

The book cover features a composite image of two figures. The upper figure is a person's torso and arms, appearing to be in a shower with water spraying. The lower figure is a person lying down, looking up. The word 'WATER' is written in large, metallic, water-droplet-covered letters across the middle. The author's name 'ASTRID AMARA' is at the bottom.

Loose Id

# WATER

ASTRID AMARA

**THE VALDE:  
WATER**

**Astrid Amara**

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# **The Valde: Water**

**Astrid Amara**

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## Chapter One

Joel Passaro wasn't sure what constituted a better birthday present: the boat ride or the blowjob.

Truthfully, it didn't matter which won out, since he enjoyed both at the same time. The sailboat rocked with melodramatic exaggeration as Joel's boyfriend, Charlie, enthusiastically went down on him. Charlie's eyes glinted as he pushed Joel's legs farther apart, as he changed the angle of his mouth to pull Joel down inside of him.

Joel's fists clenched in Charlie's thick brown hair, probably painfully enough to hurt. His hands served as more than an anchor, holding him to reality and urging a rhythm. His hands clenched in Charlie's hair because the boat tipped wildly now, frantic back and forth movements as though some god flicked the sails with massive fingers.

Concern flitted through Joel's consciousness and then fled as Charlie licked a clear drop from the tip of Joel's prick. The world could storm to death for all he cared. He was twenty-nine, he was in love, he was on the water, and he was getting laid, and that's all that mattered.

Besides, it had taken intricate trickery to get there, so he refused to let weather dampen his spirits. He had to call in sick, something the university frowned mightily

upon, and cancel all his lectures. Because Charlie ran his own engineering firm, he played hooky with fewer repercussions; however, he had spent inordinate time convincing their friend Dave that his sailboat would be safe for one afternoon in their hands. Despite Charlie's amateur knowledge of sailing, the crystal clear blue skies, and the fact that they would barely be leaving the marina, Dave still seemed hesitant, especially since he was on his way out of town. Charlie eventually silenced his concerns with an expensive bottle of wine and a promise to lend Dave the keys to his summer cabin in the Cascades.

And this was all before they had left Seattle.

The drive up to Bellingham, where Dave's boat was berthed, was plagued with traffic and arguments as the two of them viciously critiqued each other's favorite movies.

At the Port of Bellingham, they struggled through Charlie's high school sailing memories and managed to get the boat anchored off Samish Island, the journey laden with debates, bottles of wine, bouts of uncontrollable laughter, and the incessant screech of a flock of seagulls under the impression that the pair had absconded with a quantity of chum.

It had been perfect, even the fights, because they always fought, and they always fucked so much better afterward. Joel closed his eyes and tightened his hold on Charlie's hair as water splashed over the portholes.

Charlie stopped his ministrations. "What's going on out there?"

His lips were swollen from his efforts, and dark stubble was just beginning to show. His pale blue eyes appeared almost childlike with such long, dark lashes. The gold earring in Charlie's right ear glinted in the sharp fluorescent light of the cabin. He frowned as the boat jerked to the left, and nearly stood. But Joel urged him downward, trapping him between his knees, unwilling to let go of the feeling just yet.

"Come on," he whispered.

"It's rocky," Charlie said. "We shouldn't rely on the autopilot if the weather —"

"I'm almost there, baby," Joel said. "And it's my birthday. You have to do what I say."

Charlie's worried expression disappeared with a blazingly pornographic smile. He looked so pleased with himself when he did that—like he just won the lottery or he had been given the greatest compliment in the world.

"So what does the birthday boy want?"

"I want to come down your throat."

Charlie laughed. He reached out, grasped Joel's hot shaft, and directed it back into port.

Joel shut his eyes and groaned, thrilled by the feel of it. He and Charlie had been seeing each other for a little under a year, and he was surprised at how good these moments still were—how hot the sex still was, how intense the lovemaking could be. Joel had been in a longer relationship before—his first boyfriend, whom he had dated for three years—but it seemed the spark had fizzled out between their bodies long before now.

Charlie sped his movements, encouraged by the tossing of the boat. Water sloshed at the window of the cabin, but it was dark outside, well past sundown, so Joel didn't expect a view anyway. Sight was pointless. All that mattered was this, the hot, soft probe of Charlie's tongue, circling and sucking the swollen crown of his cock, coaxing Joel's climax out like a snake charmer, luring his prey with beautiful music...

The boom of splintering wood exploded through the cabin, and Joel tumbled forward, slamming into Charlie as the boat listed to the side. Charlie smashed into the wall. He reached up to brace Joel.

"Jesus!" Joel gasped. The hatch was now to his left. Water poured down the stairway, flooding the cabin floor. Joel lurched to his feet, the surging water so cold that his bare skin burned on contact. Shock constricted his throat, and he breathed heavily.

"We're in trouble," Charlie said. He sloshed through the water on hands and knees toward the hatch.

"No shit!" Joel hastily pulled up his pants.

"We're staying down." Charlie's voice shook with nerves. "That means the sail's in the water."

Charlie was very pale. He pulled himself through the hatch, stepping around the three stairs to the deck.

Neither of them knew what the hell they were doing. This was Dave's boat, and now he was on a plane to New York, unreachable. They had told no one else about their birthday escapade. And the only person who saw them depart was some older blond man on the dock back in Bellingham who had stared at their clasped hands with open disdain.

Great. Their lives now depended on some homophobe reporting their disappearance.

Joel smashed into the ceiling as another wall of water hit the boat and turned it over.

And then it was too late: the sea gushed inside through the hatch. The lights crackled and died, plunging him into darkness. Joel yelled out for Charlie, knowing it was hopeless; he was underwater and trapped inside.

His only exit was the hatch at his feet, now blocked by a torrent of water. Panic swelled within him as he fought against the current.

And then the flood ebbed and a hand shot through the hatch. Joel gripped it, hard. Charlie forcefully yanked him through.

Joel clenched his mouth closed as they plunged underwater. It was freezing, so shockingly cold he felt as though someone had just punched through his chest and squeezed a fist around his heart. His head burst with pressure. He panicked and struggled and swallowed water. Charlie tugged him upward.

Joel gasped for air as he broke the surface. Outside, the world exploded in water.



They had set sail under crisp autumn skies with no clouds on the horizon. Now massive waves pummeled the sailboat's hull. Rain, sharp and horizontal, drowned even the air.

A wave immediately crested over the overturned boat and crashed upon Joel, and he was pulled with terrifying speed away from Charlie.

"Joel!"

Charlie swam to him and gripped Joel's sodden shirt. Charlie, always a natural swimmer, trod water calmly, but his eyes were wide and wild with fear. He towed Joel back to the capsized sailboat. The bow already dipped under the waterline. Charlie shoved Joel onto the hull.

Joel's hands were numb, and he couldn't feel the cuts of the barnacles as he climbed his way up the keel. The barnacles were all he could cling to. He crawled upward, fighting off the paralysis of terror. Rain sliced into his eyes and cheeks like needles.

"Hold on!" Charlie called to him from below. Joel watched Charlie swim toward the stern of the boat.

"Charlie!" Joel cried out, but his voice was swallowed by the wind.

Joel continued his climb as the bow sank deeper. Now that he was out of the water, his body began to tremble violently. Charlie was still swimming. Where the hell was he?

A moment later, he heard his name called. He looked down to see Charlie, nothing but a pale face with black eyes in the darkness. He tossed up a life ring.

"Take this!" Charlie shouted. "The emergency positioning indicator beacon went off, and..." His words were lost as a wave crashed against the boat and Charlie sank under the water.

Joel didn't breathe again until he saw him once more, swimming to the keel.

"You need it!" Joel cried back. He scooted forward for the life ring. Another wave pummeled the keel, and Joel nearly lost the ring. As soon as he gripped it, he searched for Charlie in the water. "Get up here!" he cried hoarsely.

Joel looked to his right and shuddered as a wall, dark and looming, poised over the keel. Just as his mind translated the image into seawater, he felt the wind knocked out of him. His hold on the keel gave. He slid off the side and into the roiling sea.

He clung to the life ring. The sailboat remained below the waterline and then disappeared completely from sight. In the darkness, he could barely make out his own hand, let alone his lover.

"Charlie!" Joel shrieked, but the wind stole his voice and his mouth filled with water. When had the storm come upon them? He started swimming, forcing himself not to panic every time he plunged ever downward in the trough of a massive wave. These had to be twenty-footers. Deep trenches blocked his view. All he could see was turbulent blackness and rain.

Joel forced his frozen body in the direction of the sunken boat. Rain nearly blinded him. He swelled uphill and crashed downward in a sickening roller-coaster ride of waves.

Through flashes of light from the distant lightning, Joel thought he could make out a form, floating listlessly. He swam toward it, but his view was blocked once more as he plummeted into a trough. He tried swimming toward Charlie, but the wave behind him was faster, boosting him upward.

He saw Charlie then, arms out, facedown, unmoving.

*No no no no, please God, please God...* Joel raced toward him.

Light broke through the dark, swirling mass of clouds ahead. It was a beam, straight and true, and it hovered to the right of him.

Joel looked up. A helicopter desperately fought the wind as it struggled to maintain position.

Joel waved frantically. The light scanned the rolling surface of the water and then blazed into his eyes. He motioned toward Charlie's body.

Joel swam toward Charlie once more. They had to help him first. He was clearly unconscious, perhaps wounded by the force of the breaking wave. However, the light remained targeted on Joel. A cable and basket lowered, but the wind blew the rig nearly horizontal with the helicopter.

Joel surged upward with the swell and caught sight of a figure in a survival suit and flippers. The man disconnected himself from the cable and splashed into the water. Joel lost sight of the man several times as the tossing swells blocked his path.

And then he saw the man swim toward him, gripping a guideline. Joel tried to move forward. His legs were now completely numb. He couldn't feel anything other than the rain in his face.

"Get into the basket!" the man shouted into his ear.

"Please help Charlie!" Joel's sense of orientation faded. As the man maneuvered him into the plastic basket, all he could think was that Charlie was left to die because of him. He started to slither out and then felt a sharp pain as his rescuer yanked his arm and shoved him back into the basket, strapping him down.

"Sir, you have to stay calm!" the man yelled. He signaled to the helicopter, and Joel's stomach lurched as he rose upward. They were leaving Charlie in the water. Joel pitched forward but could move only his arms, which he thrust out in a last attempt to signal.

The noise was deafening. Hands gripped him, unbuckled him.

"How many more were aboard?" someone asked him.

"Just Charlie. Please! He's in trouble."

"We'll get him next," said the man, wrapping Joel with shiny fabric. Joel's limbs were numb. His heart beat so powerfully he could barely breathe through its palpitations.

Joel closed his eyes. His body shivered uncontrollably. He heard muffled voices around him, and a few minutes later the basket returned, carrying only the Coast Guard officer.

“What about Charlie?” Joel cried. “Don’t fucking leave him out there!”

“Stay calm, sir. The diver will return for him as soon as we spot him.”

Joel tried to sit up, but his muscles ached. Everything hurt. He struggled to keep his eyes open.

When had they been making love—one hour ago? Twenty minutes ago? He had lost all sense of time. And here he was now. And Charlie was still out there. He had worried about the state of the boat, and Joel had forced him to ignore it. This was Joel’s fault. Even the boat had been his idea. What the hell were they doing out on the open sea anyway?

The low voices at the front continued, but the drone of the helicopter blades drowned the details. And then he felt the helicopter quickly change direction.

“What’s going on?” he asked. His teeth chattered so hard, it made it difficult to speak.

A man knelt beside him, his expression severe. “I’m sorry. We’re almost out of fuel. We have to return to land and get you to a hospital. We’ll refuel and come back for your friend.”

“He’ll be dead by then!” Joel struggled again, but they pushed him back down. Their touch infuriated him. He struck out, and then one of them gripped his arm, and he felt the distinct sting of a needle.

And it was clear at that moment, as true in his mind as the thought *I am alive*, that Charlie was already dead.

## Chapter Two

On Joel's thirtieth birthday, he chose to stay on land and get drunk.

It was a pitiful way to ring in the third decade of his life, but Joel felt no compulsion to rectify it. He had turned down invitations from friends and family in order to commiserate alone, dry, and in the company of strong liquor.

It had been a shitty year.

Joel's department at the university underwent budget cuts, and now he was teaching the dreaded European History 101 to freshmen instead of his preferred topic, military history, to graduate students.

Joel's sister had gotten divorced and called him daily, detailing her struggles through the legal quagmire of retaining sole custody over his two nieces.

His water heater blew up, his refrigerator died, and his house's old iron pipes rusted open, requiring a complete replacement. All these humdrum home improvements diminished his small savings to nothing.

And although Charlie and he had only dated for ten months prior to his drowning, something had snapped within Joel when Charlie died. It was more than just guilt, although Joel had plenty of that. Charlie borrowed the boat because of him. Charlie ignored the threatening weather because Joel demanded sexual favors. And the

Coast Guard saved Joel first. It all added up to a heaping mouthful of guilt that, a year on, Joel still had a hard time keeping down.

But it wasn't just the guilt. Something else gnawed at him. Something that felt treacherously close to lost love. He had a sinking sensation he would never feel as connected to anyone again.

They didn't make sense, his feelings.

Joel was a pragmatist. He liked logic and realism, and concepts like soul mates and true love were silly and fictitious.

And Charlie and he had always been opposites. Joel selected documentaries; Charlie preferred science fiction. Joel stayed inside and read; Charlie played basketball and ran marathons for fun. Charlie was sentimental, romantic, and sappy; Joel was reserved in public and hesitant to share deeper feelings.

They disagreed often and had separate groups of friends, but when they first started dating, they found their personalities meshed despite the differences. And the sex buzzed Joel on a completely new level. It was incredibly hot. Hotter than it had ever been for him, who despite a varied history of partners over the years, was rather traditional in the sack. Until he met Charlie, that is.

It was probably this, more than anything, that he missed.

Joel consoled himself, drinking deeply. He leaned over the bar and ordered another whiskey sour. This place was not one of his usual haunts—it was in Pioneer Square, a noisy, bar-packed area of downtown Seattle glutted with drunk frat boys and Starbucks executives. It was clear across the city from his house, and that was by design. He craved anonymity, drunkenness in a place safe from accidental run-ins with well-wishing acquaintances.

The football game played quietly in vivid high definition on a screen consuming half the wall, and he watched absentmindedly. Charlie had loved football. Joel had therefore found himself interested in it by proxy. He enjoyed the strategic elements of the sport. But he hadn't watched a game in a year.

The bar seemed unusually crowded for a Thursday night, although Joel didn't know the bar, and so perhaps it was always like this. Then he noticed several well-dressed women wearing feather boas. A novelty dildo on the sticky wooden table confirmed his suspicions that a bachelorette party was under way. It seemed like a strange day to celebrate the unwavering fidelity of love, but maybe he was just bitter.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

Joel turned at the familiar voice. Ginger Carr, assistant professor at the Puget University history department, smiled at him indulgently.

Joel shook his head. "I try to find the one bar where I won't run into anyone I know, and here you are," he said.

