searching his fragmented memories, he recalled his time in the camps. Daniel tried to recollect a child version of the mysterious girl, yet came up empty-handed. There had been many children in his tribe. All were killed, before his very eyes. Their faces were a blur to him. The only person he remembered with perfect clarity was Emi'le. The tribal girl he'd tried to capture must have been around, but he could not recall meeting her. Judging by the look on her face when she discovered his brand, she had been just as shocked as he was.

The whole thing made his head spin. Why was this happening now? Why, when everything was falling into place?

The noise that had woken him began again—a quiet, odd sound, carried with the wind and much louder this time. Daniel got to his feet, trying to assess where it was coming from. He walked into the main room and stood in the center, waiting. Again, he heard it. This time it was loud, ringing in his ears like a bell.

He trembled when he heard the sound again.

It was accompanied by a female voice.

“Da’yel.”

Daniel gasped, searching the room frantically, looking for the source of the haunting sound.

“Da’yel,” the voice came again, just out of reach and impossible to pinpoint.

“Lights!”

The room illuminated brightly, dispelling any hiding places Daniel had missed.

“Da’yel,” he heard again.

Beginning to panic, Daniel ran over to his desk and fumbled with his receiver. He had to alert the Centre. Somehow, by some way, she was here. Triumphant, he held up his portable communicator.

“Da’yel,” he heard again. This time, her voice sounded hurt, insecure.

Daniel lowered his hand and closed his eyes. She pulled him toward her, her voice pounding in his head. He dropped his receiver, listening to it hit the floor. The sound of the receiver against the floor twanged in his eardrums and tingled in the hollow spaces of his ear canals. Her voice came from somewhere else, somewhere deep inside of his head.

She was calling to him, using her mind to connect directly with his.

Following his long-buried instincts, Daniel allowed her to guide him. He was floating. Belatedly, he wondered if it was his mysterious girl or the lingering effects of Entaxia. Before he could come to a decision, he stood on his back terrace. He searched the night.

His heart stopped.

He saw her crouched on the steel roof of his transportation storage unit. She watched him with curious eyes.

Daniel took a step into the darkness. He raised his hand, beckoning her down. The girl gave a shy smile and hopped off the roof. She landed silently, almost gracefully, and walked toward him.

Daniel felt the sides of his mouth tug upward. She had waited for him, followed him here. She was drawn to him, as intrigued as he was

about their chance meeting. Not since his mother passed and he lost Emi'le had he felt so complete.

"Hello," he said, at a sudden loss for words.

The girl smiled again and took another step forward. Suddenly, the night sky lit up like day had dawned. Loud sirens filled the air.

"Cease your hostility! You are surrounded!" an amplified voice boomed from above them.

The girl gasped, turned and tried to take a flying leap up to the roof. Daniel watched helplessly as long metal ropes tumbled out of the craft hovering above his building. One looped around the girl's waist, another around a wrist. Soon, both of her hands were ensnared and she stood trapped.

Daniel felt paralyzed as the cables snaked around the girl's ankles and pulled her to the ground with a sickening thud. She groaned, crying out in terror as four Centre officers came and stood over her, weapons drawn. One of them turned to Daniel.

"Good job, Officer Elite. We have been following her since her escape. We thought we had lost her until one of our units saw her on your roof. We were going to alert you, but saw you were already attempting to capture the hostile. We were glad to assist in her apprehension."

The four men held the girl up, keeping a rifle to her temple. She squirmed, as if considering the odds of fighting back.

"Don't," Daniel called out, knowing the troops would end her existence if given half a reason.

The girl looked at him, her eyebrows knitted in pain and confusion. He could feel her emotions, her anguish. He realized then what had really happened. He had caused her capture, because he called to her and she naively had answered. Whatever happened to her now was of his doing.

Chapter Five

Cala had not even stirred. Daniel merely walked back into his home, sat at the edge of his bed and stared out at the darkness. Feeling utterly destroyed, he gazed at the spot where he and the girl had stood just moments before. He looked at the pills on his nightstand for a long beat, then simply lay down and allowed whatever reprimand he deserved to deal its heavy blow.

No dreams occurred that night. Nothing but blackness entered his mind, even though he took no Entaxia. A part of him knew he'd refused the dosage on purpose. He wanted to be haunted with images of his mother, Emi'le and the mysterious young woman. Perhaps the confusion of his dreams would somehow supersede the guilt that ate away at him. It might ease the excruciating pain that had radiated through him as he'd watched his troops take her away.

Her eyes haunted him. They were so dark, so lost. She'd looked at him with confusion and betrayal in her gaze, wondering why he did not protect her, why he would not explain to the armored men that she had merely answered his subconscious call. Instead of doing what his instincts told him to do, instead of grabbing her and running into the darkness away from his troops like he'd wanted to, he let them take her.

No matter how much he wanted to dream, there was nothing for him that night. A small, irrational part of him thought perhaps it was a just punishment. His dreams were a nightly torture, but they brought him a small measure of comfort. The images of his mother, of Emi'le and even the fleeting moment he'd spent kissing the mysterious girl all gave him peace and made him feel whole. The darkness felt like a reprimand, as if

the visions had deemed him unworthy. The mere thought made him want to rage.

As always, Daniel did what he was expected to do. He woke up, got ready for work and barked out orders to various devices in his home until he was ready to start his day of function. Before yesterday, this part of his routine brought him stability and comfort. Now he felt an empty void.

"Tonight, we make our first attempt," Cala announced cheerily over breakfast.

Daniel felt the knots in his stomach twist even more. He groaned, hiding it as a grunt. If his insides knotted any more, he was going to snap in half.

"Yes. I will be home by nightfall."

"Of course," Cala said.

Daniel slipped on his black uniform coat.

Instantly, Cala stood in front of him, fastening his buttons and smoothing the front of his jacket. Daniel recoiled as if he had been doused with ice-cold water.

"It is allowed. We need to feel a degree of intimacy," Cala explained.

Daniel gave her a tight smile and nodded. "I must be going."

"Of course." Cala turned to finish her morning rituals.

Daniel watched her leave, feeling relieved. Tonight, they would start their attempts. Perhaps then, he would finally be free of his past. He would raise a new member of the Order. Help it find its way. Bring function to the society he strove to keep intact. Maybe he'd forget all about the girl, and the gnawing sense of responsibility that wracked him every time he thought of his troops dragging her away in steel manacles.

Daniel did his best to not think of last night's events. He made his way to the Centre to commence his daily duties as an Officer Elite. He had two debriefings scheduled for the morning, and normally set the afternoon aside to research leads. Before he went home for the evening, he'd run a quick patrol.

The Centre was all abuzz when he arrived. Reporters waited for the official statement regarding a detained Child of Myhu. The crowd outside had grown restless, wanting to know what was to be done with the tribal member who had displayed powers not seen in nearly twenty years. Granted, there were still tribals out there, people who held fast to the old ways and traditions, or those who refused to become part of the Order. However, none had exhibited any of the mysterious talents the Tears of Myhu brought with its deadly rain.

In the distance, Daniel saw the General standing at the podium, ready to issue the official news. His father always looked as if he belonged in front of the masses. There had been much talk of General Barrows running for office, a fact that still caused angst for Daniel. Many still shunned the elder Barrows because he had raised Daniel as his own. The only reprieve had been that, thus far, Daniel exuded all the traits of the ideal member of society.

He stopped to watch his father field questions. Daniel tried to suppress his pride, hide the smile that threatened to creep across his face. He should not feel such things, but he admired the man standing in front of the crowd. As the only father he had ever known, Daniel could not help but feel something.

“Officer Elite Barrows.”

Daniel turned and saw a young brunette woman holding a red folder. Her blue service suit and badge identified her as Observation Agent Jennings. He eyed the folder carefully. The color meant one thing—hostile interrogation. His heart began to pound against his chest.

“Yes?”

“Sir, we are in need of your expertise.”

Daniel took a deep breath and nodded. “By all means.”

He trailed the woman down a few corridors. She punched a series of buttons and two steel doors slid open. He followed Jennings into the elevator and let her choose their destination. The elevator jerked as it descended, making Daniel feel even more uneasy than he already was.

He stared straight ahead, praying, hoping against hope it was some other hostile, some non-related case.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. He accompanied the female agent down a long hallway. Again, he held his breath, hoping they would not make a sharp left. Left signaled maximum security—only the most dangerous of criminals were interrogated there.

Jenning dashed his hopes by turning left. Another series of codes were punched into a small panel. The door slid open. Daniel's heart stopped.

The interrogation room was no bigger than a utility closet. Metal rails framed a thick pane of observational glass—designed for Centre agents to safely observe detainees kept in the adjoining cell. Daniel studied the girl through the glass. He fought the nervous nausea stirring within him. She had haunted him for hours. He moved closer to the railing and gripped the cool metal bars, trying to calm himself. Watching his knuckles whiten, Daniel silently repeated his mantra until he regained his composure.

She was hunched up in a dark corner, her hands over her ears, pulling at her matted hair, once again in agony because of him. A strange pulsing sound filled the room, most likely an ionic suppressor. If there was too much noise, if the air was too thick with energy, she could not call on any of her powers. For all intents and purposes, she was incapacitated. He watched her struggle to take a deep breath and soothe herself. As she did, the pulsing grew louder and louder, causing the girl to rear her head back and cry out.

Daniel winced, called on the deepest reserves of discipline he had, trying his best not to react to the girl's plight. She looked like a wounded animal. Finally, the pulsing stopped. When she turned toward them, Daniel's eyes widened. There was a huge red gash on her arm. Unable to control his outrage, Daniel forced the words out through gritted teeth.

"What happened?" he grimly asked Agent Jennings.

"Sir, she resisted in the transportation unit. The injury was sustained when we had to secure her."

Daniel gulped, kicking himself for his sudden reaction. He could not do that again. The whole room watched. In fact, he suspected he was observed by unseen eyes through the security cameras. He knew “his expertise on this matter” was only part of the reason for his presence. They wanted to judge him, see how he would react to the girl, how he would handle one of his kind.

Daniel held out his hand, never glancing at the woman behind him. The red folder she secured was placed in his grasp.

“She is not cooperating?” he asked.

“She has not said a word, sir. We suspect she is mute.”

Daniel’s head snapped up. “Mute? She has a voice. You heard her cry out,” he pointed out.

“Perhaps she does not know how to speak or perhaps the language she speaks is different than our own,” Jennings suggested.

Daniel nodded as he looked at the girl’s file. Aside from a few pictures, there was not much. The tribals had hid this one well, and Daniel didn’t blame them.

“What is wanted of the hostile?” he inquired.

“Information on more fugitives,” the Observation Agent confirmed.

“Is that all?” Daniel cocked his head to the side.

“For now, yes sir.”

“I see, and what has been decided about her powers?”

Jennings cast her eyes toward another folder. Daniel followed her gaze and felt his heart stop again. A yellow folder sat on the table—the color of Destruction orders.

“Is it safe to assume that if she does not speak soon, new orders will be issued?” Daniel motioned to the yellow folder.

The agent nodded. Daniel looked at the file again.

“Very well then, by all means, we must extract information from her as best we can.” He kept his voice monotone to conceal his growing panic. He could not react; he could not show any emotions at all, much

less toward this girl. She was a hostile, a fugitive. She had no function in his world. Her demise would bring him peace.

“Sir...”

Daniel turned toward Agent Jennings. Her eyes wide with surprise, she looked over his shoulder and through the window. Confused, he followed her line of sight and nearly jumped back.

Standing directly in front of him, on the other side of the window, was the redheaded, tribal girl. She stared at him with expectant eyes, as if she'd been waiting for him.

“How is it she is able to see you, sir?” Jennings asked.

Daniel knew how she could see him. Despite the fact that, from the prisoner's side, the pane of glass appeared thickly mirrored, the girl could sense him standing there. The pulsing became louder and the girl grasped her throat as if the sound were choking her, then fell to the floor.

The girl shook again, pressing her palms to the ground. Suddenly, she began to cry out and bang her hands against the steel floor. She pounded harder and harder, her anguished cries drowning out the pulsing of the suppressor.

“What is she doing?” Jennings inquired.

“She's cold. In the desert, the sands are warm. You are taught as a child to burrow into the ground when the air turns cold and you have no shelter. It can shield you from the elements.”

The agent looked at the hostage, an expression of total disgust written across her face. “How primitive.”

Tears pooled in his eyes. Somehow, he could feel everything the prisoner was going through. He was aware of it all—her panic, the chill overtaking her body, the fear caused by the suppressors. He felt as if he were the one in that room being held against his will. Try as he might, he could not sever the connection between them. It was as if she had wrapped her arms around him and held on for dear life, counting on him to see her through.

From deep within, Daniel called upon something long buried. Something he had tried to forget. That something, that force, flowed out of him before he could pull back and swallow it. He could not control it.

Her tears subsided, the shaking within her ceased. She looked up in shock, staring at Daniel through the mirrored glass. He stood completely still, his eyes fixed on her.

He felt as if he was outside of himself. The well-conditioned part of him raged against his actions, but the secret part of him, the part he'd left buried, relished this rush of freedom. He concentrated and sent another surge of warmth and calm the girl's way. She smiled as she got to her feet, pressed her hands against the glass separating her from Daniel, and pinned him with her gaze.

"Sir, are you all right?" the agent asked.

Daniel barely heard her. The pulsing became louder. The room began to shake. Observation Agent Jennings looked around frantically, trying to locate the call button.

Daniel's gaze dropped to the markings on the tribal woman's wrist. Involuntarily, as if he were dreaming, he traced it against the glass—two circles linked and intertwined, the symbol for eternity.

The tears he'd tried to suppress rolled down his cheeks.

He became lost as he looked at the girl again. Their tenuous connection surged as the ionic suppressor's power slowed. Yet the strange pulsing continued to rock the room. Daniel's hands shook as he held them to the glass, palms and fingers aligned with hers.

"Sir, what are you doing?"

Before Agent Jennings could reach the call button, the glass shattered, falling all around them in a rain of shards. The redheaded girl flinched, taking a step back into her cell, her eyes never leaving Daniel's. The woman behind them screamed in shock, finally reaching the button that would alert reinforcements.

Daniel snapped out of his trance when he heard footsteps marching down the hallway. He knew the sound. They were coming for her, to

destroy her. Sirens screeched through the air. The girl took another step back, looking around the room for some sort of escape.

Daniel eyes shifted briefly, giving her the clue she needed. Now, without the pulsing and the suppressors to distract her, she saw it—a slightly raised section of flooring in the corner of the room. Her eyes focused on it and the floor panel splintered, revealing the entrance to a small service hatch.

Just then, the guards reached the outside of the interrogation chamber Daniel heard them punch in the codes.

“Go!” he screamed at the girl.

She paused, gazing at the hatch, then back at him in indecision.

As the door swished open behind him, Daniel roared, leaping into the interrogation room at full speed. Shots rang out, ricocheting against the walls of the small cell.

“Jump in,” he urged.

She didn’t move.

Finally, he was close to her. It was only then she held out her arms to him and braced herself as Daniel bent down, wedged his shoulder into her stomach and lifted her off the ground. He headed for the broken floor panel, this time obeying his instincts to flee. Gripping her legs as tightly as he could, he jumped into the small hole, into the darkness, and away from the armored troops threatening to end her life.

Chapter Six

God, what had he done? The last few hours played like a movie in his mind. He could not believe he was the man who had run down the corridor with a hostile hung over his shoulder, fleeing from his troops, sirens and alarms going off all around him, using routes only he had access to. He and the girl had escaped the Centre, for now.

Why had he done it?

Before he could even begin to answer that question, he heard a whimpering in the corner. He turned to see his disoriented companion hunched in the darkness. Daniel walked toward her, trying to assess what he was feeling.

Feeling?

When had he let emotions dictate his actions? Ever since he laid eyes on this girl, his whole world had spun out of control. He had hoped she would know what was going on, what to do or where to go from here. Yet, she sat, helpless and frightened.

Daniel knelt, staring, as she repeated her previous irrational action. Slamming her hands against the hard concrete of their hiding place. Trying to break through, find a bit of warmth or protection in the ground. They were safe here, had hidden well from the Order's Army. Daniel knew they would consider the area swept. He had taught them to always follow procedures. They would move onto the next sector and not return until all other possible areas were secured. Even with fugitives such as the two of them, his troops never broke protocol.

Fugitives.

He was a fugitive now. How had this happened? How did he go from being a revered member of the Order's Army, with legions under his command, to being a fugitive? He must be losing his mind.

The logical part of his brain, the part that had dominated Daniel's psyche for so long, took over. Yes, he was insane. That must explain the reason for his sudden disregard for his duty and function. The doctor had just increased his dosage of Entaxia. An adverse reaction, something that caused a misfire within his brain, made him act rashly. Perhaps, if he went back to the Centre, got properly treated, and returned the fugitive...

The girl whimpered again. She gripped her knees and rocked back and forth, attempting to calm herself. She shook uncontrollably.

Daniel reached for her.

"It's all right," he said softly.

She looked so small, so vulnerable. So defenseless.

Daniel touched her shoulder. The girl flinched. Startled, she pressed further against the wall. Her eyes looked as wild and desperate as a wounded animal's.

"I won't hurt you, I promise," he reassured her.

She eyed Daniel for a long moment, assessing the sincerity of his words. Slowly, she reached for the arm on her shoulder and took his hand in her small one. Daniel watched silently as she brought his hand in front of her face. She turned it wrist-side-up and studied his brand.

She brushed her thumb lightly against his marking. A strange, tingling sensation coursed through Daniel's whole system as her gentle and delicate touch enthralled him.

She cocked her head to the side and continued gazing at the mark in silent reverence. Her eyebrows knitted, as if she was struggling with a thought, searching for something just out of her reach.

Daniel felt his heart slam against his chest. His blood roared and pounded in his ears.

"Same," he finally choked out.

She snapped her head up in surprise.

Daniel took her hand and turned her wrist over, reminding her of the mark on her own delicate skin.

“We have the same brand,” Daniel continued. “I didn’t know there was anyone left of my tribe. I thought they all had perished.”

Daniel stared at her marking, his fingers still encircling her wrist.

“I...I...am sorry I do not remember you. I do not remember much. I know we are close in age. But in truth, I cannot place your face. Are there others left? Did any more of our tribe make it out? I always assumed—”

The girl pulled him toward her. Daniel resisted and tried to pull back, but she grabbed his service suit and yanked him forward. She licked her lips, ducking to capture his mouth with hers.

Daniel’s eyes widened in shock as he shook his head and again attempted to step away. The girl did not relinquish her hold. Using his stupor to her advantage, she deepened their kiss. She let go of his service suit long enough to snake her hands around his neck, moaning throatily against his lips.

It was the moan that did it. All logic and reason had already begun to slip from Daniel’s conscious thoughts, but when she moaned, he was truly lost. Their tongues danced, taunting, teasing each other’s senses, enchanting Daniel further. He inhaled, taking in her scent. She smelled of the desert, spicy, perfumed and exotic. It reminded him of his childhood, his life before the Order, all the happiness and laughter he’d had when he was young and naive. It made him ache with a pain he had not felt in years.

Something inside him broke and flooded over the walls he’d built up over time. He grabbed the girl by her shoulders and hauled her to her feet. His former disciplined reason helped him pull out of their fevered embrace.

His fists clenched and unclenched reflexively, and his breathing became less frantic as he tried to subdue his rising passion. He could not. She smelled too good, felt too wonderful. She reminded him of

everything he had fought so hard to let go of. She was too much like his dreams.

Taking an enormous breath, Daniel began to whisper his mantra.

“Dreams bring passion. Passion births lust. Lust feeds...”

At his muttered words, the girl reached out, her dainty fingers stroking his cheek. Tears filled her eyes as she looked at him questioningly.

“Lust feeds...”

His sight went blurry right before he hauled her into his arms and ravaged her with another all-consuming kiss. Her passion matched his as they both pulled at his service suit and freed Daniel from his garments. The feel of her bare hands on his chest burned his skin. He groaned and pressed her against the wall, wanting to get as close to her as he could. She gasped, tried to catch her breath as the force of his body knocked the wind out of her. Sensing his folly, Daniel pulled away.

“I’m sorry. I...I didn’t mean to be so rough.”

The girl smiled, rewarding his apology with another hungry, sweet kiss. Daniel felt set ablaze, as if a fever had sent him into a state of delirium. She was panting, her breath hot against his throat as she whimpered.

The girl pulled him closer, using his shoulders to lift herself higher, and latched her legs around his waist. Any rational thoughts Daniel might have had were violently shattered as he rested her hips atop his and impaled his length within her. Daniel gasped at the feel of her, gritting his teeth as she enveloped him tightly.

As he ended that first delicious thrust, something tugged against him, tearing in the wake of his passage. The girl cried out in pain and lowered her head against his shoulder, trying to hide her slight moans.

Daniel blinked in shock.

She was untried, unprepared. When mating occurred in functional society, certain measures were taken to make sure the female would not endure such discomfort. The Order sedated women as the natural barrier

was extracted, ensuring no pain would ensue from later attempts to produce children.

But she was not part of functional society. She was a tribal—she held this part of herself sacred. Yet, she had given it to him, freely and willingly.

As if she read his thoughts, she raised her head and smiled softly down at him.

Something shattered within him. Her lips trembled and a single tear rolled down her cheek. Yet, for some reason, she was beaming at him.

He supported her hips with one arm and reached up to her face with the other. Gently, he wiped the tear from her cheek.

“Why?” he quietly asked.

It did not make sense. Why had she allowed this, why did she give him something so precious? He was a stranger, nobody to her. Yet she had given herself without restraint.

Her hips jerked, driving him deeper inside, banishing his thoughts. He was completely sheathed, surrounded by her warmth, her acceptance. She kissed him again, using both hands to lift herself up, then slide slowly back down.

Daniel groaned. He pulled back, biting his lip. He tried in vain to hold onto some of his practiced self-control, anything that would lengthen this moment, unwilling to let it end. She wrapped her arms around his neck and tightened her grip.

“Why?” Daniel’s voice filled with desperation.

He needed to know before he threw all he knew about himself away. He needed to understand before she shattered him with her warmth, her scent and her tears.

The girl pulled back to look at him. She tugged at the hand that had stroked her cheek and laid a soft kiss on the inside of Daniel’s wrist.

“Same,” she said, with barely a whisper of sound.

Before he could process the significance of her statement, before he could find that elusive thing he needed to hold onto, she quaked in his

arms. Her movements became more and more frantic. She began to spasm around him, rearing her head back in ecstasy.

Daniel's whole body trembled. The fever rushed through him as his entire being was hurled into a state of chaos. Fear, joy, pleasure, pain, confusion and contentment all became one as their screams of pleasure echoed each other's.

No longer able to support their collective weight, Daniel slid the two of them down the wall. Daniel settled on his back, holding her tightly against him, keeping her body off the cold concrete.

He sensed the change in her breathing pattern as she drifted off into slumber. Daniel just lay there, staring up at the darkness. It wasn't the drugs; there was no logic to his actions, no real tangible reason why he chose to save the girl currently asleep in his arms.

They would have destroyed her. He had made a choice, a choice that went against everything he was raised to believe, everything he thought about his own kind. He sacrificed it all for her.

None of that mattered now. He was too tired, too frightened to sort it out. All he knew was the things that he feared now were not logical.

They were fugitives. He had betrayed his father, his troops, his function and his entire way of life. If they caught him, he would be banished, sent away or put to death. Yet, none of those things caused him fear.

For all the chaos, all the madness, all the dread, nothing felt as good, or as right, as the girl slumbering in his embrace. What scared him—petrified him beyond words—was the thought that somehow, the Order would find her, destroy her and take her away.

Take her from him.

That was his only fear.

Chapter Seven

An icy breeze swept over Daniel's prone body. He twitched and shuddered at the sudden chill, and reached for his mute companion. His seeking fingers found nothing but cold concrete beneath him. Strangely, last night he had slept better than he had in years. Her slight body, its soft and warm presence, had comforted him through what should have been a long and restless night. Not since his childhood in the desert had he awoken so rested. He had only slumbered that easily in the camps, with his mother humming a lullaby in his ear to chase away his fears.

The sound of steel rolling against the pavement jarred him completely awake. He could hear the girl beginning to mewl in fear. Opening his eyes, he choked back a startled shout. She crouched over him, gripping tightly to the lapels of his service uniform, shaking him back and forth, a look of abject terror written across her petite features.

She looked at him and then out the window, in obvious panic. The sounds of search teams surrounded them. Then he pulled her to the ground, rolling both of them underneath the sunlit window. Daniel covered her mouth, muffling her shriek of surprise.

"Area forty-seven is clear."

The officer's voice echoed through the building. They lay frozen as foot patrols searched near the abandoned warehouse that had hidden them overnight. It was only a matter of time before they were found. The Infra-Units would do a second sweep soon after the scouts had done their preliminaries.

Infrared scanners and detailed schematics of building plans had eliminated traditional door-to-door searches. The Centre troops would let

fugitives believe they were safely hidden, then send a team to apprehend them after the scanners had done their work. It was an effective strategy.

It was efficient and deadly, just like the Centre had trained him to be.

By the Gods, how would he keep her safe now?

The girl squirmed in his arms, silently begging him to release his hold on her. At first, Daniel struggled, keeping her closely bound to him. He realized she wasn't going to give up her silent pleas. Reluctantly, he loosened his desperate grip.

The girl crawled across the floor, pushed away some piled debris in the corner and glanced at Daniel expectantly. He followed her, intent on examining what she'd discovered while he'd been asleep.

There was a grate in the ground, rusty, old—hidden under the flotsam and jetsam of the abandoned warehouse. He felt warm air emanating from the black depths below.

The girl glanced at the window and back at the grate, silently pleading with Daniel, her eyes desperate, frantic.

Daniel pulled on the latch, trying his hardest to pry it open. Even if he manage to unbar it, they had no idea where it led, how far down the fall was and no clue if it would aide them. Would they manage to flee from the Order's Army or be trapped in a dingy hole? This was not the makings of a foolproof escape, but it was something. Gritting his teeth, he pulled at the grate again. The rusty steel crumbled under his hands, but it did not move.

