

SOMEWHERE I BELONG



BY TARA

# Chapter 1

Nick stood on stage listening to Henry, their tour manager, make some suggestions for the show the next night. He glanced over at Brian and moved his mouth along to match what Henry was saying. Brian stifled a smile, trying to look interested. "And Nick, if you don't stop doing that and listen you're not gonna know what to do," Henry said, irritated. Kevin shot Nick a warning glance and he looked down at the floor, "Sorry." "OK, now where was I?" Henry asked. "The lighting," Mark, Henry's assistant said. "Oh yes, the lighting," Henry went on, "We're changing it at the very end of the show. We got in some new lights that are supposed to be great when you mix them, so we're gonna start using them at tomorrow night's show." "Just as long as you don't blind us with them," Howie said. Henry laughed, "We would never do such a thing." Nick leaned on his mic stand, half listening. He wanted to leave. He was tired, and by all rights they should've had today off, but ohhh nooo, Henry had to call an impromptu rehearsal. "OK guys, the hotel has dinner waiting, so let's go," Henry said, turning and walking backstage. Nick followed everyone as they got into the van and headed for the hotel.

As they drove, he looked out the window. He really didn't want to be here. Kevin had been on his case for the last week. He couldn't even remember why, and A.J. had been teasing him mercilessly, but that reason escaped him. It seemed that nothing he did was good enough for anyone, and all he wanted to do was get away from all the madness. They'd only been on tour for a month, and already he was sick of it. The fans screamed as they pulled into the hotel, and Nick plastered that grin on his face and jumped out to meet them. He signed autographs for a few minutes before their security ushered them inside. "You alright?" Lane, Nick's bodyguard, asked. "Yeah, just tired," Nick answered, heading to the private dining room the hotel had set up for them. Lane arched his eyebrows at Nick, letting him know he wasn't buying the excuse, but didn't push it.

The guys got their food and sat down at the same table. Nick went about rearranging his food on the tray and A.J. laughed at him, "What the hell are you doing?" "Putting it the way I like it," Nick said, not looking up. "God Nick, you are such a dork," A.J. said, laughing. "I am not," Nick protested, still not looking up. "Guys, stop it," Kevin said, "I'd like to eat in peace for once." A.J. and Nick glanced at each other before they started to eat. It was silent for a few minutes. Kevin thought he was going to get his wish, that was until Nick picked up his glass and took a drink. A.J. started laughing, shaking his head. "What is so funny?" Nick asked. "You," A.J. said, "I swear it's like you're from another planet or something. No one holds a glass like that to drink." "I do," Nick said, trying to ignore him. "Yeah, you do you freak," A.J. laughed. That was it. Nick stood up and slammed his chair up to the table and walked out of the room. "Nice going A.J.," Brian said, getting up to go after him. "What?" A.J. asked, looking back and forth between Kevin and Howie, "I was just teasing, Christ!" "Well maybe its time to stop teasing him," Howie suggested. "So he can dish it out, he just can't take it?" A.J. asked, "He's

twenty-one years old, he's gotta grow up sometime." "Just drop it Alex," Kevin said. "Fine, whatever," A.J. said, going back to his meal.

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Brian walked out onto the roof of the hotel, his arms wrapped around himself. The breeze was cold, a hint of rain in the air. He looked around, finally spotting Nick sitting close to the edge, staring up at the stars. He quietly walked over to him, "Hey, can I sit down?" Nick shrugged, not taking his eyes off the sky. Brian sat down and stared at his friend for a moment, "You OK?" "I don't know," Nick replied. "Wanna tell me what's bothering you?" Brian asked. Nick shrugged again, still not looking at him. Brian finally looked up, "Wow, I didn't think you could see the stars like this in the city." "We're above most of the lights," Nick offered. "Yeah, I guess we are," Brian said, suddenly noticing just how high up they were, "Um Nick, you might wanna scoot away from the edge there." "I'm OK, I'm not gonna fall, there's a rail," Nick deadpanned. "It would make me feel better," Brian said. Nick laughed, but it didn't reach his eyes, as he scooted over, "There, you happy?" "Yeah," Brian said. "Ya know, you're gonna have to get over that fear of heights sometime," Nick said, looking back up at the sky. "I know, but I'm avoiding it as long as possible," Brian laughed.

The two friends sat in silence for several minutes, just looking at the stars, lost in their own thoughts. At last, Brian looked over, "What's wrong Nick? You've been kinda down lately, what's going on?" Nick glanced at him, then his focus was back on the night sky, "Just been thinking." "About?" "My life," he answered, "I don't fit." Brian was confused, "You don't fit?" Nick shook his head, "No, I don't." "What do you mean?" he asked. Nick sighed and looked at Brian, "I don't fit in, I never have. I've been thinking about it a lot lately and I just don't. Not with my family, or my friends, or you guys .... I don't belong here." "Nick, that's not true," Brian said. Nick shook his head, "Yes it is, and I'm just tired of being teased about it. I get that I don't fit in, I don't have to be reminded of it on a constant basis." "What makes you think that you don't fit in?" Brian asked. Nick sighed, "Brian, do you really have to ask that? You know me better than anyone." "OK, I'll admit that you do some strange things every once in a while, but just because you do doesn't mean you don't fit in," he said. "Yes it does," Nick said, "Those things aren't strange to me. I do them because it's natural for me to, but no one else does. No one in my family does them, I've never seen anyone do them."

Brian sighed, "Nick, everyone has behaviors that are unique to them. Just because you have a few more than anyone else doesn't mean you don't fit in. Look at the group, we wouldn't be the group without you, you fit in here Nick." Nick looked back up at the sky and sighed. He knew what Brian was trying to do, but it wasn't working. "We should go in, it's freezing out here," Brian said. "I'm not cold," Nick

stated. "You'll get sick again," he said. Nick shrugged, "I'm always sick, it doesn't matter." Brian watched as Nick laid down looking up at the sky. *Oh to hell with it*, he thought, laying down next to him. "I thought you were cold," Nick said. "I am, but I'm not leaving you alone," he answered. Nick didn't say anything, he just looked at the sky dotted with millions of stars. "You ever wonder?" he asked. "Wonder what?" Brian asked. "All this," Nick said, pointing at the sky, "We can't be the only ones here, ya know." Brian laughed, "You think there's aliens out there somewhere?" Nick looked at him, "Don't you?" "I dunno, I don't guess I've ever thought about it," Brian admitted. "I do, all the time," Nick said under his breath. "I guess there could be," Brian said. "I just don't understand why God would make all this, just for us, ya know? I mean there's millions and millions of stars and planets and suns out there. It can't all be just for us to look at," Nick mused.

Brian chuckled and looked over, "You think about this a lot?" "Yeah," Nick admitted, "I feel comfortable here, looking at them." "But you don't feel comfortable anywhere else?" he asked. "Not really, no," Nick said. "How long have you felt like this?" Brian asked, growing more concerned with each statement that came out of Nick's mouth. "I'm not sure. I think I've always felt this way, as long as I can remember ... but lately it bothers me more," he said. "How come?" Brian asked. "I don't know. Nothing's changed, but it just feels different," he said. "Can you tell me how?" Brian asked. Nick sighed, "I'm not sure I can explain it. It's just a feeling .. like deep inside me. I *know* I don't belong, and I never have. I just wanna ....." "Wanna what?" Brian asked, sitting up and looking at him. Nick glanced at him, "I wanna leave." "Leave? You mean the group?" Brian asked, fear showing in his eyes. Nick shook his head, "No, just leave here .... I told you I couldn't explain it." Brian calmed down somewhat, "OK, you're right, I don't understand, but I do know one thing." "Yeah?" "You are my best friend, and I love you. All the guys love you, and we'd do anything to help you out. You know that right?" Brian said. Nick smiled at him, "Yeah I know."

Brian noticed Nick was shaking, "Come on let's go in, you're shaking." "I am? I didn't notice," Nick said, sitting up. "Yeah, and if you get sick again, Kevin's gonna hit the roof," Brian said, standing up and offering Nick his hand. Nick took it and got up, walking with Brian to the door, "I can't help it, I always get sick." "Well, sitting out here in the cold is just egging it on," Brian said. Nick rolled his eyes, "Yes daddy." "Nope, I'm the concerned friend, Kevin is the daddy," Brian corrected. Nick laughed as they walked down the flight of stairs to their floor. "Mind if I come in?" Brian asked, as Nick reached his room. "You don't have to tuck me in, I'm fine," Nick said. Brian looked at him with that stubborn look he gets sometimes, letting him know he didn't believe him. "Fine, suit yourself," Nick said, entering his room and leaving the door open for Brian.

Nick went into the bedroom of his suite and changed into his favorite pair of sweats and a t-shirt, then ordered room service, since he didn't get to finish his meal. Brian watched TV as Nick ate, then got up and walked to the door of the bedroom, "I'm going to sleep." "OK man, see you in the morning," Brian

called. "K ... and Bri?" Nick said. "Yeah?" "Thanks," Nick said, then turned and walked into the room. Brian stayed until he knew Nick was asleep, then turned off the TV and the lights. He left Nick's room, just as Kevin, A.J. and Howie walked off the elevator. "Where you guys been?" Brian asked. "Bar," A.J. replied, grinning. "You should've come, there were some cute girls," Howie said. "Yeah I bet," Brian replied, angry that they didn't show anymore concern for Nick. "Guys, we need to talk," he said. "Bout what?" Kevin asked. "Nick," Brian answered. All three saw the serious look on Brian's face and immediately thought the worse. Kevin's room was close, so they all went in there. "What happened?" he asked. "Nothing happened, but I'm worried," Brian said, "He said he felt like he didn't belong, and all the teasing is making it worse." A.J. sighed, "I said I was sorry." "Not to him you didn't," Brian said, "J you didn't see him up there. He looked .... I dunno, lost. Like a little kid that just found out there wasn't a Santa Claus. He's really struggling with this, and our teasing just hurts him even more." "So what do we do? Coddle him for the rest of his life?" A.J. asked, "He's twenty-one Brian, we can't keep protecting him from the big bad world, he's gotta grow up, toughen up."

Brian opened his mouth to say something, but stopped. "Well, we can stop teasing him if it makes him feel that bad," Kevin said, looking at A.J. "Alright, I'll stop," A.J. said. "It's not just the teasing though," Brian said, "He said he just doesn't fit in, anywhere. Not even with his family." "Who does fit into that family?" Howie asked. "OK, family aside," Kevin said, "What are we looking at here? Is he depressed? Does he need to see someone? What?" "I don't know," Brian said. Kevin sat down on the couch and ran his hand through his hair, "OK, let's watch him a little more closely, and try not to upset him. Maybe he's just going through a phase, and he'll snap out of it after a while." "And if not, we can get him whatever help he needs," Howie said. "Alright, agreed?" Kevin asked. "Agreed," the three said, moving to leave the room. "See you guys in the morning," Kevin said, as they filed out of his room and shut the door. He shook his head and sighed, "Little brother, you're gonna send me to an early grave," he mumbled, worried about Nick as he went to bed.

## Chapter 2

*Nick looked around, he was in a field of exotic flowers. He bent down and picked one, looking at it. It reminded him of a rose, without the thorns, but it was small and blueish gray in color. The petals were perfect rectangles, and the scent was intoxicating. He heard a noise and looked up, seeing a group of people in the distance. Nick ran toward them, a feeling in his gut telling him to get there quick. "Wait!" he yelled, as the last person boarded what looked like some kind of ship and it took off. "Wait!! Don't leave me here!" he screamed, watching the vessel turn and head into the horizon. Suddenly, an overwhelming feeling of loss and fear came over him, "Don't leave me here," he cried.*

Nick sat straight up in bed, heaving for air and looking around. It took him a moment to realize he was in his hotel room. He threw the covers off and went into the bathroom, turning the water on and splashing his face for a moment, looking in the mirror. His eyes were red, like he'd been crying in his sleep, and his head felt stuffy. "Oh great, I am getting sick," he muttered, going back into his room and pulling out his itinerary. "Photo shoot at nine, lunch, down time, show," he read out loud. "Why on earth do they schedule a photo shoot on a show day?" he asked himself, "They know it always runs over and makes us tired." He looked around the room, "And I'm talking to myself again. This can't be good can it?" He didn't answer himself, he was afraid of what he'd say. Nick looked over at the clock, it was an hour before his wake up call. He knew he wouldn't be going back to sleep, so he decided to get an early start on the day. "Can't wait to see Kev's face when I'm the first one ready," he laughed, heading to the shower, "He'll freak. OK stop talking to yourself."

Nick took his shower and got dressed. He packed his suitcase and sat it by the door. He made one more pass through the room, making sure he wasn't leaving anything, then headed down to the restaurant. He grabbed a table in the back, hoping no one would recognize him, and ordered breakfast. He thumbed through the local paper, trying to pass the time while he waited on his food. Finally the waitress sat his plate down in front of him. "Can I get you anything else?" she asked. "Um, do you have any honey?" he asked. "Sure, I'll be right back," she said, heading towards the kitchen. Nick arranged his food and looked at it, "There, no one to tell me moving my food around is stupid," he mumbled to himself. His waitress brought him a small bowl of honey and left. He took the bowl and poured it over his eggs, smiling to himself. He had stopped doing this in front of the guys because of their comments on how gross it was. He didn't tell them that catsup on their fries was gross, so why criticize him for what he liked? Anyway, he only allowed himself the luxury when he was by himself. He took his first bite and had to keep himself from moaning. *Man I missed this*, he thought.

He had nearly finished when A.J. walked up, "Hey, mind if I sit down?" Nick shook his head and A.J. took the seat across from him. "Eating that stuff again huh?" he asked. "I like it," Nick said, hoping he wasn't about to get teased again. "Listen man, I'm sorry for upsetting you last night," A.J. said, taking his glasses off and looking at him, "You're just easy to tease, and I don't notice that it's hurting you." Nick smiled at him, "It's OK J. I guess I'm just overly sensitive about it." The waitress came over and A.J. ordered a cup of coffee. He waited until she was gone to speak again, "You never used to be. Why now?" Nick shrugged his shoulders, "I dunno." A.J. watched as Nick finished his food and sipped his hot tea. "You getting sick again?" he asked. "Think so," Nick answered, "Why?" "You don't drink tea unless you're sick," he said. "Oh," Nick said, turning his attention back to sipping the hot liquid.

A few more minutes went by in silence as the two nursed their drinks. "So, we OK?" A.J. finally asked. Nick looked up at him, "Yeah, why wouldn't we be?" "Dunno," A.J. said smiling, "Can I still tease you?" Nick laughed, "If it makes you happy, have at it." "But you'll tell me if it's too much right?" he asked. Nick nodded, "Yeah." "Good, oh look here comes Kevin," A.J. said. Kevin sat down with a surprised look on his face, "You two are up early." "Couldn't sleep," A.J. said. "Me either," Nick said, letting the waitress take his empty plates and asking for another cup of tea. "Tea? Don't tell me you're sick again," Kevin said, an exasperated look on his face. "I can't help it that I have allergies Kev," Nick defended. "Yeah, but you woulda thought the docs would find a medicine that actually worked by now," he said. Nick shrugged, "Maybe there's not one." "Come on, there's a medicine for everything," A.J. said. "Well, they don't know what I'm allergic to, so it's kinda hard to make a medicine for it," Nick said. "I thought you had that allergy test done before we started the tour," Kevin asked. "I did, three times. They didn't find anything," Nick said, getting up and tossing the money for his meal on the table, "I'm gonna go grab my stuff." "K," A.J. said, as he walked off. Kevin waited until he was out of the restaurant before turning to A.J., "He OK this morning?" "Seems like it," he replied, "We'll see."

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"Nick, look this way please," the photographer said. Nick looked and she snapped the shot. "Damn, that flash is bright," he said, blinking his eyes. "Sorry, just a few more and we're done," she said. Nick endured the rest of the photo shoot, then was released. It was Howie's turn. Nick walked back into the dressing room, pulling his shirt off. "Man, am I glad that's over," he said, dropping his pants and grabbing his own to put on. "Yeah, I hate photo shoots," Brian said, looking up from the magazine he was looking at. "Dude, there are other people in here," he reminded Nick. Nick looked around, "So." "So, I swear you have no modesty," Brian laughed. Nick rolled his eyes, "Why do we have to be modest? I mean really, we all have a body, so what?" Brian laughed as one of the make-up artist in the room with them looked like she was about to faint. Nick glanced at her, "Hi," he smiled. She just grinned as she backed out of the room, bumping into the door on her way out. "That's why you should be modest," Brian offered, "Poor girl, she's probably traumatized." "Oh shut up," Nick laughed, as he put

his own shirt on and sat down.

