

BRAZEN'S ARMY

Piper Evyins

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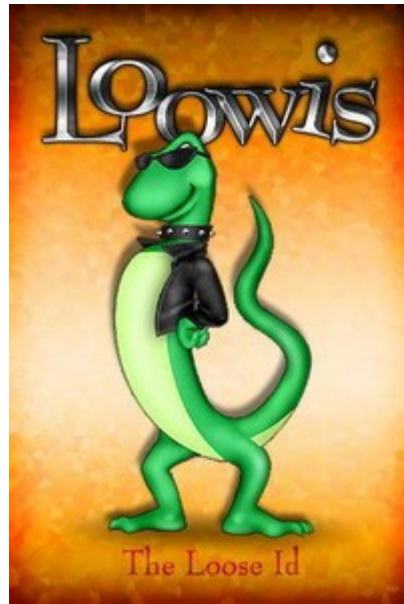
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Chapter One

It struck him, as he stalked through the filth and rubble, that the world had ended almost exactly ten years ago. Ten years ago to the day. He couldn't remember if it had been sunny or cloudy, warm or cold – all Braz knew was on that February 14, the world had woken to a flood of red hearts and soft rose petals and gone to bed teetering on the brink of apocalypse.

By the next Valentine's Day, there were no heart-shaped boxes of chocolates, and all the red roses lay on the fresh graves of the millions who had died when war erupted.

Now, ten years after the sky rained fire, long after the maps had all been redrawn to show the new state of world politics, the war raged on, albeit on a much quieter note. If there was one truth, it was that a war never really ended, a fact Braz knew better than most.

It was war that had brought him to this desiccated section of a city struggling in vain to regain some semblance of order.

Once, this had likely been a nice area – he could tell from the mangled remains of curved iron fence and the twisted trunks of what had once been elegant maple trees. Braz had a good-enough imagination to be able to put together a picture of what York University had looked like before the asteroids hit.

The snow was deep, with only a cursory effort having been given to keep the sidewalks clear. He followed the narrow path pounded down by pedestrians, careful not to slip on the iced-over surface.

He'd never have fit in here. Braz was a soldier, had been bred to it from childhood by a father who deplored weakness and loved his country more than his only son. University had never been in Braz's future, unlike his target, who had made study his life's work.

Something the poor bastard had learned or done had earned him a death sentence, and Braz was the lucky son of a bitch who got to pull the trigger.

No, war never ended. Today's work proved that.

His boots were gray with salt and dirty slush, but otherwise, Braz looked, to the casual observer, like a man of business—black slacks, black suit jacket under the long black coat that billowed gently around his ankles as he walked. Anyone looking closely would see the hardness in his eyes and realize the straight-backed, purposeful stride screamed of military training. It was to his benefit that few people saw much beyond their own troubles these days.

From the outside, the university seemed undamaged, but as Braz drew nearer, he saw signs of repairs. New bricks stood out in bright contrast to the aged originals. Shrubbery tried but failed to hide the streaks of soot and pockmarks that marred the steps to the entrance.

Braz sniffed, and he ignored the tiny part of his mind that could still feel resentment toward the world powers that had led them all to this state. He was a warrior—questioning orders wasn't an option, despite how distasteful he may find them. Braz didn't enjoy killing, but when it came to protecting his country, he did what he had to do, even now that "his" country comprised nearly three-quarters of the total landmass on Earth.

If this Dr. Sykes was a threat, Braz had no problem eliminating him. He just couldn't imagine what some scholarly geek had done to earn a bullet to the brain.

The doors swung open with a creak, and Braz stepped over the threshold. The air smelled—rich. He didn't know how else to describe it. Somehow he'd expected the kinds of smells he remembered from high school—old sweat and candy perfume.

Braz had studied the schematics for the building, just as he'd studied the file on Dr. Sykes. The picture had surprised him, partially because there were very few people taking pictures these days, so the man obviously came from a wealthy family.

Ridley Sykes was of average height with brown hair, blue eyes, and a small scar on his lip. The file hadn't gone into much detail on the nature of the man's crimes against the Atlantic Rim Alliance, but it did say the man had connections to the powerful Sykes family, one of the few families in the Alliance who had managed to hold on to their wealth during the fallout. Braz knew there were Sykeses in the upper echelons of the current Alliance leadership as well, and though the file didn't say, he was pretty sure this Ridley was connected to them as well.

Wouldn't be the first time a powerful man had ordered the death of one of his own to save face. Either way, the job was simple. Dr. Ridley Sykes had to be eliminated, no matter how much Braz's stomach churned at the idea.

He passed no one as he walked the labyrinth of halls leading to Sykes's office. Few people bothered with academia these days when it was enough just to survive. The same held true for a lot of things, Braz thought. Nobody cared about the life and times of the Egyptian pharaohs when there wasn't enough food to go around.

He found Sykes's office without any difficulty. A plain door with a simple bronze plaque that read ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS hung crookedly from a loose screw. Braz paused, his hand on the knob, and wondered if it would be better to knock and wait for the doctor to let him in, or if he should just kick the door open and get the job done with.

Knocking would draw less attention, he decided, and as much as he'd like to just finish up and get back to the base, he didn't want to be followed. He rapped softly on the oak and stepped back, unbuttoning his coat as he waited.

Soft footsteps approached; then the door swung open to reveal—certainly not what Braz had expected. His military training took over, and Braz raked a casual yet critical eye over the young man who blinked at him from beneath a fringe of shaggy brown hair. There was a moment of surprise in the man's blue eyes, quickly masked as confused patience. It could be Dr. Sykes, but despite the picture, he felt a frisson of doubt. This man looked about as scholarly as Braz's father. Butch Malone had never worn anything but standard-issue military garb, whereas the doctor wore faded khakis and an unbuttoned cotton shirt over a plain gray T-shirt, and sandals instead of combat boots. The guy looked like a prewar college student.

"I'm sorry. I'm looking for Dr. Sykes."

The target smiled, looking shyly confused as he bit his bottom lip with straight white teeth that could only be the product of cosmetic dentistry, something very few people could afford these days. "That's me." There was wariness in his eyes now, but he opened the door wide and motioned Braz to enter.

The room was a mess of old books and smelled strongly of dust and what he thought might be something chemical. A large table stood in the center of the room, topped with stacks of books, a few knickknacks that could have been artifacts, and an opened leather journal.

Sykes didn't apologize for the mess, nor did he offer coffee or tea. The man simply perched on the edge of a tall wooden stool, his arms crossed loosely over his chest, watching Braz look around.

The comforting weight of his gun against the small of his back was like a seductive voice whispering in his ear, and he knew he should just draw and fire. Quick and simple. Hell. Sykes looked about as dangerous as a newborn puppy. What had the kid done to earn a death sentence? Braz flicked a quick gaze over his shoulder, then looked back at the books crowding the shelves.

"You're here to kill me, aren't you?"

Braz didn't jump. His training was too good for him to make such a mistake. Instead, he turned slowly and met Sykes's gaze. "What makes you say that?"

"I am a genius, or did they not put that in my file? Now, since you strike me as military and not your average hit man, I'm going to guess that my father didn't hire you to rid him of his secret shame—that being me—and that in fact, you're here because some idiot thinks I'm a Dynasty sympathizer."

Braz barely managed to keep his expression neutral. What was he supposed to say? *Just do your job, Braz. Kill the kid and get out of here.* He reached under his coat for his gun, his gaze locked on the doctor's face.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you kill me. Not yet."

Braz hadn't even gotten a grip on his weapon when the room exploded with light. His body twitched with painful spasms before he drowned in welcome blackness.

* * * * *

Damn. Ridley Sykes tucked the stunner into his waistband and began stuffing books into his leather bag with little care for their age and delicate condition. Once, all this information had been stored on a computer for easy portability, but very few could afford one these days. Ridley had been one of those few, until yesterday when someone had broken into his apartment, stolen his files, and smashed his laptop. Normally, Ridley wouldn't mind—there was something more personal about books and handwritten journals, and he had made handwritten copies of nearly everything—but he didn't want to be lugging a dozen old books with him right now.

The military wanted him dead.

He supposed it was better than knowing his father was behind it, not that it still wasn't a possibility.

Ridley slung the bag over his shoulder and looked at the unconscious man sprawled on the floor, the man he'd seen in his dreams for almost ten years. The man who was going to kill him. One way or the other, Ridley knew he would end up dead

by this man's hand. He'd known it for so long now, it barely fazed him. Ridley wasn't afraid of death, but he had to finish this project. His work was far too important, and he'd been so close to finding the answer.

Unfortunately, Ridley knew that he needed his would-be assassin's help if he was going to succeed in—well, saving the world sounded so melodramatic, but he didn't know what else to call it.

The time had come, he'd known it the moment he'd opened the door to the tall, broad-shouldered man with haunted hazel eyes and familiar dimpled chin. Ridley didn't know if he'd prepared enough, but he supposed one could spend a lifetime at this and still not be ready.

He grabbed a handful of loose papers, folded them, and stuffed them into his back pocket before squatting down beside the stranger on the floor. Ridley wondered what his name was and wished the dreams had been more than a series of vivid images without sound, thought, or emotion. He'd find out soon enough—the two of them were going to get very close before this ended. Before Ridley died.

Drawing in a shaky breath, Ridley pulled the modified GPS receiver from his pocket and input the coordinates for the ancient Sumerian temple where he hoped to find the final piece of the puzzle. With one hand on the stranger's shoulder, he pressed the release button and let the wash of white light envelop them both.

Chapter Two

Braz woke with a nasty headache and the familiar taste of bile rising in his throat. His entire body hurt. For a minute, he tried to remember what he'd been drinking and how many massive thugs he'd stupidly taken on while inebriated; then his memory clicked.

The sneaky bastard had shot him. Scholarly and harmless my ass, he thought, rubbing the heels of his hands over his eyes in an effort to clear his vision, because at first glance it looked like the good doctor had shot him and left him to rot in one of those mausoleums only rich people could afford.

"I'll kill him," he muttered, rolling onto his side and rising to his knees. The place was dark, dusty, and stank like—well, he didn't exactly know what it smelled like, but it certainly wasn't pleasant.

Footsteps echoed from somewhere behind him, and Braz noticed there was a doorway. The bobbing beam of light he saw bouncing off the cream-colored stone had to be a flashlight. Instinctively, he reached for his gun, then cursed when he realized it was gone. Smart, sneaky bastard. Braz had definitely underestimated his target this time. It wouldn't happen again.

The footsteps drew closer. Braz moved to the door, crouched for attack. A moment later, he leaped, caught his target at the waist, and bore him to the hard ground.

"What the hell?" The stunned exclamation was muffled against Braz's shoulder, but he recognized the voice.

He untangled himself from the man flailing beneath him and lunged for the doctor's throat. "You're a dead man."

Sykes's eyes bulged in surprise—Braz wasn't squeezing hard enough to kill the man, just to make him hurt.

"I should have just shot you the minute I walked through the door."

"Why didn't you?" Sykes gasped, struggling to speak.

A muscle in Braz's cheek began to twitch, and he narrowed his eyes at the youthful face, which was rapidly turning red. He gave Sykes's throat one last squeeze before letting go and turning away.

Braz jumped to his feet, ignoring the coughing and wondering what the hell had just happened. He'd had the man's life in his hands, literally, and he'd failed to complete his mission. Again.

"Why didn't you kill me?" Sykes asked.

Braz turned and saw the doctor sitting up, massaging his neck with one hand, his eyes partially closed.

Braz didn't answer because he honestly didn't know himself.

"Okay, if you don't want to tell me, at least tell me what they told you I did."

There was no reason not to tell the kid, he'd already figured it out, though how he'd known Braz's purpose so quickly was still a mystery. "They said you were a Dynasty sympathizer."

Ridley Sykes snorted. "Figures."

"Are you saying they're wrong?"

"Depends on how you look at it, and how much information you have on the real reason the world is at war."

Braz stared, his best intimidating stare that never failed to send the lower ranks scurrying.

Sykes blinked and smiled crookedly. "Wow, you're good at that, but I grew up with the master of the dark scowl. Compared to my dad, you're an amateur."

Braz sneered but had to give the guy credit for bravery. "I suppose you know the real cause of this war too?"

"Of course."

He sounded so earnest and cheerful, Braz almost smiled. The guy's father must have been a grade-A bastard if Ridley wasn't even afraid of the assassin who'd just about strangled him a moment ago. "Because your father told you?"

"Yeah, right." Sykes's laugh turned into a shuddering cough. "No, I figured it out on my own."

Braz waited, not sure why he cared so much about the answer. He knew damn well the war had started because a few of the countries now leading the Ancient Dynasty had been developing weapons with more destructive capability than anyone had ever seen. After the initial attack, they'd announced holy war on any who did not side with them. Still, Braz couldn't help wonder what this self-proclaimed genius had to say.

"Aliens."

Braz had been expecting a diatribe about rising oil costs, or the overzealous nature of the antiterrorism plans set into motion after 9/11, even the unlikely revelation that some airborne contaminants had induced a state of paranoia and aggression in the world's population. Any of those he could have laughed at, mocked the doctor, and gotten on with his day. But aliens? Obviously, the guy needed serious medical attention. There was crazy, and there was *crazy*. Clearly, Dr. Sykes had leaped into the deep end of the latter. "You should have let me kill you."

Sykes closed his eyes briefly, his expression sort of resigned. "You think I'm crazy. That's okay; I sort of figured you would."

Braz turned away and studied the room. Smooth cream stone made up the walls and the ceiling. Faded markings covered nearly every surface, some sort of curly symbols he didn't recognize.

"Where the hell are we?"

"The temple of Amaj'n."

Braz glared. "That supposed to mean something to me?"