In the distance, he heard the unmistakable whirring sound of hover-copter blades. The Infra-Units were heading toward their sector.

The girl must have heard them as well, because she shot him an incredulous glare and pointed at the steel closing again. Daniel pulled even harder, muscles straining against the cloth of his service suit. Still, it did not budge.

The girl huffed in exasperation. She pushed him away by his shoulders and placed her hands on either side of the metal bars. Daniel struggled to keep his footing as he watched. She took several large

breaths to collect herself and tilted her head to the side. Daniel recognized that look of intense focus on her face.

As he expected, the grate rumbled beneath her fingertips, then broke free of the aged concrete. Daniel grabbed it in mid-flight, knowing the crash it made on impact would alert the Order's search party. He gently placed it next to the opening as the girl lowered herself into the hole. Daniel scrambled after her. He felt her grab his ankle, guiding his foot to the ledge below...no...it felt like a ladder.

Daniel began his descent. Before he lowered his entire body down the ladder, he grabbed the grate and some of the trash that had surrounded it. He secured the grill above their heads, wedging the debris through the gaps between the bars. Hopefully, that would conceal their escape route long enough for them to get clear of the scanners. She tugged his ankle again, urging him to move faster.

Daniel followed his companion down the ladder. The blackness surrounding them made the journey last forever; it was too hard to judge the distance they'd traveled in pitch blackness. After what seemed like an eternity, he felt solid ground beneath his feet.

The sound of rushing water met his ears and the smell of musty water filled his nostrils. It took all his effort not to gag against the terrible reek. He heard the girl step in front of him and clamber up the ladder a few rungs, followed by the sound of tearing fabric. A scrap of soft cotton was placed across his nose. He replaced her hand with his, listening to the sound of her resuming her descent.

Daniel guessed that she'd tore off some of the delicate cotton of her shirt to chase away the disgusting stench. The putrid smell was replaced with the scent of the girl; her woven clothing had trapped her heady, spicy scent. She had solved their problem so quickly and efficiently that Daniel suspected such activities must be the norm for her.

Taking his hand, she pulled him along the rough-hewn waterworks system. She pressed him back against the rock wall protectively whenever she stopped to navigate. The light was nearly nonexistent here

and, if not for her hand in his, he'd have quickly lost his way in the dark maze.

Daniel did his best to keep up with her hurried pace. Her familiarity with such travel gave her the advantage. While Daniel stumbled, staggered and sometimes slipped on wet surfaces and unpacked dirt, his companion floated through the darkness. Her instincts seemed to guide her.

When they were far enough away from the stench of the sewers, she removed the covering over his nostrils. Daniel could feel the dampness all around him. They still traveled close to water, but the horrible stale smell had changed to a crisp, clean one. The inability to see confused him all the more. How had they traveled from the city sewers to such a clean area?

The girl stopped suddenly. Caught off guard, Daniel slammed into her back. Fearing he would knock her off her feet, he grabbed her waist to keep them both from falling into the wetness below.

Without warning, the passage was engulfed in firelight, bright and blinding after so much travel in pitch blackness. Daniel felt cold steel against his temple.

"Let her go, you fucking bastard," a menacing voice sneered in his ear.

Daniel immediately released his hold, putting his hands in the air.

"It's not what you think," Daniel said softly.

He blinked his eyes, adjusting to the firelight. Standing in front of him were three men dressed in hand-woven, tribal clothing. One man held a torch; the other two kept their laser guns trained on Daniel. Their fingers twitched restlessly, as if just waiting for a reason to shoot. The laser barrel pressed to his temple dug deeper, the circular metal bruising pressure points and blurring his peripheral vision.

"Not what it looks like he says?" the man to his right taunted.

"Looks like a cold-hearted, soulless bastard was fixing to hurt one of our own. Not so tough without your metal army are you? You're lucky Nya didn't use her gifts to skin you alive."

“Nya...that’s her name?” Daniel repeated stupidly.

He glanced at her, unable to hold back a quick grin before the gravity of his situation occurred to him. Nya. At least he’d know her name when he died. He’d whisper it as he fell into the darkness, remembering she’d made him feel alive again for a few precious moments.

“Quit with the small talk, Tirok, and just end the bastard,” the man holding the torch roared.

Nya cried out. She pulled at Tirok’s arm until the man lowered the gun barrel he’d been holding to Daniel’s temple. Daniel felt the small room spin as Nya slammed him against the wall and spread out her arms, attempting to cover him with her own tiny form. Her quick movement alarmed one of the men, causing them to fire their weapon.

“Nya!” Tirok screamed, as laser blasts erupted.

Daniel watched the blasts head toward them. Oddly enough, the shots seemed to hover in the air as Daniel pushed the two of them to the ground. The beams hit the stone wall right where Nya’s head would have been, if not for Daniel’s quick reflexes. Stone shrapnel sprayed the room, peppering the exposed skin of his arms and face.

The room stilled. The men fell silent.

“Did she...?” one started.

“No, Nya can’t,” another one finished.

Tirok stood over them. Daniel sensed the tension rolling off the elder warrior.

“Nya?” Daniel heard concern in Tirok’s voice.

Nya pushed herself up and reached for Daniel. He allowed her to help him, knees weak from the rush of adrenaline.

Nya flicked Daniel’s wrist up toward Tirok, displaying the brand he’d struggled his whole life to hide.

“Dear God, can it be?” Tirok whispered.

“What is it?” one of his men questioned impatiently.

Tirok eyed Daniel’s marking, then slowly turned to his men.

“He is one of our own.”

The men grumbled in disbelief.

“No.”

They started to argue amongst themselves in lowered voices.

“It is not possible.”

“It is only legend.”

Nya began to shake. She dove into Daniel’s arms as if trying to bury herself beneath his skin.

“Stop,” Daniel ordered, putting all the authority in his voice he could muster under the circumstances.

All the men watched Nya shivering in Daniel’s embrace. He held her closer, trying to soothe her.

“What is wrong with her?” he asked the men in concern.

Tirok stepped forward, placing his large calloused hand over Nya’s head. Daniel fought every instinct not to pull Nya away from the older man. Tirok was only seeking to comfort Nya, perhaps obtain absolution for causing her distress. Something primal stirred in Daniel. She had sought him for protection, for strength. With that simple action, she had deemed she belonged to him.

Tirok sighed. “Forgive us, Nya.”

He met Daniel’s gaze, losing some of his earlier hostility. “She does not cope well with loud noises or explosions. Not since she was a child.”

“Why does she not speak? Since our escape she has only muttered one word.”

The heedless statement tumbled out of his mouth before Daniel could stop them. He heard one of the men gasp.

“She spoke?”

Daniel looked down at her. Her death grip on him had loosened, but she remained in the shelter of his arms.

“She never speaks at all, young one,” Tirok explained patiently. “Come, we must head to proper accommodations. These tunnels are not safe. While we dally, our best men leave the tribes unprotected. We must go back and let them know we have found our wayward girl.”

Tirok tugged teasingly on Nya's hair and she turned to look up at him from the shelter of Daniel's embrace.

"You have caused us much worry, little one. Come now, let's get you home."

Daniel let her go. This was it. She was safe. He could go back to his world now. It was obvious these men would not harm him. Maybe he could think of a reason for his sudden flight from the Centre, make up something, or perhaps do the honorable thing and turn himself in, face death. It did not matter now. Nya was safe.

As Nya started to follow Tirok, she reached out her hand for Daniel's. He began to shake his head, but Tirok spoke before he could form his reply.

"Whatever reasons you think you may have for going back, forget it, young one. Your life with them is over now. They would sooner kill you than look at you, that is for certain."

"I must return." Daniel stubbornly held onto the last of his reserves.

Nya whimpered again, in obvious distress.

"It seems as though we are in a quandary, young one. I fear Nya would only chase after you if you attempted to leave now. For her safety, I bid you come with us. I'll even hold my pistol to your head if it would ease your sense of...what do they call it? Function?" Tirok said, with a teasing glint in his eye.

Daniel watched Nya out of the corner of his eye. She bit her bottom lip, struggling to contain the tiny smile forming across her face. She glanced shyly at Daniel, beckoning with another silent entreaty.

"I have to go back," Daniel repeated, even as he took Nya's hand.

"You have nothing to go back to, young one. Perhaps it's time you came home."

Home?

Did Daniel know what home was? Had he ever?

Daniel looked over his shoulder at the dark path he and Nya had just emerged from. Tirok was right. If he even managed to find his way back

through that noxious maze, they would torture him, use whatever means necessary to extract information from him. They would force him to tell them where Nya had escaped to. If that happened, all would be lost. His sudden rush for freedom would have been in vain.

Nya tugged on his arm, urging him forward. Daniel took one last look at the path they came from before following her lead.

Home.

Was he truly going home? Daniel did not know what his true function was anymore. The only thing that made sense to him, the only thing that felt real to him, was the small, delicate hand in his grasp, the one guiding him through the dimly lit path, ushering him to whatever fate had in store.

Chapter Eight

The tribals led him and Nya to a series of old city canals. Tirok and his men boarded an open raft, loaded their weapons and gear under tarps, and took up several long-handled oars. To Daniel's astonishment, there was a flurry of activity all around them as the group drifted down the archaic canal. Never in his wildest dreams had he suspected hundreds of tribals used these waterworks to travel from place to place. How had they eluded the Order's detection for so long? Where had all of them come from?

Tribals were supposedly scattered, unorganized, wayfarers. Yet, deep within the bowels of the city, they seemed to thrive as a society within themselves. Daniel was grateful he'd conceded to Tirok's plea to stay.

Daniel's manufactured service uniform was completely unsuited to harsh desert conditions. He had already donned the simple, woven tribal clothes of his youth. Before this, wearing the breathable, loose-fitting pants and tunic of a tribal made him uncomfortable and irritated. Some of his discomfort lingered, but to Daniel's surprise, the annoyance was gone.

Emotions raged within him like a dam had been broken. Why, after so many years of conditioning and control, had he succumbed to these uncontrollable desires so easily? He hadn't been able to shake the feeling of immense relief that had washed over him the second he'd made the decision to stay with Nya. He should feel guilty, honor-bound to the society that had accepted and cared for him after his mother's death. Try as he might, he could not feel a thing for all he'd left behind.

By the Gods, there was that word again...feeling. Having one's emotions rule one's being and one's choices. How had he slipped out of his designated function so easily?

He heard someone chuckle.

Tirok stood nearby. The older man pushed the long raft paddle rhythmically through the water and regarded Daniel solemnly.

"You look uncomfortable in your own skin, young one."

Daniel closed his eyes.

"Give it time. We all feel it every once and awhile," Tirok supplied helpfully.

"Feel what?"

"The tinge of doubt—the feeling that perhaps we have made an error choosing to live the way we do—that maybe the Order is right. Maybe what we are trying to do will only bring about pain and destruction. Perhaps we should conform.

"But then I think of my children, my beloved ones who wait for me to return. I think about everyone in the Order's 'functional' society who will never know the joy of friends and family, never be allowed to dream. Then, I know what we do is right."

"What is it that you are trying to do?" Daniel asked.

Tirok bellowed out a laugh so hearty it bounced against the rock walls, causing several tribals walking along the canal banks to look up in curiosity. Tirok gave them an assuring wave and continued to man his oar.

"First, why don't you tell me what the Order thinks we are trying to do?" Tirok challenged.

Daniel shrugged. "They feel you stand against a society that has proven function and order make a race thrive...that emotions and feelings only cause strife and grief."

Tirok shook his head. "You think you thrive? They are slowly dying up there and yet they do not see. You cannot make men go against their very natures. They will eventually rebel. What helped mankind survive

the Tears of Myhu was not function and order, but the drive to continue to exist, continue to dream. The Order tells you that dreaming is wrong. We say dreams are the only way to feed one's soul. Without a soul, humanity would perish."

As much as Daniel wanted to dispute him, use all the practiced philosophy that had been drilled into his head through the years, he fell mute. Something about Tirok's words rang true—so true he felt feeble just for trying to stand against them.

Daniel looked at his marking, suddenly pensive. "How many members of my tribe are left?"

Tirok glanced at his marking and returned his gaze to the canal waters ahead of them.

"Nya, the Keeper and you are all who remain."

Daniel flinched. The Keeper. In all of the confusion and chaos of the last twenty-four hours, he had forgotten about Hido'ni.

Old rage stirred within him. He heard Emi'le's cries and saw his mother's lifeless form on the desert sands. Hido'ni had stood over them superior and haughty. How could these people follow him so thoughtlessly? Maybe they did not know what the treacherous man was capable of. If Daniel had anything to say about it, they'd find out soon enough.

He gulped, trying to choke down his anger. He'd waited years for this confrontation. Fate reminded him it would come sooner than expected.

Daniel opened his eyes and saw Nya walking toward him. Once again, it seemed as if she had sensed his strife. Her eyes clouded with concern. He reached out to her, trying to calm the drowning sensation rapidly overtaking his rational thinking. All the bitterness, all the pain of that day, all the promises of vengeance he had made threatened to blind him.

Nya slipped onto his lap. She wrapped her arms around him, holding his head against her soft bosom. Daniel inhaled her scent—it soothed him at once. The sweet spice of her skin tickled his nose and summoned unbidden memories of their feverish embrace the night before. She stroked his hair and softly kissed the top of his head.

“You mean much to her,” Tirok said quietly.

Daniel looked into her eyes. Something warm and caring shone in her expression, something more than the concern she’d shown him.

“Why do you say that?” Daniel asked, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Nya never lets people close to her. Generally, she speaks to no one. Occasionally, the Keeper of the Word is blessed with a few words, but for the most part she holds all around her at arm’s length. I suppose it is hard for her...being the last.”

“The last what?”

Tirok looked at Daniel with a sober expression.

“The last of the Children of Myhu, the last of the Awakened. Nya is special, young one. Although she holds the lot of us away, we still feel her love and affection. She has a purity all the rest of us lack, despite our search for a new and better life.”

At Tirok’s words, Nya lowered her head and stared down at her hands.

“It makes her uncomfortable when you talk as if she can’t hear you,” Daniel said, unable to prevent the sound of reproach in his voice.

“How do you know that?” Tirok asked, shocked more than offended.

Daniel slowly shook his head. “I...I don’t know. I could just tell, I guess,” he replied, his voice faltering.

Daniel tilted her chin upward, forcing her to look into his eyes. It wasn’t instinct, it wasn’t her body language. She had told him. He had heard her voice in his head.

“They do that all the time. Talk as if I cannot hear, as if I do not listen. I hear everything. Even things that I beg to be silent.”

Nya curled her hand around Daniel’s neck and shyly nestled her head into his shoulder, watching him through her lashes.

He smiled, silently reassuring her that he would not let anyone know what had just occurred between them. His sudden loyalty was completely inexplicable, but the rewards were more than worth his sacrifice.

She leaned toward him and gave him a small peck on the lips. Daniel felt his cheeks redden and burn. How was it so easy for her to show affection in public? As if it was natural and appropriate for her to kiss a total stranger? As odd as it was, Daniel dared not pull back. He reveled in the feel of her. He couldn't get enough of her touch, her smell, the sweetness of her kiss and the adoring look in her eyes. She made him feel as if he was everything and nothing all at once.

"This will put many in a foul mood." Tirok chuckled.

"My arrival?"

"Aye, that...and this." Tirok pointed at Nya. "Many have tried to court her, gain her affection. She would have none of it. How it will chafe some of our young men to know an outsider stole Nya's heart!"

Daniel watched Nya's lips lift as a faint blush crept across her cheeks. She cast her gaze at Daniel, trying to assess his reaction.

Daniel blinked, shaking his head in surprise. It was all too much and all too soon. First his impulsive actions, his exile from society and now this—the devotion of a strange, tribal girl. Was he expected to make some sort of formal declaration back?

Nya lowered her eyes, trying to mask her disappointment.

She began to pull away, only to have Daniel tighten his grip around her waist. He might not be able to process all his thoughts just yet, but he would be damned if he let her go.

Nya relaxed in his embrace. Daniel got to his feet, keeping her cradled in his arms. He walked gingerly around the raft, seeking a slightly more secluded area for them to rest.

Finding a dark nook between the tarps the tribals had erected, he resettled Nya in his lap. He reached out to stroke her cheek, watching a range of emotions play across her face.

There was so much he wanted her to know, so much he needed to say. He wanted to calm her fears, tell her what she desperately wanted to hear. But he could not. He would not lie to her. His emotions were too jumbled, too confusing. Until now, he had only given his affection freely to three people: his mother, his adoptive father and Emi'le.

Daniel opened his mouth, intending to ask her about Emi'le. He wondered if Nya had known his pale-skinned, beautiful little friend, but feared it would cause her heartache. If he spoke of Emi'le, he wouldn't be able to hide his feelings for his childhood companion.

As if Nya could sense the battle raging within him, she gently kissed his forehead. She sank further into his lap and sighed in resignation, giggling softly as she burrowed her head further under his chin. Soon her breathing slowed. Daniel listened to the lapping of water against the raft and closed his eyes, allowing the soothing sound to lull him into a much-needed sleep.

* * *

Daniel felt someone shaking him awake. He opened his eyes, blinking owlishly as a gleeful Nya came into focus. She grabbed his hand, yanked him up and dragged him to the front of the raft before he was even fully conscious.

Sometime during their journey, the canals they'd navigated had carried the raft to the outskirts of the city. The tribals must have steered down a narrow tributary off the main river and pushed the craft as far as it would go via water. They were beached on a rocky shore, the current that carried them no bigger than a muddy stream. Daniel could see the scrub of desert beginning just past the water line. Two cloaked men waited on shore.

He stepped off the vessel. Here, in the light of day, Daniel saw how crudely their raft transport had been constructed. It was a bunch of wooden and steel scraps haphazardly tied together; the polar opposite of the precise, sleek transports he'd manned most of his life. Surprisingly, even in its dismal condition, it was functional. It had safely carried the weight of himself, Nya and her rescue party. This logic went against everything he had been taught to believe.

Without precise and exact dimensions, no construct can endure long periods of use. Therefore, a design that does not fulfill a construct's specific purpose will result in fruitless and wasteful endeavors...

"Young one."

Tirok's voice broke Daniel's momentary trance. He hated the look of sympathy in the elder man's eyes, as if it was Daniel who had been misguided or misled. The Order had reigned over Earth efficiently and without error for many years. Who was Tirok to look at Daniel as if he was the one lost without guidance or shelter?

Tirok seemed to see the rage stirring behind Daniel's eyes. He motioned to the waiting men. The one wearing a green cloak stepped forward and spoke quietly to Tirok for a few moments, glancing at Daniel curiously as they talked.

Nya moved closer to Daniel, still holding his hand. She turned her body into his arms, conveying to all where her allegiance lay. It made a part deep inside Daniel ache with another rush of unfamiliar emotion. Not pain, he quickly decided. It was a sweet ache, something that warmed him from the inside out, made it possible to face all the stares and whispers.

Daniel wrapped his arms around her, watching the newest arrivals with wary eyes. The man who'd been talking to Tirok walked up to them and bowed slightly.

"My name is Ofor. I am here to escort you to the Keeper. He is anxious to see Nya. He has not slept since word of her capture."

With his words, Nya buried her head within the folds of Daniel's cloak, her shame and remorse self-evident.

"No need to make her feel worse than she already does." Daniel tightened his grip around Nya. "She's been through quite enough without all of you adding guilt to the whole mess. If your Keeper is as great a man as you all seem to think he is, then her safe return should supersede any angst her capture may have caused."

A small smile played across Ofor's lips. He cleared his throat and wiped the grin from his face, finding it hard to force his stoic look on the couple.

"Indeed."

He motioned toward a large sled with several husky dogs attached. The dogs were muscular with wide paws built for running across shifting desert sands. Their long noses and pointy ears reminded Daniel of wolves, but instead of a wolf's shaggy pelt, their mottled brown fur was short—adaptable to the heat and grit of their surroundings.

Nya disengaged herself from Daniel and walked to the sled. She bent down to pet each of the animals, smiling joyfully as they licked her face and yipped in greeting.

Ofor handed Daniel a heavier cloak.

"Wear this. The desert sands can be harsh to those who are not used to it."

Daniel obeyed, throwing the cloak over his shoulders and tightening the opening on the hood until only his eyes were visible.

"Here let me show you how—" Ofor words were cut short when he saw Daniel had managed the cloak's fastenings on his own. Ofor looked shocked.

"Of course," he said quietly. "You are one of us."

He gazed at Daniel pensively for a moment, then turned to Tirok to give him a hearty hug and a pat on the back.

"Good travels to you, my kin. I will let your Beloved One know of your safe return. She is expecting you soon."

Tirok smiled. "I will only be a day behind you. We want to ensure that no one followed our passage."

Tirok walked over to Nya and hugged her as well.

Daniel stood there, stunned. How did they all do that so freely—show such affection to those around them? The image of his mother appeared in his mind's eye. He remembered her gentle caresses, her loving embraces. Yes, it had been condoned, even encouraged, in the camps of

his youth. The freedom of emotions, one's expressions of love and caring, all of it had been a part of their daily lives. Tears pooled in his eyes and he didn't know why they'd manifested.

"Take care of him, Nya. He has much to learn," Tirok stated.

Nya smiled and took her position on the large sled. Daniel stepped behind her as Ofor manned the reins.

"Wait," Daniel said. "What about Nya? She has no covering."

Again, Ofor looked at him in shock, his surprise at Daniel's concern for Nya clearly evident.

"Nya grew up in such conditions. The desert sands do not affect her the way they might you."

Before Daniel could protest, Ofor roared, roughly jerking the reins to spur the dogs forward. The sudden jolt caused Daniel to grip the sides of the sleigh, safely encasing Nya in front of him. Nya turned her head and beamed up at him. She closed her eyes, obviously enjoying the feel of the wind against her face. The reddish brown sands whipped all around her, yet she sighed as if the feel of it brought her true bliss. Relaxing a little, Daniel watched her as they progressed through the featureless dunes. He hated his confusion, hated the thoughts that warred in his head. Most of all, he hated the fact that Nya held affection for the man Daniel had sworn vengeance on so long ago.

Even with his practiced aversion to emotion, Daniel knew hatred. At last, he would come face-to-face with the man who had murdered his mother and his beloved Emi'le.

What would he do when they got there?

Chapter Nine

All thoughts of revenge, hatred and betrayal vanished from Daniel's mind the second the sled came to a halt on the outskirts of a small village.

"You all right, young one?" Ofor inquired from somewhere behind Daniel.

He opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out. All the air had been forced out of his lungs. His eyes involuntarily filled with tears, his hands clenching the sled's rails.

It was as if he were watching a movie of his past. A past he had wanted to eradicate from his memory. As a child, he used to pray he'd fall asleep and wake up with no recollection of his time in the camps. He didn't want to remember his mother and Emi'le, or the horrible raid that ended their lives. He'd wished for everything before his time with the General to be nothing but a vague dream. He'd hoped it was something he imagined, something he could will away with all of his practiced discipline.

He took a deep breath. Gods above, it was like he'd entered a time warp. The village in front of him was nearly identical to the one he'd lived in as a child. There were tents pitched around a huge circular area, with men and woman hard at work. Children ran all around them, laughing and playing like he and Emi'le used to do. The smell of spice in the air, the whipping of the wind against the woven cloth of the tents, all of it came rushing back to him.

Nya ducked out of his arms. She ran toward the small crowd of people gathered on the edge of the encampment.

“Nya, Nya has returned!” a hysterical woman cried out as she detached herself from the group and sprinted to his companion.

The older woman grabbed Nya, hugging her fiercely, tears streaming down her lined cheeks.

Nya returned the woman’s exuberant embrace. Several children began to jump up and down, tugging at the hem of Nya’s torn skirt, trying to get her attention. As soon as the woman released her, Nya sank to her knees and gave each child her full attention as they rushed to bestow her with hugs and kisses.

“The children all love Nya. They like being her voice,” Ofor explained.

Daniel kept an iron grip on the sled, knowing if he attempted to move, his legs would give out. He lowered his gaze, trying in vain to control the helpless feelings overtaking him.

Control, his life was an exercise in control. Now that well-conditioned discipline was slipping through his white-knuckled fingers.

“I cannot imagine what you must be going through—to be here, after your lengthy separation. We have had many join us, those who have left society to live as we do. But never have we had one return to us after being with the Order,” Ofor supplied.

“Leave society?” Daniel choked out, unable to keep the trembling from his voice.

“Aye,” Ofor replied. “You are the first to return. The only one ever allowed to live.”

Daniel felt his knees weaken again for a moment. “What do you mean?”

Ofor walked to the front of the sled and methodically unhitched the pack of dogs. He glanced at Daniel.

“Tell me, young one. Have you met anyone else like you? Were there any others who were born in the camps, yet allowed to exist in functional society?”

Daniel shook his head. Truthfully, he had never given much thought to others out there like him. He was too focused on his function and proving his worth to worry about such things.

“Perhaps you should ponder that.”

Ofor slapped a dog on the rear end and the creature barked sharply in response. As if they all heeded the same command, the dogs scattered into the camp. They pranced toward the crowd of children, yelping in excitement. For a moment, Daniel feared for the children’s safety. However, the dogs gave chase and played with the children, easily forgetting their previous roles as work animals.

Nya turned to him, wondering why he did not follow. She slowly walked back toward the sled, her face full of concern. Daniel wanted to smile, move, breathe, do anything to reassure her he was all right. In truth, he was far from all right. He still rasped for breath, still felt as if the earth had been pulled out from underneath his feet. He was afraid if he loosened his death grip on the sled, he would crumble.

Nya ducked back under his arms. She looked up at him, reached out to touch his cheek. She cupped her palm along his jaw before wrapping her other arm around his waist and pulling him toward her.

His grip on the sled slackened. He removed his aching hands from the sled rails and placed them on the small of Nya’s back. He pulled her firmly against him before resting his head on her tiny shoulder, uncaring of how weak he must seem. The world around him was spinning; he needed something solid to hold onto.

“Hurts,” he whispered.