"You guys ready for tonight?" Kevin asked. "As ever," Nick said. "You did hear what Henry told us yesterday right? About not looking into the lights at the end of the show?" Kevin asked. "Yeah, I heard. Who looks into the lights anyway?" Nick asked, giving Kevin that familiar duh look. Nick noticed a bowl of candy sitting on one of the tables, "Is that for us?" "Oh no, you are not eating that before a show," Kevin said. "Why not?" Nick whined. "Cause you get way too hyper on stage, that's why," he answered. "I thought that was the point," Nick retorted, "Please??" he begged. Kevin looked at Brian, "Why do I always feel like the bad parent?" "Because you are," Brian laughed. "Well, you're no help," Kevin said. "Hey, I'm the friend, not the parent. Hand me some, too, Nick," Brian said, laughing when Kevin groaned. Howie and A.J. came in, "Oh no, you aren't letting them eat that before a show are you?" Kevin gestured towards the two, "You have my permission to stop them." Brian and Nick looked at the two, then grabbed as much of the candy as they could, and ran out of the room giggling. "Well, should be a fun show tonight," A.J. said, following them. The two older men looked at each other and shook their heads, "God help us."

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"Thank you guys for being a great audience!" A.J. yelled, as Brian ran past him, closely followed by Nick with a can of silly string in his hand. Nick stopped and sprayed A.J. from head to toe, before yelling goodnight to the audience and running up the platform. All five stood on the platform as it lowered them underneath the stage, "Goodnight!" they all yelled, as they were engulfed in the new spot lights. Nick raised his hand up and gave the peace sign as they dropped beneath the stage. "Fuck, those lights are bright!" A.J. said, pulling silly string off himself. "Yeah, I can't see," Brian said. Nick laughed, "Bri, you aren't suppose to look at them." "I didn't I had my eyes closed," he protested. "So did I, and I can't see either," Kevin said, blinking. "Neither can I," Howie added, walking into one of the supports, "Oh good grief." Nick looked around, "Am I the only one that can see?" "I can, but I had my glasses on," A.J. said, walking over and taking Howie by the arm and leading him around the post. Nick took Kevin and Brian and led them back to the dressing room.

Henry came in, "Great show guys!" "Lose the lights Henry," Kevin said, still blinking. "Why? They were great," he asked. "Cause we're all blind, that's why," Brian said. "Not all of us," Nick said, just them. "OK, we lose the lights," Henry said, "You guys need a doctor?" "No, we're fine," Howie said, "I can finally see something." "Nick, how come you can see and they can't?" Henry asked. He shrugged his shoulders, "Dunno. I kinda liked the lights myself." "Did you have your eyes open?" Brian asked. "Yeah," he said. "Well, the lights go," Kevin said, "I'm not going blind just because they look good." "OK,

I said they go," Henry muttered, "OK get showered, we're outta here in thirty."

The guys quickly showered and got dressed. They teamed up with their security guards and headed out the door to their buses. Each boy had a bus of his own, and had it decorated just how he liked it. They stopped, as always, to sign autographs and take pictures. Nick and Brian were standing close to each other, talking to a group of fans. "What did you flash at the end?" one girl asked Nick. "What do you mean?" he asked, confused. "When you guys were going down under the stage. You held your hand up and flashed something," she explained. "I gave the peace sign," he said. "No, it was like a light. We all saw it," she said. Brian and Nick looked at each other and shrugged. "I dunno, the lights were so bright, maybe it reflected off something," Nick said, as Lane ushered him towards his bus. "See ya in a few hours," Brian said, as he got on his. "K," Nick said, boarding his bus and heading to the back. "You wanna play cards?" Lane asked. "Naw, I think I'm gonna go to bed," Nick said. "You are sick aren't you?" Lane asked. Nick laughed, "I really wish people would stop asking me that." "Sorry man," Lane smiled, "See you when we get there then." "K, night," Nick said, going into the bedroom at the back of the bus and shutting the door.

He got ready for bed, then flipped the lights off and crawled in. He settled in on his back, staring up at the ceiling. It was covered with a replica of the Milky Way, and it glowed just like the night sky would. This was the one thing he'd asked for on his bus. The guys all thought it was stupid, he could have anything he wanted, and he chose this. Nick took a deep breath and let it out, "They don't understand. They'll never understand how this makes me feel. Oh great, talking to yourself again Carter, shut up and go to sleep." He sighed, taking comfort in his stars and drifting to sleep.

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One of the crewmen snuck off to a secluded corner and dialed his cell phone. "Hello? Yeah we got a problem," he said. "What is it?" the man on the other end asked. "Everyone saw, you need to get a team down here fast," he said. "Shit, does he know?" the man asked. "No, I don't think so, but you know if everyone in the arena saw it, they'll be here in no time to get him," he said. "OK, keep your eyes open. We'll be at the next venue," the man said hanging up the phone, "I just hope we aren't too late," he muttered.

## Chapter 3

Lane knocked on the door for the third time, "Nick, are you up? Come on man we're here!" Still, he heard nothing from inside the room. He tried the door, it was locked. He walked back to the front of the bus, his gut telling him something wasn't right, "Go get Kevin, will ya," he asked the driver as he fished around the glove compartment for the key to the bedroom door. The driver left and he found the key, walking back to the bedroom. He unlocked the door and opened it. Nick was still in bed, sound asleep. The room was completely dark except for the small glow of the stars on the ceiling, that seemed to illuminate Nick's face. Lane walked over to the side of the bed and turned on the small lamp, "Nick?" Nick's eyes fluttered open, and he started coughing. Lane noticed how pale he looked and reached out, touching his forehead with the back of his hand, "Damn, you're burning up." Nick shook his head, "I'm cold," he said pulling the blanket closer around him.

Kevin stepped onto the bus, "Lane?" "Back here," Lane called, as Kevin came back to join him. "What's wrong?" he asked, then looked at Nick, "Damn." "Yeah, he's burning up with fever," Lane said. "OK, I'll have Henry call in a doc," Kevin said, walking over and sitting on the edge of the bed, "Nick, you think you can get into the hotel?" "We're at the hotel already?" Nick asked. Kevin smiled at him, "Yes, and right now there's not any fans outside. So, we need to go up to our rooms, OK?" Nick sighed, looking up at the ceiling, "Can't I stay here?" he asked, coughing again. "No, we need to go in," Kevin said. Nick groaned but sat up, running his hand through his hair. Kevin found his shoes and handed them to him. Nick's hands were shaking so bad he could barely tie his shoe laces. Lane handed him a thick sweatshirt and his jacket. Nick put them on and stood up, "Whoa." Kevin grabbed the younger man and helped steady him, "You alright?" "Dizzy," Nick said, "I got up too fast." "OK, just hang on to me and we'll be in there in no time," Kevin said. Nick put his arm over Kevin's shoulder and Kevin held him by his waist as they exited the bus and walked into the hotel.

They got on the elevator and Nick leaned against the wall, coughing. Kevin watched him with worried eyes, "Nick, has it been this bad before?" "I don't know," he answered, closing his eyes and sliding down the wall to the floor. He pulled his knees to his chest and rested his head on them. Kevin glanced up at Lane, seeing the same worried expression on his face. Kevin knelt down facing Nick, "Hey, tell me how you're feeling." "I'm cold, and weak," Nick said, his head still on his knees, "My chest hurts when I breathe ... and I can't take a deep breath without coughing." "Do you think this is your allergies or something else?" he asked. "Allergies," Nick said, "But it's worse than before." "OK, we'll get a doc in to see you as soon we get to your room," Kevin said. Nick nodded, trying to take short shallow breaths to keep from coughing.

The elevator stopped on their floor and the doors opened to reveal the rest of the guys waiting in the hall. When they saw Nick sitting in the floor, they all started to panic. Kevin held his hand up to them and gave them a stern look as he and Lane helped Nick up and to his room. They walked in, with everyone on their heels and took Nick to the nearest bedroom, helping him get his shoes off and into bed. Once Nick was comfortable Kevin turned to the guys, "Howie, go tell Henry to call the doc in." Howie nodded and headed out the door to Henry's room. "What's wrong with him?" Brian asked, peering into the room. "It's his allergies, but it's the worst I've ever seen them," Kevin answered. Nick started coughing, getting their attention. "Damn, is he gonna be able to sing tonight?" A.J. asked. "I don't know," Kevin said.

Brian walked into the room and sat down next to Nick, "Hey, I told you that you were gonna get sick, didn't I?" Nick smiled, "Yeah, I know. I should've listened to you, huh?" "Yeah, you should have. You know that whole older and wiser thing," Brian teased. Nick laughed, then coughed. "Sorry, I shouldn't make you laugh, huh?" Brian said. Nick shook his head, "It's OK. Bri, can you turn the heat on? I'm freezing." "It is on, but I'll turn it up," he said, getting up and turning it up to eighty. Nick watched as Brian disappeared into the bathroom for a moment, then came back out with a wash cloth in his hand. "Here," he said, laying it across Nick's forehead and laughing when Nick flinched at how cold it was. "I'm cold and you bring me a cold rag?" Nick said. "You've got a fever," Brian replied. "Oh," Nick said, closing his eyes, "I'm tired." "I know, go to sleep. The doc should be here soon," Brian said.

Henry and Mark walked into the room with Howie. "How sick is he?" Henry asked. "Pretty sick," Kevin said, "He's got a high fever." "OK, the doc should be here within the hour," Henry said, looking over as Brian came out of the room and pulled the door almost shut. "He's asleep," Brian said, fanning himself, "I couldn't stay in there any longer. He's freezing and it's like eighty in there." A.J. pulled his sweater off, leaving his tank top on, "I'll go sit with him." "Here," Brian said, tossing him a bottled water from the fridge, "You'll need it." A.J. smiled, then stepped into the room. The guys laughed when they heard him cuss at how warm it was before he shut the door.

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About an hour later the doctor arrived. The guys watched as he examined Nick, asking him questions. Nick told him about his history of allergies, and how no one could figure out just what he was allergic to. The doctor smiled at him as Nick settled back in the bed, "I think I can help you." "Really?" Nick asked, not wanting to get excited yet. "I think so," the doctor replied, "About a month ago I had a young lady in with the same symptoms as you. She explained that she was allergic to something in the air and knew exactly what to do to treat it." Nick coughed, "I'm willing to try anything." "I'm sure you are," the

doctor said, "Let me call my office and have the supplies I need delivered." Nick watched as the doctor made the call. "Alright, as soon as the supplies are here, we'll get started, OK?" he said. Nick nodded, pulling the blankets up as another wave of chills swept over him.

Within half an hour the supplies were delivered. All the guys watched as the doctor prepared a shot. "What's in that?" A.J. asked. "Mostly antihistamine," he answered, "It's like a super dose of Benidryl." "What's the oxygen tank for?" Kevin asked. "I'm going to put him on pure oxygen for a while. It seems to help the medicine take effect faster," he answered. Kevin and Howie glanced at one another, not really sure about this at all. "OK Nick," the doc said, "I need you to roll over for me." Nick did as he was told, and the doctor pulled the blankets back and moved his sweats down revealing the top part of his hip. "OK Nick, don't move. I have to give this slow, and it will hurt," he warned. Nick nodded, grabbing the edge of one of the pillows. The doctor inserted the needle and slowly administered the shot. Nick was gripping the pillow for all he was worth as tears sprang to his eyes. "Just a little bit longer," the doctor said, "I know it's painful." Nick was almost at the verge of screaming when the doc finally pulled the needle out. "OK, you can roll back over," the doctor instructed. Nick slowly rolled over, wiping the tears from his face as he did. "Alright, let's put this on," the doctor said, placing the oxygen mask over Nick's face. "I want you to breathe normally. I'll take it off in about twenty minutes, and then put it back on after twenty more," he said. "Why do you do that?" Brian asked. "Yeah, why not just leave it on?" Howie added. "Because pure oxygen can't be breathed for an extended period of time without some side affects," he explained. "You get high," A.J. said. "Exactly," the doctor said. Kevin looked at A.J., "How'd you know that?" "Oxygen bars," A.J. said, "They're all the rage in Cali. You can sit and suck it until you see purple elephants on the ceiling." The doctor frowned, "I've heard of those. It's not a good idea." "Nope, but it makes money, so they have them," A.J. said. "How long will you do this?" Brian asked. "For about three hours," the doctor answered, "We should see some improvement in the first, but it'll take about three to completely take care of the problem." "That's about the time we need to leave for sound check," Henry said. Kevin nodded, watching Nick sleep, "OK, we'll wait and see how he's doing before we make a decision on tonight."

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Three and a half hours later Nick was sitting up in bed playing cards with Brian. His fever was gone, he wasn't coughing anymore and he felt better than he had in months. The doctor was packing up his things to leave. "Thanks doc," Nick said, "I can't tell you how much better I feel." The doctor smiled, "You're welcome," he said handing him a piece of paper. "What's this?" Nick asked. "That is the instructions for what I just did. In case you need it again down the road," he said. Nick grinned, "Thanks." The doctor grabbed his things and Mark helped him carry them downstairs. "So, you feel like working tonight?" Henry asked. "Yeah, I feel fine," Nick said. "Alright then, we need to leave in about an hour. That'll give us enough time to do a quick sound check before they start letting people in,"

Henry said. Nick got out of bed and placed the paper the doctor had given him in his suitcase for safe keeping. He pulled out some clothes and headed to the bathroom to get a quick shower before they left. The guys filed out of his room to do the same. "Isn't that weird," A.J. said, as he and Kevin walked down the hall. "What?" Kevin asked. "Nick's allergic to the air. How many people have that?" he said. Kevin shrugged, "Dunno, but it's a good thing that doc knew what he was doing." "Yeah, it is," A.J. said, reaching his room and going inside.

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Henry sat in the dressing room, going over some expense figures with Mark. The guys had a great show, and were in the showers. They were here for a couple nights, so there was no rush to leave the arena. Frank, Kevin's bodyguard knocked on the door, "Mr. Murphy, there's some federal agents here." Henry stood up, "Federal agents? What do they want?" Frank shrugged his shoulders. "Let them in," Henry said, glancing at Mark. Mark looked clueless. A man and woman entered the dressing room. "Mr. Murphy?" the woman asked. "Yes," he said. "I'm Agent Tamara Dawson with the CIA, my partner here is Agent Tom Neely with the FBI," she said. "The CIA and the FBI? What's this about?" Henry asked. "We need to speak with Nick Carter," she said. "Nick? Why, is he in some sort of trouble?" Mark asked. "You could say that," Tom said, "It's urgent that we talk to him." "Does he need an attorney for this?" Henry asked, still wary. "Oh no," Agent Dawson said, "Our agencies have intercepted some threats made against his life. We need to discuss them with him." "Oh my," Mark said. "I'll go get him," Henry said, heading into the large bathroom.

"Nick! Nick!" he called. "What?" Nick asked, stepping out of the shower, still drying off. "There's some Feds out here, they wanna talk to you," Henry said. "Feds?" Nick asked, as the rest of the guys walked over. "What do the feds want with Nicky?" Howie asked. "Something about some threats on your life," Henry said. "Oh God," Brian muttered. Nick looked somewhat shocked. Sure all the guys had had their lives threatened at one time or another, but their security always took care of it. The feds were never called in. "Uh OK, I'll be right out," Nick said, hurrying to put his clothes on. "OK, I'll tell them," Henry said, leaving the room. "Do you want us to come with you?" Kevin asked. Nick shrugged, "I dunno. I've never talked to the feds before." "We'll come if you want us to," Brian said. Nick finished putting his shoes on and stood up, running his hand through his still wet hair, "Um no, I'll be alright. It's not like I did anything, right? They'll probably let me know what's going on and leave." "Yeah true," Howie said. "But if it's a threat on your life, why aren't they talking to security?" Kevin asked. "I dunno, maybe they already did," Nick said. "We'll stay close, in case you need us," Kevin told him as they all walked out into the main dressing room.

Agent Dawson looked up, glancing between Nick and Brian, "Nick Carter?" Nick stepped up and extended his hand, "I'm Nick." She took it, "Agent Dawson, this is Agent Neely. Can we speak to you in private please?" Nick glanced back at the guys, "Um, yeah sure." He lead them to a smaller dressing room that was attached to the main one. They went in and shut the door. Kevin looked at the rest of the guys, "I don't have a good feeling about this." "Neither do I," Brian said, staring at the closed door. Howie and A.J. exchanged worried glances, as they sat down to wait for Nick.

