

ALICIA NORDWELL



**Cataclysmic  
Evolution**

A MM ROMANCE GROUP  
LOVE'S LANDSCAPES STORY

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## CATAclysmic Evolution

By Alicia Nordwell

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# CATAclysmic Evolution

By Alicia Nordwell

## Photo Description

He stood there, fingers twisted into the chain-link, a challenge in his eyes as he stared me down. His curly hair framed his face, but even with the hair you could tell he was all guy. His canted hips and tight pants hid nothing. He wore a giant watch and a ton of bracelets. The brightly colored twisted cord, leather, and braided string stood out against his honey skin.

I was in so much trouble.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*There he is again. What is his problem? Whenever our paths cross he has that same mix of wariness and anger on his face. I'm not searching him out... I don't even think I know him, do I?... and yet it seems that every time I turn around he's there, watching.*

*Dear Author, please help me. Do I know him? Have I wronged him? Why can't I remember? And how can I get him to look at me with a different, more positive expression?*

*Thank you most sincerely!*

*Bookbee*

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** teens, bullying, post-apocalyptic/ELE, disability, hurt/comfort, space travel, mutation, first love

**Word Count:** 40,796

# **CATAclysmic EVOLUTION**

**By Alicia Nordwell**

## Chapter One

“Everyone have their slipcards? You’re going to need them.” Barron ignored the lecturing teacher. Everyone waited in the parking lot, at his request, while he went over all the rules. Like they didn’t all know them already.

Well, maybe not the new kid.

Who dressed like that? He was obviously trying to attract all sorts of the wrong attention. Guys around here did *not* wear their hair long and flowing, curling around their shoulders. Jeans were meant to fit relaxed and held up with a belt, not tight and barely reaching sharp hipbones just begging to be squeezed in a bruising grip.

Barron could see the new kid’s hip bones because his shirt was rucked up under his black jacket. Black on black, how original. Emo brat with the dark clothes, flaring nostrils, and narrowed eyes. The only thing he couldn’t ruin were his soft lips, somehow a much darker red than he would have expected from his honeyed skin. Those lips had been haunting Barron for more than a week. They didn’t have classes together, thankfully.

“Barron.”

He strutted when he walked. Cocky bastard.

“Mr. Pernel!”

Barron jerked. He scowled. “What?”

“Excuse me? You want to rephrase that.” The *now* was unspoken but hung clearly in the air. His teacher could have his dad on face-to-face conference in seconds. It wouldn’t be the first time, either.

“Sorry.” Barron abandoned his slouch against the fence, snapping to attention fast enough to make the muscles in his back protest. “Yes, Mr. Hodge?” He’d better straighten up and fly right. The same words his father enjoyed snapping at him on a damn near daily basis echoed in his mind.

“Your permission?”

Barron dug the frayed slipcard out of his back pocket. They were supposed to last the entire school career from their very first day, but his saw a lot of mileage. Demotions, detentions, parent notes... they’d probably have cut down an entire forest just for him if they still sent letters home. “Got it.” He handed it over to his teacher who stuck it in his reader, eyeing the screen until it beeped.

“Oh good, not forged for once.”

“Who’d do that? It’s a field trip to a cave.” He frowned. Barron saved his forges for important things, like covering for when he had to skip. He didn’t want anyone knowing he took off school to head over to the used bookstore to attend seminars by Erink Brogherd. The guy was local, but he was going to be a big-name author one day. Barron followed his blog and always attended his talks.

“One never knows, Mr. Pernell.” Mr. Hodge handed back his slipcard. Barron shoved it into his pocket, already back to watching the new guy. He leaned against the fence, hanging on with his hands above his head; a chunky watch covered one wrist and the other was layered with leather, yarn, and cord bracelets.

How old-fashioned.

“Time to go!” Mr. Hodge shouted. “Two to a seat.”

Barron barreled on to the first bus to nab the last seat. He hated feeling knees in his back from idiots behind him. “Hey, Creed, sit with me.” His friend was skinny as a rail. Barron would get more of the seat if Creed sat with him.

Thavin and William sat in front of them. Barron reached up and yanked on Thavin’s hair.

“What the hell, man?”

“It’s getting too long.” Barron tugged on it again. “You need a cut.” He’d only get to keep his friends as friends if they toed the line his dad made him toe. So he put pressure on them when he had to. He needed his friends. Luckily, they’d been listening to him for years and didn’t really question it anymore.

“Whatever.” Thavin turned sideways in the seat. “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Man, can you believe they’re making us go on this trip again? How many times have we seen the Doestrin caves?”

“Every other year since we were old enough not to piss our pants in the dark.” Creed pulled a pack of gum out of his pocket.

“Nah.” Barron shook his head when Creed offered it to him.

“What kind?” William was a mooch, but he was picky about the kind of gum he’d chew.

“Café Mocha.”



“Kick ass. Gimme.” William had a thing for retro sayings. Had to match the name his parents had saddled him with. He snagged two pieces.

“Hey pig, just one,” Creed objected.

“I am.” He offered one square to Thavin.

“You know I don’t like that caffeinated crap.” Thavin shook his head.

“Guess I’ll just have to keep both squares.” William popped them both in his mouth and chewed quickly. “Hmm... good.”

“Dumbass.” Creed smacked him upside the head. “Those better last you all day.”

“Yeah, well, I’m gonna need them to stay awake. I’m sick of these cave trips too. Thank God we graduate next month.”

“Let me have your attention, please.” Mr. Hodge stood at the front of the bus. “We have an hour-long ride to the caves.” He rolled his eyes at the groan. “Followed by a four-hour tour of the caves.”

“What?” Thavin frowned. “Tours are two hours.”

“Hey, Mr. Hodge, what gives?” William shouted over everyone.

“I will explain if you guys can shut your traps for a few minutes, so stop talking.” Mr. Hodge was actually a pretty cool guy for an older teacher. He wore jeans and button-up shirts over a tee most days. None of the suits and loafers some teachers wore. He had a sense of humor, too.

Most of the time.

“This trip to the caves is for the senior class. I know you guys have been to the Doestrin cave system and really enjoy it”—he rolled his eyes at their boos—“but there are some very delicate crystalline structures down a tunnel at the back of the caves you’ve never seen. We hope that by now, as seniors about to graduate, you can be trusted into an area of the caves not generally open to the public. You have no idea how much the fines will be if we’re wrong. Fines that the school will not pay, by the way.”

Mr. Hodge sat in the seat behind the auto driver controls. As soon as their scheduled departure time hit, the bus started up and began the drive out of the city to Doestrin National Park.

Buses weren’t all that different from the ones his grandpa told him about. Kids were still crammed into uncomfortable seats, the buses were loud, and

they bounced a lot more than anything with hover air tires should. Barron wished he could've driven his car. It'd taken him three summers to earn the money himself, but he was determined to have some freedom over the summer when he wasn't working for his father's firm.

Barron sat back and listened to his friends bullshit each other about the party last weekend. He hadn't gone. His dad had grounded him for the less-than-perfect grade on his trig exam. Not that it mattered what he got. Barron was going to Parks University in the fall, tuition already paid for the first semester.

His friends were all going too. Barron idly scanned the bus. The preppy girls all sat together a few seats in front of them, their squeals audible over the hum of the anti-grav motor under the bus.

What were they squealing over? Abbe and Hazea had their heads together, leaning forward to talk to the people in front of them. He could tell it was the twins by their garish purple hair. One ducked down and Barron stiffened.

The new kid sat with his back to the window, talking to the girls seated around him. They were all fascinated by him, of course. Barron hadn't seen him get on their bus. The guy flicked his hair back over his shoulder. Barron ground his teeth together.

"Hey, Bar, what's up?" Creed followed the direction of his gaze. "Ahh, the new guy. Who moves right before graduation?"

"Someone who shouldn't be happy. Of course he's surrounded by all those girls, so of course he's probably giddy as a pig in shit."

Barron blinked. "What the hell did you just say?"

Creed grinned. His orange hair, pale skin, and gap-toothed grin always made him look like a jack-o'-lantern to Barron. The guy was stick thin, but he had a round face. He shrugged. "William, of course."

"Hey, that's a good one!" William snickered. "My gram taught me it. She grew up on a farm. Back when they actually had farms, that is."

"Whatever." Barron went back to staring at the new guy.

"His name's Revi Pore-something or other." Thavin frowned. "I don't remember exactly. He moved from Alabama? I think." He worked in the office and often got them information before everyone else got it. "I processed his ID file yesterday for his slipcard. Wherever he lived last was super slow sending the data."

Revi.

“He looks like a girl,” Barron muttered.

“Yeah, you and your obsession with hair. He’s gotta set your OCD on fire.” Thavin snapped his fingers. “Porter. That’s his last name.”

“Or maybe other parts of him are on fire.” William raised his eyebrows and leered at him. Barron reached up and smacked him upside the head.

“Knock it off. He’s not my type.” Barron sank down, wedging his knees against the seat in front of him. “Wake me up when we get there.” He closed his eyes, but he didn’t sleep. If he listened hard, and filtered out all the other sounds, he could hear him. The new guy.

Revi.

His drawl stood out against the clipped tones of the guys and high-pitched gabbing girls. His looks might drive Barron crazy, but his voice was very... nice. Shit.

Not part of the program. Barron was going to find a nice jock boyfriend who liked sports and beer and could hold a conversation with his dad.

Barron’s irritation spiked as he ended up standing behind the kid as everyone shuffled off the bus. He should have made William and Thavin go first. Two of the girls had stepped into a seat by their friend so they could get off together. Of course he waved them ahead of him with a campy limp wrist wave, removing the buffer between Barron and the annoyance that was Revi Porter.

The guy didn’t even shuffle like the rest of them. He might as well have minced down the aisle. Barron clenched his hands into fists. They approached the steps, and he couldn’t take it anymore. When Revi went to step down, Barron kicked his back foot, pushing it off the edge of the step.

Revi stumbled down the steps, yelping as he twisted and then fell onto the rough gravel parking lot. Barron smirked, and then glanced over his shoulder at his friends.

“Whoops. I’m so clumsy.”

Thavin frowned, but William and Creed both snickered.

“Sorry about that, new guy,” Barron said. He grinned. “I thought you’d already pranced down.”

“Mr. Porter, what happened?” Mr. Hodge asked. “Why are you on the ground?”

“I tripped.” Revi grimaced as he picked at his palms.

“Oh really?” He looked at Barron and crossed his arms over his chest. “What did you do, Mr. Pernell?”

“He tripped Revi on purpose. I saw him.”

Barron sneered at Kiena. She was such a snotty goody-goody, to use one of William's phrases. She flicked some of her bright red hair away from her ugly freckle-face. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I did not. It was an accident. I even said I was sorry, didn't I?” He directed his last comment at the new guy who was getting up with help from the twins, Abbe and Hazea. Of course they were right there to help him out, wiping the dust off his pants while he balanced on his left leg.

“Was this an accident?” Mr. Hodge asked Revi.

“Yeah, sure. I'll be dandy in a few. Just need to clean my hands up a bit.” The bloody scrapes he flashed were full of dirt and tiny pebbles. He stepped gingerly forward, grimacing when his right foot supported his weight. “Ankle's a bit sore.”

“We have a long day ahead of us. If you can't walk, you can't go into the cave. There's a first aid station by the gift shop. You can have your hands cleaned and your ankle checked out there.”

“Okay. And that's...?”

Mr. Hodge smiled. “Barron can help you over to it. As I recall, he fell climbing last year and had to spend an hour waiting for the rest of the class to finish the tour. It's the least he can do, seeing how sorry he is and all.” Mr. Hodge stared at Barron—waiting for him to object, he just knew it. “And if he can't go on the tour, neither can you, Mr. Pernell.”

“I'd be happy to,” Barron said through clenched teeth. “Do you need to lean on me?” Barron held out his arm. He didn't really want to go on the tour, but he didn't want to spend four hours with this... poofy guy, either.

“No.” Revi didn't look any happier than Barron. He took a hopping step forward. “Which way?”

“Left.” Barron continued with his one word directions until they reached the first aid station. He leaned against the wall outside when Revi went in. Walking

beside the kid, Barron had started to feel bad. He limped along without saying anything, no bitchy comments or complaints.

Maybe he was tougher than he looked.

"I can find my own way back," Revi said when he came out. He had a soft wrap bandage on his ankle, over his pants. Barron grunted, but followed the slim boy back to the crowd of seniors waiting to start the tour by the entrance to the Doestrin cave system. Guess they were going into the cave after all.

Barron's respect for Revi went up a notch—until he slid a rubber band hiding among his bracelets off his wrist and pulled his hair back into a ponytail.

"Ahh, Revi and Barron. All good to go?" Mr. Hodge checked his reader. "Good," he said when Revi nodded. "Okay, everyone. We will stay together as a group, but should anyone get lost"—he looked at Thavin, who'd 'wandered off' the last trip—"I want to remind you to stay put. I have everyone's card in my reader with active tracking enabled."

Barron, Creed, Thavin, and William walked at the back of the group. There were a couple of guys behind them, but all the girls were up near the front, and Revi stayed with them.

"Man, your prank backfired," William said. His face was shadowed in the dim cave, his dark hair almost black in the lack of light. "The girls are all over him, instead of thinking he's a clumsy oaf."

It was true. Barron didn't care, though. "I said it was an accident."

Creed snorted. His pale skin stood out, even in the cave. Some of the features in the open spaces were lit up. They cast enough light to walk along the path but threw interesting shadows and curves on the rock. Creed stepped closer to a light. "An accident." He made quotes with his fingers.

Barron rolled his eyes.

"What-ev-er." William was such an idiot. Barron shrugged.

"I couldn't care less what bitches like Kiena and the twin twits fucking think." One more month and he never had to see them again.

"You better cool it; here comes Mr. Hodge." Thavin cleared his throat. "Oh yeah, I can't wait to see the new cave. I always wondered what was beyond that gate."

They'd come up with all sorts of ideas every tour. When they were kids it was 'the bat cave', after William had found copies of old comics in the attic—

to the last time's 'deep, dark chasm that had no bottom'. It was almost disappointing that it just led to more caves, even if they'd known those ideas were stupid. The competition to come up with the craziest reason to cordon off the dark corridor had been the only thing that made the trip anything but mind-numbingly boring.

"I know you've all seen this before, but please give our guide some respect. He might actually share something you don't know, but if you're talking"—he shot a glance at Barron and the guys but mostly focused on the group behind them—"you won't hear him. Besides... I might give you a test."

What the hell? A test? On rocks, no less. Barron crossed his arms over his chest. It was going to be a very long day.

They reached the entrance to the back caves faster than before. The tour guide was giving them a different run down on the history of the cave, and moving faster than on previous tours. The entrance was narrower, forcing them all to walk singly or in pairs at the most, along the rough path. It grew darker the farther they went.

"What's with the lack of light?"

The question passed up and down the line of hushed students. The tour guide stopped them. "Can you all hear me?" His voice was faint and sounded flat compared to the echo in the big cave chambers, but in the eerie stillness of the tight cave corridor, it was enough. "Good. I know it's dark, but the path is safe as long as you walk. The cave we're going to is quite unique. The lighting has to be exact, or you won't be able to appreciate it. Too much light is just as bad as too little. The space between the panels on the ceiling allow for your eyes to gradually adjust to the ambient light needed once we arrive."

"Can he be more cryptic?" Thavin asked. He shivered. "I'm cold."

"It's not cold. You're just scared," Creed said.

"I am not." Thavin elbowed Creed.

"Ow! Knock it off, you made me smack my shoulder on the wall."

Barron growled. "Both of you knock it off." He shrugged out of his windbreaker and handed it to Thavin. "Here. I'm hot anyway." It was weird, the way there was no wind. The smell of rock and dust hung in the air.

Someone poked Barron in the back. "Hey, move."

The class had started walking again, and they hadn't noticed. "Fuck off." Barron glared at Pyl, the guy who'd poked him.

“I don’t want to get a lecture for getting lost like your idiot friend last time, so either start walking or move.”

Temptation teased Barron to show Pyl just who the idiot was, but he restrained himself. Barely. “Don’t touch me again.” They started walking once more.

Even Barron’s skin was beginning to crawl in the dim light and seemingly endless tunnel by the time a glow at the end of the tunnel began to grow. He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened and shielded them as he stepped behind the semi-circle of his classmates.

Long, thin crystals hung down from the roof of the cavern like milky icicles. Sheets of the stuff covered the ground, like they’d dripped and refrozen. The light from the corridor and a few dim spotlights sent sparkles dancing around the room every time Barron blinked.

It was amazing.

He ignored the guide’s speech and stared up at the ceiling. The stone up there gleamed. Barron had never seen anything like it.

Then the lights went out and he couldn’t see anything at all.

Girls screamed, and guys shouted. No one could move in the pitch black. It was as if the yards and yards of rock above them seemed suddenly about to collapse upon them if they moved. One of Barron’s friends grabbed his shoulder. Barron reached for William, who’d been standing on his right. Thavin or Creed grabbed on too, digging their fingers deep in a bruising grip.

“What the hell just happened?”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

“Calm down, please, calm down.” Mr. Hodge attempted to restore some calm in the darkness. When the girls didn't stop shrieking he shouted, “Girls!”

That shut them up, though a few whimpers didn't stop.

“Thank you.” There was a low murmur. “Okay, Mr. Brasher has a small light. We're going to turn it on and get the emergency lights out of the storage box. No one else is to move until further instruction.”

The tour guide's tiny light lit the room like a strobe. It bounced off the hundreds of hanging crystals and reflected around the room. Being in the cave must be like standing inside a giant gemstone, all angles and light beams bouncing off the tiny spikes sticking out of the walls and ceiling.

“Wow.” Barron couldn't help the comment. He could just imagine how this must have appeared to an early American armed only with torchlight. It was probably even more beautiful with the twining orange and yellow flames. Having the lights go out was pretty damn freaky, but no one else had probably seen the cave like they were in a long, long time.

Mr. Hodge walked through the students, who were crowded together in tight clumps. The storage locker was just to the left of Barron's group so they were second to receive their light. The teacher handed it to Thavin. “Here, son. Don't point this up at the ceiling or directly at the crystal sheets, if you can avoid it. Don't need to go blinding everyone.”

“O-okay.” Thavin flicked on the light. Barron could see the faces of his friends. They stayed in a tight clump, not holding on to each other anymore, but leaning close together. Soon the room lit up, even brighter than when they'd first come in. Barron tried to keep his eyes down; not everyone was following Mr. Hodge's directions.

There were more hurried whispers between their tour guide and teacher. Some of the students murmured to each other, and some of the girls were still crying. Barron just wanted to leave. He didn't know why the lights had gone out, and he didn't care. Maybe this would finally be the end of their school's ridiculous routine of making students visit the caves.

“Okay, class, attention please.” Mr. Hodge waited for everyone to fall silent. “Mr. Brasher is going to lead us back out of the caves. This will take a while if the lights have gone out through the entire system. Unfortunately, my



reader is no longer working either. That means extra precautions. If someone gets lost we might not be able to find you." Someone gasped, and one girl wailed. Her friends quickly hushed her, hugging her from both sides.

"Don't panic!" Mr. Hodge said. "To ensure everyone gets out safely, we're going to link ourselves in a chain."

"So we're all going to hold hands?" William asked. "Can we sing folk songs too?" His voice was shaky, but he was making jokes. A few guys chuckled.

"No, smartass, I want everyone to use one hand to hold on to the person in front's shoulder. We'll stop every ten minutes to take roll call. Anyone loses their grip, or feels the person behind them stop touching their shoulder, they're to call out. If you get separated, for any reason, do not move an inch. I will come back for you, even without the reader. Does everyone understand?"

The chorus of yeses was loud compared to the quiet. The silence felt even more oppressive afterward. Mr. Hodge organized everyone into order, sending the guide down the hall a short ways until they could all manage to line up single file. The signal to walk forward or stop was a squeeze on the shoulder.

Agas came and went as they all shuffled out of the deep cave, toward the entrance. Barron had no idea how Mr. Hodge was telling the time, but at regular intervals the squeeze came to stop and the teacher would call out the names of everyone in the senior class 'til they all responded. Barron was sweating through his thin T-shirt by the time they got back to the gate.

They'd stopped nearly twenty times.

The lights in the larger cavern weren't on, either. The formations and sculptures nature had formed out of the rock over the eons were invisible outside the tiny spheres of their lights. "From here forward there are branches and a lot of open caverns. It is imperative everyone stay together. I know you're probably tired, hungry, and thirsty. Just be patient, and we'll get out of here soon."

The train of students stopped three times after that for people who tripped or lost their grip. At least their system was working, even if it was a slow-assed system. They hadn't lost anyone, and they were halfway to the mouth of the cave.

By the time they neared the mouth, Barron's feet hurt, and his hand and arm muscles had cramped. There was sweat dripping down his sides, even in the cool of the caves. "I gotta take a piss," Creed said in Barron's ear.

“Tough. Hold it. We’re old enough not to piss ourselves anymore, remember?”

“Ass.” Creed squeezed him. Barron fought the urge to shrug him off.

“We’ll be out soon, and you can use the bathroom in the gift shop. Just stop whining.” Stiff upper lip and all that. Barron was never sure what that really meant, but like straighten up and fly right, it was another dictum that often echoed through his mind in his father’s voice.

*Be a man.*

*Don’t whine.*

*Don’t cry.*

*Toe the line, and live up to the expectations placed on you, or else.*

College really couldn’t come soon enough.

“Shouldn’t we hear someone by now?” Barron heard someone ahead of him ask.

The only one who knew where they really were was the guide. “I’m sure the cave mouth was evacuated and everyone grouped in a central location until whatever caused the electrical malfunction can be repaired. Don’t worry. One more cavern, and we’ll be out.” Their tour guide spoke in an overly-hearty voice not nearly as confident as he seemed to think it was.

The mouth of the cave let enough light into the central cavern that the teens could let go of one another. Barron shrugged his shoulders and shook out his hands. The muscles tingled with small, fiery pins as they relaxed.

When the first scream broke the silence, it surprised even him. Barron jerked, his heart racing, and spun to find out what was wrong. Soon, more screams echoed off the high stone ceiling, rebounding and buffeting them until nothing else could be heard.

Mr. Hodge shook the girls, even striking a few on their cheeks. “Stop it!” he bellowed. ‘It’ repeated, fainter and fainter, echoing over the cries, but the normally mild-mannered teacher’s shout broke the group hysteria.

“Girls, turn around or close your eyes.”

Barron couldn’t see what had set them off. It was probably some small scaly or furry creature. There was a fetid stench in the air. Maybe it had dragged in something dead or something.

He edged toward the area where Mr. Hodge and the guide argued in hushed voices. Others were moving away, making it easier to get close.

Bodies lay near the mouth of the cave. The reek of shit filled the air when a small breeze swirled the dust near the stairs leading out. There were at least ten, their bodies contorted and collapsed on the steps and to the sides, like they fell off the small slope up to the parking lot.

“Holy fuck,” Barron whispered. He gagged, covering his mouth and nose with one hand. What the hell happened? The breakfast shake he’d had before he left home threatened to come back up, and he was glad they’d missed lunch. From the sounds behind him, others weren’t able to hold onto the contents of their stomachs. The sick odor of bile set off even more people. The cries and demands to have someone tell them what happened barely filtered through his shock.

“Everyone, I need your attention.” Barron turned his head slowly from the dead men and women, the first he’d ever seen, to Mr. Hodge. “Students!” he snapped. “I know this is horrific.” He swallowed hard. “I don’t know what happened, and I can’t explain it. We need to move back, away from the bodies, while Mr. Brasher checks in with the park management and finds out what’s going on.”

“I want to go home,” Abbe whimpered. She clung to her twin sister who had tears streaming down her face.