Nya nodded in acknowledgement of his pain. She placed her hand behind his head and stroked it gently.

“Safe,” she assured him.

Daniel stepped back and stared deep into her eyes. Nya smiled and rose on her tiptoes to kiss him gently on the nose.

“Here,” she said.

Everything began to steady, as if her strength had seeped into him. His legs felt solid again, his breathing regular. The dryness in his throat

disappeared. Nya took his hand, helped him off the sled and dragged him toward the camps.

A little girl and boy ran past them. The girl paused, gazing up at Nya curiously.

"How come Nya looks funny?" the little girl whispered loudly to her friend.

"I don't know, maybe it's him." The boy pointed at Daniel.

"No Kal, she *looks* funny," the girl repeated.

The boy let out an exasperated sigh. "She always looks like that when she leaves the village."

The young girl gasped, a pretty blush coloring her cheeks. "Oh yes. Of course. I forgot."

Nya smiled down and placed her finger over her lips. The children giggled secretively and ran away. Daniel would have inquired about the strange conversation if he was not transfixed by the two children. Free of guile and worry, they reminded him so much of him and Emile at that age. Functional society seemed so far away from the happy existence they lived. If only they knew how quickly it could be snatched away.

They began to walk farther into the camps. Almost everyone cast their eyes toward him and Nya, naturally curious about the newcomer. It made Daniel uncomfortable, as if he were choking again. To his relief, Ofor stepped out of a nearby tent and headed their way.

"We must get you cleaned up," he announced.

Daniel looked down, belatedly realizing all of his clothes were covered in a thick, reddish brown film. His hands were covered as well. The strange dream he had a few nights ago came rushing back to him—the way the sands of the desert had spilled out of his palms and left a blood-red tint in its wake. He looked at Nya. She, too, was covered in the desert grit. Amused at his reaction, she lowered her eyes and grinned shyly, secretively.

"Come, come, get cleaned up," Ofor said, breaking the sudden silence. "Nya, you know where you need to be."

Nya nodded, looking over her shoulder at Daniel as she walked away. The second she took one step away from him, he felt empty inside. Ofor laughed.

“Lord man, do not look so forlorn. You will see her again shortly. Supper should be lively because of Nya’s return and your unexpected arrival. If you don’t hurry, you’ll miss it.”

“Of course,” Daniel said.

The two men walked through the camp in silence. Something was off. Daniel felt it down in his very bones, but he couldn’t put his finger on exactly what was happening. It was similar to the feelings he’d experienced at the Centre Academy. All the whispers and sideways glances—the gossip spread behind his back. At least at the Academy, he’d known what they were probably thinking. His fellow students had watched him, a tribal, with wary, curious eyes, wondering just how different he was. The snippets of conversation he heard now were not the inquisitive whispers of children, but they still held a secretive quality. They all seemed to share some sort of common knowledge, something Daniel had yet to discover. Somehow, he had to find out what it was.

The ache would not subside no matter how much he tried to will it away. It sat in the center of his chest and pounded against his sternum. Could emptiness hurt this badly? He always thought the hollow feeling would bring numbness in his wake. He was vaguely aware of Ofor handing him a silver cup, steam rising from its depths. The smell of coffee filled his nostrils.

“I am a surprised you are holding up as well as you are, young one.” Ofor slapped him softly on the back.

Daniel took a sip of coffee and closed his eyes, hoping the warmth of the liquid would ease his inner ache. Unfortunately, the beverage had no effect. He wanted to ask everyone what was happening to him. Why did he feel so cold, so empty? Yet, asking would admit to weakness—something Daniel was not willing to do just yet.

He didn’t know what to blame, his own confusion or his rage toward the Keeper. Perhaps it was all the years he’d dedicated to the Order.

Something made him hold back from trusting these people, despite the fact they had allowed him to live and rescued him from the wrath of his own troops. Daniel knew the tribals had firsthand experience when it came to the way the Order's Army dealt with their kind.

"Why?"

"Why, what?" Ofor tossed a handful of small branches into the tiny fire.

"Why help me? Do you know what I am? I am an Officer Elite. My priority at the Centre is that of great significance. Why didn't you just leave me to them?"

"Is that what you desired?" Ofor crouched down on the other side of the flames, directly across from Daniel, and watched him intently.

"It surprises me that you did not leave me to the Order. I have turned in many of you, infiltrated your gatherings. In fact, I have been directly responsible for many tribal deaths. To hand me over to my troops would have been true justice, would it not?" Daniel admitted.

Ofor chuckled. "You use words like surprise, justice, even death, like you have true comprehension of such things. To blame you for your actions would be like blaming a babe for sticking their hand in the flames."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning a child does not know that the fire is dangerous, it only knows that it is drawn to it. If no one is there to watch over them, then ultimately, the most damage is inflicted on the child by their own hands.

"You have taken orders and done everything society has told you to do out of obligation, or a false sense of loyalty. You were taken from us when you very young, left with no one to watch after you. It is not your fault you got burned."

Daniel blinked hard, feeling the prick of tears behind his eyelids. "You sound as if you knew I was out there."

"Only a few of us know about you, young one. All of the men and woman who sit within the Keeper's council, the Keeper himself, Nya..."

Daniel's throat went dry. Nya had known about him? The ache inside Daniel nearly paralyzed him.

"I watched your face as she walked away. You looked as if someone had ripped out your very soul. I was half afraid you would run after her." Ofor smiled at him, a teasing glint in his eye. "How are you feeling right now, young one?"

Daniel took a deep breath and looked down, watching the coffee grounds swirl around the cup.

"I ache inside," he whispered, slowly bringing the cup to his lips.

"You are anxious to be reunited with her. 'Tis understandable, she makes you feel safe. It is apparent to everyone that you have captured Nya's heart."

Daniel took another sip of his coffee and did his best to hide the conflict he felt.

"You seemed distressed by this," the older man observed.

"Nya is very special. She means so much to everyone here," Daniel said.

"Aye."

"I do not know how I feel. I want to say that she is in my heart. Yet, I am not even sure I have a heart."

"You have a heart, young one. Do you remember what they called you when you lived among us?"

"Da'yel." The name sounded strange on his lips.

Daniel blinked furiously, trying to hide the tears that spilled from his eyes. The ache resumed its pounding. He put his cup on the ground and wiped at his eyes with such force he felt his skin burn under his roughened fingers.

"I...apologize for my reaction. I have not said that name since the raid on my camp. It was the day my mother was murdered and Emi'le was sacrificed."

"Emi'le?" Ofor asked, curiously.

"She was my best friend. My Beloved One."

Ofor stared at Daniel, appearing stunned by the young man's knowledge.

Beloved One. Daniel remembered it was a title used for tribals who were mated to one another, those that joined together out of love and affection. To make such a statement was not only shocking, but completely unheard of. Such a title was sacred to these people. Furthermore, he was merely a child at the time. For him to profess the understanding that he had found his mate was unprecedented.

Daniel jumped to his feet, feeling foolish for his outburst.

What had possessed him to make such a bold statement a mere day after Nya had given herself to him? What was wrong with him? He would hurt Nya, hurt the people that had given him nothing but kindness. He had no heart, knew nothing of what it meant to truly feel. All that had died in the chaos of a bloody raid that had taken everything he held dear.

"Calm down, Da'yel. Perhaps you should speak to the Keeper," Olaf suggested, his dark eyes warm with concern.

Daniel clenched his fists at his sides, trying to still the shaking fury overtaking him.

"My name is Daniel," he snapped. "And your damn Keeper is nothing but a coward and a murderer."

Daniel tried to stalk away.

"Young one," he heard Ofor protest.

Daniel stopped, but did not turn back.

"Things are not always what they appear to be. Before you act rashly, perhaps you should search your mind and find some peace in the answers hidden deep within."

Chapter Ten

Daniel had enough of Ofor's preaching, the double talk and half answers. He would end this. Let all these people see the Keeper for what he was. Take down the legendary Hido'ni. He stormed toward the center of the village, trying to seek out the Keeper's tent.

Just then, the flaps of one of the larger dwellings parted and Nya emerged, holding the fabric open for someone else to step out behind her. Daniel stopped, recognizing the figure that emerged.

Hido'ni.

If he had a pistol, a weapon of any kind, Hido'ni would be on the ground, writhing in pain as his miserable life came to a violent end. Daniel wanted justice, wanted Hido'ni to atone for his sins.

Ofor's words came back to Daniel. *"You use words like surprise, justice, even death, like you have true comprehension of such things."*

Nya saw Daniel standing there watching. She lowered her head. Hido'ni placed a small kiss on her forehead and squeezed her shoulders, as if to comfort her.

She turned from the Keeper and glanced at Daniel as she walked away. Daniel felt like he was being torn asunder as he watched Nya's petite form move farther and farther away.

The Keeper stood at the entrance of his tent, holding his staff, the same way he had done the last time Daniel had laid eyes on him. He was staring at Daniel, waiting to see what the enraged man would do next.

Daniel took a step toward him, wanting to begin the confrontation he had dreamed about since he was a child.

But Nya...

She kept walking. She stepped behind a tent and vanished from his sight. He momentarily ignored his anger at Hido'ni and followed her. Daniel ran so fast, he couldn't feel the ground beneath his feet.

He had to catch Nya. The look of sorrow on her face had been clear, even across the distance that separated them. She was scared. Something had happened. Something had made her want to get away from him. Perhaps Hido'ni had told her about Emile...how much she had meant to him.

Did it cause her pain?

Daniel went in the direction he last saw Nya go. The tents all looked like a maze to him. Where had she gone? He barely caught a glimpse of her crimson skirt as she disappeared behind another tent.

"Nya." He ran to catch up. His lungs began to burn. How did she move so fast?

Daniel reached the end of the village. In a panic, he scanned the desert landscape. He spotted her disappearing over the rise of a nearby sand dune. He struggled, clambering up the hill, heedless of the staining red sand. Finally, he made it to the top of the slippery peak and started to scream her name. For the second time that day, Daniel was left speechless.

A tiny hot spring lay hidden between two intersecting dunes. Nya stood waist deep in the steamy waters.

Just like his dream...

Slowly, he made his descent down the leeward side of the dune. He did his best to keep his footing as the soft grains sank underneath him.

As before, her back was to him. He could see the heat rolling off her naked body, watched as she hugged herself tightly against the cooling desert air. Daniel reached the water's edge and saw her discarded clothes lying haphazardly across a rock. As if in a trance, he removed his own clothes and followed her into the water.

As he expected, she sensed his presence. Like his vision, she turned toward him. Daniel saw the apprehension in her eyes. He thought to wait for permission. Yet he couldn't stop moving toward her until he was

waist deep in the soothing water. He stood there unsure of what to do next.

Nya took a deep breath and stretched out her arms to Daniel. Wanting nothing more than to be in Nya's embrace, he quickened his pace. All his thoughts of Emi'le were a jumble, curiously intertwined with his passion for this mysterious and lovely girl who could turn his world upside down with a bat of her eyelashes.

Daniel watched as she sank deeper into the water, heated bubbles encasing her body. To his shock, the water around her turned blood red.

Daniel thought she was injured. Concerned, he took her in his arms.

"Nya are you all right?"

Nya shook her head.

"What happened? How are you hurt?"

Again, Nya shook her head, a hint of a smile flickering across her features.

She rose out of the water. To Daniel's surprise, the red tinge rolled off her skin with the help of the spring's warm water.

"Nya," he whispered, watching her pale skin emerge from under the dirt and grime.

The desert sands had hidden her true coloring...

He remembered what the children had said.

"How come Nya looks funny?"

Nya placed her fingers over her eyes, rubbing at the lids as if tired.

With eyes closed, she reached for his hand, placed something tiny in his palm and then immersed herself in the water. Confused, Daniel looked down. Two tiny, brown, circular pieces of plastic lay in his hand.

Eye enhancers?

Nya gasped as she rose out of the water. The red in her hair was stripped away, revealing the glossy sheen of ebony.

No, it was not possible. He had to be dreaming.

He must be going insane. How could all of this have eluded him?

Nya opened her eyes, blinked away the spring water. Her gaze was as blue as the summer sky.

Daniel felt the tears beginning to fall as he reached for her, lost in her sapphire gaze. Eyes he never thought he would see again.

“Emi’le?” he choked out, pulling her to him and pressing her body hard against his.

“Emi’le?” he cried again in disbelief, resting his forehead against hers, feeling her tremble despite the water’s warmth.

“Da’yel,” she whispered.

Daniel took a step back, shook his head furiously, afraid to believe his own eyes. “No, no, it’s a trick. You’re not real...it’s a trick. He set this up, didn’t he?” Daniel grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her violently. “Didn’t he?”

She let out a helpless cry, snapping Daniel out of his sudden tirade.

“Angry,” she whimpered.

Daniel tipped her head up, gazing into her brilliant azure eyes.

“How do I know you’re real?” he asked quietly.

Frustrated her eyes changed from sapphire to indigo. Just like when they were children.

Just like when they were children...

The truth of it all slammed into him with such force Daniel let go of Nya and flailed backwards. His legs felt boneless and he struggled to keep his footing. Nya reached for him, helping him find his center again as she pulled him into her arms.

“I watched you. God, you can’t be,” Daniel cried.

Nya placed her hand on his face, cupping his cheek in her palm. “Da’yel.”

Daniel looked at her mark. Two circles intertwined. He closed his eyes. It was her. He knew it in his bones. All the pieces came together; all the things he had felt until now had been justified.

Nya was Emi’le.

They stood, staring at each other, tears falling from their eyes. Daniel swiped his thumbs across her cheeks to catch the quickly falling drops.

He slid his hand around the back of her neck and hauled her slight form against his, holding her as if his life depended on it. Daniel lowered his lips to hers and kissed her. They trembled for a moment before the kiss deepened.

“Emi’le,” he sobbed into her mouth as he crushed her lips beneath his. Slowly, he pulled away, wanting to reassure himself she was not a figment of his dreams.

She gazed up at him, blue eyes wide with anticipation and adoration. Emi’le shivered. Clinging to him tightly, she flinched and eased her grip as if she held him a bit harder than she intended. Daniel fully accepted her needy embrace, aching for it just as much, if not more, than she did.

Emi’le wrapped her legs around his bare waist and Daniel slid into the warm cradle between her thighs. She moaned blissfully as she rolled her hips, tightening her knees against his ribs. Skin to skin, he pressed close to her, the length of him hot, thick and hard against the moist heat of her sex. She rocked her hips, creating delicious friction between them.

He lifted his head and inhaled, the scent of her eclipsing all of his remaining senses. Tracing her delicate jaw line with gentle fingers, he silently willed her to open her eyes, to see him. Her eyelids drifted up, and he found himself drowning in her beautiful blue eyes all over again.

She smiled at him, one hand drifting over his chest as she kept hold of his shoulders. Daniel felt himself harden even more, his stomach taut as she guided him slowly inside of her.

Daniel shuddered at her touch, the final walls of his resistance crumbling to dust. Need surged within him. Emi’le climbed him restlessly, ground herself against him. Giving in to her unspoken demands, he pushed his hips forward, groaning aloud at the feel of her surrounding him. He reined in the desire to slam carelessly into her, knowing he could hurt her badly with such impatience. Deliberately, he worked himself in and out, muscles straining with the effort. It became harder and harder to control, his thrusts became more frenzied.

Emi'le cried out, tightening her legs around him, delicate fingers pressed into his shoulders as she held him close, matching his frantic rhythms. He squeezed his eyes shut and rested his forehead in the hollow between her breasts, trying to calm his wild emotions. A part of him still disbelieved he was here, was with her, like this.

A logical part of his brain told him to stop the madness, get more answers to the questions that haunted him. He couldn't. All the feelings of loss and betrayal, all the pain he'd lived with for so long, all of it had washed away with Emi'le's disguise—everything else ceased to be important.

"My Emi'le, my Beloved One," he whispered.

Emi'le trembled at his use of the familiar endearment, as if she knew what it cost him to utter the phrase. She gripped his head and drew his mouth up to meet hers, worrying his bottom lip between her teeth before sliding her tongue inside his mouth. She led his hands to her breasts. The feel of her nipples hardening under his fingertips nearly undid him.

"Beloved," she affirmed, as her inner muscles tightened convulsively around him.

Daniel's entire body quaked from the effort to control himself, but he didn't want to give in just yet.

He waited until her eyes fluttered closed and her body began to shake with the promise of delicious release. Emi'le bit her lip, struggling to keep his gaze. He watched in fascination as her eyes lightened from sapphire to a pale, crystal blue. There was incredible warmth in her gaze, no conflict, no confusion—just acceptance of her own feelings.

She shuddered, throwing her head back as she found completion. Daniel tightened his hold around her waist and buried his moans in the softness of her neck. Only then did he seek release, feeling her accept him entirely, sheathing every inch of him.

They both stood there and held each other, catching their breath and listening to the water lap lightly against their bodies. Slowly pulling apart, they looked at each other incredulously, as if neither could believe their own senses.

Daniel smiled and kissed the bridge of Emi'le's nose, gathering her close. The questions that consumed him still plagued his thoughts, but right now, they did not matter.

Not when Emi'le was here in his arms.

Chapter Eleven

He was there, in the camps of his youth, the familiar battle raging all around him. This time, however, he watched the events unfold as his adult self.

In the distance, Daniel could see his mother dragging his child-self away. He saw Hido'ni running in the opposite direction, Emi'le flung over his shoulder. Just as he remembered, she was reaching out toward the young Da'yel, screaming his name as if in mortal agony.

The elder Daniel didn't need to see what happened to his child-self—he'd relived those moments too many times. He was curious about what had befallen Emi'le and Hido'ni. With one last look at his mother, Daniel followed the Keeper, watching the wise man try his best to evade the Order's shock troops.

"You must hold on, child. Do not let go," Hido'ni yelled to the wailing girl.

Emi'le clung to his back as he turned sharply to the left, halting as advancing soldiers cut him off.

Choosing the only path open, Hido'ni circled back, a new look of desperation in his eyes. He made his way toward the center of the camp, heading to a stone ledge—the one Da'yel and Emi'le had often called the altar.

Daniel gulped hard, unable to remember the last time his dreams held such clarity.

Hido'ni finally reached the stone shelf and threw Emi'le on top of it.

"You know what to do, child."

Everything around Daniel went dark. When things came blurrily back into focus, he saw Hido'ni standing there, his hands drenched in blood. Emi'le was nowhere in sight. The one thing Daniel did see was his mother's lifeless form at Hido'ni's feet. The young Da'yel was draped over her body, crying uncontrollably.

"Where is the child?" Daniel heard a familiar voice demand.

Hido'ni looked down at Da'yel's mother, then back at the uniformed man who addressed him. He held out his bloodstained hands to the soldier.

"Where you will never find her..."

Daniel's eyes flew open. He nearly jerked upward in surprise, but stopped himself when he felt the weight of Emi'le's head against his chest. He did not know how long they had lingered at the hot springs. He did have a vague recollection of Emi'le leading them back to the village.

What he did remember clearly, what re-played vividly in his mind, were the moments after they stepped into Emi'le's tent. The light scent of incense had hung in the air and he had become spellbound by the feel of her skin, the taste of her lips, the warmth he felt when surrounded by her presence. She had uttered no words, had not even spoken a whole sentence to him.

In her defense, neither had he. He was afraid to say anything. If he had tried, it would've shattered the precious moments they shared. If he had uttered his disbelief, she could disappear again. Luckily for him, she hadn't. She lay in his arms, clinging to him while she slept. Her face was buried in the crook of his neck and a thin, woven blanket covered their dampened bodies.

Daniel stared up at the tented ceiling above them, his fingers idly tracing tiny circles over Emi'le's bare shoulder. She shifted a bit and tightened her grip on him as she threw her leg over his hips. Daniel knew she was reassuring herself of his presence. He eased Emi'le's anxiety with a kiss on the top of her head.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a dark silhouette emerge from a nearby tent. The shadow walked around the dying fire. He heard the heavy thump of wood, followed by the sound of crackling embers. The fire flared, casting an orange glare through the thick canvas of Emi'le's tent. A second log was thrown, sending a shower of sparks into the still desert air. As if waiting for something, the silhouette stretched, sat back down and adjusted an object at his feet. A staff.

Daniel's heart began to thunder. Carefully, he shifted his weight, not wanting his sudden alarm to disrupt Emi'le slumber. Soon enough, Emi'le rolled away from him, curling up into a ball on the other side of their sleeping mats. Moving as quietly as he could, he stood and dressed.

Concerned she would be cold without him, Daniel took the heavy cloak Ofor had provided him and laid it over the blanket that covered Emi'le. Daniel brushed the back of his hand over her cheek and kissed her skin lightly. Warmth filled his chest, despite the cold breeze that blew through the air.

Before he got trapped in her spell again, he backed away and stepped out of the tent.

It was still pitch black outside, the village quiet, so quiet he could almost hear Emi'le's breathing from the tent. Everything around him was cast in blackness, except for the fire a few feet away. Daniel walked toward it, gaze fixed on the man sitting near the rising flames.

The man stared back for a moment, then stretched out his hand, beckoning Daniel to take a seat. He moved forward slowly, stopping just inside the circle of light cast by the blaze.

"Hido'ni."

Daniel spat the name out like he was trying to dispel demons.

Hido'ni had been the final piece of the puzzle. He'd been the key to Daniel's past, the last answer to obtain before moving on with his life. All his previous illusions of revenge had been shattered the moment Emi'le crashed into him during that raid. What was he supposed to do now? He had no idea.

Hido'ni nodded, pointing at the raised log in front of Daniel. A silver dagger was embedded in the center of the soft wood, the blade as long as Daniel's forearm.

"What's that for?" Daniel asked.

"It's no secret you have wanted my blood. Our people have come back with reports of an ambitious Officer Elite who wanted nothing more than the Solemn Keeper of the Word destroyed."

"You killed my mother," Daniel whispered, his voice trembling.

Hido'ni sighed, lowering his head. "I am indeed responsible for Nya's death."

"Nya?" Daniel gasped.

"Yes. You did not know your mother's name?"

Daniel swallowed, tears forming in his eyes again. "No."

"What do you remember, young one?" Hido'ni asked.

"I remember you. You taking Emi'le...running away from my mother and I remember you standing over the altar. At least, that's what we called it. Until yesterday, I thought it was a real altar, that you sacrificed her."

"What made you think we did things like that? Did you ever recall such practices?" the older man questioned gently.

Daniel grasped the knife's hilt and yanked it out of the log. He raised it higher, watching the firelight dance across the mirrored blade. The conditioned part of Daniel told him to fling it at Hido'ni as hard as he could. He could watch the old man crumble to the ground and have his vengeance for the death of his mother, for Emi'le.

However, Emi'le was not dead. His memory of her sacrifice had proven to be a fallacy. Hido'ni was right, not one of his childhood memories included any kind of ritualistic sacrifice. What had made him think such a thing? Emi'le hadn't died. She was alive and, until a few moments ago, had rested safely in his arms. His last dream contradicted every other memory he had. Reality itself had proven his recollections false. The part of him that still drove him to end Hido'ni's life made

Daniel's hands shake. His grip on the knife hilt grew tighter as anger swept through him. Almost unconsciously, Daniel stepped over the log, flipped the knife in his hand and pulled his arm back, ready to launch the deadly weapon at Hido'ni.

"You killed my mother, you killed Emi'le..." *No he didn't. Emi'le was alive.*

Yet, the urge to harm Hido'ni remained. For a moment, he had no control over his own body, his own mind. Somehow, whether he wanted to or not, killing Hido'ni had to be done. Daniel closed his eyes and slammed the knife into the ground. He staggered backwards, landing heavily on the log. Shaking violently, Daniel wrapped his arms around his knees.

"Gods, what is happening to me?" Daniel pleaded.

"That drug they give you. That dream suppressor...Entaxia, that's what it's called?"

Daniel nodded vigorously.

"Are you sure that's all it does, young one?"

Daniel took another gasping breath and tried desperately to clear his head. Had his mind ever had clarity? Everything up to seeing Emi'le again was fuzzy. He could hear voices all around him, see his father standing over him, droning mantras in his ear and Cala handing him Entaxia.

He slouched over, breaking out in a cold sweat. Still trembling, his eyes began to burn. He forced himself upright and looked at Hido'ni.

"You were young. You were impressionable. If I could have, I would have saved you as well. Not a day goes by that I do not replay all the things I could have done to save you and your mother."

Daniel glared at the man sitting across from him. He hated the regret he saw in the man's eyes. The pain he struggled to keep at bay. It made it nearly impossible to loathe him.

Hido'ni took a deep breath, composing himself. "But it was Emi'le they wanted. I had to keep her safe," the older man explained.

“Because of her abilities?” Daniel asked.

Hido’ni shook his head. “Because of what she meant.”

Hido’ni reached for a pot that hung over the fire, poured the contents into a small mug and passed the cup to Daniel.

“You will feel a lot worse before you feel better. The drug was in your system for a very long time. We have learned from the others that besides suppressing dreams, it leaves your mind open to suggestion. The cleansing process is difficult, but you are young and strong. You will make it through.”

“Others have not?” Daniel’s tremors steadily worsened. He put the cup to his lips and took a gulp of the heated liquid. It was heavy, thick with desert spices and slightly bitter. As it worked its way down his throat, he felt the tremors weaken slightly.

“Yes. The elder ones who escaped the Order a bit too late. I think they knew they would not make it through. Maybe they just wanted to taste true freedom, if only for a moment.” Hido’ni looked up at the night sky.

“What is the Order doing?” The question sounded strange. Wasn’t he supposed to be privy to the Order’s plans? He had been one of their Elite.

Hido’ni shook his head. “Later, young one. You must rest. I’ll get Emi’le to help you back to the tent.” He stood.

“Wait...Emi’le. What happened to her? Why doesn’t she speak?”

Hido’ni took a deep breath before he answered, as if the words were hard to say. “Since the day your mother died, she has not spoken. She took your mother’s name to honor her. Hardly anyone here knows her real name. She hides from everything and everybody. She feels responsible. Emi’le has never been the same.”

“Why?”

“Because she dreamed about it. She came and told me how it would transpire, down to the part where she was supposed to die.”