Ginger laughed. She was clearly inebriated, her eyes lidded, her carefully styled hair starting to frazzle and come undone. She threw her arm over his shoulder, and Joel looked down into a low-cut dress displaying more bosom than was typical for a regular night out at the bar. He raised an eyebrow.

"It's Lucy's bachelorette party," Ginger explained. "That's my excuse. But I'm surprised to see you here."

"Just trying to drink alone," Joel said.

"How healthy," Ginger commented. "I noticed that. It's why I'm offering to drink with you. Plus I need for you to help me fool the gals I'm sitting with. They've been staring and drooling over you all night, and I just don't have the heart to tell them you're queer. So play along, will you?"

Joel obliged her, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

"Does that work?" he whispered.

"Sure," she said, giggling.

"Although I don't think anyone actually uses the pick-up line 'Can I buy you a drink?' anymore."

"Really?" Ginger frowned. "I spent the last nine years getting my doctorate, and now I'm surrounded by students I can't sleep with. I'm completely out of touch." She smiled at him again, her cheeks dimpling. "Still, I meant it. What can I get you?"

Joel clinked his glass against hers. "Since it's my birthday, you can buy my next whiskey sour."

Ginger's eyes widened. "It's your birthday? And you're here by yourself?"

"That was the point..." he started, but before he could protest, he was dragged by the arm over to a table of women dressed in slick skirts and sleeveless blouses, despite the promise of rain outside. They made room for him and introduced themselves, all speaking at the same time. Joel just sat down and smiled and let them buy more drinks and wallowed in their attentions. It was nice. But then he could have immersed himself in the attention of his real friends too.

The women sandwiched him in the bench seat.

"You look like Cillian Murphy," the one named Erica commented, reaching across the table to pet his black hair.

"Nah. He looks like a younger Jude Law," said the other one. She sat awfully close.

Joel glared across the table at Ginger, whose eyes laughed at his uncomfortable squirming.

Ginger bought a round of shots, and Joel joined the ladies, shuddering as the cheap tequila burned on the way down. But the reciprocal flush of warmth and looseness ameliorated the taste.

Despite his intentions to celebrate alone, he remained at the table because the women were funny and good at keeping his mind off more melancholy thoughts. Their conversation never ventured near the topics of true love or the open sea, and for that he was grateful.



Erica finally collapsed in the corner of the bench seat. When the other woman ran off after spotting an old acquaintance, Ginger moved to sit beside him.

"Thanks for the company," Joel said, squeezing her shoulder. "I didn't think I wanted any, but you made me feel better."

Ginger shook her head. "Why are you celebrating your birthday all by yourself anyway?"

"I'm getting over someone."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," he said, although he certainly didn't feel it, especially not tonight. Christ, it had been a year. Shouldn't he be over this by now?

"Did you break up?" Ginger asked.

"Not purposely. He died."

"Oh, Jesus! I'm so sorry!" Ginger covered her mouth. "When?"

"Last year."

"Oh."

Joel could tell by her expression that this was not an acceptable answer. Clearly she also thought he should be over it by now.

"This is the anniversary of his death," he clarified.

"He died on your birthday? How terrible!"

"Yeah. Pretty much takes the wind out of my sails." Joel winced at the expression. He had grown to distrust lots of things in the last year, like water and boats and people who liked water or boats. Now he was going to have to stay away from them in metaphor as well?

"What was he like?" Ginger asked kindly. She rubbed his arm. There was nothing sexual about it, she was just being a friend, and Joel felt relieved.

"He was...difficult." Joel smiled at the memories. "We fought a lot. Had great make-up sex. He was moody. But he was also romantic, a fantastic lover, and very put

together. Organized, you know. Had his own business and everything. And he had a great smile. It was so honest and sweet, and it reached his eyes."

"Yeah?" Ginger looked dreamily off toward the corner of the bar. "What did he look like?"

"He looked like..." Joel followed her glance and stared at the corner of the bar. "Actually, he looked a lot like that guy over there."

"Who? The tall guy with the messy brown hair? The one in the leather coat?"

"Yeah." Joel narrowed his eyes. "Charlie looked exactly like him."

Joel put his drink down and stared openly at the group of people in the corner by the pool table. There was a middle-aged Asian woman with expensive glasses and a guy with long hair who appeared to be barely twenty-one. They chatted with a man who looked just like Charlie. Same height, same stance, same hair color. Same pale face, same blue eyes. It was Charlie's spitting image.

Strike that. It was *Charlie*.

"Holy fuck!"

Joel pushed away from the table. Ginger stood as well, looking concerned.

"What's wrong?"

"That's him!" Joel jostled his way across the crowded bar. The closer he got, the more he recognized Charlie's features. The length of his lashes. The small scar on his chin. The gold loop earring in his right earlobe.

Charlie turned, and they made eye contact.

Joel's throat felt tight, closed.

Charlie's eyes seemed to flicker in recognition, but then he frowned and turned back to his two companions without saying a word.

Joel felt like he'd been slapped.

"Hey!" Joel grabbed Charlie's arm and spun him around.

Their eyes met again. Something was different—cold blue water seemed to reflect back at Joel. It startled him badly. He released his hold on Charlie's jacket and stepped back.

For a moment, he grew frightened. What if Charlie *did* drown in the ocean? What if this was some sort of sea ghost? This man's eyes were as frigid as that night had been in the swells.

Joel shook his head. He was being ridiculous. Seven whiskey sours will do that to a man.

"What do you want?" Charlie asked. There was no malice in his tone, but no warmth either.

"Charlie. It's me." This was so surreal, Joel's brain was having a hard time keeping up with the visuals. He stepped forward. "It's me. Joel."

Charlie's expression remained blank. "Sorry, don't know you." He turned back to his friends, who watched Joel carefully. The woman smiled nervously, but the young man glared.

"What the fuck do you mean, you don't know me?" Joel's hand involuntarily formed a fist. "Charlie, where the hell have you been? Are you even aware that we had a *funeral* for you?"

"My name's not Charlie." He glanced at Joel briefly, eyes traveling down Joel's body. Arousal sparked in Charlie's eyes, but no recognition.

There was no way this was someone else. Granted, the old Charlie would never dress like this, black shirt, black leather coat, jeans, and black boots. But even if it was some unknown, long-lost twin, they wouldn't have shared the same crescent-shaped scar on the chin. Or the slight crooked bend in the nose.

Joel leaned forward and whispered, "Are you in trouble? Why didn't you call me or—"

"Is there a problem here?"

A burly, bald man appeared, carrying two beers. He handed one to Charlie and glared at Joel with open hostility. "Who are you?"

Joel fought to control his temper. He turned back to Charlie, his heart hammering in his chest. "Just... Look, can I talk to you alone for a minute? Please?" He stared hard.

The bald man flicked Joel on the shoulder as if he were a fly. "Fuck off. We're busy."

"Fuck. You." Joel squared his shoulders. He knew he was screwed if the guy actually hit him; he was wasted, and he was a terrible fighter. But Charlie's cold expression hurt him more than he could bear at the moment, and if the choice was either crying or getting the shit beat out of him, he chose the beating.

The bald man carefully placed his beer on the edge of the pool table. He swooped in and grabbed a fistful of Joel's shirt. Then he shoved Joel against the wall of the bar. Patrons nearby went silent.

"I told you to fuck off," the man said. "I don't like your kind so close."

Joel inhaled slowly. He always suspected the day would come when he would be beaten for being gay. He just didn't expect it in Seattle. Or in this neighborhood.

He pried at the man's hand, trying to break free. The man swung his fist back. Before he could strike, however, Charlie reached up and grabbed the man's fist.

"That's enough, Ray," Charlie said. His voice was low and mean. He stepped between them. "Give my drink to Yez," he told the bald man, and then he grabbed Joel by the coat sleeve and yanked him toward the back exit.

Joel stumbled and followed, frightened by Charlie's menacing presence. He used to be so playful. Charlie had walked with a lazy swagger unless he was running at full speed along trails. Now he stalked toward the door like a hunter. He shouldered open the emergency exit and shoved Joel into the alley, pushing him against the gritty brick wall of the bar.

"Don't come back here," Charlie said. His voice was the same. The exact same. There was no way this could be anyone else. And yet the way he spoke sounded wrong. He had a different cadence; his stresses fell on odd syllables. It was almost as if English were his second language.

Joel glared at him. "What the fuck is going on? First I watch you drown; then you disappear for a year, and now here you are, *alive*, and you won't even acknowledge me or —"

Charlie's lips crushed against Joel's own. He pressed himself against Joel's body. Joel could feel Charlie's hard-on pressing into his thigh.

Joel shoved him in the chest. Charlie stumbled back. For a moment, a real emotion fluttered across his face—confusion—but then it was gone so fast, it could have been nothing more than a twitch of the eye.

"No!" Joel said, his voice shaking in his rage. "You can't kiss me until you explain yourself!"

Charlie's blue eyes were dilated in the dimly lit alley, and his cheeks were flushed with his arousal. A light mist of rain fell over them both, but he didn't seem to notice.

He swallowed and then turned away. He didn't look back. He opened the door to reenter the bar.

Joel lunged and yanked Charlie back. "What the hell happened to you?" Joel asked. "Is it those people in there?" Joel moved closer. "Are they threatening you? Are you in trouble?"

"No."

"So you choose to hang around fucking homophobes now?"

Charlie blinked. "What?" He shook his head. "Look, just get out of here."

"Charlie, I —"

"Stop calling me that. I'm not Charlie." His expression was devoid of all emotion. He looked like a stranger. "If you know what's good for you, you'll go home." Charlie went back inside the bar without another word.

Joel leaned against the bricks and adjusted his jeans. Well. That was wonderful.

Happy birthday, asshole.

Exhaustion washed over him, and he considered going home and crashing. Depression tugged his eyes closed. He straightened his appearance and walked back into the bar, just in time to catch Charlie and his friends departing out the front entrance.

Joel hurried through the bar, dodging several dancing women draped in boas. At the entrance, he couldn't tell which way Charlie and his companions had headed.

"Damn it!" He slapped his palm against the edge of the door.

"They went south." Ginger appeared at his side, grinning. "I saw them leave just a minute ago."

Joel leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Thank you. Thanks for listening too."

Ginger hugged him. "Happy birthday. Now hurry if you want to catch him. I'll see you tomorrow."

Joel turned right to pursue Charlie and his rough gang of friends.

## Chapter Three

This is stupid, Joel thought, but then again, so was the idea that his drowned lover had suddenly reappeared, healthy and whole. Despite its impossibility, he could not stop himself from running down the darkened street after him.

Up ahead, he recognized Charlie's walk before he could make out the rest of his group. They were leaving Pioneer Square.

Charlie and his three companions walked the sidewalk in a tight cluster. The wind blustered forcefully, whipping up the salty, seaweed smell of Puget Sound and causing brown and orange leaves to blow about the street like it was hosting its own parade. Sparse rain fell, but no one seemed to notice. They spoke in low voices, the three men gathered protectively around the woman, keeping her between them. She laughed occasionally and seemed completely at ease, and yet Joel felt tension. He noticed the way the bald man extended his arm behind her back, urging her forward, noticed how Charlie and the other young man kept her effectively corralled. They spoke like old friends, but there was something in the way Charlie kept looking at the woman that seemed at odds with his normal behavior.

But what the hell did Joel know about Charlie's normal behavior? He had just kissed Joel, then told him to fuck off. Something was definitely wrong with him. Joel

assumed he had some sort of brain injury. It would have been a miracle that he survived the storm in the first place; there was bound to be physical damage. But if he had amnesia, what had he been up to the last year? It looked as though he had gotten himself tangled up with a cruel crowd.

Joel tailed them at a distance. He suspected that the bald man knew he was being followed; he kept glancing surreptitiously behind. More than once, Joel ducked into a doorway to avoid detection. They started in Pioneer Square, which even on a Thursday was rambunctious with drunks and loud with music. They passed by Qwest Field, lit up brightly, the parking lot full, the rumble of 67,000 cheering Seahawks fans emanating from inside.

The crowds thinned as they continued south toward the port, and Joel worked harder to remain unnoticed.

At last they stopped outside an old brick warehouse on the edge of the industrial district that ringed the port. The smells of the water drifted over him in fishy, pungent bursts of wind. A distant factory droned into the air. Streetlights blurred in the soft shower of rain. Joel's black wool trench coat was dripping and heavy with moisture.

Charlie and the other three entered the warehouse. Once the door firmly shut, Joel emerged from the shadows and took in his surroundings. He was nowhere public. Light industry surrounded him. The large, flat, unassuming building had no windows, no sign on the door, not even a visible address. Yet cars surrounded the block. As he watched and waited, a couple, dressed elegantly as though going to the theater, chatted warmly as they opened the warehouse door and stepped inside.

Joel's first thought was that it was some sort of after-hours club, an illegal meeting place for drugs or gambling. But the couple who entered didn't fit into his amateur criminal profiling. For that matter, Charlie didn't either, although his homophobic friend certainly did.



If he just walked in, there was a chance he could be shot on sight. But angry as he was, and still slightly drunk, Joel found he didn't really care. Fortune favored the bold. Besides, what if Charlie truly did have amnesia and needed help?

Joel rubbed the rain out of his hair, buttoned his coat, and opened the door.

He was startled by what looked to be a common, urban bar. Patsy Cline played on the stereo, and clusters of people sat at tables, lined an elegant-looking wood and brass bar, and ordered drinks. There were no visible guns, nor were there brutes. The patrons were old men and women, young couples, even some children. He saw blacks and Latinos and Asians and Indians among the white faces. The only oddness to the patrons was their variety.

And the way they all stared at him when he walked in.

Most continued their conversations or read their papers, but Joel could feel multiple pairs of eyes watching him as he approached the bar. He sank into the shadows near the wall and waited to be served.

The bartender studied him with open suspicion.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm with them," Joel said quickly, nodding to one of the tables. This was clearly a private club. But why was it in the warehouse district?

The bartender stared at him for another few seconds. He shrugged. "What do you want?"

"Whiskey sour," Joel said.

The bartender slid him his drink. The glass was crystal.

"How much?" Joel asked.

"Open bar." The bartender turned away as if he couldn't stand speaking to Joel another second.

Joel wandered to the corner of the room and stood next to an ornate gas fireplace. The flames roared and licked toward him. He held his hands out, warming himself after

the walk in the cool rain. He drank half the cocktail immediately to steady his nerves. He searched the room for Charlie but couldn't see him anywhere. He noticed a door on the far end of the room, leading down what looked to be an ornate, wood-paneled hallway. Joel casually made his way toward it, all-too-aware of the other patrons observing him. He set his drink on an empty table and walked down the hall.

There was a set of bathrooms, but then the hall turned and opened into another club room, furnished in leather sofas and a large dining table. Hallways led off in every direction.

Joel wandered. The club was like a labyrinth, and even keeping close count of his turns, he worried he had gotten lost. One room contained all sorts of technical equipment. Another was the kitchen, but it was on a massive scale, as though it serviced a large hotel rather than a small bar.