## Chapter 4

Nick lead the way into the room, walking over to the small fridge and opening it as Agent Neely shut the door. "You guys want anything?" Nick asked, grabbing a bottled water. "No thank you," Agent Dawson said. "Mr. Carter, have a seat please," Agent Neely said, gesturing to the couch in the room. Nick walked over and sat down, feeling extremely nervous, "What's all this about?" Agent Dawson sat across from him. Under any other circumstance, Nick might have hit on her. She was blonde, her hair up in a loose bun, gorgeous blue eyes, and fair complexion. She was wearing a business suit with her badge on the belt and a 9mm in a shoulder holster under her jacket. Agent Neely was skinny, with black hair and brown eyes. He just looked like a Fed, right down to his cookie cutter suit. Nick glanced between the two. They seemed to have trouble knowing where to start. Both were exchanging nervous glances with each other.

"Did I do something?" Nick asked. "Oh no, not at all," Agent Dawson said, "Mr. Carter, we're here ...." "Nick, Mr. Carter is my dad," Nick said. She smiled, "Alright Nick, we're here because we feel your life may be in danger." "By who?" Nick asked. There was that nervous glance again. Agent Neely sat down and opened the briefcase he carried in, "It's hard to explain." Now Nick was confused, "Why's it hard to explain? Who is it?" Agent Dawson looked over, "No sense beating around the bush Tom, just spill it." "Spill what? You guys are starting to make me nervous here," Nick said. "Sorry Mr. Carter ..." Nick glared at him. "Nick, it's just that there's a lot of history and politics involved," Tom said. "OK, so start at the beginning," Nick said. "Alright," Agent Dawson said, "First of all we aren't from the CIA or the FBI." "You're not?" Nick asked, glancing at their badges again, "They why does your...?" "That's where we started out, but we're part of an unknown government agency called A.I.P," she said. "AIP?" Nick asked. "Yes. Alien Immigration and Protection," Tom explained. Nick muttered the agency to himself, "But what does that have to do with me?" They both glanced at each other, "Because you've been under our protection for the last twenty-one years," he said. Nick stared at the two, trying to wrap his mind around what they were saying. "You're an alien, Nick," Agent Dawson said.

Nick considered the two for a moment, then started laughing. "Oh this is a good one. Who put you up to this? Brian? I swear I'm gonna kill him, you guys had me worried," he laughed. The two agents glanced at each other. "Nick, we're not joking," Tom said. "Oh yeah right. You expect me to believe that I'm an alien, like from outer space? Are you nuts?!" Nick said, laughing so hard he could barely talk. Agent Dawson looked at him, "Nick I wish we were joking, but we're not." Nick calmed down seeing the serious expressions on both their faces. "You were sent here for protection when you were just a month old," Tom said, "So far we've been able to hide you, but what happened at the show last night revealed who you are." Nick felt his heart drop to his stomach, "Wait... you're really serious?" "Yes," they both said. Nick ran his hand through his hair nervously, "Sent here? Sent here from where? And

who's after me? And what do you mean what I am? What am I?"

Agent Neely took a small box out of the briefcase and sat it on the coffee table, turning it on. He then walked over and switched off the lights. Nick gasped as the room suddenly filled with the image of the milky way. It was a hologram, and the various suns and planets moved around them. "Here is Earth," Agent Dawson said, pointing. Nick nodded. "You're from a planet called Celeste. It's on the outskirts of the milky way," she went on. Nick stood up and walked to the edge of the hologram, "Here." Both agents stared at him with surprised expressions. "Yes, how'd you know?" Tom asked. "I dunno. I just always felt drawn to it," Nick said, staring at the planet. Tamara turned the machine off and flipped the lights back on. Nick blinked for a moment, then turned to face them, "Why was I sent here?" She gestured for him to sit back down, which he did. "Nick, the entire planet of Celeste has one race. We call them Celestians, but to the rest of the galaxy they are known as the Ange or, simply Angels," she said. "Angels?" Nick asked. "It's because of their features," Tom explained, "See they all look the same so to speak. All have dark brown hair, dark blue eyes, and tan complexions. They have perfect facial features and are generally very physically fit. So the rest of the galaxy calls them that because, in a sense, they are perfect." "But I don't look like that," Nick said. "No, you don't. Which is why you're here," Tamara said.

"Wait, you're telling me they sent me here because of the way I look?" Nick asked, shocked. "In part, yes," she said, "See Celeste has two suns, so their appearance here, which we just described isn't what they look like on their own planet. There they have light brown hair, light blue eyes, and fair skin. The only thing we have to compare you to is our albino's here. And you are the only one." "What do you mean the only one?" he asked. "In all of their history, you are the only Angel that doesn't look like all the rest," Tom said. Nick sighed, "That's just great. Not only am I an alien, but I happen to be a freak too? Wonderful, just wonderful!" "There's more," Tamara said. Nick laughed, "Great." "Celeste is ruled by a royal family, much like Britain is ruled by the queen," Tom said, "You're part of that family." Nick's mouth dropped open in shock. "You were sent here to keep you safe. Your family knew they couldn't hide you on Celeste, so they sent you here," she said. "Hide me from who?" he asked. "The King," Tom said, "He would've had you killed."

Nick sighed and sat back against the couch, "So why after all this time am I in danger?" "Last night at the show, your mark showed up in the lights," Tom said. "Mark? What mark?" Nick asked. "All Angels are given a mark at birth. It glows in the natural light of their planet. It shows your rank in the society. Somehow the lights emulated the natural light of Celeste and it flashed as you were going under the stage. The entire arena saw the flash, but only a few knew what it was," Tamara said. Nick looked down at his hands, "What does it look like?" Tom retrieved another device from the briefcase and walked over to Nick. "This replicates the light from Celeste's suns. Hold your right hand out, palm up," he said, turning it on and holding it over Nick's hands. Nick stretched his hand out and watched as the mark

appeared on his wrist. "Oh my God," he muttered as it took a glow all its own. It was a circle, with a braided outline. In the middle was some kind of bird, and backing it the two suns, with their rays flowing to the edge of the circle. It seemed to be alive, shimmering in the light. "The raven in the middle is what denotes royalty," Tamara said. Nick looked up at her with tears in his eyes, suddenly he was overwhelmed by it all, "Wh-what do I look like?" She glanced at Tom and he nodded. "Come over here," she said, walking over to a full length mirror and standing in front of it. Nick followed her and stood beside her. Tom took the light and held it up to Nick's face. Nick's breath caught in his throat as his skin paled, and his blonde hair turned white, with a few golden streaks in it. But it was his eyes that scared him. They went from the blue he'd known all his life to an intense lavender. It was almost as if there was a fire behind them. They seemed to glow, piercing through him with one look. Tears were streaming down his face, turning iridescent in the light and shimmering as they fell. Nick shook his head and backed away, "No, you have to be lying. This has to be a trick!" "It's no trick, we're telling you the truth," Tamara said. Nick glanced at her, then back at himself in the mirror, "NO!!!"

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"What the hell are they talking about in there?" A.J. asked, looking at his watch. "I have no idea," Brian said, biting on his fingernails. "Maybe we should go in and check on him?" Howie suggested. Kevin shook his head, "Nick's a grown up, he can take care of himself." Just then they heard Nick scream. "Or maybe not," Kevin added, running to the door with the rest of the guys and bursting in. Nick was on his knees in the floor, his hands over his face, crying uncontrollably. The two agents stood near him with compassionate looks on their faces. "What's going on in here?" Kevin demanded. "This doesn't concern you," Tom said. "Yes it does," Kevin said, "What'd you do to him?" "Nothing," Tamara answered.

Brian and Howie knelt beside Nick, placing their hands on his back. "Nick, what's wrong?" Brian asked. Nick shook his head, still crying. "Please Nicky, talk to us," Howie begged, "What happened?" Nick was afraid to look up, not knowing if the light was still on or not. "Nick, the light is off," Tom said, as he placed the device on the coffee table. Nick looked up, briefly glancing at Brian and the guys before turning to the agents. "Tell them," he said. "They don't need to know," Tamara said. Nick glared at her, "Yes they do, now tell them!" "Tell us what?" Kevin asked. "Do I need to call an attorney?" Henry asked. Nick stood up, shaking his head, "No Henry, can you and Mark wait outside please?" "I don't think this is .." Henry started to protest. Nick shook his head, "Just wait outside. This is just between me and the guys, OK?" Henry glanced at Mark then turned and left. When Mark walked out and shut the door behind him, Nick faced the agents once again wiping tears from his face, "Either you tell them or I will."

The two agents glanced at one another, then shrugged their shoulders. "Alright guys, have a seat," Tamara said. The four sat down on the couch. Nick took a chair across the room, and pulled his knees up to his chest in it. He couldn't stop crying, although it was more controlled now. He wiped the tears away as they fell, waiting for the agents to explain. "OK, we're sitting, what the hell is wrong with Nick?" A.J. asked impatiently. Tom took a deep breath, "Alright, here's the short version. Nick is an alien from the planet Celeste, and we've been protecting him for the last twenty-one years. Somehow his mark showed up in the lights at last night's show and now he's in danger of being found." The four leaned forward and glanced at each other for a moment, then looked back at the agents. "Nick .... an alien?" Kevin asked. "Yes," they both said. The four glanced at each other again with raised eyebrows, then burst into laughter. "Nick an alien, yeah and I'm fucking Justin Timberlake," A.J. howled. "Oh," Brian said, holding his side as he laughed, "E. T. phone home!" Kevin pointed at Nick, still laughing, "I don't know how you set this up, but you are so getting paid back for it!" Howie couldn't even talk, he was laughing so hard. No sound was coming from him and his face was turning red.

The agents looked at Nick as the boys continued in hysterics. Nick took a shaky breath and stood up, still wiping away a few tears, "Guys, this isn't a joke. Believe me, I wish it was." he said in a small but serious voice. The guys looked up, calming down when they saw Nick's face. He looked broken. Like someone that had just found out his entire life had been a lie. Sadness and fear lay in his eyes, as he silently pleaded with them to understand. Tom picked the light back up and glanced at Nick. He bit his lip and nodded, knowing the only way for them to really believe was for them to see it. Tom turned the light on and held it up. "Jesus fucking Christ!!" A.J. yelled, climbing up the back of the couch, trying to get away. "Holy shit!" Howie said, his eyes wide. "Sweet mother of God," Brian mumbled. Kevin just sat there, stunned speechless. Nick stared at them through his now lavender eyes, his chin trembling and iridescent tears falling down his cheeks. Brian got up and walked to him, picking his hand up and looking at his mark. Slowly the rest followed in morbid curiosity. Nick watched as they tentatively touched his mark, and his hair. Brian looked up at him, dropping his hand and pulling him into a hug, "It's alright Nicky," he said as Nick broke down. He had been so afraid the guys would push him away, and when Brian hugged him, he lost it. The rest of the guys joined in the hug. The agents watched as they comforted Nick. Then Kevin looked over at them, "Tell us everything."

## Chapter 5

The guys sat on the couch, shocked. The agents had just finished explaining everything they had told Nick. Kevin opened his mouth to say something, then shut it, looking confused. "I got a question," A.J. said, "How come Nick looks like his family? I mean his little brother is his spitting image." "The Carter's were specifically chosen to take Nick in. We knew that if they were to have any children of their own, they would bare a striking resemblance to Nick," Tom explained. "Do they know where I came from?" Nick asked in a shaky voice. He still hadn't quite calmed down completely, a tear escaping every so often. "No they don't," Tamara answered, "They know you were in danger, but they don't know that you aren't human." "But why didn't they tell me I was adopted?" Nick asked. "They were instructed not to. We were afraid that if you knew, you might want to try and find your birth parents. We couldn't allow that to happen. The Angels are a very advanced race, they monitor everything here. If you went looking for your parents, they would've found you," Tom said.

"OK, if Nick's mark showed up in the lights, did the audience see him? What he looks like?" Kevin asked. "No, they only saw the mark. Which is to our advantage," Tom said. "How?" Brian asked. "You all were already under the stage. All they saw was a hand and the mark, which means they don't know it was Nick," Tamara said. "But it has to be Nick, they know he's blonde," Howie said. "Yes, and so is Brian," she said, smiling. Nick looked up at her, "Oh no, you can't." "Can't what?" Howie asked. "Use Brian as a decoy," Nick answered, "You can't." "Nick, we don't want to use him as bait, we just want to confuse them. Maybe it'll buy us time," Tamara said. Nick shook his head, "No. I don't want him in danger because of me." "Don't you think I should decide that?" Brian asked him. "What exactly are you wanting to do?" Kevin asked. "We want to put a guard on both of them. We have two teams ready to come in. They consist of another body guard for each of them, then we will place team members in as the crew and bus drivers. We don't want to be obvious that they are being guarded," Tom explained. "But it will be," A.J. said. "How so?" Tamara asked. A.J. sighed, "Look at you. You drip Federal Agent. Anyone that looks at you will know." "The teams will be undercover," Tom said. A.J. shook his head, "Doesn't matter, you can still tell." Tamara and Tom glanced at one another. "OK, if you can tell. How many people do you think work for us that are on tour with you right now?" Tamara asked. A.J. thought for a moment, "Two." They both looked surprised. "Name them," Tom said. "Harold with the road crew and Julie in wardrobe," A.J. said with a satisfying grin. "Is he right?" Brian asked. "Yes, but that's beside the point," Tom said. "No it's not!" Nick yelled, "You are not putting my friends in danger just to hide me!"

Brian put his hand on Nick's arm, "Calm down. They aren't forcing me to do anything that I wouldn't

already do. It'll be fine." "You don't know that Bri. You could get hurt. What if they take you and then find out they goofed, they might kill you," Nick worried. "We won't allow them to take anyone," Tamara said. "But you can't promise that," Kevin said, "You said yourself they were more advanced than us. How do you fool them? How do you fight them if they're smarter and have better weapons than we do?" "We don't," Tom admitted, "We deal with them diplomatically. The Angels are a very structured race. They are steeped in tradition and diplomacy. I don't believe they would forcefully take Nick, and we won't allow him to go." "So why are you guarding me if you don't think they'll take me?" Nick asked. "Because there is always an exception to the rule," Tamara said.

"Um, why do they want Nick back anyway?" Howie asked. "Yeah, it's been twenty-one years. How do you know they still want him?" A.J. added. Tom sighed, thumbing through a file, "They are a hard race to understand, but we know they still want Nick. They've been sending search parties here since the beginning looking for him. Even as recent as last month." "Oh my God," Brian said, looking at Nick, "The doctor. He said that a woman was here a month ago with your symptoms, that's how he knew what to do for you." Nick looked at the two, "Yeah, why didn't you guys tell someone what to do for me when I got sick?" "Nick, once we gave you to the Carter's we could no longer have any official contact with you. We didn't know much about your race then, and didn't realize they were allergic to something in the air until much later. You seemed to be doing alright, so we didn't risk it," Tamara said. "But I've been sick every couple months for my entire life!" Nick said, "You couldn't drop a line to mom and tell her how to stop it?" "No we couldn't," Tom said, "We told you before, they monitor *everything*." "So they know who we are, right?" A.J. asked. "Yes, they know who the Backstreet Boys are," Tamara said. "So why don't we know anything about them?" Kevin asked.

Both agents laughed. "Could you imagine the chaos that would throw the entire planet into?" Tom said. "Our world isn't ready to find out that there is life on other planets," Tamara added. "So the government keeps this from us for our own good?" Brian asked. "Yes," they both said. "Well that sucks," A.J. said. "Yes it does," Tom agreed, "But I'd rather it be this way than the alternative." "Which is?" Howie asked. "Our world thinking we can expand and take on some new territories. We aren't ready to be in a war with any of the worlds we know about. They are all far more advanced than us. It would be utter suicide," he said. "So what keeps them from coming here and taking us over?" Nick asked. "You and others like you," Tamara answered, "As long as a race can slip into society unnoticed, we will take them in. That's what keeps us safe. None of the worlds we've come in contact with want to start a war, for fear of hurting their own people here." "So are there other Angels here?" Nick asked. "No, just you," Tom said. "They don't like it here. It's too dark and if they stay here for any period of time they get sick," Tamara added. Nick sighed, leaning back against the couch. Brian glanced at him, knowing he was mired in emotion, even though he was doing a good job of hiding most of it.