Sykes sighed and ran his hands through his shaggy hair, leaving most of it standing on end. "Amaj'n was a priestess in ancient Sumeria, and not a very popular one either. She stood up to the status quo, denounced the gods Enkii and Enlil. Those who followed her were forced to do so in secrecy, but it's said she bestowed on them powers to rival the false gods."

"Wow, that's fascinating," Braz sneered. The guy really was a crackpot.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions. Why are we here? How did we get here? Why did I bring you along? It's simple, really. I brought us here with a Dynasty Site-to-site, we're here to find the priestess Amaj'n, and I brought you because I need your help to defeat the aliens that instigated the war, so peace can return to the land — you know, all that fun stuff."

"*You* know you're seriously whacked, right?"

"Maybe. But explain to me why my apartment was broken into only hours after I told my father my theory? And why the very next day, the military sends an assassin to off me?"

"And just who is your father?"

"Senator William Sykes."

A senator's son. They'd sent him to kill a senator's son. Braz frowned. It did seem a little too much to believe the timing was simply a coincidence. But aliens and a long-dead priestess?

"Let's just suppose I believe you, and I'm not saying I do. What makes you think there are aliens involved?"

Sykes sighed. "It's a long story."

"I like long stories."

"Okay." He drawled the word out and pressed his thumbs to his temples. "In the last few years, I've found evidence that points to the ancient gods Enkii and Enlil being aliens who created the human race in order to use them as slaves, basically to cater to all their needs. It gets kind of fuzzy for a while, but it seems the two ended up going to war and eventually used their human followers to fight for them. Then, for some reason that isn't written anywhere that I can find, Enkii and Enlil left Earth, before their armies could be completely decimated."

"And how does this bring us to the current situation?"

"Because there was a story that the gods would return to reclaim what was theirs, namely Earth and the human race, to continue the war at a time when the population had grown and progressed enough to be a formidable army. The problem is, they didn't anticipate that we'd stop worshipping them after a few thousand years. Hell, most people wouldn't even recognize their names. I think when they came back, they first watched us, then each contacted the leaders of the countries they felt would be the strongest. Most of whom told them to go to hell."

It made for an interesting story, if one believed in that kind of thing. Braz didn't, but he liked a good tall tale, so he nodded and asked, "Okay, then what?"

"Try to remember what countries were hit the hardest by the asteroid showers—and which ones went completely unscathed."

Braz frowned and tried to remember back ten years. He'd still been in basic training, but he could remember the names of the countries hit the hardest. Sykes

looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to come to some kind of realization, and suddenly Braz saw it. “The countries that now form the Ancient Dynasty didn’t get hit.”

Sykes nodded. “That’s because they weren’t asteroids—they were energy weapons fired from orbit.”

“That could just be a coincidence. Besides, you said these two aliens were at war with each other. Why aren’t there two armies fighting each other, rather than one fighting the ARA? I thought you said these guys hated each other.” Braz didn’t doubt the countries that now formed the Atlantic Rim Alliance, the ARA, would have refused to bow down to anyone. They were the most powerful nations on the planet and included all of North America, Europe, and most of Africa, as well as China and Japan, and yet they were still losing against countries that would have been considered third-world, poverty-stricken nations.

“Because right now, we’re a bigger threat—the nonbelievers who dared to defy our creators.” Sykes held up his arm and pulled back the sleeve of his shirt to reveal a Dynasty Site- to-site. “Do you really think these were man-made? Created in some of the poorest countries on the planet? It’s alien technology—Damn, I don’t even know your name.”

Braz snorted. “Lieutenant Colonel Brazen Malone.”

“Dr. Ridley Sykes, but you already knew that. Anyway, alien technology, and it’s not the only example.”

Braz pushed himself to his feet and crossed his arms over his chest. Powdery dust hung in the air, covering his skin and clothes, and this was his best—okay, only—suit. He just wanted to get the hell out of here, grab a shower, and maybe see if he could scam a beer somewhere. “Look, I’m sure you really believe what you’re saying, but you can’t honestly expect me to go along with it. For all I know, we could be in a replica of some temple the university students created.”

“We’re not,” Sykes assured him.

"Says you."

"I can prove it to you. Help me find the tomb of Amaj'n, and I can prove to you what I'm saying is true."

"Sykes, even if you find the tomb, the chick is long dead. What good is it going to do you?"

The doctor flinched and looked away. Braz thought he saw a blush creep up the young man's cheeks. "I'm descended from one of her followers, probably through my mother. She'll awaken for me and drive the aliens away."

"Jesus, this just keeps getting better and better." Obviously, the guy was further gone than Braz had originally thought. "You think you're descended from a bunch of people who had godlike powers?"

Now the doctor was glaring at him, looking like a petulant child who'd been caught in a lie. "It's true. I've dreamed about you for ten years."

A chill wormed its way up Braz's spine. "You're seriously messed up, you know that?" he snapped; then he sighed at the doctor's miserable expression. "Fine, let's go find Sleeping Beauty, but if we don't find her, I'm finishing this mission."

Something told Braz he would regret following his gut on this one.

Chapter Three

Things weren't going as well as Ridley had hoped. Stupid of him to think they'd mesh together as well as they had in his dreams. Honestly, what had he expected, the man to jump into his arms and plant a pulse-pounding kiss on him?

If he was honest with himself, he'd admit it was exactly what he'd expected. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* How could he not have realized Braz Malone would think he was some sort of lunatic mental-ward escapee?

He could feel the man's amusement as surely as if Braz were laughing at his back while they walked down the dark tunnels of the temple. Ridley gritted his teeth and concentrated on the narrow flashlight beam cutting through the darkness. It shouldn't hurt, but dammit, he wanted Malone to like him. In the dream they'd been friendly, despite Malone's biting sarcasm. Hell, they'd been way more than friendly.

Images from his dreams popped into his mind, making him blush even as his cock throbbed. They'd fucked. There was no other way to accurately describe it. It was primal and raw with only a few niceties tossed in as an afterthought. Braz took and Ridley gave, or maybe it was the other way around, he wasn't sure. It was the kind of sex he'd only ever experienced in those dreamscapes; no partner had ever had the

ability to utterly control him, and make him enjoy the loss of self, like Brazen Malone had in those dreams. He nearly groaned.

"So tell me more about this dream."

Ridley stumbled, nearly dropping the flashlight. "Why do you want to know? I thought you didn't believe me anyway."

"I don't, but if a guy claims he's been dreaming about me for ten years, I want to know the details."

"I already told you, we defeat the aliens who started the war. There really isn't more to tell," he lied.

"Come on, there has to be more to it than that. Did we get some cool ray guns? Or maybe I got to fly some kind of fighter ship?"

The bastard was mocking him. Ridley clenched his teeth and continued walking. When Malone started whistling a jaunty tune—off-key—Ridley's fingers tightened painfully around the flashlight. After five minutes, he was sure he'd ground all the enamel off his teeth and figured his hand had formed into a permanent claw from his grip on the light.

"Would you knock off the whistling? It's friggin' painful."

"Sorry, but since you didn't want to talk about your dream, I had to do something to pass the time while we wandered around in circles."

"We are not wandering in circles." He hoped. His mind hadn't exactly been focused on the floor plan.

"I'm sure I've seen this naked dude a few times already."

Ridley stopped and sighed. His gut was churning so badly, he thought might puke. "Fine, you want to know more about the dream?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

Ridley spun on his heel, grabbed Malone's shoulders, shoved him hard against the wall, and kissed him. It was a kiss meant to punish, just as the grip on the man's

shoulders was intended to bruise. He pressed his body tight against Malone's, felt the ridged tenseness in the other man's muscles.

Shit. Ridley pushed away and stumbled back, panting for breath, his eyes never leaving the narrowed hazel ones glittering in the darkness. A kernel of fear bloomed in the pit of his stomach. Christ, just because they'd been "together" in his dreams didn't mean Malone bent that way in real life. He was dead. Didn't the military teach their soldiers how to kill a man twenty ways with their bare hands?

Finally, Malone heaved in a ragged breath and collapsed against the wall. "You could have just told me we fucked."

Ridley blinked. Not really the reaction he'd been expecting. "Yeah, well, you pissed me off."

"Figured that."

"You're not going to kill me for kissing you? Snap my neck? Rip my still-beating heart out of my chest?"

"Haven't decided. You'll be the first to know when I figure that out."

A smile twitched in the corners of Ridley's lips, and a small, strained laugh escaped.

Braz grinned crookedly. "I still think you're crazy as shit, though." He pointed down the dark passage. "Lead on, Dr. Jones."

"My name isn't Jones."

Braz stared at him a moment as if trying to figure out an interesting puzzle before shrugging. "Never mind."

This time when Ridley turned the beam of the flashlight into the dusty gloom, the air was lighter, as if they'd stepped past the awkwardness to a place where they both knew where they stood.

The tunnels narrowed, and for the first time, Ridley noticed footsteps in the sand. Were they going in circles? No, he'd have noticed if the path had gotten this close

before. He shrugged it off. It wasn't inconceivable that other researchers had explored the tombs. People still found places like this intriguing, despite the war that raged around them.

The walls continued to narrow, until suddenly they opened in to a cavernous room, empty but for the open stone casket standing in its center.

"Oh crap." This wasn't good. Ridley felt his stomach drop and take up residence somewhere near his baby toe.

"What's wrong?"

Ridley didn't answer. He sprinted to the casket and peered inside. Nothing. Not a bone or a scrap of aged fabric, not even dust. Maybe this wasn't the right temple. No, he'd checked and double-checked the inscriptions. This definitely was the temple of Amaj'n—the priestess just didn't happen to be in residence at the moment.

"She's gone."

Malone coughed. "Excuse me? What, did she run out for a paper and a pack of smokes? What do you mean she's gone?"

"The casket is empty."

"All right, Dr. Jones. We came, we saw, we proved you're not quite sane. You didn't honestly expect to find a real-live woman in there, did you?"

It felt stupid to say yes when put that way, so Ridley stayed silent, ignoring the insult and the incorrect name. His fingers gripped the cold stone as if he could somehow call the absent priestess to him. There had to be something he was missing. He stepped back and shone the flashlight on the walls. More concentric circles wound their way up the walls, and it took him a minute to realize they weren't actually concentric, but a spiral. At the very center, over the casket itself, was painted a man lying on his back, with his arms crossed over his chest. Running along the length of his body were a series of symbols, roughly translated, it said, *Blessed be the scholar who sacrifices for all.*

Ridley tossed the light to his reluctant partner, who caught it easily, then stepped back to the stone box.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting a closer look." He vaulted over the side, pleased that he'd managed it without falling on his face. Ridley had never been very athletic, but he'd kept in shape—especially knowing what he was going to be doing in the next few days.

"Wait, you can't just climb in there."

"Sure I can." He lay back, wincing at the cramped space. Amaj'n must have been a tiny woman. He bent his knees, twisted a little onto his side so his shoulders weren't pressed so tightly against the sides, and waited.

"You know, I could probably put the lid on this baby and call it a mission," Braz commented. "What exactly are you trying to do?"

"I don't know. She has to be here." Except she obviously wasn't. Ridley sat up and sighed. He watched Braz shine the light around for a minute, when he saw something reflect the beam. "Hold on. What was that?"

"What was what?"

Ridley scrambled to his feet and leaped from the box with less grace than he'd managed when he'd vaulted into it. His left foot caught on the edge, and he landed hard on his shoulder, rolling through the dust until he could regain his balance.

"Nice move there, Dr. Jones."

"Would you stop calling me that? Give me the light." He didn't wait for Braz to hand it over and simply snatched it from him, then crossed the room to where he'd seen the reflection. "It's over here. I know I saw something." He heard the colonel mutter under his breath, probably nothing complimentary, and chose to ignore it.

"Check this out. There are footprints here."

"Fascinating. And this is supposed to mean something to me, why?"

"Because they're boot prints, with rubber soles that bear a striking resemblance to the sole pattern on standard-issue combat boots." Ridley looked over his shoulder and saw he'd caught the man's attention.

"Combat boots?"

"Yeah." Ridley leaned forward and picked up the item that had caught the light from the flashlight. "And I don't think they were here on a sightseeing trip." He held up the shiny bullet casing and saw a gleam in Braz's eyes the second he realized the significance of that bullet.

* * * * *

Braz wished he had his gun. The cold chill of impending danger had begun its slow creep up his spine. His stomach burned with the familiar rush of adrenaline as he grabbed the light away from Sykes and shone it at the walls again, this time looking closely for more clues as to what had happened. Bullet holes—not so much holes as pockets of stone that had been chipped from a bullet's impact.

"This had to have happened recently," Braz muttered, picking up another casing from the thick dust.

"It's my fault. I told my father my theory, hoping he'd want to end the war. God, I was so stupid."

"You weren't stupid. He's your father; he should have trusted you." Good advice, but Braz knew better than most how untrue that statement really was. Now wasn't the time to think about his own father, though. "So what now?"

"We have to find out where they took her. If they've managed to awaken Amaj'n—"

"I thought only one of the descendants could do that?"

Ridley looked uncomfortable for a minute, shuffling his feet and refusing to make eye contact, before he finally looked up. His blue eyes looked haunted, like a man

who'd seen too much death. It wasn't a look Braz had expected to see on the young doctor's face. "There are a fair number of us, at least there were."

"What do you mean *were*?"

Ridley sat down on the ground and leaned his back against the wall. "I'd been researching stories of people who, after the start of the war, suddenly gained unusual powers—telekinesis, pyrokinesis, empathy, and a whole bunch of others that I'd never have believed possible before. I could find them because it's almost like I could sense them, like we were all connected. Two days ago, when I told my father about Amaj'n, someone broke into my apartment and destroyed all my files and smashed my computer, but they must have made themselves a copy of whatever was on the hard drive, including all the research on descendants."

"How do you know they made a copy?"

"Because not more than two hours later, the descendants all started to die. Every single one of them, hunted down and executed. The only way they could have found them all so quickly was with my files."