“We’ll get back to the school and notify all your parents as soon as we can. Right now my scanner’s still not working and neither is Mr. Brasher’s communication device. I need everyone to stay together, in a group, for just a little bit longer.” He started to usher the students toward the dim shadows at the back of the big cavern, near the grouping of rocks many younger kids used to climb on and sit.

Barron sank down to the floor when they stopped. The bodies were out of sight, but not out of mind. He could still see their pale faces. It hadn’t been a peaceful death, whatever had happened. Their eyes and mouths had been locked open, a rictus of pain and death stamped over their face. One man’s arm had stuck up in the air, the fingers curled. Barron’s stomach churned at the memory.

He swallowed convulsively to stop from gagging until the urge passed.

“What does that?” He wiped his hands over his mouth, unsure of the answer and not really wanting to know. He didn’t say it, but Barron wanted to go home

too. His friends huddled around him, close enough to touch, but not really touching. None of them replied.

Ages seemed to pass before they heard footsteps hurrying toward them. The tour guide's light beam played over the group. Barron shielded his eyes from the spotlight, but wasn't fast enough. Afterburner images, little round circles, floated in front of him.

"Damn." He rubbed his eyes.

Mr. Hodge's mouth dropped open when the other man began gesticulating wildly. He shook his head. Mr. Brasher took a step back. He shook his head.

"—can go out and see for yourself if you don't believe me."

What? What could he go see? What in the hell was going on?

Barron watched. He was used to listening to what wasn't said, knowing how to judge a mood by the details. When his dad came in with rigid shoulders, taking deep breaths, Barron knew it was time to disappear.

But the tour guide wasn't angry.

He was scared. Really scared.

"What the hell happened?" William asked.

Thavin pointed a shaking finger at the area just out of sight where the bodies had fallen. "I saw one of those guys on our way in. H-He had kids with him."

Creed's usual smile was gone. He shook his head. "My guess would be an attack. Like a bomb. Something knocked out everything electrical. The lights are off and so are the fans." He pointed at the air duct fans which weren't quietly forcing fresh air into the caves. "We should get satellite service here, but my com is dead too. I mean, it's on, but it's not connecting to anything."

Barron's dad had his communicator, the consequence of not getting the grade he was expected to achieve on his trig test. The CD was locked in his desk drawer. "Maybe it was something chemical."

Some girl overheard them. "A chemical bomb?" she shrieked. "Mr. Hodge, Mr. Hodge!" She jumped up and ran to their teacher. "What's going on? Are we going to die?"

"Trielle, calm down." Mr. Hodge put his hands on her shoulders. "You need to slow your breathing down before you hyperventilate."

She wasn't listening, and other people were catching her hysteria. Frankly, Barron was surprised it hadn't happened sooner. Half the guys were crying too!

"Listen to me, everyone. We can't help these people. Mr. Brasher is coming with us, and we're going to go back to the school. You're all going to line up and get on the bus. I want everyone back in the exact same seats they sat in on the way here. Make sure your seat mate is here. This is not the time to fuck around, people.

"On the bus. Now."

Everyone stood up and began to shuffle to the cave entrance. Some of the girls let out sobs as they edged around the fallen bodies, but they kept moving. After so many hours in the dark, the sunlight was intense. Barron's eyes watered. He shaded them with one hand.

There were a few cars on the road, stopped at random spots, but he didn't want to see inside them. What kind of bomb could do this, could kill so many people so quickly? There were kids outside on the small play structure near the picnic tables.

After that, Barron tried his best not to see anything.

He was afraid to breathe or touch anything, but they had no choice. Barron hadn't prayed in years, but as he made his way down the aisle of the bus to the back seat, he sent a fervent prayer to whatever entity might be listening to protect them all.

With no electricity, the bus was on full manual. Mr. Hodge forced the doors shut and sat in the folded seat in front of the controls. Never, in all the years Barron had been in school, had anyone actually had to drive the bus. They'd had drills, of course, but he never expected it to actually happen.

Could Mr. Hodge even drive something as big as this? He clenched the back of the seat in front of him and wished for a seat belt as the teacher actually pushed a button to turn the bus on using the back-up independent power system.

It didn't work. Mr. Hodge smacked his hand on the panel. "Damn it!"

What the fuck else was going to go wrong? They lived an hour, by vehicle, away from the park. It'd take forever to walk. What if whatever had actually happened were to happen again? Apparently anyone in the open had been a sitting duck.

“No, wait. Blue button, three times, prime the system to switch to gas manual, then the green button.” The eerie silence on the bus magnified Mr. Hodge’s tense mutters. He followed his own directions, and the bus finally rumbled to life.

Now they had to make it back. Some people talked once Mr. Hodge managed to get them out of the parking lot and onto the highway, their hushed whispers barely audible over the incredibly loud engine. They couldn’t go very fast, even on the highway. Cars were all over, like they’d died just as surely as the people Barron occasionally caught glimpses of.

He tried to face forward and not look. By the time they approached Mission Flats, the sun was nearing the horizon. Barron should’ve been starving, but his stomach was twisted in knots. The town was just as bad as everywhere else.

There were a few people outside the police station. Mr. Hodge stopped the bus. “Everyone stay in your seats. I know you’re all anxious to get home and find your families, but I can’t let you off this bus until we know more. I’m going to go inside. Mr. Brasher is going to stay with you. Sit tight, and don’t panic.”

Mr. Hodge quickly jumped out of the bus and then shut the doors from the outside. He trotted over to the young couple standing outside the station. Everyone watched, but the windows wouldn’t go down, and they couldn’t tell what they were saying.

They gestured toward the station. Mr. Hodge looked back at them. He held up one hand and then folded all but one finger down. He disappeared inside the police station then.

“Do you think our parents will be at school?” William asked. He huddled in his seat, with his arms wrapped around his chest like he was cold, even though the air on the bus was stifling in the early evening warmth.

“Could be. They survived.” Thavin tilted his head toward the shaking people standing beside their car.

After a few minutes, Mr. Hodge finally reemerged from the station. An officer was with him.

“That’s Harvey.” William stood up, pounding on the window. “Harvey!” His older brother had been given a name even more unfortunate than William’s. His brother looked up. A look of relief lightened the suddenly aged features.

Harvey jumped up the steps. William stumbled as fast as he could down the center aisle of the bus. They crashed together, arms wrapped tight around each

other. Harvey pushed William back, peered into his face, and then pulled him close again.

Not a word was said as everyone watched. Barron wondered where his dad and mom were. Everyone else was probably thinking the same thing. Mr. Hodge stood silently at the front of the bus, his mouth a grim white line.

“Thank God you’re okay.”

“Harvey.” William was shaking almost uncontrollably. “What happened?”

Harvey hadn’t been a cop long enough to see much, and it showed in the fear Barron could hear in his voice. “We don’t know. Not yet. A lot of people died all over, though. Everyone outside was affected almost immediately, and a lot of other people...” Harvey looked up, scanning the bus. Shocked silence met his words.

Not even the girls were screaming. The tears he could see streaming down the faces of so many of his classmates fell silently, as if any response would mean what Harvey said was real and actually happening.

Barron wished William’s brother would stop talking. He wanted to clap his hands over his ears and not listen, but he was just as numb as everyone else. It was too much to deal with for anyone, even him.

Of course he wasn’t done. Harvey swallowed hard, then went on in a thick voice. “I’m sorry, but I don’t have all the answers. The most we can figure is there was some sort of attack. The machinery in the basement went crazy at the station, then everything went dead. I was stuck in the evidence locker for over two hours. By the time someone came into the station looking for help and found me, people were already sick. Some were dying or already dead.

“The planetary satellite system seems to be down. Most electrical devices are shot. So far, less than twenty adults and a handful of little kids have been found. Those who are healthy and capable are going around the town, door to door, to find survivors. We have to help each other or more people could die.”

Harvey took a deep breath. “I know you’re high school kids. I know you’re scared too, but... I need some volunteers.”

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## Chapter Three

"I found three kids in a treehouse today. The stink was awful, even from the ground." William dropped onto the cot beside Creed. He rubbed the back of his neck, then winced. The skin was already pink, and rapidly turning red. "How did we get used to this shit so fast?"

"Necessity."

That word was beginning to have an evil overtone to Barron. They should all be living it up, planning a graduation party to end all parties... instead they were searching houses for dead people.

"That why you got burned?" Creed picked at peeling skin on the back of his hands. He was sitting on his cot, next to Barron's.

"Yeah."

Barron got up and went to the locker room. He wet a washcloth and twisted out most of the water. It dripped on the gym floor as he headed back to the cots. Coach would've had a fit... before. "Here." He wrung out the last of the chilled water on the reddened skin, and then draped the folded rectangle across William's neck.

"Ooh." William hunched his shoulders and shivered. "It took less than three minutes out in the sun. I mean, the treehouse wasn't up very high."

"That's why we have the covers over our hats. Keep it on from now on." Barron sank down on his cot. He lay flat, propping his head up on his arms. There were windows near the roof, covered with mesh to keep them from breaking. Even with the windows, the light in the gym was dim.

The backup power grids were spotty, and the light of the sun didn't penetrate the dirty brown clouds blocking the sky, even at noon. The UV rays did, though, and too many people had been burned before they realized the problem. Barron had spent the second half of the week lying on his stomach to avoid the pain of a burn he got *through* his T-shirt.

It took forever for him to find a comfortable position on his back that didn't irritate the sensitive skin still healing from his exposure. Barron had never had such a bad burn before, and he hoped to never have one again.

William shook his head. "I couldn't keep it on and get up in the treehouse. I had to check."



He'd ask why, but he already knew the answer. Barron closed his eyes. Anyone not in a thick concrete basement or building, far from windows, had died. Most within hours. They were the lucky ones. The ones who weren't lucky raved wildly, screaming in pain, before they collapsed.

Most of the folks dying like that were already gone. Finding the decomposing bodies, bloated and reeking in the late spring heat, wasn't any better.

But what else were they going to do? No one wanted to assume and miss a survivor. They had to check anywhere a person might have been.

They'd cleared the cars first. Coach found Barron's mom in hers near the bulk goods store. His dad had died where he spent much of his life—in his office.

Mr. Hodge had organized pallets for his class and any other kids found alive. There were just a few. Not nearly enough had made it, outside the senior class members out of town on their field trip. The first night Barron went home despite Mr. Hodge urging him to stay. He needed time to himself, to come to terms with the fact that he'd lost his parents in one day.

No more micromanagement. No more demands to shape up or else. No more hugs and no more knowledge that, for all their faults, his parents wanted the best for him. The silence in the big house was enough to drive him crazy. He'd retreated to his room when the sun went down. He lit a camping lantern they'd had in the garage and huddled under his favorite blue quilt.

The silence was too complete. No fan whirring from the computer. No TV. No cars humming past on the road. It was that quiet, coupled with the stress of wondering if whatever it was that killed everyone would come back when he was all alone, that drove Barron out of his bed.

He packed a backpack and kept it in his gym locker. Clothes, a few pictures, his favorite Brogherd novel—the author's first, a signed edition Barron kept under his bed—plus all the cash his father had tucked in the family safe filled the pockets. He already had his parents' wedding rings, but he'd grabbed his grandparents' rings as well.

Then he'd walked back to the school. The darkness was absolute, all the streetlights out. His lantern only lit up a small circle around him, but he'd made it. William and Creed were already set up in cots next to each other. William's brother Harvey slept at the station in case someone needed help, but he wanted William to stay at the school. Thavin still had his older sister; he was staying at

her apartment by the community college at night to protect her. During the day, they all searched. It was that or sit in the gym doing nothing and helping no one.

Without any answers.

With the grid completely wiped out, there was no news over the television or radio. Mr. Hodge led their small group, watching over his kids, as he called them. He made sure they got food, and he chivvied all the boys into taking a shower—even though the water was cold. It was better than living with the stink.

After the first day of moving dead bodies, no one had argued about showering.

“Hey”—William kicked the leg on his cot—“I heard you found a kid.”

Barron closed his eyes. The little girl's mom must not have been inside when whatever it was hit. She'd made it back in, but sometime after that she died on the floor of the bathroom. Marya had been on the counter when he came in, rummaging in the cupboard for another box of cereal.

She shrieked when she first saw him, screaming about strangers. She'd chucked a dirty cup at him, and he'd had to dodge the plastic missile. It'd been hell to get her to trust him enough to come down off the counter, but once she did...

Her little pink backpack had smacked against his back as he walked her to the school. He'd packed her some clothes, then grabbed a picture of her and her mom and a fuzzy unicorn blanket to cover her while he got her out of there before a reclamation crew came back. She'd insisted on carrying a lop-eared stuffed bunny clenched in one arm. The blanket had to be over them both, and the extra layer killed Barron in the late evening heat, but it kept her safe.

Her other arm clung to the back of his shirt as he hustled them both to the school and out of danger from the sun.

“Yeah, I did.”

“That's it, that's all you have to say?”

Barron sighed. “Her name is Marya. She's three, I think.” She never shut up. He kinda liked that about her. It was like white noise to cover up the silence he'd grown to hate. All he had to do was say uh huh, then smile, and she beamed. Eventually, she conked out with the other preschooler staying in the kindergarten room.

“You going back out this afternoon?” Creed asked.

“Of course.” First he needed a nap. Barron could sleep with the noise of the other people in the gym. The footsteps, squeaking shoes, and creaks of the cheap cots lulled him to sleep. He only woke up twice from the nightmares.

After the second, a real doozy of a mind trip as William called them, Barron sat up. Thavin lifted his head off his pillow, blinking sleepily. “You okay?” He’d arrived sometime while Barron slept.

“Fine.”

They didn’t ask each other about the dreams themselves anymore. They all knew what horrors they held. Barron sighed. He’d watched far too many zombie movies before... whatever had happened. The uncertainty of what exactly went wrong ate at him. It always seemed like everyone knew what went wrong when the world was coming to an end in movies, but they didn’t know shit.

In Barron’s dreams, the people he found were trying to eat him. Getting back to sleep after the corpse of Marya’s mom latched on to his ankle, trying to get to the little girl he held in his arms, had felt so real. He didn’t get any more sleep before it was time to go back out. He grabbed a sandwich, just some peanut butter slapped between two slices of limp bread, and a bottle of water for his backpack. He checked his map. His assigned section was highlighted in red, and it was filled with far too many little x marks.

It was still hot outside. The cloth hanging on his hat helped cover his face and neck from damage. That, along with the UV fishing shirts and gloves, kept him safe from being burned again as he walked house to house looking for survivors and marking the location of bodies on his map. His sunglasses were the kind that wrapped around, but they didn’t keep the sweat from dripping into his eyes and making them sting.

He was exhausted by the end of his second shift, dragging his feet as he walked back to the school along Main Street. He’d nearly finished his latest quadrant, but it took him out to the edge of town. Walking took so much longer than driving; he’d never spent so long on his feet. All he had time to do was look for survivors, eat, and sleep. He barely had the energy to talk to his friends. After just a week, it felt like this new reality had been going on forever, with no end in sight.

When he got back to the school, the parking lot was lit up. Not by the streetlights, but from the headlights of cars. Camouflage Humvees filled three

spots next to the gym entrance and a large truck was alongside the short wall around the corner. Barron hurried inside to check in with Mr. Hodge and Harvey. He'd finished his quadrant and needed a new one. When he made it to the coach's office, two guys in green fatigues stood outside the door.

"You can't go in, son," one said when Barron approached.

"I have to check in," Barron protested. He crossed his arms over his chest.

The other soldier produced a slip of paper and a pencil. "I have a list of volunteers here. Name?"

"Barron Pernell."

"Got you." The soldier ticked off a mark next to his name. "Your teacher said for all you boys to clean up and hit your racks."

Did Mr. Hodge really expect them to just ignore the soldier's appearance? They were supposed to shower and sleep, like the prospect of some explanation for the deaths all around them didn't haunt them all?

Barron sneered. "Whatever." He knew he wouldn't get anything out of the two guys standing *outside* the door, anyway.

The other kids staying in the gym were huddled in small clusters throughout the room. Sweat trickled down Barron's back as he peeled off his UV layers and hung them up, along with the ridiculous head covering that made him feel like he was a woman from the Middle East.

"Barron!" Thavin came bounding over with Creed and William behind him. "Did you see them?"

"The soldiers?" Barron flapped his shirt, trying to get some air moving, to dry the sweat dripping down his spine.

"Well, duh." William rolled his eyes.

His friends had changed, they all had, but some things stayed the same. William still liked his weird old sayings. Barron shook his head at the goofy teen, but he smiled too. "Yeah, I saw them."

"Do you think they know what caused all this?"

"Probably. There's that big base about four hours west of here, remember? They probably had all sorts of equipment monitoring, just in case. Not like they're going to come running to tell us, though. We're just kids."

Creed was quieter than usual. "Do you guys still think this was a bomb?"

Barron raised an eyebrow. "What else could it have been?"

"Actually, a lot." Thavin rubbed his hands together. "I've been looking some stuff up, at night. The doors to the college historical library don't lock, with the school shut down and all, so I've been sneaking books out for research. It takes forever doing things the old way. Creed and I were talking about how this sickness spread, and how the power went out right when it first started."

"So, what was it?" William asked.

"I don't know. No, really, I don't," he said when William scoffed. "But I do know I can't find a single description of any bomb or chemical weapon that could kill people like this, yet be completely harmless in hours."

"Plus the sky." Creed looked up, like he could see the murky atmosphere through the ceiling. "That's not normal." The blue sky and puffy white clouds they'd stood under before they went to the Doestrin caves were gone, replaced by a brown layer blanketing the sky as far as they could see.

"You're right. A bomb doesn't fit." Barron fought off a yawn, but it won. It was so big, and so long, that his eyes watered. "But you don't have any answers. I don't have any answers. We're certainly not getting any out of them"—he pointed over his shoulder with one thumb—"until they're damn good and ready to tell us. I'm gonna go shower."

Maybe getting cleaned up and crashing on his cot wouldn't be quite so difficult after all. Barron could barely keep his eyes open. He braced himself with one hand on the cold tiles, letting the water beat down on his head. It didn't help.

After a few seconds, the water began to feel like icy needles on his skin, so he rinsed and got out. At least his dad's insistence that he keep his hair short had been good for something. Three minutes in and out was all it took to finish cleaning off the dust and sweat from another long day tagging bodies.

Tomorrow they'd finish checking the town, and then they'd haul more bodies and dig more graves. The survivors had all looked for their families first, along with the victims who'd fallen in public. That day had been horrific, for all of them. A strange numbness fell over him when he looked for bodies, but another day like that... He tried not to think about it.

That didn't stop the dreams. This time his friends threw Barron into a grave. He couldn't move, couldn't speak, as his body slumped limp over his parents' rotting corpses. He couldn't breathe, couldn't beg them to stop like he

desperately needed, no matter how hard he tried. Then they began to cover him with dirt. It fell into his open mouth, clogging his throat, and he couldn't get it out.

"Shit!" Barron's shout was garbled. He spit out the corner of his sweat-soaked pillow, pushing it off the cot onto the floor. He flipped over in his cot and swiped one arm over his damp face. It wasn't tears. His parents were already buried, and his friends would never do that to him. Concentrating on the small sounds of the teens sleeping all round him, Barron did his best to slow his breathing.

He'd give anything to shut his brain off. His whole body ached for rest, but his mind wouldn't let him. Everyone else was in the same boat. How long would it be until one of them snapped?

The black depths of the night were slow to fade. Desperate for a distraction, Barron got up and began to roam the school. The brick building was laid out like a square with a courtyard in the center. With the sun still below the horizon, Barron could safely go outside in his shorts and tank top.

Barron picked a wilting rose off one of the bushes beside the double doors to the cafeteria. Dew coated the picnic tables and benches. He sat down anyway, shivering at the contrast of the cool droplets against his sweaty skin. He slumped against the table, propping his cheek against one fist.

He shook the flower, top down, over the table. Drying petals flew all over. A few stubborn central petals clung to the bud, but he plucked them off, just tore them away from the stem until nothing was left of the red rose but a pile of pieces.

"What are you doing out here?" a man barked. "Identify yourself."

Barron jumped. He smacked against the leg under the picnic table and grunted. His knee throbbed. He was probably going to have a pretty bruise; he'd managed to find the end of the screw.

"Fuck that hurts. What's your problem?" Barron spun sideways on the bench. He glared at the soldier behind him.

"Why are you out here?" the soldier asked again. He fingered his rifle but didn't point it at Barron. That was probably something of a minor miracle; the guy looked barely older than Barron himself, and he was definitely spooked.

"I couldn't sleep." Barron bit the words out, still rubbing his knee. No way would he tell the guy why he couldn't sleep. "In case you haven't noticed, this

isn't a military base. I live here. I woke up early, so I decided to come out here so I wouldn't wake anyone up. Now go away." He turned his back on the soldier, expecting him to leave.

"We all get them." The gun made a solid thunk as he set it down on top of the picnic table near the pile of ruined flower parts. "Bad dreams."

Barron snorted. "What do you know about it?"

"Plenty. I was about to ship out after basic training. Got a unit and everything. Some of the guys had seen action before, and they had nightmares. One guy told me it was a burden we bore to protect our people."

"Yeah, well, I'm not a soldier."

The soldier dropped one hand on Barron's shoulder. "You might not wear a military uniform, but you're protecting your people just the same."

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## Chapter Four

None of them were issued new quadrants the next day. They all got a new group assignment.

And no answers.

Barron spent two days tracking down every bit of metal that could be scrapped and piling it into a huge trailer. The soldiers took over the body detail. He felt almost guilty at the surge of relief when he found out he didn't need to dig any more graves and watch dirt cover people he'd known for most of his life. He needed a break from the new reality; they all did.

The only teenager not scrapping metal was the new kid. Barron had forgotten all about him until he showed up... in a uniform. His long hair was fastened at his neck. He ran around doing things for the soldiers; most of them treated him like a kid brother.

It made sense when Revi ran after an older man, yelling, "Dad!"

He was a military brat. Barron never would've figured it, not with the hair and bracelets. Barron had too much to do, and was far too exhausted, to worry about one random guy he barely had time to notice. Maybe before he would've continued to go out of his way to give Revi a hard time, but Barron had far too much to do trying to survive to indulge in petty animosity toward the girly boy.

Dawn on the third day brought a whole new ballgame. Two girls had tried to go out and burned right through their UV coverings. All their sunblock measures, and they didn't protect them for even a minute.

"I'm telling you, our ozone is gone. That's the only thing that can explain all this!" Thavin kicked his backpack. "I just can't figure out *why*. I've read twenty books, all with different possible originating events. What I wouldn't give for even a basic reader right now."

Barron twisted around on his cot and balled his pillow up under his head. "What kinda things?"

"Global warming—that was a big thing like eighty years ago, apparently—but it's not a problem now, with the new air scrubbers. Massive volcano eruption, except there'd have been some sign of it beforehand, I figure. Chemical bombs seeding the upper stratosphere to ruin the chemical balance—"



“Could that have caused the sickness?” William asked.

“I don't know. Nothing seems to fit.”

His frustration was palpable. Thavin was the smart one, the one who'd been going to college on a full blown academic scholarship on a fast track doctorate program. But he was operating outside of everything they'd ever known. Long before they'd entered school, paper books were replaced by readers, and online libraries were searchable with a flick of the eye.

“What do you think's gonna happen now?” Creed asked. He'd grown very quiet and barely spoke after his last shift. He asked the question they were all thinking, though. They couldn't go find scrap metal during the day. The bodies were all buried.

William, Thavin, and Creed all watched him, like he still had all the answers. Barron didn't know shit about what was going on.

“Mr. Hodge, Harvey, and the military guys have been pretty tight for days now. Something's going on. They just aren't telling us shit. You hear anything, William?”

The normally chatty teen shook his head. “Harvey told me to stay here. I might as well not have a brother still living,” he said bitterly.

“Hey.” Barron swung his legs over the edge of his cot and sat up. He reached for William, tugging on his shoulder to avoid his still tender neck. “You still have him. He's trying to keep us all alive, whatever that takes. You know he loves you.”