Joel decided to turn around and try another direction, but he got confused and went through a set of glass French doors he hadn't passed through before. They opened into a large foyer, its opulence garish. The marble floor, gilded ceiling, crystal chandelier, and massive oil paintings reminded Joel of a museum. In the center of the great hall was a water feature, a fifteen-foot marble fountain in the shape of a man, spewing water from the palms of his hands. Beneath him, a deep pool of water swirled.

And in the center of this pool, Charlie knelt, holding the Asian woman's head underwater, drowning her.

Joel froze in shock. The woman's limbs flailed and smashed against the marble lip of the pool. Charlie's grip on her neck tightened. The bald man shoved at her back. Her glasses lay broken on the marble floor.

The murder was watched by the young man and another, a blond man in his forties, who yawned.

"Stop it!" Joel ran toward the woman. "What the hell are you doing!" He yanked at Charlie's arm.

The bald man charged at him, and Joel felt the air forced out of his lungs as he was punched in the stomach. He flew backward and slid on the marble floor.

"You fucking prick!" the bald man yelled.

"Who is he?" the young man asked.

The older blond man narrowed his eyes. "No one. Human."

Joel saw the woman lay limply, face submerged in the water, even though no one held her down anymore. She was dead. Charlie had just killed her with his bare hands.

"Are you all fucking nuts?" Joel screamed. He rushed to his feet, gasping for air.

"He'll be a problem," the blond said. "He'll call the police. Kill him."

Joel looked to Charlie for help. Charlie tensed his fists but said nothing to intervene, and at that moment, Joel realized that indeed, *his* Charlie was dead. There was no way the man he had loved would have anything to do with murder. Mourning coursed through him all over again, churning his stomach.

"Kill him!" the blond demanded.

It was another line Joel couldn't imagine was ever used in real life. People didn't say, "Kill him" in real life, did they?

He didn't stick around to ask if they were serious.

He ran.

## Chapter Four

Joel pushed through a set of double doors and found himself in a long hallway. There were no exit signs. His heart raced frantically as he heard his assailants behind him, gaining on him. He charged full speed to the end, which only led to another staircase.

This building was a nightmare. He heard shouts from afar, and his fear mounted. What if the other patrons got involved? Was this an elite snuff club? Who *were* these people?

The older blond man reminded him of someone, he realized, but his thoughts couldn't harden, because he was too busy searching for windows or ways out. He ran down the stairs and threw open every door he passed, finding nothing but bedrooms, offices, and storage. At the end, he found another set of doors. He pushed one open and saw it was nothing more than a bathroom.

Someone shoved him from behind, and he fell inward, his left knee smashing hard against the cold tile.

"You son of a bitch!"

Joel flipped over. Pain radiated from his knee. He winced up at the face of his assailant.

It was the blond man, the one who looked familiar. As he snarled, Joel placed the memory. This was the man who had watched him and Charlie set sail a year prior. He had been there, at the marina, that horrible night.

Had he rescued Charlie? What had he done to make him into a killer?

This stranger—this familiar stranger—reached down and grabbed the front of Joel's coat. Joel kicked his shin. The man let go, and Joel scrambled backward on his hands. He stood shakily, his left knee pulsing and threatening to fold.

Something shot out of one of the bathroom stalls.

And then he was blown backward by what felt like a wall of ice. His head and back slammed into the bathroom tiles, and he found himself unable to breathe.

He stared in shock. His cheeks burned, yet his skin felt icy, but he couldn't move. The man glared as he approached. Joel felt wetness and looked down as the wall of ice appeared to melt around the man's hand. The man felt Joel's ass. Joel panicked, but he remained trapped against the wall.

The man fumbled in Joel's pocket and pulled out his wallet. He ripped out Joel's driver's license and smirked.

"Well, hello, *Joel Passaro*." He dropped the wallet, pocketed the license, and then wrenched Joel's arm back. Joel gasped as frigid water suddenly drenched his clothes.

The man pounded Joel's head against a toilet stall. Joel's vision blacked, and he felt himself collapsing. His attacker gripped him hard and propelled him forward, thrusting his face into the toilet bowl.

Total panic surged through Joel. *Oh God, please, not drowning!* He struggled and kicked at his assailant.

The man pushed harder. Joel's mouth opened in shock, and foul water rushed in. In alarm, he surged against the man's grip. The water in the toilet bowl frothed and wrapped around him, impossible, a liquid gag, filling his throat, his nose, rushing into his ears. Fear shuddered through him.

Joel did the only thing he could think of. He pushed himself deeper into the toilet bowl, whacking his head against the grimy porcelain as he reached up and grabbed the man's arm. He yanked the man over his shoulder.

The blond's head smashed into the reservoir tank, and he lost his grip on Joel. Joel slipped under him as the water in the bowl surged into the air like a talon. It punched into Joel, a fist of water, hurling him to the ground before crashing over him in a frigid wave. Joel grabbed his wallet and bolted out of the bathroom stall in terror.

*What the hell is going on?*

He gasped for air and wiped his eyes. He was drenched, his coat a wet deadweight on his shoulders. His head pounded, and the stench of the toilet clung to him. He turned to take off at a run, but his left knee shot a shock of pain up his leg and he nearly collapsed. His choice was simple: get past the pain or wait for the snuff team to come find him. He shambled out of the bathroom and began looking for a way out.

Joel seemed to have a head start, but every door he tried to open was locked or led to a vacant room. At last he found a door with a heavy panic bar. He pushed it open and gratefully saw he was at the rear exit of the warehouse. He didn't stop to get his bearings. Instead, he limped into the rain.

Breathing still felt like a luxury, and he took deep gulps of air as he rushed for the shadows. His face and neck tingled from the chill of his assault. He brushed at his coat, and a sliver of ice dropped to the pavement.

*What the hell?*

"He's over there!"

Joel glanced behind him. Nearly a dozen men and women burst from the warehouse and spread out. Several ran down his street. There was even a child coming after him, and he spotted Charlie in the crowd. A sharp ache filled his chest at the sight.

Joel quickened his pace. The streets were vacant, all the structures locked tightly for the night. A car passed, and he shrank away from the lights.

He turned north, toward the crowds exiting the Seahawks game. He needed witnesses. As he moved, he stayed low, crouching behind Dumpsters and clinging to shadows. As a van drove past slowly, windows open, Joel rolled under a parked car.

Once they passed, he limped north. Football fans began to fill the streets.

As soon as the tailgaters around him thickened, Joel ditched his wool coat and pushed himself deeper into the throng. He removed his blue flannel shirt as well, offering it to another man, who drunkenly accepted it with a cheer and a splash of beer from his plastic cup. Joel slipped between the revelers, shuddering in his sodden white T-shirt.

He spotted the black sign and yellow painting of a cab at the intersection and made a last run.

He waved his arms and threw himself in front of the taxi, which slammed on its brakes to avoid hitting him.

"Help me!" Joel cried. He moved to the side and threw open the passenger door.

"What the hell is your problem, man?" the taxi driver shouted.

"Please just drive!" He coughed.

The driver went through the green light. "Where?"

Joel put his head in his hands. What the hell was he going to do? The bastard knew his name and his address. He couldn't go home.

He considered going straight to the police. Then he imagined trying to describe what he saw. His dead lover, back from the grave, drowning some woman in a posh warehouse. He had no evidence, nothing at all to back up his story.

"Where to?" the driver asked again.

"Mercer Island," Joel said. "I'll direct you once we're there."

## Chapter Five

The pale yellow, sprawling 1950s rambler was Joel's grandmother's house. Since her death several months ago, the house had been vacant and for sale. But the collapse of the real estate market had slackened demand for multimillion-dollar waterfront homes.

He limped to the door and tried the realtor's key box. Naturally, it was locked. Swearing, Joel clambered over beauty bark and through the overgrown brush to the back of the house. Lake Washington splashed noisily at the dock, and Joel shuddered.

In the dead apple tree, Joel found the spare key his grandmother had always kept hidden. He went in through the sliding glass doors of the basement rec room.

A quick tour of the house assured him that everything was securely locked. His heart still raced, though. He'd never been chased before. He could now officially say he hated it. It was as scary as drowning.

Only a bare minimum of furniture remained staged in the house, just enough to give the impression of a coziness for prospective buyers. Joel found a phone in the den, but there was no service.

*Great.*



His sister had been on his case for years about getting a cell phone. Well, ha-ha. She was right.

At least the hot water was still working. Joel took a long shower, rinsing the stench of the toilet water from his hair, hoping the heat would soothe his throbbing knee. He dried off with a new, unabsorbent white towel and tied it around his waist.

He crawled naked under the thin comforter of the showcase queen-size bed. It didn't smell like his grandmother. It smelled like dry-cleaning chemicals, the sheets shiny and rough.

He curled in a ball, shivering. He was bone weary, but the fear of the last few hours made sleep impossible.

Joel grimaced, recalling the taste and fear of drowning in the toilet stall. They were indeed serious about this whole "kill him" thing. And Charlie had just stared blankly when the pronouncement was made. He clearly approved of the idea. But why? What had he changed into? He had murdered a woman with his bare hands.

Joel clenched his jaw and shut his eyes, forcing his emotions back down. He tried to sleep.

But as he closed his eyes, he replayed images again. The blond man in the bathroom, rendering him frozen. The pack of men and women, chasing him out of the warehouse. And Charlie's cold blue eyes looking at the flailing body of the woman he drowned as if he were bored.

It was this last image he could not reconcile. Charlie had a temper, but he was never a violent man by nature. Memories flooded Joel's mind. The time they went to the park and Charlie insisted on visiting the children's petting zoo. The wariness he expressed whenever Joel went into excessively gruesome details about some battle he was researching. His guilty secret of finding romantic comedies worth the cost of admission.

And even though he had the sheer body strength to be a tough guy, Charlie had always preferred to resolve disputes peacefully. Whether they were arguing with some

business owner, dealing with crabby fellow passengers on a plane, or fighting with bosses, Charlie was always willing to calmly negotiate long after Joel stormed off in a rage.

Where was the quiet, romantic Charlie now? There was no love in his eyes anymore. Nothing but that cold seascape, unrecognizable, unforgiving.

Joel pulled himself completely under the comforter. At least he was safe for the time being. It would take time to find the connection to his grandmother and this address. Even if they asked his neighbors or his friends, none of them had ever been here, so they wouldn't be any help.

The only person he had ever brought here, in fact, had been Charlie.

The doorbell rang.

Joel shot upright in bed.

For a moment, he remained there, bundled in the comforter, too terrified to move.

Then he forced himself to face the situation. Joel limped to the front door. He peered through the peephole and felt the color drain from his face.

"Joel. Let me in."

Charlie's voice, sounding reasonable. Well, of course he did. Apparently now that it suited him to remember Joel, Charlie sounded like his old self.

The fact that Charlie had found him here, so soon, was the last, final proof that this was indeed his old lover. But rather than reassure, the thought just made Joel sick. Joel knew he couldn't fight Charlie off if it came down to it. He had enough experience wrestling in bed with him to understand who would lose.

Joel quickly padded back to the bedroom and dressed in his damp clothes. He shivered as he pulled on his wet T-shirt. He laced up his boots as fast as he could. As he walked back down the hall, he saw the front doorknob spin as Charlie tried to open it.

"Open the door. I'm not going to hurt you."

Horrified, Joel walked backward down the hall, fighting the urge to throw up. He paused as he passed the kitchen. There were no knives, not even a rolling pin. Joel grabbed the glass carafe from the showcase coffeemaker.

In the rec room, he crouched under the expansive windows. Something rustled outside. Beneath the blinds of the glass doors, the shape of two dark leather boots appeared.

Joel waited. Silence.

The glass doors shattered inward.

Joel sprang to his feet. His knee buckled, but rather than fall, he threw himself forward. He swung his right arm and smashed the glass carafe into Charlie's face.

Charlie recoiled, covering his face with his hands. Joel fell on the shards of glass. They were icy cold. Adrenaline made it painless. He bolted through the hole in the doors.

"Joel!" Charlie's voice shook in rage.

Charlie charged after him, raising his arms. Joel heard a roar from behind and turned as a wall of water from the lake surged forward.

The wall of water curled over him and froze solid.

Joel's heart beat frantically as he struggled to break free. He stood fully encased in a tube of ice. Something deep within him surged and pulsed, enraged and frightened, and he howled as he thrashed against these unnatural icy bonds.

Charlie looked furious. "I'm serious." He marched toward him. "Don't fucking run." Charlie breathed heavily, and his hand cupped his bleeding cheek.

Joel didn't answer, too scared to think, much less speak. His skin burned from the ice.

Charlie shook his head. "I told you to go away, but you wouldn't listen, would you? What am I thinking? You never do."

"You son of a bitch!" Joel finally gasped. He struggled against the ice. "Let me go!"

"Promise not to run away."

"You killed that woman!"

"Settle down," Charlie said. "I'll explain everything. But you have to remain calm."

Joel didn't trust him. He was a murderer now, a complete stranger. And Joel knew there was no way, in the face of such an unnatural occurrence as this wall of frozen lake water, he could remain calm.

But he also knew that he couldn't run anymore. So he nodded weakly.

Charlie pushed his palm out, and Joel's body drenched in water. In shock, Joel tried to step away, but his knee buckled once more and he started to fall.

Charlie pulled him close, holding him up. "Easy there," he whispered. He held his palm against Joel's shoulder.

Joel's entire body tingled as all the water ran against gravity, trickling up to Charlie's hand. It trailed along Charlie's sleeve and dripped down onto the lawn. The sensation tickled, but his clothes stiffened and his skin warmed.

"Better?" Charlie whispered. His mouth brushed Joel's forehead. Charlie twined his fingers in Joel's hair, and the moisture sucked from Joel's strands as well, dribbling down Charlie's arm.

Joel swayed. Charlie bent as if to carry him, but Joel weakly pushed him away.

"Don't touch me," Joel said. His voice was hoarse. He stumbled toward the house. His knee throbbed unbearably, and he involuntarily grunted with every step.

Charlie kept his distance until Joel reached the door. Then he gripped Joel's arm and helped him over the jagged pieces of glass. Once inside, he didn't let go. Instead, he led Joel to a woolly white sofa in the rec room, the price tag still attached to the armrest.

Joel collapsed into the cushions, too hurt, too tired, and too defeated for the moment to move. Charlie left him but was gone only a moment before he returned with the comforter off the bed, which he draped over Joel. Charlie sat beside him. A long, thin gash marred his cheek. It had stopped bleeding, but his chin and face were covered in blood.

Joel shivered against the couch pillows.

"Still cold?" Charlie asked.

Joel glared at him.

Charlie's face remained expressionless, despite the concern in his voice. "You need to leave Seattle, change your identity. I can't protect you on my own; there are too many of us, and once Mar tells the others, you will be hunted down and killed."

"Murder's a big part of this new club of yours, isn't it?" Joel said.

Charlie frowned. "I didn't kill anyone."

"Yes you did! I saw you drown that poor woman with my own eyes! You —"

"She's not dead. She's fine."