Braz had never been much good at offering comfort. It wasn't the Malone way, and he certainly hadn't picked up the skill in the military. He didn't even know why he felt the need to do it now. "It's not your fault," he offered, dropping down next to Sykes with a last fond farewell to the suit and jacket.

"It *is* my fault. You don't understand; if we fail, it all rests on me. I'm the last. I watched them all die, every single man and woman who were to be Amaj'n's army. I felt the bullets rip through their skulls. I'm the only one left because I was too much of a coward to include myself on that list, not that it stopped them from sending you to kill me. And the worst of it is, I knew all this time that it would happen. I've dreamed it for years, that you would lead an army against the aliens." He looked up with shiny eyes. "Except, in those dreams, I never saw anyone but you and me."

Braz knew he was in trouble right then and there. He was about to defy orders and lead a fucking rebellion, turning himself into a traitor, all because of a man who

may or may not be crazy. But Braz also knew that he'd follow Ridley Sykes, a man who was brave enough to risk everything for what he believed to be right, to hell and back. This war had to end.

An army of two against the entire world and a couple of powerful aliens with weapons he couldn't even conceive of. Brazen's army. Christ, they were definitely screwed.

Chapter Four

"So what now?"

Ridley sighed and let his head fall back against the wall. "Hell if I know."

"I thought you had some sort of plan, or had seen the plan, however it works."

"Well, in my dream we found Amaj'n, so I'm not entirely sure what to do." He paused and let his gaze drift around the room. "If the military got her first, they'll likely take her remains somewhere secure, right?"

"Right, but there are hundreds of secure facilities. There's no way of knowing which one."

True. Ridley knew there was also the chance that it hadn't been Alliance soldiers who had been here, but given that the Alliance big shots had his files, it seemed the more likely scenario. If he had his computer, he could access the military net—but it was gone, smashed along with a lot of his favorite possessions.

Basically, they were up the proverbial shit creek. Hell, the whole world was, and it was his fault.

"Why don't we get some food, get cleaned up, and then we can figure out what to do next?"

Ridley turned and looked at the man beside him with suspicion. "What?"

"I'm hungry and dirty. I can't plan on an empty stomach."

"Colonel, we're screwed. Not only did I inadvertently lead assassins to kill hundreds of people, but I've failed to awaken the ancient priestess. There's nothing to plan." He dropped his forehead onto his knees and groaned into the heavy silence.

"Look, Sykes, I'm not much good at speeches, but my dad always used to say the battle's not over so long as your heart's still beating. You can't give up."

Ridley snorted. "You're awful chipper about this, considering it's been less than an hour since you called me crazy."

"I know. It's strange. The truth is, we're losing this war, despite what the politicians are saying. The Dynasty soldiers have weapons that can cut through a squadron in seconds. Nobody knows where they got all this technology, but things are starting to make sense. I'm tired of losing friends. I'm tired of fighting. I'd rather risk court-martial by following this crazy plan of yours than let this continue for another decade."

"We could both end up dead." Ridley kept his voice light, despite the lump forming in his throat.

"True, but if you give up now, I'll have to kill you, and after that kiss, I was sort of hoping to shoot off something other than my sidearm."

He couldn't help it. Ridley laughed. Braz Malone had a dirty sense of humor that hadn't been evident in any of the dreams. Ridley had to admit it wasn't what he'd expected. The man in his dreams had always been so serious, so deadly calm, even during sex.

"If you're trying to cheer me up, it worked." He frowned. "You know the whole sex thing might have been, I don't know, wishful thinking on my part. So if you're not interested —"

"Shut up, Jones."

Ridley squeaked as two big hands closed over his upper arms, dragging him onto his knees so he was straddling the other man's thighs, drawing him tight against a very hard chest. Braz captured his lips, drawing him into a kiss that was both demanding and gentle. Oh God, he'd dreamed of this for so long. Ridley moaned and grabbed two handfuls of short black hair.

"You're prickly," Braz complained, his breath fanning against Ridley's cheek.

"Sorry. Been a little preoccupied."

"S'okay. I like it."

Ridley caught Braz's lower lip between his teeth and tugged gently, loving how it made the older man's muscles tighten. "Like that too."

"I know." He'd done it so often in dreams, but the reality was so much better. Ridley pressed his erection against Braz's stomach and kissed him deeply. "Wanted to taste you for so long," he whispered.

Long fingers fumbled with the button on his pants, then lowered Ridley's zipper, before reaching into his boxers to grip his cock. Ridley eased back and struggled for a moment to free Braz from his dress pants, smirking when he realized the colonel wasn't wearing any underwear.

Ridley could think of at least a dozen things he wanted to do, things he'd fantasized about doing with the man who was slowly driving him insane. Then he felt Braz take his hand and wrap it around both of their erections. He knew he was done for. One of Braz's hands covered his own, so they were both jerking each other off as one, and the other hand slid down the back of Ridley's pants to circle his hole. He whimpered.

The burning edge of an orgasm gripped him. "Oh God." He threw back his head and pumped his fist harder over the two thick cocks. Braz's finger pushed, slipped inside, and Ridley came, hot spurts of semen coating his hand.

"Don't stop," Braz ordered.

Ridley tightened his grip and stroked, his fingers slippery over the smooth, hard lengths. "God, yes." A second later, Braz's body tensed, and he moaned into Ridley's mouth. More jets of hot cum streamed over their joined fingers and onto Braz's shirt.

"Holy crap," Ridley muttered, leaning forward to rest his head against the wall. Braz uttered an inarticulate grunt beneath him, but Ridley got the point. Slowly, a little dizzy, he climbed off and collapsed against the wall. "Well, now we're really filthy."

"I have every intention of getting even more filthy with you, but somewhere a little more comfortable would be nice."

A warm flush swept over Ridley's skin. "I'd say my place, but it's probably not safe."

"True. Mine's not much better."

"How do you feel about Scotland this time of year?"

Braz snorted. "Never been there."

Ridley sighed. He'd sworn after his mother's death never again to set foot in the cottage outside Dundee, but their options were pretty limited. Given a few days, his father might think to send someone there to look for him—maybe. William Sykes owned so many properties around the ARA that he'd likely forgotten all about the place where his wife had died, which was why Ridley had felt safe adding those coordinates to the memory of the Site-to-site.

Ten minutes later, after gathering the things they'd left in the first chamber, Ridley transported them to the northern coast of Scotland.

* * * * *

Braz felt the stomach-dropping dislocation as the world went white; then, with a jarring lurch, he was standing in damp grass, feeling more than a little queasy. A cold drizzle fell from a slate gray sky, quickly soaking his coat and turning the temple dust into mud.

Ridley tugged at his hand, and Braz realized he hadn't even noticed they were holding hands. He'd never held a man's hand before, and he let go quickly. Holding hands was one of those niceties that led to lovers thinking things were more serious than he intended.

"You okay? You get used to transporting after a few trips."

"I'm good." Braz realized he could smell the sea, the salt, rotting seaweed, fish, and something that made him think of men with weathered faces and bowed legs wearing white cable-knit sweaters. He could hear waves crashing like muffled thunder, not too far away, punctuated with the random, high-pitched call of gulls. "I'd kill for a shower right now, though." *A hot shower*. His whole body was shuddering, either from the cold or from transporting. Ridley gestured to their left and started walking. "Where'd you get one of those things, anyway?"

"Stole it. A few months ago I was in Egypt doing some research, and a few Dynasty goons tried to hassle me."

Braz frowned. "How many?"

He looked over and caught the blush creeping up Ridley's cheeks. "Six."

"You took out six of them? Those guys are one step below suicidal." He was impressed. The kid was obviously tougher than he looked.

"Yeah, godlike powers, remember? I didn't take them on hand-to-hand."

Braz didn't know what to say to that. He was teamed up with the guy, and he had no idea what he was capable of, or who he was beyond the basics of the file he'd been given. A chill wound up his spine. For a moment, he wondered if he'd made a huge mistake that was going to get him killed. Sure, Ridley looked innocent and harmless, but —

"Malone?"

Braz realized he'd stopped walking, and he looked up into Ridley's bright blue eyes. "Yeah?"

"You okay?"

He coughed into his hand and looked away to where he could just make out the dark waters of the channel in the distance. "Just wondering why you looked so scared after you kissed me. I mean, if you took on half a dozen armed soldiers with no problem, you couldn't have been worried that I'd be able to hurt you."

"Right." Ridley drawled the word out and ducked his head. "See, the thing is, while some of the descendants had things like telekinesis or telepathy, I got this lovely talent for controlling someone's bodily functions. If I wanted to, I could have stopped your heart, made your lungs seize up. Technically, I could probably restart them again, but I didn't want to take the risk." He looked up into Braz's eyes and flinched. "Well, it's not like I've been able to practice using these gifts."

No, Braz didn't suppose it would have been wise to – well, whatever it was Ridley could do. The military part of his mind wanted to know all the details, the limitations, the possible offensive advantage those powers would give them. The rest of him just wanted to pretend this whole thing was a bad dream and that the guy currently leading him toward a cottage near the Scottish coast was just some random one-night stand.

Unfortunately, Braz had always been too practical for his own good, something his father had drummed into him from early childhood.

"Hold on. We should be able to see the cottage from the top of this rise. I want to make sure it's safe."

Braz nodded and fell back, following the doctor's lead. At the top of the hill, they dropped onto the wet grass. The cottage was nothing like he'd expected. Two stories tall, the house stood in the middle of extensive gardens blooming in a riot of color. Beside him, Ridley pulled a pair of binoculars from his bag and scanned the area.

"I don't see anyone."

"Nice place."

Ridley shrugged and tucked the binoculars back into his bag. "Dad bought it for my mother. She used to escape here when he was being particularly obnoxious. I spent a lot of time here as a kid."

Braz heard the sadness in Ridley's voice but decided not to press for answers. As far as hideouts went, it wasn't bad. There was a long driveway, so they'd be able to see anyone coming from far off, but he couldn't see any places to hide if they had to run. "I guess this area wasn't hit too hard in the asteroid shower."

"You mean the orbital attack? No, it wasn't. Lucky for us, I guess."

"You sure your father won't send people here to look for you?"

"Pretty sure."

Ridley's lips pressed together and his eyes narrowed. Definitely a touchy subject, Braz thought, wondering if it was worth digging into. Probably not, at least not now. Too much on their plates. Besides, he barely knew the kid. He wasn't sure if they'd be sharing personal histories.

Without a word, Ridley pushed himself off the ground and started walking. Braz followed, his gaze flickering back and forth between the overgrown hedges and Ridley's back. The kid had a nice body for a geek. Braz had felt the firm, hard muscles when he'd had Ridley pinned on the floor of the temple, when he'd almost strangled the man. Somehow he'd expected softness, but Sykes obviously worked out. There were calluses on Ridley's hands too, where he'd expected to find the smooth, unblemished fingers of someone who hadn't done an hour of physical labor in his life.

Everything about Ridley Sykes surprised him. Normally, Braz hated surprises, since in his experience they tended to land him in the infirmary, but the doc was like the Christmas presents his mom would wrap in layers and layers of paper, boxes inside of boxes, that made his heart pound with anticipation.

He couldn't wait to unwrap this little surprise.

Chapter Five

Ridley felt the colonel's eyes on his back and wondered what the man was thinking. His cheeks heated with color as his own thoughts turned decidedly impure.

There was a good chance he'd be getting laid tonight. Despite the dreams, despite his long-held anticipation, he wasn't ashamed to say he was scared as hell. He wasn't a virgin, but he was far from experienced. After all the buildup — ten years worth of wet dreams, dammit — he didn't want the reality to be a letdown.

He knew, in the end, this war would bring his death. He'd seen it enough times in his dreams to know. Ridley had accepted it with a kind of numbness he'd seen soldiers utilize in the war. He imagined Braz would understand the feeling quite well.

What Ridley feared was the sex not living up to the visions, because if that wasn't real, what if the rest wasn't either? It might mean the victory he'd seen wasn't going to happen either and —

Hell. He really needed to stop analyzing everything to death. Whatever happened would happen, and all he could do was his best.

With that thought firmly in mind, Ridley looked over his shoulder, met cool hazel eyes, and stepped up to the heavy black door. The key ring in his pocket was heavy. Holding a key to each of his father's properties was part of his backup plan. Fingers that

could handle the most delicate of artifacts fumbled the keys until finally grasping the correct one, an old bronze monstrosity that had always looked so large in his mother's delicate hand.

The door opened to a dark entranceway with a rough stone floor and green walls. Eager to be out of sight of any potential threats, he ushered Malone in and shut the door softly. The air was heavy with the smell of furniture polish and age. He'd always fancied he could smell the centuries in the cottage, knowing it had stood for so long and survived so many hardships.

"Nice place." Malone grunted behind him, and Ridley wasn't sure if the man was serious or simply mocking him again.

"My father never dismissed the maid, so at least it's clean. Helen loved my mother and despised my father, so I know she won't rat us out." He realized he was babbling, and clamped his mouth shut. "Shower. I'll show you to one of the guest rooms so you can get cleaned up."

Before he could take a step, a hand fell on his shoulder and turned him around. Wary, he looked up into Malone's eyes, searching for something that would tell him what the older man was thinking. He saw nothing; damn that military aloofness.

"Why don't you show me to your room and we can shower together?"

It wasn't a question. Hell, it was practically an order, and it made Ridley's stomach clench.

"Uh, are you sure you wouldn't rather —"

Cool, firm lips closed over his, cutting off whatever idiotic suggestion he was about to make. Obviously when he'd mentioned showing Malone to the guest room, he'd been temporarily insane.

Strong hands gripped his hips, pulled their cloth-covered erections together, making both men moan. Somehow, they stumbled up the stairs, tongues dueling and fingers exploring, and they nearly fell into Ridley's room. God, this was so much better than he'd imagined. Dirty, damp, and desperate, Braz took control, and Ridley felt like

he was merely along for the ride. Not that he minded in the least, because it was well worth the price of the ticket.