Howie looked at Nick for a moment, then to the agents, "Um, if they get Nick back, what would they do

with him?" Nick looked up, not sure he wanted to hear the answer. "Most likely, they would study him. Find out why he's not like everyone else, and then ..." Tom trailed off. "Then what?" Brian asked. "They would kill him," Tamara finished. *Nope, definitely didn't want to hear that answer.* "Alright," Kevin said, "Bring your people in. We'll do whatever we have to to keep Nick safe." "Should we cancel the tour?" Howie asked. "No, keep on as you normally would," Tom said. "If you cancel they'll know you're hiding," Tamara added. Kevin nodded, standing up, "We've all had a long day. Let's go back to the hotel and rest, we can talk more in the morning." "Good, idea," Tamara said, "We'll call our team up and get them in place." "What are you gonna tell Henry?" Brian asked. She smiled, "We'll take care of him, don't worry." The guys got up and headed for the door. Nick walked over to the agents, "Um, can I have that?" he asked, pointing to the hologram machine. Tom picked it up and handed it to him. Nick smiled weakly, "Thanks." Tom nodded, feeling sorry for him. Nick had just had his entire life turned upside down and all he asked for was a cheap hologram machine. The least he could do was give it to him. Nick clutched the box to his chest, as if it was his most prized possession, as he left the room.

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Brian knocked on the bedroom door, peering in, "Hey, can I come in?" "Sure," Nick said. He was laying in bed staring at the ceiling. The lights were off and the machine was on. Stars and planets hovered in the air. Occasionally a comet would streak by. Brian had moved into Nick's room, taking the extra bedroom, not wanting to leave him alone. He walked over and sat down on the bed, "This is pretty cool." "Yeah," Nick said, still staring at the planet on the edge of the galaxy. Brian watched him for a moment, "You wanna talk?" Nick shook his head. "You want me to leave you alone?" Brian asked. Again he shook his head. Brian sat back and watched the stars, knowing Nick would talk when he was ready.

After about ten minutes he finally spoke. "It's not fair," he said softly. "What?" Brian asked. Nick sighed, "I don't belong there either. I can't believe they exiled me because of the way I looked! How vain are these people anyway?!" Brian shrugged, "I don't know." Nick looked at him, "Am I that bad of a person?" "No! Not at all. Don't ever say that," Brian said. Nick looked back at his planet, "Where do I fit then? I don't fit here, and obviously I don't fit there. Is there ever going to be a place I fit? A place that I belong?" "Nick, please don't. You know you belong here with us. We love you," Brian said, his heart breaking for his friend. "I know, I love you guys too," Nick said, "But ..." Brian held his hand up, "No buts. I've been thinking since we got back, and I'm not sure they're telling us everything. Maybe it's not exactly what they're making it out to be." "You think they're lying to us?" Nick asked. Brian shrugged, "Maybe. I mean look at how long the government has been lying to all of us. We've only heard one side of the story here." "Yeah but to hear the other side, they have to find us," Nick said, "Then what if we're wrong, and they were telling us everything? Then I'm screwed." "True," Brian agreed.

The two were quiet for a moment, then Nick looked at him. "Bri, I need to ask you something," he said, "When you saw me, were you scared of me?" Brian smiled at him, "No. I was shocked, surprised, but not scared." "Why not?" he asked. "Because I knew that no matter what you look like on the outside, you're still my best friend on the inside," he answered. Nick smiled, that was the answer he was hoping for. "Bri, I'm scared," he admitted. Brian put his arm around the younger man's shoulders, "So am I Nicky, so am I."

## Chapter 6

*Nick sat on his bed putting his shoes on, getting ready to go to the venue. When he looked up, it was straight into the dark blue eyes of a stranger. Nick stood up quickly, noticing several more men in his room, "No, leave me alone!" The men said nothing but came at him. Nick fought with all he had but they had the upper hand. The men wrestled him to the floor and bound his hands behind his back. "Don't take me please! I didn't do anything!" Nick screamed as they brought him to his feet and shoved him to the door. Nick dug his feet into the carpet, hoping to at least slow them down. Didn't anyone hear him screaming? Where were the guards he was suppose to have? One of the men glared at him, "Stop fighting us, you cannot win." Nick struggled against them, screaming at the top of his lungs, "Help me! Please!"*

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Brian sat on the couch reading the morning paper. He had ordered room service, but decided to let Nick sleep as long as possible. He heard a knock on the door, and walked over, expecting it to be room service. He opened the door, surprised to see the guys along with Agents Dawson and Neely. "Hey," Kevin said, walking in, "Nick up yet?" "No, he didn't sleep much last night so I was letting him sleep in," Brian answered. "Good, he needs his rest," Howie said, sitting on the couch, "I don't think I'd be able to sleep at all if I was him." "Me either," A.J. said, "I had a hard time getting to sleep myself last night, I can't imagine what Nicky is going through." Brian sighed, "He feels lost and scared." "Rightly so," Tamara said, "We were hoping we would never have to tell him who he was." Kevin glared at her, "And how many others are here just like Nick, that don't know who they are?" Tom met his gaze, "There are none in the situation that Nick is in."

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*Nick pulled against the hands that held him, "No please don't take me!" He saw something out of the corner of his eye, and looked over. One of the men had drawn something that resembled a gun, aiming it at him. Nick frantically glanced around the room, trying to find some way out of this. There wasn't one. He looked straight at the man with tears in his eyes, "Please don't kill me." The mans face was expressionless as he pulled the trigger. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, as Nick watched several golden waves of light come at him. When they hit, his body stiffened under their power, then darkness consumed him.*

Nick sat straight up in bed, gasping for air. He looked around the room with wide eyes, for his assailants. After a moment, he realized it was a dream. No, not a dream, a nightmare. He lifted a shaking hand and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He forced himself to take deep breaths to calm down. When he could no longer hear his heart pounding in his head, that's when he noticed the hushed voices coming from the other room. He listened for a moment, but couldn't understand what was being said, so he got up and padded across the room to the door. It had been left ajar just enough for him to see the guys sitting on the couch talking to the agents. He stood there unnoticed and listened.

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"Why don't I believe you?" Kevin said with an edge in his voice. Tom sighed, "Listen, we didn't come here to debate others' plights, we came here to protect Nick." "You really believe they'll kill him if they get him?" Howie asked. Tamara nodded, "Yes we do." "But why?" Brian asked, "Why not just leave him here then? Why search for him all these years just to take him back and kill him? It doesn't make sense." "You're right it doesn't, to us. But you have to understand that their race is defined by their looks. Nick is a variation they've never seen before. So to them, to preserve their race, they have to study him. See why he is the way he is so they can prevent it from happening again," Tom said. "That's just stupid," A.J. said shaking his head, "You can't define something by how it looks. It's what's on the inside that defines a person." "Alex, you have to understand that is a very human belief. Not all the worlds we deal with think that way," Tamara said.

Brian looked at her, "How much do you know about his race? I'm sure he's got a lot of questions." "We know enough to deal with them on a diplomatic basis," Tom said. "No, I'm not talking about dealing with them, I'm talking about what they're like," Brian said, "You see Nick does some things that to us seem strange, but to him come natural. Can you tell him if that's something these Angels do or not?" "We can try and answer his questions, but I'll admit, we don't know everything about them," Tamara said.

Nick opened the door and walked out. He would've liked to have stayed hidden to see where the conversation would go next, but he couldn't any longer. His hands were shaking, but not from fear this time. He knew if he didn't eat soon, he'd be ill. Everyone watched as he walked to the small table and sat down, picking up the room service menu. "I already ordered," Brian said, "It should be here any minute." "Thanks, I'm starving," Nick said, propping his head up with his hand and looking at everyone. "Um, we came to let ya know that the teams are in place," Kevin said. Nick nodded, wishing the food would hurry up and get there. It was getting hard for him to hide his hands. "Are you alright?" Tamara

asked. "Yeah, I just didn't eat much yesterday," he answered. She glanced at Tom, then walked over and sat down next to him. "Did you eat anything sweet yesterday?" she asked. "Not much, why?" he asked. She smiled at him, "Because the majority of what Angels eat is sweet. It's like protein is to us, you need it to survive." "I'll be damned," A.J. said, "We just thought he was a candy junkie."

Just then a knock came at the door and Kevin answered it. It was room service. The man pushed the cart over next to the table and left. Nick looked at what Brian had ordered and smiled. "Thanks Bri," he said, grabbing his plate of scrambled eggs and the jar of honey. "No problem," Brian said, taking his own plate and sitting down, "You know I don't mind if you eat that in front of me." Nick poured the honey over his eggs and mixed them up. He could see the grossed out looks on everyone's faces, but he didn't care. He was craving this. He took a bite, savoring the flavor in his mouth. He sighed as he felt his hands begin to steady and his energy began to come back up. "Starting to feel better?" Tamara asked. He nodded, "What else can you tell me?" "Well, we know you need sugars like we need protein," Tom said. "And that some of our food is poisonous to you," Tamara added. "Like what?" they all asked. "Like asparagus and artichokes," she said. Nick laughed, "No wonder I always get sick when I eat those. Mom used to try and make me eat them when I was younger. I'd take one bite and in like five minutes I was puking." "They can kill you in large amounts," Tom said. "Don't have to worry about that," Nick said, "Not planning on eating them ever again."

"What about his obsession with his food being in the right place before he eats it?" A.J. asked. "That is an Angel trait as well," Tom said, "They are very ritualistic. Things have to be just right before they go on with whatever they're doing." A.J. laughed, "And we just thought you were nuts. Who knew?" Nick smiled at him as he continued to eat. "But if Nick was brought here when he was only a month old, how does he know to do these things?" Kevin asked. "He was born with a basic knowledge of them," Tamara answered. "Born with it?" Howie asked. "Yes, they aren't like our children. Our children are born with a clean slate so to speak. We must teach them everything. Not so with Angel children. They are born with a general knowledge of their most ingrained habits. So even though Nick never grew up there, he will display the same habits as those that did," Tom explained. Nick finished eating and took a sip of his coffee, "Would I um, would I know what things looked like even though I've never actually seen them?" "It's possible, why?" she asked. "I have this reoccurring dream. I've had it since I can remember. I'm in a field of some kind of flower I've never seen before and there are two suns in the sky above me," Nick said. "What does the flower look like?" Tom asked. "It's blueish gray. It kinda reminds me of a rose, but without the thorns and its small with rectangular petals," Nick said. "That's Tsars Might," Tamara said, "It's the flower they always give to visiting dignitaries. I believe it's their favorite flower."

Nick smiled, taking another sip of his coffee. A quiet joy filled him as he realized he wasn't insane. There was a reason that he did the things he did. That even though he didn't look like the others, he still displayed their habits. If only he had looked like everyone else, he might have fit in..... actually belonged.

A.J. pulled him from his thoughts. "Oh does he have like some kind of super power? Ya know like Superman, he's normal on his planet but here he has some extra abilities that no one else does?" he asked. Nick couldn't help it, he burst out laughing, "J you've been watching to many movies. Don't you think if I did, I woulda figured them out by now?" A.J. shrugged, "You never know." The guys looked at the agents. They didn't seem to think it was all that funny. "What? I don't do I?" Nick asked. "We aren't sure," Tom said, "Some of the Angels we've dealt with do seem to have some extra abilities. But they don't flaunt them, and it's more a feeling I have, than actually seeing it, but it's possible." A.J. grinned, "I've got the perfect costume for you," he went on excitedly, "A black pair of tights with a blue shirt and cape. You can have a big N in the middle of the shirt." Everyone laughed. "Big N?" Nick asked. "Yeah for super Nicky!" A.J. said. Nick threw his napkin at A.J.'s head, but missed. He got up and headed to his room laughing, "Well super Nicky is taking a shower," then he put his hands in front of him as if he were flying and ran into his room, shutting the door behind him to the laughter of everyone.

## Chapter 7

The guys sat backstage trying to fill the time before their meet and greet. Nick was asleep on the couch, while the rest of the guys occupied themselves with the normal before concert activities. The last two weeks had been quiet. The teams had come in and were now just a part of the crew. Nothing had raised their suspicions so far, and the guys were hoping that maybe they were wrong after all. Maybe the Angels wouldn't come after Nick. But as long as they weren't sure, they kept their eyes open. Brian had taken on some of Nick's habits, wanting to make it harder for them to tell who was who if they did show up. When they were in public, Brian would eat just as much candy as Nick, hoping to confuse anyone if they happened to be watching. So far all it had done was make him hyper, and he thought he was getting a cavity. But he was willing to endure whatever he had to, to keep Nick safe.

Henry walked into the dressing room, "Guys, Meet and Greet in thirty." "Alright, Henry," Kevin said, standing up and stretching. Henry started to leave, then noticed Nick on the couch, "He alright?" "Yeah, he's not sleeping much at night though," Brian answered. Henry shook his head, "Poor kid. I don't know why someone would threaten him like that." The guys glanced between them, knowing Henry didn't know what was really going on. "Because they are sick, that's why," Howie said. Henry nodded, leaving the room.

Just as Henry walked out the door, Nick stirred in his sleep, mumbling. Brian walked over, looking down on him. After two weeks of sharing a suite, he knew what the mumbling was. Nick was having another nightmare. "Nick, wake up," he urged, gently shaking him. Nick moved away from his touch, already short of breath, "No ... please." The rest of guys came over. "We need to wake him up before he starts screaming," Kevin said, reaching down and shaking him harder, "Nick, wake up!" Nick brought his hands up, trying to fight Kevin in his sleep, "Let go!" "Shit," A.J. said, "If he starts screaming the whole place is gonna hear." "Nicky, wake up, it's just a dream," Howie said, touching his cheek as Kevin tried to keep Nick from punching him. A.J. watched as the three tried unsuccessfully to wake Nick up, and with each outburst Nick got louder and louder. Thoughts of the other morning when Nick woke up the entire floor of the hotel ran through his mind. "Oh hell," A.J. muttered, as he pushed the other guys away and grabbed Nick by the face. "I'm doing this to shut him up," he said as he leaned in and kissed Nick on the lips. Nick immediately stopped fighting as his eyes flew open. It took him a second to realize it was A.J. that was kissing him, and when he did, he pushed him off, "J are you nuts!"

Kevin, Brian and Howie were in shock, and laughing so hard they couldn't breathe. Nick was wiping his mouth off with the back of his hand, glaring at A.J. like he'd lost his mind. And A.J..... A.J. looked

stunned. He was staring at Nick, blinking his eyes, like he'd been shocked or something. "J, why the hell are you kissing me?" Nick asked, getting angry. "I-I was trying to shut you up," he finally said. "Shut me up?" Nick asked. "Yeah, you were having a nightmare," A.J. answered, "I j-just tried to ...." he trailed off, turning and walking over to the snack table and getting a bottled water. "What's wrong with him?" Howie asked. "I dunno," Kevin said, staring at A.J. Nick got up, recognizing A.J.'s reaction to him, "I'll talk to him, I think I know what it is." The guys sat down as Nick walked over to A.J.

"Hey," Nick said, nudging him with his elbow. A.J. looked up at him, his eyes full of confusion, "Nick, what just happened?" Nick sighed, "I'm not sure, but ... this isn't the first time it's happened." A.J. stared at him. Nick lowered his voice to a whisper, "All my life, anyone that's ever kissed me on the lips like that has the same reaction you just did. I don't know what it is, because I don't feel anything other than a normal kiss. But obviously you did." A.J. nodded, looking down, "It's like in that moment our lips touched, you took my soul. I can't explain it, but I feel like ... hell I don't know what I feel." "J, I'm sorry. I guess I should've told you guys that, but I never guessed one of you would try and kiss me," Nick laughed. A.J. smiled, "Sorry, it was the only thing I could think of to stop you from screaming." Nick grinned at him, "If it's any consolation, it was nice for the half second I didn't know it was you." A.J. laughed, "No, that's no consolation at all." Nick put his arm over A.J.'s shoulders, "Thanks though. I really don't wanna have to explain to everyone why I was screaming." "You're welcome, I think," A.J. said, smiling at him. Nick searched his eyes for a moment. The confusion was still there, but it wasn't as strong. "You gonna be alright?" he asked. A.J. nodded, "Yeah, I think so. Have you asked the feds about that? Maybe its one of those Angel traits?" Nick shook his head, "No, I don't think I want to talk to them about my sex life. That's a little too personal ya know." A.J. laughed, "You have a sex life?" Nick shoved him, "Oh shut up!"