Joel stared at him, wondering if he was honestly supposed to believe that.

Apparently he was. Charlie looked sincere.

"I saw her limp body," Joel said.

"She revived about five minutes later."

"Yeah. Right."

"I'm serious." Charlie rubbed his hand over his face. He looked exhausted. He leaned back against the couch. "I don't suppose your grandma has any booze around, does she?"

"She's dead."

"Sorry," Charlie said, but it didn't sound like he meant it. He shook his head. "Look, it's complicated. I wish you had just left me alone."

"Well, *I'm* sorry," Joel snapped. "But a year ago I was in love with you, and foolishly I seem unable to forget that."

Charlie's expression softened. "Happy birthday, by the way."

Joel gaped. And then he laughed. It was such an absurd thing to say, given the circumstances; he laughed and felt tears pool in his eyes.

Charlie laughed as well. His face broke into a smile, and Joel couldn't help the surge of relief he felt, deep within him, at the sight. This was *him*. His lover. He was *alive*, beautiful and breathing, despite everything. Joel should have been celebrating.

Charlie reached into the pocket of his leather coat and pulled out his mobile phone. He pressed buttons and scowled at his screen. "They're at your house. But word hasn't spread outside the city. Yet."

At the moment, Joel didn't care. "How the hell did you survive the storm last year?"

"I didn't."

Joel waited for more explanation. None came.

"...And?" he finally asked.

"Hold on. I'm trying to think of the best way to explain this."

"Just tell it to me in chronological order."

"That doesn't really work with us." Charlie pocketed his phone.

"Us? You mean you and your murdering, homophobic buddies?"

Charlie's eyebrow raised. "Why do you think they're homophobic?"

"That one guy said he didn't like my kind."

Charlie snorted. "Yeah. Mortal. That's what he meant."

"Oh, terrific. So are we talking vampires here?"

"Vampires? Where do you get these ideas?" Charlie scoffed and gave him such a familiar, disapproving look that Joel felt like he had his old lover back again.

"I drowned," Charlie said slowly. "But then, about five minutes later, I revived."

"How?"

Charlie stared at him in silence for a moment. He clenched his jaw repeatedly, a new habit he hadn't had before. Finally, he spoke. "I'm not the Charlie you knew. I have his memories, and some of his characteristics, but that isn't my name or who I really am. I regained my own consciousness when Charlie died."

The back of Joel's neck tingled. "What's your name then?" he asked quietly.

"Arath Jag." Charlie made some arcane hand gesture. "Water Lieutenant, formerly under Captain Taradai, now allied with the Retributors."

Joel covered his face with his hands.

"I'm one of the Valde. We are the original elements who created the world: Fire, Water, Earth, and Air. We cannot die, but the Fire and Water Valde have been imprisoned in human bodies, forced to reincarnate life after life."

"Why?"

Charlie ground his jaw. "There was a war," he said, staring at the air accusingly. "Between us all. Our armies fought over supremacy of this world. In the end, the Earth and Air armies formed an alliance and forced the Fire and Water armies into the bodies of human beings. We are trapped, unconscious, and only if we die by our element do we regain our former memories."

Joel scowled. "I don't get it."

Charlie sighed. "It means that a Water Valde only reawakens if he is drowned. Likewise, you have to burn alive a Fire Valde for them to remember who they truly are and awaken their powers."

Joel looked wearily at Charlie. "Uh-huh."

"It's a very dangerous time to be around me. A small group of Fire and Water soldiers have joined forces, despite the long-standing war between our kinds. We

believe that if we fight together, we can overthrow the Earth and Air guardians who keep us imprisoned, and finally win our freedom.”

Joel decided to pretend this was a normal conversation, if only to better understand what kind of trouble he was in.

“So the Retributors are rebels?” Joel asked.

Charlie nodded. “Many of my own kind would rather kill me and have me reincarnate than fight alongside the Fire General. That’s why you need to stay away from me. I’m a target. The rest you probably won’t understand.”

“I was always smarter than you.”

Charlie smirked. He stretched his hand out toward the broken window of the sliding glass door.

Joel watched, frightened and yet mesmerized, as a surge of lake water burst into the room and then suddenly paused, hovering in the doorway like a dog begging permission to enter.

Joel’s breath caught, and panicked messages to flee immediately rushed through his mind. But the water’s surge ceased; it formed a glossy, translucent wall, from which a delicate tendril of liquid spun out and connected with Charlie’s outstretched hand.

Joel stared as Charlie slowly directed the water. It was captivating and beautiful and disturbing as well, the water seemingly conscious, its movements fluid but also predatory, *alive*. Water itself became a menacing thing, vital and graceful. It curled around Charlie’s body like a sultry dancer.

The tingling at the back of Joel’s neck flared into an all-out shudder of fear. This was not anything he could explain away logically. This was one of those moments where he was going to have to abandon logic. Forget the laws of nature; what he was witnessing was *real*. Charlie pulled a tendril of water from the whole and spun it around his finger as if it were yarn. He pointed to Joel’s knee. The water formed a circle of ice around Joel’s injury. The rest of the lake hovered in the doorway patiently, apparently nothing better to do with itself.



"Impressed?" Charlie asked. He flashed one of his perfect smiles.

Joel scowled. "Too cold."

Charlie's smile faded. "Sorry." His palm hovered over the icy bandage, which melted and yet impossibly remained in place, a watery circle of chilled water that eased the throb in his injured knee.

"Is it still too cold?" Charlie asked. "I could –"

Joel reached out and touched his fingers. "I'm just kidding. I'm fine. It's very impressive. It's...it's unbelievable. As in, I can't believe it."

Charlie's expression hardened. "This is why you have to leave, Joel. Mar is not just some guy you've pissed off. He's a Valde, as old as the earth itself, and water is his to command. You cannot win." As if emphasizing his point, the water in the room crashed down to the ground and slunk back to linger in the doorway once more.

"Can't you just tell him not to kill me?" Joel asked.

Charlie shook his head. "He's not going to take orders from me. We don't get along well. Besides, he's a Captain. I'm just a Lieutenant."

"Well, is there any way to kill you people?"

Charlie's eyebrow raised. "The bodies we are in are as vulnerable as yours. We can be shot or stabbed or strangled like anyone. But we have power around our elements and will reincarnate if the body expires."

Joel cocked his head. "So you have to be near water to use it? You can't create it on your own?"

"No, I can manipulate water in close proximity. And Fire Valde cannot start a fire themselves but can wield nearby flames."

"Is the bathroom out of your range?" Joel asked carefully.

Charlie glanced at the nearby wooden door. "No. Why?"

"I'm just figuring out how to protect myself."

"You can't," Charlie urged. "You pose a threat to our plans, and Mar is powerful enough to have you killed."

"Mar's the older blond guy?"

Charlie nodded. As he sat there, he beckoned more water from the door and used it to wash the blood from his face. "That's him."

Joel touched the swelling on his forehead. "Nice guy. Tried to drown me in a toilet."

"He doesn't have any respect for human beings," Charlie said.

"And you do?"

"I'm not going to kill people for the hell of it."

"How reassuring." Joel pushed off the comforter. "So he's your leader?"

Charlie finished washing his face and flicked his fingers away from his body. His face was completely dry.

Even if Charlie's words seemed like madness, the evidence kept confirming them. Joel watched Charlie's movements carefully.

"Mar leads the Retributors," Charlie said. "That is, until we find General Dev." The gash across his cheek from the broken glass was clean but looked red and angry. Joel felt a momentary pang of guilt.

"Who's Dev?"

Charlie smiled. "He's one of the most powerful of the Valde. He can summon all the armies at once. Under him, we will fight the allied forces of Earth and Air and finally break free of this prison."

Joel shook his head. "This makes about as much sense as *Battlefield Earth*."

Charlie laughed unexpectedly, a short bark, and his eyes glittered. "I forgot that movie. Terrible."

"Yeah." Joel smiled sadly. "Remember that night we rented it? You passed out in front of the TV with a bowl of potato salad firmly clutched in your right arm. You wouldn't let it go. I let you sleep with it."

Charlie's smile slid away. "That wasn't me, Joel. I remember it. I lived Charlie's life. But it's only a small part of who I am."

Joel frowned down at his hands. After a while, he said, "You can't bring my Charlie back, can you?"

"No."

"Even though you are him."

"Imagine if your Charlie had amnesia," he said. "That's what I am—lifetimes of memories he forgot."

"You remember your past lives?"

"For most of them, I was never aware," Charlie said. "I reincarnated in the body of a human, grew old, and died, never awakening to my true self. Only the few times I have drowned have I been conscious."

"How many times is that?"

Charlie squinted at the wall in concentration. "Thirteen? Fourteen times?" He nodded. "Fourteen, if I count that one time I was awake for only a few hours before being killed."

Joel shuddered. "Jesus. What a life."

"That's why we need to find the General. Once we are all conscious, we can end this madness."

"Where are Earth and Air? Are they in bodies?"

"If they want to be," Charlie said. "But for the most part, they are here." He motioned at the air. "All around us, tracking our movements. We are volatile by our very nature. During the first great battle, the Earth and Air armies realized the natural

opposition between Fire and Water would never allow us to ally. They joined forces and smothered us. Since we cannot be destroyed, they imprisoned us instead.”

Joel considered whether he could possibly find one of these Earth or Air Valde, wherever they were. Perhaps if he allied with them, betrayed Charlie and his gang of rebels, they could protect him?

But he crushed the thought as soon as it was born. He had no idea what he was doing, or who of these superpowered beings could be trusted. He would have to figure this out on his own.

“So what’s your plan?” he asked, trying to keep up. “Burn a whole bunch of people until you find your precious General?” Joel couldn’t keep the sarcasm from his voice.

“We don’t need to,” Charlie said. “Mar is one of the few of us who is a seer. He can look at a human being and see the Valde who lives within, if there is one. He can tell at a glance who General Dev is.”

Joel noticed the way Charlie’s expression softened every time he mentioned Dev’s name. He sounded like a religious convert under the spell of a charismatic guru.

“Mar recognized Sergeant Kal, another Water, in the body of that woman several days ago,” Charlie said. “That’s why we drowned her, Joel. We didn’t kill her. We woke Kal up.”

“How do you know she’s on your side?”

“She was one of the first Retributors who allied in 1732, after the last great battle between Fire and Water. She grew sick of the others’ complacency.”

“The others don’t care that they’re prisoners?” Joel asked.

“It’s been too long for them to remember what they once had. They like their comfortable lives here and have become attached to the earth itself. They don’t want to see it damaged for some ancient retribution.”

Joel sat upright. “Damaged? So this little war of yours is going to harm people?”

Charlie shrugged. "I don't know. There wasn't life on the planet when we had our first great battle. The other battles we've had over the years have only been between Fire and Water, and we have been restricted by our human bodies."

"And the fact that I'm human and mortal and could possibly die in this battle of yours means nothing to you?"

Charlie frowned.

Joel clenched his teeth. "Do you have any feelings for me left? Anything at all?"

Charlie stared at him. "I like you. But I'm waiting for the General."

"You've said that," Joel said bitterly.

"He is my lover."

Joel hated himself for feeling so crushed by the words. He clenched his jaw and stared down at the circle of water around his knee. The pain was dull now, and he knew it would be all right by morning as long as he didn't stress it. But the thought did little to lift his spirits.

Charlie stared down at the water as well. They both sat silently. And then Charlie shook his head. "I normally have nothing to do with mortals, you know. They're too fragile. They die so easily."

"So why are you helping me?" Joel asked quietly.

Charlie's blue eyes stared at him. "Because Charlie loved you."

Joel felt tears stinging his eyes.

"Besides, you look amazing, and I remember you give incredible head." Charlie flashed his pornographic smile.

Joel shook his head. "Asshole. That sounds like something my Charlie would say."

Charlie reached out and patted his shoulder. It was at once so unlike him and so relieving that Joel had to clench his eyes shut to keep from crying.

"Get some rest," he heard Charlie say. He felt Charlie's weight lift from the couch. "I'll wake you in a few hours."

Joel curled into a ball and turned, burying his head in the large pillows of the sofa.

He felt Charlie's presence, standing beside him, but after a few minutes Charlie departed. Joel heard him exploring the house.

He opened his eyes a crack and looked at the broken door. The wall of water was still there, rippling with rain and air, impenetrable and yet liquid, and Joel pulled the blanket tighter around himself. What the hell had he gotten himself mixed up with?

He wanted to be vigilant, stay awake and keep an eye on this person who was now his enemy. Charlie not only had superpowers but could be crazy, and neither option boded well for Joel's future.

But his eyes refused to open once he shut them, and instead he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

## Chapter Six

It was a common-enough dream. He was walking down a busy city street, clenching his fist. Only this wasn't Seattle. People dressed strangely, and many shrank from him and ran away, as if he were deformed.

He tried to look at his reflection, but he couldn't see himself. And Charlie was there, drowning people with water from his hands.

Someone yanked on his leg, cold hands groped him, and he shot upright.

Charlie stepped back, startled. "I'm icing your knee," he said defensively.

Joel glanced down his body. His jeans had been removed while he slept. His leg lay suspended on a cushion of cool water, impossibly formed in the shape of a pillow.

"How the hell are you doing that?" Joel asked, his voice gravelly from sleep.

Charlie shrugged. "It's like forming your hand into a fist."

"Well, thanks." Early light shone through the broken door and peeped from the edges of the large living room blinds. The wall of water was gone.

Charlie looked tired as he sat down on the floor, leaning his back against the sofa. "You can keep sleeping. I called Greyhound and bought you a ticket to Chicago. We don't need to leave for the station for another hour." He smiled.

Joel's stomach clenched. It hurt too much to consider, the fact that he had found Charlie alive and here, tending to him and smiling at him, but that he could no longer have him. Charlie was in love with someone else. And this someone else was an immortal soldier with a penchant for epic battles. What a dick.

Joel paused. If he had that opinion, it meant he believed what Charlie had told him. Looking down at his gently rippling pillow of cool water, he could think of no other explanation.

"So I guess when I leave, this is good-bye," Joel said.

"If you know what's good for you it is."

Joel sighed. "I get you back from death, after a year of guilt and hell, only to lose you again."

Charlie stared at him for a long moment. Then he turned slightly, his large hand spread out on Joel's thigh.

"You know, I recall that Charlie never finished giving you last year's birthday present."

"Please don't refer to yourself in third person," Joel asked, rubbing his temples. "Even if you are named Jag or something. It's hard enough keeping this information down."

Charlie smirked. "All right, I'll be Charlie" —his hand slid up Joel's thigh— "who owes you a present."

Joel's body responded immediately. Blood and heat rushed to his groin. "What about your beloved General?"

"We spend lifetimes apart. It's not what you would call a conventional relationship. He wouldn't mind."

"Oh, he wouldn't, would he? Very generous man."

"He's not a man. He's a military mastermind who will change the whole world."



“Sorry. I’m not showing my proper respect.” Joel meant the comment to be sarcastic, but his voice hitched as Charlie’s palm slid upward to cup Joel’s testicles.