Shirts were ripped carelessly over their heads, buttons popping with no thought to the fact that neither of them had any other clothes. Ridley tripped over his lowered pants as he was pushed toward the bathroom. With the hard, callused hand stroking his cock and a hot mouth clamped over one of his nipples, he barely managed to remain coherent enough to set the shower's water temperature with. Once in the shower, he turned his mind to more important things, like the firm muscles rippling under his fingertips and finally learning the taste of the tanned flesh Ridley had sampled only his dreams. Braz tasted like the South, of hot spices and sweat. Ridley was close, so damn close, and he didn't want it to be another handjob.

"Malone, please."

There was no lube, but they made do with lotion. When the first thick finger pushed past the tight ring of muscles, Ridley moaned and pressed back, begging for more, but Braz took his time, tormenting Ridley, slowly stretching him, adding a second, then third finger, until Ridley was sure his legs would collapse.

"Dammit, Malone." Ridley panted, vibrating on the edge of release, yet so desperate to hold back until he had what he wanted.

Finally, Braz pulled his fingers free and Ridley felt the hot, blunt head of the other man's cock press against him, with just enough pressure to make him want to scream. He tried to push back, but Braz's hands held his hips immobile. "Jones, who's in command of this army you saw in your visions?"

"What?" His mind scrambled to think past the teasing heat, so close but not close enough. "Uh, army? You are." God, he hoped that was the right answer, because he honestly had no idea what the other man was talking about.

Evidently it was, as he was rewarded with just a bit of that thick cock entering him. Again he tried to push back, only to whimper as that glorious shaft pulled out.

"Uh-uh, Jones. If I'm in charge, we do this my way. Do you understand?"

"Yeah." He panted, muscles straining against the urge to move.

Then he was moaning, lost in the sensation of being filled, stretched, and God was it good. Better than the dreams, better than anything. Hot water slid down his face, blurring his vision, and he didn't care. All that mattered was the fierce, almost brutal claiming of the man behind him, driving into him.

Sparks snapped in his vision, white then black, with each powerful stroke of that cock against his prostate. God but he wanted it so bad, and yet he never wanted it to end.

"Fuck."

Ridley heard Braz echoing his own mindless cries, and he felt the fingers on his hips dig in hard enough to bruise, and he lost control, his body shuddering and trembling with the power of his release, even as Malone growled with animalistic satisfaction as he orgasmed deep in Ridley's body.

Hot breath against the water pouring down his back drew his attention back to the present. He blinked wearily and realized the water was getting cold. How long had they been standing there while his mind went on a merry vacation? Obviously long enough for the hot water to run out. The colonel was still behind him, still buried in his ass and not moving except for the rise and fall of the hard, muscled chest against Ridley's back.

"Braz?"

"Shut off the water, Jones." The older man sounded tired, maybe a little out of it. It had been a messed-up day, more so for Braz. Ridley was trying to process the simple concept of time ticking out on a race he'd been running for ten years, but the colonel had the enormous mental task of trying to rationalize aliens, psychic powers, and maybe worst of all, disobeying orders.

Wrapped in thick towels, the two men left the bathroom, and Ridley suddenly wasn't sure what to do next. They needed food, clothes, and sleep, maybe not in that

order. Clothes would be a problem, food as well, since he doubted Helen kept the cupboards stocked or the fridge full.

"How hungry are you?" he asked, eyeing the bed with no little trepidation. Would Braz want to share a bed? Ridley didn't want to presume the soldier wanted anything more than they already had.

"Starved."

Ridley nodded and scanned the floor, grabbing up his boxers and khaki pants. With a grimace, he slipped them on, knowing he'd need another shower. His shirt was a write-off, there was a grand total of one button left on it, and oddly, he didn't remember it being buttoned up in the first place. He hardly ever fastened up his shirts unless he was nervous enough to start playing with the little disks, unconsciously slipping them into place. The T-shirt was all right, somehow only suffering a small rip under one arm. "I'll run into the village and get some food and clothes."

Hazel eyes narrowed. "Not alone, you won't."

"I'll only be an hour, tops. I'll get something from the pub so we don't have to cook."

"Look, Jones, I've risked my career for this little sideshow. No way I'm letting you out of my sight until this thing's done."

Ridley swallowed around the lump in his throat, while mentally scolding himself for being such an idiot. Of course Braz didn't trust him not to take off. A quick round of shower sex wouldn't change that. So he shrugged and waited, casting a few longing glances at the bed.

Chapter Six

He'd never been one to pay attention to scenery beyond watching for potential threats, but Braz had to admit the walk into town was pleasant. Cozy little homes with fairy-tale charm lined the rutted road; yards were casually cluttered with children's toys that had been abandoned when the misty rain had begun. It all looked so normal, like there wasn't a war being fought not that far away. Even with the persistent chill, he felt warm inside.

Braz had gotten used to being cold or damp or just uncomfortable. Not much room for niceties in the military, especially not these days. At least the doc had found himself a jacket, even if it was about ten years out-of-date and a few sizes too small. The younger man had grumbled about idiot assassins not giving him time to gather his own coat, and the muttering kept Braz entertained on the short walk into the village.

"You know, I don't need a babysitter. I've been taking care of myself a long time now," Ridley grouched, shoving his hands deeper into the jacket pockets.

"Your dad was not big on the fathering thing, huh?"

Sykes shot him a look that clearly said, *Duh!* "Let's see, my father is probably one of the people who signed your orders to kill me, so no, we don't have the kind of relationship where he took me to amusement parks or ball games."

"Hate to say it, Jones, but there hasn't been an amusement park or ballpark open in nine years." Very few recreational centers had stayed open when the war broke out, and those that had held on went bankrupt within a year.

"True, but there were when I was ten and spent the summer in a hotel room while my dad went to meetings." He paused and shot a curious glance over his shoulder, blue eyes narrowed. "Why do you keep calling me Jones, anyway?"

Braz snorted. "Indiana Jones." At the blank look he got in response to the name, Braz laughed. "You mean I've been calling you Jones and you had no idea who I was comparing you to? Jesus, you have led a sheltered life. Okay, Indiana Jones was a fictitious archaeologist who fought the bad guys to save precious artifacts and the world. I'm sure that big brain of yours can see the parallel here."

Ridley frowned. "I've never heard of him."

"You do know what movies are, right?"

"No, I'm completely ignorant of pop culture of the last century," came the sarcastic response. "So this Jones guy was a character in a movie?"

Braz nodded, then mentally calculated dates. "You'd have been in Pampers, sucking on your thumb when those films came out, though." He smirked. "Of course, Indy was older, had the whole whip-and-fedora thing working for him. Women were crazy about him."

"So you're saying I'm not sexy enough now?" Ridley asked, his tone casual and bland, making Braz wonder if the kid was insulted or simply teasing.

"You got a whole other brand of sexiness, kind of a clueless, naive scholar thing that makes me want to teach you what you've been missing out, burying yourself in books."

Ridley stopped and turned, brows drawn down in a fierce glare. "Okay, first of all, I'm not a virgin for you to ravish and corrupt."

Braz smirked again. The doc was fun to rile, with his cheeks turning red and his blue eyes snapping sparks in the cool drizzle. "Calm down, Jones. I'm sure the natives don't need a rundown of your past lovers."

In fact, two young ladies were snickering behind their hands as they passed. Ridley flushed a nice crimson and stuttered out a hello, his gaze taking in their surroundings. "Well, crap. We passed it."

Delighted laughter filled the gloomy afternoon air, and Braz was stunned to discover it was his own. He honestly couldn't remember the last time he'd felt like laughing. War generally didn't leave room for jokes, and his position demanded a level of propriety that seldom allowed levity. Assassins just did not let loose; it simply didn't fit the profile.

"You're a jackass, you know that?"

"Sure do. So where's this place you're lookin' for?"

Ridley sighed and turned around, walking back to a store they'd passed a minute or so before. The clothes inside were simple jeans, T-shirts, sweaters, and basic undergarments. Not many stores sold silk shirts or suits these days, when most people couldn't afford them anyway. Prices were a little higher than he'd hoped, but apparently the doc had planned for a life on the run and had a good bit of cash in his wallet, and not just American currency either.

Half an hour later, loaded down with two bags of clothes and a paper sack from the local pub, they headed back up the narrow, rutted lane to the cottage. Once inside, they silently dished up their meal and settled at the table.

"So, any ideas of what to do next?" Ridley asked as he nervously ripped his slice of bread into little chunks.

Braz raised an eyebrow and poked at his stew. "Not really. If we can get into a base, we could check the military network, see if that gets us anywhere."

"True. Some weapons would be good. I've only got one stunner and one handgun." The younger man looked at him, his blue eyes intense and solemn. "Braz,

promise me that no matter what, you'll do what it takes to see this through to the end. No matter what happens to me, you have to find a way to defeat the aliens."

Braz frowned, not sure if he should be insulted or not. "Kid, I just threw away all hope of freedom by disobeying orders. I'm not going to go half-assed. I've been military trained since I could walk, and I don't back down, no matter how dirty the job."

"Right." The clenching in his stomach eased. Truth was, he didn't quite know how to handle the sleeping situation. Sex, sure, he could deal with that, but would Braz want to share a bed? He dried his hands on the tea towel and turned, biting his lip as he hesitated.

"Come on, Jones. I'm not going to slit your throat in your sleep."

He laughed, nervous and shocked because that hadn't even entered his mind. "Good to know. So, I can show you to the guest room if you want."

Hazel eyes narrowed. "I'm only gonna say this once more, I go where you go; got it?"

"Yeah, I got it. I'm not going to take off, though."

Malone snorted. "Never thought you would, but since I've failed to report in, they'll send others, and if they send someone here, I want you close." The older man paused. "Besides, I'm betting there was more to those dreams than one quick shag, right?"

Ridley swallowed back the sudden urge to reveal the one element of his dreams that had been constant: Ridley dying. He knew he should be completely honest with Braz. They were partners, after all. But he stayed silent, rationalizing his decision by not wanting to make Braz worry, not when it could be a distraction.

Chapter Seven

Braz led the way to the bedroom, curious about his host's sudden case of nerves. Not for the first time, he wondered why he was so intrigued by the scholar. Braz wasn't stupid by any means—he wouldn't have survived as long as he had if that had been the case—but usually he didn't go for the brainy types. Then again, he didn't spend much time around the scientists whom he served with.

If Braz had to describe his type, he'd have said tough and non-commitment oriented. Ridley was no pushover, but he didn't think the doc would have survived as a soldier. There was just something so innocent about the man, despite his obvious fighting skills, a boyishness that Braz hoped would still be there when this was done.

While Ridley turned down the sheets and fluttered about the pillows, Braz stripped out of his clothes. Naked, he climbed onto the bed and leaned back, arms crossed behind his head. He saw the flush brewing on Ridley's face as he realized his dithering had left him in the position of undressing for an audience.

Braz nearly laughed. None of his past lovers had been shy. War and the desperation born of facing imminent death tended to put a stop to most of the niceties. A quick fuck didn't leave room for prevarication or hesitation, not when you'd long

since learned to take what you could get before the one you wanted came back in a body bag.

If anyone should be scared, Braz figured it should be him. Ridley deserved more than a quick tumble, probably wasn't the type to just have a quick go and not expect something afterward. Not that the doc was girly, but Braz doubted he'd be okay with what passed for foreplay in the barracks. The fact that Braz wanted to give him that was worrisome. He'd long since learned that it didn't pay to let people get close, because it only hurt more when they died.

He watched as Ridley tugged off his clothes, tossing them with faked casual indifference before crawling between the sheets and reaching for the light. The lamp switched off, and Braz felt the doc shift against the cool cotton sheets, trying to get comfortable.

It would have been entertaining, letting Ridley fidget for a while. He could tell there was still some trepidation on the young man's part. Braz wasn't the type to hesitate when there was something he wanted, though, not anymore. He mentally cursed his own stupidity. The damned kid was making him soft.

He reached across the bed and pulled Ridley close, ignoring the sudden tensing of muscles under his fingers. "Relax, Jones," he whispered against one shoulder before nipping the warm skin. When Ridley tried to roll over to face him, Braz pushed against the slender back until his lover was lying flat on his stomach.

"Wait—" Ridley's protest was cut off with a groan as Braz tugged down the man's boxers and pushed himself into the still-loose and slick hole. "Fuck," Ridley muttered, his voice muffled by the pillow.

God, the doc was hot and so tight. He pulled out slowly, drawing hisses and whimpers from the man beneath him, then thrust in hard enough to make the headboard slam against the wall.

Again and again, he pounded into the welcoming heat, pressing kisses against Ridley's sweat-soaked neck. He'd fucked a lot of soldiers in his life, men and women,

and none of them had the ability to light this kind of fire in his stomach. The combination of innocent pleas and the lightly muscled body demanded he stake his claim forever. He felt humbled, and it pissed him off. Braz Malone wasn't the mushy, sentimental type, and no pretty-faced scholar was going to change that.

Ruthlessly, he pumped his cock into the doc's fluttering ass and held himself away from the tempting skin that begged to be suckled on, to be marked. He gripped the man's slender wrists and pinned them down, as if to prove he was the one in control here. That he was in control of himself.

When Ridley arched and came with a harsh cry, Braz grunted and told himself he didn't find the sound appealing. This wasn't about feelings; it was about fucking. So he fucked the kid hard and bit his tongue to keep any sounds of pleasure from passing his lips when he came.

Without a word, he rolled off to the side and deliberately put some space between them.

"Malone?"

"What?" he grunted blandly.

There was a long moment of silence before Ridley sighed. "Nothing."