William shrugged.

“Besides, you have us.” Barron squeezed his friend's shoulder. “It doesn't matter what else happens, we'll face it together, all four of us. Just like we always have.”

“Yeah.” Creed crouched between Barron and William's cots, and Thavin leaned sideways and bumped William's other shoulder. For a second they were all touching, communicating without saying a word.

Their little bromance knot broke up, not because someone noticed them, but because no one was looking at them, no one at all.

Mr. Hodge stood behind the guy Revi had run after. Harvey stood beside him. There was a line of military grunts behind them.

“What's going on?” Creed asked.

Barron shook his head. "Dunno."

"Can we have your attention?" The adults in the room moved forward but most of the teens stayed where they were, grouped with their friends.

"My name is Lieutenant Colonel Porter. I was stationed at the Markez base three hundred miles west of here. I'm sure everyone has questions, but I have few answers. The base was working on establishing communication outside the area, but we were sent out prior to that being accomplished.

"We do know every town was hit the same way. Whatever the event was that claimed the lives of so many, and damaged the basic infrastructure of our country, seems to be widespread. Our climate has been affected. Going out during the daylight hours is no longer feasible. I'm afraid there's nothing more we can do for those who haven't already been saved. It's been too long, and if they haven't been protected from the sun by now—they're dead."

Scattered protests came from the small group of adults. He said what no one wanted to admit.

The colonel overrode them. "I know this is hard, but we must be pragmatic in these times. We need the metal and other circuitry. I have my orders to retrieve these materials, and assist as many survivors as possible to relocate to Markez base."

"What if we don't want to go?" Mr. Vass used to run the bowling alley. He'd been down in the ball return area under the lanes when the power went out. He'd gotten stuck down there when the electronic lock froze. "My family has lived here since the turn of the century."

Mr. Hodge stepped forward. "What kind of life will you have here? Something has gone seriously wrong in the world. We can't hide from that and pretend life goes on as usual."

A woman from the middle of the group spoke up. "I buried my husband and my sons." Her voice broke, but she went on. "How does anyone hide from that?"

"I'm not saying anyone is ignoring their loss." Mr. Hodge took a deep breath. "But what Harvey and I haven't been telling everyone is big."

The kids began whispering.

"I knew it!" Thavin said.

"Shh." Barron hushed him. He wanted to hear.

“Fresh water stores are running out. The reclamation plant is shut down, and there’s about a week’s supply of dry rations. We won’t survive here on our own. We’re not equipped. They are at the base. No one will be forced to go... but if you stay, you’ll probably die.”

Silence fell over the gym. Mr. Vass slumped down in his chair, covering his face. His shoulders shook. A woman began to cry and another hushed her, rubbing her back.

The twins, Abbe and Hazea, clung to each other.

Barron couldn’t believe things were that bad, and yet they hadn’t told anyone. What right did they have to hide the truth from people?

“When are they leaving?” Barron had stood up and spoken before he even realized he was going to. “How long do we have to decide?”

“We were leaving tomorrow morning, but the situation with the sun has complicated matters. We have to go back tonight.”

“So... hours. You expect everyone to pack up and move their entire lives... in a few hours?”

“We can spare two hours after sundown when it’ll be safe to leave the school to gather up any stragglers not here. After that, we’ll move out and head back to Markez. I know this is hard”—Lt. Colonel Porter looked grim—“but other towns have faced this same decision.”

“We have three buses available. We have to limit everyone to one bag. Harvey will help ferry people out to their homes in the outlying areas in the buses to gather any belongings they haven’t already packed.”

Barron sank down on his cot. He already had everything he needed, but...

“We’re going to go, aren’t we?” Creed asked. He looked scared.

“I don’t plan to die in this town.” Barron sat up straight. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to us, but we can’t stay here.”

“I gotta talk to my sister.” Thavin twisted his hands together. “She’s not here. We can’t leave without her.”

“They won’t bail on anyone,” William assured him. “You need to calm down. You heard Mr. Hodge. He and Harvey will help everyone after dark. We’ll get her. I’ll go with you. I have a bag already packed.”

“Did you know this was going to happen?” Creed glared at William. “And you didn’t tell us?”

“No!” William protested. “I just... I got what I needed before. I didn't want to go back home more than once.”

“You know he would've told us if he knew, Creed.” Barron shook his head. “I have all my stuff, too.”

Hushed arguments broke out all over the gym. Barron sipped his bottle of water over dinner, conscious now of how precarious their society really was.

“Mr. Hodge?” Barron went up to the beleaguered teacher when he finally spied the man alone—probably for the first time since the announcement.

“Yes, Barron?” Mr. Hodge sounded weary. He rubbed his forehead.

“I don't need to go back to my place. I thought, if the people watching over the nursery kids needed to go, I could stay with the little kids.”

Mr. Hodge eyed him. “You're sure?”

He nodded. “I am. I don't know if anyone checked, but I packed some mementos for Marya, the little girl I found, too. I don't know about the other kids, but I made sure she had some stuff that was her mom's.”

Barron blinked when Mr. Hodge rested a hand on his shoulder. “You're a good guy, Barron. I know you haven't always acted like one, but I always knew inside you cared for people, other than your friends.”

That was corny. Barron felt his face flush. “It was common sense,” he protested. “She won't remember her—I didn't want her to grow up without something.” He might not have the best memories of his parents, but he had them. Barron knew exactly where he came from and who his family had been. He couldn't imagine growing up without that comfort. He'd never tell anyone, but his heart ached for Marya.

She was innocent.

“Well I'm glad you volunteered because Jenn does need someone to take over for her tonight. The little ones should be asleep soon, but if you can just make sure they stay in the kindergarten room and don't go wandering off if they wake up, I'd appreciate it.”

“I can do that.”

Barron told the guys he was going to stay at the school, and headed to the makeshift nursery. Jenn, a woman he didn't know very well who'd worked at the post office, was waiting inside the open doorway.

“They’re all asleep,” she whispered. “But Marya and Polluck might wake up to go to the bathroom. Just help them out the best you can, okay?”

“Got it.” Barron had never helped a little kid go to the bathroom. He wasn’t really sure he would know what to do, but it couldn’t be that difficult. He’d been a little boy once.

It was dark in the kindergarten room. The only light came in the windows from the moon over the trees. Barron sat in one of the tiny plastic chairs and leaned his head against the wall.

How in the hell had the world come to this?

This was not supposed to be his life.

“Gotta go pee.” The high, piping voice coming out of the dark startled him.

“Ow.” Barron rubbed the back of his head. A little kid was standing in front of him when he opened his eyes.

“I need the potty.”

“Marya?”

“Now,” she whined. There was a little light in the bathroom. Barron flicked it on and the cold, white light made more shadows than anything else, but it was enough to make out the toilet. “I need help.”

Marya pushed down her pants, but needed help getting on the toilet. Barron’s face felt like it was on fire when he lifted the little girl and helped her balance when she swayed sleepily. She held up her free hand. “Tissue, please.”

Barron passed her a small handful.

“All done?” Barron lifted her off the toilet and steadied her when she nodded. She pulled up her own PJ pants, thankfully. “Back to bed, okay?”

“I want Mama to kiss night.” Marya looked up at him, like he could make that happen.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie. I can’t get your momma.” Her lip wobbled, and Barron’s heart broke. He swooped her up and squeezed her tight. Her little body was so light in his arms, so tiny. He was an adult and had the ability to at least understand what was going on... if only they knew, but what about her?

Damn it. His throat burned, and he couldn’t speak. She laid her head down on his shoulder and wrapped one arm loosely around his neck. Barron rocked Marya until her little sniffles faded and her body went heavy against him.

He put her back to bed and sat back down in the little chair. He buried his head in his hands and fought off the fear and anger swamping him. It wasn't fair—not for any of them. His dad's voice still floated in his head, demanding to know when he was ever promised life would be fair. Barron clutched the short strands of his hair and tugged. The pain helped block out the voice in his head, but for how long?

When Jenn came back, she had a few more adults with her to move the kids. Barron went back to his cot and grabbed his packed bag, ready to go on his cot. One by one they filed out of the gym for the last time. They'd sat around all day, but the stress of leaving for the unknown pressed down on all of them.

No one on the buses spoke. Barron found himself at the back, his friends around him, once again. This time they weren't heading for any cave. And they wouldn't be coming back.

Watching the streets fall behind them was the last thing Barron wanted to do. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the seat.

Tomorrow was a brand new day.

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## Chapter Five

Barron wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his arm. He'd never worked so hard—not even looking for supplies and survivors. Of course, he wasn't likely to come across any dead bodies here.

The metal scavenged from all the towns was dumped into a giant pile and had to be separated. By hand. Even more barbaric, by the time they were done moving the metal into the giant underground bunker each night, they barely had enough time to wash... in the lake.

He whistled to get his crew's attention. He had Creed, Thavin, and William, plus several other guys from his class he'd never really been on more than nodding terms with. He also had four guys from Winchester. They mostly kept town people together in the bunk areas but the crews were mixed. Probably to foster cooperation, or some other such crap.

"Time for our au natural soak and dinner." The sun would be up within the hour. The fast approaching summer didn't leave much nighttime, but they'd worked hard and almost finished the sorting. A soldier stood outside the bunker. He marked off Barron's group chits.

Some people had protested contributing to the group effort to stay alive. They didn't work, they didn't get a chit. They didn't get a chit, they didn't get food or water. There was a lot of shock and grumbling, but no one outright rebelled. Where would they go? The surrounding countryside had been stripped clean by the military crew, so there was no way a human would survive a single hour once the sun rose.

The martial discipline wasn't hard for Barron to accept. He'd lived with his father's version most of his life. Do what was expected of you and keep your trap shut. He could do it. William needed more reining in, but his friend had far fewer jokes to tell than before.

There wasn't much to laugh about.

Mess Hall was full with late shifters shoveling in their rations. MREs. Yum. Barron shuddered at the idea of eating reconstituted mac and cheese yet again, but when he was handed the mud brown packet he kept his mouth shut.

"Oh yuck, powdered cheese again. These things are from the stone ages," Creed complained.

Barron elbowed him in the ribs. "Eat it." He took another bite out of the packet and tried not to taste it.

"I'd kill for something fresh."

Barron swallowed. "There is nothing fresh. Did you see those trees by the lake? Dead. All the plants are gone. I'm just glad there weren't any fish in that lake."

Small animals died in droves.

Thavin opened his mouth, but Barron scowled at him. "Just eat it and stop bitching."

"No, it's not that." Thavin stared out the double doors. Barron looked over his shoulder. A steady stream of people filled the hall—all headed toward the huge bunker hanger. "What do you think's going on?"

"I don't know." Barron shoveled the last few bites of his pasta down, then grabbed his bottle of water. "Let's go see."

The crowd gathered around a man standing on top of a Humvee. He was leaning down, speaking to someone on the ground. He waved a hand, then nodded.

Barron could see the shiny emblem on his collar when he stood, reflecting the makeshift lights set up around him. Someone important then.

"I hope most of you can hear me," the man shouted. "My name is General Keene. This is my base. I know life has been very hard in the last month, with few answers as to what happened on the seventh of May, or why.

"We've discovered a way to communicate with other bases. It's beyond archaic, but the military has the equipment for Morse code. We've learned this wasn't just our area, or state, or even country. The entire Western Hemisphere experienced the light event that knocked out our power."

"Was it a bomb?" someone shouted.

"Will there be more?"

"People, people,"—the general held up his hands—"please listen, and I'll tell you everything I know."

"Yeah right." Thavin snorted.

"Shut it," Barron snapped.



“The light was not a bomb, or an attack on the West from the East. They’re starting to experience the same environmental die-offs we’re seeing here, on a larger scale too. Our real answers came when we received a broadcast by the Joint Space Venture. Orbiting craft and sensors showed a burst of gamma radiation of deep space origin.”

Dead silence greeted his words. Barron wasn’t the only one confused, apparently, but Thavin must have understood where the general was going because he swayed on his feet, reaching out for William’s shoulder blindly.

“The scientists postulate that a star collapsed, and when it did, it emitted a ray of gamma radiation capable of traveling at unprecedented speeds... and Earth was in its path. This is an extinction level event, people. Life on Earth as we know it will cease to exist very soon.”

Soldiers began wading into the crowd, trying to calm the shouts, screams, and panicked sobbing. Barron could barely feel the ground beneath his feet. Nothing felt real, not the bodies pressed around him, or—most of all—the news the general so bluntly stated.

“Citizens, please calm down!” General Keene roared. “There’s more!”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” a man in the front shouted. He shook a fist at the soldier in front him trying to get to him to be quiet. “No I will not quiet down. How can you expect us to be calm when you said we’re going to die?”

“I said life on Earth was going to end... I didn’t say we plan on sticking around for it.” General Keene’s shout finally made its way through enough of the crowd. Panic was replaced by confusion. “The gamma radiation has already begun a life cycle die off. Any humans exposed to the ray died within moments, or hours, depending on the amount of shielding. Half the ozone layer on Earth has disappeared, and the brown clouds now blocking the sun don’t actually block the harmful UV and UVB rays—hence the extreme damage to anyone exposed to the light. In short, the surface of the Earth will soon be unlivable.”

Barron shook his head. He didn’t mean—

“This base was built around the manufacturing center for deep space craft. A carefully picked colony plant—the first ever—was going to be sent to a habitable planet found by the JSV. Now that colony ship is going to be a life raft. Our life raft.”

Barron had never considered military service or space travel. They’d all heard of the colony slated to leave in the next two years, but it seemed like such

a far off event. He'd not paid much attention, but he knew the details shared had been vague.

"How will any of us survive long enough to reach another habitable planet?" A woman cradled a baby against her hip. "Will my son even see it?"

"Are you talking about cryosleep? I heard the last mission went horribly wrong, and no one survived."

The general placed his hands behind his back. "Under ordinary circumstances, this information would not have been shared until the colony was successfully entrenched on Paradise. The most classified secret in this project was the new fold technology engines. With a special anti-matter field, we'll be able to shrink space, in essence, in front of the ship. This will allow space travel at an unprecedented speed. For it to work, though, the hull must be formed with an interlocking carbon nanotube coating, filled with fluid to block radiation from space and stand up to the pressures of the space folding."

"The metal," William whispered.

"Your efforts to bring the materials we need, and the work done over the last few weeks, means we've nearly completed the ship. Fortunately, the computer systems were not yet operational and the gamma ray didn't fry them like most of the other operating tech in the hemisphere. Another week and the entire CI would have been a smoking ruin. But that didn't happen, and we're going to make it. We number in the hundreds now, but we've sent out the call to anyone who can make it under the cover of darkness to congregate here. We will leave no one behind if they can make it."

"What about supplies? What about water and food? How will there be enough?" Barron recognized Mr. Hodge's voice. After leaving their homes because there was no way to survive without supplies, it was something many of them had to be privately wondering.

"Not all the metal, plastics, and other fabric gathered are intended for the ship hull. Another classified secret is a large scale replicator that can break down objects to their basic molecules and then reassemble them into needed items—like food, clothing, and other necessities.

"Obviously, there will be some reduction in raw molecules over time, but with vigilant recycling, it'll last a long time, certainly long enough to set up the colony and begin to appropriate material to replace our stocks. Now, I will attempt to answer questions—if they are presented in a calm fashion."

“You claim to not know about the gamma thingy. But, if that’s true, how come this ship is so conveniently prepared?”

“Do you really believe that, if we knew this was coming, we’d send a mission to a new planet filled with civilians?” the general scoffed. “No.”

“Earth has been doomed for far longer than the month since the UV gamma radiation ray. Scientists have studied the world, and there were signs for decades that we’ve been wavering on a knife point with destruction of humankind on either side. Anyone could know that; it was recently beamed through the news feeds, in fact.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “This is not some grand conspiracy. Life doesn’t work out like that. This is a goddamned tragedy for the human race. One that just might spell extinction for all of us, if we’re not careful.” The general kept talking, but Barron wasn’t really listening.

Space.

A new planet.

“We’re gonna be aliens,” William said. He grinned and ran a hand through his curling hair. “I wonder what it’ll be like.”

“Different.” Thavin looked up at the ceiling of the hanger, as if he could see beyond it to the disappearing stars. “I read a lot of science fiction stories. People always try to relate to the new planet like it’s just a new part of their own, with some strange plants and creatures. But the truth... it could be anything. Probably way different than anything we could dream up.”

“Come on, let’s get some sleep. I’m sure we’re all going to be swamped with things to do until they shove us in their tin can spaceship.” Barron was wiped out and longed for the oblivion of sleep.

In the ten days that followed, Barron found out just how right he was. He knew why basic soldiers were called grunts after that. His group saw more of the ship than most, ferrying around supplies, carting tools and crates, and passing messages.

It was a big ship, but there were a lot of people coming to get on it. Thousands had already come, with more arriving each night. They were crammed into the base anywhere it was safe—a lot of the space was underground. Thankfully the ship was in a separate chamber built into the side of the mountain. He had no idea how in the hell they planned to get it out to launch.

No one would tell him either. Like it would really matter, when they were all leaving Earth for good in the floating tin can anyway. Barron wasn't good trapped indoors. He liked staying busy, seeing and doing new things.

How was he going to manage a space flight?

Barron tried not to think about it too much. He couldn't change it. He just had to live with it. He knew how to do that better than most.

The exodus into the ship began two weeks after General Keene's revelations. Barron made sure his stuff was all secured in his bag, and settled it firmly on his back. They were loading folks on the ship by town. His was one of the first in the order.

The hanger was a zoo by the time he got there.

"Where were you hiding?" Mr. Hodge asked when Barron slid through a knot of people to check in with him. Each town had a head who would liaison with the ship staff. Before everyone crashed, exhausted from prepping for launch manually, the chain of command was shared in a last announcement. General Keene introduced the ship captain, the man who held all their lives in his hands.

Captain DeLeon was a lean man, Hispanic, with grizzled hair and a face that would likely crack if he ever smiled. Barron was more than willing to stay away from the man and the hulking security staff, but he wasn't hiding.

"Just getting my stuff," he told Mr. Hodge.

"Well your friends already checked in. We'll head over to the ship as soon as the sun goes down far enough. We have to move before the light completely fades, so make sure you stay under the UV shaded walkway rigged up. It's not big, so stay in line."

Barron snorted. Graduation would've come and gone the night before, and here he was, still walking in lines and checking in with the teacher. "Got it, Mr. Hodge."

There were about thirty people from his town in a clump by the door. The sunset couldn't break the cloud cover, but the light was fading. There was a nice breeze occasionally gusting in through the door, bringing the smell of hot dust and concrete.

He missed the scent of green things, but Barron closed his eyes and tried to memorize the feeling of the warm air caressing his face and ruffling his hair.

“All right, everyone. One last time. Single file, stay in line, and don't move from under the UV shade. We're in D section on the third level on the ship. Each room sleeps eight. We split based on gender.” Not a single couple had made it through the gamma radiation.

“Let's go.”

Barron shuffled along in the middle of the group, just behind the kids and Jenn. Dread coiled in the pit of his stomach. He was consigning himself to a tin tube. Well, not tin—a carbon-nano-filled-with-funky-fluids—tube.

“Bunny!”

“Marya!”

The cries startled Barron out of his funk. Jenn stood at the edge of the shade, one arm reaching for the little girl racing out into the sun. Barron dropped his bag and yanked off his windbreaker, running after Marya who began shrieking as she tried to find her stuffed bunny.

He scooped Marya up, covering her with the jacket. She flailed, knocking off his hat and exposing his face to the sun.

“Bunny! Bunny!” she sobbed.

“Barron, get back under the shade!”

Barron squinted, trying to see through the tears streaming down his face. It felt like the skin was peeling off his arms, neck and face. Her pink bunny was rolling away. He lunged for it. He stumbled but managed to grab one of its ears.

Marya was still crying and squirming, but Barron managed to hold onto her and the bunny and scramble back for the waiting crowd under the shade. He stumbled, unable to see anything but bright-white light, and fell to his knees.

Barron whimpered when they dragged him under the shade. His entire body felt like it was on fire. Someone took Marya and the bunny, and then grabbed his hands.

Agony from the touch lanced up his arms. He screamed, jerking away. It felt like his skin tore off in their grip, exposing his nerve endings to the biting air.

“We have to pick you up, Barron. I'm sorry.”

Barron shook his head. “Don't touch me!”

“You can't just lay here, we have to get you to the med bay.”

“No,” he moaned. His protests didn’t stop them from reaching for him. Hands lifted him under his shoulders and along his sides and legs. They didn’t touch his bare skin, but it was too much.

The pain overwhelmed him. He wanted to scream, but he couldn’t breathe. Dying shouldn’t hurt this much.

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## Chapter Six

“We need to get him stabilized.”

“The tank won't work on his eyes.”

“Either we worry about those now and risk him dying from infection, or we worry about them later and save his life at the expense of his short-term sight. This is my ward. Do as I say.”

Barron could hear them speaking, he even understood them, but it was like a layer of cloth separated him from the rest of the world. Bright white cloth that surrounded him, painful in its purity. Someone blocked it, trading the light for dark, and he sighed in relief.

The disassociation between his mind and his body was ripped away the second he was moved again. This time Barron didn't lose consciousness, though he wished he had, as he slid into a tingling fluid. Chills raced up and down his spine, and shivers wracked him. It felt as if his skin split in uneven cracks all along his limbs with every shake.

He moaned.

“He needs more meds.”

“No. His body is already in shock. More pain meds could push him over the edge. Get him in the tank and let the fluid do its job.”

Barron wished the people arguing over him would just shut up. He really wished he could tell them that, too, but it was all he could do to hold in the screams as more of his body was lowered into the stinging fluid.

He didn't want to go in the tank. The tank hurt. Barron tried to pull away from the grip on his arms, but he couldn't break the hold. He just slid into the tank faster. Barron's panic rose as the fluid seeped into his ears and began to cover his face. How was he going to breathe? Were they drowning him?

The fluid echoed with his gasps for air. There was no scent to it as it lapped at his nose and then closed over it.

Trying to hold his breath was futile. Barron gasped... and air filled his lungs. He wasn't breathing the fluid. His heart began to slow from a frantic drum beat to a slower pace. The tingles began to spread and join until his whole body might've been vibrating for all he knew. It felt like it.

Garbled voices spoke around the tank, but he couldn't understand them anymore. Exhaustion dragged at Barron's limbs. He let go of the almost subconscious tension in his muscles and let the fluid in the tank cradle him.

It felt good. The pain was gone or maybe it was just hidden. Barron didn't really care.

He was so tired.

So tired.

Barron jerked when a hand reached into the tank and touched his face. At regular intervals, someone kept doing that—touching his mouth—and it was fucking pissing him off.

“Leave me alone!” he snapped. Except, he didn't. There was something in his mouth he hadn't even felt before. It was round and hard and covered his lips, dipping between them to invade his mouth. “What the fuck?”

That came out garbled too.

Barron reached for his mouth, but the goo in the tank was too viscous. He couldn't reach through it to his mouth—he could barely move at all.

The next time Barron woke the hands weren't touching his face, they were tugging on his shoulders. Barron kicked his legs and dislodged one hand from an ankle. His feeble struggles didn't stop them. Why wouldn't they let him sleep? He wanted to sleep.

“Hey, calm down, young man. We're taking you out of the tank; if you struggle, we could drop you.”

His skin felt far too tender to take a drop on the floor. Barron fell still, other than a fine tremor he couldn't stop. The anticipation of agony when they placed him on a soft surface consumed him, but it didn't hurt.

Thank God it didn't hurt.

“C-c-cold,” he said through clenched teeth. Air flowed over his body. Did they have him in some sort of freezer? All he could see was a pale blur.

“Just a minute.”

Barron heard a beep, and then warm air enveloped him. “Ahh.”