Joel remained silent as Charlie’s fingers slipped past the elastic of Joel’s underwear and gently fondled his balls. Charlie’s touch was cool but familiar. He scooted forward and pulled Joel’s underwear down. He brushed his tongue over each testicle slowly. Joel spread his legs wider, pulling one leg completely free of his underwear. The movement caused only a small protest from his knee.

Charlie crawled fully onto the couch and crouched between Joel’s legs. His tongue laved a path between Joel’s asshole and his scrotum, sucking each ball into his mouth before he moved forward, lifting the sac in his hand as his tongue caressed the length of Joel’s shaft.

Joel knew this was a mistake. If he was going to have to leave Charlie behind, the last thing he should be doing was having sex with him. But there was no way he was going to stop this. Not when Charlie was so good at it, lips tightening around the crown of Joel’s cock and then slowly lowering, lifting, sawing with growing effort until Joel’s world collapsed down into this one sensation, this one compulsion, pleasure building and spreading through every nerve in his body until he thought he couldn’t bear it any longer.

Charlie gave Joel’s cock a last swipe of his tongue, and then he sat back on his heels, looking flushed, manic. He pulled a condom from his back pocket.

“Can I fuck you?” Charlie asked huskily.

In response, Joel lifted his legs, gently cupping the back of his right thigh to urge his knee upward. He looked down at his own body, open and supine for the taking, and his cock leaked, trailing a web of cum from its top to his belly.

Charlie made a low noise of appreciation at the sight. He quickly stripped off his own jeans, and his cock sprang free, slapping against his tight belly. Charlie’s dick was a beautiful sight to Joel, a marvel of heat and flesh, veined and rugged, always looking so demanding. It pulsed as Charlie positioned himself between Joel’s spread legs.

Charlie gave himself a quick stroke, and Joel watched avidly, taking in the sight and the smell of him, mushroomy and dark, his balls heavy, the sac loose. But his view was broken as Charlie rolled on the condom.

Charlie reached down and spread Joel's buttocks apart, caressing them with his palms. A finger pressed against Joel's opening, and then slick warmth lubricated its movements. Joel glanced to the side to watch water fly from his forgotten floating pillow into Charlie's palm, where it dripped against his ass, warm and soothing.

Charlie's finger pushed past the ring of Joel's muscle, and Joel spread his legs wider, entranced by the sight of Charlie's hand moving back and forth, his fingers frigging his ass with a mixture of care and force.

Charlie reached for a couch throw pillow and shoved it under Joel, lifting him higher.

"You look amazing like this," Charlie whispered roughly. "Your ass is so fucking tight." One hand forced Joel's legs open as the other guided his prick to Joel's hole.

The wide crown of his cock plugged at Joel's tight opening and then pushed through. Joel gasped as his insides expanded with hardness and heat. He shifted slightly, urging his muscles to relax around the intrusion. The tinge of pain faded as Charlie's dick bluntly rested in just the right spot.

Charlie paused, studying Joel's expression with what Joel could only assume was desperation. Joel exhaled slowly and then tightened his ass muscles, squeezing Charlie's dick harder.

Charlie groaned. He gave a small thrust forward. Joel's vision filled with stars, and his body shivered in pleasure around Charlie's cock. He rocked his hips forward, and Charlie immediately responded, pulling out and back. They relearned the feel of their connected bodies, two steps forward and one back, and the tempo accelerated. Joel grasped his own cock and stroked it. Charlie pounded into him earnestly now, a frantic pace that left Joel dizzy and stunned with the sensation. All thoughts died in the shock and spasm of being fucked. He couldn't tell where his body ended and Charlie's began.

Charlie leaned down and kissed Joel, tongue thrust deep, and Joel exploded, his cum shooting onto his chest and fingers. As he clenched around the thick shaft in his ass, Charlie gritted his teeth and froze. A moment later, Joel felt an odd, soothing fullness, a sultry dessert. Charlie pulled out and leaned back against the arm of the couch, breathing heavily. Joel wiped the sweat from his forehead onto his shirtsleeve. Charlie didn't sweat at all. He lay there, gathering breath, smiling his pornographic smile, looking gorgeous and disheveled, his prick still erect, red and prominent between his spread legs.

A spell of contentment washed over Joel, a sense that if he could have anything in his life, this was it. Right here. Charlie watching over him, grinning at him, flushed from fucking.

And then Charlie swung his feet onto the floor and stood. "It's time to go," he said, breaking the spell. He dressed quickly. Joel watched him, his throat growing tight. This was the last time he would see Charlie's long, lean thighs, the loose, uneven drop of his testicles, the pink tint to the crown of his cock, the light pattern of chest hair. The last time he would smell Charlie's salty, masculine skin, catch the glint of his earring in the low lamplight.

Joel rubbed his hand over his face. His chin and cheeks were red from Charlie's stubble. His lips felt puffy. His ass throbbed from the stretching.

He closed his eyes and savored the sensations, each one equally, cementing this memory for posterity.

Charlie finished dressing and turned around. He raised an eyebrow. "Your bus leaves the station in twenty minutes. We have to go now."

Joel said nothing as he dressed. His clothes were dry but reeked slightly of toilet water and sweat. As he passed by the mirror in the hallway, he caught a glimpse of himself. He looked like a ghost of the man he was when he left home the night before. Thirty didn't appear to be too promising a year.

It was still early, and frost crystallized the windows of Charlie's car, an elegant silver-gray Jaguar that he definitely hadn't owned back when they were dating.

Joel was going to ask about it but then found he didn't have the energy for small talk anymore.

Charlie reached out his palm and all the ice on the car melted and splashed to the ground.

"Handy," Joel said. "You could sell that as a service on cold mornings."

Charlie didn't seem to be in the mood for small talk either.

He beeped open the doors, and Joel stiffly sat down, wincing both from the tenderness of his backside and the state of his filthy jeans as they made contact with the plush leather seats.

Charlie said nothing on the drive across the floating bridge, back to Seattle, and neither did Joel.

At the train station, Charlie parked and walked Joel to the bus stalls. On the way, he stopped at an ATM. He still said nothing, gently gripping Joel by the sleeve and directing him to the proper bus as if Joel were a child. Joel shook free of Charlie's grasp, but Charlie didn't seem to even notice. He was staring at the stall numbers. He stopped beside a Greyhound heading east to Spokane.

"There are fewer Valde in the Midwest, and almost no awoken Retributors," Charlie told him. "Go to Chicago. Here's my cell number. Call me when you get there, and I'll wire you more cash." Charlie handed him a thick wad of twenty-dollar bills and a scrawled piece of paper.

The handwriting was so familiar, it blurred Joel's vision.

"Go." Charlie gave him a small shove toward the bus.

Joel turned. Charlie looked tired but not equally saddened by the parting. Joel sucked in his heartbreak and nodded. Time to act like a man.

"Thanks for the help," he said. He turned and stepped onto the bus.

"Wait." Charlie yanked him back down and hugged him tightly. Mindless of the crowd around them, Charlie kissed Joel, quickly and with force.

"Be careful. Don't die," Charlie said, his voice low and gruff.

Joel boarded the bus. He sat down in a window seat, feeling stunned by it all. Charlie remained there, watching until the bus backed out of the stall and turned onto the street.

As soon as Charlie was out of sight, Joel moved to the front of the bus and stood, gripping the cold metal pole for support.

"Where's the next stop?" he asked the driver.

"Stewart Street Station," the man said. "Last stop in Seattle, then on to Ellensburg."

Joel sat down again. Traffic was heavy at this hour and seemed worse in the sunlight. He was used to the combination of congestion and overcast skies. They went together, a portrait of Seattle life, where the only color came from red brake lights, illuminating the snake of freeway traffic like a colored streamer.

But in the sunlight, the traffic seemed insulting. The Olympics shyly revealed themselves between clouds off on the horizon, and the promise of actual heat awakened the city, filling it with optimism that Joel didn't share.

What was he going to do now?

Joel leaned his head against the window. A greasy stain from someone else's forehead obscured his view of the world outside. He let the traffic blur by and concentrated.

He knew Mar's minions waited for him at home. No doubt they knew his parents' address, his sister's, and his office at the university. He couldn't go to the police without having to explain his crazy story, and they'd be more likely to lock him up than help him.

But there was no way he was going to take off like a thief and leave his life in shambles. He deserved more. He had worked too hard for his position at the university and had too many friends in the area to make departing easy. He liked his old, decrepit house. He liked his possessions and the familiarity of his world. And no one was going to take that from him, especially not some psychopath with a penchant for drowning people.

If he was unwilling to sacrifice everything, he was going to have to find a way to gain the upper hand and demand his freedom.

By the time he exited the bus at the Stewart Street Station, he had a rough plan in mind. He turned north and started walking.

If he hurried, he wouldn't even be late for his first lecture.

## Chapter Seven

Joel reached the Puget University campus in north Seattle just before nine. One of his students, Rob Doren, immediately noticed his disheveled appearance.

“Rough night, Dr. Passaro?” he asked with a grin. Rob was the football team’s right tackle this season. His shoulders blocked out the sun.

Joel brushed at his stained shirt. “It was my birthday. Things got a little out of hand.”

Rob whistled. Joel thought to correct his impression and then changed his mind. While he remained protective of his image on campus, knowing some of the older, tenured professors in his department didn’t like him, for the moment it seemed smart to not walk the campus alone. Rob’s affable smile and fierce body type didn’t hurt either.

The grounds were still damp from last night’s rainfall. Puddles on the brick pathways glittered in the sun. They walked the wide paths through beauty bark gardens and past the library and science buildings.

Outside the history department building, Joel spotted three men loitering at the entrance. The way they scanned the crowd set Joel on edge.

“By the way, Rob, I can’t help but notice you’ve skipped about half of my lectures.” Joel walked in sync with Rob, passing the men as they entered the building.

"I can't help it. I find them boring," Rob said.

Joel laughed. "Well, at least you're honest." In the hallway, he peered through the window. The three remained, eyes keen on the crowd.

He didn't stop at his office in case others waited there for him. He went directly to the large auditorium and started his lecture about the Crusades, ignoring the giggles and whispered suggestions about his casual jeans, stained T-shirt, and bruised forehead.

As he left the building, he caught a glimpse of the bald man, Ray, from the night before. The recognition sent a chill down his spine. They were really here and truly wanted him dead. This was not just a morbid flight of imagination.

Through the day, Joel moved from classroom to classroom, always traveling with others, flanked by students and other professors. The same three men tailed him. Their scruffy, outdoorsman attire blended them into the student population, but their alertness set them apart in a crowd.

He kept to public places and never ventured anywhere alone. At least the men distanced themselves whenever witnesses were within sight. If they were so worried about detection that they'd rather kill Joel than risk discovery, at least they were also unlikely to make a spectacle of themselves by committing murder publicly in front of witnesses.

After lunch, Joel needed to make a few phone calls, but he feared venturing into his office alone. Instead, he made his way across the quad to Ginger Carr's office.

She shared a large room with two other assistant professors and a visiting professor from France. The room smelled like sweat and wet shoes.

Luckily, she was in her office, at least physically. Mentally, she looked like she was under one of the tables at the bar in Pioneer Square.

"Head hurt much?" he asked her, smiling.



Ginger's eyes were puffy, and she squinted at him with a grimace. "You look like I feel. Did you find your boyfriend?"

"Sort of." Joel changed the topic quickly. "Can I borrow your phone?"

She rubbed her temples. "Why can't you use your own? I've got fifteen minutes before class, and I can't find my lecture notes."

"I'll help you search after my phone calls."

Ginger grunted and then rolled a distance away in her office chair, leaning limply against one of the armrests and closing her eyes.

Joel spoke with staff at the medical center in a low voice, but halfway through the conversation, he saw Ginger's eyes turn toward him. She immediately stopped pawing through a stack of books and papers on the floor to watch him.

When he finished his call, Joel glanced out Ginger's window. The view from her side of the building was of the courtyard below, molded hillocks of green lawn around a fountain. The fountain made Joel shiver.

Joel spotted his three stalkers peeking from under an awning.

He took a good look at them. Ray, the threatening bald man, was still there, and an older fellow with an impressive black beard. The third man was as huge as Ray and even more muscular, with intimidating scars across his face and a full head of red hair. He looked like the kind of guy who enjoyed killing people.

Joel backed away from the window.

"What's going on with you?" Ginger asked.

Joel spun around, startled by how close she was to him.

"Nothing." He flashed her a smile. "Thanks for the phone. Did you find your notes?"

Ginger's hungover expression worsened as she frowned at him. "Why on earth did you reserve a room that hasn't been used in—"

"I'll walk you to your class," Joel interrupted. "Aren't you leaving now?"

Ginger scowled but gathered her stack of books anyway. "You're avoiding my questions."

"Yes."

"Does this have something to do with last night?"

"Maybe." Joel held the door open as she shuffled through with a big yawn.

The two of them walked together to Jenson Hall. Ray, the redhead, and the bearded man all diligently followed, keeping their distance but never straying from sight.

Joel steadied his nerves. He handed Ginger her books at the door, then walked south past the fountain to the medical center.

The medical center building was one of the largest on campus, a massive complex of towers and parking garages. Even though he was alone, there were still dozens of witnesses as he walked diagonally through the parking lot toward the side entrance. Halfway along the building, he found the entrance that he was looking for and three narrow steps leading to its plain white locked door.

Joel unlocked the door using his magnetic key card. He turned and glanced back.

He and Ray made eye contact.

Joel darted inside. He dashed down the flight of stairs and turned, unsurprised to see a foot block the closing door.

Ray threw open the door. He smiled.

Joel ran. His knee twinged only slightly, thanks to Charlie's unconventional hydrotherapy.

He didn't dare look back. Everything depended on timing. He heard footsteps and breathing behind him, gaining, as he dashed down the dark hall. This part of the building hadn't been used in years, and only the dim green glow of emergency lights illuminated his passage. The linoleum floor peeled in places, and he nearly tripped in his headlong rush. He turned and turned again, taking pleasure in navigating with ease

a building as labyrinthine as the one in which they'd pursued him last night. There was a rattle in the pipes, the sound of their breathing, and a solid silence of ghosts lingering in the facility like a fog that made Joel's skin crawl. He pushed himself forward, tuning out his fear.

He used his key card to swipe his entrance into the original primate testing facility. Operations had moved years ago to a separate building downtown, and yet animal odors lingered, the air tainted by stale feces and astringent solvents.

Joel left the entrance door ajar and bolted through the shadows of reception, pushing through another door into the observation rooms.

He fumbled with his key card at the door. As he shouldered the door open, he felt one of the men reach out and grab him. Joel jerked forward, repelling him, and launched into the narrow room, rushing to the door on the opposite end.

He heard the first door shut and then keyed his way through the second, then slammed it behind him with all his strength.

Fists pounded the other side.

They were trapped.

Joel leaned against the door, catching his breath and steadying his heart. He shook with adrenaline and fear. He felt along the wall beside the door for the panel and switched on the lights. A plastic sign informed him he was in observation room four. He walked over to a long bank of windows providing a glimpse at the darkness within. He could barely make out the men, grappling with both sets of doors as if turning the knobs often enough would magically open them.