Braz mentally slapped himself on the back. This was war, and he couldn't afford to start thinking sappy thoughts about a lover when there was a good chance neither of them would survive. He deliberately ignored the voice that scolded him for not accepting wholeheartedly the only good thing that had come his way in a long time.

* * * * *

Ridley waited for the colonel's breathing to even out into sleep before he climbed from the bed and padded into the bathroom. His heart was still thudding erratically in the wake of his orgasm. It was an odd counterpoint to the anger burning in his gut.

He couldn't figure out Brazen Malone. One minute the guy was laughing and teasing him; then he was cold and unrelentingly military. Ridley knew that this whole

partnership wasn't going to be easy. Malone had lived a hard life, fighting a losing war, closing himself off from his own emotions. At least, that's what Ridley told himself in order to soothe the enraged voice in his head that was demanding he go back into that bedroom and do something he'd probably regret. Hitting a highly trained soldier might not be one of his best ideas.

It was like he'd caught a glimpse of a different Braz than he'd expected, and when the serious, focused Braz from his dreams made an appearance tonight, he'd felt cheated. Ridley had to remind himself that this wasn't about romance or any kind of a relationship. It was about saving the world.

Closing the lid on the toilet, he dropped onto the cold seat and ran his fingers through his hair. He wished he had all the answers. There was something, just out of his reach, that he knew was crucial.

If he weren't so tired, he'd go back downstairs and read through all his notes. Of course, Malone would probably wake up and think he'd run off or something. Frankly, Ridley was surprised the colonel hadn't woken up when he'd slipped out of bed. Braz struck him as the type to sleep lightly in case of danger.

The day's events were jumbled together in his mind, adding to his exhaustion and hindering his ability to sort out facts. It was pointless to try and figure out the missing details when he was so tired and emotionally drained. Tomorrow would be soon enough.

After washing his hands and face, Ridley shut off the light and made his way across the darkened room to climb back into bed. Beside him, Braz grunted and rolled over, pulling Ridley close to his chest and holding him in place with steely muscled arms. A whisker-stubbed cheek rubbed against his shoulder before a small sigh escaped the older man's lips.

Ridley let out a sigh of his own and tried to get comfortable. He didn't think he'd ever have enough time to figure out the mystery of Brazen Malone, but for now, he'd just enjoy the tender side of the man, even if it only came out in sleep.

Chapter Eight

It took Braz all of ten minutes to figure out the doc was giving him the silent treatment. He'd woken up alone and had immediately jumped out of the bed and gone looking for his missing geek, only to find him sitting at the dining room table with about a dozen notebooks scattered around him.

Braz had stood there for a moment being watched by the mildly confused blue eyes before the younger man turned back to his notes without a word.

Uncaring of his naked state, Braz went into the kitchen to pour himself a cup of the coffee he could smell, and sat down. His companion didn't once acknowledge his existence after that first glance.

"You gonna pout like a girl all day?"

"I'm not pouting, I'm working," Ridley said mildly, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

It probably should have been obvious, except Braz was feeling a little guilty about the previous night's wham-bam-thank-you-Sam episode, and he was good enough at reading body signals to recognize the tense shoulders as a sign of pique. "Uh-huh," he finally said, completely unconvinced.

"You're a major asshole, you know that?"

"Colonel Asshole, thank you very much," Braz quipped and saw slender fingers tighten around a well-chewed pencil.

After a moment, Ridley sighed and looked up, his eyes carefully blanked of emotion. "I just want to get this done with."

Braz raised an eyebrow. The kid may be good at masking his emotions physically, but his voice was too expressive. Sykes sounded almost disappointed. The razor-sharp edge of guilt bit into his chest again, and he forced himself to shrug it off. They had a job to do, after all. "All right. What have you got?"

"Nothing much yet. I've been going back over the prophecy, and I'm a little unclear on this one part about sacrifices. Then there's some stuff about warriors and scholars and the warrior's reward. It was a fascinating society, most everything revolved around the military. Scholars were rare and coveted, only the best warriors were given one to protect."

"Given?"

"Oh yeah. Once you reached a certain rank, there were strict no-fraternization rules, but to make up for it, you got the honor of protecting one of the keepers of knowledge."

"And this sacrifice thing?" Sacrifices sucked. He should know; he'd been the executioner for more than a few of them.

Sykes sighed. "The original text was pretty badly damaged, so the translation is patchy."

"You think they're talking about human sacrifice? These alien guys could be into that if what you said about them is true."

Ridley shook his head. "No, I think it has to do with Amaj'n and her descendants."

There was something in the man's voice that Braz didn't like. "We aren't doing any ritual killings, Jones. And I don't think what those bastards did to the people in your files counts."

"You don't know that! I all but handed them hundreds of lives," Ridley burst out, throwing the pencil across the table, barely missing Braz's face.

"You didn't know what they were going to do. You didn't invite them into your apartment and hand over your computer and tell them to have fun killing innocent people."

Tears were running silently down Ridley's pale cheeks, and his hands were clenched into fists. "Shut up! Just shut the hell up. You may not have a problem with killing people, but I'm not you, okay? I fucking killed those people, even if I didn't pull the goddamned trigger."

"The hell you did. You were trying to help. You did what you thought was right."

The fight seemed to go out of him, and Ridley dropped back against the back of his chair. "It doesn't matter."

"Look, Doc, people die in a war, and yeah, it sucks, but you can't take every death onto yourself, not if you want to get through it in one piece."

Ridley didn't say anything but calmly closed up all his notebooks, stacking them precisely in a way that screamed OCD or a man on the verge of cracking. Braz could almost see each muscle being determinedly relaxed.

"We should get some breakfast in town, then get moving. I don't want to be here any longer than we have to." Ridley's voice was calm, almost bored, in direct contrast to just a minute ago.

"Sure. Just let me get some clothes on." Braz set his cup on the table and pushed out of the chair.

"Jesus, you're naked?" Ridley asked, eyes wide and mouth slack in shock.

"You're just now noticing this?" Maybe the kid was a little more out of sorts than Braz had thought.

"I wasn't really paying attention."

"Obviously." Braz turned and sauntered out of the room, feeling the heat of the doc's gaze on his ass.

There was a saying in the barracks: never waste an opportunity to get under the enemy's skin. Braz figured he was making good progress with the doc, even if he didn't really class Sykes as an enemy. He didn't really know how to class their relationship now. Lovers, yes. Partners, sort of. He didn't really trust the guy and knew without a doubt that there was information he hadn't been given about this whole situation. Braz decided to settle on reluctant allies with benefits. Always nice to work with someone who was great in bed.

Braz dressed in the new clothes he'd bought the day before, stiff jeans and a simple sweater. It would hardly help them blend in to their surroundings at a military base, but it wasn't like he could pick up uniforms at any old store in town.

He was starting to think he was crazy. After a good night's sleep, Braz was finding it hard to believe he'd tossed away his whole life because one wacko historian said the real threat wasn't the Ancient Dynasty's army, but a couple of extremely old aliens with advanced technology.

Braz was sure he could spin it as an attempt to gain information on Dynasty supporters. It would probably still earn him some time in the brig, but hopefully it would lessen the chances of execution. Braz didn't want to go out like that. He'd rather die in battle.

Odds were, he'd end up dead on this little adventure, but he wasn't worried about it. He'd been living on borrowed time since the day his dad signed him up for the air force.

* * * * *

They transported to the military base with suspicious ease. Ridley had found the coordinates for a base in Glasgow and, after breakfast, used his stolen Site-to-site to get them inside. There were no guards, no alarms. Ridley wouldn't have thought anything of it, except the colonel wouldn't shut up.

"What kind of moron is running this base, anyway?" Braz muttered as they passed yet another door marked with a high clearance code, but lacking the required guard. "Something's wrong here."

"Would you shut up? We'll have more guards than we can handle with our two weapons if you keep talking," Ridley snarled.

"It's a trap," Braz snapped back. "Besides, you can do your godlike powers thing if we get in trouble."

His spine tingled, like the time he'd been investigating a cave in the Amazon and four massive spiders had worked their way under the back of his shirt. "I'm not going to kill people who are on our side."

"There is no one on our side, Jones. These guys assigned me to kill you, remember?"

"Of course I remember." *How could he forget?* It wasn't like being the target of an assassin was an everyday occurrence for him. But he knew Braz was right, these guys wouldn't hesitate to kill either one of them. It didn't mean he had to like the thought of taking their lives when he had such an unfair advantage. "We need to find a computer terminal."

"There should be one in the communications bunker." A dark scowl settled over Braz's face. "Which should be heavily guarded."

It wasn't. When they found the bunker, and Ridley thanked military protocol that ensured bases all had the same general layout so Braz had no problems finding what they needed. There were no guards in sight. He was starting to think the colonel was on to something with this whole trap idea. There had been guards, but they'd been easily

dodged by hiding in convenient closets or empty storage rooms. Either the air force was slacking on its training and security, or something was up.

"I don't like this," Ridley muttered as they ducked into the communications room.

"It's about time you caught on."

"Well, excuse me if I'm not an expert on military procedure."

"Calm down, Jones. Let's just get what we came for and get out of here." Braz positioned himself against the wall with a clear shot of the door. Ridley almost doubted the colonel needed to worry, though, considering the state of things here.

Ridley turned his attention to the computer terminal and easily bypassed the security net. Either his hacking skills were much better than he'd ever thought, or this was part of the setup. But why would they want him and Braz to break into the compound?

The instant he entered the search terms, the door slammed open and uniformed soldiers stormed in. Rather than the gray of the ARA, they wore the green and black of the Ancient Dynasty. "Oh shit," he muttered and ducked under the desk as red beams shot up the wall behind him.

Ridley watched Braz push over a desk for cover, but it was obvious they were no match for the dozens of armed soldiers who were pressing inside, with more outside the door. Ignoring the clenching in his gut, he stretched out with his mind and gripped four of the ones closest to him and twisted their lungs, making them collapse on the floor. Again and again he used his powers, stopping hearts, seizing lungs, or severing nerves.

It wasn't enough. A stunner caught Braz, and he went down in a heap. Ridley froze, then redoubled his efforts until there were so many in the room that he couldn't keep up. Just before the butt of a pistol cracked across the back of his head, he saw the piles of bodies left in the wake of his attack, then everything went black.

Chapter Nine

Braz woke with a pounding headache and the knowledge that they were screwed. He'd been in a lot of tight places before, but he wasn't exactly sure how to get himself and his unlikely partner out of this one.

They were in a cell, but it was like nothing he'd ever seen before. Rather than steel bars, they were surrounded by thick green beams of light that he just knew would hurt like a bitch if he touched one. A few feet away, Ridley lay sprawled on his side, a small pool of blood under his head.

Dragging in a ragged breath, Brazen pulled himself across the floor and pressed his fingers against Ridley's throat, relieved to find a steady pulse. They were alive but trapped, probably in enemy territory. "Well, this sucks."

Footsteps drew his attention away from his unconscious cell mate, and a moment later, a tall, slender man with dark hair and eyes appeared. He was beautiful, with an otherworldly quality that set Braz's teeth on edge.

"Ah, you are awake." The voice was deep and laced with a strange accent.

"Where are we?"

One elegant eyebrow rose in amusement. "You are aboard my vessel. I am Enlil. No doubt your friend has mentioned me."

Brazen narrowed his eyes at the proof of Ridley's claims standing before him. He'd believed the scholar, but a part of his mind had still found the concept of aliens and prophecies impossible. Despite the apparent hopelessness of the situation, Braz felt a surge of hope. If the alien part of Ridley's story was true, then it was possible the part about Amaj'n was as well.

Being captured was just a minor setback as far as Braz was concerned. *Get to know the enemy, find his weak spots, and then use them.* He had no intention of giving up now that he'd seen proof that their task wasn't a fairy tale. "You don't look like an alien," Braz drawled.

"Indeed not, at least according to your people's amusing imaginations."

"What are you going to do with us?" This whole evil-alien thing wasn't exactly playing out the way Braz had thought it would. He expected these aliens to be more barbaric and violent, not politely condescending and pompous.

"You and Dr. Sykes are my guests," Enlil stated, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Braz raised an eyebrow. "As in being held for your amusement as you torture us?"

A tinkling, unnatural laugh escaped the alien's perfect pink lips. "Oh no! I desire nothing more than your safety and comfort, especially that of your friend." There was something almost carnal about the way the tall being was staring at Ridley, and it was confirmed when Enlil added, "He's quite beautiful, isn't he?"

Braz's previously ignored protective instincts kicked in. Ridley Sykes was his. No poofed-up, god-wannabe alien was getting his hands on the doc. He snarled and shifted his body to block the alien's view.

"My, my. So possessive. Tell me, does he taste as good as he looks?" When Braz didn't say anything, Enlil smirked. "Perhaps I will have to have a taste. It has been a long while since I fucked a mortal."

Braz ground his teeth together until his jaw ached. He knew the bastard was trying to get a rise out him, and he didn't plan to give him the satisfaction. Enlil's smirk grew, and he raised his arm to push back the fabric of one elaborately beaded sleeve.

A small transporter was revealed, and with one long, slender finger paused dramatically over the button, Enlil cast a smug look into the cell before the world dissolved into light, then faded to reveal another room.

There was a huge bed covered in some sort of silk-like red fabrics. The walls were a garish gold. The whole thing screamed sex, from the padded cuffs hanging from the headboard to the display case full of what were obviously bedroom toys. Braz had never been into the whole whips-and-leather thing, but he knew a few guys in the barracks who were. He'd fucked a captain who had wanted to be spanked with a paddle, and while it had been interesting, Braz wouldn't say he'd enjoyed it more than the norm.

The thought of Ridley tied to the headboard, though, was another story. Except the doc wasn't there.

Blind fury bloomed in his gut, and he turned to pound on the door, only to find there was no door either. He was trapped in this alien tribute to carnal excess, and that sick freak was doing God-knew-what to his doc.