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The guys walked into the meet and greet to the cheers of the fans. They all smiled and waved as they sat down at the table that was set up at the head of the room. Brian and Nick sat next to each other, both with a sucker in their mouth. The bodyguards stood behind them, watching the crowd as the line started moving. Nick finished signing his autograph and looked down the line. His eyes stopped on a young woman quite a ways back. She looked to be around his age, long blonde hair, golden tan and perfectly physically fit. "Nick?" the girl in front of him said. He smiled, "Hi, sorry. What's your name?" He signed the girls poster, but his attention kept going to the young woman in line. He felt strange, like a sinking feeling in his stomach. He knew he didn't need any more sugar, he was already on his second sucker since he'd sat down. He looked back at the woman in line. She was close enough now, that he could see her eyes. They were as green as Kevin's. Something in the back of his mind told him that she was the reason he was feeling like this.

Brian leaned over and whispered in his ear, "You alright?" Nick nodded, "I feel a little strange." Brian looked at him with concern in his eyes. "I'll be OK," Nick whispered as the next person stepped in front of them. They both dawned their famous smiles and went on with the activity of signing their name and posing for pictures. Finally the woman Nick was staring at, was in front of them. Nick smiled at her, hoping he was hiding the way his stomach was doing flip flops, "Hi," he said taking the cd jacket she handed him, "What's your name?" "Ana," she said, in an accent Nick didn't really recognize. Nick signed the jacket and slid it over to Brian, "Ana, that's pretty. You aren't from around here are you?" She smiled, "No, I came over from Europe to see you." "Wow, just to see us?" Brian said. She nodded shyly, as she took the cd jacket from Brian, "Thank you." They both smiled at her, thanking her for traveling all that way just to see them.

The rest of the meet and greet was pretty uneventful. After the guys finished signing, they mingled around with the fans for a few minutes. Nick noticed Ana in the group of girls he and Brian were talking to, but she hung back, content to just listen. He didn't get another chance to talk to her before they were ushered backstage to get ready for the show.

"So what was going on out there?" Brian asked as they walked down the hall to the dressing room. Nick shrugged, "I'm not sure. I just felt strange." "Like how?" Tom asked, coming up beside him. "I dunno, like a strange feeling in my stomach," Nick said, "Am I getting sick?" "I don't think so," Tom said, looking concerned. "Then what?" Brian asked. "Nick, was the feeling associated with someone in the room?" he asked. Nick stopped walking, "Yeah, why?" "Because I know for a fact that some of the Angels can tell when others are around," he said, pulling his radio out, "Who was it?" "Ana," he said, "But she didn't look like an Angel." "Tell me what she looked like," Tom said, relaying the information into the radio. "Alright, all the agents are looking for her," he said. Nick was suddenly frightened, "So what do we do?" "Act as if nothing is going on. You'll do the show and then we're going back to the hotel just like normal. The guards will be with you every time you set foot off stage," Tom said. "And I'll be with you too," Brian said. Nick nodded, trying to curb his fear.

"What's going on?" Kevin asked, coming out of the dressing room. Brian and Nick walked over to him. "They think they're here," Brian said as Nick walked past the two into the dressing room. "Who, the Angels?" Kevin asked. Brian nodded, glancing at Nick. He was getting into his costume for the show. "Shit," Kevin mumbled, "What do they want us to do?" "Act normal, but keep an eye out," Brian said. "Alright, I'll tell D and J, you stay with Nicky," Kevin said. "I plan on it," Brian stated.

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Ana walked into the bathroom, going into one of the stalls. She shut the door and removed her wig, running her hand through her long dark brown hair. She reached behind the toilet and grabbed the bag she had left there hours earlier. Quickly she changed clothes, and placed a new wig on. This one was red. She then took out the contacts she had in and replaced them with a brown pair. Once she was done, she took out what looked like a cell phone and punched in a code. "Installez une autre equipe. Il y a de deux d'entre eux, et je ne peux pas dire le quel est lui," *Install another team. There are two of them, and I can not tell which one is him*, she said. "OK Ana, séjour avec eux, nous serons là bientôt," *OK Ana, stay with them, we will be there soon*, the voice on the other end said. She turned the device off and placed it in the purse she was carrying, stepping out of the stall. She threw the bag in the trash on her way out of the bathroom, heading into the arena to take her seat.

## Chapter 8

After the concert was over, the guys were rushed out and driven back to the hotel. The agents were on alert, and they were jumpy. Nick and Brian returned to their suite, letting the agents sweep it first. When they found nothing, they allowed the two to enter. Tamara came in with them, "We're going to place someone in the room with you." "Is that really necessary?" Brian asked, "We're on the top floor, how else are they gonna get up here but through you guys?" The look she gave him didn't comfort him any, "We don't want to underestimate them." He nodded, glancing at Nick. He had gone to his bedroom and was getting things ready to take a shower. Brian knew he was scared to death, but he was trying to put on a good front for everyone. "So where's the agent gonna sleep?" Brian asked, turning his attention back to Tamara. "He won't," she said. "That sucks," Brian said, "I'd hate to have your job." Tamara laughed, "That's what we signed up for. Anything it takes to keep the ones we're protecting safe. Now you guys have your bracelets on right?" "Yeah, we don't take them off," he answered. "What about your panic buttons?" she asked. "We have them," Brian said. She nodded, "Make sure they are close.... just in case." Brian nodded, heading to his room to shower as well.

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Nick sat on his bed looking at the picture of his family as he did every night. He missed them. He hadn't seen them since the tour started, and only talked to them a few times. Aaron was on his own tour, and the girls were doing various things. It was hard to catch them on the phone. He really wished he could get in touch with someone. He was scared and even though he knew he couldn't tell them why, just talking to them would make him feel better. He was sure of that. He'd tried everyone, getting their voice mail. He left them each a message, telling them that he loved them and missed them. He wasn't sure what was going to happen, so he made sure they each knew he loved them. It was the only thing he could do.

He felt a chill move up his spine and shivered. He wasn't sure if he was really cold, or it was just the fear making itself known. Either way, he grabbed a heavy sweat shirt and put it on over the t-shirt he was wearing. He got up, needing to do something to get his mind off the situation. He walked into the living area. Brian was showered now, and sitting on the couch flipping through the channels. "Hey, you wanna do room service and watch a movie?" he asked. Nick smiled, "Yeah, sounds good." Brian picked up the phone and dialed room service, placing their order. "Hey Shane, you want something?" he called. The agent came in from the balcony, "Coffee would be good. It's kinda chilly out there." Brian ordered it. "Why don't you stay in here?" Nick asked. Shane smiled at him, "Gotta see them coming, if they

come at all." "Oh," Nick said, wondering exactly what he was going to see from a balcony on the top floor of a hotel. He knew the agents weren't telling him everything, he could see it in the way they looked at each other when they were asked a question. He tried not to let it bother him, telling himself that they were there to keep him safe, not play twenty questions. But sometimes it concerned him. This was one of those times.

Room service came and went. Nick and Brian settled in on the couch, watching movies. They had picked out their all time favorites. All comedies of course. They both needed a laugh, and for the two hours the movies ran, they could escape ... and laugh. Nick jerked awake. He wasn't sure when he had dozed off, but from the looks of the snow on the tv it had been a while. He glanced over to see Brian asleep on his end of the couch. He started to reach over and wake him up, but something stopped him. He had that sinking feeling in his stomach again, and this time it was ten times worse. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down, but to no avail. Fear swept over him. He didn't dare look behind him, he could feel something there, and it scared him. He reached over and grabbed Brian's arm, squeezing it. Brian stirred and looked at him. He could tell something wasn't right by the fear in Nick's eyes. "Panic button?" Nick mouthed. Brian looked for his, knowing he'd laid it down when he came in. He spotted it on the bar, across the room. Shit. "Bar," he mouthed. Nick glanced down at his hands and Brian followed his gaze. He pointed to Brian, then to the bar. Brian nodded, meeting Nick's eyes again. The two friends stared at each other for a moment. Nick could feel them behind him, and hoped he and Brian could hold them until help arrived. "Go!" Nick yelled.

Brian jumped up and ran for the bar, as Nick threw himself over the back of the couch and charged the men standing behind them. He punched the first one he came to, knocking him back. Then he turned and rushed another. The man grabbed him and they both went down. Nick could feel several pairs of hands on him as he fought. He swung wildly, connecting a few times and sending his assailants stumbling backwards. Brian made it to the bar and grabbed the panic button. Just as he squeezed it, he was tackled from behind. He turned as he fell to the floor, taking the two men down with him. He started to scream, but one of the men quickly put something over his mouth. Whatever it was, it stuck there, and no sound escaped it. Brian glared at his attackers as they grabbed him by the arms and forced him to stand. Another man came forward and cuffed his wrists in front of him. Brian continued to struggle, but at the same time, he scanned the room for Nick. He found him in the floor, still fighting. But he had the same mysterious thing over his mouth and was having his hands forced into the restraints. He could hear muffled sounds coming from Nick, and knew he must have been screaming for even that much sound to escape.

The men forced Nick to stand next to Brian. They both watched as another man and Ana came into the room from the balcony. Ana no longer had a disguise on. Her long dark brown hair was pulled into a loose pony tail. Ringlets framed her perfect face, and her dark blue eyes seemed to pierce right through

them both. They both stared at her, unable to look away as the man with her handed her some sort of device. Nick knew what it was before she even turned it on. He looked at Brian with utter horror in his eyes, as the light illuminated the room around them. Brian watched as Nick's mark began to glow with an intensity he'd never seen and his eyes faded from blue to lavender in an instant. Nick looked down, turning his head away from the light. Ana reached up and pulled his head back around, making him look at her. She smiled, "We finally found you." Nick pulled his head back, shaking it. Tears streamed down his cheeks, as he tried to pull away from the men that held him. Brian could hear his muffled cries as they started to drag him towards the balcony.

"Nick! Brian! Open the door!" Tom yelled from the hall. Brian lunged forward, grabbing Nick and hanging on for dear life. Nick turned and grabbed Brian's arms as the men tried to pry them apart. The pounding on the door grew louder, as the men worked to get the two friends away from each other. Finally they broke them apart. Brian screamed, lunging for Nick again. Nick watched in horror as one of the men took out the same gun from his dreams and aimed it at Brian. In an instant the space between the man and Brian was filled with golden rays, and Brian crumpled to the ground. Nick heard the banging at the door, and knew they were trying to break the door down. He had to buy them time. Nick turned so abruptly that he caught the men holding him by surprise. He raised his hands and caught one of the men across the cheek with the edge of the restrains, slicing his face open. Then he turned and kicked another in the stomach, as he tried to run for the door. He didn't make it. He felt the rays hit him and every muscle cringed under their power, then the darkness overtook him.

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"Ready, one, two, three," Tom said, as he Kevin and several of the agents and bodyguards slammed into the door. It broke open, and they ran into the room. Howie immediately spotted Brian on the floor and ran to him. The agents ran to the balcony, watching as the transport hovered away from the building and started to disappear into the night. "Fuck!" Tamara spat, pulling her radio, "Get the cars here now!" Tom checked on Shane, as he was unconscious on the balcony. "Go, I'll stay with them," he told Tamara, and she headed back through the suite with the agents on her tail. Kevin watched them run by, "D, J, go, I'll stay with Brian." The two men nodded, running to catch up with the agents.

Tom drug Shane into the room and shut the doors. Kevin glared at him, "This is what you call protection?" Tom didn't say anything. Instead he walked over to the frig and pulled out a bottled water. Walking over to Brian, he poured some of the water over the film across his mouth. It desolved, and Tom wiped his face with a towel. "Is he gonna be alright?" Kevin asked. Tom nodded, "He's just stunned. He'll come around in a few minutes." Kevin tried to pull the restraints from his hands. "Hang

on, I think I have something that will get those off," Tom said, standing up and leaving the room. A moment later he returned with a key. It worked, and Kevin pulled the restraints from his cousins hands, letting them fall to the floor. Tom went back over to sit next to Shane, waiting for him to come to. Kevin looked over, "Can they stop them?" "I hope so," Tom replied.

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Howie and A.J. sat in the van with Tamara and several other agents. They were racing through the city, following the signal of Nick's bracelet. "Where are they?" A.J. asked. "Above us," she answered, scanning the sky. Howie looked out, "There!" They all looked, seeing the transport just ahead of them. "God this is gonna be close," Tamara said. The driver, rounded a curve and slammed on the gas. "They have to be heading for the park," one of the agents said, "It's the only place big enough." Howie glanced at A.J. "Big enough for what?" he asked. "To land one of their ships," Tamara answered.

The van turned, heading into the park. Howie looked ahead of them, his eyes widening, "Oh my ...." "Fucking God!" A.J. finished for him. There in the middle of the park was a space ship that made the Star Destroyers from Star Wars look tame. "How the hell did they get that under the radar?" Tamara spat, pulling her gun. Howie grabbed her arm, "You'll hit Nick!" "Trust me, a gun shot is a lot better than what they're gonna do to him," she said, rolling her window down and aiming at the transport. Several of the agents followed suit, and soon there was a gun fight going on all around them. Howie and A.J. ducked behind the seats as the van came to a sudden stop and the agents spilled out. They fired at the transport as it made its way into the hull of the ship. Howie watched as the ship started to lift off, "NO!" "Fuck," A.J. said under his breath as the ship rose into the air and sped away from them.

***Note: The dialogue in italics is the Angels speaking in thier native language.***

## Chapter 9

Ana walked down the ramp from the transport as the ship took off. Several men followed her, carrying Nick. She walked over to the medical team that was waiting, *"We have several wounded."* They nodded, heading into the transport to help. *"It is him?"* an older man asked, looking at Nick as they laid him on a stretcher. Ana nodded, *"Yes doctor, it is."* The man smiled as a few of his attendants started to push Nick out of the docking bay towards the medical wing. Ana followed them, *"He put up quite a fight."* The doctor nodded, *"I'll make sure he's fully examined."*

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"Oh fuck! Oh fuck! Oh fuck!" A.J. hit Howie on the arm as the ship disappeared from their sight, "Dude, stop. He's gone." Howie glared at him, "He can't be! God, can't we do something?! Can't we go after them?!" Tamara walked up to them, "Come on, we're going back to the hotel." A.J. wiped his face with the back of his hand, trying to force the tears away, "Is that it then? They got him and we can't do anything to get him back?" "I didn't say that," Tamara said, "Let's get back to the hotel." A.J. grabbed a rather hysterical Howie and pulled him back into the van.

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Ana stood in the medical wing watching as the nurses and the doctor examined Nick. They had removed his restraints and the silencer from his mouth. *"I want the gambit run,"* the doctor said. The nurses nodded, pulling Nick's sweat shirt off. They all cringed. *"What are those?"* the doctor asked, disgusted. Ana laughed, *"They call them tattoos. They seem to be very popular here."* *"Do they wash off?"* one of the nurses asked. Ana shook her head, *"No they are permanent. I'm sure we could come up with a way to remove them without leaving a trace, but if he has them, it means he wanted them. I don't know about you, but I'm not willing to tell him we took them off because we thought they didn't look good."* The doctor ran his fingers over the tribal band on Nick's arm, *"How barbaric. This world isn't as civilized as I believed it to be."* Ana laughed, *"I'm sure they would say that about us."*

The nurses took several vials of blood from Nick. One even cut off a small strand of his hair and took it to be tested. They moved him to a large machine and ran him through it, getting images of all his internal organs, muscles and bones. They had moved him back to the bed and had started an IV, when

Nick moaned and started to move. *"Get me a sedative. Quickly!"* the doctor instructed.

Ana moved to the side of the bed as Nick opened his eyes. She could see his fear as he quickly glanced around, realizing he was in some sort of hospital. His eyes moved to the IV in his arm, then up to the bag. The liquid was a translucent red, like nothing he'd ever seen before. "They call you Nick, right?" Ana asked. Nick looked at her for a moment, then tried to sit up. Ana and a couple of the nurses grabbed him and forced him back down. "We won't hurt you," she said, "We're trying to help you." Nick shook his head, tears streaming down his cheeks, "Let me go!" Just then the doctor appeared next to the bed with a strange looking gun like device in his hand. Nick took one look at it and screamed. "No! Please .... let me go, please!" he screamed as he tried to force his way out of the bed. The doctor grabbed Nick by the hair and held his head still as he placed the device to his neck and pulled the trigger. Nick jerked as the drug entered his body, then he collapsed unconscious.