“Here.” A rough cloth settled over his body up to his armpits. “There, now you won't get cold.”



The cloth was scratchy. It irritated his ribs and nipples with every breath. “What did you put over my eyes?” Barron reached up to touch his face. Someone grabbed his hand.

“Please don’t do that.”

“Who are you? What’s going on?”

Another voice spoke on the other side of the bed. A woman. “My name is Dr. Aya Samuels. The other person is one of my medics, Nolu. We’ve been caring for you after you were involved in an incident on your way to the ship. Do you remember?”

A bunny. A little girl with her hair in a ribbon... “Marya! Was she hurt? Is she okay?” Barron reached for the doctor with one hand. “Please tell me.”

“Calm down.” Dr. Samuels grabbed his hand and gently rested it back on the bed. “Your body took a lot of damage, and you went into shock. You need to remain calm and try not to stress yourself.”

Why was she avoiding his questions? “Where is Marya?”

“She was here. She had a severe sunburn on her hands and face, but you had her covered up in seconds, which helped protect her from the amount of damage you received. I treated her and sent her back to your ship quarters with her caretaker—and her bunny. She was going on and on about B saving her bunny. I guess B is you.”

Barron nodded. He sank into the pillows and let go of the doctor’s hand. “Thank you,” he whispered. Marya was okay. Barron closed his eyes. They were sore from straining to see the doctor.

“You’re welcome.” Dr. Samuels patted his hand.

“You, on the other hand, were out in the sun for about twenty seconds without protection. You sustained severe burns over most of your face, back, and arms, with minor burns on your stomach and legs. The tank healed most of the superficial skin damage, and we were able to rehydrate you while you were in there as well.

“Unfortunately, the damage to your skin was not the worst injury you sustained. Marya knocked off your sunglasses, leaving your eyes unprotected. The eyes are far more delicate tissue than the dermis layer of your body... one I’m unable to heal with the tank. I’m sorry, Barron, but until we get to the new planet and I can set up a full clinic, I can’t fix your eyes.”

“Fix my eyes? What happened to them? I remember the stinging, and them watering so bad I couldn't see. What happened to my eyes?” Barron reached for his face again, jerking his arm away when the doctor tried to stop him.

He slid his fingers up his cheeks, expecting to find some type of healing goop over his eyes, but they were dry. He opened his eyes, but the milky clouds were still there.

“Barron, remember what I said about staying calm. Nolu!”

“How do I stay calm? I can't see. *I can't see!*” Barron shook his head. “This can't be happening. I can't be blind. No one goes blind anymore!”

A hiss and a cold sting bit Barron high on his neck. “What the—”

“When you wake up, we'll talk some more.” The doctor's voice came to him through a long tunnel, echoing distantly.

Huh. Just like in the cave, when the whole world came to a crashing halt.

“Barron?”

“Mphm.” Barron didn't want to wake up. He couldn't remember why in his sleepy haze, but he remembered he didn't want to wake up. “Ngh.” He grabbed the blanket before it could be yanked off the bed.

Ouch. It hurt to move his hands, like his skin was tight.

“Barron, you must wake up now. We're about to take off.”

“Okay. See you later.” He yawned and shoved the pillow under his head better. It was flat. He hated that. He'd have to ask his mom to get him a new one. He ignored his parents' whispers.

“Dr. Samuels said get him up.” A cold, wet cloth smacked Barron in the face.

“What the hell?” Barron jerked upright. He blinked repeatedly. It didn't help. “Oh, damn.” He wasn't at home. His parents weren't bugging him to get his ass up for school before they left for work. “What?”

“Hello, Barron. I'm Nolu, if you don't remember me from before. We need to get you back to your bunk. The ship's going to take off soon, and for the twenty hours we'll be in-system everyone is confined to quarters. Dr. Samuels says rest is best for you. She contacted your group leader, a Mr. Hodge, and he said your friends were anxious to see you.”

“Okay.”

Barron reached down to push aside the blanket. Only then did he realize he was stark naked. He couldn't see her, but he'd heard a female voice. No way was he flashing his dangly bits. "Can I get something to put on? And some privacy?"

"Oh, right, sorry. I have a pair of pants and a shirt right here. Mejia stepped out."

Barron fumbled with the cloth, trying to figure out how to put them on. He grit his teeth.

"Here. Feel for the waist, then slide your hand around the band until you feel the ties. That's the front." Nolu guided Barron's hand by the wrist. Barron nodded curtly. He grabbed the sides of the waistband and pulled it up and over his legs, then stood up, pulling the pants up all the way. Standing was more challenging than he thought it would be.

Unable to really see anything more than light, and a faint shadow that had to be Nolu, he had a hard time staying balanced. "Does the doctor think my sight might come back on its own?" Barron grabbed the bed, then slid his free hand over the top, looking for the shirt.

"You might see some improvement." He coughed. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Damn it, the guy was an idiot. He couldn't even explain anything without sounding like he had no fucking idea what to say. "Just say it."

"You damaged the cornea, as well as your retina. Injuries like that don't spontaneously heal." Nolu sounded regretful, but he didn't sugarcoat the matter. Barron appreciated the lack of bullshit. He might be hesitant, but...

Barron snorted. No wonder why the guy apologized. Seeing anything in the near future wasn't happening. "Thank you." He found the shirt and spread it out, checking the openings. Sleeve, sleeve, neck, bottom. It didn't seem to matter which side was front or back, so he slipped it over his head. He'd stumbled into his clothes with his eyes closed before school enough to know how to get a damn shirt on—sight or no sight.

At least it was comfortable.

A single claxon warning echoed through the ship. "I'm sorry I can't give you more time to get used to this, but we have to go. Mejia," Nolu called.

The door slid open with a hiss. "I'm going to take one arm, and she's going to take the other. We'll have you walk between us. We won't let anything happen to you."

Like a damned invalid, Barron was forced to lean on the two medics. He was woozy, and without his eyesight, he'd never make it. He knew the D section on the third level was just four levels down from the med ward, almost directly in fact.

But he'd never find his way around the ship like this. "Just walk normally," Mejia said.

Normal walking did not involve holding on to two strangers like a damn cripple and praying he didn't fall into anything. Barron grunted and closed his eyes. The strange effect from the light made him dizzy; he kept straining to make things out, too. His head began to hurt, a steady throb in his temples.

"Keeping your eyes closed is a good idea. I think your glasses were lost, but you can requisition a new pair when we're done with the launch and in-system travel. They might help reduce the white glare."

"Thanks," Barron muttered. The trip down the magnetic lift was silent. The quiet broke as soon as they entered D section.

"Barron!" William reached him first, pushing the female medic away and taking her place.

"Oh my God, man, you're okay! They said you would be, but..."

"You looked like you'd been barbequed man." Barron frowned. Now he had an image of himself on a platter with a fruit in his mouth or something.

"Creed! Shut up," Thavin hissed.

"But he looks fine now, perfectly normal—other than a little pale."

"Christ on a cracker, Creed, *shut up*." William's hand tightened on Barron's arm.

"Okay, okay, fine. Shutting up."

"We're glad you're back, Barron." Barron swung his head around toward Mr. Hodge's voice.

"Thanks," Barron muttered.

"Boys, Barron should be in his bunk—Doctor's orders—and so should you—Captain's orders. The ship will launch soon."

“Yes, sir. C’mon, we’ll get you all set up.” Thavin took Nolu’s spot. Barron swallowed, trying to get rid of the bitter taste in his mouth.

Barron’s stuff had been shifted to a bottom bunk, apparently. He went to climb in and smacked his head on the bottom of the bunk above him.

“Ow! Shit.” He rubbed at his forehead.

“Oh, stellar job guys. Let him get hurt again, why don’t you?” Creed snorted. “How about, ‘duck your head, Barron, there’s a metal beam here’?”

“Bugger—”

“That’s enough,” Barron snapped. His head hurt, his skin still felt like it was stretched too tight over his body, and everyone was probably staring right at him. “Just get out of the way.” He shook off his friends and slid his hand along the bottom of the bunk, feeling a number etched in the metal at the corner, then reached down to find his mattress. He could crawl into his own bed, damn it.

“Get in your bunks like Mr. Hodge said.” Barron rolled over, finding his pillow and then the small buttons on the headboard. Which one was it again?

“Hey,” he said quietly. “Which button’s for the stasis field?”

“Third from the left.” The answer sounded like it came from the bunk across from Barron. He squinted, trying to see who was talking, but he didn’t recognize the harsh whisper. All he could see was a shadow.

“Thanks.”

The guy rolled over. “Whatever.”

What was his problem?

Barron pressed the third button and the stasis field activated down by his feet, slowly moving up toward his head. Before it could reach him, he settled back into the bed. The stasis fields would be shut off when they reached space.

Until then, Barron would nap. It’s not like he had anything else to do.

Napping was pretty much all he did for the next three days. He got up for meals, but he hated the fact that someone had to guide him there, help him figure out where his food was. Even then, he spilled half of it. He started asking for blended meals, like a toothless old person. Then he had to sit there and wait for someone who had the time to take him back to D section.

Screw it, Barron was tired of fucking waiting around. The cafeteria was empty. Thavin had to run down to Security, but he said he’d be back in a few

minutes. He could make it down two straight corridors. Of course he smacked his shins against three chairs.

All in all, Barron was feeling very bitter, except for when Marya would climb up in his bed. He always sat up, letting her squirm around on his lap as she jabbered on. He didn't regret running after her, he just wished...

"Ow!"

He stumbled and fell. The metal grate on the floor sliced into his palms and skinned his knees.

"Whoops. I'm so clumsy."

Barron clenched his teeth together. Why hadn't he expected this? He'd heard the whispers and knew what they were probably saying.

*Weak.*

*Victim.*

*Worthless.*

*Annoying burden.*

He couldn't even avoid a twerp trying to get back at him. Barron knew exactly who tripped him.

"Revi Porter!"

Barron jerked back against the wall.

"Front and center, young man. Now."

Someone else was in the corridor with them.

"Did I just see you just trip Mr. Pernell?"

"Yes, sir." Revi's drawl made it sound like he said, 'suh'. "But Dad—"

Shit, it was Revi's dad, the lieutenant colonel. "No buts. You committed assault on a fellow survivor. A young man who was severely injured, and could've died, after he selflessly ran after a little girl—one he'd already saved once before. Yet you felt it was acceptable to knock someone down who is unable to protect himself.

"Maybe you need to spend some time helping Mr. Pernell about his daily routine, so you can make up for your disgraceful behavior."

Barron cringed. Why not put a sign on his back that said, 'useless cripple'. He slid a hand across the floor, looking for his glasses. He didn't like anyone

seeing his eyes—not after several people had gasped when he looked toward them. And the voices were always aimed at his chest, like just looking at him made people uncomfortable.

Finally, he found his glasses and slipped them on.

“I’m fine.” It was time to stop this whole thing before it got even more humiliating. “It was an accident.”

“Are you trying to tell me I’m wrong? That I didn’t see what was clearly visible?”

Barron snapped. “Yeah, maybe you’re as blind as me. I said I’m fine, and it was an accident.”

“He did the exact same thing to me the first day we met, Dad. He’s a disrespectful ass, clearly, because he didn’t understand what you meant at all.”

“I don’t fucking care what he meant, or what he says. I don’t want you helping me. Just stay the hell away from me.” Barron lost count of how many steps he’d taken. He’d have to feel the letter plates on the sections. “I don’t need anyone.”

Barron was done relying on other people. He could manage on his own. It wasn’t forever; just until they got to the new planet and Dr. Samuels could fix his eyes. He took a few steps forward and then his hand reached open air. He stumbled sideways and slammed into the edge of the door.

He grunted, biting his lip.

“Oh yeah, smooth,” Revi taunted him.

“Son!” Lt. Colonel Porter had a bark on him just like Barron’s dad had—before he died. But Porter wasn’t his dad, and Barron didn’t need to listen to the overbearing jerk.

“Sorry, Dad.”

“Apologize to him, not me.”

Even though it clearly galled him, Revi apologized. “Sorry, Barron.”

“Whatever. I don’t accept your apology, just like I don’t accept his opinion that I need your help.”

“That, Mr. Pernell, is clearly untrue. Further, whether or not you care what I meant previously, I’ve spoken. As an officer on this ship, I can dictate the responsibilities of the civilians on board. You, Mr. Pernell, will have an aide

until such time as your eyesight can be restored. Revi will assist you during your waking hours. This is not up for debate. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir." Revi sounded as furious as Barron felt.

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## Chapter Seven

“Dinner.”

“Fuck off.” Barron wasn't that hungry. Certainly not hungry enough to be seen with Revi. At lunch he'd expected one of his friends to come get him. Creed had come to his bunk and whispered the news they'd been ordered—*ordered*—not to help him.

That was Revi's job, and his dad wouldn't let anyone else do it. Creed apologized profusely, but Barron knew it wasn't his fault. It was the Porters', both of them.

Well fuck if he was going to allow it.

“If you don't go eat, I can't go eat.”

“Sucks to be you.” That was one of William's favorite lines.

“Hell no. No way.” His bed jerked. Revi must have kicked it, judging by the cursing and hopping thuds he could hear. That slow drawl got stronger when Revi got pissed.

Barron snickered.

“I'm not going hungry because you feel like being your usual asshole self.”

“You don't know me.” Barron turned onto his side. Revi's dad had moved fast sticking them together—the ass was in the bunk next to his now. “I'm busy. Go away.”

“I know everything I need to about you. You're an overbearing bully who isn't worth a hill of beans without his friends backing him up. And you're just acting lazy. *Now. Get. Up.*”

“No.”

Annoying little twerp, meet immovable object. Barron knew Revi couldn't make him get up, and he wouldn't dare touch him again. Barron let his whining fade into the background. He didn't really have anything on his mind. If he could've, he would have read his one precious book. He couldn't even enjoy his favorite Brogherd novel.

What he wouldn't give to get lost in a horror story that went away when he tapped the off button. Why didn't life have an off button? Well, it did... but he wasn't willing to push it.

Barron fell asleep. He woke a few times when everyone came in from work before leaving in groups to go eat, but he didn't feel like talking. Everyone knew about Revi being saddled with him, the lazy cripple, so why shouldn't he go with it?

D section was quiet when Barron finally woke. The dormitory-style room housed everyone from his hometown and then some. He'd been in and out of the dorms when they packed the ship. Over half of them were empty.

So many people had died. Barron still saw them in his dreams.

Thinking about it would bring on nightmares. He sighed. He couldn't go back to sleep. He heard a lot of snoring, but no one was talking or walking around. A way to tell time would be really nice, but Barron figured it must be the middle of the night.

The perfect time for a snack. Barron slid his hand into his pocket. His chit was still there. Good. Barron sat up, and his bed creaked. He froze and listened.

Nothing.

Two steps to the end of his bunk. One more to make sure he was in the center of the corridor. Turn. He had to go thirty steps to the door. He slid his foot forward just above the floor. One. Another. Two.

By the time he got close to thirty the tension made his muscles tremble. He held up one hand so he wouldn't run into the wall with his face. Thavin had suggested he try orienting by counting steps, and it was working, but the uncertainty of not knowing what was around him rattled his nerves. What if someone dropped something? He wouldn't see what everyone else could avoid. Plus, he probably looked stupid, shuffling around with his arm out.

Barron breathed a silent sigh of relief when he made it to the smooth metal exit from D section to the corridor. The door opened soundlessly. The corridor was silent in a way the room full of sleeping people hadn't been. Barron could feel a hum through the floor, vibrating into his feet. Maybe it was from the engine turning the sections around the core, creating the artificial gravity they all needed to keep from floating up to the ceiling.

He imagined it could also be the engine, something they'd been told about but never seen. He'd gotten close enough to the engine bay to see the two gigantic soldiers armed to the teeth standing outside the access door. Like they needed weapons with all their genetic modifications.

The idea they were going to shrink space... it boggled his mind. Barron was a bit of a math whiz, though he didn't really share it around school, but he

couldn't imagine the computations needed to figure the amount of power needed to create the field around the front of the ship they'd need to move through space faster than the speed of light.

Barron jumped when the door slid shut behind him. Damn things were on a timer at night so they'd stay shut if someone forgot to turn off the proximity sensor. He'd been lost in the strange sensation of the ship itself and nearly got his heels chopped off. He had to pay attention. Now that he wasn't worried about physical objects in his path, Barron set out. Three smooth metal doorways—all shut—broke up the textured bands waist high along the wall. He slowed, searching for the last door. The cafeteria served processed foods made from the raw molecules broken down from the collected scrap.

It was kinda weird if he thought about it. His burger might have once been someone's car door or bicycle. He couldn't tell the difference between the replicated food and what he remembered eating, though. It smelled the same, too.

He could smell tomatoes and garlic in the hall. He had to be close to the cafeteria. Barron slid his hand along the door and felt the seam in the middle. Double doors. He'd definitely found the cafeteria.

Spaghetti with his lack of sight would be a disaster, but Barron knew they kept ready-made snacks and other foods on hand. He groped his way through the cafeteria, trying not to bang into any tables or chairs. They'd had lunch in there every day when they helped load the ship; he remembered where the cold storage was, along the right-hand wall.

He managed to knock over a chair and kick a table leg so hard he could've sworn his toe audibly popped—and was probably broken—by the time he felt the smooth doors with their sleek handles. Below those were cabinets.

Barron opened one storage unit and began sliding his hand over the shelves inside. He was looking for a triangle package... Aha! He'd found it. His stomach grumbled. Barron slid to the floor, crossing his legs. He opened the sealed top of the package of food and grinned when he took a big whiff. He'd found a ham sandwich—or a toaster masquerading as a ham sandwich—but he didn't care. It was so good.

Wolfing down two took less than five minutes. Barron barely chewed, just shoved it in his mouth. He'd acted like he wasn't hungry, but all it had taken was one bite for his stomach to prove him wrong. If he admitted it—and he never would—he'd been starving. Ramping Revi's temper up until his accent

thickened, and he was ready to blow, was too much fun. He should get something to stash in his pillow.

That took longer. Barron didn't want something easily crushed, like crackers, or anything in a lot of packaging that would leave any evidence behind he couldn't get rid of without getting busted. He picked up packages, investigating different foods in the cupboards, then carefully set them exactly where he found them until he finally found an apple. He didn't really like the seeds, but he could eat pretty much all of it.

And wouldn't that piss off Mr. Southern High-and-Mighty of the long, curly hair?

Barron grinned. He palmed a second apple, and then slid the cupboard shut. He tossed the packages from his sandwiches in the recycler. Armed with his snacks, he made his way back to D section, reversing his direction and counting his steps. The apples went into the pockets of his loose jacket so he could walk with his right hand brushing along the wall.

In far less time than he expected, Barron made it back to D section. Barron actually traced the section plaque twice, just to make sure. Now his stomach was sated, he was beginning to get tired again. Barron crept quiet as a mouse through the corridor to his bunk, counting the steps exactly in reverse.

It worked.

He didn't need Revi, and he was going to prove it.

The next morning he yanked his blanket over his head when everyone got up. Everyone but him. Barron snickered into his pillow as Revi raged at him. The smooth lumps in his pillow reassured Barron he, at least, wouldn't go hungry.

Apparently he'd pushed his new guide past his limit. Revi started smacking him in the head with a pillow.

"Get up, get up, *get up!*"

Barron rolled over, shoving his blanket down. He stared toward the side of the bed where Revi stood, breathing hard, and said, "You have to be kidding me. A pillow? What are you, ten? A girl? That's it, you're a girl aren't you? Shoulda known with that hair."

"*You* have to be kidding *me*," Revi mocked him. "Is that what all this has been about? My hair? You don't like me because you think my hair is girly?"

Barron didn't answer him.

"That's it, isn't it! Now who's ten? Didn't your parents teach you better than to judge a person by their appearance?"

Baron swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. He pushed off the thin mattress and stood up, facing Revi. "My dad taught me to look and act like a man, not a girl." He flexed his hands into fists, grinding his teeth. "Even blind I'm more of a man than you'll be on your best day, girly boy."

"Well this girly boy is going to knock some sense into your blind ass."

Barron targeted the sound of Revi's voice and jabbed. His fist was swept aside by a block, and Barron barely managed to protect his face. His left arm throbbled from the punch he'd taken in return.

Revi didn't say anything else, but Barron heard the slide of his feet on the floor to his left, away from the bunks and toward the center of the room. He turned with the sound and stepped forward—straight into a kick to his gut.

"Ugh," Barron grunted, bending into the blow. He swung but the edge of his fist barely glanced Revi's body. His teeth clacked together from a sharp blow that felt like it came from an elbow. The iron tang of blood filled his mouth from the tip of his tongue. He'd damn near bit it off.

That was it. Barron couldn't exchange blows with someone who could freaking kick like that. He couldn't see them coming to duck under or step back, and he was going to get his ass kicked if he didn't do something else. He had to get an advantage... and he knew just how to do that.

The next blow smacked into his jaw again, but Barron let it rock his head sideways, going with the strike instead of against it. Then he lunged, wrapping his arms around Revi's slim body with one shoulder into his ribs. They struck the floor, and Barron grinned fiercely at the choking sound Revi made when he landed on top of him.

Wrestling he could do.

Or he thought he could. "Son of a bitch." Revi was as slippery as a water weed. All that hair would've been a great handle, but he couldn't feel it loose like he'd always seen it before. "Did your mommy do your hair for you? Make you all pretty?"

They rolled around, grappling with each other, trying to get on top and stay there. "Was not," Revi gasped. He slammed his head against Barron's mouth, battering his lips against his teeth.

“What?” They hammered at each other, with their elbows and shoulders. Barron’s whole torso was throbbing. If Revi thought he could distract him... Barron spit out the blood in his mouth. He felt Revi’s legs fold, and quickly spun them, flipping his opponent face down with one twist of his hips. He locked his ankles around Revi’s legs and spread them, using his weight and height to stay on top. He wound one arm under Revi’s shoulder and against the back of Revi’s head, trapping his arm and smashing his face into the floor.

“*My mom*”—Revi’s voice was garbled, but Barron understood him—“*was not a bitch, you bastard.*” He shuddered, and then went limp.

Oh shit.

The frustrated rage that drove Barron since... well, since forever, faded just enough for his conscience to begin screaming at him. Barron hadn’t liked his parents alive, but he still missed them. Even though he’d longed to be on his own, he’d never expected it to happen like it had, with the entire world going tits up. He’d been holding on to a stereotype, one he knew was wrong and hated since he turned twelve—when his dad caught him trying to do his hair with some glitter gel for a party—just because he felt like such an unfeeling traitor.

Because, in the depths of his heart, he was relieved his dad was gone. He didn’t have to be a carbon copy of the man who’d raised him, not anymore.

So why was he still trying to hurt someone who was different, just because his dad would’ve approved? No one deserved to be in the amount of pain he’d heard in Revi’s voice.

He’d loved his mom. No one could sound like that if they hadn’t had their heart ripped out by loss.

And Barron made it worse.

He scrambled away from Revi until he slammed into a bed. Barron pulled his knees up. He swiped one hand across his mouth, smearing warm liquid—probably blood—over the back of his hand.

Damn it. Damn the whole fucking world, and the ship, and Lt. Porter. Damn his brain for getting logical when all Barron wanted to do was take out his pain and fear on someone else. But he couldn’t do it. He didn’t want to be that guy. He hadn’t wanted to be a bully.

Saying sorry wasn’t something he was used to doing. Barron had to do something. What if Revi started crying? Barron hated that shit.

He slid one hand along the bunk. The numbers etched into the bottom corner of the bunk were wrong. Odds, when his was even. He was across the

corridor from his bed. He was sixteen. Barron stood up, groaning as the muscles in his shoulders, back, and stomach flexed.

Black and blue bruises were probably already forming all over his body. He shuffled down, away from the harsh sound of Revi's breathing. He stretched out his hand, unsure of the space and unwilling to smack his face into anything again.