Daniel’s head snapped up. “She was supposed to die?”

“According to her dreams, yes. I could not let that happen. She meant too much. So I chose to save her. I was young and arrogant. I thought I

could twist fate's hands. In doing so, I lost everything. My tribe, my family," Hido'ni admitted.

"Family?" Daniel repeated numbly.

His hands were so unsteady now that he had to place the cup on the ground for fear of spilling it. He was burning up. He tried his best to move away from the fire's heat. His teeth rattled no matter how hard he clenched his jaw against the sound. How could he be so damn hot when his body was acting as if it were being frozen alive?

"My family was lost in the raid just as your was. Emi'le knew that and has never forgiven herself. Also..."

"Also what?"

It felt like an eternity passed, waiting for Hido'ni to speak. Daniel knew by the weary look on the old man's face that whatever he was about to say pained him dearly.

"After the raid, Emi'le found her mother's remains. She had been beaten, her neck broken. Whoever killed her took their time doing so. It wasn't done with the Order's normal, so-called efficiency. It was cruel, brutal and every bit as savage as they accuse us of being. After that, she has never truly allowed anyone close to her again. It was as if she lost herself when she lost you..."

As his surroundings began to spin, Daniel slumped over. He would have fallen backwards had someone not been there to catch him. He weakly raised his head and saw Emi'le sitting next to him, before his vision went blurry. Emi'le pulled Daniel into her arms and settled his head against her shoulder. At her touch, his body went lax, immediately accepting her comfort. Moments later, he was lifted into someone's arms and heard Emi'le whimper.

"It will be all right, child. We will see him through it. He is one of our own."

Daniel belatedly realized it was Hido'ni who carried him away from the fire. He was too drained to protest as Hido'ni laid him on Emile's sleeping mats. Someone drew the cover up over him.

“Rest, young one. I promise I will answer your questions when you are better.”

Hido’ni exited the tent. Daniel heard Emi’le rummaging around nearby. The weight of another blanket settled over him, then a gentle dabbing soothed his sweat-drenched brow. Daniel struggled to open his eyes. Although they felt welded shut, he finally pried them open.

Emi’le knelt at his side, her face filled with concerned adoration. Daniel wrapped his hand weakly around her wrist. He knew how sick he was, knew Hido’ni had told the truth. He could feel the drugs in his system, working against him, burning through his veins like liquid fire. He wondered if he would truly make it through.

“Emi’le,” Daniel whispered.

Emi’le raised a cup to his mouth and helped him swallow a bit more of the liquid Hido’ni had given him earlier. It all had happened so quickly. How many days since his last dose of Entaxia? He shivered again, a knotting pain settling in the pit of his stomach. Emi’le rubbed his belly, trying her best to soothe him. She lightly kissed his lips, then smoothed out the blankets, trying to calm her own sense of worry by busying herself with petty tasks.

“I love you Emi,” Daniel blurted out.

Emi’le blinked in surprise, kissed the inside of his wrist and smiled. She lowered her head to his chest and sighed. Daniel tightened his grip around her as best he could.

“Forever,” he heard Emi’le say softly, before his world went dark again.

Chapter Twelve

Through a red haze, he heard the blasts again. Why did he always end up here? In this raid, in the place where his greatest pain had occurred? He felt weaker than usual. Everything looked blurry.

Fire raged all around him. The smell of burning canvas stung his nostrils, yet he was freezing. In fact, he was shivering so hard he could barely take a step. Instinctively, he knew where he had to go. He knew what he had to see. He had to get to the rock table, the place he and Emi'le had coined the altar.

The sand beneath his feet clawed at him, holding him in place, hindering his movement. Why? Why did all of this feel so different? Da'yel legs gave out and he slammed heavily to the ground. His whole body ached.

Raising his head, he saw Hido'ni place a near hysterical Emi'le on the stone ledge.

"You know what to do, child," Hido'ni implored.

Da'yel's eyes burned as he struggled to keep them open. His eyelids felt like lead weights, but he had to see what happened next.

Emi'le began to cry even harder.

"Emi'le," someone screamed.

Da'yel saw the young version of himself running pell-mell toward the stone table. Somehow, he had escaped his mother's grip and gone in search of his young friend.

"Da'yel," Emi'le cried.

Da'yel climbed on the ledge and held his young friend in his arms. Her cries subsided instantly.

“Da’yel, go with your mother now,” Hido’ni ordered, just as Nya, his mother, came running up to them.

“I told you to take him away!” Hido’ni roared.

“He would not go without Emi’le.”

Daniel looked over his shoulder and saw the General coming toward them.

“Oh Gods,” Hido’ni muttered.

“Please, child, there is not much time. You know what he wants. You must hide.” Hido’ni’s eyes filled with tears.

Emi’le started to cry again, eyeing the large stone in front of her.

“Please,” Hido’ni pleaded.

The young Da’yel looked at the rock, then back at Emi’le.

“You can do it,” Da’yel urged.

Emi’le’s tears lessened as Da’yel gently nudged her closer to the large boulder.

“Hurry,” Nya implored.

Daniel watched as the younger version of himself squeezed Emi’le’s shoulders, silently encouraging her. Emi’le focused on the large stone in front of her. It rattled for a moment and then moved to the side, revealing a tiny space.

As soon as there was enough room for her to squeeze through, Emi’le crawled inside.

“Go in, son!”

Young Da’yel tried to fit himself next to Emi’le, but there was not enough room. Even as Emi’le pulled, Daniel knew both children could not be hidden in the small space.

“I will not fit!” Da’yel yelled.

Emi’le sobbed harder.

“Da’yel, do not leave me alone,” she begged.

Da’yel saw General Barrows almost upon them. He looked at his tiny friend solemnly.

“Hide yourself. Do not come out until everything is silent,” the young version of Da’yel instructed. “I will come get you when it’s over.”

Emi’le whimpered once more before slowly nodding her assent. Wordlessly, she moved the large rock over her hiding place, encasing herself in darkness. Moments later, General Barrows arrived with his soldiers.

Everything blurred once more.

No, not again. Not now, when everything was becoming clear.

The elder Daniel fought to keep his focus, to stop the red haze from washing away the scene unfolding in front of him.

“Where is...child?” he heard his adoptive father shout.

Everything went black again. Daniel cried out in frustration.

When the scene appeared again, it was the same image he had seen throughout his life, the one that haunted all his dreams. Hido’ni stood over his mother’s lifeless body while young Da’yel cried helplessly. Hido’ni’s hands were drenched in blood as he stared coldly at General Barrows.

“She is where you will never find her,” Hido’ni vowed.

He looked down at his bloody hands and roared. Enraged, he rushed the General.

“No,” Da’yel howled, trying to warn Hido’ni as a member of the General’s unit aimed a gun at the Keeper’s midsection.

The laser blast erupted into the air and everything seemed to move in slow motion.

“No!”

“No,” Daniel wailed, rising from his bedding in panic.

He screamed out for his mother, for Hido’ni, even to his father, the General. Grasping at empty air, he screamed out for Emi’le.

The flaps of the tent ripped open.

“Be still, Da’yel,” a voice commanded.

Two large hands pushed him back down. He struggled vainly against the arms pinning him.

"I have to help him. Emi'le is hiding, she's waiting for me." Daniel continued to thrash against his would-be captor. He was on fire, the heat of it seared his skin, and still, he fought with everything he had.

"Let me go. She waits," he pleaded.

Exhaustion set in. Daniel could no longer fight against the one who restrained him. His skin went clammy with sweat, chills wracking his body.

"You are in a fevered state, young one. You must rest."

Daniel opened his eyes and saw Hido'ni hovering above him.

"Rest, young one," he commanded. Daniel looked into his eyes. Even through a haze of fever, Hido'ni looked solemn, tortured. It was as if he agonized alongside Daniel, as if he could feel the pain Daniel experienced. "Rest."

Daniel gasped, tried to control his ragged breathing. "Emi..." he whimpered. "Tell her I am sorry. Tell her it's my fault."

A cool rag was placed on his forehead.

"Tell her yourself, young one," Hido'ni replied, with a hint of amusement in his voice.

A small, cool hand rested against his bare chest. Daniel blinked, trying to still his spinning vision. Emi'le's concerned face swam into focus. Gently raising his head, she brought a cup to his lips. How many times had she done this now? How many nights had she spent caring for him? In all the chaos and confusion, she had been there.

Even when he was growing up, it had been her face he saw. Emi'le was all he pictured in his mind's eye when things got too hard, when everything hurt too much. Thoughts of her calmed and steadied him. Even when he'd thought she was dead, she had been his peace.

Just as she was now.

"Emi," he whispered, reaching out with one shaky hand.

Emi'le smiled at him.

Daniel heard the rustle of tent flaps as Hido'ni left. Emi'le moved away. Alarmed, Daniel grasped her wrist.

"Don't go."

Emi'le reached behind her for another blanket.

"I am always with you Da'yel," he heard in his head.

Emi'le wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, then lay down next to Daniel. He shook his head weakly, pulling at his own blanket. He raised it as best he could, trying to control his trembling hands long enough to get his point across.

Emi'le hesitated.

"I need to feel you. I need to feel your skin against mine," Daniel explained.

Emi'le got to her feet. Her fingers found the ties of her dress and she pulled the woven cotton over her head.

Daniel watched her, amazed she let his gaze rake over her naked curves so long. Finally, she lowered herself to the bed to wrap herself around Daniel's heated body.

"There are lots of things I want to tell you. Things I never could. I stopped myself from saying things when we were younger," Daniel whispered. "You always knew, didn't you? What I was afraid to say, afraid to admit." Daniel's voice got weaker and weaker. "We were so young...it didn't seem as if it was possible then. But it was."

Emi'le enveloped him in her tiny arms and snuggled closer. She nuzzled his neck and sighed with pleasure, her small hand caressing circles across his chest. Comforting him.

"You're everything to me, Emi'le. You're all that matters to me now. Being with you is all I want to know," Daniel declared.

Emi'le shook her head, chuckling softly. She kissed his chin and raised her hand to his face, closing his eyes gently with her fingertips. It was time for him to rest. Her body went rigid against him. Her meaning was clear. If he did not seek rest, she would move away. Daniel laughed through a raspy cough.

“Okay, I will rest for you, Emi.”

Emi’le burrowed against him, securing the blankets that covered them.

“Anything for you.”

Chapter Thirteen

Daniel slowly made his way up a small rock outcropping, carefully leaning on a sturdy walking staff the Keeper had given him. Why the old man had taken such an interest in Daniel remained a mystery. Perhaps he truly felt responsible for the horrific events that transpired all those years ago.

The tribals called Daniel's entrance into functional society an abduction and a kidnapping. He was almost positive the General used the same words to explain Daniel's recent disappearance from the Centre. Or did he?

Did the General truly hold any emotional attachment to the son he'd accepted as his own? Or had his adoptive father moved on, continued with his function, made modifications to accommodate the loss of a soldier without looking back?

Daniel recalled how the Order dealt with losses. There was no mourning period or ritual. Everyone went on like business as usual. Within a few days, someone else took up the function their fallen predecessor had once filled. Is that what had happened with his role? Did Daniel really care? All his life, he'd felt as if he did not quite fit. He'd always assumed it stemmed from not being born into his function.

Now his mind was clear. The strange fog that had always clouded his thoughts had dissipated and he could see the reason clearly. While he grew up in the General's household, everyone around had observed him and studied his every move. Had he been nothing but an experiment to his adoptive father? Was that the reason he had never met anyone like him?

Would the questions never end? Daniel had mistakenly assumed when the jumbled recollections of his past became more linear, more real, he would find some peace. However, now that he could see things for what they were, knew that Hido'ni had not caused Emi'le's death, more questions arose.

Was Hido'ni really responsible for Daniel's mother's slaying? Everything about the way the elderly man conducted himself contradicted his claim of responsibility. He was there throughout Daniel's illness, relieving Emi'le when she needed rest. His eyes shone with kindness for those around him. Daniel had not experienced kindness growing up in the General's home.

At first Daniel thought Hido'ni doted on all newcomers. As he got better and was able to amble around camp, he saw that most newcomers were kept far away from the Keeper. Ofor had told him that outlanders were not trusted with the identity of some of the more prominent members of the tribe. Sometimes, it took months for refugees to be privileged enough to become part of a camp.

"You are a rare exception, young one," Ofor had teased him.

Daniel knew it was because of Emi'le's insistence he remained in their tent.

Their tent. Exactly how and when it became their common dwelling really didn't matter. In fact, it made perfect sense to both him and Emi'le. Surprisingly enough, it seemed to be fine with everyone else in camp as well.

That unnerved him. He knew how protective everyone was of her. Even though only a handful of people knew her real name, they all had adopted her into their families. Daniel had lost count of the number of times they had been invited to share meals or family fires with other tribal members.

Emi'le always graced their invitations with a warm smile and shook her head. She'd assist Daniel back to their tent and set their own fire, knowing he was still weak, yet doing nothing to insult his male ego. Emi would settle a few pillows behind him, then ease into his arms. They

would sit together, eating leisurely and waving at camp members as they wandered by. When they were done with the meal, Emile would clear away their wooden plates and utensils, and then snuggle in his embrace until the fire died down. After the night air became too cool to enjoy, they'd retire into the tent. When Daniel felt strong enough, they would make love. Other times, they just fell asleep in each other's arms.

Everything about Daniel's old life seemed so far away from where he was now. He couldn't help but feel that his time in the Order had been an illusion, and that this new life was real. The path he'd chosen with Emi was where he should have been all along.

Watching the camp's daily activity unfold below him, he felt content. Their lives were so simple, yet had such purpose. They did not do things for the sake of functionality or logic.

Oftentimes, the things they did were completely illogical. He watched as parents stopped daily chores in order to play chase with their children, how adults stayed up late to sit by the fire and tell lively tales, knowing full well it would leave them fatigued during the following day's activities. They did these things because the time spent together brought them joy and laughter.

Had his society been wrong all along? Is that why more people left the Order every day? Is that why the refugees wanted to join the "misguided" tribals? Did they seek a simpler, better way of life?

"You look so serious, young one," a voice boomed behind him.

Daniel turned to see Tirok scaling the rocky outcropping, carefully balancing two silver mugs in his hand. He reached the top and sat down next to Daniel, cautious not to spill the hot contents. Settling himself, he handed Daniel one of the cups and took a sip of his own.

Daniel drank, inhaling the strong aroma of coffee appreciatively.

"Care to tell an old man what has you so pensive this afternoon?"

Daniel chuckled, taking another sip of his coffee. "Just collecting my thoughts, I suppose."

Tirok nodded slowly. "You are holding up well."

"I will take your word for it, Tirok," Daniel joked.

At first, he'd felt like a weakling. His illness dragged on forever. Hido'ni had explained it wasn't only the detoxification of Entaxia that ailed him. Sometime during their trip, Daniel had contracted desert fever. The fever was rare among tribals, but Ofor's wife had suggested it was more of a re-acclimation to his native climate.

If only it were that easy. If only he could find a place among these people that effortlessly. Even though his body seemed to be slowly adjusting to tribal life, his mind felt as if it would never reconcile the two halves of his upbringing.

"You are hard on yourself, young one. But that is an admirable trait. You expect much of yourself, make no excuses for your shortcomings. You only strive to make yourself better. Many see that, and they respect you for it."

Even though I have killed so many of our kind? He was doing it again—referring to the tribals as if he was already one of them. Wasn't he? Is that what had bothered him for so long? Why his dreams haunted him so?

"You do not look as weary as when you first arrived. I can see you are resting better," Tirok reassured him.

Daniel turned to face him, taken aback by his timely words. Did Tirok have the ability to read minds?

"I can understand your restlessness this day. I hate when we have to move while some of us are still out gathering."

Gathering, the term they used for the raids conducted by tribal members to bring in food and supplies. Refugees came seeking the tribe's help every day. Despite the fact that few outlanders were asked to join the exclusive group Daniel traveled with, tribal members still felt responsible for their wellbeing and did what they could to provide the exiles with essentials as they adjusted to their new existence.

Daniel had also begun to understand why it was so difficult for the Order to capture some of the more wanted tribal members. They moved constantly, never staying in one place for too long. Each time they

traveled, only a few key people knew their final destination. It was the only way to ensure the safety of everyone else in the camp.

“Some are out gathering?” Daniel inquired.

“Ofor is among them,” Tirok said solemnly.

Daniel had learned the two brothers were very close. Their parents had died when they were teenagers. Only separated by a year, their loyalty and devotion to each other extended to their lifemates and children. So much so, they had made a pact to never be a part of the same party. If one died during a gathering, the other would remain behind to ensure both families were cared for.

Their practice had soon become an unspoken tribal rule. No two members of the same family would ever be part of the same gathering party.

Tirok rose to his feet and reached down for Daniel’s hand.

Daniel finished his coffee, feeling invigorated. He took the hand Tirok offered and rose to his feet. He was surprised at how fast he had grown to like the man who’d once held a laser gun barrel to his head.

“Come, we will break camp and commiserate. Both of our loved ones will return to us safely.”

At Tirok’s words, Daniel’s fingers went slack. The metal cup fell from his hand and bounced off the rocks. Clunking sounds echoed through the air as it tumbled to the earth below. Daniel’s eyes widened with shock. Both of their loved ones?

When he had woken alone this morning, Daniel assumed Emi’le had gone to visit Tirok’s lifemate. Tirok’s eldest had fallen off a cliff and broken his hand a few weeks ago. Though the child was fine, Emi’le checked on the family every day. Tirok’s clan meant a great deal to her.

He had known a gathering party was leaving this morning. He hadn’t known that Emi’le...

“Young one?” Tirok saw the look in Daniel’s eyes. “You did not know,” he confirmed. “I am sorry. When the parties are more dangerous Hido’ni goes along and Nya always accompanies him.”

Daniel scrambled off the rocks.

"I have to find her!" he screamed to Tirok.

Daniel tried to rush back to camp, but two hands grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around. Enraged, Daniel swung his fist at Tirok, who ducked, missing the young man's blow by inches.

"Stop trying to stop me. I have to find her!"

"You won't be able to. Listen to me," Tirok yelled, as he fought off Daniel's wild punches.

Tirok continued to dodge Daniel's fists. The young officer could tell by the lack of counter moves from his opponent that the elder man was hoping fatigue would set in. Tirok dove for his midsection and slammed him bodily into the ground.

You are exhausted and will kill yourself if you continue. Listen to me," Tirok repeated.

Daniel finally stopped, his arms aching almost as much as the emptiness that had settled in the pit of his stomach.

"She will be fine," Tirok reasoned, pinning the young man's arms to the dirt.

Daniel's head snapped up, unable to avoid Tirok's tirade.

"She will be fine. Hido'ni and Ofor will not let anything happen to her. She means too much to us all."

"I know what she means to all of you," Daniel spat out. "I know how useful her powers are. That's why she's out there, because she's like some sort of weapon."

Tirok centered himself on top of Daniel and glared at the boy, reproach in his eyes. "Because you are distressed, I will excuse your statement once. Just once. But never again imply that Nya means so little to us."

Tirok flung himself away from Daniel. "Only once, young one," Tirok grumbled. "Next time, I will not withhold my blows."

Daniel pulled himself to his feet. "Someone should have told me," he argued.

"I will give you that. Usually, we leave those matters private. However, given the circumstances..."

Daniel turned away, knowing Tirok was implying Emi'le's lack of speech had caused him to be kept in the dark. In truth, she could have made him aware. They had their ways of communicating. She had shielded him, because she knew he would oppose her going at all.

"You must understand young one. This is our way. Nya has been doing this since she became of age. Just as you performed duties at the Centre," Tirok explained.

"They are looking for her, now more than ever. If I had known, I could have done something—maybe gone with them." Daniel hung his head trying not to give into his angst.

"We do not allow family members to go on the same gathering parties."

"We are not family," he argued.

Tirok looked as if he was going to explode for the second time in as many minutes. He took a deep breath and lowered his gaze.

"That's not...that I don't...that I don't feel that...she is everything to me. What I meant was..." His shoulders sagged. He would never be any good at explaining his emotions. Especially now, when he felt so vulnerable. The Order had taught him to view such a feeling as fatal. Yet, he tried, needing to let loose his fears.

"If she does not return, we will never have a chance to be just that," Daniel whispered, looking out into the desert sands.

"I know that's not what you had meant. It's not exactly what I meant either," Tirok replied.

Daniel turned to face him, waiting for the man to explain himself. Tirok sighed again and shook his head, ending his internal debate.

"That's for another time. Our tempers are high and our nerves are shot. We must break camp."

Daniel's fists clenched at his side. More secrets. Normally, he wouldn't have relented until Tirok explained himself, but right now, all his thoughts were on Emi'le.

"They will find us within a day or so," Tirok assured him.

Fear and anger would not serve him now. Daniel knew that. He had to focus his energy on something else, something better. He must focus on the idea that his Emi would return safely. *Hope*.

Yes, that was the word. His mother used it often when he was a child. He had used the phrase in passing many times. Now, faced with Emi'le's sudden departure, he would actually have to feel it. Daniel nodded to himself, allowing Tirok to lead him back to camp.

He lowered his head. He had to be strong and not worry about his earthbound angel. His peace, the only thing that made sense to him now, was out there facing guns and the soldiers he had trained. The thought of one of them cutting her down nearly brought Daniel to his knees.

She had to be all right. She had to make it back.

Chapter Fourteen

Two days. It had been two days since Tirok had rocked his world with the news that Emi'le had left with the other gatherers. Daniel should be used to it by now. His world had shifted so much, so rapidly over such a short period of time, he should be accustomed to it.

But he was not. This latest development kept him constantly on edge. He did his best to avoid taking out his frustrations on the people around him. He worked quietly beside them, assisting in daily chores where and when he could. He volunteered for anything and everything he could think of to keep his mind off Emi'le's departure.

For the most part, the tribals were sympathetic to his plight. Those who didn't understand his angst kept their distance. He tried to be patient. They were born into this way of life—this is what they did to survive. Daniel had not known desperation or struggle, at least not in the fundamental sense. In the Order's functional culture, nourishment was provided when he was hungry. When he needed rest, it was granted.

Here, they fought to survive each day. Still, for all their woes, Daniel could see they were content, at peace. None of them were tortured with nightmares or anxiety about whether or not they would excel at their function.

Not like in the Order.

By the eve of the second day, Daniel was climbing the walls. That night, Tirok announced the tribe would break camp again and travel farther into the desert. Daniel lost the tenuous control he'd been keeping on his emotions. He was sure the shouting that emanated from his tent that night could be heard on the other side of camp. He didn't give in until fatigue overtook him.

A little while later, Tirok emerged from the tent and announced they would break camp in one hour.

Helpless, Daniel could only comply. He gathered all of Emi'le's belongings and followed Tirok's orders. That was something he could do, follow orders. He had done that his entire life. He did it so efficiently Tirok became concerned.

"We are afraid for you, young one. It is not good to retreat so far into one's self that no one can reach you."

Daniel said nothing. He was through arguing, through explaining himself. All he wanted to do was get to the new camp, set up their tent and wait to hear news of Emi'le.

The camp moved so deep into the desert, Daniel wondered if the gathering party would find them. He tried to assure himself that the tribals had been doing this for years and Emi'le would return safely.

As the hours stretched on, his concern turned into anger. Why hadn't Emi told him? Did she not trust him? This was a dangerous train of thought, one that could easily lead to bitterness and mistrust. He tried to rein it in, to concentrate on the tasks at hand. Was Daniel nothing more than a charity case for Emi? Surely, if he meant anything, she wouldn't leave him here to wonder about her safety.

After the camp settled, he needed to leave, get away from everyone around him. Find somewhere to relax before his anger got the best of him. Just as he began to walk away, he heard shouts coming from the far north side of camp.

Daniel looked up and saw Ofor approaching. His lifemate seemed to appear out of nowhere. She flung her arms around him while his children jumped up and down with outstretched arms, impatiently waiting their turn to greet their father.

Within moments, Tirok appeared. He clasped his brother's hand warmly and smiled at him. Ofor nodded in greeting, tilting his head toward Hido'ni. The Keeper walked to them, obviously favoring one leg. Daniel took a few steps toward the old man.

"Are you all right?" Daniel heard his own voice boom out.

Everyone looked in his direction, taken aback at his show of concern for the man he had sworn vengeance on.

Hido'ni nodded. "All is well. The trip back can sometimes be difficult."

Daniel crossed his arms. Now that the moment of concern had washed away, he fought for control again. His clenched his fists and repressed the urge to shake the two men by their shoulders until they let him know about Emi'le.

"Nya," Tirok's oldest screamed excitedly.

Daniel whipped his head around. He watched, breathless as Emi'le approached. She smiled brightly. Her hair was damp. She must have already bathed and removed her disguise. Her smile faltered as she saw the look on Daniel's face. How long had she been back? Why had she not come to find him right away? The burning rage that had built up the last few days swept over Daniel as he strode up to her. He grabbed Emi's wrist and yanked her away from the crowd.

"Young one!" Ofor yelled in surprise.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tirok place his hand on Ofor's chest and shake his head. If Daniel had any rational thought left, he would have been grateful for Tirok's intervention. However, he was too far gone with anger and relief to care. He didn't halt his headlong rush away from the welcoming party. He felt Emi resist at first, then give in to his demands. He tore into their tent and pulled her around to face him.

She gasped, looking fearful for a moment before her indigo gaze darkened with anger.

How dare she, how dare she be angry? She had no right, not when he had been left without a word, without a thought for his feelings. He stepped toward her, ready to lay into her and unleash the anger he felt.

"How could you?" he sneered.

Emi'le glared at him. She opened her mouth.

"How dare you abandon me?"

Emi'le's eyes widened. She was gawking at him, looking suddenly confused. She shut her mouth, forgetting the few words she'd saved.

Daniel dropped to his knees and pulled her close to him, holding on for dear life. He buried his face in her stomach, trying to assure himself she was there, she had not left him forever.

Instantly, he felt weak and foolish. He should have continued his tirade. He couldn't, he was too relieved she had made it back safely. He slowly raised his head and looked into her watery eyes.