Ana moved out of the way as they got him settled again. *"He is a feisty one,"* the doctor said, setting the device down, *"Are you sure he'll be ready by the time we arrive?"* Ana shrugged her shoulders, *"I don't know. But it's my job to at least try."* The doctor smiled at her, *"I don't envy your job. There's no telling what they've told him about us, about him."* Ana sighed, *"I get the feeling they've told him what they wanted him to believe. Convincing him of the truth may be more difficult than we thought."* *"That's why the King sent you,"* the doctor grinned, *"You're the best."* Ana laughed, heading for the door, *"Let me know when he's been taken to his quarters."* *"Yes my lady,"* the doctor said, as she left the room.

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Brian moaned, opening his eyes. Kevin was right next to him, "Bri?" Brian blinked a few times, trying to get the cobwebs in his head to clear. Then it hit him. "Nick! Kev, they took Nick!" he cried. Kevin nodded, "I know. They went after them." Tom came over, "Brian are you alright? Did they hurt you?" Brian shook his head, trying to sit up. Kevin helped him. "God, I feel like I got hit by a truck," Brian said. "That's the affects of the stun rays. You'll be back to normal in a few hours," Tom assured him. Brian looked over and saw Shane sitting up, looking much like he felt. "You OK?" he asked. Shane nodded, looking very apologetic, "I'm sorry. One second there was nothing, and the next they were right in front of me." Brian nodded, rubbing his face with his hands, "God please let them get Nick back," he mumbled.

Tamara walked into the room, in heavy conversation with someone on her cell phone. A.J. and Howie followed her in. Brian knew by the looks on their faces it wasn't good. "We lost him," A.J. said, "We

fucking lost him!" Brian put his head in his hands, beginning to cry, "No ... God no!" Howie sat down next to him, putting his arm around Brian and letting him cry on his shoulder. Tamara ended her conversation, looking at them, "The ship will be ready in the morning." Tom nodded. Kevin looked at her confused, "What ship?" "The one going to Celeste," she said, "We're going after him."

# Chapter 10

Ana walked down the corridor, her boots clanking on the metal underneath her feet. She rounded the corner to see the doctor standing outside Nick's quarters. The door was open and several guards were placing him in bed. Ana watched as the guards carefully laid him down and covered him with the blankets. Each one had a look of awe on their faces, like they couldn't believe Nick was real. One of the guards tentatively reached out and touched Nick's hair. Ana cleared her throat and they snapped to attention. She smiled at them as she entered the room, *"I understand your curiosity, but remember who he is. There are barriers you cannot cross,"* she said, glancing at the young soldier. *"Yes ma'am,"* they all said. *"You are dismissed,"* she ordered, waiting for them to clear the room before she addressed the doctor. He could barely contain his excitement as he thumbed through the results of the tests they had run on Nick.

When the door hissed closed, she looked at him, *"What did you find?"* *"I don't understand it. Medically it's not suppose to be possible, but he carries all the genes for our extra abilities,"* he beamed. Ana was shocked, *"All of them?"* The doctor nodded, *"I ran the tests several times. Each time the result was the same. He isn't the imperfect one here, we are."* Ana sat down at the small table, the doctor walking over and taking a seat across from her. *"I know that I'm a doctor and should be above this, but, do you think the prophecy is true?"* he asked. Ana shook her head, *"I don't know, but it's starting to look that way."*

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Kevin sat in a small waiting room of sorts. Brian, Howie and A.J. were seated next to him. They had left the hotel in the early morning hours and been driven to what looked like a remote abandoned military base. Looks can be deceiving. The base was alive with activity. People were running around like mad trying to get the ship ready for take off. The agents had told Henry that Nick had indeed been kidnapped and that they were taking the rest of the boys into hiding until they were able to get Nick back. Henry had somewhat freaked. He was worried about Nick, and then the reality of having to cancel the rest of their sold out tour set in. Kevin left him to it. He didn't offer any apologies, they had just left. Now they were awaiting their fate. It seems the 'higher ups' didn't like the idea of the guys going. Tamara and Tom were pleading their case for them. Both agents knew the guys wouldn't accept no for an answer, and even if they were forbidden to go, that they would find a way around it.

All four looked up as Tom came into the room. "Well? Do we go?" Brian asked. Tom nodded, "Yes, but

you have to sign waivers." "Waivers?" A.J. asked. "In case you get hurt or killed you won't sue the government," he answered. "We'll sign whatever we have to," Kevin said. "I thought you would. Listen guys, you aren't trained for this. Space travel isn't like getting on an airplane. It's hard on the body. You could get sick ... and then when we land there's always the possibility that you could get caught in the cross fire. This is going to be really dangerous," Tom warned. "We understand that, but we aren't letting them take Nicky without a fight. We have to at least try," Howie said. "Alright, someone will be in with the paperwork. And you will get a very quick briefing," Tom said. "Thanks," Kevin said, as Tom turned to leave the room. Tom just shook his head, leaving the guys to wait.

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Nick slowly opened his eyes, blinking against the brightness of the room. After a moment his eyes adjusted and he looked around. He was laying in bed, in a large, very immaculate room. All the furniture was adorned with jewels. The table and chairs on the other side of the room looked to be some sort of wood, but it shone like the sun, polished to a high shine. He continued to scan the room. There was a sitting area, and what looked like the doors to a closet and bathroom. The bed he was in was the softest, most comfortable bed he thought he'd ever been in. The sheets felt like satin, but they were warm to the touch, as was the blanket. All were a deep purple color.

Nick sat up, groaning when he did. He felt like someone had drained him of all his energy. It hurt to move. His body wanted to lay back down and sleep some more, but he ignored it. When he sat up he noticed the emblem on the bed. It was the same raven from his mark. He looked down at his wrist. His mark was glowing brightly. He sighed, knowing he now saw the world through lavender eyes. He didn't like his appearance. He knew he would never be able to sneak anywhere, to try and get away. He stuck out like a sore thumb.

He looked across the room, noticing a large drapery on the wall. Again it held the same raven as his mark. Nick forced himself to get out of bed. He was happy to see he was still wearing his sweats and t-shirt. His sweat shirt lay neatly folded in one of the chairs close to the bed. His feet hit the carpet and sank into it. It too, felt like satin under his toes, and it was heated. He slowly stood up, not trusting his legs to hold him. After a moment he carefully walked across the room to the tapestry. He touched it. It felt like crushed velvet under his fingers. He grabbed a side and pulled it back, peering behind it. There was something there, but he really couldn't tell what it was. Looking up he saw the tapestry was on a rod. He took the edge in both hands and slid it back. His breath caught in his throat as he stared out the window.

"Oh my God," he muttered, trying to catch his breath. He stared out into the nothingness of space. He tried to find a pattern in the stars, something that he could recognize, but he couldn't. He was used to looking at the stars from Earth, not from space. Everything looked different. He knew the ship had to be moving at great speeds, because the stars seemed to be moving slowly from one side of the window towards the other. Nick's heart was in his throat. How was he going to get back? Even if he found some way to escape, he could never get back to Earth on his own. Slowly the reality started to sink in. He would never see Earth, his family, the guys .... ever again. He was going to be tortured and then killed on some distant planet, alone.

His legs were shaking so badly that he just sat down where he was, right in front of the window. He couldn't take his eyes off it, even when he felt that sinking sensation in his stomach. He was scared to death, but there was no use in fighting whatever they decided to do to him. He had nowhere to run, no escape. So when the door hissed open, he didn't even glance back. He continued to cry, not even caring that someone else was witnessing him do so. "Nick, you should lay back down," Ana said, walking up to him but standing far enough away so she wouldn't seem threatening. "Why?" Nick asked, hugging his knees to his chest. Ana wasn't sure what he meant. Was he asking why he should be in bed, or why was he here at all? "Nick, I will explain everything to you, but right now you need to rest," she soothed.

Nick glanced up at her for the first time. Her appearance was different than it had been in the hotel room. Her hair was a light brown now, and her eyes were a crystal blue. She was wearing a sort of military like jump suit and boots. Her hair pulled back in a high pony tail. Nick's gaze fell on her mark. It was different than his. She stepped closer, holding her hand out, letting him get a better look. He stared at it for a moment, then held his wrist up next to it to compare. Ana smiled at his curiosity. She knew he was scared, but he also had an eagerness to learn about who he was.

Nick glanced from her wrist to his. Her mark didn't have the braided outline or the raven. It only bared the two suns, with their dazzling rays. He looked up at her, "Why are they different?" "Come, let's get you back in bed, then I will answer your questions," she urged. Nick got up and went back to the bed, crawling in and pulling the blanket over his legs as Ana propped several pillows behind him so he could sit up. Nick settled himself, then looked at her, waiting. Ana pulled one of the chairs over and sat down, "Our marks denote what place in society we are. I'm not of the royal family, so mine doesn't bare the family's crest." "Why do I feel so weak?" he asked. "We did some tests on you. The weakness is a side affect of the sedative and some of the tests," she answered. Nick looked scared again, "Tests?" Ana gave him a reassuring smile, "We needed to make sure you were healthy. That you weren't carrying some disease we have no immunity to. Also, we wanted to run some genetics tests on you. See why you are different than the rest of us."

Nick looked down at his hands. Suddenly he was ashamed of his appearance. He knew he must look like some freak to everyone. "So what now?" he asked. "What do you mean?" Ana questioned. He looked up at her, "Now that you've done your tests, what are you going to do with me?" Nick watched as the confusion on Ana's face turned to pity. "What did they tell you to make you so afraid of us?" she asked. Nick bit his lip, "That you would kill me after you found out why I'm like this." Now Ana looked shocked and angry, "We would never do such a thing. We've been searching for you for years, we would never hurt you." "You already have," Nick said under his breath. Ana watched the sadness return to his face, and tears well up in his eyes. She stood up, "I will let you rest now. We have much to discuss, your highness." Nick watched her head toward the door, "Why'd you call me that?" Ana passed her wrist over a sensor next to the door and it hissed open. She turned to face him, "You are our prince, and the only heir to the throne," she said, then moved, letting the door close between them.

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The guys sat inside their quarters. It was a small room, with only two sets of bunk beds, a small table and chairs, and a bathroom. They had been quickly briefed on the rules of the ship and were taken to their room. Brian unzipped his bag, pulling out a heavy sweat shirt and slipping it over the one he was already wearing. "I hope it's not gonna be this cold for the whole trip," he said. "Me too," A.J. said, pulling the blanket from his bunk around him. "Let's just be glad they agreed to let us come," Kevin said, noticing he could see his breath for an instant. "Yeah, they didn't have to," Howie said.

"I can't believe we are freakin' going into outer space," A.J. said. Brian laughed nervously, "Yeah, who woulda thought?" They felt the ship move and the low hum of the engines increase. "Sounds like we're on our way," Kevin said. They sat silently for several minutes as the ship lifted off and presumably headed out of Earth's atmosphere. Howie looked at them all, a worried expression on his face, "What if we're too late?" "Don't D, please," Brian begged, "We have to pray that we aren't." Kevin looked at his cousin, "Bri, you heard them. It'll take us twice as long to get there as it will them. It is a possibility." Brian shook his head, "I refuse to think that way. We're gonna get there in time, we just have to." Kevin, A.J. and Howie exchanged glances, hoping Brian was right.

# Chapter 11

Nick heard the door hiss open and turned over. He was still half asleep as he watched someone push in what looked like a room service cart. They set the table across the room, then left. He sat up, rubbing his face for a moment. Then he pulled the blankets back and stood up, walking over and sitting down. He pulled the cover from the plate in front of him, scrunching up his nose. "What the hell is this?" he asked himself, staring at the strange looking food. He picked up the fork and pushed some of it around, trying to decide if it was safe to eat. There was something that looked like scrambled eggs, but it was blue in color. Also, there was a side of some sort of meat, again the wrong color—green. Nick bit his lip, gathering some of the egg-like food on his fork and bringing it to his nose for a smell. It smelled wonderful. He hadn't realized just how hungry he was until now, but he was still afraid to taste it.

He sat his fork down and looked at the liquid in the glass in front of him. Again, not a color he would've picked to be drinking. It was almost blood red, and thick looking. Kinda like milk, only thicker. He sat there debating his plight. He could eat and calm the growling in his stomach, or he could refuse. Maybe if he refused to eat, they would take him back? Maybe not, the way his luck was running, he'd just starve to death. He felt that sinking sensation in his stomach and turned to face the door as it hissed open. Ana stepped in, "May I join you?" Nick nodded, and she walked over, taking the seat opposite him. "You aren't eating, is something wrong?" she asked. "What is it?" Nick asked, looking like a child that was being made to try something new. Ana smiled, "This would be our version of eggs and bacon, and milk." "Your milk is red?" he asked. Ana shrugged, "Yours is white, what does color have to do with it?" He looked back at his food, then up to her. "Just try it," she urged. Nick sighed, then picked his fork up and scooped a small bite onto it. He looked at her once more before he took it into his mouth. He smiled, it tasted just like his eggs and honey combination.

Ana watched him eat for several minutes. "How did you ever survive there?" she asked. Nick looked at her, "I found ways to satisfy my cravings for sweet stuff." She nodded, as he finished the last bite and pushed the plate away. Nick looked at her for a moment, "Ana, is that your real name?" "Yes, your highness it is. Ana Leigh Coland," she answered. "I wish you wouldn't call me that," Nick said, standing up and going to the window, staring out. Ana stood behind him, "I must call you that. It's who you are." Nick shook his head, "I'm Nick Carter. I'm not some prince, I'm just me." "You are our prince, and you aren't Nick Carter. Your birth name is Frederick DeGrafe the fifth," she said. Nick turned around and stared at her, "My name is Fred? Oh that's just great!" he said throwing his hands up and turning back around. Ana walked over to stand beside him, "I know this must be difficult for you, but....." "Difficult! You call this difficult?! You fucking kidnapped me and took me from everything and everyone I know and love! And to top it off you tell me my name is Fred! This is a little more than difficult!" Nick screamed.

"Your highness, I understand that you are upset. If I were in your shoes, I would feel the same way, but we don't have much time," she said. "Time for what?" Nick asked, still staring out the window. "You have to learn everything about us before we arrive on Celeste. You must learn our language, our customs, and what it is to be the heir to the throne," she said. Nick turned to face her, "Why?" "Because the King, your father, is ill. It's my job to teach you what you need to learn before we arrive, because you may have to take the throne as soon as we get there," she explained. Nick's mouth dropped open, "No, I can't. There has to be someone else." "The alternative would be a civil war," she said. Nick moved to the closest chair and sat down, putting his head in his hands. "I'm sorry you're faced with this pressure, but if you don't do this, thousands will die and our world would be in danger," Ana said. He looked up, "What do you mean the world would be in danger?" Ana took the seat next to him, "We are the peacekeepers on our side of the galaxy. The worlds around us would like nothing more than for us to be plunged into chaos so they could come in and take over. The only thing that stops them now is the fact that we are a united planet. We serve one King. If he dies with no one to assume the throne, the leaders of the various provinces will fight for power, and the other worlds will take advantage of it."

"There's no one else? The Queen can't rule on her own?" Nick asked. Ana shook her head, "We are a patriarchal society. We are ruled by a King, or King and Queen. Never by a Queen alone." "Damn, haven't you guys heard of women's lib?" Nick asked. Ana smiled, "Yes we have, but it doesn't work when you are dealing with other societies that don't recognize it." Nick sighed, "How long before we get there?" "Two weeks," she said. "Two weeks!?! I can't learn all that in two weeks!" Nick said, shocked. "You can," she said, "Most of it you were born knowing. I just have to remind you." "Ana, I can't learn a whole language in two weeks," Nick protested. "I'm sorry, but that's all the time we have," she said. "Then we're screwed," Nick muttered.

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The guys walked down the corridor, heading for the dining room. They followed several soldiers, and got in line. A.J. peered down the line, "That doesn't look like food to me." Howie elbowed him, "Be nice." "That was nice," A.J. said as he had a clump of something resembling food plopped on his tray. He smiled at the woman and headed for a table. The four sat together. They didn't know anyone, other than Tom and Tamara, and they were nowhere to be seen. "What is this?" Brian asked, poking the food with his fork. "I dunno, but just eat it," Kevin said, taking a bite and wishing he hadn't. "God that is awful," Howie said. "What happened to be nice?" A.J. teased. "It went out the window with my appetite," Howie answered, pushing his tray aside. "D you gotta eat," Kevin said, "We're gonna be here for a month, and it's probably not gonna get any better."

"At least it's not freezing anymore," Brian said. "Yeah, now it's like a sauna," A.J. retorted. "I'd rather be hot than cold any day," Brian said, wiping the sweat from his brow. A.J. laughed, "You kill me. Always looking for the bright side of things aren't you?" Brian grinned at him, "I have to. It'd be too depressing if I didn't."