He had to backtrack to his left because he'd swung too wide, but finally he found his bunk. He grabbed his pillow and reached into the pillow case, pulling out the apples he'd stashed there. He took a few steps to the end of the bed, then held one out.

"Here."

Silence.

"Hey. I said here."

"What?" Revi's voice was still muffled. Was he crying or was his face still against the floor?

"Take the damn apple." Barron shook his hand. "Just... take it."

"Why?" Revi's voice got clearer. "What'd you do to it?"

"Nothing. You said you were fucking hungry. Take the damn apple, or I'm dropping it. You can eat it off the floor."

If Barron was Revi, he'd get a cheap shot in when he wasn't expecting it. Or he would have ten minutes ago. Whatever. But Revi plucked the apple out of his hand, not touching him, and didn't hit him either.

Revi didn't start eating it. Barron still held the other apple, but his mouth fucking hurt. He wasn't sure he could take a bite without dislodging some teeth that had to be loose after the last head-butt. He licked his lip, wincing when his tongue slid over the split on the bottom.

The apple made a crunching sound when Revi bit into it.

"You're a pretty good fighter," Barron said quietly. He shuffled backward and sat on his bunk. Barron rolled his apple between his palms, looking down. He wondered what color it was. His stomach was still flipping around.

Maybe it was a good thing he couldn't eat.

It was too quiet. Revi hadn't taken another bite. Barron was relying on his other senses more and more. The less he tried to see and the more he tried to hear and feel, the easier it was to get a sense for what was around him.

And right then it felt like he was being stared at.

By Revi Porter.

Who'd just beat the crap out of him—and maybe knocked a little sense into his head at the same time. Barron was so tired of the act.

“Where'd you get the apple? One of your friends sneak them in for you?”

Barron shook his head. “I got up after everyone was asleep last night and ate some sandwiches in the cafeteria. I brought the apples back myself.”

“No way.” Revi snorted. “You're blind.”

“Doesn't mean I'm weak,” Barron snapped. His temper flared. “I don't need you, you know, no matter what your dad thinks. I'm fine on my own.” He didn't need his friends to lead him around either. Barron would damn well learn to deal with his nearly non-existent life until his eyes healed on their own or could be fixed.

“What happens when we get to the new planet? What then, huh?”

“Then Dr. Samuels fixes my eyes, and I do whatever I have to do.” He could maybe help build the habitats. He was good with his hands.

“What if she can't?” Revi asked quietly. Most of the belligerence in his tone faded.

“She will.” Barron couldn't think otherwise... but the words of the general about people dying from exposure kept flashing in his head. He wasn't going to die, the tank saw to that, but *what if* the damage was too bad. Could they make him new eyes?

Or would he be stuck in a blinding fog of light forever?

“Sorry.”

Barron didn't know what to do with that. What was Revi sorry for? Taunting him? Hitting him? Making him think about what would happen if he never saw again?

Was it payback for making him think about his mom?

Or maybe he was just... sorry.

Barron let out a big sigh. “Yeah. Sorry.”

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## Chapter Eight

“Are you going to get up for lunch?”

Barron turned his head toward Revi, but didn't sit up as he considered the question. His face hurt, and chewing would probably make his jaw throb worse, but earlier his stomach had growled loud enough to hear over the sound of the little kids leaving after their morning naps. He and Revi had been lucky to not get busted for fighting—Jenn had brought them back into the dormitory from the nursery to nap a few minutes after they'd come to an uneasy truce.

At least it'd broken the awkward silence between them. Barron sat up and reached for his shoes. Revi's bed creaked. “Don't.”

Barron didn't know if he was going to try to help him, but he didn't want Revi to.

“Don't what?” Revi had moved, but he was standing too far away to be reaching for Barron's shoes.

“Nothing,” Barron muttered. He grabbed his tennis shoes where they were tucked under his bunk and shoved his feet into them. “Can we sit next to my friends? I won't sit next to the girls. No fucking way.”

“So it's not just my girly hair you hate, but actual girls too?” Revi sounded amused.

“They're shrill and talk too much. Not to mention, they're annoying as hell.”

“Jeez, Pernell, is there anyone you don't hate?”

“My friends.” Barron stood up. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I've known them since we started school as kids.”

“Fine. We'll sit by your friends.”

Barron started counting steps. He made the turn into the center corridor between the dormitory bunks. “Where the hell are you?” He hadn't heard Revi move.

“Behind you.”

Good. No way did he want to look like Revi was leading him around or something. He walked toward the door, pretending confidence he didn't feel.

He knew how many steps it was. He'd made it the night before while everyone slept. He could do it now.

Twenty-nine. Barron put up his hand and the door was literally right in front of him. He'd barely avoided smacking into it. The door slid open when he touched it.

The humming in the corridor was muted. He couldn't feel it in his feet. People moving around. He could hear their steps and snatches of conversations. Barron turned, a little hesitant. He knew which way to go, but crashing into someone would be embarrassing. Revi would probably laugh. Barron would've... before.

"Everyone's on the other side of the corridor, leaving the cafeteria to head back to work." The living quarters were on several rings orbiting the center ship area. People were heading to the lift or to use the central no-grav tube.

Made it easier for him, at least. He walked, trailing his hand along the wall. He didn't want to miss the doors by miscounting again. The hall fell silent. There must've been a lull in the eating schedule.

The cafeteria doors slid open as they approached with a quiet snick. Even after just a few days, Barron was noticing a lot more sounds around him than he'd ever heard before. The buzz of everyone talking in the cafeteria was a dull roar as their voices blended together. He'd once walked into a flock of birds and set them off, squawking, and it was almost that bad.

He paused before going in.

"The line is on our right. Maybe nine of your steps." Revi's voice came from right behind Barron's shoulder. He was close, almost touching. That let him speak quietly so Barron could hear him but no one else could. They joined the line. Revi actually pulled him back a little before he bumped into the last person before them.

"Thanks." Barron casually slid his hands along the bar at the counter tray area. It was empty. He reached up to the counter above the slide and picked up a tray.

"Pizza, sub sandwich, or salad?" a woman asked.

Oh, pizza. Warm and cheesy. "What kind of pizza?"

"Three cheese or pepperoni." Okay, so they weren't exactly original in the topping choices, but Barron wasn't going to complain. He didn't want another sandwich, and no way was he eating rabbit food.

“One of each.” His mouth watered. He was really hungry and could smell the doughy crust and cheese, along with the sharp tang of tomato sauce. A vibration between his hands let him know the plate with his pizza had been set down on his tray. “Thanks.”

“Cheese only, please.”

Barron didn't wait for Revi. He slid down the line slowly. When the back of his hand hit another tray he stopped.

“Drink?”

“Milk, please.”

“Milk?” Revi sounded amused.

“It's good with pizza. I like milk. Made me big and strong. Obviously you didn't drink enough of it growing up.”

“Uh huh. Your size had nothing to do with your genetics and everything to do with nutrition.” Barron could almost hear Revi roll his eyes.

“Well, I'd say yes if I were still acting like an ass, but I'd be lying. Genetics for an average, white male dictate about eighty percent of a person's height, with another twenty percent influenced by environmental factors like nutrition and lifestyle. Lack of protein and Vitamins A & D, like milk and meat—Mr. No Pepperoni—are two of the main nutritional contributors to growth, or lack of it. So yeah, I drink milk.”

“Holy shit. You're a geek.” Revi's voice rose.

His face heated at Revi's audible shock. “I'm not stupid, no. But I am *not* a geek.”

Revi didn't say anything else. They finished getting their food. Barron paused after he picked up his tray.

“It's pretty busy in here. Let me lead you.”

Barron ground his teeth. “No.” Just... no.

“Do you know where your friends are?”

“No. And since your dad said they couldn't help me, they can't exactly come and get me so I will know, either. But you're still not leading me around.”

“Shit. Why did you have to mention him?” Revi muttered. “He's here, and he's looking right at us.”

“Well, let’s stop standing here.” Barron suppressed his urge to snarl and scowl.

“Fine, but if something happens it’s your fault—not mine. Turn left, then walk about six steps and make a right.” Revi was right behind him again.

Barron tightened his fingers around the tray. He hated this. Not being able to see, depending on someone else to guide him around like a baby. Revi wasn’t touching him, but his breath puffed against the sensitive hair at the base of his neck, and Barron almost swore he could feel the heat from Revi’s body along his back.

It was almost as bad as it would’ve been if Revi took his hand. Barron tried to suppress the thoughts chasing circles around in his brain. He had to pay attention. He counted and turned, taking deep breaths through his nose.

“Not so much, turn a little left or you’ll bump into the end of a table with a bunch of the dreaded girls at it. They might think you want to sit with them—God forbid!”

“Oh, shut up.”

Revi snickered. “Wuss. Afraid of a few girls.”

“Do you think, if I turned around right now, tripped over nothing, and dumped my food all over you that your dad would buy it was an accident?”

“Do you want him to come over here? *You* shut up,” Revi hissed. “Your friends are at a table about twenty steps straight ahead.”

When they got close, William called out to him, “Hey Barron!”

“Hey.” Barron winced when his legs hit the bench attached to the table. “Ow.”

“Be careful! Here, let us help you.” Someone took his tray and then grabbed his arm.

“Damn it, guys, if you take my tray I don’t know where it is. And I can sit down on my own. *Someone* didn’t tell me we were at the table.”

“I said twenty steps.”

He had. Barron made a face. “I lost count when William distracted me.”

“Sounds like that hurt.” A tray smacked down on the table beside him, and the bench shook.

“Dude. You’re an asshole,” Creed snapped. “Why don’t you go somewhere else? Like out an airlock or something.”

“Lay off, guys. I’m stuck with him, so no airlock treatment tonight.” Barron was kinda starting to enjoy the verbal sparring with Revi. He was a real smart ass.

“Here.” Thavin grabbed Barron’s hand and put his milk in it. “I stuck a straw into it.”

“Damn it.” Barron put the milk down. “You know, I think I actually like Revi’s guiding me around. He tells me where stuff is, and he doesn’t move me around like a doll.”

No one spoke.

“I’m blind. Temporarily. I’m not incapable.”

“We’re just trying to help,” Thavin said.

Barron sighed. “I know, I know. I just... I don’t like needing it.” It was a lot less awkward having a stranger helping him than his friends, now that he’d actually let Revi. Besides, he didn’t get his feelings hurt when Barron acted like an ass, he just flipped him shit right back. “Sorry.”

“You should be.” Creed bumped his shoulder. “You’re lazing about, and we’re all working our butts off.”

Barron groped the table, finding his tray and the plate. “I’d rather be working,” he muttered. He took a bite of pizza and groaned. He was so hungry. No more skipping meals.

They were all quiet as they shoveled food in like they hadn’t eaten in weeks, instead of hours. Barron tried not to make a mess. Good thing they gave him extra napkins, because he wasn’t sure he was successful.

Someone burped.

“Gross,” Revi said.

“Hey, better out than in.” William snickered. “Who knows what end it might come out then?”

“You’re a pig,” Thavin said.

“Yep.” He clearly didn’t care. Barron snorted. He never had.

“Bet I can burp louder than you.” Creed tried but failed.

“Heathens! I’m surrounded by heathens!”

Barron ignored them as he started his second slice of pizza. He began to eat the pepperoni off first.

“You have weird friends,” Revi said.

He did, but they were his friends and had been since they were little. “Yeah, so?”

“Nothing. Just saying.”

“You two are getting along now?” William asked. “So we shouldn’t replace his shampoo with dye or anything?”

“Where in the hell did you get dye?” Barron wanted to know.

“I cannot give up my sources,” Creed intoned. “Confidentiality and all that.”

“Dye, pfft. I got some of that instant hair gel the girls use on their legs.”

“No shit?”

Barron had to stop them before Revi ended up bald or looking like he had doll hair.

“Yes, we’re getting along now, so no, do not make him bald or turn his hair whatever color you found.” It was probably bright purple or green or something. Barron shook his head. “I was an ass for a stupid reason. I shouldn’t have tripped Revi that day at the caves.” Looking back, it wasn’t funny. He knew why he’d really done it, even if he still didn’t want to admit it.

“Yeah, well, he tripped you too. We all heard about it. And you’re blind!” Thavin snapped.

“I am not blind! I just... temporarily can’t see. And—”

“Shh!” Barron couldn’t tell who was hushing him. “What?” he asked.

“Some military bigwig is coming over here, and he looks pissed.”

“Fuck, it’s my dad.” Revi shoved a napkin in Barron’s hand. “Wipe your face; you have sauce on your cheek.”

Barron scrubbed, then winced. Damn it, his face still hurt.

“Mr. Pernell. Revi.”

“Sir,” Revi said. Barron stared up toward the voice. Revi’s dad was standing off to his left, maybe at the edge of the table. He did not sound happy.

“Care to explain yourselves?” Oh no. That tone of voice didn’t fly with Barron.

“We’re eating lunch.” Barron waved a hand over the table. “Pretty sure that’s what’s going on, but I can’t exactly be sure. Or are we not allowed to have lunch with my friends?” If the ass tried to tell him who he could and couldn’t hang out with, Barron was going to blow a gasket.

Revi elbowed him.

“Ow.”

“Something wrong, Mr. Pernell? Perhaps one of those bruises is throbbing.”

More like his ribs. “Nah, those are fine.”

“Revi?”

“I’m fine, Dad.”

“So the two of you show up with battered faces and expect me to believe... what, exactly? Nothing happened? I told you before—”

“Revi had to help me out. Well, he’s doing that. We’re here, aren’t we? I’m eating lunch, he’s eating lunch, and no one’s on the floor—here at least. We had a bit of a tangle earlier figuring out how to make this ‘helping me out’ thing work. It was an accident.”

“A tangle? And did any of you see this?”

“No,” chorused Barron’s friends.

“We *told* you, and I’m saying it again. We’re fine.” Barron crossed his arms over his chest. His dad was dead. Revi might have to answer to his dad, but Barron didn’t. He stared obstinately forward, waiting.

“We were alone, sir,” Revi said. “It was just an accident in the dormitory. That’s why we missed breakfast.”

Guess Revi wasn’t such a daddy’s boy. Or maybe he didn’t want to get into trouble.

“If that’s what really happened...”

Barron wasn’t going to crack. He hoped Revi didn’t either. Silence reigned at their small table.

“Fine. But don’t let any more ‘tangles’ happen. Since you two seem to be fine, and you’ve shown you can manage together, I’m putting you to work. We

should be planet-side in a week. Until the habitats can be set up, all non-emergency medical care will be on hold. I'm putting you in charge of sorting materials for the housing units. You still have two good hands, Mr. Pernell, and the more work you do now, the sooner you get to see later."

What a douche. Barron narrowed his eyes. Work or don't have his eyes fixed... basically a threat. "Yes, sir." Revi sighed.

Barron wasn't that upset about the work, just the asshole's way of telling him what to do. He'd been going crazy in his bunk. He knew they were being punished, though, and that pissed him off. "Whatever."

Revi's dad must have been a drill sergeant at one time. He barked, "Report at 0600 tomorrow. You can get oriented to the housing hold before breakfast when the workroom is empty. Since you didn't seem to mind missing breakfast today, it shouldn't bother you to miss it tomorrow either."

Damn, Revi's dad was a hard-ass. Barron scowled. Who did he think he was? Barron ground his teeth together on the response he wanted to give. He waited until he heard the heavy stomp of boots on the metal floor fade away. He wouldn't forget that sound again.

"*That's your dad?*" Creed whispered. "Oh, my god, that must suck."

"Tell me about it. Why do you think Mom and I moved four hours from the base he worked at?"

A buzzer went off.

"Lunch is over. Gotta head back to work," Thavin said.

"You'll be back for dinner, right?" William asked.

If they had to miss breakfast the next day? "Definitely." Barron began to make plans while his friends got up. Creed took his tray for him. Barron made sure to thank him to make up for his crankiness earlier.

"I can't believe you talked to my dad like that," Revi said.

Barron shrugged. "Why not? I'm not in the military, and I'm not his kid. He has rank, and shit's all fucked up right now... but I've had enough with my life being dictated to me. My dad was like that. Always on my case and telling me what to do, how to act, how my friends had to act. I don't have to take it anymore, and I won't. A new world means things are going to change."

He took a deep breath. "I'm going to change."

\*\*\*\*



## Chapter Nine

When they first met, Barron couldn't have imagined he'd laugh and shove Revi unless he was knocking him down or taunting him. Becoming friends? Never.

But he'd spent every waking moment of the last few days with Revi, and they got along pretty well, actually. Revi's accent always got heavier whenever Barron was driving him nuts, and he poked and prodded in return to try and set Barron off.

His dad, Lt. Colonel Ass, popped up far too regularly. He hovered over them. Revi acted just like Barron had before he lost his parents. Well, most of the time.

"So he's the reason for the hair and stuff?" Barron gestured over his shoulder with one thumb. Revi's dad was stomping away after he bossed them around some more. Barron replied with the word 'whatever' whenever he could.

The man really hated that word, so Barron loved it.

"No. I like how I look." Revi paused. "Okay, I do like how much it bugs him that I refuse to cut my hair." They laughed. Revi slammed another box on the table in front of them. "Screws this time."

Barron cursed. He couldn't feel the differences in the screw with gloves on, but the threads chewed up the tips of his fingers when he sorted them. Vegging on his bunk didn't seem so bad anymore.

They sorted through that box, and three more after lunch. Barron shoved his glasses off his nose. He was sweating, and the nose pieces were irritating him. They usually got a break, but they were pushing hard. This was the last day before they dropped in-system of their new home world.

"Why don't you take those off?"

"My eyes..." Barron shrugged.

"They don't bug me."

Taking off his glasses showed off his eyes, which always started people whispering. Like he couldn't hear them say his name. He didn't care what they were whispering about—saying he got what he deserved, or fawning over him

for saving a little girl at the cost of his sight, and nearly his life. Barron hated it. Working together in the holds, Revi didn't have anyone to whisper to about Barron's eyes, though.

He was just Barron.

Ex-bully, not-quite-reformed jerk when he wanted to be... the guy who snapped at his friends and got surly when people tried to help him. He wasn't good for anything but the most menial of tasks. Separating out different sized screws was getting fucking old. Revi seemed to be the only one who—

“Shit!”

“What?”

“Something in that fucking box just cut the shit out of my hand.”

“You're bleeding!” Revi grabbed his wrist.

“Yeah, kinda what I just said.” Barron fought the urge to yank it back. His palm burned. He tried to keep it still, but his fingers twitched. “Is there something *in* my hand?” he said through his gritted teeth. He didn't want to touch it, but it felt like there was something in there.

“Uh-huh.” Revi's hand shook.

Barron hissed. “That fucking hurts. Stop moving.”

“I'm not trying to. There's a-a piece of metal through your hand. Like all the way.”

Okay. Revi was good at a lot of things. Clearly, he was not good with medical emergencies. Blood was pooling in Barron's palm. He could feel it dripping down the side and hitting the floor.

“Is there a cloth or something around?”

“Uh...”

“Revi. Find me something to wrap around my hand. I don't care what it is.”

Barron cradled his hand when Revi let go. “Here. We can use my shirt.” He helped wrap it around Barron's hand.

“Medical.” Barron panted. The thing in his hand felt like a heated spike. He couldn't seem to make his fingers stop twitching, and every heartbeat felt like a giant fist squeezing his hand. “Now.”

“Right. Right! Let's go.”

Barron waited. Revi started to walk away. "Revi?"

"What? Why aren't you coming?"

"I don't know if I'm up to counting steps."

"Oh, shit. Yeah. Sorry." He hurried back and touched Barron's good arm, still cradling his palm, now swathed in Revi's shirt. "Um, how do you...?"

"Just hold on to my elbow and help guide me." Revi helped Barron to his feet and led him away from their work table area.

"You can talk to me." Barron focused on walking. When he'd gotten burned getting Marya out of the light, it'd been over fast. Even driving some jagged piece of metal through his hand didn't begin to approach that pain, but damn, it hurt.

"About what?"

"I don't know, Revi, just anything. Fuck!" Did he have to think of everything?

"Um, have you heard about Paradise?"

Barron grunted. "Stupid fucking name for a planet. Could it be more cliché?"

Revi slid closer to him. "Door."

Bare skin. Revi's side was pressed against Barron's arm. He was shirtless.

Touching him.

If only it wasn't because Barron was a cripple who needed help walking because he'd just stabbed the shit out of himself.

"...it's like some sorta lover's landscape or something."

"Huh?"

Revi pulled him to a stop. "Are you going into shock? There's a lot of blood on that shirt."

"What? No. Just, keep going. I was thinking."

He snorted. "Only you would be thinking at a time like this. I was saying Paradise is some sorta tropical wonderland. Near Earth standards for just about everything. It's perfect for us."

Barron had striven for perfection every single day of his life. "There's no such thing as perfect."

Revi shrugged, his arm bumping Barron's shoulder and jostling his right arm. Barron hissed.

"Sorry. Let's take the no-grav." The tube in the center of the ship, where it didn't rotate and had no gravity. It was a quick way to travel between levels.

Revi stepped in front of him. "Let me do all the work, okay?"

When Barron nodded, Revi stepped behind him. He held onto one arm and slid his other one around Barron's waist. "God, you're big."

"Thick, not big." Big made it sound like he was fat.

"You just have to argue with me, don't you?"

Since he'd stopped fighting his attraction to Revi, the feelings that had flared up the first time he saw his wavy hair and casual, arrogant walk as he strolled through the school, were back—stronger than ever. He didn't have to worry about his dad. There was no one to disapprove if Barron didn't date a strong, conservative man who liked sports and plotting to take over the world one business at a time.

But even if he'd admitted Revi was exactly his type to himself, he had no idea how to even begin to approach Revi. He liked to think they were friends.

Maybe when he got his eyes fixed.

The drop into freefall in the no-grav lift startled him. "Whoa."

"It's okay. I can see the entrance to the medical level. I've got you." Revi squeezed him in his arms. No one had hugged Barron close like that, full body, since he was little. In the weightless environment of the no-grav, the only thing he could feel, beyond the sensation of air brushing past his face, was Revi's body against his.

Barron liked it.

Too much.

"We're here." Barron let Revi reel them in with the level's tow line. Mass and momentum still mattered.

The medical wing was quiet—even quieter than the levels holding the materials for the new habitats where Revi and Barron had worked.

"Can I help you?"

"He got hurt."

"I can see that. You're kinda accident prone, aren't you, Barron?"

"Nolu?"

"Yeah. Guess you just had to come back and see us, didn't you?"

"Well, I can't have you forgetting about me. Out of sight, out of mind, right?"

Nolu chuckled. "Somehow I doubt you're easily forgotten."

Was the medic flirting with him? While Barron was standing there with a chunk of metal in his hand, and Revi, shirtless, next to him?

"Only crippled blind guy on board, huh?"

Revi dug his elbow into Barron's ribs. "You're more than that. You're the crippled, blind smartass on board."

"Ow. Shit, Revi. Really? Don't I hurt enough with this thing in my hand?"

"Sorry," Revi muttered. He rubbed Barron's side. "There. All better."

Barron swallowed. Hard.

Nolu chuckled. "All right. Let's take a look?"

The examining bench the medic made Barron sit on was hard. He could hear squeaking and something rattling. "Rest your arm up here." He guided Barron to slide his arm across a table in front of him. It shifted under his arm, and he froze.

"Ahh." Sweat beaded up on Barron's forehead.

"Let me get you something for that." Cold metal clicked over his right wrist, and Barron lost feeling in his hand completely. He sighed and slumped in relief from the absence of pain. "There, that should be better."

"It is."

"Okay. Time to take a peek." Barron couldn't feel him doing anything. It was oddly surreal, having a body part unfeeling, like it was gone and his wrist ended in mid-air. "Nice bandage you made here."

"We were working. It was cleaner than everything else." Revi was right beside Barron.

"Swift thinking."