"Never," she whispered to him, conviction shining in her expression.

Emi'le reached down, cradling his head with her hands.

Daniel turned slightly and kissed the skin of her palm. He tugged her down by the wrists and captured her mouth with his own, letting her drink in his desperation. Hungrily, silently, he begged her to take it away from him. His fear and panic were too much for him to handle.

Emi'le rolled on top of him, covering his face with soothing kisses. Daniel closed his eyes, allowing himself to get lost in her touch. He felt her gathering his tunic over his head. Daniel helped her pull it off and hurriedly kicked his breeches away. He gazed up just in time to see Emi'le step out of her dress and toss it aside. Daniel slid his hands under her arms and cupped her shoulders, drawing her down on him.

Emi'le kissed him so sweetly he forgot all about his anger. He loved feeling her atop him, soft skin rubbing against his own. She held his face in her hands and covered it with delicate nibbles. She smiled, gently kissing his eyelids as she stroked his face. Emi rested her forehead against his, enjoying this tender moment.

Slowly, she eased herself down the length of his body, playfully nipping his skin with her teeth. Daniel tried to sit up to watch her progress, but Emi'le pushed him back down, laying another teasing peck on the inside of his thigh.

He inhaled sharply, biting his bottom lip as he felt the warmth of Emi'le's mouth around his manhood. God, it felt incredible. The disciplined part of his brain vaguely remembered that functional society had considered such an act lewd. Sex was not meant for pleasure, only function.

However, all of that was quickly discarded as he felt the warm wetness of her mouth slide across him so sweetly.

“God, Emi,” he moaned, gripping the sides of their sleeping mat.

It was nearly impossible to hold off the explosion rising within. The sounds of her taking him in her mouth drove him crazy. He frantically reached down for her, gasping with need. Daniel pulled her into his arms and kissed her roughly, hands sliding up the silky skin of her thighs until they rested on her hips.

Emi’le lifted herself onto him. Daniel bit back a groan as she lowered her chest to his. They lay there for a moment, clinging to each other, stilling the storm of ill will that had caused them to argue. It didn’t matter anymore. They were here, together.

Daniel closed his eyes, tightening his grip around Emi’s waist, refusing to let her move. He wanted to stay inside her, surrounded by her warmth and love. It was the only peace he knew. Only with Emi’le did he feel whole, loved and accepted.

Emi’le shifted restlessly as her own desires took precedence over anything else. She nuzzled and licked his neck before suckling on it softly, teeth lightly grazing his skin. Daniel moaned, jerking his hips upward, inching himself deeper into her. Emi’le pressed her forehead against his, trying in vain to calm the frenzy flooding her senses. Daniel felt her muscles quiver around him. He ran his hands teasingly over her breasts, gently squeezing the hardened buds below his thumbs.

Emi’le sat up, throwing her head back as the passionate climax sent her over the edge. Daniel raised his knees to support her back, surrounding her with his body. He took one nipple in his mouth and sucked gently, trying to match each of her tremors with his tongue. Emi’le began to shake, arms wrapped tightly around his neck.

“Da’yel,” she whimpered.

As it had always been, Emi’le shattered him with a word. He reared his head back and released his seed inside her as she rode out his frenzied rhythm. He struggled for breath, his heartbeat thudding loudly in his ears. Finally, their panting ceased. They sat in silence, holding

each other, feeling their heartbeats pound against one another's. Daniel pulled back to take her sweat-drenched face in his hands. He kissed her again.

"You are the only thing that matters to me, Emi. I know that scares you. I know there is more out there than us, things you need to do. Things you want me to be a part of. But, I cannot lose you. I would die without you.

"It may not be the same for you. But when you are away, I ache. I hurt. I want to tear up everything around me until you are back here, safe in my arms. Please do not think me weak or foolish for it, Emi. I am not like the others. I doubt I ever will be. This is who I am. This is what you mean to me. I love you." Daniel's words came out in a rush.

Emi'le leaned close and kissed him. She pressed her lips to his ear.

"I live only for this."

Daniel stared in shock. She had actually spoken the words, did not use her mind or utter a one-word sentence. She spoke freely. He somehow knew it would not happen again for a long time. Knew she never used her voice for fear of what her utterings would cause. As irrational as it was, Daniel understood the logic.

He knew what it had cost her to give him that. She gave him what she had given no other. She trusted him to keep her precious words locked inside of him. It was a beautiful and treasured gift, one he planned to always honor.

Daniel settled them both onto the sleeping mats. Emi sprawled on top of him, her body completely resting on his. She tried to shift to the side, but Daniel's arms kept her locked in place. Emi chuckled, the melodic sound drifting through the quiet night as they both closed their eyes and found rest.

Chapter Fifteen

Daniel paced outside Hido'ni's tent. Ofor had awoken them to inform them the Keeper had called for an emergency council. Emi'le's presence was requested.

Tirok explained Hido'ni and Emi'le would sit in private meditation for a few hours before the council was called. Daniel knew Tirok told him in an attempt to ease any feelings of jealousy Daniel may have felt. Normally, he would insist on being present. However, Hido'ni regarded Emi'le as a daughter. Even when they were younger, the Keeper had kept her safe and protected. Obviously, he had saved her from a gruesome fate the day Daniel had been taken.

Even if a small part of Daniel could not fully forgive the old man for what had occurred, he still trusted him with Emi'le.

It had been a few hours since the meeting had begun. There were a lot of debates circling within the tent. Should they move again? Was it time for what the council referred to as the Great Rise? That made Daniel's stomach turn with fear and uncertainty. He had a good idea of what it might mean. The question of the tribals' success at such an endeavor was already answered in Daniel's mind. They would fail. The Order, for all their faults, had one thing in their favor—military power.

The tribals could probably get away with a few scattered raids. However, a no-holds-barred military attack? The very idea was fruitless. Daniel listened to their plans, feeling a mixture of guilt and envy. He wanted to be inside the tent with Emi'le. Still, did that give him the right to eavesdrop?

It was all harmless until he heard Ofor's latest report. Daniel felt chills run down his spine. They obviously had no idea what they were getting into.

Daniel squeezed his eyes shut, willing the council to dismiss the matter. What should he do? If he did not warn the council, they would send their people into terrible danger. If he did warn the council, then that was it—he'd betray the society that had raised him since his mother died. Despite everything he still felt an odd loyalty to the Order. If he spoke against them, there would be no turning back. It was a lose-lose situation.

This was the moment, now or never. The council was about to vote. Daniel knew which way they would go. He felt the earth shift beneath him. Before Daniel realized what he was doing, he yanked back the flap of Hido'ni's tent.

Many pairs of eyes turned to look at him in surprise.

"Young one, you are interrupting an important meeting. You have no say here," Ofor said sternly.

"I believe I do." Daniel scanned the large tent.

His eyes met Tirok's sympathetic gaze, then Hido'ni's look of concern. Finally, he found Emi'le in the crowd. Slowly, she stood, keeping her sights fixed on him. Hido'ni laid a hand on her shoulder, as if letting her know everything would be all right.

For a moment Daniel thought he would falter, walk right back outside and let them have their vote. Until he remembered Emi was standing there, waiting for him to finish. He knew she would be there to back him up. Emi would stand with him, regardless of what everyone else had to say. For that reason alone, Daniel had to speak up.

"If you go on that gathering, you will walk into a trap," Daniel said, finding his voice.

The room erupted in chaos and disorder. Everyone began to scream and yell at once. Hido'ni rose to try to ease the heated crowd. Daniel was only vaguely aware of all the noise and ruckus around him. What he saw, what he felt, was Emi'le's presence. She had a strange smile on her

face, gazing at Daniel with pride and encouragement. It made him feel as if he could conquer the world.

Snapping out of his reverie, Daniel looked around the room again. The arguments had not ceased.

“Forty immunization packs for newborn infants. Eighty-two dairy supplements for children whose mothers have trouble producing milk. As well as twenty-eight secondary booster packs to ward off childhood onset of Myhuian Influenza!” Daniel roared.

The crowd stopped talking and looked at the screaming young man. Ofor turned to Daniel, shock written across his face.

“Those are the essentials that you named in your report, am I correct?” Daniel asked.

Ofor sat down and nodded.

“This gathering raid you are voting on. It’s a set-up. There is no transport for Sector 3257. It’s a ruse.”

Everyone began to mutter and whisper among themselves.

“Our intelligence is sound, young one. We believe it to be genuine,” Hido’ni assured him.

Daniel took a deep breath.

“Except for the fact that the mastermind of that ruse is standing in front of you and telling you, it’s a trap,” Daniel said softly.

He closed his eyes, then looked directly at Emi’le. “It is something the Centre has been working on for the last seven months. It was a plan I put into place. It was flawless. The Centre went to the main Royal Council and got the exercise sanctioned. We were to release a leak stating that the Centre would be the new storage facility for all the supplies used to increase the survival rate of all newborn human beings west of the Northern Territories.

“We even cleared out a wing in the Centre. According to plan, only a handful of people knew what the storage was being used for. We released the leak to our intelligence agents. For months, you have been fed reports of equipment and supplies going into the Centre. We even had

medical trucks deliver fake crates of supplies, in case you had surveillance.”

Daniel looked down, no longer able to look at Emi’le. He felt ashamed, ashamed of who he was and his part in the plan that would have essentially wiped out everything and everyone she ever cared about.

“I knew your people would not be able to resist a shipment of supplies for children. I knew how you thought, what was important to you. You were supposed to get information about a weak point in the transportation procedure. I made the shipment as enticing as I could. Not enough to cause the Centre to be short-changed, but more than you had ever seen. I knew you would emerge in order to obtain supplies to help your children, if for no other reason.”

“So there was to be nothing in the transport?” Tirok asked.

Daniel took another breath. The more he revealed, the worse he felt. Dread pooled in the pit of his stomach. How could he have planned a massacre?

“The immunizations would have been placebos, no good. The dairy supplements, expired and useless. There would be no Myhuian Influenza vaccine. Instead, there would have been a tracker in a pack you could not get open. It was supposed to lead us back to your camp and to Hido’ni.”

Daniel wanted to sink into the ground, rip away the last part of his confession. He had gotten this far, he knew he had to continue. Daniel looked up and stared into Hido’ni’s eyes.

“My orders were for you to be killed on sight. Anyone who got in the way was to be eliminated.”

Daniel’s eyes began to water. Ashamed, he stole a glance at Emi’le, pain ripping through him with such fury he thought it would bring him to his knees.

“Anyone,” he whispered.

Daniel scanned the room through the tears streaming down his face. It was a blurry sea of stunned faces. He felt sicker than ever.

"I have no reason to lie or any excuse for my actions. It was what I did, who I was. You were viewed as a threat to my way of life. I did what I thought was best to protect it. Forgive me," he choked out.

Before anyone could say or do anything, Daniel retreated. He sprinted out of Hido'ni's tent directly for Emi's. He felt as if he would retch. Emi'le would never forgive him. He was a monster—he knew that now. Nothing had ever been so clear to him in his life. They conditioned him not to care, disregard human life in favor of function and order. On his word, he was to annihilate all of them. Tirok, Ofor and their families, Hido'ni, Emi'le... If he had not rescued her that day, Daniel would have destroyed them all. He would have never known any of them, never experienced the freedom of human emotions and never held Emi'le in his arms again.

He had to leave, get away from these generous people. He did not deserve the respect they had given him. He picked up a small satchel and gathered a few items from the tent. He heard small footsteps approaching, knew Emi had come to check on him. It was cowardly, but he could not look at her.

"I won't take much. Just enough to get me to another encampment or to a hover vessel," he announced.

Daniel stuffed something blindly into the bag, still unable to face Emi'le. She dogged his steps until she stood directly in front of him. Daniel crouched down on his haunches and stared down at her feet.

"It's all right if you hate me. I hate myself." Daniel felt her hand gently touch his face. He slowly tilted his head up. Daniel closed his eyes, too disgusted with himself meet her gaze.

"So brave," her voice said in his head.

Daniel chuckled bitterly. "Brave? I don't think so. If you only knew the truth. Emi, I debated not telling you at all. I thought about letting them come here to rescue me, convincing them to let you go back with me. I told myself I could get you used to life in my home...with them. Told myself my father could pull some strings. No one knew what you

really looked like. I could make a home for us there. We could have been happy. All I had to do was not say anything.”

Daniel opened his eyes finally. Knowing her beautiful blue eyes had never left his face.

“But then, I saw you standing there, ready to take on that whole damn crowd for me. I couldn’t, I wouldn’t take away everything that meant something to you. Even if it meant showing you who I really was, I would do it. Tell Hido’ni and the others the truth. Keep you here and safe with the people you love. Even if it meant you knew I was evil.”

Emi’le kept staring down. She lowered herself to her knees and kissed him lightly on the lips. Daniel flinched in surprise, only to be caught in another sweet kiss. Daniel’s arms shot from his sides and curled around her waist, tugging her body against his.

“My Da’yel, so brave. I love you.”

Daniel heard her in his mind. Her love and conviction punched through his insides. Emi held his heart in her hands. She still loved him, still wanted him.

He could not stop the desperate groan that escaped his throat. Daniel leaned forward until Emi’le was on her back, and he was resting on his elbows atop her. His fingers found the garment tie on her shoulder and tugged gently, watching the fabric separate. Slowly, he slid her clothes off, only raising his body long enough to toss them aside. The heat of her skin rose steadily under his seeking fingers. Her eyes glazed over with want and desire. This was his idea of perfection.

Daniel kissed her delicate mouth. This time, Emi’le whimpered.

He gazed at her naked form, at the curves he ached to touch. Her skin flushed, as if he made Emi feel she was aflame under his careful scrutiny. He inhaled, moaning as her scent surrounded him. He covered her, nibbling on her lips.

He buried his nose in the crook of her neck, breathing deeply.

“You smell so good. Do you know that, Emi?” he whispered. “You smell sweet and spicy. Like the desert as it turns to night, the time when

everything around us begins to calm down, when everything around us is at peace. That's what you are to me, Emi. Peace."

He kissed her, bracing her face in his hands, moving her head left and right as he devoured her mouth, needing to taste every part of her. Slowly, he worked down the pale column of her neck, nipping and kissing the delicate skin. Daniel desperately wanted to give her the same pleasure she had given him.

He suckled on the pink tips of her breasts, squeezing them gently under his palms, instantly rewarded by Emi'le's cries of desire. He lingered over them, feeling pleasure soar through him as she squirmed beneath his touch. He was still amazed how giving her simple caresses thrilled and excited him.

He spread her legs, settling his body between them. Emi'le stiffened as he began to kiss across her ribcage, inch by inch. Daniel gently stroked the outside of her thighs, waiting for her restlessness to fade. He sank lower, licking at the tender skin between her sex and the crook of her leg. He moved his head, dragging his nose gently across the dampened curls above her sex. Rubbing his cheek softly against her inner thigh, he positioned himself at her center. Placing a kiss on her nether lips, Daniel lapped up the tiny bit of her essence that spilled onto his lips.

He watched as Emi'le's mouth opened, breath catching in her throat as her back arched. Fingers splayed across her hips, Daniel trapped her beneath his questing mouth. He tasted and teased every part of her, moaning throatily when Emi writhed and melted under every swipe of his tongue.

Emi'le gasped. Her body jerked and trembled. Daniel drew his thumb across the nub nestled within her folds as he tunneled his tongue deep within. He felt her legs tighten against his shoulders as she broke loose under him. She clasped his head tightly, bucking her hips up in the air. It was not until he heard her sob aloud that he relinquished his hold. He rose, concerned he'd somehow hurt her. Daniel wiped the tears from her eyes and rained soothing kisses across her face.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "Did I hurt you?"

Emi's head snapped toward him. Before he could say another word, she kissed him savagely. She was begging him, pleading for something. He could feel the urgency driving her. She pulled frantically at the laces of his breeches, telling him in no uncertain terms what she wanted. Daniel grabbed her wrists and threw them over her head.

"Emi, please calm down."

Emi whimpered and squirmed. Tears formed in her eyes. Daniel kissed Emi deeply, swallowing her desperate cries as he slid inside of her. He moved achingly slowly, soothing her, soothing the fire he had set.

"Shh, Emi, I'm here. See?" Daniel groaned, increasing his steady, rhythmic pace. She felt too good to go slow, too warm and accepting for him to stop.

"I'll always be here."

He kissed her again, his movements becoming harder, more forceful. His need for her quickly wore down his resolve. For a moment, he was afraid the passion would engulf him, that he would bruise her.

Just then, Emi's legs wrapped around his waist, locking him inside her, driving him further, deeper, with one frenzied thrust of her hips. Daniel grit his teeth, only vaguely aware he'd begun to pound into her. Animalistic grunts filled the air.

"Not...going...anywhere...mine...mine...mine," Daniel chanted.

Emi's head reared back as she shook under him. He gathered her in his arms, pressing her body against his as she reached her peak. Daniel's cries of release intermingled with her moans of pleasure. Slowly their bodies stilled. Then sat within each other's arms for hours, loving each other, giving and taking freely, healing each other in ways only they knew.

The day turned into night. Daniel watched a sliver of moonlight play on Emi's dampened face as he kissed her swollen, ravaged lips. She smiled at him.

"My home is with you now, Emi. I'll never leave you."

Daniel felt Emi trace her thumb under his tired, sated eyes.

“Promise?” Her tiny voice sounded more hopeful, more loving, than he had ever heard before.

Daniel nodded slowly, turning his head to kiss the inside of her palm. He lowered his head and kissed the skin that lay over her heart. Daniel looked into Emi’s eyes and spoke the words with more conviction than he’d ever had, more love than he’d ever thought he deserved.

“I promise.”

Chapter Sixteen

Daniel stood atop a large sand dune, scanning the area below him. He watched two children laugh gleefully as they played chase. A small puppy yapped at their heels excitedly as the children ran a bit too far from the encampment.

“Jemma! No’al!” Daniel called.

The boy and girl immediately halted, looking up at the man who loomed over them.

“It is getting dark,” he proclaimed.

“We have finished our supper,” the young girl argued, hands on her hips.

Daniel bit the inside of his cheek to keep his smile hidden. He had to be stern, but young Jemma reminded him so much of Emi’le at their age. She was fearless, defiant and stubborn.

“Aye, young Miss Jemma. However, you play too far from your home fires. Resume your play. But this time, keep inside the camp.”

“The light makes it too easy to find each other.” Both children groaned in unison.

“Then perhaps you should find another game to play or better yet, rest for the night. Tomorrow is an important day, especially for young master No’al.” Daniel winked at the young boy.

No’al nodded, doing his best to fix a grown-up look on his face. “He is right, Jemma. Maybe we should head in.”

No’al whistled for his dog and began to walk into camp. Jemma crossed her arms and glared at Daniel. She stomped her foot and

followed her playmate, trudging dramatically the entire way. Daniel chuckled, shaking his head.

“That was very unfair of you, young one.”

He turned to see Ofor making his way up the dune. He reached the top of the rise and sat down in the sand. Daniel sat next to him, never taking his eyes off the terrain.

“You know my son has a serious case of hero worship when it comes to you. He follows you around like that little puppy you rescued for him. I still think you gave it to him only to annoy me,” Ofor teased.

Daniel laughed. “Perhaps I was manipulating the boy. However, I would rather have him safe than lost in the darkness. Besides, tomorrow is a big day for him.”

Ofor thumped his fist on Daniel’s back and smiled. “As is it for you. I still do not know why you did not take Tirok up on his offer to cover your turn on watch. It would have been understandable. You do need your rest,” he pointed out.

“I pull my weight, Ofor. I sat around like an invalid for the first few weeks I was here, doing nothing. Now that I can, I am thankful for the contributions I make. My beloved understands.”

Ofor nodded.

Daniel suspected his friend wanted to say more, but out of respect, he did not push the issue. It was no secret why Daniel worked so hard, why he took any chore they laid at his feet, why he treated his turn at watch duty with the utmost vigilance. A part of him still felt the need to prove his loyalty to the tribe. He craved their acceptance. Needed to do penance for his past deeds.

None of the tribals resented him. In all honesty, a few were wary. Their feelings were understandable. Not only was he an outsider, he held the heart of the gifted girl they all treasured. This knowledge drove Daniel to always give them his best. Nothing ever happened on his watch. In fact, he had helped the tribe find more effective ways to survey the camp below without drawing unnecessary attention.

He was even brought into war council. Daniel's vast knowledge of the Order's tactics became invaluable. He no longer felt guilty—his logic had changed drastically in the last few months. The Order had things they needed to survive, things to keep them safe and sheltered. He could help the tribals attain supplies with minimal or no casualties, so he aided them as much as he could.

Hido'ni had allowed Daniel to sit in on council meetings. The Keeper was trying to appease him, show he was accepted by the tribe. However, Daniel still felt compelled to prove himself.

That was why he sat perched atop this dune. Of all the chores Daniel was given, watch duty was the one he held most sacred. It was the ultimate gesture of trust—allowing him to watch over them until midnight relief came. In the beginning, he would sit with the men who came to relieve him. But then the nightmares began...

He remembered that night all too well. It had been quiet, up until the moment Emi'le's cry ripped through the desert air. Daniel had never run so fast in his life. He dove into the tent, ready to attack any presence that menaced his beloved, only to find her wailing in her sleep, kicking off the blanket he had laid over her hours before. Daniel had shaken her gently by the shoulders. Emi'le jerked, her elfin features frozen in fear and horror.

"Emi, 'tis all right," he'd whispered comfortingly.

Emi'le reached out to touch his face, frantically patting his chest, as if checking to see if he was solid, real, as if she disbelieved he was there. Reassured, Emi had sunk into his embrace, crawled over him, practically trying to bury her body into his own.

That first night, Ofor, Tirok and Hido'ni visited the tent to make sure she was all right. When the men suggested they speak outside with Daniel, Emi'le had become hysterical. Her grip on him tightened and the bamboo tent poles began to shake violently. Clearly, she was letting everyone see her displeasure at the very thought of Daniel going anywhere. When she'd finally calmed down, she slept fitfully, clinging to him as if her life depended on it.

The nightmares did not happen frequently, but Daniel never allowed her to sleep alone after that. In order to be with her when she retired, he always took the first night watch. When the terrors haunted her, she'd sit straight up in bed, wailing and howling as if she were being torn in half. Daniel would gather her in his arms and rock her gently back and forth.

She would calm almost instantly, holding onto him for dear life until he lulled her back to sleep. Other nights, she would wake with a gasp and cry so painfully that Daniel's nerves would be ripped to shreds. On those occasions, he would lie on his side with her back against his chest, cocooning himself around her. He'd sometimes slip inside her and slide gently in and out, giving her a quiet pleasure to replace the sorrow. Emi would sigh and move closer as he kissed the back of her neck and wiped her tears away.

"Shh, my love. I'm here Emi, I'll always be here," he would vow.

She needed to hear those words. Whatever tortured her had something to do with him. His reassurances that he would be there gave her the comfort she needed to find rest.

"Please, my love, tell me what terrifies you so?" Daniel pleaded, over and over again.

Emi'le refused to utter any word. She had not spoken in nearly a month—neither in his mind, nor in the soft whispers he'd been occasionally blessed with. Hido'ni told Daniel to let it be. Emi'le had always feared her words, too afraid of what they might bring. She would reveal whatever plagued her in time, when she felt it was right. Everyone else seemed to understand, so Daniel did his best to be patient.

The simplicity of his new life should have frightened him. When all was said and done, what motivated and inspired him were the moments he lay next to Emi, intertwined and tangled up in each other as the night fell away. Loving and being with her gave him a sense of completeness that still had him in awe.

"Mine, mine, mine," was his constant chant as they made love.

He needed her to know, no matter what the future held. Maybe that's what had motivated him to approach Hido'ni a few weeks ago. He'd gone

seeking the answers to his questions and, more importantly, the wise man's blessings.

Hido'ni had smiled patiently and tried to contain his amusement while Daniel nervously paced the length of the tent. Daniel must have looked like an idiot but, like everything else he'd done in his life, he needed to do it just right. By the end of their meeting, Hido'ni was smiling with pride.

When Daniel was satisfied, he left the Keeper's tent and sought out Emi'le. She stood next to a large metal tub, elbow deep in soapy water, smiling and laughing with the other women as they washed clothes. He hid out of her view and watched for a moment, delighting in the joy he saw in her expression.

Daniel tugged at her hand, pulling her away from her chores to whisper conspiratorially in her ear, like he'd done when they were children. He remembered the way her blue eyes sparkled in awe as he divulged his plans. Just as he'd hoped she would, Emi launched herself into his arms and covered him with frantic kisses, showing him exactly what she thought of his idea.

They made love many times that night. Morning dawned to find them wrapped in each other's embrace, watching as rosy light filtered through their canvas walls. They slept through the rest of the day. When they finally emerged for dinner, they bore the ribald jokes of fellow tribals with good humor. They were too happy, too content, to be bothered.

Everything went by so fast after that day. They relocated again and the preparations for tomorrow's event had been lengthy. The entire camp knew the celebration was more than your average ritual. It was the final thing. Daniel was surrendering the last bit of his old life. He would be fully initiated into their ways, be given back what was stolen from him so many years ago. He would truly be home.

Nothing could mar this feeling, not even the solemn looks on Emi's and Hido'ni's faces as they had emerged from meditation that morning. Something had changed. Hido'ni looked older, more somber than usual.

Daniel wanted desperately to question them, but he was distracted by the joy and love radiating from Emi'le's face when she saw him approach.

Ofor's voice snapped him out of his reverie.

"I almost forgot. Hido'ni bade I give this to you." Ofor pulled something out of his pocket and handed it to Daniel.

Daniel stared in shock. These people he'd grown to love and respect were constantly surprising him.

"It can't be," he whispered.

"Tis what it looks like—it belonged to your mother. The Keeper has kept it all this time."

"What?"

"He kept a few personal effects of the people who fell that day. We thought he kept them to torture himself. No matter what we say, he will always feel responsible for all those deaths. He went back into the battlefield afterwards, collecting mementos of the fallen, things he knew meant something to them."

Ofor looked at him solemnly.