Joel couldn't help but smile. They might be immortal, but they were still as dumb as monkeys.

The men banged about their surroundings, and Joel watched silently for a minute. From their room, they saw only a wall of mirrors and the steel table inside.

Joel found the bank of switches and flipped on the room lights.

All three men immediately stopped moving and glanced about. They were in one of the observation rooms that researchers had used to monitor primate learning skills. Ray banged his fists against the glass. He clearly knew the mirrors were windows, but he couldn't see Joel himself. He pounded the glass several feet away from Joel—glass that had been built to sustain the blows of primates much larger than humans.

"I'm going to fucking kill you!" Ray shouted, loud enough to be heard even without the room's microphone on.

Joel found the two-way mic and switched it on. "I figured that part out on my own," he said calmly.

The redheaded man held up his hands. "I'll burn the motherfucker!" he hissed.

Joel smiled again. No source of fire anywhere near the observation room, nor any water—just solid walls and safety, for the time being.

But he couldn't hide in the basement of the university medical facility forever.

"Which one of you has Mar's number in your phone?" Joel asked. None of them responded.

Joel repeated the question. Finally, Ray glared at the mirror, although he was still several feet off from making eye contact.

"Why?" Ray asked.

"We work out a deal," Joel said. "A guarantee of my safety. In return, I don't go to the police and report what I've seen, and I let the three of you go."

"He'll never go for it," Ray hissed. "You think he's afraid of you? You're nothing! No one!"

"Exactly," Joel replied. "Which is why I'm not a threat to him. So give me the phone."

The three men spoke in low whispers. Finally the bearded man reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He pressed a button and then held it up in the air.

Joel fiddled with the control panel in the observation room, accidentally opening an air vent before finding the switch for the food pass-through. It popped open beneath the bank of windows.

The man placed the phone into the tray, and Joel snapped it back, grabbing the phone just as it began to ring.

“Is it done?” Mar’s tone was terse on the phone.

“Not yet,” Joel responded. “We need to talk.”

## Chapter Eight

The Daily Donut had two great advantages as a rendezvous point. For one, it was directly across the street from the Seattle Police Department's East Precinct headquarters on 12th, and the place was lousy with cops. Secondly, it had amazing doughnuts, which were Charlie's greatest weakness.

Charlie may have regained thousands of years of repressed memories, but apparently he still was a sucker for a good cruller. Joel leaned against the doorway and just watched him for a moment, smiling as Charlie licked his fingertips like a cat grooming himself in a sunbeam, content and comfortable, crumbled remnants huddling on his yellow plastic plate.

Charlie had shaved for their meeting. His earring glittered in the harsh fluorescent light. His clothes were dark and expensive, far nicer than anything he would have worn in his past life, but Joel couldn't complain. They complemented him, made him look unapproachably important, in control. He was so different from the laid-back, Converse-wearing man Joel had fallen in love with.

And yet the way he eyed the doughnuts on other patrons' plates with calculation was so familiar, Joel laughed out loud. Charlie immediately turned and seemed almost

embarrassed to be caught expressing such unbridled craving. His expression sobered at once.

Joel made note of the three uniformed officers sitting together across from Charlie's table and scanned the room for anyone who looked suspiciously superpowered.

Charlie said nothing as Joel sat down across from him. They were at one of the window tables. Joel appreciated that the police station was visible.

Charlie's steel blue eyes narrowed to slits.

"You're such an idiot," he growled. He kept his voice low. "I help you out, and this is what you do?"

Joel stared into his cold eyes. Here, most of all, Charlie was a different man. His eyes held something primal, icy, and angry.

Joel pushed his chocolate old-fashioned across the table. "You have it."

Charlie glanced down at the plate. His scowl softened. "You've got a suicide wish," he said. He took a bite of the doughnut.

"I'm not going to change my whole life for you." Joel knew that it was a petty and passive-aggressive thing to say, but he was unable to stop himself.

Charlie frowned.

"I refuse to run like a criminal when I've done nothing wrong," Joel continued. He absentmindedly yanked at the plastic tag on the sleeve of the sweater he had purchased on the way to their meeting.

Charlie watched him silently. He polished off the doughnut and then wiped his mouth. His expression was neutral once more.

"Mar is furious," he said. "You're in way over your head."

"Too bad. Now we're going to play by my rules."

Charlie expelled air angrily and crushed the plastic coffee cup in his hand. The remaining coffee squirted out but pooled politely at the edge of the table. Charlie glared at it, and it slunk backward into the destroyed cup.

"I told him my terms," Joel said, keeping his voice calm. "You come here, alone, with an offer of how to resolve this, or I leave your boys to rot for eternity in my nice little hiding space. Immortal or not, I bet they still get hungry."

"I think I convinced Mar that you would leave us alone if we didn't threaten you," Charlie said.

"You *think* you convinced him?" Joel shook his head. "No. I need a guarantee. This is my life, Charlie, and unlike you, I only have one go at it."

"I know! That's why you're being such a fucking idiot!"

At Charlie's rising voice, the cops across from them looked over. Joel smiled at them, glad they were paying attention.

Charlie leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Mar can tag you. It's a way a seer can mark someone for other Valde to identify. It will be a signal that you are not to be harmed."

"Will that work?"

Charlie nodded. "We use tags for Valde who have been identified as children but whom we don't want anything to happen to until they are older and in full-sized bodies. But it is Mar's tag, and the other Valde who are not allied with the Retributors will recognize it. You may be in danger from other Valde, but not from us."

"I'm supposed to believe Mar will just let me go? Put a special stamp on my head and call the whole thing off?"

"What more do you want, Joel?" Charlie shook his head. "You stepped into the middle of a war. And until we find General Dev, all our moves have to be careful ones."

"Sounds like you have enough to worry about not to bother with me."



"Exactly," Charlie confirmed. "You aren't important. That's how I convinced Mar to agree to this."

Although he only repeated Joel's thoughts, the words thumped around in Joel's gut heavily. He was sick with emptiness and the prospect of loss.

"What happens next?"

"You bring the others with you, and we meet with Mar."

Joel shook his head. "No. This is done without Mar."

"He's the only one who can tag you," Charlie said. "He's the seer, not me. You have to meet him."

Joel hesitated. Charlie reached out and grabbed his hand, squeezing it.

"I will make sure he keeps his promise," Charlie said, softly rubbing Joel's wrist. The feeling was comforting. "He will do as he agreed."

"That's awfully kind of you, considering that you are risking your position among your own people on my behalf."

Charlie frowned down at their clasped hands. Something sad crossed over his eyes.

"I don't want anything to happen to you."

A tremor of fragile hope filled Joel's breast. He curled his fingers around Charlie's wrist, offering reciprocal strokes. A year ago, he would never have been so public with his affection. Charlie always wanted to hold hands when they had first started dating. Joel had been too self-conscious to agree to it. He remembered with a pang how happy Charlie had been, a week before the boating accident, when Joel had spontaneously kissed him in the middle of Pike Place Market. Charlie's delicious smile had stayed on for the rest of the afternoon.

"Charlie..." Joel tried to conjure the right words. What could he say to spare his life? To beg this man back to him? It was all so pointless.

Besides, Charlie was no longer human. He was extraordinary, a superhero, albeit not one fighting for the betterment of mankind. What would someone like him want from someone like Joel? There was something deeply delusional about believing that a supernatural immortal being would find a mere human being interesting for very long. Charlie had much more in common with his General.

And yet Joel felt he had to try anything. The grief of another parting welled in his throat and made it difficult to swallow.

They made eye contact, and Joel could see Charlie in there, in those cold eyes, glancing at him with honest affection. But then, like blinds closing, the affection disappeared. Charlie jerked his hand back and blinked rapidly.

"Where do you want to meet?" Charlie asked roughly.

Joel cursed his weak emotions for playing havoc with his mind. He shook his head to clear it and then refocused on the fact that his life was in danger.

"I'm not bringing the others," he said finally. "I can't move them safely. Once I'm tagged, I'll give you the key and their location."

"We can meet this evening, outside the warehouse."

"No." Joel still felt where Charlie had touched him, cold and lingering. "We meet somewhere neutral, somewhere I feel safe."

Charlie frowned. "What do you have in mind?"

"Somewhere public. How about Montlake Park?" Joel then remembered the park was on the waterfront and shook his head. "No, no, that's too close to the shore. How about—"

"You can't get away from it, so don't try. You're going to have to trust us." Charlie eyed Joel's coffee cup.

"Somewhere in the city center—"

"He can pull water from the drainpipes below the street," Charlie reminded him.

Joel sighed. "Fine. Montlake Park."

Charlie reached forward and stole a gulp of Joel's forgotten coffee.

"Get your own," Joel growled.

"You're not drinking it," Charlie said. "It's getting cold."

"So? It's still my coffee. I get to do with it what I like, and that includes not drinking it."

Charlie shook his head. "You are always so wasteful." He got up and returned a minute later with a piping-hot cup of coffee. He sipped at it as he sat down.

Their business was over. They had decided on a rendezvous point, and the best plan that Joel could rely on for his own safety. There was no need to remain. He needed to find a hotel and take a shower. And maybe walk along 1st Avenue, past the army surplus and knife stores, and see if any sort of weapon might do him some good.

But he found himself loath to leave Charlie, who looked content once more, in the sunny window, sipping his afternoon coffee.

Joel drank in the sight of him as he tasted his own lukewarm drink. "Mar was at the marina last year, wasn't he?"

Charlie smiled. "Yeah. He was in Bellingham looking for the General, when he spotted us at the port. He recognized me and conjured the storm."

"Another thing to like him for," Joel commented. "I take it he didn't find Dev."

"No. Mar knows he's nearby; he can sense his presence in the vicinity. But he's not sure who exactly until he meets him face-to-face."

"So when he finds the General, Mar falls under his command?" Joel asked.

"Of course. Mar is a Captain, Dev is a General."

"And you are all traitors, so what does rank matter?"

"Rank is everything," Charlie said, and he sounded almost bitter.

"And what about you?" Joel wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer to his question, but he now found himself curious. "General Dev is your superior officer, and yet you are lovers. It must be unequal."

Charlie stiffened. "He is my leader, yes, but when we are alone, everything changes. It doesn't matter what bodies we wear or our genders or how we engage in acts of pleasure. Our bond has lasted thousands of years, and nothing can break that. In bed, we are equals."

"Really?" Joel ignored the bolt of jealousy that fired through him.

Charlie grinned sheepishly. "All right, maybe we're not *entirely* equal. Dev has a very demanding personality. One might even call him dominant."

"Ah. So no more topping for you, huh?" Joel teased.

Charlie looked affronted for a split second and then burst out laughing. "Not when we're both in male bodies." He cocked his head and stared at Joel. "Maybe that's why I always preferred fucking you to being fucked? I somehow knew that the day would come when I couldn't call the shots anymore?"

"Hey, just because you bottom doesn't mean you aren't in control," Joel protested. It was true he usually bottomed for Charlie, but that was because he loved the feeling. "It's not some passive nature creeping to the surface."

"I really did love fucking you," Charlie mused. He looked out the window and smiled fondly, as if recalling their last time.

"Yeah? Well...I liked it too." Joel swallowed. Oh God, here they went again. Joel clenched his fists and forced himself to remember that he had three hostages and was bargaining for his life. "But that's all over now."

Charlie's gaze flicked back at him. He frowned.

"You have your General," Joel continued, "and I have my life to live, Valde free."

Charlie still frowned, and so Joel reached out and stroked his arm. "Hey, if this General loves you so much, I'm sure he'll bottom for you just like I did."

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "You haven't met Dev. You don't know what he's like."

"No, I haven't," Joel said. "And I have no desire to either. He's stealing you from me, his little gang of rebels are threatening to kill me, and he's plotting some massive war that will threaten life on this planet."

"Plus he'd be jealous," Charlie added. He rubbed his thumb slowly over his plump lower lip, looking at Joel hungrily. "You've got the kind of body that turns him on."

"I thought you said he wasn't the jealous kind?" Joel was finding it hard to concentrate with the direction this conversation was going.

"He isn't. But after all these years together, I know what attracts him. He would really like you."

"Yeah? Why?"

"You have that thin, athletic build he likes," Charlie continued. "He likes men with dark chest hair, and you've got a really tight ass."

"Say that a little louder. I don't think the cop across the room heard you well enough." Joel blushed from Charlie's bluntness.

He shouldn't be doing this. He knew how easily Charlie got worked up talking about sex. It was almost as much of a turn-on to him as foreplay itself. And Joel had nearly forgotten his own reaction to it.

"Oh yeah," Charlie continued, lowered his pitch even further. "Dev would definitely like to keep you around. Ever consider a threesome? He could fuck your ass while I pump my dick down your throat."

"Uh, maybe not right now," Joel said, a little shakily. "Sounds complicated."

"We work well as a team, he and I."

"Do this often, do you? Find little mortals to gangbang?"

Charlie barked a laugh. "Actually, never. I'm just talking naughty because I have a boner the size of this table."

Joel breathed heavily for a few moments, concentrating.

Life in danger.

About to die.

Hostages imprisoned.

Not a good idea.

He gave his head one last resounding shake for clarity and then stared back at Charlie's lust-glazed expression.

"There's a motel across the street," he said finally. "Want to fuck?"

## Chapter Nine

Charlie was peeling off his clothing before Joel had gotten the chain across the hotel door.

They both stripped, staring at each other and breathing heavily, the urgency and threat of the evening's impending meeting leaving a dangerous, thrilling coil of fear in Joel's gut that seemed to heighten his senses.

"This is a bad idea," Joel mumbled.

"Yeah," Charlie grumbled back, his voice low, but his eyes did not seem to agree with him. They raked over Joel's nudity with predatory hunger. "I want to suck your dick, right now." Charlie shook off his trousers, and his cock burst forth, bobbing and swaying. He advanced upon Joel.

Joel shivered in anticipation. He reached down and stroked his own shaft.

But rather than throw him on the bed, as Joel was secretly hoping, Charlie cradled Joel's jaw and held him still as he ran his tongue over Joel's lips, pushing through their opening to plunge deeper inside. He tasted like home. But there was something else there too—a cool, liquid sensation that reminded Joel of drowning.

Their cocks met and rubbed against each other with almost painful friction. Charlie's kisses turned feral, they bit and probed deeply, and Joel felt as though he *were*

drowning, giving over control to this watery force that moved like liquid around him, consuming him.

"How do you want it?" Charlie whispered into his ear. He licked at Joel's earlobe, a sensation Joel felt down into his toes.

"I want you to blow me," Joel panted, ashamed and thrilled by his own words. He would never imagine talking dirty before he met Charlie. Now his body flushed with embarrassment, battling with desire. "I want to come in your mouth."

Charlie's eyes were dilated, glazed with his arousal. He quickly shoved Joel back down on the bed and kissed him again. Joel closed his eyes, his body responding to the adrenaline coursing through him.