"Actually"—Barron could hear Revi shuffle his feet against the textured floor—"Barron told me to get something to wrap up his hand with. I just stripped."

Barron squeezed his eyes shut. Without anything to distract him, with the pain gone and no way to see Revi in person, all Barron could see in his mind were Revi's sharp hips jutting above his low cut jeans as he lounged against the fence. That small strip of flesh had teased Barron into losing control.

He'd pretended to trip Revi that day getting off the bus because Barron didn't like feminine guys. Really, he'd had to get him away before he gave into the urge to curl his hands around Revi's hips, slotting his thumbs right into those two dimples on his back, just above his ass, and sliding the tips of his fingers into the front of Revi's tight pants.

Shit, shit, shit. His pants weren't nearly loose enough to hide an erection. Barron tried to imagine what Nolu and Revi were looking at—his hand splayed out on the table with a shard of metal jabbing through the palm, blood oozing around it.

That helped some.

Nolu made a sound. "Looks like you did a number on yourself. I need to get Aya. She can determine if you've damaged the tendons running through your hand. Just wait here." Nolu walked away.

It was silent for a few minutes. "I'm sorry," Revi said.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I should've checked that box."

Barron snorted. "You didn't stick it in there on purpose or anything, so why would it be your fault?"

"Still—"

"No. You help me around and stuff. You don't have to babysit me. Besides, I'll be able to see soon. So don't worry about it."

"Oh." Revi sounded off. "Okay. I get it. I'm just helping you around. Guide-dog-r-us, that's me, courtesy of my dad."

Damn it. Barron always said the wrong thing. "That's not what I meant."

Before he could explain, the doctor came in.

"What's this I hear about you damaging yourself again?" Dr. Samuels asked. "Who were you saving this time?"

"No one. Just doing my part—the crap I can do."

“He reached into a box of screws he was sorting and jabbed this piece of metal through his palm,” Revi explained.

“That’s a lot of damage for reaching into a box.” She sounded suspicious.

“I was angry.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be sorting things out of boxes you can’t see when you’re angry.”

Barron snorted, then laughed. “Yeah. That’s one way to look at it. Of course, if I could actually *look* in the boxes, I never would’ve done it.”

She sighed. “I’d hoped you’d regain some vision naturally. Unfortunately the damage was more severe than we originally thought. Once the new settlement is functioning, I want to try some new procedures.”

“Procedures? I thought you could fix me.” Barron’s heart pounded. He couldn’t live like this forever. He couldn’t be blind.

“Hey, calm down. I’m sure I can help you. Take some breaths. Your hand is bleeding worse because your heart is racing.” Dr. Aya covered the hand Barron could still feel. “Just take some deep breaths.”

“I want to see.” It was stronger than want. “*I need to see.*” Barron wasn’t going to lose his cool again, as much as he wanted to shout and rage at the doctor. At the whole unfair crapstorm that had become his life. The only thing that got him through each day was knowing that it was one day closer to the day he’d be normal again.

The room was silent for a moment. “I know. I promise, I will do my best.” The doctor cleared her throat. “Okay, let’s get you patched up. Nolu, why don’t you get this other young man something to put on, seeing as he apparently gave up his shirt as a bandage.”

“Sure. Why don’t you come with me? We have some scrub tops in the locker room.”

“You going to be okay?” Revi touched the back of his shoulder.

“I’m fine.” He wasn’t going to freak out.

“All right. I’ll be right back.”

A door opened and then shut. Barron was alone with Dr. Samuels. “I wanted to talk to you for a minute.”

“Why?” Barron asked suspiciously. What other news did she have for him that could be so bad she’d need to send the others away?

“Your young man.”

“He’s not mine. His dad is making him help me as a punishment because we were acting stupid.”

She scoffed. “He didn’t hover beside you with his hands clenched together because he’s forced to be here. When someone is hurt, the people who care for them hurt too. Don’t shut him out. I think he needs you, just as much as you need him.”

“He what?” Barron blinked.

“He cares about you. The way you are *now*. You can’t see it, but I can. I just thought you should know. You don’t have to see for it to be true,” she said gently.

“Maybe I do.” He couldn’t even sort parts without screwing it up. What use would he be, even on a new planet?

The door slid open, and Barron stopped before Revi could overhear him saying something he didn’t want him to know. Yet.

“So, this is a pretty bad puncture, but I’ve pulled out the metal and stimulated all your tendons. Your hand function seems to be fine, but this will hurt while the tissue regenerates. I can’t do full treatments for something that isn’t life-threatening, so you’ll have to heal the old-fashioned way. I can numb it for a few days, but that means no more working.”

“But we’ll be in-system tomorrow. There will be a lot of work to do when we land on the planet,” Barron protested.

“Tough. You can distract some of the kids with stories or something. You don’t need to be doing manual labor.” Dr. Samuels slid the band off his wrist, and Barron grunted. The pain was different, but it was still there. “I’ll numb you up in a second. First, I need you to wiggle each finger. Tell me if the pain is more severe with any one digit.”

Barron clenched his other hand into a fist in his lap, but he did what she asked. The pain stayed strong, throbbing like his heart rested in the palm of his hand, but it didn’t get worse.

“Good, good.” He heard a spray and then his hand went numb again, all through the palm, but he could still move it.

“I want you to keep the hand still, so I’m going to splint it. I don’t want to seal the wound because that metal was pretty dirty. I’ve cleaned it, but if you



develop an infection, I don't want to have to dissolve the faux tissue." She muttered under her breath, "Damn barbaric conditions."

She just finished wrapping his hand when an alarm went off. "That's the light-speed alert. We must be close to Paradise."

"We need to get back." Revi touched Barron's elbow. "We missed another meal."

"Good thing I've got snacks stashed."

Revi laughed. "Of course you do."

"You two go on now," Nolu said. "I'll clean up here, Aya."

"Thank you for fixing my hand," Barron said.

"You're welcome. We'll see you soon." Dr. Samuels patted his shoulder. "Think about what I said."

"All right." Barron slid off the table.

He certainly had a lot to think about.

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## Chapter Ten

They'd reached Paradise, but things were not the idyllic scene Revi described it as. No one would tell them anything concrete, but everyone knew something was wrong. Barron discovered if he sat quietly in the lounge, people seemed not to see him any more than he could see them.

As if losing his eyesight meant his ears didn't work anymore either.

Idiots.

"Hey, ready to head back?" Revi entered the lounge where Barron had spent most of the day. He'd been ordered to finish the sorting, but he still came back every meal and got Barron. He put a hand on Barron's shoulder.

"Shh." He tugged Revi down onto the bench next to him. "They mentioned something about Paradise. Something about a golden locks or something."

"A golden lock? That doesn't make any sense?"

Barron shrugged. "I just overheard it; I didn't say it."

"Well it looks like they're leaving, anyway. Let's go talk to the guys." After the first day, Revi had fit in with the rest of Barron's friends, as if there'd always been a spot for him in the group.

They congregated on Revi and Barron's bunks. Barron shared what he'd overheard. There were enough people in the room to drown out their conversation, if they kept their voices down. He had to trust the others to keep an eye out for anyone paying too much attention to them.

"Really? Golden locks. That doesn't make any sense."

"Goldilocks!" Thavin had been lounging on Barron's bed behind him. He sat up. "That's why we're still traveling in-system. It makes sense now."

"Why don't you explain it to the rest of us?" Creed huffed.

"The Goldilocks Zone is like 'just right'. Like the old story? Not too close, not too far, but just right."

"I don't get it."

"I do," William said. "It's a story my grandma used to"—everyone groaned—"tell me. Little blond chickie goes into some bears' house in the woods while they're gone, and the mom and dad bears' stuff is always wrong, but the baby's stuff is just right. What does that mean for a planet, though?"

“Planets in a solar system’s Goldilocks Zone have a moderate temperature and liquid water. Essentially, the shit we need to survive.”

Revi kept tapping his hands on his legs when he was thinking, which he seemed to do a lot. The sound drove Barron nuts. “So, Barron was right. Nothing’s perfect, much less this tropical Paradise they keep telling us will take the place of Earth.”

“An alien planet across the universe? Is that so surprising?” Creed snorted. “How old is the damn data? If this ship is the first one ever built with faster than light speed capabilities that means what they *think* they know about Paradise was—at best—years old. It could be decades old. Look how fast Earth died. Hundreds of millions of years, and it was ruined in seconds.”

“Maybe the human race is destined to die,” Barron muttered.

No one argued with him.

Tired after a long day, everyone drifted off to their own bunks. Barron hadn’t done shit, so he rolled onto his stomach and fished around under his bunk for his backpack. Reaching inside, he fumbled through the clothes and albums until he felt the sleek cover of his favorite book. He pulled it out.

The letters were raised on the cover. Barron traced them. He’d give his right arm for a distraction. His hand was already useless anyway.

He snorted.

“What?”

“Nothing, just a thought.” Barron opened his book and ruffled the pages, just to hear and feel them.

Revi’s bunk squeaked. “What do you have there?”

“A book.” Barron slid a finger back and forth across a page. Tiny little scratches marred the slick page.

“You mean, a real one? Paper?”

Barron nodded.

“Wow. What is it?”

“A novel by Erink Brogherd.”

“Never heard of him. What’s it about?” He sat on the edge of Barron’s bed.

“Horror. Death, murder, mayhem. The usual gory thriller with a bit of mystery to find out who done it before they do you into the grave.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Revi chuckled. “Is it any good?”

Barron shrugged. “He’s my favorite.”

“Can I read it? I mean here, so you can listen, too?”

Revi wanted to read to him? Horror in a southern accent... that’d be new. “Sure.”

“Scooch over so I can lie down.” Revi pushed on Barron’s shoulder.

He wanted to lie down? On the narrow bed Barron barely fit in? “This’ll be interesting.”

“Well, this way you can hear me, and we won’t bug anyone else,” Revi said. Barron rolled onto his side on the edge of the bed. He stuffed a pillow under his head. “Oh, let me get mine.”

Barron leaned back when Revi crawled onto his bed so he wouldn’t tip forward. He wobbled. “Whoa, be careful.” Revi grabbed his arm and kept him from falling off.

“Thanks.” Barron took a deep breath. He could smell the chemical scent of the shampoo and body wash in the ship shower, plus the scent of Revi’s body underneath. It was just the lightest whiff of sweat and skin.

Good thing his sleep pants were loose. Revi’s shoulder brushed against his chest and their feet tangled as he got comfortable. “Okay. So. No Surrender.”

Barron settled in to listen. Revi’s voice was a smooth drawl, just hard enough to understand he had to listen, but he’d read No Surrender at least five times. He knew it well enough to listen without having to work at it.

*“You’re not like the others. You’re special, one of a kind.” The knife point was all he could see as it traced down Kith’s cheek. “So beautiful.” Silver flashed in the light of a single bulb dangling from the ceiling. “Not anymore.” Cackles filled the room as...*

Barron blinked. His glasses were gone. He’d fallen asleep listening to Revi read aloud, but he was still on his side, and he wasn’t alone. How long had he slept? Barron couldn’t hear anyone moving around. It felt like night. Was Revi still reading?

Reaching out tentatively, Barron touched Revi’s back.

“Mmm.” The sleepy sound was muffled. Barron flattened his hand, soaking up the warmth of Revi’s body.

He jerked his hand back when Revi shifted. He wiggled around and then slid against Barron, chest to chest. Revi slung an arm over Barron's side and snuggled against his shoulder. He sighed and went limp.

Holy hells.

There was no way his pants would hide what was going on down there. Thank God everyone was asleep. Barron tried to will his erection away, but with nearly head-to-toe contact between him and Revi... yeah, so wasn't happening. He grimaced and tried to relax anyway.

Who knew what the next day was going to bring? Probably a lot of shit from the guys, but Barron didn't really care. If Paradise wasn't sustainable, they were all going to die anyway.

He'd overheard whispers he hadn't dared share about the state of the engine when they dropped back to light speed.

There was nothing like global disaster followed by a potential death sentence floating through space to learn life was too damn short to worry about stupid shit. He was going to enjoy something Barron never thought he'd get to have.

He buried his face in Revi's soft hair and curled his arm around him. When he woke up, neither of them had moved. His arm was numb and his nose itched, but Barron was too happy to move. Faint sounds from the front of the room distracted him. That must've been what woke him up.

"...going down in..."

"...civilians last."

He could only pick up snatches of the conversation, but it looked like they'd arrived at Paradise, a full day later than expected. He wondered how far that was in terms of distance. He was distracted from the conversation when Revi's breath caught, and he froze.

In his distraction, Barron hadn't realized he was playing with Revi's hair until it slid through his fingers. "Hey," he said. Wow, raspy. He cleared his throat.

"Hey." Revi still hadn't moved away. He'd moved his head, but the edges of his curls still twisted around Barron's fingers. "I didn't mean to fall asleep here."

Here was his chance. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Without his sight it was hard to know how Revi was reacting to waking up in his arms, but his

voice was calm, and he hadn't jerked up and out of Barron's bed like it was on fire. Barron cleared his throat again.

"I didn't mind. I mean, I liked it." He closed his fingers around those curls, not tight, but enough Revi had to feel it. He wanted to lean down and kiss him, but how awkward would it be if he kissed his nose or something?

Or worse, if Revi didn't want to be kissed. Barron licked his lips. Maybe he should ask? But who did that?

"Revi," he whispered, "Can I—" He started to lean down, and apparently, Revi had the same thought. His forehead hit Revi in the nose.

"Ow!" Revi jerked back, then winced. Barron loosened his hold on Revi's hair.

"Sorry. Damn it. Just..." Barron clenched his jaw. If he could just see what the hell he was doing! He wanted to growl in frustration. "Sorry. My stupid eyes."

"I had my eyes closed. It's okay, don't worry about it."

Don't worry about the kiss? Or kissing in general? Was his awkward fumbling a complete turn-off or something—

Those soft pinks lips Barron couldn't keep out of his dreams landed on his as Revi took control, obliterating Barron's internal freak-out. Barron's fingers clenched tight again. He wasn't holding Revi's head still, he was holding on for dear life as they pressed together, lips to toes. Revi controlled the pressure, moving his hand to Barron's cheek and cupping it. He licked at the seam of Barron's lips and then sank his tongue inside.

No one had ever taken control as they touched him that way. Barron relaxed into the kiss and let Revi lead, touching and tasting, and then he sucked on Revi's tongue.

Revi pulled away with a gasp. "Damn."

"Damn what?" Barron asked. His heart raced, and he fought the urge to hold Revi tighter in case he tried to get up.

But no, Revi had kissed him.

"That was amazing."

Barron's face warmed. He relaxed. "Yeah."

"Too bad everyone's going to get up soon. I don't want to stop, but I don't think we should put on a show either. There are little kids in the room."

His heart sped back up. "Do you... does that mean you want to get up?" He reluctantly slid his hand out of Revi's hair. After all the snarky comments he made about it, he loved having it wrapped around his fingers.

"No. Not if you want me to stay."

Barron nodded, unable to speak through the lump of pure relief in his throat.

The last bit of tension went out of Revi's body, and he rested his face against Barron's shoulder and neck. Barron smiled. He didn't have to see to know things were okay between them. He could feel it. His arm was still numb, but the rest of his body was so amped up, Barron didn't care.

"Well lookie here. The two of them finally quit dancing around each other."

"Uh-huh. And now they're doing the dance with no pants."

Barron growled, woken up by his friends' idiocy when he'd been having a very good dream. He tried to stretch, but then he remembered.

Not a dream.

"We have pants on," Revi said. His breath puffed against Barron's neck.

Barron shivered. His neck was very sensitive. Revi made a small noise and then blew deliberately across his neck and ear.

"Why are you guys... ugh... waking us up?" Holy shit. Barron had not expected this sort of thing from Revi. He was outgoing and funny, but there'd been a distinct space between them until Barron had shoved a piece of metal through his hand. There'd been a lot more touching since then.

It felt really good. Okay. There was no way Barron was standing up.

"There's an announcement in thirty minutes. We're supposed to go to the lounges on each level."

Barron shivered when Revi kissed his neck and then scooted back.

"Oh, my arm. Damn." His fingers tingled like crazy as the blood finally returned to his arm. Revi grabbed his palm and rubbed it. Barron groaned. "That's good."

"Would you two get a room?"

"Your grandparents taught you way too many stupid sayings, William," Thavin said.

"Whatever."

Revi snickered.

“If you’re going to get ready and get something to eat, you should get moving. Mr. Hodge wanted us to warn you two.”

“I overheard him, last night. Or maybe early this morning.” Barron remembered waking up and hearing talking. “We must have arrived at Paradise. I heard something about going down and civilians last. Maybe we’re going to land.”

“I bet they use shuttles. That way they can leave the ship in orbit. It takes a lot of fuel to liftoff. And if the planet isn’t viable...”

That was a buzzkill. Barron sat up on the edge of his bed. “Can you hand me my glasses?” he asked Revi. He had no idea where they were.

“Sure.” Revi didn’t hand them to Barron; he slipped them on his face instead.

“Thanks.”

“Wow, zero to one ten in a single night.”

“Guys! Enough commentary. You did what Mr. Hodge asked. Now. Go. Away.” They scattered. When Barron got irritated, they knew better than to stick around. “I’m gonna go get changed. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

They grabbed breakfast and then headed down to the lounge. It was weird, holding hands, but it was a lot easier getting around. He didn’t have to keep count. It was easier to pay attention to their surroundings, because he knew he could trust Revi not to let him smash into a wall or get snicked by a closing door.

The lounge was nearly silent when they got there. Barron sat on the floor and Revi sat beside him. They leaned against the wall near a lot of other teens, while the adults took the furniture. Revi leaned in close. “The little kids aren’t here. That’s probably a bad sign,” he said in a low voice.

“Attention.” The speakers crackled to life before Barron could respond. “This is Captain DeLeon. We have arrived at the planet dubbed Paradise. As rumors have been flying, I’m sure many of you know the mission parameters have changed. Paradise is no longer a green planet within a safe distance to the double suns of this solar system. Some cosmic event has pushed the planet beyond that distance.

“However, we do not have the resources at this time to locate and travel to another viable planet. We are currently scanning, and while temperature



averages are far colder than expected, there is a temperate region on each continent surrounding the aquatic regions. These are not frozen, as expected, and life forms have registered on the satellite scans taken over the last twenty-four hours.”

Barron slumped against the wall. Cold, but livable.

Maybe the human race wasn't doomed after all.

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## Chapter Eleven

“Did you get a jacket?” Barron asked Revi. He’d been helping hand out cold weather clothes they’d remade from turned in lightweight clothing people had packed. The ship’s resources were strained, but no one had come prepared for cold. It was late spring, nearly summer, when they left Earth, and they’d headed for a tropical planet—or so they thought. Barron shook his head. Like expect the unexpected shouldn’t have been drilled into all their heads.

“Not yet.”

“Good.” Barron pulled one out from under the counter where he was taking chits and scanning them into the computer. “I thought you might like this. It’s black, I’m told.” The coat was slim, but with the interlocked heat wave that would capture and hold Revi’s body heat, regulating the temperature with a small control panel on the base of the front seal connection.

“It’s really soft.”

“Reminded me of your hair.” Barron felt his face heat. He braced himself against the counter, fighting the urge to hide behind it.

Revi grabbed Barron’s hand from the edge of the counter, forcing him to let go. “Relax. You’re so tense. I like the jacket a lot. Thank you.”

Barron smiled. “You’re welcome.”

“Here’s my chit.” He pressed it into Barron’s hand. Barron scanned and handed it back after he heard the machine beep.

“I’ll come back later and get you before dinner. Right now we’re assembling parts of the habitat housing that will fit into the shuttles.” Thavin had been right. The scientists and top military officials went down in shuttles to verify that living on the planet was feasible before beginning the process of building the habitats. “I need to talk to you. Alone.”

That would be hard to manage. “We might have to skip dinner then.”

“Maybe.”

Working through the afternoon with a ‘we need to talk’ type of conversation hanging over him made Barron nervous. Talks were never a good thing.

Finally, he was able to shut down the scanner. He slid his hand around the counter as he walked to the front, then hopped up on the bare edge to wait. The

lines had all disappeared, and other than the workers creating more clothing and gear and stowing it in the appropriate bins, it was quiet. Barron appreciated the feeling of space, and the solitude.

“Barron.”

He jumped.

“Careful. Don’t fall off.”

Revi worried a little too much. Barron snorted and hopped off the counter. He’d felt the area in front and knew how high it was. He was fine. He was getting more comfortable in his inability to see, and that made his life easier physically, if not mentally.

He still struggled with Dr. Samuels’ caution that his eyesight might not be repairable. He reached out his hand and held his breath until Revi took it. If their talk had anything to do with the kiss, and sleeping in the same bunk, surely Revi wouldn’t hold his hand. He’d be back to guiding Barron by counting steps.

Right? Barron couldn’t answer his own question. They headed back to D level. Everyone on their section was in the cafeteria or working, so they actually had some time alone.

“You’re wearing the coat. Did you go down to the planet?” Barron asked.

“I did.”

Why was he back? “I thought only military was going down. How’d you manage that?” He worked hard to keep any accusation out of his voice.

“My dad, of course. He tried to make me stay, but I reminded him that he’d paired us up. The captain’s in charge, ultimately, and he insists that everyone have a partner for safety. Since my father paired us up through the disciplinary board, he couldn’t get away with separating us.”

Barron frowned.

“Why are you frowning? This is good. It means we stay together.”

“It means you’re stuck on the ship with me, instead of on a new planet getting to experience things firsthand.” That’s what it really meant. How long before Revi resented the burden Barron represented until his eyes were fixed?

*If they got fixed.* Barron tried to erase that thought as soon as it popped into his head, but it was too late. He’d tried so hard not to even think about it.

“No, stupid, that’s not what it means.” Revi pounced and shoved him onto his back on his bunk. “It means to grab your stuff and the book. We go back down on the first shuttle in the morning.”

Barron stared up toward his face. “Really?”

“Yup.” Revi leaned forward and removed Barron’s glasses. The light blinded him at first, but not completely like it had at first. He could make out the vague outline of a shadow, but the only place he saw Revi’s face was in his memory. “Really, really.”

Oh. Kissing Revi sent his heart racing. Barron bent his legs, and Revi settled between them, their lips never separating. Barron cradled Revi’s face and thrust his tongue in Revi’s mouth.

“Mmm.” Revi wiggled closer. Their erections rubbed together. Barron grunted and thrust up, starting a rough rhythm. His feet slid on the smooth blanket.

Revi moaned and tore his mouth away. He pressed his head against the pillow next to Barron’s head and panted. His breath tickled the short hair on Barron’s neck.

“Damn!” Barron ran his hands down Revi’s back and palmed his ass. Toned, just enough to grip in each hand... definitely as nice as he’d imagined.

“We’re... We’re gonna get busted.” Revi ground down, rocking his hips. He wrapped an arm under Barron’s and held onto his shoulder.

“Don’t care.” It’d been so long. Revi squeezed Barron’s hip. Barron was primed and ready to erupt. He fought to hold off, but it was no use. “Gonna come.”

Revi nodded. “Uh-huh.” They ground together. Barron needed just a little more. He braced his feet against the mattress and thrust, pulling Revi down so hard it nearly hurt.

“Ugh.” His breath caught, and his toes curled. Barron shot into his pants, his hips stuttering. Revi moaned, but kept moving.

“Close.” Barron fought off the fog threatening to descend. He reached around inside Revi’s pants and palmed his bare flesh. Hot and throbbing, Revi’s slender prick was sticky and dripping.

He stroked down to the base, then slid his hand up to the head and squeezed.

“Fuck.” Revi drew out the word. Hot cum spurted over Barron’s hand. It made a huge mess. Barron grimaced and slid his hand out carefully, wiping it on his shirt.

Revi went limp on top of him. They rested, trying to catch their breath.

“So we’re going to Paradise?”

“Weren’t we just there?”