When he'd admitted to himself that the scholar was his, Braz chose not to think about, though if he was honest, he'd say it had happened the instant he'd stepped into that office and seen the wide blue eyes light with recognition. He was a practical man, raised to be so by a father who was generous with punishment and delighted in withholding praise. It had taught him to let go of things like materialism, but Ridley Sykes was his, if for no other reason that Braz had held the man's life in his hands and made the choice not to end it.

Surveying the room again, he mentally made note of possible weapons. There were four paddles, a selection of butt plugs, and a variety of chains with clamps

arranged in the display case. He figured the chains could come in handy if he could get close enough to strangle the alien bastard.

A small stool stood near the bed, and he picked it up, testing its weight and strength. It wasn't ideal but would do in a pinch. A wardrobe next to the sex-toy display held an abundance of silk shirts and what looked like leather pants in a variety of dark shades of blue and gray. Braz vowed that it would be a cold day in hell before he put any of them on.

A small bathroom hid behind a sliding door, and that little find had him walking the perimeter in search of possible entrances that might be too well disguised for him to have noticed. "At least I've got my proof about the aliens," he muttered as he dropped onto the bed, his explorations complete, and began to form a plan for rescuing Ridley.

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Ridley couldn't move. The air was thin and cold, with a faint metallic taste that made his tongue feel pasty. The light was bright against his closed eyelids, and it turned the darkness a bloody red. Mentally calculating his injuries, he realized he wasn't hurt anywhere and that he was being restrained. There were straps on his wrists, holding them out at his sides.

"Well, this sucks." The words echoed off the walls with a hollow sort of resonance that was eerie and made his skin itch.

"You are awake," a voice said softly and from close by. It bordered on the verge of being feminine, but Ridley decided it belonged to a male.

"Who are you?" He risked opening his eyes and immediately shut them again, hissing at the sting of staring into harsh, cold light.

"My name is Enlil."

His heart skipped several beats. *Enlil*? Ridley fought the urge to open his eyes again, wanting badly to see the creature he'd spent so many years studying. Academic

curiosity fled at the realization that finding Amaj'n had just gotten a whole lot harder. "What's going on? Where am I?"

"I have brought you to my ship to treat your injuries, Dr. Sykes. You have nothing to fear from me."

Something cool and soft trailed over his chest, making Ridley realize he had no shirt on. From the feel of it, he wasn't wearing pants either. He jerked away as much as his restraints would allow when the questing touch reached his hip. Hot breath ghosted over his cock, and he was powerless to prevent the twitch of interest.

"So responsive," the voice whispered, before something warm and wet swirled over his growing erection.

Oh God. This was a dream, some kind of bizarre nightmare. He wasn't really strapped down to a table while some alien who wanted to take over Earth licked his cock. That agile tongue wrapped itself around Ridley's length and tightened, drawing a moan from his lips. He'd never felt anything like that, like a snake had coiled around his hard flesh. He couldn't imagine it was even possible for a human tongue to do that.

When moist heat closed over his aching length and drew him in so the head of his cock was encased tightly in the alien's throat, he bit back a choked cry and arched his back. Fuck, it was so good, and yet so wrong. He bit his lip, trying desperately not to make any sounds that would encourage his captor, yet each sweep of tongue over his sensitive flesh brought him closer and closer to the breaking point.

It was almost a relief when the alien pulled off with a final hard suck and dainty lick. "Humans taste so good. I'd forgotten over the centuries. We made you that way, you know?" Enlil confided. "We made your flesh and sweat to suit our appetites, made your bodies exactly to our needs, whether it be to fight in our name or to spread your legs for our pleasure." Again, that impossibly strong tongue wrapped around his cock and milked him hungrily, then lapped up the juices Ridley had obligingly provided. "Tell me, Doctor, does your warrior please you? Does he fuck you hard and make you scream?"

Ridley didn't know how to answer that, and his brain wasn't functioning on all its cylinders. He realized he hadn't once thought of Braz since he'd woken, and felt immediately guilty. "What have you done with him?" he demanded.

Enlil chuckled. "He's waiting for you, quite impatiently I might add. But you didn't answer my question."

Ridley pressed his lips together and refused to answer. A soft, disappointed tutting sound came from the vicinity of his groin.

"It's not nice to ignore your host, you know?"

"I don't think it's any of your business."

"Ah, but it is. Everything about you humans is my business. Perhaps I asked the wrong question. Does the good colonel suck on your beautiful cock until you beg him to take you?"

Ridley arched into the hot mouth that closed over him again, sucking greedily, only to pull off as his balls began to draw up close to release.

"Well, Doctor? Does he?"

"N-no," he whimpered. His whole body was trembling on the brink of orgasm.

"Shame. You are so beautiful when your face is flushed and your cock is begging for attention."

Cool hands pushed his thighs apart, and though Ridley's head screamed no, his body offered up no resistance. A finger teased his entrance lightly. Ridley wanted so badly right now, but not like this, he wanted Braz's hard, thick fingers in his ass, not these cold, strange digits. "Please let me go," he whispered.

"Soon, pet. I will send you back to your warrior, but not yet."

That hot tongue was back, licking his balls and the sensitive skin behind them. Warm saliva dribbled down past his hole, offering up enough lubricant for that clever finger to breach the protective ring of muscles.

"A body like yours should be enjoyed. Does your warrior enjoy you like I am?"

Two fingers pushed into his body, stretching him and gliding over his prostate with gentle strokes.

"Do you like his fingers in your sweet, tight ass?"

"Yes! Fuck yes."

The alien hummed and slipped his fingers free and wrapped what Ridley knew had to be a cock ring around the base of his captive's erection. Ridley sobbed, aching for release and yet dreading it at the same time. Then he was screaming as that impossible tongue pushed into his ass, deeper than any human tongue could ever manage. Snakelike, it fluttered, flicking deliciously against his prostate before withdrawing and thrusting in again and again.

On and on it went, until his throat was sore from begging and his muscles were trembling uncontrollably. The tight grip on his cock kept him on the brink of orgasm, and he thought he might die from the need to come.

Enlil pulled away and, with one last lick to the drooling slit, sighed. "So good. But as much as I would like to fuck you, I think I would enjoy watching your colonel pleasure you. Would you like me to send you to him?"

Ridley couldn't answer, his whole being concentrating on the pulsing of blood and pleasure in his groin.

"Will you beg him to take you? To ram his cock into your greedy little ass?" The finger was back now, teasing lightly, just barely entering his hole. "If I send you back to him, will you let me watch and direct his actions?"

Ridley whimpered.

"Make your choice, Ridley Sykes. Do you want your warrior with the conditions I have provided, or will you stay with me and let me fuck you over and over like you deserve to be fucked?"

"Braz. I want Braz!" he shouted, hoping the alien wouldn't renege on the deal.

"Very well."

The red haze behind his eyelids was replaced with bright white light. He opened his eyes and saw he was on a bed, in a room done up in gold and red. Immediately, his hand fell to his cock and tried to get the offending ring off, but it didn't budge.

"Ridley?"

"Get it off. Fuck, Braz, I need to come," he pleaded.

"What the hell did he do to you?" Hazel eyes were hard with rage, and a muscle was jumping in the colonel's strong jaw.

"Please, Braz. Need you."

"He's quite tasty." Enlil's voice came out of nowhere, some sort of speaker they couldn't see.

"What did you do to him?" Braz shouted.

"I got him ready for you. Such a prize you had in your possession, and yet you never availed yourself of all the pleasures he offered."

"Get that thing off him."

"We made a deal, he and I. I get to watch you take him and instruct you, and I'll remove it. If you don't agree, then I take him back and enjoy his body for as long as it amuses me."

Ridley looked at Braz desperately until finally, the other man nodded.

Chapter Ten

“What do you want me to do?” Braz asked, casting his gaze about in hopes he could find the camera and speaker. *Fucking bastard*. Ridley was whimpering on the bed, his hand desperately pulling on his red, swollen cock, and this sicko wanted Braz to participate in the torture?

“Take off your clothes and retrieve one each of the plugs and paddles I provided.”

Braz ground his teeth and stripped out of his jeans and sweater before crossing the room to the toys, wishing he could use one of those whips on the alien, and not in a sexual way. He selected a small blue plug and was about to grab the closest paddle when the alien spoke again.

“I believe he can take more than that child’s toy.”

Angrily slapping the blue one back onto the shelf, he picked up a green one that was blunt at the end and rippled along its length to flare widely before tapering in then back out to a loop which was obviously meant to be a hand grip that would fit nicely into the doc’s ass crack. Toy in hand, he grabbed a bottle of lubricant and the closest paddle and made his way back to the bed.

“This is how human scholars were treated when we created your race. Each one was paired to a warrior who protected them and took pleasure from their bodies. A

shame your people have stopped the practice. Warriors would have fought to the death for a treasure such as yours, Colonel."

"Whatever," Braz snapped. "What now?"

"Tie his hands to the headboard and lift him onto his knees."

Ridley obeyed without hesitation when Braz nudged him into action. The young man was trembling, sweat popping on his neck as he knelt, legs spread on the silk sheets. Braz could see the moisture dribbling from an obviously well-stretched anus, and he wanted to kill the alien with his bare hands.

"I'm sure you can figure out the next part." The voice was sarcastic, making Braz bristle in anger.

"You okay, Jones?"

A small nod of the head was Ridley's only answer. Mentally berating himself, he dribbled the oily lube onto his fingers and rubbed them over the green synthetic surface, then pushed the blunt head of the plug into Ridley's hole. The young man pushed back, his ass hungrily swallowing the toy as he whimpered and begged for more. The widest part sank past loose muscles, and Braz knew it would nestle directly against his lover's prostate.

God, it was hot. He'd watched a couple of airmen fuck themselves with dildos and butt plugs and wondered what the big deal was. Now he knew. The way Ridley's muscles clenched in little spasms around the green synthetic plug, the way his hips shifted in an effort to gain friction, and most of all, the way Braz was totally in control of everything his doc felt, made his stomach squirm and his cock harden in record time.

Braz knew he shouldn't be enjoying this. It was wrong, practically rape, and yet, he wanted to pull the toy out and slam his dick into that grasping channel until they were both sweating and screaming. He wanted to grab that handle and fuck the sweet ass slowly until Ridley was a sobbing, pleading mess, but most of all, he wanted to be the one to have gotten the doc worked up and desperate.

He waited a moment for more instructions, but the room was silent but for Ridley's panting and the soft creak of the bed. Taking it as a sign that he could take things from here, Braz reached out and placed one hand on Ridley's shoulder. "Jones?"

"Yeah?"

His voice was breathy and so damn sexy, Braz unconsciously tightened his fingers and rubbed his cock against the man's thigh.

"Tell me if you want me to stop, all right?"

Ridley nodded and dropped his head, as if bracing himself. Braz looped his fingers into the plug's handle and twisted it slowly, eliciting a delighted moan from the shackled man. Experimentally, he pulled until the widest part appeared with a soft pop before he pushed it back into the sucking hole.

"Yes! Fuck. Do it again."

He obeyed, slowly at first, then faster as Ridley's pleas grew more and more desperate. Braz's erection was smearing gleaming pearls onto the doc's buttocks and he was about two seconds away from taking the place of that toy when an amused voice cut in.

"Very nice, gentlemen. But you aren't making full use of your prize, Colonel."

"What do you want?" he asked through tightly clenched teeth, vowing that if he ever got his hands on the sick bastard, he'd rip the alien's tongue out.

"Oh, many things, but I believe you might enjoy the sight of those sweet, rounded cheeks all red and rosy from a spanking. Enkii was always more fond of pain than I, be glad it was me you were brought to."

He'd known it was coming, but he really didn't want to have to do it. Sykes had to be in agony already; Braz didn't want to add to it by paddling him.

"Jones? You okay?"

"No. I want to come so bad, Braz."

"I know," he whispered and pressed a kiss to a pale, sweat-soaked shoulder. "I don't want to hurt you."

Ridley snorted. "At this point I'd say you could do whatever you wanted as long as it led to orgasm."

Shifting on the bed, Braz picked up the paddle and went to pull out the plug.

"No, no, Colonel. Leave it in. The pleasure that he will experience will be immense."

Braz wanted to shout that it had already gone way past that point, but had no choice except to follow the alien's rules if he wanted Ridley released from the cock ring. Wincing, he raised the paddle and brought it down across the young man's buttocks. Ridley screamed, and Braz had to assume it was a good kind of scream, because he hadn't hit the other man very hard.

Again and again he brought the smooth black paddle down, alternating between the left and right cheeks at random, and occasionally smacking full in the center so the rigid plug would push in, rubbing against Ridley's prostate. With each blow, Braz watched with fascination as the doc's ass clenched and sucked on the plug while Ridley yelped and pleaded for him to do it again.

Ridley's ass cheeks were red, bordering on purple in some spots, when the alien finally called out that he was satisfied. Braz wanted to bite those abused cheeks, feel the heat against his lips and tongue, but this wasn't about him. "Have you had enough?" Braz snarled up at the ceiling.

"Come now, warrior. I'm merely showing you the proper way to tend to your scholar." The alien tutted. "So many traditions have been lost to time, but this one was important. So much knowledge and lore has been lost because your scholars weren't properly protected. How many great minds were executed because there was no one to keep them in line?"

Braz didn't know what the hell the being was talking about. He was sure Ridley would know, if the kid weren't too mired in passion to think straight.

"I don't know, but I don't see how this would save their lives."

"If Ridley had been yours to protect, you would have stopped him from telling the truth of this war, and he wouldn't have been hunted. It was the job of the warriors to protect the priests and scholars from the world around them, but also from themselves."

"Can we have this discussion another time?"

"Indeed, your boy is growing desperate." Enlil sounded amused at the young doctor's state.

Ridley was mindlessly rolling his hips, and he'd bit through his lip. Bright red drops of blood were dribbling down his chin.