He could feel Charlie's heart beat against his own thin rib cage, and he nearly sobbed into Charlie's mouth with relief. He was *alive*. The thought still left him reeling.

Charlie slid down Joel's body, hands trailing along his sides, until he crouched between Joel's legs. He took Joel's cock into his mouth, and Joel's mind stalled. He pushed himself deeper down Charlie's throat. Charlie's mouth was hot, watery. His tongue probed the slit of Joel's shaft, and he moaned, as if approving. Charlie cupped Joel's balls, smoothing the wrinkled skin with his thumb, stroking the underside rhythmically with each bob of his head.

Joel laced his fingers into Charlie's brown hair. His fingers curled around the strands. So good, he thought, just like before, on the boat...so good.

And for a moment, he wanted to stop.

But then pleasure built within him, and stopping was impossible. Instead, he turned his body, reaching to grasp Charlie's thick, hot cock, jutting from dark curls of pubic hair with hearty enthusiasm. Veins pulsed under the skin, and his cock was already wet with precum, pearling at the tip. Joel inhaled the deep scent of Charlie's skin. Joel ran his tongue along the underside of Charlie's cock, licking the salty precum from its tip, eliciting a low growl of appreciation from around his own shaft. Charlie thrust his dick forward.



Joel licked the tip once more, covering it with saliva, and then lowered his head, pushing Charlie's cock into his mouth. Joel's throat spasmed at the first contact, shocked by the width, but then his body remembered; it hadn't been that long after all. He used to take Charlie in his mouth all the time. He concentrated on the hard heat against his tongue and breathed through his nose, tightening his lips into a ring at the base of Charlie's shaft.

Charlie shuddered. His own lips tightened at the base of Joel's shaft, and then the two of them formed a rhythm, tongues and fingers and wordless, grunting thrusts, the flash of flesh spread open and then pulled away, the pushing hunger that sank into him until it almost hurt. His lips stretched and strained, and he didn't care, because the taste and feel of this massive prick filling his mouth was exactly what he had been craving, what he had missed, what he needed to truly heal...

Pleasure bolted through him, and he came, pumping forcefully down Charlie's throat, all his fear and grief and rage pushing out of him with each last thrust. His mouth still full, he gasped around the shaft inside of him until the ecstasy faded, and then he sped his movements to finish Charlie off.

Charlie sucked in a gasp and then froze. A second later, his hot, salty seed gushed down Joel's throat. Joel swallowed repeatedly. He licked at the remainder of Charlie's cum spilling out of the corner of his mouth.

Joel turned himself around and collapsed alongside Charlie on the cheap motel bedspread. Charlie wiped the corner of Joel's mouth with his thumb. He was breathing heavily. He looked at Joel tenderly. "You are so beautiful."

Joel lay there, catching his breath, feeling content. The troubles that faced him outside this plainly decorated motel room faded. There was just this, the strong odor of semen and his sweat, the feel of Charlie's legs tangled with his own. Joel held on to Charlie for another moment, hoping to warm Charlie's cool skin with his own strong heat. Then he lay on his back and rested his head on his hands. He stared up at the ceiling, and after a moment, Charlie did the same.

"This is going to work, right?" Joel asked, and suddenly he wasn't sure if he was inquiring about the impending confrontation with Mar or about the two of them.

"It'll work. Mar won't betray you." Charlie clearly assumed he meant the former.

"He's a traitor to his own army," Joel said. "He might as well betray me as well."

Charlie gritted his teeth sharply at the comment. Anger flashed in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Joel asked, turning to face him.

Charlie was silent for a moment, and then he said, "Is it a traitor who seeks to save his own kind from tyranny?"

"Are you and your little band of rebels not breaking the rules of your truce? That's called rebellion, Charlie."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Charlie growled. "We have no choice."

*"A man's choice is but to be a tyrant, traitor, prisoner: no other choice has he."*

"Who's that from?"

"Aleksandr Pushkin," Joel said. "You would have known that if you had read that book I gave you last year, you bastard."

Charlie suddenly smiled. He kissed Joel's shoulder. "I did read it. I just don't have a memory for quotes the way you do."

Charlie entwined his legs with Joel's, and Joel leisurely stroked Charlie's flank, trying to warm his flesh. He was always so cold now, so like the sea that birthed his new being.

Joel closed his eyes and recited, "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

Charlie was silent for a moment, his chest rising and falling with his steady breathing. Then he curled his arm around Joel's back, pulled him in, and kissed Joel on the mouth.

"You claimed you never read the Bible," Charlie joked.

"You recognized that one!" Joel cheered.

Charlie shrugged. "I once was a monk. This was back in 1448, and the sermon was in Latin, but the gist was the same."

Joel smiled against his chest. "I cannot imagine you as a monk."

Charlie's laughter vibrated his chest. "I've been a farm girl, and a money lender, a drunk fisherman, a doctor, and a mercenary, to name a few of my careers before awakening."

"Which did you like the best?" Joel asked. "Of all your lives."

"I can't say. Once I awaken, I only have one goal. I want out of here. This body chafes like scratchy scales upon my skin. I want to be what I used to be, a conscious force. All of this is so trivial and meaningless. What life is to you is nothing but a jail cell to me."

Joel stared up at the ceiling. Small glitters of color were embedded in the spackle. He finally said, "So none of this means anything to you." Charlie didn't respond, and he continued. "You've lived more than a dozen lifetimes, and you've taken nothing from them? Nothing at all?"

Charlie faced him. He seemed stunned, silent.

"You are so focused on the injustice of a million years ago, you can't pick even one happy memory here? Just one?" Joel whispered.

"You."

Charlie said the word so quietly, Joel thought he misheard him. And then his chest filled, warm and heavy and happy.

Charlie closed his eyes.

"Thank you," Joel said quietly.

"And doughnuts."

Joel smiled. "Thank you for helping me."

"I don't know why I am," Charlie said softly. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing here." He looked almost bewildered with himself as he said it.

"Well...thank you all the same." He kissed him, languid and slow. Charlie's cock responded on cue, presumptuously pushing into Joel's groin.

Joel glanced at the bedside clock. In those stark red digital numbers, reality blinked back at him. He was still on the run. And his time had run out.

## Chapter Ten

When they left the motel, Charlie had flaunted a crooked smile. But silence grew in the car, and once they parked, he was stiff and distant once more, stalking toward the waterfront as though it had made off with his mother.

With all Charlie's playfulness gone, Joel was left with the soldier, and it set his nerves firing. His heart hammered in his throat as they crossed the street and headed to the narrow strip of grass along the waterfront. Impressive houses lined the other side of the road, and Joel hoped their drapes were open and they were actively admiring their view.

He had also hoped more people would be out. West Montlake Park had a small marina, and every time he'd visited the park in the past, it was dotted with couples and families. But a light drizzle misted the landscape and scared away park strollers.

Joel walked toward the fuzzy image of Mar in the rain. His hands shook, but Joel kept them in his pockets and maintained a neutral expression.

Mar was flanked by four others. To his right stood the Asian woman, alive as promised, no longer wearing glasses. The image of them smashed on the marble floor shuddered through Joel. It was fascinating, how the same body could appear so

different. Same hair, different soul. Cold and calculating. Someone who had lived through countless lives and suffered innumerable deaths.

Joel also recognized the young man with the long blond hair. Yez, Charlie had called him. He stood glaring at Joel, flicking a lighter open and closed in his hand. The other two looked unfamiliar to Joel, but now that they stood in formation, there was a similarity to them. A cold blue radiated from half of them. The other half seemed to smolder as they glared.

Mar narrowed his eyes at Charlie. "You arrived together?"

Charlie said nothing. But he did not stand behind Mar as the other soldiers did, flanking in aggression. He remained by Joel's side.

"Come here," Mar ordered.

"I just want to make sure Joel is safe." Charlie spoke clearly, but there was a hesitation in his voice. Joel distrusted it. He looked into Charlie's eyes. None of the coldness he needed to rely on was there anymore. Instead, Joel saw what was almost confusion, as if Charlie didn't know what to do.

"How does this tagging work?" Joel asked.

"Come here, and I'll show you." Mar smiled.

Joel hesitated. He could feel tension pouring off Charlie.

"Explain what happens first," Joel said.

"I spit in your eyes," Mar said. Joel froze, wondering if he had been insulted, but Charlie didn't blink.

"Honestly?"

Mar snorted. "Valde recognize each other through the eyes. This will be where they will read my tag clearest."

Joel stepped forward. Mar held his hands out.

And then something changed.

He could feel it first in his chest cavity. A constriction, his ribs tightening, the feeling spreading down his legs, cramping pressure. He gasped.

He was yanked backward and tucked into Charlie's arms. Charlie gripped him tightly, mouth curled in a grimace.

"Stop it!" Charlie hissed. Joel still felt like he was being crushed. Charlie's hands groped at his body, pressing on his chest, and Joel felt normalcy return, his body filling once more.

"What the hell?" he gasped.

"He's pulling the water from your body," Charlie said. He stepped in front of Joel and shielded him. "Just get this over with, Captain. Do what you promised."

"I've changed my mind," Mar said.

"And what about the others?"

"We'll find them eventually." Mar stepped closer.

Charlie narrowed his eyes. "Captain, we don't have time for this. There are more important things to worry about. He has no evidence, nothing to use against us."

"He has seen us, and he can report us," Mar said. "The humans may not care, but what about the others? As soon as the other Valde hear we are working with Fire, it will be over for us!"

"Joel won't go to the police." Charlie stretched out his arms, blocking Joel from sight. "Just let him go!"

Mar's brow furrowed. "Why do you care so much about this human?"

Charlie said nothing. He stood still as stone, blocking Joel.

Mar sneered. "Don't tell me you've fallen in love with a mortal!" He barked a cruel laugh. "And what will our beloved Fire General do without his eternal fuck toy?"

Charlie glared angrily but kept his arms outstretched, fingers spread.

Mar's expression changed. He looked genuinely perplexed. "Are you serious? After a thousand years, you are going to abandon everything we've worked for, even General Dev, for *that*?" He pointed at Joel.

"I don't want him harmed."

"He's nothing!" Mar shouted. "He's nobody! Just let him die!"

"No." Charlie backed into Joel, back against Joel's chest, and wrapped his arms behind him, clasping Joel to him. "You'll have to take my life too, and we both know what Dev will think once he discovers you killed his lover over a mere human being."

Mar looked torn. He glanced at his companions, poised to charge. Joel noticed streams of water creeping slowly toward him through the grass, from all directions, rivulets like feelers. Joel's throat tightened. He tapped Charlie's hip, but Charlie didn't even look down.

"I know," he whispered. "Stay calm."

"This is ridiculous!" Yez shouted, breaking ranks. "Enough, Captain! Let's have done with him!" He flicked the lighter in his hands, and an explosion of fire burst in the air.

"No! Leave it to me!" Mar shouted.

Charlie spun around and crouched over Joel. Cold permeated Joel's senses. Charlie's sleeve blocked his sight. He clasped Joel to him in a tight, protective embrace. Joel struggled against him to see a shimmering bubble of ice form around them. Orange light burst, and their bubble melted, showering him in an explosion of lukewarm water.

Yez ripped Joel out of Charlie's arms, and Joel stumbled back, falling. Yez launched a ball of fire toward Joel, but Charlie jumped in front of Joel, taking a direct hit to his exposed face.

Joel watched in horror. He was going to get Charlie killed. Again.

Charlie roared. A cyclone of lake water swirled around him, quenching the fire. The water shattered into slivers of ice that sprayed toward Yez.



Undeterred, Yez bolted toward Joel.

“No!” Mar shrieked.

Joel reached out to Charlie, but Yez barreled into him, a burning inferno, face no longer discernible as anything but flame, and Joel could no longer think of Charlie, no longer think of anything but the pain.

## Chapter Eleven

Joel's entire body was afire.

Pain was everything. Blinding, burning, consuming. He screamed as agony racked his body, as the flames burned his throat, his hair, his face. Animal panic overpowered his rational mind, and he shrieked. He thrashed and rolled on the ground and begged for God to save him. In the midst of all this mind-numbing pain, Joel felt a stretching, a breaking, like something laboring out of him.

It grew. It was hot and heavy and it devoured the flames around him, joined him. He stopped screaming. He breathed deeply, in and out. Distantly he could feel a frigid burst of cold, see others above him, covering him in layer after layer of icy water. He channeled his energy, all that heat, and forced it out of his skin. The ice exploded around him, shattering apart. The grass beneath his feet caught fire.

He stood, walking away from the burning land. Flames dancing in his palm caught the nearby park bench ablaze. He was naked, his clothes turned to ash.

He breathed slowly and deliberately, and he sucked the flame from his skin. He pulled all that combustible heat into himself, into his eyes, and once he was no longer on fire, took a slow breath of air. Memories leaped up from inside him, filled him, and

Joel knew who he had been and who he still was and who he would be. He turned to face his audience.

They all stared at him, dumbfounded.

And then, with a small, nervous smile, Mar knelt at his feet and bowed his head.

“General.”

## Chapter Twelve

No one moved.

No more darkness, but blinding light, a polished, vivid glare over the world. Then smell. The salt and organics of flesh, heavy organs, the weight of breath within him. Hot and alive, with eyes. The stench of the water, surging menacing and close, slick with seaweed. Rotten blackberries and cut grass. Singed hair at the back of his neck. The staggering sensations of life inside a body.

The wind swirled at his ankles and lifted upward. He felt the air's loathing like claws upon his naked flesh, curses breathed along his exposed thighs, his genitals, and through the hairs on his chest. Exposed, but only the invisibility of these eyes alarmed him.

Bowed heads knelt before him in the wet grass. Only one pair of eyes met his, cold blue and beautiful. They were wet as they glowed. But he was always near tears at this part.

"Come here," Joel said, voice rough. He smelled lemon hotel shampoo in Charlie's hair. He felt surf inside him, roiling, a threat of consumption. He fought his instinct to withdraw and stepped closer instead. Arath Jag, as Charlie, masculine and strong, his body filled with scents and power. His skin was cold under his hands.

He clasped Charlie to his lithe, naked body. Charlie felt bigger, looking out the eyes of this new body.

But no. He was Joel just as certainly as he was Dev, both a professor and a General of the Valde. Of course his understanding of military stratagems surpassed his fellow historians. They were academics. They had not fought battles wrought with pain and racked with defeat. They had not seen their loved ones strangled without breath, nor had they fought and won.

In skin and bones, he had to crane his neck to kiss his lover.

The only plus of flesh was this kiss, hot and sweet and filled with memory, the same taste, no matter the body, the gender. Still this, cool and fresh, like sea salt and froth, the sound and shape of a shell. Charlie's smell masculine, his stubble sharp, pain with a soft caress. The kiss reminded him why now, here, he could not forgive.

Charlie seemed to sense his aggression and bent to lean his forehead on Joel's shoulder, breath labored, but perhaps this was only from his affection. Joel held him close. Charlie's body was tall, taller than Joel, and Charlie had to lean down to curl upon him.

"This is new," Joel said.

"Yes." Charlie smiled. Their secret.