Barron snickered. “Oh, that’s awful. You shouldn’t make jokes.”

“Stop laughing, you’re jiggling me. I’m trying to relax here.”

“I don’t jiggle.”

Revi poked Barron in the side. “Sure you do.”

“Do not. And I’m not ticklish.” Barron laughed when Revi growled. “Bet you are, though.” Revi squirmed and tried to get away but Barron held him close, holding him down with one arm across his back and used the other to mercilessly tickle Revi’s ribs and side.

Barron grunted when Revi flailed and smacked him in the head with his arm. “Ow!”

“Serves...” Revi panted. “Serves you right!”

“Okay, okay. Truce.”

Revi dropped a firm kiss on Barron’s lips. “Truce.”

“Do that again.” Barron hadn’t been in a relationship in over a year. Having someone to touch, and be touched by, felt amazing.

“Mmm... no.” Revi scooted back. “We should go clean up. Kissing you is the exact opposite of what I should do, unless we want everyone to know what we were doing.”

“No way. Can you imagine the field day the guys would have with this? They were bad enough this morning when we hadn’t come in our pants like pre-teens.” Barron swung his legs over the side of the bed. He found his pack. “Pajamas?”

“Sounds good. I’m not very hungry.”

“You sure?” Barron found a pair of sleep pants and a sleeveless shirt.

“Yeah.”

Barron balled up his clothes in his clean hand. “Okay. Ready.”

They went into separate showers. Barron couldn't wait to see Revi, though he loved touching him too. Until then, a little privacy didn't hurt.

Good thing, too, because when they got out of the shower people were coming in.

"Hey, Barron, Revi. You guys missed dinner."

"Bet I know why."

"William, shut up." Barron refused to blush. He wouldn't blush. Creed, Thavin, and William started laughing.

He was so blushing.

"Go do whatever. Just stop bugging me." Barron didn't need to see them. He could hear William just on his left. He cuffed him on the shoulder. "Jeez, William, cackle much? Let's go," he said to Revi.

They went over to the bunks. Barron had dumped his clothes in the cyclor in the bathroom to get them clean. He didn't bother folding them, just shoved them into his pack. He checked everything else. It was all still there, so he was ready to go to Paradise. "You wanna read?"

"I could do that."

Barron settled on the bed, holding *No Surrender*. "Before you start, why don't you tell me about Paradise? You haven't mentioned it at all."

Revi climbed in beside him. He didn't leave space between them this time, curling in close from the start. "It's cold. There's nothing living on the surface. Literally... nothing. Where we landed was rock, loose soil, and more rock as far as I could see."

"So utter desolation." Barron sighed. "Can we survive there, do you think?"

He didn't say anything.

"Revi?"

"I don't know. At least it's a planet. The air isn't toxic, though there's a really weird smell. I could hear the water moving, but the wind was whipping like crazy. Kinda spooky, the way it was whistling. Everyone going down will be issued glasses to cover their eyes to keep the dust out. The air was full of it."

At least his sunglasses wouldn't be so out of place. "So you didn't see any plants?"

“Not one, but I didn’t get out of the shuttle. It was too damn cold. I just handed things to people who were already equipped to handle the weather.”

That was strange. “Huh.”

“You wanna keep talking, or should I start reading?”

“You can read now.” Revi turned over onto his back, and Barron leaned against him, sliding one hand across his stomach.

Revi squeaked. “Stop that.”

“Sorry.” Barron grinned. He hadn’t been *trying* to tickle Revi.

“Do you want me to read or not?”

No way did he want to miss out on hearing that voice, especially since he’d read *No Surrender* so many times. He could listen to Revi without having to pay much attention to the words’ meanings. “Read, read.” Barron was drowsy and close to falling asleep in no time. He slid a leg over Revi’s and sighed. No way was Revi getting away now.

A hand on his shoulder woke Barron.

“Mr. Pernell. Mr. Porter.”

Barron lifted his head. “*What?*”

Mr. Hodge chuckled. “You haven’t changed that much.”

He had, just not in the way Mr. Hodge could tell.

“Colonel Porter put out a call for those going down to Paradise. That’s you.”

Barron rubbed at his eyes with the heel of one hand. Revi mumbled against his neck and then rolled over. “Okay.” He yawned. “We’re up. Thanks.”

Revi slid off the other side of the bunk and Barron rolled over. He grabbed his bag. Groping around on the bed, he found the book and stuck it inside. “I’m going to go get changed.”

He made it to the bathroom before he realized they never talked to the guys last night. They’d be pissed if Barron left without telling them. Damn. Barron ran a hand through his hair. He put on a set of sturdy jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. He’d get his coat out of the compression pocket on the side later. It’d be too hot on the ship and shuttle, otherwise.

The door slid open. “Revi?”

“No.”

“Thavin?”

“Yep. You figured you’d head on down to the planet and not say good-bye? Thoughtless asshole.” Thavin’s voice lacked any real heat.

“I was just going to wake you guys up.”

“Revi beat you to it,” Creed said.

“Yeah, he’s considerate of what friends mean.” William was there too. Revi woke all of them up. Barron smiled. “He’s not abandoning his best friends.”

“I’m not going that far, and you’ll be down before long. Suck it up, you saps. Besides, you get to stay up here, where it’s warm and there are showers and shit. We’re gonna be camping on an alien planet, freezing our nuts off. You think I wouldn’t make you guys suffer through that with us, if I could?” Barron’s voice was rough. He reached out and grabbed whoever was closest, pulling them into a hug. “Come on. Group thing.” He’d hugged the guys in the last few months more than he ever had before, but they all needed one another. Barron wasn’t going to pretend he didn’t need his friends.

They were his family, after all.

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## Chapter Twelve

Barron took a deep breath and coughed. “Oh damn, you weren’t kidding about the smell! What is that?” Rotting plants? Animals?

“Funky, huh? You get used to it pretty quick, though.”

“Ugh. Don’t know if it’s really a matter of getting used to it or my ability to smell burning out from toxic fumes.”

Revi bumped his shoulder. “Poor Barron.”

“Damn straight.” He fumbled with the latches on his seat. He grit his teeth, but finally managed to get them undone. “Lead on, McDuff. Your dad was quite insistent I not be a burden down here.”

Revi made a noise in his throat. “You know you’re misquoting a hundreds-of-years-old guy who is still famous, right?”

Barron shrugged. “You think we’re not going to have to fight to keep me down here?”

“No. I do.” Revi sighed. “It’s my fault he doesn’t like you, unfortunately. Well, really it’s still your fault—but not all the way.”

Okay. Barron blinked. “That made no sense.” They sat, waiting for the people to shuffle past on the shuttle so Barron could get out safely. “Explain.” They had time. The shuttle carried four hundred people who were going to start building the habitats to house the new colony.

“You know you were an ass when we met, right?”

Barron’s face warmed. “Yeah. Sorry,” he muttered.

“It’s good. I had a talk with Thavin last week, and he explained about your dad. Guess yours wasn’t a very nice guy, either.”

“He wasn’t a bad dad, but he was very rigid.” Barron wasn’t mad that Thavin had told Revi about his dad’s expectations, though he hadn’t really realized Thavin had known how bad it was. Out of his friends, though, Thavin was probably his best friend and spent the most time at his house.

“Yeah. My dad would probably really like you, actually. You fit his ideal son benchmark more than I ever will—or want to—but I told him about the shit you used to say and do. He hates bullies. I know what you did wasn’t that bad, more juvenile teasing because you liked me—”

“Wait!” Barron interrupted. “You knew that?”

Revi snickered. “You stared at me, a lot. It wasn’t hard to figure out.”

Barron’s face felt like it was on fire. He shuffled his feet. “Damn, that’s embarrassing.”

“Yes, it should be, you dork. I thought you were a weird asshole for a long time, until Thavin and I talked.” Okay, Barron really had to thank Thavin. He smiled. “But I’m pretty capable of looking after myself. I’m smart, plus I run and swim. I can fit in to some groups. My cousin didn’t fit in anywhere.”

That didn’t sound good.

Revi’s voice got thick. “He had Gaoschevin syndrome. They couldn’t fix it genetically in utero, and when he was born it was too late. He had brain damage, plus some deformities to his face. The kicker was that my aunt and uncle put him in real school instead of letting him stay home or going to a special academy. My uncle was real old-school about being a man.” That sounded really familiar. Barron swallowed.

“Bullies tormented Castillo for years. It broke him. He was usually happy around me, and we had a lot of fun growing up, but he hated school days. One day his dad made him go when all he wanted to do was stay home.

“Turned out, they started swimming in gym that day. He couldn’t stay up in the water, so Cas had to wear floats. Some fucker took them away, and when Cas tried to get them back from him and his loser friends they shoved him around. Then one of them missed catching him, and he slammed his head into the side of the pool.”

“Oh God, did he die?”

Revi sighed. “No. He ended up a vegetable. Cas would’ve been better off dead, but my uncle couldn’t let him go—not after it was his fault Cas was in school that day. He died when the gamma ray hit.”

He stopped talking. Barron shook his head. “I don’t know how you can’t hate me.”

“I kinda did. But that was before I realized you were just an idiot who wanted my attention but hated wanting it.” Revi slid his hand down Barron’s arm and then intertwined their fingers.

“I didn’t hate wanting you. I was afraid,” Barron said quietly. “Not as afraid as your cousin, but my dad would’ve gone apeshit if he knew I even liked you,

much less tried asking you out. I'm sorry I was a coward. I'm really sorry." He sniffed.

"Hey, I didn't tell you all that to make you feel guilty. You weren't like those guys. You didn't go out of your way to torment me physically—you just said a bunch of stupid shit. Besides, why do you think I let those girls go ahead of me on the bus that day? I wanted to see what you'd do."

"I hated that you ignored me. And I did hurt you, remember?"

Revi squeezed his hands. "Yeah, but then you had to help me to the first aid station. I liked that."

Barron lifted his head, staring toward Revi in shock. "What now?"

"Well, I'm much better at hiding things than you are, obviously, but I might've had a thing for you too. I like the brooding jerk type. What can I say?" He laughed.

"Thanks. Thanks a lot," Barron said drily. "Is it clear yet?"

"Yeah, our area's empty."

Barron stood and felt his way down the row of chairs and into the aisle. "So your dad's coming down on me hard because he thinks I'm an asshole. Why'd he pair us up, though, if he was that worried about me bullying you?"

"Well..." Revi muttered under his breath.

"What?"

"He saw me. I tripped 'a blind cripple'. I didn't really mean to. I'd planned to catch you and then make a smartass comment, but he came around the corridor right then, and I froze."

Barron stopped dead in his tracks. "Oh, fuck no. You did not just call me a cripple."

Revi sighed. "Those were his words, not mine. I knew you'd get stuck on that part of what I said. I know you're not crippled. You're just temporarily unable to stare at my handsome face." His joke fell flat. Barron was angry, and he wasn't hiding it behind any fake laugh.

"My dad thought Cas should've been in a special school—not to keep him safe, but to keep him out of the way. He respects a person who works hard and is useful. Cas couldn't do much for very long, or he got headaches. He was quiet. You're not him, but you'd been on medical leave. Dad considered you useless."

Barron clenched his hands into fists. He winced when the motion pulled on the healing wound on his palm. "Then I hurt my hand sorting, proving him right."

"No. He's wrong, and we both know it. I'm sorry he's been acting like a jerk." Revi put his hands on Barron's shoulders and squeezed them. "You can help out. I talked with Mikelos. He's in charge of the building. Someone has to man the delivery system. You'll have a communicator and when the loaders finish filling a cart with parts, they'll signal you. You'll send it down to the build site. Apparently something went wrong with the wiring and it can't be done automatically."

"Sounds fun."

Barron was right. It was a real hoot. He sat in a small, freezing cold booth erected from hastily connected spare panels. Revi didn't tell him, but once when he was bored, Barron felt over the walls. There were no windows, and the whole thing was maybe four foot square.

It was like an upright, metal coffin.

His job consisted taking a call on a handheld communicator, pushing a button and pulling a lever, and then making a call to the crew at the build site. Then he did it in reverse once they'd emptied the cart.

By the end of the first day, Barron was tired, his hands ached with the cold, and he was stiff from not being able to move around much.

The metal wall shook when Revi jerked the door open. Damn thing kept sticking. "Early dinner down here. Ready to eat?" Barron was starving too.

"I could eat a horse."

"It's the cold. Makes your body work harder to stay warm."

Someone had fixed hot stew, and Barron went back for two bowls. He didn't care how he looked when he ate it by picking up the bowl in his hands and drinking it down instead of using the spoon. He got more of it, he didn't spill, and it warmed his hands through his gloves. He could practically feel the heat returning to his body.

He sighed when he finished his second helping. "I could eat more, but I'm not sure it'd fit."

"Me too." Revi burped and laughed. "We need to give up our seats, anyway." Everyone was eating in shifts in the assembled mess hall. "Want to

go for a walk? We can take a detour on the way back to the shuttle.” Lucky them, they got to sleep in their chairs.

“Yeah.” Moving would work out some of the kinks in Barron’s body from sitting so long.

The chilly wind slapped at them as soon as they stepped outside. Barron grunted, then pulled up the scarf he’d requisitioned. “Damn, I hope it gets warmer than this here.”

“It should. I overheard some of the scientist guys scurrying around say that it’s winter right now. Apparently there’s still some seasonal effect in the areas around the water.”

“Then why the hell didn’t we go where it was summer?” Barron growled.

“I wanted to know that too. There’s more vegetation and open water here, even though it’s colder, apparently.”

“Well, this is an alien planet. Maybe the plants need cold to grow, not warmth.”

Revi slid his hand into Barron’s. “Or light. The main sun’s going down right now, and the sky’s all yellowy gold, but I can already see the stars. The sun is so much farther away than Earth’s. It’s dim here.”

“So you’re trying to say I’m not missing all that much?”

Barron knew he was. They were on an alien planet, and he felt like there was so much he was missing because he couldn’t see. They were the first people to travel so far beyond Earth, and this was his new home.

Would he ever get to see what it looked like? He covered his maudlin moment by hip-checking Revi. “You can wax poetic over the sunset enough for both of us, Mr. You Quoted Shakespeare Wrong.”

“Oh, whatever.” Revi pushed him back, and it was on. Barron grunted and tried to block, but not being able to see made up for their size difference. Revi caught him by surprise as they goofed around a few times, but whenever he got close Barron managed to get hold of him to push him back.

Their laughter drowned out the sound of the waves hitting the rocks. “You’re not going to win,” Barron taunted. “I am the immovable object!” He tried to plant his feet, but a rock rolled under his heel. Just then, Revi darted in for another shove. Barron toppled over backward.

“Holy fuck nuts!” Barron landed on the ground with one arm all the way into the water. It soaked his sleeve and glove. “Shit. Cold. Cold, cold, cold.”

He scrambled to his feet, holding his arm out to his side.

“I’m sorry! Are you okay?”

“I’ll b-be fine,” Barron said through gritted teeth. The wind, which had died down, picked right then to gust. It felt like his entire arm was encased in a slab of ice. Every part of his arm ached.

“You need to get inside before your coat freezes.” Revi grabbed Barron’s dry hand. “We’ll run. Just make sure to plant your feet so you don’t roll a rock under you again.” They ran carefully to the shuttle. Barron hissed when they made it inside and started to get his jacket off. Some of the fabric had frozen to his arm.

“We need some help. I don’t want to tear your skin.”

“I d-d-don’t want to go to medical again,” Barron objected. “Your dad will use it against me. You kn-now he will.”

“Fine.” Revi heaved a sigh. “Just, grit your teeth. This might hurt.”

“What—”

Revi yanked his sleeve off his arm in one swift jerk. Barron clenched his jaw shut around the yelp trying to escape. He breathed hard through his nose. Revi grabbed Barron’s hand and squeezed it.

“Oh damn.”

“Now what?” Barron held his breath, trying to prepare for... whatever.

“Your hand is so damn cold. I’m trying to warm it up before I get this glove off,” Revi said. “I stuck it in my armpit.”

“Now my hand’s gonna reek. Th-thanks!”

“Hey, eau de Revi. Every guy should be so lucky.”

Barron shook his head. “Feels warm enough.”

“Let’s see.” Revi slid his fingers under the edge of the glove around his wrist. “I’m just going to peel it down inside out. Hold your fingers out.” Barron stiffened his fingers.

The glove slid over his palm. “Fuck.”

“What?”

“Your hand. The bandage is soaked. Does it hurt?”

“No. It’s cold but doesn’t hurt. Maybe the water made it numb. Just finish getting the glove off. Dr. Samuels gave me more material to bandage it. I have it in my pack.”

“Seriously? You need to have this looked at, Barron.” Revi finished getting the glove off. “Hold still. I’ll get the bandages so you can cover it. You don’t need to get dust in the wound.”

“I don’t need to go see the doctor. It’s even colder out there now and my jacket’s soaked. Is the wound bleeding?”

“A little.”

“Well, there you go. Blood will flush out any dirt and shit. It’ll be fine. I’m *not* going.”

Revi sighed. “Fine.”

They bandaged his hand and laid his coat across the top of his chair. “At least these recline, but it sucks we don’t have bunks.” He’d miss sleeping with Revi tucked in close to him.

“It could be worse. My dad used to make me go camping with him, just what we could pack in. We slept on the ground with a bed roll and our packs for pillows.”

Barron snorted. “No way would my dad have done that. Five-star all the way was his motto. He traveled executive class—round-the-clock room service and a full bar. Always.”

“You don’t seem that stuck up.” Revi handed Barron an extra blanket. He’d changed into dry clothes, but the shuttle’s temperature controls were set cooler than the ship, and Barron was still half-frozen. “I mean, you just do okay outside of a city.”

“William’s brother, Harvey, used to take us camping all the time. They lived near the edge of Doestrin Park. We’d hike into this big meadow about forty-five minutes from their house by this little creek. It even had fish. Nothing big enough to eat or anything, but they were fun to catch.” Barron smiled, remembering their last trip. They’d planned another one before everyone went off to college. They hadn’t needed Harvey to keep an eye on them for a few years, so they were able to sneak out some drinks and other party supplies.

“Maybe we can fish here. At least once the scientists figure out what everything is and all that.” Revi yawned. More and more people were returning

to the shuttle from the late dinner shift. "I'm beat. The panels for the sides of the habitats are heavy, even if all we're doing is guiding and holding them in place for sealing."

"Go to sleep, then. I'm not going anywhere."

Barron still hadn't gone anywhere over a week later. Dr. Samuels had come down to the planet, along with everyone but the essential ship personnel and the families with young children. Barron missed talking to Marya, but he was glad when Thavin, William, and Creed were dropped on the planet to freeze along with him and Revi. By that point, they were staying in one section of the habitat already finished and sealed off.

Of course they were sleeping on the floor in blankets just like Revi predicted. Outside structures had to come before creature comforts. The daily work schedule was accompanied by all sorts of 'work for a better life for all' propaganda.

How much of a reminder did the head honchos think they needed that the fraction of humanity they saved were all necessary for survival?

It was mind-numbingly boring, but Barron kept his job. His hand was feeling better, but since he wouldn't take time off from pushing a damn button to see the doctor, he couldn't do anything else. They weren't even allowed to walk down by the water anymore. The security guys had cordoned it off for everyone's safety so no one fell in.

Barron and his friends put their heads together and figured there was something they weren't being told. Creed overheard some guys talking about the life in the oceans being unique—something or other unlike anything the scientists had ever seen—and the possible ramifications could be dangerous. They'd clammed right up when the sealer in his hand banged against the panel he was securing until they passed him.

They'd stayed up late the night before, whispering in a huddle in the corner they'd claimed. Creed and William were insistent that there was something big that could come out of the water to chomp on human flesh, but Thavin pointed out the lack of prints of any kind or any sightings.

Revi backed him up. He hadn't seen any when they walked along the waterline, and they'd been so close Barron actually fell in.

Barron had no freaking idea. He was consumed by other thoughts and had only paid half-attention to the conversation.



“What?” Revi rolled over in his arms and faced Barron. “You’re thinking so hard it woke me up.” They’d combined their sleeping rolls so they could sleep together again. There hadn’t been much touching below the waist. Working out in the cold from morning until dinner exhausted them both. If Barron wasn’t so distracted he’d probably be far more frustrated than he was.

“I can see you.” Barron reached up and ran his finger from Revi’s forehead to the tip of his nose. “Not perfect, everything looks wavy, but I can see you.”

Revi grinned. “Really? That’s great!”

“Is it? I’d be happy if it was just my eyes, but look at my hand.” A week before he’d still had an open gash on his palm from the thick chunk of metal that had actually stuck in his hand. Barron held his hand up so Revi could see it.

“It’s healed! Not even a mark.”

“Tell me, shouldn’t that wound have left a scar? Plus, I itch all over, all the time. It’s getting worse, Revi.” Barron swallowed. “What’s happening to me?”

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## Chapter Thirteen

“You need to go see the doctor.” Revi stared at Barron. The night before he'd been able to see the oval of Revi's face, his hair shoved back into a ponytail. Barron hadn't said anything—afraid it was fluke or something—but he could see even better when he woke up. Everything appeared as though he was looking at it through a veil of water, but the bright white radiance was gone.

“What if it goes away?” His chest was tight, as if he couldn't draw a deep breath, and the itching had intensified.

“What if it doesn't? I'm happy you can see again, but Barron, something *really weird* is going on with you. I don't care what the hell my dad thinks, and you shouldn't either.” Revi scowled. “Get up, get dressed, and get the hell over to see Dr. Samuels!”

“I know. I know you're right. I just... I'd hoped the look on your face when I saw it again wouldn't be you glaring at me still.” He'd never gotten to see Revi's smile directed at him. Other people, sure, but he'd never gotten to see that happy look just for him.

Revi leaned in and kissed him. He held on to the back of Barron's neck, pressing their foreheads together. “Really look in my eyes. I'm not mad at you; I'm worried. So please do what I ask. Go see her.”

“Okay, I'll go.”

Those gorgeous pink lips captured Barron's attention as Revi *finally* smiled just for him. “Good.”

“God, you're hot.” Barron brushed his thumb across Revi's full bottom lip.

“Yes, I am.”

Barron laughed. “So modest, too.”

“Hey, it's not my fault you're stunned by your first sight being the vision of the hunky manliness of me.”

Barron wrinkled his nose. “Ha, ha. Well, I'm definitely not into you because you're funny.” He smacked Revi's ass.

“Hey!” someone objected sleepily. “None of that when I'm a foot away from you.”

Barron leaned up on one elbow. "Like I haven't heard you doing far worse over the years out camping when you thought we were all sleeping."

Creed was always horny. It used to be even worse when they were younger. He was their main source of porn and other illicit material. William's brother was too straitlaced, and Thavin only had one sister. Creed had lived with his dad, and he was a pretty cool guy who didn't worry about the sort of thing he said normal teenage boys were into.

A slap on the ass? The tamest of things Barron had seen in Creed's video collection topped it.

"Well, hit him quieter then. I'm sleeping here."

Revi shook with suppressed laughter.

"So glad we could amuse you," Barron said. "I'm getting up." The itching was getting to him. He could deal with pain, but damn... feeling like he wanted to peel his skin off to make it stop crawling was the worst.

"Do you need me to come with you?"

That was right. With Barron's vision back—at least somewhat—he didn't need a guide. "Maybe you should. I wouldn't want your dad to think he can separate us." He might anyway, if the damage was fully repaired, but Barron would soak up every minute of Revi's time that he could before then.

"He can't separate us. We're from the same section, and we're together now. I'm not going to abandon you. We are together... right...?"

Barron knew he was committed for as long as he could keep Revi. He opened his mouth to tell him exactly how he felt, sappy sentiment and everything.

"Oh my God, yes. He's so into you it's disgusting. Now go away!" Creed flopped over, turning his back to them.

Barron and Revi snickered. So much for a magical moment.