"The last lesson is simple. It is your job to protect and please him, but he has yet to taste your essence. He cannot truly be happy until he has felt your cock deep in his throat."

Braz groaned at the thought of those swollen lips around his aching flesh, even if the alien directing this whole show was entirely insane. He highly doubted it would be bring Ridley immense happiness, but this was the last thing they needed to do to end the doc's torture.

Braz moved around the bound man until he was kneeling at the head of the bed. Ridley's blue eyes were glazed and almost mindless with passion. His tongue came out to lick lips dry from almost constant panting, smearing the blood that was still welling up to the surface. Without any encouragement, Ridley dipped his head and took Braz into his mouth.

Braz groaned at the moist heat and instinctively thrust up, forcing Ridley to take more. The scholar bobbed his head, his rhythm uneven due to exhausted muscles, but it was so fucking good. The doc's buttocks were raised high, and the green handle was visible in the cleft, and Braz reached for it, twisting it roughly. Ridley squeaked and sucked harder, his mouth and tongue hungrily working to earn more of the same.

Eyes heavy with lust, Braz gripped the handle and gave the man what he wanted, and was rewarded with almost frantic suckling. His hips jerked, thrusting his cock deep into the willing throat until he was so damn close, Braz thought he'd die. Scrambling back, he moved out of Ridley's reach and dropped against the pillows, trying to catch his breath and get his body under control.

"Please, Braz. I can't." Ridley swallowed. "I need you."

He looked so lost and pathetic that Braz couldn't take it. If this whole thing was supposed to be about him protecting the younger man, then he'd finish this now, whether the alien agreed or not.

"He's had enough," Braz shouted. "Take off the damn ring." There was no response. Snarling, Braz tugged the plug from Ridley's ass and tossed it onto the floor. Shaking with anger, he positioned himself behind the now-crying man and thrust home.

The force of his entry pushed Ridley facedown on the pillows, and Braz fell with him, pounding mindlessly into the shuddering body that was desperately arching up so the angle hit just right.

"Oh fuck, fuck, fuck. Braz!" Ridley's ecstatic shout was followed by seizure-like shudders, and Braz knew the alien had somehow disconnected the cock ring by remote.

Heart pounding, he slammed home one last time into the rippling channel and came, biting down on Ridley's shoulder from the force of his orgasm.

He collapsed onto the sweaty back and saw that Ridley was out, his mouth slack and his eyes closed. Braz wasn't far from passing out himself. That had been fucking incredible, barring the irritating alien's lectures. As bad as he felt for the young man, Braz knew that he'd do it again. It probably made him a bastard of the first order, but having the slender body trembling for his touch had been powerfully erotic.

Before he fell asleep, he reached up and released the restraints, then pulled Ridley into his arms, not willing to let the alien get his hands on Braz's scholar again.

Chapter Eleven

Ridley's eyes fluttered open, and he immediately closed them again. His whole body hurt, and he felt heavy, almost drugged. There was a weight on his stomach and another on his thigh, and someone was breathing softly against his neck.

The events of the previous day rushed back, and he felt his face heat and his cock swell. Despite how humiliating it had been to be so completely at Brazen's mercy, it had been the most intense sexual experience of his life. If not for the fact that they'd been forced to do it for an audience, he'd have labeled it the best night of his life.

Ridley's sex life had been decidedly vanilla and boring up till now. Brazen Malone was unlike any other lover Ridley had ever had. There were no pretty words, no false promises that meant nothing come the clear light of dawn. He found he liked the rough, almost possessive way Braz had commanded his body, and God, the pain and pleasure from being paddled had been so unbelievable.

Now that his mind wasn't fogged with lust, he could try and make sense of what Enlil had said. The alien had called him a scholar and Braz a warrior. There had been enough mentions of them in the histories from the time the aliens had been on Earth, and in the prophecy as well, he knew it had to be important.

As he'd told Braz, it was true that high-caste warriors were paired with a scholar, who was often in charge of recording histories, battle strategy, and designing defenses. The sexual nature of the relationship wasn't as well documented, but he'd read enough to see the implied Dominant/submissive connotations. If he'd had his computer, he would have been able to examine the photographs of the original carvings, but he didn't even have his notes here.

The rest of the alien's behavior was unsettling. How had he known so much about Braz and himself? Had the Dynasty known enough about them to give that information, or was there some kind of telepathy thing at work? The thought of Enlil snooping through his thoughts made Ridley's skin itch. If that was so, the alien would know that he and Braz intended to kill him, if at all possible. Without the aliens, the Dynasty would lose their tech supplier, and the war could be brought to an end. So why were they still alive?

Suddenly he bolted up in the bed, his heart racing and his skin rippling with goose bumps. The prophecy said something about sacrifices needed. His dreams had shown him dying at Braz's hand. The icy chill that had been sitting at the base of his spine since he'd seen Brazen step into the office made sense. Ridley had to die in order for Amaj'n to be reborn. That's why the ARA had ordered all the other descendants executed, and that was why Enlil hadn't killed them. If Amaj'n were reborn, she would bring about Enlil's and Enkii's destruction, at least according to his research. Right now, Ridley was the only one standing between the two aliens and destruction.

For all that he'd known he was going to die in this exercise, Ridley wasn't ready to go. It was selfish, maybe, but it wasn't fair that his life was destined to end, just when he'd found something he wanted for himself. Whatever this was with Braz, Ridley wanted to explore it more, find out what made the colonel tick.

The man could be so cold and harsh one minute, then gentle and comforting the next. It was an interesting contrast and made sex an emotional guessing game. Ridley

found he liked that, not knowing which side of Brazen Malone was going to be touching him from one minute to the next.

The bed shifted, and he turned to see sleep-heavy hazel eyes staring at him with concern.

"You okay, Jones?"

"Fine." Except he wasn't. It was on the tip of his tongue to blurt out his revelation about the prophecy, but he kept silent, needing a bit more time to think the situation through before he shared his discovery.

He lay back against the pillows and wasn't surprised when Braz didn't pull him close or offer any kind of intimate touch. Hot and cold.

"Look, I know none of what happened was your choice, so if you're pissed, well, I wouldn't blame you." Braz sounded vaguely worried, maybe a little guilty.

Heat flooded Ridley's cheeks. "I liked it." The words burst from his lips before he could hold them back, before his mind had even processed the thought. "I mean, with you, not him, and not with him watching. It isn't something I'd want to do every time or anything, but yeah, I liked it." God, how humiliating.

"You're a kinky little bastard, Jones. I like that about you." Braz smirked and nuzzled into his neck, biting down lightly.

"I think I'm more perverse than anything." He had to be, or else he'd go mad with the man's mood changes.

"That's good too."

Ridley sighed. "You think he's watching still?"

Braz's muscles tensed. "I don't know, but if he is, I hope he knows we need food."

Food hadn't even entered into his mind until now, with so much information to process, but now his stomach spoke up with a demanding gurgle.

A column of light appeared, and when it receded, there was a table and two chairs and enough food for an army. "I guess that answers your question."

Braz's eyes hardened. "Perverted bastard." There was a wealth of deadly promise in those words, and Ridley shuddered even though the sentiment wasn't directed at him. He knew Braz would have no trouble killing him when he finally got around to admitting the situation, and it was both comforting and painfully depressing.

"It could be on a timer of some sort, or maybe it's just a coincidence." Ridley ignored the other man's disbelieving grunt and wondered how he could prove it, one way or another. If his theory was right, the alien wouldn't want him in danger and would step in if Ridley did anything to put himself at jeopardy.

Acting on impulse, he walked to the table, grabbed up the knife that lay on the platter and slammed it into his own thigh.

"What the hell?" Braz snapped, lunging for the knife. "Are you crazy? What was the point of that?"

"Proving a theory," Ridley muttered, lowering himself into a chair. That had hurt way more than he'd been expecting, and now his whole leg was burning. He sat on the chair and let the colonel wrap the wound tightly, knowing it probably should have stitches.

There was no interference from their captor. Ridley hoped it meant the alien wasn't actually telepathic. He supposed it could mean that the opposite was true and Enlil had known all along that he wouldn't inflict an actual life-threatening injury on himself. *Please let it be the former.*

Braz shot him one last irritated look before dropping into the opposite chair and poking at the breakfast offering. Ridley could tell the man wanted answers but seemed content to wait for now.

As they picked through the food, much of which had to have come from Earth, Ridley told himself to just say it. People were dying on their home world, thousands of them every day, and the longer he sat on the solution, the more lives were lost. His conscience was screaming, but his heart wanted just a bit more time.

"You're awful quiet," Braz said around a mouthful of pineapple.

"Just thinking."

"About last night?"

"Not really, but sort of."

The colonel snorted. "That clears things up."

"Sorry. Just remember you said you'd do whatever it took to get this job done?"

Hazel eyes narrowed at him under a fringe of sleep-mussed black hair. "Well, what if I told you that I figured out what to do?"

"All right, spill."

Ridley dragged in a deep breath. "You have to kill me."

* * * * *

Braz made no outward sign of having heard the whispered confession, but inside he was screaming. It was impossible. Sykes was insane or suicidal or some shit like that. For a moment, he wondered if maybe this had to do with Ridley's guilt over the other descendants being killed, or maybe he'd just given up now that the situation looked so grim. "What makes you say that?"

"It's the only thing that makes sense. I think the ARA officials knew about the prophecy, that's why the others were killed. At first I thought they were seen as a threat, or as some kind of spies planted by the aliens, but I was wrong. We're the sacrifice, the descendants of Amaj'n."

"That the stupidest thing I've heard. Why would you all have to die?"

Ridley hushed him, then whispered, "I don't think he's telepathic, or he'd have stopped me from stabbing myself, but if there're cameras, he could still listen in. Whatever we do, it'll have to be almost instantly fatal." A harsh, bitter sigh escaped the young man's lips. "As for why, because the powers we have are hers, and until all of us are dead, she can't be reborn."

Braz ran his hand through his hair and thought about things objectively. Why would an alien who had no problem killing humans in mass slaughter keep the two of

them alive? If it was true that Ridley's death would bring the dead priestess back, then it would make sense for Enlil to keep the doc alive, but then why him too? Smart strategy would demand Braz be eliminated as a physical threat.

Unless the alien was just a horny pervert who got off on watching two humans have sex.

He voiced the question aloud and saw Ridley's eyes narrow in thought. "Tradition. If they can take over, they'll want to put things back the way they were. If nothing else, these guys are big into their own legend, and the warrior/scholar partnership is part of that. If they kill you, they need to find another soldier to be my protector, according to their ways."

"So he's planning to use us as an example when they've destroyed our world and have the survivors worshipping them again?"

"I suppose."

They settled into silence again, both doing more poking at the food than eating. Finally, Ridley pushed his chair away and went back to the bed. Neither of them had put clothes on, but it didn't seem to be an issue. Only yesterday morning, Ridley had been shocked at Braz coming into the dining room in the buff. A lot had happened between then and now.

Braz didn't want to believe this harebrained theory. Hell, he still could barely wrap his mind around the fact that he was being held captive by an alien.

Even more than that, he didn't want to believe he was going to lose the one thing that had made him feel in years. He'd fought to protect faceless masses and the ideals of the nation he called home, and he'd have been honored to have died in their name.

It stunned him to realize he'd happily take a bullet to protect this one man, not just because it was expected of him as a soldier, but because Ridley's life meant more to him than some vague concept of freedom. Ridley Sykes was a little slice of light in a long string of dark days, and he was going to have to extinguish that light. A few days ago it

wouldn't have mattered, and it pissed him off that if he'd just pulled the trigger when he'd first set eyes on his target, he wouldn't be dealing with this emotional shit.

Could he even do it? He'd killed, taken more lives than he could count, but none of them had been more than a face in a folder or a shape across the battlefield. Killing Ridley now that he'd gotten to know him, had tasted his skin and felt the heat of his body, would make him something he never considered himself to be—a murderer.

Tossing an apple core onto an empty plate, he rose from the table and crossed the room, his eyes alert to every nuance of the doc's posture. Ridley's knees were pulled up to his chest, his chin resting in the small cleft as he stared into space. Shaggy hair fell low on his forehead, just short of blocking his vision.

"How sure are you about this?" Braz finally asked, sitting close enough to be considered cuddling. He didn't want any eavesdroppers and figured hiding their conversation with foreplay would kill two birds with one stone. "Play along. It's the only way to keep this secret." Ridley nodded and closed his eyes.

"Pretty sure." But Brazen could see in Ridley's eyes he was completely convinced this was the only choice. For a moment, he looked around the room, waiting for Enlil to comment or laugh about their foolishness. A big part of him wanted the alien to beam Ridley out of there so he wouldn't have to make this choice.

His stomach clenched painfully, and a lump formed in his throat as he pressed a kiss to his lover's shoulder. "This sucks."

Ridley snorted. "I'm not afraid of dying, you know. I knew this was how it would end, but I thought it would be in a fight or from a stray bullet or something."

"You knew you were going to die?"

Blue eyes looked up, and Braz felt himself caught in their intensity. "I knew you were going to kill me. I've known for years, since the dreams started. It happened in dozens of ways, but it was always you."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"What, you mean when you were itching to shoot me or trap me in a stone coffin?" He looked away, his expression a little lost and empty. "If I'd known my death was a necessity and not just the result of fighting this fight, I would have."

Somewhat satisfied with that, he resumed trailing kisses over Ridley's jaw. "I don't get it. You'll die eventually anyway; we all do. Won't Amaj'n be reborn then?"

Ridley shook his head. "It's not a sacrifice, and even if it would work, I'm not going to sit around and let thousands of people die in a war if I can stop it."

Braz sighed and ran his hands through his hair. He didn't want more people to die—that had been the point of him following Ridley on this insane mission in the first place—but to trade the man before him now for nameless, faceless people... It had to be done, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

"Braz?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you do something for me, before you—you know?"