Charlie blinked and then pulled back. He removed his coat, his dark blue shirt, the color of deep water. He offered this to Joel, who put it on. This body was familiar and still chafing. A prison of bones and blood. So heavy.

"Get him some pants," Charlie told one of the men.

Joel looked through the man. *Shand*. A Private, Fire, not his before. A new one.

Shand hesitated. A young body. Acne, and large eyes that showed fright clearly, like small birds peering through a filmy circle. With a kick from another—*Tren*, the fool—he fetched a bag from a nearby car. He was out of breath when he returned. He handed over a pair of gray warm-ups with shaking hands.

His trousers smelled musty. Joel pulled them on. Loose at the waist and slightly long. Everything clasping him, weights on anchors.

Joel's mouth curled into a wicked smile, and he scoured the sky, sensing the eyes of the Air Valde. He knew they watched everything. He stepped forward, kicked at Mar's knee.

"Stand up," he ordered. A memory came to him. The same man, shrouded in rags. He had hated him then too. He had crushed him in his phalanx like so much dust under the wheel of his chariot.

Mar stood trembling. Not in fear, not like the others. He shook in rage. There was acid in the air. Natural enemies, the two of them, Fire and Water, born to quench each other.

And the Air took heed. Cyclone suction, at his feet and throat. Joel felt his breathing change. Suffocation was so easy for them. As he gasped, he looked to Charlie, who watched with concern but inhaled deeply. He was so vulnerable in this body. The knowledge of it made his anger burn white, and the others looked away, bowing lower, as if the earth would shield them from his wrath. But earth was false sanctuary, and his anger was for those who hid in the elements.

How did the others not feel the clammy grasp of this air?

Mar's expression boiled. "After all these years, even in your human bodies, you and Arath Jag still find each other!"

Joel smiled, and it brought anticipation to the faces around him. He reached out and entwined his fingers with Charlie's. Safe. Here.

This is my lover, he thought, and the thought filled him, shutting out the constant threat of his enemies, beneath him, filling his lungs.

"Is it jealousy?" Joel asked. "You wanted Jag for yourself? Is that why you tried to drown me?"

"I wanted more time!" Mar shouted. His fists trembled at his sides. "I have done everything for you, sir, and yet I will never be your second in command!"

"And now you will be no one," Joel told him. He reached out his hand for a spark. He could feel them passing in the cars, dangling from the mouths of strangers, a cauldron in the kitchen beyond. Everything burned when you looked for it.

Mar went pale. "No! Don't take me out of the battle, I beg you! I will serve you however you wish, General! I will be your slave! But please let me fight this war!"

His fear was honest. Nothing scared Valde more than being left behind, unaware of oneself in the piteous form of a sobbing human baby.

Charlie's hand squeezed. "There are so few of us. We may need him."

"We soon will have everyone. They will be conscious, and they will be righteous. I have no use for a traitor."

"No!" Mar cried. Water burst upward from the street grates. It surged from the lake and pooled from the air, and nothing mattered, because Joel's anger formed a cocoon, isolating him and protecting him. Anger made him invincible; he lost care of the future, and lived now, for this unforgivable sin, for this betrayal.

Charlie tensed beside him and pushed back the force of water with his own. Joel stretched out his hand, past the barrier air presented. He felt the fire in the passing truck, pistons sparking. He pulled it into himself and then outward, a whoosh of heat and light. *This feels right, this is better*, and the thought made him sad. *Only when I'm an inferno do I feel like I can breathe.*

Mar turned to ice and blocked with a cold fist of water. None of the others came to his aid. They watched silently, mouths open. Joel punched fire through Mar's heart, effortless, and watched the frail human body become engulfed by his flame. The smell of Mar's burning hair overwhelmed the stench of his own humanity. He was close to laughing, and that, he felt, was an improvement.

\* \* \* \* \*

Something was different with Charlie.

He was silent, at Joel's side. Thinking quietly, eyes troubled.

They made plans to meet with the others at the warehouse and said good-bye. The two of them returned to Charlie's apartment. Joel had never been to this place before. It was new to him, and everything fascinated him, because everything belonged to his lover.

The strange amalgam of Charlie and Arath Jag was visible in this room. The space was utilitarian, like Jag. Stocked pantry, doors braced for invasion, utter silence, better to hear the whispers from the Air.

But then there were signs of the human Jag had become. Running shoes in the corner, bent and scuffed with use. A painting, abstract light and color, above the mantel. Books, dog-eared with bent covers, carried and adored. No purpose at all, nothing but the inclinations of a human heart that Jag could not fully discard.

They sat on sleek aluminum chairs and ate chips at the kitchen table. The beveled glass in the tabletop looked like beads of seawater.

"I should have known," Charlie said finally. He watched Joel carefully. "I should have guessed it was you."

"Only a seer like Mar would have known. How could you have guessed?"

Charlie broke a chip apart in his fingers. Long, thin, strong. Joel liked them better than the hands on the body of his last incarnation.

"We never had anything in common, and still I couldn't live without you," Charlie said. "You fulfilled me beyond all logic, and only one being has ever done that."

Joel breathed in the words and their meaning. They burst like fireworks inside of him. His human heart turned over in his chest, and he leaned across the table to kiss Charlie.

How could he love something this much? How could he need another so badly?



I will burn this world for you, he thought, and the thought grew flames in his mind, the anger alive, a fierce, inconsolable thing. I will extinguish them all to set you free.

He made to stand, and Charlie stood too. They shed their modern clothes. Joel's cheeks burned from the friction of Charlie's stubble. He wanted to feel Charlie until it hurt. He wanted to burn his own impression into Charlie's body. He wanted to claim him.

He saw them then. The eyes, the swirl and subtlety of air currents, keeping track of him, and a shudder ran through him. He would let them watch. He would let them see what two human bodies can do, how they had turned five thousand years of imprisonment to their own advantage, a sexuality that these captors would never understand in their form as cold breezes.

"Bend over," he said.

Charlie hesitated and then languidly bent over, hands resting on the tabletop. The sight was stunning. The tight-packed muscle of his buttocks, the shadow and curve of his crack, a hint of pink, the dark smells. Joel reached out, drawn to Charlie's testicles, hanging there, swaying slightly. How could a shape be so pleasing? The skin so soft here, like down, he stroked them with new fingers, these fingers for the millionth time, the first time like this...

Charlie groaned and palmed his cock. Joel pushed his hand away and stroked the flesh himself. He knew exactly how to please Charlie, just how he liked it. Joel reached both arms through Charlie's legs, fondling his sac and cock. He trailed his hands upward and spread Charlie's cheeks apart to glimpse the prize, a small ring, pink and blinking with expectation.

This hadn't happened before, in these bodies.

It had happened a million times.

It was new and safe. Familiar and different.

"Where's your lube?" he asked.

Charlie was speechless, his knees locking and unlocking as Joel's hands fondled.

Wetting his finger with spit, he pressed into Charlie's hole. Charlie tightened instinctively against the intrusion.

"Tell me," Joel said.

"Top drawer," Charlie gasped. "Bedroom."

"Let's go."

Joel did not pull his finger from inside of Charlie. Charlie straightened with difficulty. His eyes were wet already, wet and lost. He was pulling inside of himself, as he did when the sensation was too much.

"Stop," Joel ordered. He gripped Charlie's shoulder and kissed him, hoping to clear his mind. For all his valor in war, Charlie was so easily overwhelmed by the carnal.

Joel's finger stayed inside of Charlie's body. He flexed it to urge Charlie into movement. Charlie's body trembled as he led the way down the hall into a small bedroom. As they walked, Charlie breathed deeply. Joel admired the flex of the muscle and tendon underneath Charlie's pale skin.

In the bedroom, Charlie bent over a bedside table and fumbled for the lube inside the drawer while Joel played with his ass. Charlie's reactions, shivers so violent in their pleasure, said what Charlie did not speak.

Finally they broke, and Charlie fetched the lube and lay down upon the bed. The gel was cool on Joel's fingers. He looked down at the smear on his skin. Watery and blue. He studied his fingers. These would go deep inside of his lover. He wanted to claim him, again and again, to show everyone how it is done, how a commitment is made, what promises mean...

"You are thinking dark thoughts," Charlie said.

Joel laughed. "When am I not?" He knelt onto the bed and crawled to Charlie, who lay sprawled on the bedspread, a carnal feast of hair and muscle and skin. How could trappings be so beautiful?

"I love you inside a body," Joel said. Charlie spread his legs wider, and Joel moved closer. Charlie sucked in air at the cool sensation of the gel and then smiled again.

"And yet you are so desperate to be free of them."

"I might miss this," Charlie said. He pressed his finger inside. Hot and dark, so aromatic he felt drunk on it.

"Don't let the others hear you say that," Charlie cautioned.

"I won't. These are words for you only."

"I know."

"We haven't done this, have we?"

Charlie tilted his head. "Done what?"

"This body. Joel. Joel's never fucked you."

"No." Charlie stared at him. In his eyes, Joel saw so many people. Charlie. Elise. Madhur. Helen. Gerard.

"Why not?" Joel slipped two fingers inside Charlie's hole. Slick and tight. He scissored them. The flesh resisted, then stretched.

Charlie's eyes were wide, dilated. So much to see in there, the only way to see him, all of him.

"I think...I was...saving myself. For you." Charlie was having difficulty. He squirmed under Joel's fingers.

"Never? In this body?"

"No." Charlie's arms trembled to keep his upper body raised.

"Don't be frightened."

"Of course not."

"I won't hurt you."

"I know."

So precious, this sensation. Opening Charlie up. Again. Each body he got to do this, a fresh claiming.

He remembered their conversation in the doughnut shop.

"You want to do this to me." Joel stated it, didn't ask.

Charlie was moaning now. Joel drilled his fingers inside. He wanted him wide. Flesh was so weak and so pliant.

"Say it."

"Yes." The word was like a whisper, but a wicked gleam lit Charlie's eye. "But I already have fucked you, Dev. Now I need you to take me."

"I know."

When Charlie looked up, his eyes were fully dilated, hazy and gone. Joel cradled Charlie's head and kissed him. Hot and searing kisses, enough to burn him back.

"Stay here. Stay with me."

Charlie struggled. He was so easily lost when fucking. He loved the act. He knew this would be the sacrifice of their war.

"I am here. Don't stop," Charlie whispered.

"Then look at me. I can't see you otherwise."

Joel's body trembled with need. He smiled at the sensation. He reached down to open Charlie once more, fingers slipping inside with no resistance now. Flesh hot and grasping.

Joel slowly fed his cock into Charlie's ass, slow enough to do so without pain, slow enough to drive Charlie wild. Charlie fisted the bedsheets. His teeth gritted against each other, his eyes large and dark, but they did not stray again.

"I need to see you," Joel choked out. He pressed himself fully in, shocked that such tightness would accommodate, amazed at the sight. He reached between them and

felt it, the connection, the rod of his shaft impaled deeply inside another man, the trembles and leaks of Charlie's cock, hovering there, like a promise between them.

Joel thrust inside. Charlie shuddered beneath him and then went perfectly still.

They held their breaths. And then slowly, eyes wide and black, Charlie moved against him, pushing himself deeper onto Joel's cock.

The rhythm was slow. It was so much at once. Heat and pressure and nerves firing. Shivers of pleasure, in his bones and flesh, the smells and sight. A man, spread before him. Fucking him, fast now, his testicles shaking with each thrust. He pumped Charlie's cock, and fluid leaked from the tip, clear and sticky, webbing to Charlie's undulating stomach.

Joel closed his eyes and held his breath, and he came then, shooting semen inside his lover. He did not breathe, because he did not want to share this with the air. This was his. His and Charlie's to behold.

Charlie's body clenched tight, his free hand clutched at Joel's arm, and then he came as well. It shot onto his heaving breast, dark wetness of pleasure. Charlie made a choking sound and shuddered.

The sound alarmed Joel, and he withdrew quickly. He glared about him.

"You fucking bastards!" he hissed at the air. *Breathe, breathe...*

He clutched at Charlie's face, his neck, but Charlie's eyes lost their diluted focus, and Charlie frowned.

"Who are you talking to?" he asked.

"I thought..." Joel withdrew, ashamed of his fears. He had to remain focused and know the difference between a gasp and an attack.

Charlie smiled at him. "I'm fine. I'm wonderful." In this body, his smile was crooked, lazy. It did not fit his driving energy, but right now, reeking of sex, it suited.

"You really cannot see them?"

"No. But I know they are here."

"How?"

"You tense and glare at the air. It's clear they are threatening you."

Joel breathed heavily for a moment. Hoped each inhalation would hurt them, even just one of them.

"I love you," Charlie whispered. His eyes focused once more.

"Even though you allowed a mere mortal to tempt you from our cause?"

"Who do you mean, General? Joel?"

"That's who I mean."

Charlie laughed. "You *are* Joel. How else would I have loved you so intensely? Besides, I never intended to actually leave."

Joel closed his eyes and pulled Charlie close. "It's all right. Sleep now."

"I don't want to. I haven't seen you for over one hundred years. You must have spent an entire life without me."

"No, I haven't awoken since our last time."

"Really?" Charlie kissed him. "It's been harder. For me, that is. I have been awake. And waiting for you is torture."

"It won't happen again."

Charlie said nothing.

"We will fight them, at last, and either we will win or we will diminish. Either way, I have no intention of leaving you alone for another hundred years."

Charlie ran his fingers through Joel's hair. Then he said, "The others?"

"When they awake, they will join us. Fire and Water, the new truce. Under my lead, we will not fail."

"I believe you."

"Then close your eyes and go to sleep."

Charlie shifted, their bodies heavy around them. Charlie tucked his head onto Joel's shoulder. Joel clasped him tight and stared at the air around him, thinking.

There was so much to plan for. All those at the club, awaiting an officer in charge. Those three fools, captured in the basement by a mortal. And all those unaware in their bodies, waiting to die and be reborn. He had to begin once more, nearly from scratch.

He closed his eyes, and in the darkness, he saw Joel's sister. Her children. His house and Ginger and his career. All trivial things, human things. They meant nothing to him now. Why even see them again in his mind?

And then he looked down at Charlie. Charlie had remembered. He had remembered Joel. Even here, in the bedroom, signs of a human life worth remembering. A photograph. A beach at sunset. Charlie grinning madly. So much more, but still, a man.

Perhaps Joel would visit his sister after all. Go to work, live a normal human life, while his plan took shape. And so he would continue, not as he was in the far past, but as he was this past night, and strive secretly to be a being reborn.

"Go to sleep." Charlie cracked open one eye. Blue and fresh, like seawater. He smirked. "Sir."

Joel smiled back. He pulled fiery heat up from his core and wrapped his arms around Charlie's cool body.

Yes, the battle would begin. But it could wait until tomorrow.

 THE END 

## **Astrid Amara**

Astrid Amara lives in Bellingham, Washington, with one man, two dogs, and countless mice. She served in the U.S. Peace Corps and works as a civil servant paid by your tax dollars. When she isn't working or writing, she is either riding horses or sleeping.

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