"He watched you all your life, young one. From a distance, he made sure you were cared for. Felt it was the one thing he could give your mother."

Daniel wiped the tears from his eyes. "Why did he not give this to me himself?"

Ofor shook his head. "I do not know, young one. Maybe he did not feel worthy."

Ofor stood, leaving Daniel alone to stare down at the object in his hand, trying to make sense of it all. He remembered his mother—her smile, her loving ways. How proud she would have been if she were here.

"Tis all right if Emi'le causes you distress, if she spins your head a bit. Girls often do. Especially ones you hold close to your heart."

"Who says I hold her any more dear than any of the other friends I have?" a young Da'yel said, indignant.

“So, you are not upset that Kale was partnered with her for your reading exercises?” his mother asked, amused.

“No,” he said, most unconvincingly.

Da’yel’s mother laughed. “’Tis all right to care for someone. Son, love is the one thing that makes no sense, yet makes all the sense in the world. It is the one thing that guides us when the darkness threatens to overtake us. Always take care of the ones you love.”

Daniel looked up into the night sky and smiled.

“You’re watching, aren’t you mother?” he whispered to the stars. “I know you are.”

Chapter Seventeen

To Daniel, it looked as if an angel had descended to earth. Emi stood before him in a simple, white cotton dress, pale skin shining in the sun. The other women had adorned her ebony locks with strings of iridescent seed beads that reflected all the colors of the rainbow. Her tiny, perfect hands held tightly to his, her impish, blue eyes gazed up at him in love and adoration.

This was it. He was giving up the last bit of his old life, just as everyone said. That was not why he stood in front of their tribe, why he held her hands within his. That reason was secondary. There was only one real reason—because he loved her, because she was his and he was hers. He was going to spend the rest of his life loving her and wanted all to know it, see it.

Hido'ni stood beside them, looking toward the crowd as the couple faced each other. Pulling a small braided rope out of his jerkin, he held it in the air.

“Just as two threads laced in opposite directions will form a strong weave, so do two lives. You two share a love that others will look upon for example, for conviction. Your trust and faith in one another will hold you together, no matter what the future brings. Learn and grow together.”

Hido'ni took Daniel's wrist in one hand and Emi'le's in the other. Stacking their clasped hands atop one another's, he wrapped the cord around them.

“Through this action, you bind yourselves to each other, and only each other. You give yourselves into each other's hands. May your path be blessed with tears and laughter, hard work and play, sadness and joy...may everything in this world be yours to give to one another.”

Hido'ni unwound the silken rope from their clasped wrists and looked at Daniel. "What do you bring as a symbol of your love for this woman?"

Daniel swallowed hard and turned to a waiting No'al. The young boy stood proudly behind him, holding a small pouch in his hand. Daniel's hands shook when he took the silken bag from the child's fingers. He had originally fashioned a silver choker for Emi, just as he had seen many of the married lifemates give to one another. After last night, he had changed his mind.

Daniel pulled the object Ofor gave him out of the bag, then turned to Emi'le. Taking her hand, he gently clasped squeezed the pliable metal around her wrist. Emi looked at him in confusion for a moment, before tears began to course down her cheeks. Daniel wiped them softly away, smiling broadly.

Emi'le stared down at the delicate cuff that now adorned her wrist. It had been polished, the silver plaits shone brightly in the sunlight, the blue beryl stone glittered as bright as her eyes.

"It was my mother's," Daniel whispered quietly.

Emi nodded. Daniel suddenly remembered the way Emi used to admire it as a child. She would sit on his mother's lap and stare at it, one delicate finger tracing over the silver-wrapped stone.

"It reminds me of your eyes, Emi. When you are happy your eyes turn this shade of blue," Daniel's mother had said.

Daniel was rocked by the memory. So many things were slowly coming back to him. He held Emi's face in his hands, waiting for her to open her eyes again. She bit her bottom lip and took a deep breath before she looked up and smiled.

Hido'ni cleared his throat, his own emotions getting the best of him. His voice was rough.

"For now, feel no cold, for you will be warmth for each other. Find shelter within each other. Take the good with the bad. And always love. Revel in your journey. Make it an example for us all. Be strong and face the future, whatever it may bring. You are now joined, no one's but each other's. May your days be long and filled with bliss."

Emi'le took a step forward, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck. When her lips touched his, a burst of white light flashed behind his closed eyelids. The kiss branded him so deeply inside, he knew she was becoming part of his very soul. Everything around them swirled. Daniel felt as if they were becoming one entity.

Another blinding flash flickered over the crowd. He heard thunder in his ears. Finally, the air around them stilled. He looked up and saw he'd raised Emi in his arms. Her legs dangled in the air as he held her, pressing her body against his. The crowd muttered all around them.

"Wow," No'al whispered. "You guys got all glowy."

His eyes were round as saucers. Emi'le looked down at Daniel in amazement and began to laugh. He shook his head, adding tonight's events to the long list of questions he had.

For now, Daniel held Emi'le close and swung her round in circles. Out of sheer exuberance, he threw her up in the air and cradled her in his arms. Her laughter echoed through the night as he bounced her down the makeshift aisle. The other tribals joined their progression, the couple's joy contagious. They forgot the strange glow that had crept around the newly wed couple, forgot the way the sky thundered when they kissed.

* * *

If there was such a thing as perfection, Daniel had found the meaning of it.

He held Emi'le in his arms, pressing her tightly against his chest, her legs locked around his waist. They stood in the center of the hot spring and only the sound of the water splashing gently against their bodies could be heard for miles all around them.

Daniel bent his knees, providing a seat for his new bride. Emi giggled, lowering herself onto his knees, keeping her body against his, enjoying the feel of her husband's hands stroking her back.

They had arrived here after a two-day journey across the desert. The other tribal members had assured Daniel it was quite normal for couples to go off alone for a few nights after their mating. Tirok had even teased, assuring them his eldest child was conceived on the first night of his matrimonial coupling. Daniel was glad they'd chosen to come to the hot springs. This place symbolized finding Emi'le again.

Emi had blushed and hid her head in Daniel's chest. Although she was a grown woman, she still treated the entire tribe as parental figures. Daniel had admonished Tirok for making her uncomfortable, but in the end, playful banter won out. Everyone was in high spirits as they bid the couple farewell.

The only person who seemed troubled was Hido'ni. After he blessed Emi and Daniel, he kissed Emi on the forehead and whispered in her ear. She took a deep breath and nodding slowly, obviously ending the discussion that lay between the two of them. When the Keeper hugged Daniel goodbye, he held him close. Try as Hido'ni might, the Keeper's unspoken message eluded Daniel.

"I am very proud of you," was all the Keeper had said as he pulled away.

With that, Tirok and Ofor grabbed Daniel and placed him on a sled. The woman did the same to Emi'le. Everyone cheered. Emi positioned herself between Daniel's legs and grabbed the dogs' reins.

As soon as they arrived at the spring, they pitched their tent, built up a small fire and made love. After they ate, they loved each other until the sun lay low on the horizon. Whatever troubles plagued Daniel quickly floated away. Emi'le was his wife; his life was a good one. He had people he loved and cherished. His memories were slowly returning. Everything radiated hope and goodness for him and his bride. Why worry about the bad? For now, all he wanted to do was hold his wife, perhaps create another life from their fierce love.

Daniel sank a bit lower into the water, keeping Emi'le straddled across his waist. He kissed her lips playfully, nipping them gently with

his teeth. He was rewarded with another of Emi's giggles. He loved that he could make her laugh, loved that he knew what laughter truly was.

Emi'le kissed him back, sighing contentedly. She lowered her head to his shoulder and trailed kisses across his neck. Daniel turned his head to the side and kissed her elfin nose.

"Emi, we should map the directions to this place. I want to come back here once a cycle. Just you and me, so we can be alone like this, remember our joining."

Emi'le nodded solemnly, giving him a tight smile. Her impish eyes filled with sadness before she swallowed it down.

Daniel frowned, reaching for her chin. He shifted her body until their faces touched. Resting his forehead against hers, he kissed her lips, holding the back of her head to keep her close to him.

"Emi, I know something is hurting you. Something is eating away at you. I have tried to be understanding, even knowing that you chose to confide in Hido'ni and not I. Honestly, I know you are trying to protect me. But it tears me asunder to see such pain in your eyes. I do not even fault you for staying silent, but we are husband and wife now. Your burden is my burden. Besides..."

Daniel kissed her lips and nuzzled her throat softly. "I miss the sound of your voice."

Emi'le chuckled. In an effort to distract him, she shifted her hips and impaled herself atop his member. Daniel groaned.

"That's not fair. I cannot argue with you or properly interrogate you when you distract me so."

Emi'le ignored his pleas, gripped his shoulders tightly and pumped her hips up and down. Daniel moaned, burying his face in her chest.

"You feel so good, Emi. Nothing has ever felt so good."

Daniel tugged one of her tiny, pink nipples into his mouth. Emi'le's breath hitched in her throat as she whimpered. Daniel smiled. He loved that reaction, loved that he made her lose control, adored that she was as addicted to his touch as he was hers.

He allowed her to play on him a little longer, trying to stretch out their playful coupling. When the heat of their bodies and the warm water began to dull his senses, Daniel walked carefully out of the spring, staying encased inside his wife as he maneuvered them both into the tent. He laid Emi'le down onto the sleeping mats while they shared a devastating kiss. Unwilling to end their pleasure, he pulled away, smiling mischievously at the sound of her breathless moans.

Daniel propped himself between her legs and sampled the delicate taste of her body. He licked and sucked the water off her skin, trailing torturous kisses down her torso until Emi'le writhed beneath him. Pushing her legs further apart, he ran his nose down her inner thigh and inhaled her sweet scent before pressing his tongue deeply into the folds of her sex.

Emi'le cried out, her hips thrashing convulsively as she anticipated her release. Daniel kept her dangling on the edge, teasing her with thoughts of completion only to slow his caresses when he felt her approach climax. He devoured her taste hungrily, his hands clutching and lifting her hips to ensure that every part of her didn't escape his tongue's careful attention. Emi'le was bucking wildly beneath him. When he finally backed away, she howled, thinking he would deny her again. She was about to roll him over and take control when he filled her completely with one long, delicious thrust. Emi'le screamed her release, seizing her husband close as she sobbed in ecstasy. Daniel shouted with pleasure, covering his wife's mouth with his. When their frantic rhythm finally ended, Daniel rolled off Emi'le and tugged her limp body atop his.

Their release seemed to go on longer each time they made love. Sometimes, it was so intense Daniel swore they would not survive the encounter, but to his delight, they always did. The frenzy would wane, as it did now. Their breathing would eventually become less ragged as they kissed away one another's tears. Sanity would once again prevail, leaving the two lovers spent and satiated, reveling in the journey they had just taken together.

Emi'le smiled as she gazed down at her husband. Her pinky finger gently stroked his eyebrows, traced a slow path to his lips. Daniel

playfully caught her finger between his teeth and shook his head back and forth as if he were a dog worrying a bone. Emi's delighted giggle caused him to laugh out loud.

She placed tiny kisses all over his cheeks, the line of his jaw, his eyelids, running her fingers through his hair and along the sensitive skin of his scalp. With eyes half closed, he watched his wife study his face carefully, as if she was memorizing every line, every curve.

"I love you Emi," Daniel whispered.

Emi kissed him again and placed her lips close to his ear. "I love you Da'yel. Forever. Always."

Daniel gasped. He took her face in his hands and kissed her so sweetly that when he pulled away, Emi'le had tears in her eyes.

"Thank you." He lowered her head onto his chest and closed his eyes, letting the soft sounds of a desert night lull him into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

“Officer Elite Barrows! Can you hear me?” Daniel heard a voice bark out.

He felt heavy, drugged, as if his limbs had atrophied. The pounding in his head was excruciating, as if it would explode into a million pieces at the slightest disturbance. He cracked his eyes open and the pain increased tenfold. The light was blinding. Daniel groaned, weakly choking out a cough as he gagged on the unmistakable taste of rope. His throat was dry. He jerked forward and fell bodily to the ground, the rough landing sending sharp spikes of pain through his already throbbing skull. His hands and feet had also been restrained.

Dear God, what had happened? Where was Emi’le? The last thing he remembered was sitting in the small tent by the spring, drinking tea Emi’le had prepared for them.

He closed his eyes, struggling to recall precisely what had occurred. The memory was fuzzy...Emi’le hovering over him, tears in her eyes as she kissed his eyelids closed. Had she drugged him? Why?

Someone helped him to his feet.

“It’s all right, Officer Elite Barrows. We have been tracking you for months, trying to pinpoint your exact location. We were finally able to locate you and the tribe that captured you. Unfortunately, they moved again, but their attempt to send us on a hunt after them instead of securing your location did not work, sir. We were able to spot you on radar last night—you and the girl they left behind to guard you.”

At the officer’s words, Daniel forced his eyes open. Emi’le.

Daniel looked up and saw his wife standing between two soldiers. Her hands were bound behind her and her head hung low. In full disguise. Gods no, this was not happening. Why had she allowed the Order to capture them? Once more, why did she hide her true appearance?

His blood ran cold remembering the yellow folder that held her death sentence.

Destruction orders.

Daniel screamed behind his gag, tried to order them to let her go. Nothing clear came out. Daniel swayed on his feet and Emi'le's head reared up in concern. Her eyes filled with tears again. Apology and love shone out of them so fiercely that Daniel roared angrily through the gag.

"No Emi," he thought. "Don't let them see. Don't let them see what I mean to you. Run, save yourself."

Emi'le ducked her head in a silent confirmation. She had heard his instructions. Yet, she did not run. She stood there, perfectly still, waiting.

"Why, Emi? Why?" he begged her mentally.

This time Emi'le gave no physical response. She shut him out. His heart constricted, his blood ran cold. Somewhere in the distance, he heard a dog barking.

No. No'al's puppy. Ofor and his son were nearby. They had probably come to retrieve him and Emi'le. Daniel scanned the terrain, looking for any sign of their companions, and saw nothing. They had hidden themselves well. He prayed they wouldn't attempt to attack the troops. The tribe would be outnumbered.

The puppy darted over the rise, barking furiously, ready to take on every single one of the Order's troops.

"Get rid of that animal," one of the solders ordered.

Daniel watched as the man took aim. He screamed through his gag. "No!"

Daniel watched helplessly as the laser shot left the soldier's gun. Something inside him shifted as he concentrated on the laser fire. It

slowed, just as it had that day in the canals, when Emi'le's life was endangered.

The puppy stopped in its tracks, veered to the right, then turned tail and ran in a completely different direction. It disappeared behind a sand dune as the shot hit the dirt, right where the puppy would have been.

"What was that?" one of the soldiers muttered in shock, completely forgetting about the dog.

All eyes turned to Daniel. His whole body began to shake. Dear God, did he just do that? Before he could fully process what had happened, Emi'le whimpered. The two guards who flanked her were suddenly launched in the air, hitting the ground forcibly. They lay stunned for a few seconds before shouts erupted across the encampment.

"She is Awakened!"

Daniel gasped. She had made the officers think it was her, when he had caused the laser shot anomaly. The revelation of his newfound power was secondary to his concern for Emi. Calling attention to her powers only reminded the Order's Army that they viewed her as a hostile in the most extreme sense of the word. They would treat her like a rabid animal. Using any means they deemed necessary to restrain her.

"*Run Emi! Run!*" he screamed in his mind.

To his immense relief, Emi'le bolted. To his horror, she didn't run to safety. Instead, she ran to him, tackling his aching body with all the force she could muster. Emi kissed him, desperately pressing her body against his, despite the ropes that held them apart.

"No! Run!" he yelled through his gag. "Run!"

He tried to nudge her away, silently pleading as panic and fury swirled within.

"*Run!*" he screamed again.

Emi'le continued to kiss him, trying to soak his body into hers. The world stilled for a moment as her lips pressed to his ear.

"Always," she whispered.

"Get that creature off my son!" a familiar voice yelled.

Emi'le howled as if she were being ripped in half as a soldier grabbed her around the waist and yanked her off Daniel. Another soldier bound her ankles. The officers pinned her between them and dragged her farther away.

"How dare you let her touch him? Did you not see his distress? And why is my son's mouth still bound?" The General's orders boomed out a staccato rhythm.

Daniel blinked as a fuzzy image appeared. Soon the picture came clearly into focus. His adoptive father stood over him.

"I knew it. I knew they had done something to you, taken you against your will. It's all right, son. I'm here to take you home. You're safe now." The General placed his hand on Daniel's shoulder.

"You're safe now," he repeated.

Daniel felt something prick into the skin of his left shoulder. He glanced over just in time to see one of the soldiers retract a needle from his arm. The General untied his gag.

"Everything is going to be fine. I promise you, son, I will make those tribals pay. Make her pay for doing this to you," the General vowed.

Daniel tried to fight the powerful drugs surging through his body. He looked for Emi'le, but could not see her. All he could hear was her horrible, pain-filled screams as his world went black.

* * *

Emi'le snickered with glee as she darted away from Daniel. He stopped for a moment, watching as she zigzagged around the tents, holding his satchel.

"Emi, you will make me late for guard watch," Daniel scolded playfully.

Despite his pleas, Emi'le moved farther and farther away, her girlish giggles trailing through the encampment. Knowing she would not relent, Daniel gave chase.

As always, she was faster. If she hadn't been doing this just to tease, he knew he'd have no chance to catch her. Luckily, she was only playing, making him laugh as she flitted past, sidestepping just out of reach. Daniel dove toward her, catching her around the waist as they landed on the sand with a muffled thump. He rolled them both over and sat atop Emi triumphantly, satchel momentarily forgotten.

"Ha. Got you." He thumped his chest dramatically before landing a resounding, conquering kiss on his beloved's lips.

Emi'le laughed, looking up at him in awe. Suddenly, her gaze was drawn over his shoulder and she gasped in horror. All the joy in her face vanished.

"Da'yel," she whimpered.

"Emi, what's wrong?" He turned to see what held her in such terror.

The sky around them darkened and everything became black as night. Daniel reached down to comfort Emi and, to his horror, his lifemate began to fade away.

"Emi!"

"Dreams bring passion. Passion births lust. Lust feeds violence. Violence brings chaos. Chaos stands against the Order," a voice repeated sternly.

Startled, Daniel rose to his feet. He turned, ready to challenge the forces that had torn Emi from him, and saw General Barrows standing in the darkness. He held his hand out to Daniel, repeating the mantra, his face as cold and expressionless as a mask.

"Dreams bring passion. Passion births lust. Lust feeds violence. Violence brings chaos. Chaos stands against the Order."

Daniel jerked up.

"Emi!" he screamed again, his voice hoarse with emotion.

"Daniel, it is all right, you are home now," a female voice said.

Daniel shook his head, trying to rattle the numb and fuzzy feelings out of his head. What was wrong with him? Was he still sedated?

“Do you need another dose? Your father gave you one when you first arrived. Perhaps you need another one?”

Entaxia? Daniel thought to himself blearily.

Of course, his father and the Order would want him back on his regular doses of medication as soon as possible. It made him numb, complacent. The General probably hoped Daniel would forget his life with the tribals, forget his wife. At the very thought of losing Emi, all he could feel was his heart breaking. Had the Centre agents already eliminated her? How long had he been out cold?

“Emi!e,” he whimpered.

“Daniel, please let me help you.” The voice sounded concerned.

“Emi,” Daniel repeated dumbly.

He felt a cool hand on his face. She was safe. It must have been a dream. Daniel opened his eyes, smiling at her attempts to comfort him, just like he had so many times for her. His easy grin suddenly contorted into a soundless scream of horror as the face above him swam into focus. No, it couldn't be. Daniel blinked furiously, hoping this was another part of his nightmare, but the image did not change.

“Cala?”

Chapter Nineteen

Daniel saw Cala lying next to him. He bolted off the bed, searching vainly for his cloak. The solid walls of his sterile home seemed to choke him with sudden claustrophobia. His stomach turned as if he was going to become ill.

“Did we? Have you? Did you sleep next to me. Did you touch me?”

Cala blinked in confusion. “Of course I did, Daniel. I am your partner. Your father swore he would retrieve you. He had the Royal Council hold my position until you returned. Did you think I would abandon you?”

Daniel shook his head, hurriedly pulling on a pair of his old service uniform pants. The material seemed to suffocate his skin with its manufactured textures, abrasive and unforgiving. How had he worn these suits every day?

“Dear God, this is not happening,” he muttered. “Please...this is not happening. Did we do anything?” he asked, slightly hysterical.

“Daniel, be calm. No, we did not make any attempts. Although it was advised, I thought it best we wait. We all know that things have been very difficult for you as it is,” Cala said, doing her best to soothe him.

She could not truly comfort him. Her voice lacked any true emotion. It was not her fault—she had no idea how to feel or to think on her own. Her responses had been trained and conditioned, just as his had been. Daniel turned away, stumbling into the bathroom.

“Water,” he spat out angrily. “Forty degrees Fahrenheit.”

“Warning, Daniel Barrows,” came an automated voice. “Such extreme temperature may cause bodily discomfort.”

"I said water, forty degrees!" Daniel roared.

The computer overhead beeped frantically, readjusting itself to Daniel's heated command.

"Very well. Water, forty degrees Fahrenheit, to commence in three, two, one..."

Water poured out of the faucet. Daniel cupped his hands, splashing it on his face and over his head, practically drenching himself in cool water to try and shake off the numbing complacency.

"See, you are already readjusting," Cala announced.

Daniel stopped, idly watching the water disappear down the drain. He looked up and watched Cala approach him through the reflection in the mirror.

"Your father said he would visit first thing in the morning. I have prepared dinner. Freshen yourself and I will set supper out."

Cala took a step forward and placed two more amber pills on the sink. Daniel stared down at them. A part of his brain began to misfire. If he took them, he could just sink back into his life of conformity, forget everything that had occurred between him and the tribals. He could go back to his function as Officer Elite Barrows.

But Emile...

Daniel lowered himself onto the edge of his steel tub, grasping the cool metal rim to steady himself. He felt as if the air around him had vanished, leaving him choking and gasping for breath. His wife, his beautiful beloved wife—he had to find her, save her. Slipping the two pills off the countertop, he formulated a plan.

* * *

Daniel stood at the doorway of his dining room. Cala set down a hot bowl of soup in front of his normal place, motioning for him to sit.

Daniel took a deep breath and nodded, trying to paste an expressionless look on his face. He had to play this just the right way,

had to play it cool. He was going to crawl out of his skin. Everything about being here made him want to revolt. He sat, doing his best to ignore the scratchy feel of the black service suit against his skin.

This environment felt alien. He missed the feel of his woven clothing, the sun against his skin. Even the computer-regulated air currents that kept this dwelling at a comfortable temperature felt restrictive and impersonal.

He had to get out of here.

He picked up the shiny silver utensils, then looked at his soup, staring down for a long time. God, he would never pull this off. He could not pretend, not even for a moment. He wanted to be back with his tribe, needed to find his wife. He desperately had to get away from Cala, the General and the Order. He wanted out of functional society as soon as possible.

"You called for her again," Cala whispered.

Daniel's head shot up, pinning Cala with his gaze.

"The girl, that name," Cala explained. "Emi'le."

Daniel tightened his grip around the silverware until his knuckles turned white. Cala stared back with somber eyes.

"The girl they captured...who was she, Daniel?"

Daniel gulped, trying his best not to explode at the sound of Emi's name on her lips. Cala may not understand what they were doing to Emi'le, but he did. Cala was a victim of circumstance, chosen for him solely based on her breeding and function. He owed her the truth before he turned her whole world upside down.

"Cala, I do not desire to hurt you."

"Hurt? Are you going to hit me Daniel?" Cala cocked her head to the side in confusion.

Daniel shook his head. Under different circumstances, the absurdity of her question might have offended him.

"No, Cala, but this life...your function. I no longer share your goals."

"I do not understand Daniel. We received certification. It is time for us to—"

"No." Daniel slammed his fist down on the table. Cala flinched. Training could not prevent the momentary flash of fear in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Daniel whispered.

"Sorry?"

"Cala, I can not...I will not. Cala, I am already married," Daniel finally spat out in frustration.

Cala gasped, looking around the room as if someone might have heard him.

"You cannot, Daniel. It's forbidden. You are going against the Order."

Daniel closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he looked at Cala with a determined, intense gaze.

"I do not care about the Order, Cala. I do not care about the law. All I care about is finding my wife."

He pulled the two pills out of his pocket and showed them to Cala.

"I was going to put these in your soup. They are not just dream suppressors, they make you complacent and unwilling to question authority. They suppress any true emotions. It's wrong. No person should live without emotions."

Cala got up from the table and sat closer to him, taking the pills from Daniel's hands.

"The girl, the one they are holding?" she asked quietly.

"She is my wife. My lifemate. My Beloved One." Daniel's voice overflowed with emotion. "I have to find her."

"She is Awakened," Cala said. "They are studying her and intend to terminate her life."

Daniel jumped to his feet. "I know, I know. I have to get her out. I have to find her." Daniel paced the room like a caged animal.

Cala's eyes widened. "You...you love her."

Daniel stopped his frantic pacing and looked at her.

“Of course I do.” Gritting his teeth, he tried his best to tone down the incredulous sound of his voice. “She is everything to me. She’s my life. If she dies, I’ll die.”

Daniel leaned against the wall, then sank down to the floor, at a sudden loss for ideas. Truthfully, he’d thought no further than getting out of this dwelling. He had no idea how to break Emi out of the Centre’s compound.

“God, what am I going to do?” Daniel whispered.

Daniel felt a shadow pass over him. He looked up and saw Cala standing in front of him. She lowered herself to her knees and studied him carefully.

“Nothing has changed. Your status, your standing—they still regard you as one of their best and brightest,” Cala clarified.

Daniel groaned. “Cala, please, listen to what I am saying—”

“No, Daniel. *You* listen,” Cala implored. “*Nothing* has changed. You can walk into the Centre now with no questions. Everyone thinks you have been taking regular doses of Entaxia. You still have your function.”

Daniel blinked in shock as Cala’s words finally sank in.

“But you know I have not been. You can report me,” Daniel pointed out.