"He's right. I'm into you." The heat Barron put in his voice made those five little words so much more important than they sounded.

"Good," Revi whispered.

"I'm just gonna go like this." Barron snagged his jacket. "You can change if you want."

"I'll be quick." Revi took his bag and went to the makeshift bathrooms set up off to the side of the room, with changing stalls and some cleaning cloths. They didn't have running water, but medical and the cafeteria did. Everyone else used the shuttles for personal needs.

By the time Revi came back, Barron was digging at his arms. He couldn't stop scratching. The skin on the back of his shoulders, down to his fingertips, was tingling, and it felt like millions of little biting bug were crawling on them. He spun on his heel. "Let's go."

"Whoa." Revi grabbed his jacket from where he dropped it. "You need this."

"No, I don't. I'm fucking hot." He couldn't wait to get outside. "Let's go," Barron repeated.

By the time they made it to medical, Barron was doing his best to writhe while staying on his feet. He could only breathe in pants. He couldn't get enough oxygen, couldn't stop scratching. He barely felt the wind that had Revi hunching his shoulders and burying his face in the collar of his jacket.

"Is someone here?" Barron shouted when he got inside. Most of medical was still dark. A figure hurried around a panel.

"Shh. There are people sleeping in here."

"Well, I can't. I swear to God, I'm going nuts here." Barron dug at his arms.

Revi gasped. Barron looked down. He'd dug furrows in his arms and skin was sloughing off in strips. "Holy fuck. What's wrong with me?"

"Dr. Samuels! I need you out here, *now!*" The guy rushed over to Barron. He hissed when he touched his skin. "You're already burning up. Fuck."

"Nolu? What's going on?" Barron recognized Dr. Samuels' voice. The tall woman had her white hair pulled back into a neat bun, even though it was the wee hours of the morning. She looked older than Barron expected from her voice.

Nolu looked a lot like he'd expected, though. His skin was dark, nearly as dark as his hair held back in tiny braids. Barron wondered absently how long it took to braid hair that long as he did his level best to rip his skin off.

It itched so bad!

"Is he okay? What's going on?" Revi followed them as Dr. Samuels and Nolu grabbed Barron by his elbows and wrists, forcing him to stop scratching.

They pulled him back toward the screened area where the lights were blazing bright.

“He needs to get into a tank immediately,” Dr. Samuels said.

“A tank?” Those were reserved for people with life-threatening injuries or illnesses. Barron twisted his fingers, trying to itch between them.

“We need to bring down your fever and keep you from getting worse. We can deliver what you need to breathe far beyond what Paradise’s atmosphere can provide. You’re going to need it.”

“He’s going to stop breathing?” Revi’s voice rose. Barron wanted to take Revi in his arms until he calmed, but the urgency with which the doctor reacted to his appearance scared Barron, too.

“Strip.” They stood before a tank. Dr. Samuels turned and tapped furiously on the control panel. Nolu and Revi helped Barron get his clothes off. They had to fight him as he kept trying to scratch. Barron knew he needed to stop, but he couldn’t seem to, no matter how hard he tried.

Revi leaned up and captured Barron’s face with both hands. “I’m not going anywhere. Remember that. You can’t leave me either, no matter what’s going on. You fight it.”

Barron nodded. He was gasping and couldn’t talk. He rubbed his cheek against Revi’s hand, staring into his eyes.

“Good.”

He stepped back and let Nolu and Dr. Samuels insert Barron into the tank. By that point, Barron’s head was spinning and he needed their support so he wouldn’t fall over. Barron opened his mouth for the breathing tube, swallowing when he was told. The influx of pressure forced his breathing to slow and deepen.

The dizziness started to fade. His arms and legs grew heavy and then the feeling in his limbs went away. The loss of sensation in his entire body usually would’ve freaked Barron out, instead of a localized pain blocking like the bands provided, but in this case it was a relief.

“Barron.”

He blinked.

“Can you hear us? Blink twice for yes, once for no.” Dr. Samuels’ voice filtered through the fluid in the tank.

He struggled to do what she asked.

“Good. Feeling better?” He blinked once, then rolled his eyes. Then he blinked them twice.

“Okay. I’m guessing that’s a smartass remark about feeling... and yes, you feel better. Or at least you don’t feel anything, right?”

Barron blinked twice again. Lifting his lids took monumental effort. The tank made all but the tiniest movements impossible. He couldn’t even twitch his fingers.

“I need you to stay calm. I have a few questions. Revi’s still here, just like he promised. If he knows something about what I ask you, do I have permission to talk to him about your health?” she asked.

Blink. Blink.

“Thank you. That helps. Now, Barron, I need you to answer this question honestly. The water’s cordoned off. Did you sneak past the markers?”

Barron blinked once.

“Are you sure?”

Two blinks.

“This is important, Barron. You won’t get in trouble. Wait. Revi says you fell in the water before it was cordoned off. You fell into the shallows. Did you get your wound wet? I noticed your hand is healed.”

Yes! Finally, she was getting to the damn point. He blinked twice for yes, again.

“Damn it.” Now she sounded tired. “I was afraid of that. There’s something out there, something in the water. When it infiltrates a wound, even a tiny one, on a person’s body they begin to display all the symptoms you do. Usually much sooner, though.” She paused. “The itching, breathing, and fever... did those start this morning?”

Barron blinked twice.

“Have you noticed anything else?”

Barron blinked twice. He fluttered his lashes and waited. He knew Revi would explain.

Dr. Samuels’ voice came through the tank again. “You can see again?”

It took all he had, but Barron managed two more blinks.

“I know you’re tired. I need you to stay relaxed, okay? The monitor will alert us to any change. If you need anything, we’re right here. Feel the tube in your mouth? On the underside is a small button. If you press it even a tiny bit with your tongue, an alarm will go off, and we’ll be over in seconds. For now, just rest.”

Barron couldn’t do anything else. Time in the tank meant very little. Every speck of skin on his body was immersed in fluid infused with whatever medicine the doctor deemed necessary. He caught flashes here and there, but nothing understandable.

Even though he shouldn’t have been able to feel anything, slowly the pressure inside Barron’s body changed. It felt like the tube feeding him oxygen was failing. Breathing grew harder.

He forced his eyes open. Barron could see in the tank, a first for him. He shouldn’t have been able to see through the murky fluid, but it was easy. Two figures stood on either side of his tank. They wore security uniforms and had weapons.

*What the hell?*

Using his tongue like Dr. Samuels told him, Barron set off the alarm. The doctor appeared in front of his tank by the monitor.

“Would you please move? You’re in the way!” Dr. Samuels snapped.

The security guard moved when she prodded at him with a tool of some kind that looked pretty pokey. “Thank you. Barron, are you okay?”

He blinked once.

“What’s wrong? Do you hurt?”

Barron shot a look side to side at the guards, and then blinked once for no. Dr. Samuels bit her lip. “How’s your breathing. It looks a bit labored.”

Blink. Blink.

“I can help with that.” She tapped the monitor. Barron watched her. The other night her hair had been immaculate, her clothes tidy. It was a far cry from how she looked now. Her shirt was wrinkled, and she’d tucked several strands of loose hair behind her ears.

What was going on?

The pressure in Barron's chest eased. A man appeared behind Dr. Samuels. "What did you do?" he asked.

"I increased the hydrogen again."

Again? Why were they giving him hydrogen? Barron tongued the button again, setting off the alarm. He fought to move, but he couldn't.

"Barron, calm down. You're stable at the moment. I know you want answers, but don't panic. I don't want to have to increase the hydrogen mixture so soon." She looked so worried Barron knew that was something she *really* didn't want to do.

"This is Dr. Lunquist. He's one of the scientists from the ship. We've been monitoring your condition. Barron, you're undergoing a metamorphosis, and it's almost complete. We believe this began when you landed with your injured hand in the ocean the first night you were down here."

"I still don't believe it could've happened that early," Dr. Lunquist argued.

Barron blinked twice deliberately.

"And I told you my theories on that. He was blinded back on Earth rescuing a little girl, and he had a severe gash on his arm. Deep tissue UV damage, plus the eye and palm injuries, slowed down the replication and repurposing of the cells in his body until he was reasonably healthy enough to make a suitable host." Dr. Samuels' voice took on the tired tone of someone who'd repeated themselves, a lot.

"There's no proof of that supposition."

"God damn it, what else is there? We can see it happening, healing and changing him, but at a much slower rate than the others. They all changed so fast we couldn't keep up. And. They. Died. He's alive. There's a reason for that!"

Dead?

They'd had other people in there who touched the water? Who'd been changed?

Who died?

Barron slammed his tongue against the alarm again and again. He wanted out. He wanted out of the tank right that second. He strained and finally managed to move one hand. He pressed his palm to the glass below the monitor.



They had to let him out. Where was Revi? He'd know.

He'd get him out.

"I'm sorry, Barron. I didn't mean to say all that in front of you." Dr. Samuels pressed her hand against his on the outside of the tank. "I'm doing my best for you. I swear. Try to stay calm."

Calm?

She wanted him to stay calm!

Barron blinked once, squeezing his eyes shut.

Out.

He... wanted... out.

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## Chapter Fourteen

Barron woke up again. The process was more gradual than before. His breathing sped up. He could move. He curled his fingers into fists, then spread them back out.

Weird. There was... skin between his fingers. He waved them and the tank fluid rippled. Bluish tissue ran down the outside of his hand. And his arm too! Barron lifted his arm. It fanned out like a wedge and was attached from just above his wrist to his armpit. Barron reached for it. It gave under his fingers, thin, slick.

And it glowed. His arms were limned in a faint shimmering light. He couldn't tell what color it was, just... sparkly.

The sensation of his fingers on it sent a shivery quiver up the nerves of his arm. Barron arched his back and shuddered. He grunted around the mouthpiece. Okay. No touching.

He triggered the alarm on the tube, but didn't hear anything. Where was the alarm? He thrashed in the fluid. He could move, but he felt drunk, uncoordinated.

Tap. The sound on the tank echoed through the fluid. "Barron," Dr. Samuels whispered.

Barron jerked his head up. "Mmm." He gestured toward the tube, blinking rapidly.

"I know, I shut off the alarm. We have to get you out of there."

We? Barron blinked twice. The guards were gone, but he could see two shadowy figures behind the doctor. The lights were low. It must still be nighttime.

"You must remain silent when we pull you out. Stay calm, okay?" She spread her fingers on the tank.

What was with her thing insisting he stay calm? She was a doctor. She was supposed to have a good bedside manner, right? Who in their right mind thought telling a person to stay calm would make them anything but calm?

Revi came out of the shadows. "Hey, it's us. I promised I wouldn't leave you alone, remember?" Barron blinked twice, firmly. He slid forward, pressing both hands against the tank.

The fluid level began to drop. Barron started to slip to his knees, but Revi reached in and grabbed his arm. Creed grabbed his other arm.

They lifted him up the rim of the tank. Barron squinted. The world was wavy and fuzzy, like a he had a film across his eyes. Barron blinked several times, and it went away. Dr. Samuels grabbed the mouthpiece. She pressed a button on the end, and it retracted. It slid up Barron's neck until the flat disk sealed around his lips popped off.

Barron panted. "What's going on?"

"Shhh. We'll explain, just wait."

It was so hot outside of the tank. Barron was dizzy. He couldn't climb out on his own. Creed and Revi got him out. Revi propped him up from the front, holding his hips, while Creed got him a thin robe.

"Let's get out of here." Revi looked up at Barron. "Just stay with me, okay?"

Dr. Samuels led the way. Creed and Revi held Barron around the waist and at the wrist, avoiding the weird skin that had somehow curled up into a thin tube along his arm. He stumbled between them. His skin was so sensitive, every tiny thing on the floor dug into the soles of his feet.

Barron jerked back when the door to medical slammed open. "Someone's coming!" William hissed.

"Who's coming?"

"It doesn't matter. If anyone sees us, we're screwed," Dr. Samuels said grimly. "We have to run."

They burst out of the door in a knot. Thavin waved from the edge of the partially finished...

Wait. The habitat was complete.

Creed dropped his arm. "You guys get back to your bunks," Revi told him and William. "You can't be caught up in this right now." Dr. Samuels grabbed his other arm. What the hell? Barron did his best to run, but questions ran through his mind as his uncoordinated limbs fought him.

"Stop!" Shouts behind them spurred everyone to run faster.

"To the water," Dr. Samuels panted. "It's his only hope."

Barron gasped for air, heaving, trying to get enough oxygen to keep running. Darkness began to creep in at the sides of his vision.

“He’s not going to make it.” Revi squeezed Barron’s wrist.

“He will. We’re almost there.”

Boots crunched on the gravel as they were pursued down toward the edge of the ocean. Barron’s feet took a beating but the cool, waterlogged sand soothed them as soon as they stumbled onto the rim of beach along the pounding waves.

“We will shoot if you try to enter the water!”

“Go. I’ll hold them off.”

Dr. Samuels held her arms out, sheltering them as she turned to face the pursuers behind them. “I’m the only trauma doctor the colony has. Are you really going to shoot me to get to these boys?”

Revi ripped off the robe. “In, in, go in the water.”

He was so hot and the water looked so good. Barron looked at Revi, hesitating.

“Come on!” He waded into the water and a shot rang out.

“No!” Barron shouted. He jumped forward and caught Revi. A dark wound on Revi’s shoulder was already bleeding through his shirt. Blood dripped into the water. Barron slapped a hand over the wound, pressing down. “Dr. Samuels! Get him out.” Revi couldn’t stay in the water. The thing might get him.

Shouts broke out on the beach. The shots stopped, but the damage was done.

Dr. Samuels darted a look over her shoulder. “I can’t. It’s too late, Barron. Go. Swim. Keep pressure on the wound.” She pointed up the beach. “Don’t go that way. Go toward the suns.”

“Revi!” a man shouted from the beach. “Son, wait!”

Barron wasn’t a great swimmer, there was no way he was going to stick around. The doctor thought they weren’t safe, and Revi promised he wouldn’t leave him. Barron wasn’t going to leave Revi either. He waded out farther into the water until he was chest deep.

“Go, Barron,” Revi begged.

He curled an arm under Revi, shuddering when the skin under his arm unfurled. His chest eased and Barron took a deep breath. He pressed his hand against Revi's wound and used his arms to keep their bodies pressed together.

Then he started swimming.

Leaving Dr. Samuels behind made Barron feel bad, but whatever was going on, she and Revi had wanted him to get away from the habitat. It took a few minutes to figure out how to get a good rhythm going, but the longer Barron was in the water the easier it was.

Revi shivered in his arms, but the water slowed the bleeding. "C-c-cold." Revi's teeth chattered.

"I'm sorry. Should we get out?"

"N-no!" Revi jerked. "Stay in the water!"

The million questions Barron needed answered would have to wait. He pushed wet tendrils of Revi's hair out of his face and started swimming again.

"Can you kick? It might help you stay warmer," Barron asked him.

Revi began moving his legs, small kicks at first, and then more. The rough fabric of his jeans rubbed against Barron's bare stomach.

The suns were beginning to rise in front of them. They'd been going down the shore long enough for the full dark to fade to a steely gray. The stars never fully went away as the distant suns rose in a mix of colors. "If the sunset is anything like this, I can't wait to see it."

"Better." Revi panted. He was taking another break, letting Barron tow him.

"Are you doing okay? We need to get you out, Revi. You're going to get hypothermia or something." His body should've shut down from the cold by then.

"I'm fine. Warming up every minute."

Barron stopped. They bobbed in the water. "What?" If Revi felt warm then he was hypothermic. "That's it, you're getting out." He didn't suggest getting out. Barron didn't want to get yelled at again.

Revi rested his head against Barron's shoulder. "I'm fine. We can take a break over there, though, if you need to stop. The plants aren't toxic. If my dad gets a shuttle, he might come looking for us, and we'd be hard to spot there."

A huge snarl of plants floated in the water to their right. Barron had avoided several smaller patches. It was strange, comparing the lush tangle of plants to the completely barren shore on their other side.

He struck out for the edge. The closer to the plants they got, the warmer the water was. Barron frowned. "Am I imagining it, or does the water feel hot?"

"It does." Revi sighed. "That feels good. Wonder if these plants are the reason why there's still water here? Hmm... you know what, I don't care. It's nice here."

"Damn it." If Barron hadn't avoided the plants earlier, then Revi could've gotten warm. "Can you hold on with your good arm?"

The plants were an odd scarlet hue in a variety of shades. Long stems looped and knotted together, and some hung over into the water like handles.

"Yeah." Revi grabbed a vine, and Barron let him go. He shook out his arm, the muscles sore from holding Revi so tight.

"I'm going to check your wound, okay?" Barron looked at Revi's shirt, then shook his head. He ripped the hole wider. It was the best way to see the wound without removing the shirt and exposing even more of Revi's body.

The flesh around the raw wound was pale, but rather than a hole, there was a furrow taken out of the top of Revi's shoulder. It wasn't as bad as he thought. "Thank God."

He peered closer. "Is that... are you already healing?"

"Probably." Revi rested his head on his good hand and sighed. "The symbiont is very efficient."

Barron jerked back. "Symbiont?"

"Yeah. Lucky for me, I have exactly what it needs to flourish. You and the three soldiers that died back in the habitat weren't so lucky."

Was he delirious? His lips weren't blue. Barron touched Revi's forehead, but he felt okay. Barron frowned. Before, the skin between his fingers had been blue, but now it was a flushed pink. He lifted one arm out of the water.

The weird flap of skin was pink too.

"What in the fuck happened when I was in the tank?" Barron snapped. He couldn't wait anymore. He had to know.

Revi blinked slowly. "I don't know everything, exactly. I know what Dr. Samuels told us and what the guys and I could overhear. You're good at that science and math crap, so maybe it'll make more sense to you."

"Just tell me." Barron wasn't mad at Revi, but he was so sick of everything—all the drama had to stop.

"Basically, these plants aren't plants. They're alive kinda, but only when they're not yet plants."

Barron closed his eyes. "That makes no sense."

Revi frowned. "They have... spore parasites? Yeah, parasites is what they said. They release into the water and are basically living organisms that seek out hosts." Revi pointed at Barron and then his chest. "We're hosts."

"These plants have spores they release that seek out living organisms? That symbiont you mentioned."

"Yeah!" Revi looked pleased. "I knew you'd get it."

Little bits of information began to fall into place. "The thing they were worried about—it was the symbiont. Not some of the animals living in the ocean."

"Exactly. The military guys were freaking out about securing the colonists, the science guys were freaking about study and understanding, and Dr. Samuels was fighting to keep you guys alive. She couldn't save the three soldiers, but the symbiont didn't work as fast on you. She was able to keep changing your tank settings just enough to keep you alive."

"I almost died?" Barron shook his head. "How long was I in the tank?"

"Nearly a week."

Barron gaped at Revi. "That's insane."

He nodded. "Your body needed hydrogen rich water. Cold, hydrogen rich water. Without it, your body kept shutting down." He pointed at Barron's arms. "Then you grew those, and it got worse. Dr. Samuels couldn't keep up with the demands your body had for hydrogen, and the tank couldn't filter out the massive quantities of carbon dioxide you were putting out."

"So you guys broke me out of the tank? Why did you have...?"

"The scientists and General Keene wouldn't stop arguing. They were going to fight over what to do about you until you died." Revi stared at him. "We weren't going to let that happen," he said simply.

Barron swam closer. "And you got in the water, knowing the risk of this parasite getting in you, like it did with the wound in my hand. Knowing it would change you like me. That you might die, like the soldiers."

"I wasn't going in a tank. I wasn't going to die. Dr. Samuels took some of your blood. She had Mejia study it, down to the cells. The parasite invades the cells and becomes a symbiont. It's changing your body, but it helps you too. Why do you think every living creature on this planet is in the water?"

"There shouldn't be anything living on Paradise. It's too far from the sun, Thavin said."

"Exactly!"

"So this plant has something to do with keeping everything alive?"

"Yep." Revi smiled. "And it fixed your eyes, too!"

"Yeah, but now I'm a freak." Barron waved the shimmering flaps under his arms in the water.

Revi let go of the tangle of the plants. "Well, I'm going to be a freak, too. It's already in me. The water was freezing at first, but now it feels good. I'm already acclimated to the water temperature. It'll start changing my body soon too—the new tissue in my hands and feet, the stuff under your arms, that clear shit that grows over your eyes underwater... Dr. Samuels said your body was adapting to both breathe and live underwater."

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't want to live underwater. We're humans! Mammals."

"Whales and dolphins lived in the water on Earth before they went extinct, and they were mammals, too," Revi pointed out.

"What are we going to eat? Are we going to sleep on the plants? What about the other animals? Is something in this water going to try to eat us?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think they're vegetarians. From what we figured out, everything in the water revolves around these plants. Dr. Samuels said she was going to try to meet us to take samples. Thavin, William, and Creed are going to sneak food and stuff to a spot we found away from the habitat. There's one or two scientists who seemed reasonable. Mostly, they want to study you... well, and me now too."

"Great. We can be lab specimens swimming around and letting them poke and prod us for food." The plants drifted close enough to shore he could stand up. Barron let go of the floating bundle.



“You’re so negative.” Revi sighed. “Do you have any idea how much planning and work went into getting you out? So you could live? Do you have any idea how I felt when I thought you were going to die?”

Barron swallowed. He relived the moment when Revi was shot, again. “Yeah,” he said hoarsely.

Revi reached him and wrapped his arms around Barron’s neck. He hissed when he moved his injured shoulder, but he didn’t let go. “Then stop. We’re alive. We’re together. Plus, we get to be the first aliens humans have ever met!”

Things were never going to be the same, for either of them, but Barron couldn’t change that. Freaking out about it wouldn’t stop Revi from changing, or make Barron’s body stop glowing like he was some freaky nightlight. “You’re right.” Barron leaned forward and pressed their lips together. Revi was warm, so warm in his arms.

Revi grinned. “Of course I am.” Revi kissed him back. Barron slipped his tongue in Revi’s mouth and got a mouthful of hair.

“Ack. Okay, so maybe your hair might be a little bit long for living in the water.”

“Well, I might cut it for you. Not all the way off though.”

“No, not all the way.” Barron like Revi’s curls.

“Besides, it might make my dad too happy.”

Barron pulled Revi closer. “Can’t have that,” he murmured. He began kissing Revi’s jaw. He’d missed so much, unable to see the look of pleasure on Revi’s face as they touched.

Revi wrapped his legs around Barron’s waist. “My dad’s an asshole, but he was actually on the doctor’s side about letting you out of the tank, you know.”

Barron jerked. “He was?” He figured, from the colonel’s appearance on the beach, that he’d been part of the security team trying to stop it.

“Yeah, well, I might’ve hinted we’d break you out, and I’d go with you if he didn’t convince the general.” Revi shrugged, then hissed. “Ow. He didn’t like the idea.”

“Well, I love it.” Barron pushed the wet hair away from Revi’s face. “I’m glad we’re together. One way or another, we’ll figure everything out. But can we please stop talking about your dad while I’m working my way up to finally getting to see you with your clothes off?”

Revi smirked. "You're definitely feeling better."

"The sunrise looks like gold spreading across the sky. We're alone, on a planet called Paradise, and pretty much guaranteed to be alone out here. What else are we going to do to keep ourselves occupied?"

A grin spread across Revi's face. "What, indeed?"

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Alicia Nordwell is one of those not so rare creatures, a reader turned writer. Striving to find something interesting to read one day, she decided to write what she wanted instead. Then the voices started... Yep, not only does she talk about herself in the third person for bios, she has voices in her head constantly clamoring to get out. Fortunately for readers, with the encouragement of her family and friends, she decided for her own sanity to keep writing. Now you can find her stories both free and e-published! Oh yeah, she's a wife, mom of two, and lives in the dreary, yet ideal for her redhead complexion, Pacific Northwest. Except for when she disappears into one of the many worlds in her head, of course!*

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