"You guys up for some company?" Tamara asked. The four smiled and made room. Tamara sat down and dug right into her food. "Eww, how do you eat that?" Howie asked. "It's an acquired taste," she admitted, "But it has all your nutrients in it." "Well, nutrients suck," A.J. said, taking a bite and making an awful face to go with it. Everyone laughed. "So Agent Dawson," Kevin said, "Have you ever been to Celeste?" "Once," she said. "Only once?" Brian said. She nodded, "We don't like to go there, much like they don't like to come to Earth." "Why not?" Howie asked. "It's too bright. Their suns are intense, and we burn easily," she said. "So what can we expect when we get there?" Kevin asked. "Yeah, they have to know we're coming," A.J. added. "They do, and I'm not exactly sure," she admitted, "We hope they receive us and hear our plea to return Nick." "But you don't think that will happen do you?" Brian asked. "No I don't. That's when plan B comes into play," she said. "Plan B?" Howie asked. "We take him back by force," she said.

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"Mother," Ana prompted. Nick thought for a moment, "mère?" Ana smiled, "Yes, now father." "père," Nick said. "See you remember this," Ana encouraged. "I remember some words, that's way different than actually speaking it," Nick said. "Alright, try this. I am a prince," she said. "Ana," Nick said, sternly. "Just try it," she said. "Je suis un prince," Nick said. "You know this, you can do this," she urged. Nick sighed, "You think so?" Ana nodded, "I do. Now tell me what I'm saying. Je suis prince Frederick DeGrafe le cinquième, l'héritier au trône de Celeste." Nick shook his head and laughed, "I am prince Frederick DeGrafe the fifth, the heir to the throne of Celeste." Ana smiled.

"But how come I know all this stuff, but I didn't understand it on Earth?" he asked. "Our dialect is different than that of the French on Earth. Long ago we tried to colonize there, but found the living conditions to be intolerable. We left, but the tribes that were already there adopted our language. They speak with a different tone than we do, though for the most part, it's the same language. You needed to hear it as we speak it to understand it," she explained. Nick nodded, staring at her, "Je ferai ceci dans deux conditions." *I will do this under two conditions.* "Name them," Ana said. "One, stop calling me your highness," Nick said. "I have to call you that when we are in public," she protested. "I'll endure it in public, but when it's just us, don't," Nick said. "Alright, and two?" she asked. "Two, I want

to keep my name. I want everyone to be informed that my name is Nick, not Frederick," he insisted. "I will relay your wishes to the royal family, only they can make that decision," she said.

Nick stared at her, "OK, tell them this. I adamantly refuse to be known as Fred. If I have to adopt this life, I at least want to keep the name I grew up with." "I will tell them," she said. Nick stared out the window, "I guess it's useless to ask this, but, will I ever see Earth again?" Ana was quiet for a long time before she answered, "I have to tell you something before I answer that." Nick turned to face her, "What?" "It's how you got there. I don't know what your government told you, but I'm willing to bet it wasn't the truth," she started, "Your high.... um Nick, you were kidnapped when you were only a week old. Taken right out of the palace with no witnesses. It took us a long time to figure out where you'd been taken, and when we did, you had already been placed in the general public. It was impossible for us to locate you." "Why?" Nick asked. "Do you realize how many blonde haired blue eyed boys there are your age on that planet?" she asked. "Oh, good point," Nick said. "Your government said they would return you if we shared some our knowledge with them. We took their word in good faith, and gave them what they wanted, but you were never returned. We soon realized they never had any intentions of giving you back. They've in a sense, held you hostage all these years. They knew as long as they had you, we would cooperate with them, give them the technology they wanted," she said.

"How did they think they would get away with that?" Nick asked, angrily. "I don't know, but it worked for twenty-one years. Nick, you are more than just our prince. In some ways you are more revered than the King himself. They knew as long as they had you, we'd do anything they asked," Ana said. "What do you mean, I'm revered?" he asked, confused. "There is a prophecy. It's ages old, but it talks of a perfect Angel. One that doesn't bare our looks. It says this Angel will be our salvation in a time of need, a great king. When you were born, many thought you to be the fulfillment of that prophecy," she explained. Nick laughed, "Ana, I'm not perfect, no one is." "That's where you're wrong. You are genetically perfect. You carry every gene for our abilities. No one has ever done that," she said. Nick rubbed his face, "Abilities?" "We have certain abilities that other races don't. Some of us are lucky to have one or two, but you carry all seven," she said. Nick held his head, "God, I'm getting a headache. This is too much Ana. You can't just dump all this on me and expect me to just accept it. I have seven extra abilities? How come I haven't noticed them by now?" "Because you have to be taught how to use them, and only an Angel with that ability can teach you," she said.

Nick sat up and looked at her, "Is sensing other Angels one of them?" "Yes," she said. "Then how come I can do that? No one taught me how," he asked. "Because I possess that ability as well. When you saw me at the meet and greet, something in you clicked, am I right?" she asked. He nodded, "Yeah, it did. I knew it was you that was making me feel that way." "When I say teach, it's a little different than what you understand teach to be. Sometimes, if the genes are strong, which yours obviously are, all it takes is to be in the vicinity of someone with that same ability for it to click. Albeit, you'll have to learn how to

fine tune it, and to control some of them, they may just click like you did with me," Ana said. "Is that why you're keeping me in here away from the others?" he asked. "Yes. We don't want to overwhelm you," she answered. Nick laughed, "I think it's a little late for that."

Ana studied his face for a moment, "You're tired?" Nick nodded, "Yeah, why is that? I just got up a few hours ago." "First time in space will do that to you. It's like jet lag sort of. Go ahead and rest, we will continue later," she said, standing to go. Nick walked over to the bed as she headed for the door, "Ana?" She turned around, "Yes Nick?" "Merci de me dire la vérité." *Thank you for telling me the truth*, Nick said. She smiled, relieved he had accepted it, "You're welcome."

## Chapter 12

Nick jerked awake, sitting straight up in bed. He tried to calm his breathing as he rubbed his face. He couldn't remember the nightmare, but the feeling it left him with was unnerving. His skin was crawling. He slid out of bed and walked over to what he thought was a closet. He wanted to get a shower and get out of the clothes he'd been wearing since he was taken. He wasn't sure exactly how long he'd been gone. There was no clock in the room, and he wasn't even sure if it was day or night. He ran his hands over the door for a moment, trying to figure out how to open it. Then he remembered that Ana had passed her mark over a sensor to open the door to his room. He looked along the sides of the door, smiling when he found it. He passed his wrist across it and the door hissed open, revealing a closet full of clothes. Nick stepped in and looked through them. Most of them he wouldn't wear on a bet. They reminded him of something out of the King Arthur movies, tights with a shirt that hung down past his rear. He quickly passed those up. There was no way he was wearing tights. He dug to the back of the closet finding a jumpsuit like the one Ana was wearing. His was a bit more frilly than hers. Of course it bared the raven on it, and it had gold piping down the legs, but it was better than tights, so he grabbed it. He managed to find some boxer briefs, socks, and a t-shirt in one of the chests. He didn't know if everyone wore these, or if they just got them for him, but he didn't care. Right now, anything that he was used to, was welcome.

He took the pile of clothes and headed over to the bathroom. He'd been in here a couple of times, but only to do his business. He hadn't really looked around. To say it was opulent would be an understatement. The floor looked like marble, and you could've fit ten people in the tub. He sat his clothes down on a dressing table and went in search of some towels. When he found those he went over and investigated the shower. It didn't look like any shower he'd ever seen. There were knobs and switches. It looked more like the cockpit of a plane than it did a shower. He bit his lip, wondering what to do. After a few minutes he was no closer to figuring the thing out, and getting angry with himself. He finally walked out of the bathroom and over to the door. As he approached he could tell there were two guards standing outside. He passed his wrist over the sensor and the door opened, surprising them. Nick smiled shyly, "Um could one of you help me?" The guards looked at one another, and Nick realized they didn't understand him. "*Could one of you help me?*" he asked again. The older of the two stepped forward, "*What can I do for you?*" "*Can you show me how to work the shower?*" Nick asked, completely embarrassed. The guard smiled, "*Yes your highness, follow me.*"

After a minute or so of explanation, the guard left and Nick stripped down and got in the shower. The water was exactly the right temperature, and he sighed, letting it undo some of the tension in his muscles. As he soaped up he noticed a few bruises on his arm and stomach. He assumed they were either from him struggling or from some of the tests they had done. He washed his hair and face, and

then just stood there. It felt to good to get out, so he indulged. He was waiting for the water to get cold, but it never did. He finally decided to get out, rinsing his hair once more then turning off the water. He stepped out and dried off, then dressed.

After he dressed, he walked over to the sink. Everything he needed had been laid out for him. He quickly glanced into the room, wondering who had come in and done it. No one was there, so he stepped back into the bathroom. He shaved and brushed his teeth, then fixed his hair. It was to short to do much of anything with, but spike it, so he did. When he finished he stepped out, noticing a pair of boots setting next to the bed. "OK those weren't there before either," he said, looking around. This was starting to weird him out a little. Mostly because he wasn't sensing anyone coming or going. The items just seemed to appear out of thin air. Nick took one more look around, then walked over and started putting on the boots. They laced up to about mid-calf, so he tucked his pants legs into them. He thought he remembered that was how Ana had worn them. When he was done, he went back over to the door and opened it. The guards turned to him. *"Is it day or night?"* he asked. *"Morning, your highness,"* one of the men answered. Nick smiled, *"Good, please tell Ana that I'd like to see her."*

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Brian stepped out of the bathroom with his towel wrapped around him, his teeth chattering. "Oh no, please don't tell me," A.J. whined. "N-n-no hotttt waterrr," Brian stuttered. A.J. sighed, "I told you not to tell me Rok." "S-sorry," he said, quickly putting his clothes on, trying to get warm. Howie sat up in his bunk, "I wonder if their ship is like this one." "What do ya mean?" Kevin asked. "Well, everything on this bucket is falling apart. Sometimes things work and sometimes they don't, I just wonder what kind of shape their ships are in," Howie said. "For Nick's sake, I hope it's much better than this," Brian said. "I'm sure it is," Kevin agreed.

"So what are we doing today?" A.J. asked, "I can't just sit in this room for a month. I'll go nuts." "I hear ya," Kevin said, standing up, "I was thinking of asking Agent Dawson if they could give us jobs." "Jobs?" Howie asked. "Yeah jobs," Kevin retorted, "We've gotta do something to pull our own weight around here. You guys saw how the soldiers were looking at us. I think they think we're here for a free ride." "Aren't we?" A.J. asked. Kevin glared at him, "No! We're here to help get Nick back, but until then we've gotta contribute something to the upkeep of this ship." The three stared at him for a moment. "You're right Kev," Brian said. A.J. elbowed him, "You're only agreeing with him because he's your cousin." "No, I'm agreeing because he's right. Those soldiers aren't gonna protect us if we don't show them we aren't some spoiled pop stars hitching a ride. We gotta help out and earn their respect if we want them to save our asses if it comes down to that," Brian said.

"Good point," Howie said. "Yeah, I guess I never thought about it that way," A.J. said. "Fine, so its agreed then?" Kevin asked, "We all get a job until we reach Celeste." The three agreed, somewhat reluctantly, but they agreed. "Good," Kevin said, "I'll go see Agent Dawson and get things going."

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Ana stepped into Nick's room, "You asked to see me?" Nick turned around from the window and smiled. Ana was still in a jumpsuit, although this one was a different color. Her hair was down and fell to the middle of her back in ringlets. Nick felt his heart skip a beat, she was so pretty. Why hadn't he noticed that before? Probably because he was so scared to before. Ana stared at him, "Your highness?" "I thought we agreed you weren't gonna call me that," Nick said. Ana blushed, "Sorry, I forgot." That made Nick smile even more, "It's forgiven. I want to look around the ship, I'm tired of being in here." "Nick, I'm not sure that's a good idea," she said. "Please Ana, I feel like a caged animal. Just for a walk, we don't have to stop and talk to anyone," he pleaded. Ana sighed, looking at him, "You know, pouting isn't a good quality for a royal. It demeans you." Nick just stared at her, giving her his best puppy dog look. He didn't know how effective it would be, knowing the lavender eyes probably took some of the edge off. Ana groaned, "OK, OK, stop that." Nick smiled, "It may be demeaning, but it works." She laughed, shaking her head.

The two stepped out of the room. The guards looked at Ana questionally. "*His highness wishes to look around the ship,*" she told them. They both nodded, following along. "Are they gonna follow us the whole time?" Nick asked. Ana looked up at him, "They are your royal guards. Where you go, they do too." "Oh ... I guess I'm used to that. I've had a bodyguard since I was twelve," he said, looking around. Ana stayed quiet, watching him. He seemed fascinated with everything. Nick stopped, peering through a window into a large docking bay. "Wow, how many of those are on the ship?" he asked. "We have three docking bays. This one is the smallest of the three," she answered. "Can we go in there? Those ships are cool," he asked excitedly. "Yes," Ana said, leading him to the door and going through.

Nick walked into the bay, his mouth slightly open in awe. There were four small ships in the bay. Each looked like it would hold twenty people. Nick walked along the hull of the closest ship, letting his hand slide down the metal. He was so enthralled with the ship, that he didn't notice the mechanics and flight crews that were in the bay. They all stared at him wide eyed, and when Nick approached them, they all bowed. The movement caught Nick's attention, and he looked over, then back to Ana, "What are they doing?" "You are the prince, they are showing you respect by bowing," she answered. "Um, can I tell them to stand up, it's kinda freaking me out," he said. Ana stifled a laugh, "Yes you can." Nick looked at

them, *"Please, stand up."* Slowly they stood up, still staring at Nick in awe. Nick smiled at them, then went back to looking at the ship. "Can I go in?" he asked. Ana gestured toward the ramp, and Nick walked up. He was trying not to seem too excited, but he couldn't help it. He'd never seen anything like this in his life, and it was just .... too cool.

He walked from the back of the ship to the front, looking at everything. He ended up in the cockpit and sat down in the captain's chair, peering through the windshield into the docking bay. "I gotta learn how to fly one of these," he said. Ana grinned, "Alright, but not today." Nick laughed, "I didn't mean right this instant." Ana nodded as he got up and exited the ship. The workers were still in the same places they had been when Nick went in the ship. They were whispering excitedly amongst themselves, but when Nick came down the ramp, they quieted down. "Ana, am I suppose to dismiss them or something?" he asked. "No your highness, they are just curious. You are like a legend to most of us, and seeing you in real life is a bit overwhelming," she explained. "Oh," Nick said, heading toward the door they had come in. When he reached it he turned around, *"Thanks for letting me look around."* The crew glanced at each other in awe for a moment, then one of them stepped forward, *"You're welcome your highness."* Nick smiled, then left the bay.

"Ana, why are were they so shocked?" he asked. "Because you said something to them that wasn't an order," she said. He looked at her, "Was I not suppose to?" "Well, it's rare for a royal to address anyone in a lower class than they are without it being an order," she said. "Well that's stupid," Nick said, continuing down the corridor, "People are people, it doesn't matter what class your in." Ana laughed, "If only more of your family thought that way."

They turned the corner and Nick stopped dead in his tracks, "Whoa!" "This is the garden," Ana said. Nick stared at the vast forest in front of him. There were trees. Yes trees, growing in the middle of the ship. "How did you ...." Nick asked, too curious to finish his own question. Ana watched as he stepped into the vegetation and looked at the leaves and flowers around him. "This is beautiful," he finally said. "We like it," Ana said, walking up next to him, "We have them on all our X class ships. It helps on long trips to come here. It reminds us of home, and helps tremendously with morale." "I bet," Nick said, walking along the path, gawking at everything he passed. "How big is this?" he asked. "It covers almost half of this section of the ship," she answered. Nick walked down the path until it left the trees and opened up into a meadow of sorts. There was the flower from his dreams. The entire meadow was filled with them. He reached down and picked one, bringing it up to smell. "I've dreamed of these my whole life," he said, looking back at Ana. She smiled, "It is the flower of the royal family. It's called...." "Tsar's Might," Nick said, "The agents told me." Ana nodded, "At least they got something right."