Cala nodded. “I could, but I do not feel that I want to do that. I think...I want to help you. You...mean something to me. I do not wish to see you in this state.” Cala’s voice was tremulous as she tried to explain. “We are to retire in a few hours. Your father knows we are supposed to start our attempts tonight. Thinking we will be exerted from our activities, he will not visit early. That gives you plenty of time. I will tell them you acted as if everything was all right. I shall assure them we procreated and you left early in the morning. I will say that I presumed you’d gone to the Centre.”

Cala got to her feet and held out her hand. He stood, thanking the Gods the General had chosen such a perfect mating partner. He doubted this was what his adoptive father had in mind, but the General would never suspect Cala’s involvement.

"Why would you help us? Help me?" Daniel asked, suddenly skeptical. "I am abandoning you. Betraying you."

Cala shrugged. "Are you, Daniel? You were never mine. You called out for someone else in your slumber for as long as we have been paired. You tell me now that you belong to another. Is it her, Daniel? Your Emi'le?" Cala asked gently.

Daniel nodded slowly.

"Then you must go," Cala replied. "Save her."

He smiled down at Cala and kissed her softly on the forehead.

"I owe you more than you can ever know, Cala."

Cala looked up at him, the beginnings of a smile dawning on her face. "Just tell me one thing, Daniel. This love? Is it worth it? Risking your existence? Walking away from everything you have ever known?"

Daniel grinned sheepishly, tucking a wisp of hair behind Cala's ear in a last moment of thankful tenderness.

"Tell me," she implored.

"I did not know life before Emi'le. She has had my heart since we were children. She has held the best part of me safe until I was in my right mind and could reclaim it. She is everything real. Is it worth risking me life? She is my life, Cala. Is she worth walking away from everything I know? I didn't know anything, not a damn thing at all, until she came back. Is her love worth it? Her love is the only thing worth anything. I need her, Cala. I need to love her, be with her. Make her laugh, and be there to wipe her tears when she is sad. I need to fall asleep with her in my arms, wake up and have her face be the first thing I see. Love is the *only* thing worth anything." Daniel's words rushed out of him in a torrent.

Cala blinked in surprise as a tear rolled down her cheek. She wiped it away, staring at the evaporating droplet on her fingertip in awe.

"Do you think, Daniel? Do you think I will ever feel this love you cherish so?"

Daniel wiped away another tear from his ex-partner's eye.

“Yes, Cala, I have no doubt you will.”

Chapter Twenty

Daniel stood outside of the Centre, staring up at the steel monstrosity before him. It would not be hard to explain why he was here in the dead of night. While under the influence of Entaxia, he'd always been driven and dedicated. His co-workers would only see it as a valiant attempt to get back to his function as soon as possible.

Yet, the same question plagued him over and over again. Would he be able to pull this off? He had to, for Emi's sake. Somewhere in the confines of his former workplace, his wife was being tortured. He had tried several times to reach out to her. He called to her with his mind, yet there was nothing but silence. Daniel tried not to let it affect him, even though it pained him to realize his wife was shutting him out. He knew she was protecting him. A part of him resented it, but there was no time for that debilitating emotion now. He had bigger woes.

Taking a deep breath, Daniel walked up the steep, marble steps. Before he reached the top, someone grabbed his shoulder. Caught off guard, Daniel was whirled into the darkness and slammed into the marble wall.

"How asinine can you be, young one?"

Daniel grabbed the two meaty wrists gripping the lapels of his service suit and tried to pry them loose. He opened his mouth, ready to lay into his assailant, when a large hand covered his cries.

"It is Tirok, you foolish boy," the man said urgently, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Daniel's eyes widened. "Tirok?"

He let Daniel go long enough to step into the moonlight and confirm the validity of his statement. Daniel blinked in shock. There stood his fellow tribal, in full Order service gear, looking the part of a guard officer to the tee.

"How did you get that suit?" Daniel asked in disbelief, still trying to process the events of the last few minutes.

"Come on now, young one, how do you think we slip in and out so easily? We have many of these suits for infiltration. Do you think you were the only person capable of subterfuge?"

Daniel chuckled nervously, looking around to make sure no one was watching this little exchange. "How many of us are about?"

"Many. Hido'ni is already inside," Tirok explained.

"What? Is he insane? He is number one on the Order's list of wanted fugitives."

"Aye, but he would not listen. He feels responsible for what occurred. He knew your wife was hiding something. She insisted on separating from the camp. Hido'ni knew there was danger, but chose to listen to her. She had always been so level-headed before..."

"Before me?" Daniel finished his friend's statement, a little more accusingly than he'd intended.

"Before she let her heart rule her decisions," Tirok amended gently. "She must have known something was going to happen, with the nightmares and such. We will all know soon enough, young one. However, what you are attempting was foolish. Are you just going to walk in there and demand to see her?"

Daniel nodded. He hadn't been the only one letting his heart rule his actions.

"Da'yel, they are not as transparent as you may think. They will watch you like a hawk. You cannot just saunter in there, thinking they will grant you access to her. Remember what happened before—you helped her escape."

"They think she drugged or coerced me," Daniel spat out in disgust, remembering the conviction in the General's voice. He was so sure Daniel

could not have gone willingly. “Besides, my father is lead investigator on this case.

“Remember what I told you before, young one. Sometimes, things are not what they seem,” Tirok replied somberly.

Tirok glanced over his shoulder toward the entrance of the Centre. “Now, listen. We have several of our people already inside. We are going to shut down the security division—it will darken the city for over forty-two hours. All security measures will be offline, giving us plenty of time for what we are setting out to do,” he whispered, eyes gleaming with excitement.

“Something tells me this is not just about saving my wife,” Daniel observed, one brow raised questioningly.

Tirok took another deep breath, his expression vaguely apologetic. “We have been planning this for many years, Da’yel. Your Beloved One’s capture only catapulted us into action. We are going to shut down the Entaxia labs—not permanently—enough to stop production long enough to wean people off of the drug’s influence. We want to let people make up their own mind. If they choose to live in this life after their eyes have been opened, then so be it. However, if they choose to leave, they will know there is life beyond the Order.”

“You will not succeed,” Daniel argued. “The Order’s Army is too strong.”

Tirok smiled. He reached out and grasped Daniel by the shoulder. “Do not underestimate the will of man, young one. Our cause is just; the Gods will smile down on us. We have faith. Your focus is to rescue your wife. They are holding her underground. It will not be easy to get to her. You have knowledge of the tunnel system, correct?”

“I designed the escape routes myself,” Daniel confirmed.

Tirok nodded. “She is four levels down, under what you call your Investigative Labs. Can you reach there from your office?”

Daniel tried not to fixate on one piece of information that Tirok had unknowingly revealed. Under the Investigative Labs, an area very few ventured into. Far away from the rest of the Centre, it was where they

interrogated prisoners with more aggressive tactics. Had they tortured his wife? Daniel felt his insides twist again. Anger coursed through his veins, threatening to overtake his reason.

“You must calm yourself, young one. You still have to make it through those doors and convince them to let you into your old office. Make sure all of your cameras are angled away from your tunnel panel. It will not be easy,” Tirok reminded him quietly.

Daniel took another deep breath and looked up at the building.

“It does not matter, my wife needs me.”

* * *

Daniel crawled carefully through the ventilation system, making as little sound as possible. He had successfully gained access into the building with no incident. He’d gotten to his office and locked the door. He’d even had the foresight to turn on his classical music transceiver, indicating to his staff he was doing research and paperwork. No one had seemed surprised to see him. In fact, they’d all acted as if it were any other day, like he hadn’t been missing for months.

They were all conditioned to not question authority. That conditioning, along with taking Entaxia, made them mindless drones. Daniel briefly wondered if he could save his father. Did the General know what was occurring? Was he as addicted as the rest of functional society?

Finally coming to the end of the narrow passageway, he shimmied his way down the metal tubes that lay between floors. Landing on his feet, he took a quick look around to ensure no one lay in wait for him. Satisfied he was alone and not being followed, Daniel reached for the small pack he had with him and turned on his wrist light, making his way through the intricate maze of service tunnels.

After what felt like hours of cramped travel through the featureless metal shafts, he approached the restricted section of the Centre. Daniel crawled down the narrow exhaust pipes, looking in the rooms below. He

stopped to peer in every cell, shining his light into every dark corner to make sure his wife was not hiding in the darkness.

Please my love, tell me where you are.

Daniel steadily began to lose hope. He closed his eyes one last time, reaching out for his wife. He was irritated at her intentional silence. He strengthened his resolve.

"I will not leave here without you, Emi. Tell me where you are."

Just then, he heard it, a tiny, little gasp, as if his harsh tone alarmed her. Daniel held his breath and closed his eyes, trying to pinpoint which direction the sound had come from. He heard other sounds, shuffling and small groans. She was obviously trying to hide her pain from him. He finally traced the noise to the last room on the left. They'd put her as far away from escape as possible, of course.

Daniel tried his best not to make any sort of ruckus; however, his need to be reunited with his wife was wearing his patience thin. He clambered through the air duct, no longer caring who heard him. He arrived above her holding room, attempting to still his ragged breath. He peered into the room below.

"Emi," he whispered.

Daniel could not see her, but he heard his beloved whimper. Good God, she was crying, trying vainly to hide her sobs. He listened for a moment, making sure no one was in the room with her. Not that he cared. The entire Order's army could be waiting for him and he would care less. His wife was down there.

Daniel yanked on the hatch, pushed it to the side as he jumped into Emi's cell. He panned his light beam across the darkened room, anxiously searching. His heart stopped when the light illuminated the far right side of the cell. He ran to her. Dropping down, he skidded across the floor on his knees to a halt. He bent over the curled-up form, his hands hovering over her, afraid to touch her, no matter how strong the urge.

Angry tears flooded his eyes as he gently turned her over. They had beaten her repeatedly. Her dress was ripped, her entire body filmed in

sticky sweat. Daniel quietly assessed the damage. Her eyes were swollen, dried blood staining the side of her mouth. As carefully as he dared, he gathered her in his arms, flinching when she cried out in pain.

“Emi, I’m so sorry. I should have been here sooner,” Daniel sobbed.

He tore off the end of her skirt and pulled out the small canteen of water attached to his belt. He wet the scrap of fabric, and brought it gently to his wife’s face.

“I am so sorry, my love.”

Emi’le groaned, shaking her head as if too disoriented to understand his words. She slowly opened her eyes, looking up at Daniel in shocked disbelief. To his surprise, she gasped, weakly trying to push him away.

“No,” Emi whispered. “Run, run...”

“Never, Emi,” he swore. “Not without you. Don’t you know? I would die without you.”

Emi’le whimpered.

“Shh, Emi. I’m here. I am not going anywhere, remember?”

Emi’le sniffled and looked up at her husband. With a shaking hand, she reached up and palmed his face, giving him the best smile she could manage.

Daniel smiled back, allowing tears to fall freely from his eyes. He turned his head and kissed the inside of her palm before gathering her in his arms and rising slowly to his feet.

“I am getting you out of here,” he assured her.

Emi’le nodded, resting her head against his shoulder. He undid the pack, pulling out the uniform he had absconded from supply. Quickly he washed off her face and arms removing the red film hiding her pale skin. Daniel winced as he removed her clothing, trying to overcome conflicting emotions of fear and rage. She was battered and bruised. As he suspected, the Order’s people had not shown her the merest speck of humanity. Emi’le did her best to assist him, but she was so weak.

When she was properly disguised, Daniel readjusted her weight and gently placed her hands around his neck to anchor her body safely to his.

“That’s my Emi,” he whispered, coaxing his wife. “It’s going to be all right now.”

Daniel looked up at the hatch, knowing he could not get her up and through the tunnels in her present state. He had to take her out through the hallway. If he got them past the far corridor, they could slip out the service elevator and up to the maintenance deck. Once they cleared maintenance, he would sneak them out the supply door. From there, they would have to navigate within the city.

They’d only make it if Tirok and the others successfully disabled the security sector. If not, they would be seen by the cameras and never make it past the hallway. As if his prayer was instantly answered, all the lights went out.

“Attention, security cameras offline. Please cease all activity. All registered units, please report to security substations for immediate repair. Attention, security cameras offline. Please cease all activity. All registered units, please report to security substations for immediate repair,” an automated voice stated from above.

Daniel sighed in relief as dim, orange safety lights illuminated the room. All power was being routed to auxiliary systems. Tirok and his team had succeeded. He shook his head in disbelief, surprised at the man’s ingenuity.

He heard the sound of crisp footsteps echo down the hall. Daniel pressed his back to the wall, waiting to see if anyone was going to step in. The footsteps quickly retreated in the other direction. The Centre was obviously more concerned with the security crisis than one badly beaten girl held in a subsection of the basement.

When all the sounds of life faded, Daniel turned to the panel on Emile’s cell and punched in his father’s code. The door clicked open. He kicked it the rest of the way ajar and pulled them out into the hallway. Daniel ran down the corridor and spotted the service elevator. With a

touch of a button, the doors swished open to let them inside. After the doors closed, he held his wife closer to him, careful not to crush her.

“We’re almost there Emi.”

His route successfully avoided most of the Order’s soldiers on their way out of the Centre. With the loss of power, the maintenance corridors became completely unmanned. Shouldering the supply door open, Daniel stepped out into the darkness. The sun had begun to lighten the eastern sky. There was not much time left. He had to move fast.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a utility vehicle parked nearby. It would have to do, even though he’d ditch it as soon as possible. Taking one last look around, Daniel made his way to the transport. He looked down at his sleeping wife and smiled.

“It’s okay, Emi, we are almost there. We’re almost there.”

Daniel picked up his pace. He pulled at the door of the truck, groaning when he found it sealed against intruders.

“Emi, please, I need you to stand for just a moment, love. Can you do that?”

Emi’s eyes snapped open and she nodded furiously. Daniel kissed her lips encouragingly.

“My Emi, so brave,” he teased.

Gently setting her on her feet, Daniel picked up a sizable rock and threw it against the transport’s glass window. Reaching inside, he wiped the majority of glass away and flipped the door latch. He took Emi’s hand and tugged her forward, trying to help her inside, surprised at her sudden resistance.

Daniel turned to let Emi know it was safe to enter, nearly getting knocked on his back. A large fist flew at him, aiming unerringly toward his jaw. Daniel ducked, and then quickly straightened back into battle stance.

“No,” Daniel choked out.

Emi stood helpless, a laser gun pressed against her temple as someone held her battered and bruised body too tightly. Daniel watched

as Emi'le's eyes tracked toward her abductor's face. To his horror, she screamed in terror, blue eyes wide with surprise. Daniel straightened from his brawling position, his heart breaking anew.

"Please don't," Daniel pleaded, looking at the large man who held his only reason for living in a brutal grip. "Please let her go, Father."

Chapter Twenty-One

The man who Daniel called father rarely showed any true emotion. He had seen the General display barely a hint of concern when illness or injury had struck Daniel throughout the years.

The rare moments when his father had shown pride had made Daniel's sense of self-worth soar through the clouds.

However, never in his life had Daniel witnessed the look of evil menace that contorted his adoptive father's face as the General glared at his adopted son's tiny, frightened wife.

"Father, please," Daniel implored.

"I cannot do that, son," the General stated coldly, banding his arms around Emi'le.

Emi'le whimpered as she stared up at her captor, paralyzed by debilitating fear. Her breath hitched painfully as the General tightened his hold. She bit her lip to prevent herself from crying out. Daniel's head spun. Why had the General broken his disciplined control? Did he resent Emi for trying to steal his son? There was no time to sort it all out.

"You're hurting her!"

The General's head snapped up. A cold smile crept across his face. "Since when does a high-ranking officer of the world's greatest army worry about the care and comfort of a hostile?"

Daniel took a step closer, only to have the General back up. Daniel raised his hands in the air to indicate he held no aggressive intention toward his father. "Father, please just let her go."

"Answer my question, boy," the General demanded. "Why do you care?"

Daniel looked at his wife, their gazes locking for a brief moment. Emi'le shook her head, pleading with him to stay silent. She was still trying to protect him, even though she was the one in immediate danger.

"She is my wife, my Beloved One." Daniel refused to hide the one thing that had ever made him feel complete.

Emi'le eyes clamped shut, anticipating the worst.

The General roared. "You stupid boy. I handed you the world on a platter. Saved you from those damn savages and this is how you repay me? Take up with the same filth I taught you to destroy? You're no better than that filthy whore I rescued you from."

Emi'le gasped, opening her eyes. Fury settled in her impish face as she struggled against the General. The slight against Daniel's mother propelled her into action.

Daniel took a step back, knowing what his wife was capable of. Before she could find a focal point to concentrate on and gather strength, the General pressed his blaster even further into her temple.

"Emi. No!" Daniel screamed.

The General jerked as Emi'le's name left Daniel's lips.

"Emi?" the General repeated. He pulled Emi'le hair back pressing his pistol harder into her temple. Daniel watched helplessly as the General blinked in what look like disbelief, then let out a mirthless chuckle.

"Yes, Emi'le," a voice from behind them confirmed.

The General glanced past Daniel and smiled smugly at the man approaching them.

Daniel stomach lurched with dread. Of all the people to have stumbled upon this horrid little scene, it had to be him.

"Hido'ni, please leave. I am handling this," Daniel reassured him, still holding his arms in the air.

Hido'ni walked up to Daniel and put his hand on his shoulder.

"No, young one, I will not walk away from him again. Not like before."

Daniel knitted his eyebrows in confusion. "*Not like before?*"

“General Barrows,” Hido’ni began. “Let the boy and girl go. We both know it’s my blood you are after.”

The General glared at the old man. “It did not have to be this way. If only you had listened to reason. You could not compromise. You thought your way was the only way, isn’t that right, oh Great Keeper of the Solemn Word? All you had to do was be courageous enough to lead, and all this bloodshed and deception would have ended.”

Hido’ni took another step forward and pushed Daniel behind him. He gave Emi’le a reassuring smile before he answered the General’s accusations.

“I followed my heart...did what I thought was best. I felt the greater good would have been to give our people a choice, without the influence of military force or narcotics. No one who stayed with us was forced to stay—unlike the society you serve. No harsh sentence or fear of death was imposed if they did not comply. No mantras or brainwashing. No judgment or intolerance for the things we did not know or understand.”

Hido’ni’s words angered the General. He pulled on his young victim even more, causing her to cry out in pain.

“Emi!”

Hido’ni held him back, reminding him that the more he tried to reach his young wife, the more the General had reason to hurt her. Daniel was hardly listening as he watched the General nuzzle Emi’le bruised face roughly against his.

“Hush, Emi’le. My, my, my, and here I was beginning to lose all hope. I thought you would elude me forever, had nearly given up. I signed orders to wipe out all of the camps north of here. I was a day away from the first strike when my scouts stumbled upon you and my misled boy over there. Naturally, I had to save him first. He is revered by his troops, and well, let’s face it, I have invested quite a bit of time into him, even though at present, he is showing a lack of gratitude.”

Daniel’s blood ran cold. The truth ate at the air all around him. Emi’le’s dreams had been of the attacks, just like she’d seen during their childhood. She had dreamed of her tribe’s destruction, perhaps his own

death. All the nights she had clung to him as if she needed reassurance he was still there, Emi had known the Order was coming. She had sacrificed herself to save her tribe and her husband.

“This debate is getting us nowhere,” Hido’ni declared.

“No, you are right for once, old man. This ends now. I am going to kill you, then that ingrate standing next to you and then I am going to wipe away any trace of my ties to your disgusting tribe,” the General spat out, looking down at Emi’le.

Emi’le sobbed, trying to pry herself away from her captor. The General only pressed the barrel of his gun harder into her head. She wailed again and began to kick hysterically.

“Papa, plea...ease!” Emi’le cried suddenly, her unused vocal cords sounding harsh and sore from her forced words.

Daniel’s eyes widened with shock. Hido’ni’s shoulders sank and he refused to meet the young man’s gaze. Emi’le continued to cry.

“Papa, please,” she repeated, sagging in the man’s arms.

The General hauled her up, then looked over at Daniel, his lips curling in disdain.

“I guess you know my secret now,” he said, no hint of remorse in his voice.

Daniel shook his head, trying to make sense of it all. He struggled to remember the fateful day he had met the General with true clarity.

“Da’yel, do not leave me alone!”

Da’yel glanced over his shoulder and saw General Barrows almost upon them. He looked at his tiny friend solemnly.

“Hide yourself. Do not come out until everything is silent,” the young version of Da’yel instructed. “I will come get you when it’s over.”

Emi’le whimpered once more before slowly nodding. Wordlessly, she moved the large rock over her hiding place, encasing herself in darkness.

Moments later, General Barrows arrived with his soldiers.

“Hido’ni! Give me what I am after.”

“Never. She is lost to you!” Hido’ni bellowed, his face red with anger.

“Where is my child?”

“You are no longer her father! Her father is dead to her. You care nothing for her,” Daniel’s mother yelled.

“She is no concern of yours. I brought her into this world and I will gladly take her out. She is an abomination.”

Young Da’yel screamed, launching himself at the General, ready to take on any threat against his family or his young friend.

“No, Da’yel,” his mother howled.

Da’yel blinked, trying his best to use his gift, if he could just still time before the troops had time to react. His mother yanked at him too quickly. She threw herself in front of him and a deadly volley of laser shots hit her directly in the chest.

“Nya!”

Da’yel watched helplessly as his mother’s body fell to the dirt in front of him, landing heavily on her side.

Hido’ni hovered over her, yanking off his tunic to try and staunch the copious amounts of blood from flowing out of Nya’s rapidly cooling form.

“Mama!” Da’yel cried.

“Nya,” Hido’ni whispered, placing his hand gently on her forehead. “Forgive me, I have failed us.”

Nya smiled weakly up at Hido’ni’s desperate apology. “No, you have not. You will only fail if he finds her. She is special.”

Nya turned to Da’yel, and touched her son’s face for the last time.

“Keep her safe, always. Promise me?” Nya asked, as her breathing slowed.

Da’yel nodded.

“My son, so brave. I love you. I promise I will always be with you.”

Da’yel watched as the life flickered out of his mother’s eyes.

“Mama?” he asked plaintively.

Hido'ni began to sob as he closed Nya's eyes with his bloodstained fingertips.

"Give me my child now. Where is she?" the General demanded.

Hido'ni rose, his hands drenched in Nya's blood. He stared coldly at General Barrows.

"She is where you will never find her," Hido'ni vowed.

Shock overtaking him, Hido'ni looked down at his hands and roared. Enraged, he rushed General Barrows.

Laser blasts erupted the moment Hido'ni leaped. His body was hurled through the air, landing a few feet from Nya's lifeless form with a sickening thud. Da'yel cried out. As he struggled to reach the Keeper, Da'yel felt someone grab him around the waist and lift him off the ground. He kicked and screamed, trying desperately to free himself.

Hido'ni crawled toward Nya's body, blood seeping from the wounds in his chest.

"Nya," he whispered, as he flung his arms over Da'yel's mother.

Da'yel stopped his struggle long enough to see that the evil General was the one who held him in an iron grip. The man leaned over the injured Keeper, holding a squirming Da'yel aloft.

"Remember this day. Remember as you lie there with the life draining out of your veins. You are responsible for it all. This is your doing. All you had to do is hand her over. Instead, you have lost everything. Know that because of you, this exchange has occurred—a child for a child."

The General straightened, turned and walked away from the destruction he'd begun, clutching the struggling boy.

"Mama!" Da'yel wailed. "Papa!"

"Da'yel." The sound of Hido'ni's voice jerked Daniel abruptly back to the present.

Daniel snapped to attention. He couldn't help but stare at the Keeper in complete disbelief. How had he kept the secret this long? How had

Daniel forgotten it? The General's maniacal laughter rang sharply in his ears as his world overturned.

Daniel dragged his gaze to the General, suddenly revolted at the thought that he'd ever held any loyalty for the monster holding his wife hostage. The General only scoffed at Hido'ni. Glancing down at his nearly catatonic daughter, he pressed his lips to Emi's ear, whispering loud enough for Daniel and Hido'ni to hear.

"It would seem as if I am not the only one still hiding secrets."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Daniel shook his head. Perhaps all of this was a dream. It all seemed too unreal. Yet, standing there, staring at the Keeper, the truth of their situation slowly set in. As if a dam had broken, countless memories bubbled to the surface.

Da'yel's childhood came rushing back to him: sitting at the home fires with his mother and father, walking in the desert holding Hido'ni's hand as they circled the perimeter of the camps, Hido'ni showing him the Order's Army as it patrolled the territory borders.

He remembered sitting quietly in his tent as his father and mother conducted secret joining ceremonies. He'd been there to see them laugh, seen his father hold his mother on his lap and stare up at her adoringly.

"Papa?" The word crept out of Daniel's lips.

He watched a myriad of emotions cross the Keeper's face—acknowledgement, pride, sadness, pain, joy. All the things a father should feel for his child.

"Aye, son, I am your father," Hido'ni confirmed.

"How touching," the General mocked.

Daniel closed his eyes, memories crashing into his consciousness like waves.

The General hovered over him as he lay restrained on a cold, steel table.

"Make him forget as much as you can," the General ordered. "Implant the false memories as well."

"Sir," a disembodied voice replied. "His dosage of Entaxia will have to increase with time until it becomes fatal."

"No matter. I only need him alive long enough to exact my revenge and find that abomination. Tribals are stupid, primitive people. Eventually she will come to him. She will feel drawn to him. All we need to do is bide our time."

The General—of course. He must have been the one who betrayed the tribes, told the Order of the secret forbidden ceremonies, and the existence of an Awakened among them. He'd turned on his tribe, on his own flesh and blood. As if sensing Daniel's train of thought, the General looked down at his daughter.

"Did Hido'ni tell you how much you look like your mother? You have the same fear in your eyes as she did the night she tried to warn everyone of my plans. She looked so helpless as I choked the life out of her. She wouldn't listen. All we had to do was give you up and we could have had everything. Instead, I took what I could get—her life."

The General held his wrist up, revealing a large scar to Emi's terrified eyes.