"Sure." *Anything to put off this task a little longer.*

"Last night, I know you were doing what he told you, but do you think we could do it one last time? Just us; whatever you want." His gaze flickered over to the wall where the display case hung, and his cheeks flushed.

Braz swallowed. One last chance to hold this man. God, he wanted it, but his heart was shying away. Every second he spent was one more memory to hurt him when Ridley was gone, and one more step toward falling for the selfless, brave person who had given him hope.

He ignored the little voice that said it was too late, that he'd been hopelessly lost the minute he'd agreed to help him. Braz wasn't the type to believe in love at first sight, but there'd been something there in those curious blue eyes that had drawn him in. No other target had made him hesitate.

He realized his silence was being taken as rejection. He leaned forward and captured those soft lips with his own. Surprise and hope lit Ridley's eyes before his lashes dropped to fan across pale cheeks.

Braz drew his scholar in so Ridley was sitting in his lap. Unlike their first encounter in the dusty tomb, this was about giving just as much as it was about taking what he wanted. His fingers soothed over lightly muscled arms, memorizing the feel of him. He was determined to make this last, to give Ridley everything he wanted,

He loved the feel of Ridley's tongue in his mouth, Ridley's hands in his hair, tugging urgently in a wordless plea for more.

Braz pulled back and looked into glazed blue eyes and realized Enlil had been right, Ridley Sykes was beautiful, with his cheeks flushed and his hair mussed from passion.

"What do you want, Jones?"

"Everything. Anything. Just, don't stop. Please, Braz." There was so much longing in those words, different than yesterday's frantic need for completion.

"Do you want the toys, like yesterday?" Braz held his breath, hoping the younger man would say yes. The memories of Ridley's clenching muscles and cherry red cheeks made him shudder, and he wanted that one more time. Ridley blushed and nodded once, looking both shy and seductively needy at the same time.

Growling, he dragged the scholar in for a hot, demanding kiss before he pulled away and climbed from the bed. He wanted this to be different than the alien's guided fucking. This time it would be Braz, and only Braz, who made Ridley Sykes turn into a puddle of blissed-out flesh.

Eyeing the toys with a jaded eye, he chose the blue plug that he'd first picked up last time, as well as a red one that was similar to the green. He also picked up a small paddle, a leather cock ring, and a pair of nipple clamps.

Ridley's eyes were glazed, glued to the items in Braz's hand. His hand had drifted down, and he was gripping his cock.

"Hands off, Jones," Braz instructed gruffly.

Ridley clamped his hand between his knees in an obvious effort to control himself. The absolute trust in those blue eyes made Braz's heart thud painfully against his ribs.

He set his choices on the bed and knelt in front of Ridley, pulling the other man up so they were pressed chest to chest, their cocks brushing with each tiny shift. Braz nipped at the slender throat and ran his hands down smooth hips to cup the firm globes of Ridley's ass.

After a few minutes, he nudged Ridley, encouraging him to lie back on the pillows. The sight of all that tight skin lain out for his pleasure made his mouth dry. Braz started with the lips, moist and plump from their kissing. Ridley tasted so sweet, Braz never wanted to stop plundering the hot cavern, teasing and suckling greedily on Ridley's tongue.

But there was so much more to enjoy, and Braz knew if he wanted to make this last, he had to stop before he lost the temptation to push Ridley's legs up and thrust hard and fast into the man's body.

Reluctantly, he pulled away and trailed light, nipping kisses over Ridley's shoulder, his collarbone, and finally to one pebbled nipple. Ridley arched and whimpered, and when Braz attached one of the small clips to the mocha-colored flesh, the scholar gasped. "Holy fuck."

Braz smirked and closed his mouth over the other nipple, teasing it into a hard peak. A hiss escaped Ridley's lips when the second clip was in place.

Smearing a generous amount of lubricant on his fingers, Braz shimmied farther down the bed and licked Ridley's erection and nudged his partner's legs apart. The first finger slid easily past the opening ring of muscle, so he slipped a second in as well. Ridley was already panting, thrusting his hips up to get more. Braz deliberately set a slow pace, watching the blue eyes glaze and his lover's tongue dart out to lick dry lips.

"Stop teasing," the scholar snapped.

"I thought this was my show."

"You're such an asshole."

"Says the guy who's got my fingers in his ass," Braz joked, wriggling said digits against the sensitive bundle of nerves and making Ridley hiss in pleasure.

"Now so isn't the time for one of your random trips into humor land."

Braz picked up the red plug, and his partner eagerly eyed it. "What's wrong, Jones? You want me to flip you over, ram this in your greedy little ass, and then spank the hell out of you?"

Ridley's eyes rolled back and his cock twitched, a large, glistening pearl forming at the tip.

"I'll take that as a yes." He pulled his fingers out and spread some lube on the toy, then pushed it quickly into the clenching hole. "Too bad I'm in charge here, huh?"

Gripping the base of the plug, he slowly fucked the scholar and dipped his head to capture the head of Ridley's dick, sucking hard and poking his tongue into the drooling slit. The stream of babble coming from the doc's mouth would make a jaded sailor blush, but Braz obeyed the stuttered commands and quickened his pace until he felt Ridley's body start to tense.

Jerking away, he flipped the now-cursing man over, mindful of Ridley's injured thigh, reaching under the arching hips to grip the base of the throbbing shaft tightly. "Uh-uh, Jones. Not yet." With the other hand, he picked up the paddle and delivered twenty hard strokes across trembling cheeks, then tossed it across the bed. Moving into position between his lover's thighs, he yanked out the plug and pushed his cock in, nearly coming at the heat and quivering muscles drawing him in.

He thrust lazily, getting control of his own body before he reached for the second toy. It was slim and straight with a round, blunt tip. Smirking, he pulled partway out of Ridley's body and dribbled some lubricant on the length of his own cock, then pushed forward, pressing one finger in alongside his erection. Ridley yelped and moaned, lifting his hips eagerly. Adding a second finger, he kept a slow, steady pace.

When he felt Ridley was ready, he grabbed the blue plug and liberally coated it in oil before lining it up against his cock. It took a few seconds to get the head in, then the rest slid in easily as Ridley shoved hard against Braz's intrusion.

"Fuck. God that feels good."

Braz grunted and drew back, the toy sliding along with his movement, then, with a sharp jerk of his hips, thrust hard and fast. "You like that, Jones?"

"Yes. Harder, Braz. Fuck me harder."

Braz complied, snapping his hips almost violently until Ridley was sobbing and shuddering from the force of his orgasm. The desperate clenching of muscles drew Braz over the edge, and he came with a roof-raising shout.

They lay, the sound of their heavy breathing the only sound in the room. Braz rolled over, pulling out of Ridley's twitching body, and tossed the toy away. The doc was dazed, his face flushed and his lips swollen. It was the way Braz wanted to remember him.

"We should do it quickly," Ridley whispered.

Braz jolted. "Yeah." Neither of them moved. "I don't want to."

"I don't either, but—"

Yeah, saving the world sucked. He stared into Ridley's blue eyes and pressed a rough, bruising kiss on the other man's lips.

"Do it," Ridley said, his voice calm.

Braz felt his eyes sting and realized he was crying. As his hands closed over the slender throat, he forced himself to hold Ridley's gaze. He owed it to the other man to look him in the eyes. Braz knew a hundred ways to kill a man—hell, he'd probably used all of them at one point or another in his career—so he knew how to make it quick. Just the right amount of pressure, in just the right spot, and it would be over in seconds, with no chance for resuscitation.

The muscles in Ridley's neck tensed as he instinctively struggled for breath. Braz's vision blurred from tears, but he held on until his lover fell limp against him.

A sob escaped his lips. He, Brazen Malone, who hadn't cried at his mother's death, or any other time in his life, broke down and let his grief overwhelm him. Dragging Ridley's lifeless body against his, he pressed a last kiss to unresponsive lips, then lay down against the pillows.

The room filled with light, a wind with a vague floral scent drifted past, and he could have sworn he heard a woman's voice whisper, "Rest, Brazen Malone. You've done well."

Epilogue

Braz woke up in a strange bed. There were blue cotton sheets in place of the red satin, and he was alone. Blinking sore eyes in confusion, he climbed from the bed and surveyed the room intently. It was quietly masculine, dark furniture, two of everything. On top of one of the dressers sat a picture in a black frame. Two men stood in front of what he recognized as the university where he'd first met Ridley. The taller of the two had his arm around the other, smiling crookedly while his companion grinned widely. It was them. But it was impossible. They'd never had their picture taken together, and they'd never been so freely happy.

And Ridley was dead.

Braz turned the picture down and opened the drawers, pulling out dark, simple T-shirts and faded, well-worn jeans. Curious, he turned to the second dresser and found brighter colors, lots of khaki, and he knew these had to be Ridley's. They were his style.

After dressing in the first things he put his hands on, Braz wandered out of the room, wary of possible danger and completely confused. The last thing he remembered was the light leaving Ridley's eyes, the muscles of Ridley's neck tight beneath his fingers, then a flash and a softly whispered female voice.

He was almost sure this was another of the alien's tricks and that Ridley's theory had been proved wrong. Anger and grief burned in his stomach. He'd killed his lover, the man he'd only just realized he was in love with, for nothing.

Stepping into the living room, he caught his first glance of the world outside. Green lawn spread away from the house, surrounded by a simple white fence and cheery flower beds. A barbecue and patio table sat on a deck that had obviously been repaired recently, judging by the unweathered boards that made up part of the railing.

Stepping out the sliding-glass door, he breathed in the unforgettable scent of earth. There was no metallic tang to the air, just soil, the sweet wisp of marigolds from a planter box a few feet away, and a hint of smog from the traffic that hummed comfortingly from not too far away.

He was home.

None of this made sense. Heart racing, he went around to the front of the house and saw a tidy street lined with houses that had all seen recent repair. It was like the war had ended and people were finally able to put their lives back together.

"What the hell?" Had all this happened while he was on Enlil's ship? It had felt like only two days, but time could have moved differently there.

Or had there been something else at work?

His legs trembled, and he sat heavily on the front step, running his hands through his hair. How long he sat there, Braz couldn't say, but the light had changed when he looked up and saw a cab pulling up in front of the house.

The door opened, and a man stepped out. He had shaggy brown hair and a slender build that was very familiar. Braz's mouth went dry, and he couldn't breathe. It was Ridley.

As Braz stared, the young man walked hesitantly up the cobblestone path, fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. His blue eyes looked wary and confused.

"Ridley?"

A ragged breath burst from Sykes's lungs. "You know me?"

Braz's eyes narrowed. "Of course I know you."

"Thank God. They told me this was where I lived, and that my name was Ridley Jones, but I don't remember anything before I woke up in that hospital."

He didn't remember. God, what the hell was going on here? "What else did they tell you?"

Ridley shrugged. "I was found in an alley after a meteor strike. There was something about a war being over, but I don't know anything else."

Braz's eyes narrowed in thought. He knew there hadn't actually been meteors, but if the general population thought there had been one recently, then he'd seriously missed something big. "Come on, Jones. Let's get you inside. We'll figure this out, all right?"

Ridley nodded and let himself be led into the house. Braz saw him looking at everything with a dull sadness in his eyes. "I don't remember this place."

Braz almost said he didn't recognize it either, but figured it would only freak the scholar out. "We haven't been here long."

"Oh."

A heavy silence hung between them. Braz wished he could think of something to say to make sense of the situation, but he was completely in the dark. Ridley should have been the one with the answers, not sitting there looking even more like a college student than normal.

Leaving the other man standing by the living room couch, Braz went in search of something that would give them some clue to what they'd been dropped into. On the wall next to the fridge hung a digital clock/calendar. Unless it hadn't been set, the date was May 29, 2020. Over three months had passed.

He didn't know how that was possible.

Having even more questions now than before, he went back to the living room to find Ridley staring out the window. "Jones?"

"Yeah?"

"You all right?" A slight lift of the shoulders was his only answer. "Is there anything you need?"

"What's your name?"

The question left a hollow feeling in his chest.

"Brazen Malone."

Ridley hummed thoughtfully. "And were we friends?"

"Something like that." Braz closed the distance between them and placed a light kiss on lips turned red from nervous biting.

"Oh." Surprised wonder lit blue eyes. "I wish I could remember."

Braz wrapped his arms around his lover and breathed in the scent of him. He had a suspicion that Amaj'n was responsible for this. How else could he explain Ridley being alive, this house, and the time loss? Giving Ridley the name Jones had to be her doing. The only person who could answer that question, though, had no memory of his own life, let alone the mythology surrounding the long-dead priestess.

Maybe someday they'd find the answer, but Braz doubted it. It was one of those things that should just be accepted and not questioned. Ridley was alive, they were together, and the war was over. Maybe it was better that Ridley didn't remember; then the younger man wouldn't ever have to relive those agonizing seconds where his life slipped away. Braz only wished he could have that luxury.

The comforting warmth standing trustingly in his arms was enough to push the memory away a little. Perhaps, with time, it would seem more like a nightmare.

"You know what we should do?"

Ridley looked up and met his gaze. "What?"

"We should go for a walk." They had just saved the world, after all. Braz wanted to see it with his own eyes, and then when Ridley was a little less unsettled, he'd spend some time enjoying the fact that, despite the odds, they were both here to enjoy their victory.

THE END

Piper Evyns

Piper Says...

Life would be freaking awesome if I could camp every day of the summer. Sadly, there's no electricity in the wild, so I stick close to home so I can write. One day, I'll invest in a portable solar generator to power the laptop, and I'll be set.

I am a huge toy addict. Not sex toys, though those are cool too, but I mean techie toys. I'm the kind of person that will drool over every new apple product when it comes on the market, even if I have no use for it.

Check out Piper's Website at <http://www.piperevyns.com>