"I cut it out myself. I showed the Order my allegiance. I offered you, the abomination, to them." He shook Emi'le roughly. "When that did not work, I set out to prove that tribals could be rehabilitated. I reprogrammed him to serve his function and added a little kick to the mix. It nearly worked. Daniel was a good little boy until this...filth came for him again. In fact, how did you get around it, Hido'ni? Years of programming Barrows to kill you and yet, you stand before me very much alive. How did you pull it off?"

Hido'ni looked at his lifelong nemesis gravely, scolding him as he would a wayward child. "I did nothing, Ry'non. You underestimate my son's fortitude, as you always have."

"Do not call me that. My name is General Barrows!" he yelled, nearly foaming at the mouth. "And he is *my* son. I raised him."

"No, you stole him, used him and attempted to brainwash him. But you could not. Ultimately, he was stronger than you, stronger than your drugs and mantras. He is his own man."

Daniel knew Hido'ni was egging the General on, bending his emotions against him. The General would snap, and all the hate and anger he had suppressed throughout the years would overtake him. It was a gamble, a tremendous risk, but Daniel knew they were running out of time. Daniel eyes locked onto Emi'le's.

"Duck!"

Emi'le doubled over, throwing the General off balance. Daniel lunged to grab his wife and whirled her away from danger. The General trained his gun on Daniel. Distantly, he heard Emi'le scream as a laser shot left the General's weapon. He concentrated, easily slowing the laser discharge. He pulled him and Emi to the ground just in time.

The impact against concrete jarred Emi'le out of her fright. She glared at her father, murder in her eyes. Before she could do anything, Hido'ni began to grapple with the man, tackling him to the ground. The two elder men rolled over, locked in a struggle too long in coming.

Daniel was just about to bring his elbow down upon his stepfather's head when he heard the unmistakable sound of muffled laser blasts. Hido'ni jerked. The wrestling match came to an abrupt end.

Heaving with exertion, the General lay on top of a still Hido'ni. He pushed himself off the Keeper, staring down in shock. Two silver daggers were embedded hilt-deep within his chest, a great stain spreading across the fabric of his suit. He scrambled away from Hido'ni and leaned against the transport, eyes glazing.

Emi'le and Daniel rushed over to Hido'ni's still form. Daniel pulled his father into his arms as Emi'le tried to stop the copious bleeding.

"It's all right. You're going to be okay," Daniel said, not knowing if he was trying to convince his father or himself of the impossible.

Hido'ni smiled with pride as he looked up at his son.

Daniel could see all unspoken things his father longed to say to him. Tears formed in his eyes as he smiled down at his father, trying to convey all that he felt. All the pieces fell into place.

"You're my father." He choked out with conviction, infusing his words with love and pride. He felt his father's time slipping away. Concentrating Daniel slowed it, prolonging the few moments they had together.

"Forgive me," Hido'ni implored.

Daniel watched helplessly as his father struggled to catch his breath.

"I should have told you sooner. I wanted to so many times. To hold you and call you my son."

Daniel nodded.

"I know why you didn't," Daniel interrupted, preventing his father from exerting himself further. "I had to remember on my own. I had to figure out who I was with no outside influences. You were just doing what was best, as you always have."

Hido'ni coughed. "Hardly. The truth is, I was afraid. You were so angry at me, in such pain. It broke me to see you in such torment. When your anger lessened, when we became close, I feared if I revealed our connection it would refuel your hatred of me. I was a coward. I was terrified you would not understand why I never came for you. Why I didn't..." Hido'ni coughed gasping for another breath. "I just got you back. I could not bear to lose you again."

"It's okay, I understand." Daniel tightened his grip around his father. "I'm here now. Everything will be all right."

He did his best to infuse confidence in his words. Trying to will his father back from death's door.

"Aye, son. I will be with your mother soon. 'Tis more than okay."

"You cannot leave me, Papa. I just got you back," Daniel argued in vain. It was fruitless even now, he could feel his father's breathing slow, hear his heartbeat becoming fainter.

"I have always been with you. I have watched over you all your life. Please, forgive me for allowing you to stay with him," Hido'ni pleaded.

Emi'le cried as she held Hido'ni, sobbing so loudly her wails echoed off the walls. Hido'ni reached out to her, placing his hand gently over her head.

"Tis all right, Emi'le." Hido'ni smiled at her, then returned his gaze to his son. "I kept her safe. Just like I promised your mother."

Daniel nodded slowly. "I know...because she is special. Others would have exploited and destroyed her. I understand why you did what you did."

Hido'ni chuckled weakly and shook his head. "No, son. I kept her safe because she is special, but not for her talents or gifts. I kept her safe because she is special to my son. She is my son's Beloved One. She belonged to him, so I took care of her until he could come back for her. I kept her safe because she is yours."

Tears began to fall freely down Daniel's cheeks. His father's words touched him and tore him asunder all at once. Using the last bit of his strength, Hido'ni put two fingers under his son's chin, forcing him to look into his eyes.

"You have you're mother's eyes...so green, full of life and love. You are a strong one. I am so proud of you, Daniel."

Daniel shook his head. "My name is Da'yel. I am the son of the Solemn Keeper of the Word. I was named after my father's father," Da'yel said proudly. The air around him expanded, letting him know he was losing control.

Hido'ni eyes shone brightly as he gazed up at his son. For a moment he shone with life, as if Da'yel had restored something to his father that he feared lost forever.

"Thank you," Hido'ni sighed out.

The Keeper gazed up at Emi'le.

"Take care of her," he admonished gently. Just at that moment the space around them constricted, then expanded. Hido'ni looked up at his son. Daniel felt his father's pride as he embraced his powers.

"I know who I am now. I'll never forget," Daniel whispered.

Hido'ni closed his eyes, his peaceful smile faded as his body went lax.

Emi'le began weeping again, holding onto her surrogate father with all her might. Daniel cradled the fallen man in his arms, letting the tears

flow over his one-time nemesis, the man he had been taught to despise. Now his very soul was shattering at the loss. He poured out all his love and devotion, every forgotten memory, every stolen moment, as he held his father in his arms.

The young couple's mutual cries stilled abruptly as they heard the General groan. Emi'le rose to her knees and crawled over to him. The old man looked down at the daggers protruding from his body.

"Primitive," he huffed in disdain, as he glanced disparagingly at his daughter.

Daniel sat there for a moment, unsure of what to do. He knew his wife, knew her capacity for love. She could not let a wounded animal die without offering comfort, much less her own flesh and blood. Daniel watched as she reached out for him, gently placing her hand on his chest. The General just looked at Emi with disgust.

"You are the only thing left of who I was," he whispered. "Why could you not just die?"

The General grasped Emi'le's wrist weakly yanking her hand off his chest. He turned away as he drew his last breath. Unwilling to accept even the smallest bit of comfort in his last moments from the daughter he had spent a lifetime trying to destroy.

Emi'le sat there staring at the hand her father had yanked on. She moaned, sobbing harder as her father's denial rang in her ears. Da'yel gently laid his father's body down and went to his wife. He gathered her in his arms and helped them both to their feet.

"It's all right, Emi. I'm here," Da'yel vowed, kissing her tear-stained face. "I'll always be here. I love you."

Emi'le buried her face in her husband's chest, seeking shelter. Da'yel hooked his chin over the top of her head and looked down at the General.

He would give the man nothing, use everything the General had taught him. He would give him no emotion, no loyalty, nothing. Daniel turned and carried his wife to the transport.

Da'yel laid his wife inside and then walked back to his father's fallen form.

He had wanted to say so many things to his father. Let him know he understood what it cost him to keep his silence. Express how much he admired him. Tell him he hoped he would be lucky to have half the strength, courage and integrity his father had. There was so much he wanted to say, but nothing seemed to convey the intensity of his emotions. Perhaps that in itself was enough. He lifted his father off the alley floor and held him close. Da'yel swallowed, the ache threatening to overtake him. He pressed his lips to Hido'ni's forehead. He could give his father his love.

He could hear the sounds of chaos in the streets. The tribals had started the Great Rise. Eventually both he and Emi'le would join in the fight, but for now, he had other matters to attend to. He had to keep his wife safe, give her time to recover, bring back his father's body. Honor him with a proper burial. The rest of the world would have to wait.

For now, his duty, his function was to take care of the ones he loved.

Epilogue

The Premier Communiqué of the Solemn Keeper of the Word

Twenty-Seven years have passed since the Great Rise. I recall wondering during my childhood if we would know anything but war. I lived in daily fear of the outcome. Would the tribals prevail or would we find ourselves back under the Order's stringent hand?

My father used to remind me not to underestimate the will of man. Our cause was just, he assured me, and the Forces would smile down on us. He'd remind me to have faith. My father was almost always correct. It made it difficult to follow in his footsteps. Much was expected from the son of such a great leader.

It was assumed the son of the greatest and most just Emperor the world has ever known would assume the throne. That was never my desire. Just as my father and mother, I felt too comfortable with tribal existence to live overlong in the city. A part of me worried that I would disappoint my parents when I announced my intention to stay with the tribals. I should have known better.

My father just smiled when I made my announcement. He shared a knowing look with my mother, as if aware of my intentions all along. Somehow, they always knew.

When I told my father of my desire to become the Solemn Keeper of the Word, like my grandfather and my Godfather Ofor before me, he simply nodded. He told me that when I scribed my First Communiqué, I would be expected to write about him, something I was already well aware of.

However, when the plans were finally discussed, my father told me to tell the truth. Some would dispute this version of events, call it biased propaganda. This is the way it truly unfolded. Facts do not need belief to remain true.

My father was the Great Emperor Da'yel, once known as Officer Elite Daniel Barrows. That moniker was left in a dark alley on the eve of the Great Rise. As my father often said, that man died alongside both of my grandfathers. He did not speak much of my grandfather Ry'non. Perhaps because any mention of him caused my mother great distress, which was something my father could not endure.

My father's father, the man I was named in honor of—we spoke of him often. He was loved and revered by many. He helped raise my mother, loved my father. It was his vision that had kept the fight alive when the tribals felt their endeavor was fruitless.

When the dust settled, when the great Order's armies were defeated and the Emperor Pienu was overthrown, a new world leader had to fill that vacuum. My father was the natural candidate. It was, after all, his vast knowledge of the Order that had helped the tribals exploit weaknesses throughout the years. His wisdom and ability to lead became a beacon for everyone around him. My Godfather Ofor once told me my father could march into the fires of Hades and men would follow, because they knew Da'yel would have taken on every demon single-handedly to keep the people he loved safe.

At first, my father hesitated. He did not want such power; he had already seen how power changed men. He did not want to look into the mirror one morning and not recognize the face staring back at him. He told me once that he had been in that position once in his life and he had no desire to repeat it.

It was my mother who finally persuaded him. They say world leaders are only as strong as the wisdom of the counsel they keep. Regardless of how many sound and wise voices surrounded my father, ultimately he heard my mother's voice above all others. It was her he listened to, even though my mother hardly ever spoke a word.

My mother.

When my father urged me to tell the truth, I know what he truly meant. He wanted me to exalt and praise my mother. My father credited all of his success to her, all of his wisdom and sound judgment to her influence.

To the world, my father was untouchable. He ruled with a fair hand and kind heart. However, he sometimes seemed distant. At times, some said he lacked emotions. Perhaps it was residual ripples of the Order's training, but what the general populace saw was completely opposite of who he was behind closed doors.

As a child, I would hear them at night. They'd sit with their heads together like children, my father whispering sweet endearments in my mother's ear, her soft giggles flitting through the air. I would wake up some mornings to find them sitting by our home fire, my mother nestled in my father's lap as they watched the sun rise. When you were in their presence, you felt their love so strongly it was hard to pull yourself away.

My father did not like the Imperial Palace and spent a great deal of time in the tribal villages. He knew my mother was more comfortable there and my father would have moved heaven and earth to make my mother happy. They loved each other, loved their children and always tried their best to pass on their knowledge to others.

He awoke one night screaming in terror. By the time I burst into the room with my Godfathers Ofor and Tirok, my father had my mother clenched in his arms as if afraid she would disappear in front of his eyes. My mother wrapped her tiny arms around his waist, trying to comfort him as best she could.

After that, nothing was ever the same. My mother grew weaker and sicker by the day. My father never left her side. He demanded a new Emperor be found to relieve him of his duties. After I renounced my right to the throne, a new Emperor was crowned with my father's blessing.

He then brought us all back to the tribal villages, knowing my mother would wish to remain here. My mother tried to greet each day with joy and wonder, treating everything as if the end were not near. The Imperial

doctors said it was a violent strain of the Myhuian Influenza and nothing could be done. She would have her good days and bad days, feel strong one moment and weak the next. Through it all, my father was there, doting over her. He took excellent care of her, refusing to allow anyone else to tend to his Beloved One.

My father often said, without my mother he would be nothing. This was no secret to anyone. Perhaps that is why it was no shock to find them the way I did that morning.

They were in a small tent by the hot springs they visited every year to celebrate their joining. I remember how long it took to get to them, as if time itself had slowed my travels. It was not until I discovered them that I figured out what had happened.

Knowing her time was coming to an end, my father had carried my mother to their spring. He held her in his arms as she quietly slipped away, used his gifts to stretch out the time. My father never really developed his gifts. Ironically, they only seem to manifest during times when he felt intense emotion. He had spent most of his life suppressing his feelings. When he allowed them free reign, he had the power to do the remarkable. Draining all his strength into prolonging their time together, my father fatally exhausted himself. When my mother passed, he quietly followed her into eternity.

People always make romantic statements—such as saying they cannot live without the ones they love. With my parents, this was the truth. It was as if they shared the same soul, took the same breaths and had the same heartbeat. My parents could not survive without each other.

I found them there, looking like they had just fallen asleep, like any other day. My mother was resting atop my father, her head tucked under his chin, with his arms wrapped around her. I did not want to disturb them. I wanted to keep them just they way they were.

No'al and Jaden, sons of my father's most trusted council members, convinced me to dig the hole. They helped me lower them into the

ground, being careful to preserve their loving embrace, and bury them next to their spring.

As we finished, the sky opened up with a thunderous roar and poured rain on the parched earth. This was a cleansing rain, a rain that washed away all the damage that the Comet Myhu had inflicted on our battered planet. Folklore says that my parents were the last of the Children of Myhu and, with their passing, the rain came to finish the healing my parents had started. Many said they did not die, but simply dissipated into the rain. I, desiring to protect their final resting place, allowed people to believe that.

One cycle has occurred since their passing. The new Emperor still rules, much like my father did, with a fair hand and a kind heart...

"Hido'ni," the Keeper heard a voice say.

Hido'ni set the pen down and turned to greet the man beside him. "Yes No'al?"

No'al bowed slightly. "The Emperor is here to see you," No'al announced.

Hido'ni rolled up the scroll he'd been writing on and rose to his feet.

No'al pulled the curtain aside ceremoniously as the Emperor stepped into the tent. The Emperor stood tall before Hido'ni, silently waiting. The Keeper slowly bowed, careful to pay his ruler the proper respect.

"Greetings and congratulations. I hear you are writing your first Communiqué today."

"I was, Your Highness, until I was interrupted," Hido'ni said teasingly.

No'al chuckled and hurriedly cleared his throat, trying to cover his amusement with a false cough. The Emperor's green eyes shifted toward the Captain of the Guard, then back at Hido'ni's placid blue gaze.

"A lesser ruler would take offense to such ribbing."

"'Tis good you are not a lesser ruler," Hido'ni quipped.

The Emperor smiled brightly. "You may be Keeper, brother dear, but remember, I can still beat you in a foot race."

"Aye, but I have the power to rewrite history, Nya."

The Great Emperor Nya laughed, holding out her arms to her brother. Hido'ni embraced her tightly and then motioned to his scroll.

"Are you writing of our parents?" she asked.

Hido'ni nodded as he spoke. "The way Papa would have wanted it."

Nya smiled, gazing pensively down at the parchment. "They did love each other so, did they not? I wonder if I will ever feel such love?"

Hido'ni gathered his sister in his arms. A strange feeling coursed through him. It was as if his sentiment did not derive from his own thoughts. His father's voice rang in his head as he leaned down and whispered in his sister's ear.

"Yes, Nya, I have no doubt you will."

About the Author

Claire Michaels was born and raised in Hollywood, California.

Growing up she was told constantly that she had her head in the clouds. Little did everyone know that her daydreams were not just random, everyday fantasies, but seeds of what was to become a lifelong passion and obsession...writing.

After traveling the U.S. and living everywhere from Florida, to New York, to Indiana, to Arizona, and then back to California, Claire discovered her quest leading her home to Los Angeles...the place her heart and spirit had been all along.

Recently settling back home, Claire has been devoting her time to perfecting her craft and deciding to go for the gold and live her dream. To become an author.

Deciding to take a chance, she submitted one of her novels to Samhain and was thrilled to become a part of the Samhain Family.

Life threw her another curve ball when one of her oldest friends swept her off her feet and made her fall deeply and madly in love with him. She was married last July and is now happily living the married life.

Claire loves a good book or movie, and she especially adores those that can spin her into a new world and incite emotions deep within her.

To learn more about Claire Michaels, please visit www.clairemichaels.net. Send an email to Claire Michaels at clairemichaelsau@aol.com or join her newsletter.

She eats men like him for breakfast...literally.

The Shadows of Night

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Book one of the Kindred series.

In a world of shapeshifters, Hart and Katara are hereditary adversaries. But they have to put their enmity aside in the face of a brutal attack from another enemy.

Uniting their peoples is a difficult task, but the real challenge will be working together without killing each other...or falling in love.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Shadows of Night*:

When Katara slid back into consciousness, she felt a throbbing in her skull. Not as agonizing as the pain she'd felt last time, but certainly not pleasant, either. It appeared she was doomed to headaches as long as she dwelt among the Antler Kindred.

She opened her eyes to see Hart looming over her, his dark eyes filled with anxiety.

"What happened?" she said foggily.

Some of the anxiety faded from Hart's eyes, to be replaced with irritation. "You tried to jump to your death," he said in a low growl.

She thought for a minute, trying to remember exactly what had happened. "I did no such thing," she said at last, haughtily—or as haughtily as she could manage, considering she was supine on a cold stone floor. "I was attempting to jump to the roof below."

Hart blinked at her. "Are you mad? It was too far away."

"I think I could have made it."

"In your animal form, possibly. In human form? Impossible." He sighed. "I knew you would try something insanely reckless. I *knew* it."

"I intended to climb down the tower," she said with dignity.

"Oh, well, that was certainly not in the least insanely reckless."

"It wasn't reckless!" she retorted. "There were numerous handholds. But I couldn't get out of the window for some reason."

"A force field. The windows of our buildings have them, to prevent children from falling to their death, or despairing lovers from taking their own lives. A sensible safety precaution, designed by the Ancestors when the keep was built. It also keeps out insects."

"A force field?" she repeated, perplexed.

"You cannot see it, but it behaves like a wall."

She was impressed by the Antlers' ability to create such a thing, even though it had thwarted her attempt. "A magic wall," she said, unable to keep the awe from her voice.

"It is not magic." She could see condescension in his smile. "It is technology handed down to us from the Ancestors."

"I see," she said, although she did not. An invisible wall sounded like magic as far as she was concerned. "Well, I was unable to get to the wall beside the window, but I could reach forward. When I heard you coming, I decided to jump to the roof below."

"So you jumped forward with a great deal of force, only to encounter another force field."

She reached up and rubbed the aching lump on her forehead. "Is that what happened?"

He nodded. "There is enough space for a person to lean her head out of the window, but if you attempt to throw yourself from the window, the force field will prevent it."

"I see." Another escape plan thwarted, she thought ruefully. Getting out of the Antler keep was going to be more difficult than she had originally anticipated.

"What you tried to do was incredibly stupid."

"It wasn't—" She broke off, remembering the distance to the nearest rooftop far below. Very well, she decided sullenly. It had been stupid.

“Yes, it was indeed stupid. But I had guessed you would try something, so I left you alone to discover for yourself that you cannot escape.”

Rubbing her head, she began to sit up. He caught her other arm and helped her to a sitting position. “Shall I take you back to the medical chamber?”

She cringed, remembering the sharp smells of the room. “I am fine.”

“You seem all right. But I will have Otwa come up and look you over, just to be on the safe side. Were anything to happen to you, my father would impale me on his antlers.”

“And that would be a terrible pity, I’m sure.”

Hart grinned at her sarcasm, lifting her into his arms and dropping her onto the circular bed in the center of the chamber. He looked down at her with a mocking smile. “You wound me, Claw.”

“I’d certainly like to,” she said.

Time might march on but hidden in each human are the embers of evolution that flicker to life when nature insists.

Evolution's Embers

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Earth is in trouble, flooded with pollution and uninhabitable for females, who are instead sent into space to live. As the birth rate becomes predominately male, the human race must find a way to stabilize the population. No chances will be taken on relationships doomed to failure because of personality conflicts. Males that desire a female to mate submit to intense testing and wait for a female whose results match. They will also agree to share-one female can provide children for two males and stabilizing the population must take precedence over personal choice.

Jala is an Estroko, a female gladiator who trains and competes in martial arts. Only females can be Estroko and winning freedom from matching is an Estroko's ultimate reward, but a dishonorable knee sweep ends that dream for Jala-sending her to be matched for reproduction.

She comes face to face with a pair of males who consider her their match-and their possession. Jala won't abandon her dreams because science says Cassian and Sion were meant for her. Cassian and Sion can't fathom why Jala ignores the passion igniting between them.

In an era when science controls attraction, what happens to the tender emotions that can bind more than just the body? Love doesn't show up on test pages, it flows through the blood and takes root in the heart.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Evolution's Embers*:

"Yefet is quite warm this season. You won't be cold once we transport to the surface. Cassian and I have provided a sturdy home for you."

She hissed softly, making him raise that eyebrow again. Jala didn't care if he did hear her. She wasn't going to start holding her tongue to keep his ego polished. Even if she'd heard human males expected that sort of master-like treatment from their matches. Listening to gossip wasn't the wisest idea but every negative comment she'd ever heard about ending up matched was surfacing from her memory to torment her.

"I won't thank you for building me a cage."

"It's better than your training facilities."

She grinned and showed him an even row of teeth. "I guess that depends on who you ask. What you call a training facility was what I knew as a home."

"Females enjoy security."

He said it like he believed it. Jala felt her grin turn into a smile. "I enjoy taking care of myself."

"You shouldn't have to."

"And why not?" She wasn't smiling any longer. Arrogant, egotistical male! She didn't have a scrap of patience for their y-chromosome barbarian attitude. "I can provide for myself just fine! Just because I was born a female doesn't mean I need a free ride. The law shouldn't force me to be some male's dependant."

"Match. You will be my match and it's not a dirty word."

She snorted at him. Sion shook his head and stared at the defiance shining from her face. No one ever *snorted* at his orders! Hostile attitude certainly seemed almost too weak a word for her current mood.

"Sion is a whole lot more even tempered than I am, Jala."

The opposite doorway was filled with the commander of the ship. He had darker features and black hair compared to the light golden hues of Sion. She flinched as she applied a name to one of them. Her fickle hormones were already turning against her. Flooding her blood stream and making certain she noticed little details about her male companions. Those embers of evolution encoded right into her genes, the damn things had been blissfully dormant but now it appeared her allotment of mercy

had been exceeded. The Resource Department's tests had dumped her right into close quarters with the sort of males who she found too attractive for her own good. During a competition, she could focus and avoid the issue. Cohabiting with them was going to be a much more difficult test of her composure.

Living among females was nice and uncomplicated. You trained hard and indulged in friendly companionship. Men ruined that balance just by being male. They caused a chain reaction in the body that spelled disaster for any woman who wanted to keep her brain from becoming a slave to her uterus.

"You seem to have missed a few lessons in manners." The commander walked towards her with solid steps as his dark gaze cut into her. "Snorting is not an appropriate response to any officer."

Jala very precisely looked at the top of her arm. When a man joined Interlink force, his service number was laser inscribed on his left shoulder. Not that she could actually see her arm through the insulated suit but the commander's face tightened as he understood her gesture.

"It appears I didn't register to follow your dictates. That's too bad for you." Her words sounded spiteful but she refused to care. Their approach was too certain, their words too full of their own authority over her. The walls were pressing in on her as she struggled to just breathe, her lungs felt too heavy to inflate. She felt like was a puppy at a pet store as it was boxed and sent home with whoever had paid the price for it. Forever expected to wait upon the whim of the owner for morsels of affection as well as the most basic of necessities. It was a humble position for a woman who had been so close to earning a living as the master and owner of her own school.

"What in the cosmos is that?" Sion's hand snaked up the pants she wore to clasp around her calf. Her legs were bent with both feet up on the bench she sat on because she'd been rubbing her knee. She hadn't checked to make sure the fabric was pushed all the way back to her foot. Sion had sat on the other side of her feet and she'd left them there to keep the man from getting too close. That meant he could see up the

baggy leg of the suit and his medically trained eye instantly found the brown bruising decorating her leg.

He shoved the fabric up her leg as his eyes examined her. His face tightened with rage as he identified the severity of the injury.

“Why wasn’t this treated?”

“Because it didn’t matter once I’d lost my final match because of it. Let go of my leg.” She tried to yank her limb out of his grasp. His fingers tightened as he aimed harsh disapproval at her.

“Do you have some kind of fetish for pain?” Sion asked the question in a whisper-soft voice. He was almost afraid to hear her answer. There were rumors about Estrokos liking rough handling. Her little rosy nipples weren’t pierced but that didn’t mean she didn’t enjoy other kinds of pain. Any female who drove herself hard enough to reach her senior year had to be able to work through pain, and it was possible that her decades of training had warped her senses until Jala considered it enjoyable.

His hand was stroking her foot. Jala frowned as the firm strokes felt amazing while they worked at the throbbing agony that gripped her limb. The strength he had in that hand was amazing. It made her want to melt into a puddle and just enjoy the motion of his fingers. Comfort wasn’t something she was used to getting from anyone but herself. Only little girls got tender attention, but once they began to grow up, each Estroko student was expected to appear strong no matter what personal pain they might be enduring.

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