Nick laughed, walking back over to her, "You don't like them do you?" "Not really," she admitted, "Any world that would do what Earth did doesn't deserve to be liked." He looked at her seriously, "Ana, there are good people there. Don't hold what a few did on all of them. The majority of the world doesn't even know there is life on other planets yet." She looked at him shocked, "You're kidding?" "No, I'm not. I only found out a few weeks ago, when they told me I wasn't human," he said. Now she was even more shocked, "You thought you were human?" He nodded, "Yes I did. Why do you look so angry?" "They told us you knew who you were," she said. "When did they say that?" Nick asked. "A few years ago. We sent delegates for an inter-galactical meeting. While they were there, they asked about you. Your government said that you were fully aware of who you were and that you had no desire to meet with them," she said. "Son of a bitch," Nick said, angrily. "Now you see why we dislike them," Ana said. "I'm beginning to," Nick said, turning his attention to the flower in his hand. He raised it up to smell its fragrance once more, then offered it to her. Ana stepped back, "I cannot." "Why?" Nick asked. "Nick, the royals present this flower to those they are courting. Whether it be dignitaries from another planet, or those they wish to date, I am neither, so I cannot take it," she said. "Oh," Nick said, disappointed, "I didn't know."

"Shall we continue?" she asked. He nodded, following her down the path, still carrying the flower. They came upon a young mother and her toddler. The child was playing in the grass as the mother read a book. She hadn't noticed Nick, as she continued to read. Nick leaned close to Ana, "Can I give the flower to the child?" "It would be a great honor to the family if you did," she said. He nodded, walking up to the two. Nick sat down next to the child and smiled at her, "*What you making?*" The child stared at him with her crystal blue eyes, "*A house.*" "*Oh that's a good house,*" Nick said. By this time the mother had noticed him and was down on her knees bowing to him. "*Please, get up,*" Nick said, smiling at her. The woman stood up and watched as Nick played with her daughter for a moment. "*I know what'll make this the best house ever,*" Nick said. "*What?*" the young girl asked. Nick sat the flower right in the middle of the stick house, "*There ya go.*" The little girl's mouth dropped open in surprise and she jumped up and hugged him so tight he couldn't breathe for a moment. "*Thank you,*" she said. Nick smiled at her as he got up, "*You're welcome little one.*"

Nick nodded to the mother, then headed down the path, Ana and the guards following. Ana caught up to him, "You have a way with children." Nick laughed, "I like kids. They just tell ya how it is ya know? No prejudices or preconceived notions of how you're suppose to be. Besides the majority of my fans are young, like her." "Most of your fans are three?" Ana asked. Nick looked at her, "There is no way she was three! Five, six maybe but not three." "She was three, I know the family. You must remember our children are a bit more advanced than those of Earth," she said. "I'm trying," Nick said, "There's just so much stuff I don't know yet." "Which is why we should be working," Ana prompted. Nick laughed, "Alright, we'll go back to my room." Ana chuckled, "Yes, I think you've touched enough lives for today. I can hear the stories already."

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Kevin returned to the room with Tom. "So, we got jobs?" Brian asked. "Yup," Kevin said. Tom took out a list, "OK, Howie and Kevin, you'll be working in the kitchen. Brian, you're assigned to maintenance. And A.J. you're with the cleaning crew." "Wait, isn't maintenance the cleaning crew?" A.J. asked. "No, maintenance in the docking bays. Brian's gonna be working on the transports," he answered. "Oh cool!" Brian said, grinning. "So what exactly am I gonna be doing?" A.J. asked. "Cleaning crew," Tom said, like he should know what that means, "You know, the floors, the bathrooms." "Ohh no!" A.J. protested, "How come I get that, and they get kitchen and mechanic?" "J we pulled our names out of a hat," Kevin said, "It could've been any of us." A.J. glared at him, "Why don't I believe you?" "I'll trade if you want J. I can clean toilets with the best of them," Brian said. A.J. rolled his eyes and sighed, "No, it's fine Rok. If that's what I got, I'll deal." "Good," Tom said, "Here are your assignments and who to report to," he said, handing them each a slip of paper. "When do we start?" Howie asked. "Right now," Tom said. The four followed Tom out of their quarters and down the hall. "Hey D, see what you can do with that crap they call food, will ya," A.J. called as he turned down a different hall. Howie laughed, "I'll try."

# Chapter 13

Nick stared at the map in front of him, "Mardica?" Ana shook her head, "No, this is Mardica, this is Novaduel." Nick sighed in frustration, "I'm never gonna get this." "You will, we just have to work on it some more," she said, going over to a cabinet and pulling out a little machine. "Maybe this will help," she said, setting it on the table and turning it on. Suddenly a hologram appeared in front of him. He was looking at a mountain region. "This is Mardica, our second largest province," Ana narrated, "It contains our mountainous region. There are four major cities, with smaller ones scattered throughout the mountains." The hologram changed to a beautiful city. "Gold Creek is the capital of Mardica. There are around two million inhabitants, not counting the smaller cities on the outskirts," she went on. "Damn," Nick said, utterly fascinated with the architecture and how everything looked brand new, even though it was ages old.

"Name the other cities," Ana prompted. "Um, White Cap," Nick said, as he said it the hologram changed to picture that city, "Nile's Pass and Tumacer?" Ana smiled, "See this isn't that hard." Nick laughed, "Geography isn't my strong point. I'm gonna screw this up." "You'll do fine, besides I'll be with you for a while after we land," she encouraged. "You will?" Nick asked, surprised and hopeful at the same time. "Yes, the royal family asked me to stay on and continue your lessons once we reach Celeste. They know you feel more comfortable speaking English, and I'm one of the few that speak it fluently enough to teach you," she explained.

"Oh, I did notice the guards couldn't understand me. I didn't realize that none of you could," he said. "We learn it as children, but it's like most things. If you don't use it, you lose it. Some may be able to pick up a word here and there, but not enough to really understand you," she said. "Then how come you can speak it so well?" Nick asked. "I was chosen to be an ambassador to Earth when I was younger. Whenever a need arises for us to go there, I go along as a representative for our planet. Although, lately there's been no reason to go, except to look for you," she said. "Why not?" he asked. "We aren't sure. We monitor all their communications, but something hasn't been right for a couple of years now. We were never on what you would call friendly terms, but we could tolerate each other. But recently it seems we can't do that anymore either. Our intelligence division has been looking into it, but I think they're ready to cut ties with us altogether. Kinda like, they got what they want from us, now go away, type of attitude," she said. "Would that be a bad thing? Cutting ties?" Nick asked, surprising even himself with the question. "Depends on who you ask," she said, "Some of the royal family would like nothing more than for them to drop out of existence, but others want to keep the communication open." "Like who?" Nick asked. "Your uncle for one," she said.

"Uncle?" Nick asked. Ana punched a few buttons on the hologram machine and suddenly a man was standing in front of Nick. He was tall and very muscled. He had the same light brown hair and crystal blue eyes that everyone else had, but bore a scar on his left cheek. "This is Count Mason DeGrafe, your uncle and the King's brother. He rules Novaduel," she said. "Wait, isn't the palace in Novaduel?" Nick asked. "Yes, but each province is ruled by a Count. The Count's make up the royal council to the King," she answered. "Oh OK," he said, "So why's he so gung ho on Earth?" "That's the million dofe question," she said. Nick looked confused, "Dofe?" Ana thought for a moment, "Um like your dollar. Its our currency." "Ohh, OK," he said. "Now back to the lesson," Ana urged, "Name the cities in Aqualystine."

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A.J. dragged into the cafeteria. He was exhausted, dirty, and starving. He didn't care if he did have to eat the same old crappy food, he was hungry enough to enjoy it. He grabbed a tray and slid through the line. The place was almost empty, only the kitchen workers and some of the maintenance crew remained. Everyone else had eaten and gone already. "J, over here!" Howie called. A.J. walked across the room and sat down with him and Kevin. "So how was your first day?" Kevin asked. A.J. shook his head, "God man, I'll never take maid service for granted again." "That good huh?" Howie laughed. "I don't understand what women do in a bathroom to get it that nasty. I thought guys were suppose to be the nasty ones," A.J. said.

"Well, at least you don't see this stuff before it's cooked," Howie said, "I don't think God himself could turn this into something edible." A.J. laughed, "So where's Bri?" "Dunno, haven't seen him yet," Kevin said. "I bet he's having a great time working on those transports," Howie said, "He always had this desire to work on stuff." Kevin looked over, "He did?" "Yeah, told me a long time ago that he found it interesting to take things apart and see what made them run," Howie answered. "You sure that was Brian? I thought that was Nick," A.J. said. "Pretty sure," Howie said, "Although .... hell I dunno. Those two were always doing stuff together, maybe it was Nick." The three got quiet for a moment. "Kev, you think Bri is OK? I mean they were so close and all," Howie said. "I'm sure he's worried, but he seems OK," Kevin answered. A.J. looked towards the door as several men walked in. "Oh my God," he said, laughing. Kevin and Howie turned to look.

Brian came in last, covered from head to toe in black grease. The only thing visible on his face were his eyes through the black mess. Brian bypassed the food and came over, plopping down next to A.J. "What the hell happened to you?" he asked. "Initiation, I think," he replied, "One minute I'm standing under a transport holding an oil pan, the next I'm swimming in the stuff." A.J. grinned, "Yup, I'm really glad we didn't switch." Brian laughed, "Yeah, I bet you are. So what's for supper?" "Only God knows,"

Kevin said. Brian looked at it for a moment, "Um I'm not sure even He knows."

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Nick wandered the halls of the ship. Ana had left about an hour ago, and he was bored. He started off with the guards, but lost them. *Lane could teach them a few things about not getting dumped*, he thought. His only problem now was that he was completely lost. He kept thinking that he would run into someone, but he didn't. It seemed as if the entire ship was deserted. He had gone down a few levels, then back up, but now he wasn't sure if he needed to go back down, or up to get back to his quarters. "Damn it," he muttered, running into another dead end, "Do you know what it feels like to be a rat in a maze? Yes I think I do," he laughed.

He came to a corner and stopped. He felt someone close, just around the corner. He heard crying, and realized it was a child. He rounded the corner to see the little girl that he had given the flower to earlier in the day. He peered down the hall, wondering where her mother was. Maybe she was lost too? He carefully walked up beside her and sat down, "*What's wrong little one?*" The child looked up at him, her iridescent tears sliding down her cheeks, "*Everyone made fun of me.*" "Why?" Nick asked. "*They said I made up the story of you giving me the flower. I thought they were my friends, but they didn't believe me,*" she cried. Nick opened his arms and the little girl climbed into his lap. He gently rocked her as she cried into his shirt, "*You know what? Sometimes friends make fun of you because they love you. My best friends in the whole universe always made fun of me. I knew they loved me though, and that was kinda their way of telling me.*" She looked up at him, "*That's a stupid way to tell someone you love them.*" Nick laughed, "*Yeah it is, but sometimes it's easier to make fun than to really say what's in your heart.*"

Nick held the child as she cried. After a few moments she settled down. It still fascinated Nick that such intelligent speech was coming from a three year old. Nick patted her back, "*Where are your friends now?*" "*Everyone is eating,*" she replied. "*So that's where everyone is,*" Nick said, "*I hate to admit it, but I'm lost. Can you take me where everyone is?*" The little girl nodded. Nick stood up, still holding her, "*Point the way. Oh and this way your friends will see that you told the truth.*" The child smiled, staring at his eyes. "*Why aren't you like us?*" she asked. Out of the mouths of babes. Nick laughed, "*I don't know. I guess God decided to make me different.*" The child looked at him in awe, "*You know God?!*" He shook his head, "*Not personally no.*" "Oh," she said, sounding disappointed.

The child lead him down hall after hall, finally reaching the door to where everyone was suppose to be.

Nick waved his wrist over the sensor and the door slid open. He stepped inside and took in the scene. Families were seated together, laughing and talking. The room was bigger than the docking bay he'd been in earlier, and filled to the brim with people. The aroma of the food made his stomach growl. *"This is where you eat?"* he asked the girl. She nodded, *"Everyone eats here .... but you."* Nick let that sink in for a moment. Somehow being a royal had it's own limitations. Why was it so bad for him to mingle with those of the lower classes? He didn't know, and he didn't care. *"Where's your mommy?"* he asked. The child scanned the room, pointing, *"There."* Nick followed her gaze and found the woman he'd seen earlier at a table with an older child and a man, presumably her husband.

He headed that way, still carrying the little girl. As he walked through the room, he noticed all conversation had stopped. He didn't want to look behind him, because he knew what he'd see. He glanced, yup, everyone on their knees. That was another thing he didn't care for, and would never get used to. He walked up to the table and smiled, *"Hi again, you can get up."* The woman and man stood up, looking at him in awe. Nick felt embarrassed, although he wasn't sure why. *"Mommy, can the Prince stay for supper?"* the little girl asked, happy to still be in Nick's arms with no plans to leave. *"Krista, I'm sure the Prince has other things to do,"* the mother said. *"Um, actually I don't,"* Nick said, *"Would it be alright if I stayed?"* *"Please mommy???"* Krista begged. The man stepped up. Nick noticed the healing gash on his cheek and recognized him as one of the men that he fought with in the hotel. *"We would be honored if you sat at our table your highness,"* he said. Nick smiled at him, as the mother took the child from his arms, *"Thanks, and I'm sorry about that,"* he said, gesturing to the man's cheek.

The man smiled, *"It's a badge of honor. Who else can say the Prince gave him a scar?"* Nick laughed, sitting down with them. Then he remembered the rest of the room. *"Please, everyone stand up. Don't let me interrupt your meals,"* he called. An excited buzz went through the room as people got up and sat back down at their tables. Nick knew all eyes were on him. He was used to being the center of attention, just not in this way. He and the soldier struck up a conversation, and before long were comfortable with each other. Nick was sure to include the man's wife and children in the topic of conversation, not wanting anyone to feel left out. They ate, and got to know each other, as much as a soldier can get to know a Prince.

*"So you guys always bring your families with you?"* Nick asked. *"Yes, on long trips we do,"* the soldier answered. *"Isn't it dangerous? I mean aren't you afraid they could get hurt?"* he asked. The man smiled, *"We haven't met a world yet we couldn't handle."* Nick laughed, *"I see."* *"Please, tell us about Earth,"* the older child asked. Nick smiled, *"Earth is wonderful. There are lots of different places, and different people. It's interesting to go to the next city and see what the people and the land is like. I miss it, a lot."* Nick looked down at his hands for a moment, then back up to the family, *"Well I should go, let you guys get on with your dinner."* *"You are welcome to stay,"* the man said, seeing the sadness in Nick's eyes. *"No, thank you. I just remembered that I do have something that I need to do,"* he said, standing up. He

sighed as he walked over to Krista, *"Now don't let your friends tease you anymore, OK?"* She nodded, reaching up and hugging him. Nick returned the hug, and turned to leave. *"Oh, can you tell me how to get back to my room?"* he asked sheepishly, *"It's a big ship, and I haven't learned where everything is yet."* The man smiled and gave him directions. Nick thanked him once more and quickly left the room. He made it as far as the elevator before he felt the tears on his cheeks. He punched the button for his level and looked up at the ceiling, "I just want to go home."

# Chapter 14

Ana walked as fast as she could down the corridor. She could see the guards outside Nick's room, pacing nervously. *"What is it?"* she asked, as she approached them. *"His highness, he's refusing to eat, and he won't get out of bed,"* one of the guards said. *"Since when?"* she asked. *"He came back from his walk last night, very upset. He didn't eat supper and now he's refusing to eat breakfast,"* the other guard answered. *"What happened? Did someone upset him?"* she asked. The guards glanced at one another, the older finally biting the bullet. *"We don't know. He ditched us a few minutes into the walk. He was gone for quite some time before he made it back,"* he replied. Ana put her hand on her hip and raised her eyebrows, *"He ditched you? Can you explain how he did that?"* *"I apologize my lady. I don't know how he did it, one second he was in front of us, and the next he was gone,"* the elder guard said. Ana sighed, trying to calm down. Royal guards weren't supposed to be this stupid. *"I advise you to look into the situation and make sure it doesn't happen again,"* she said, passing her wrist over the door sensor and walking into Nick's room.

She was met with total darkness. Apparently Nick figured out how to work the lights, and had turned them off completely. The only light in the room was from the stars passing by outside the window. Ana blinked a few times, trying to make her eyes adjust. One thing Angels didn't have was good night vision. She finally was able to make out Nick's silhouette lying in bed. He was facing the window, the blankets pulled up to his chin. She took a step forward, "Nick?" He didn't answer her, instead he kept his gaze on the window. Ana moved closer, still not able to see very well. *"Lights, up,"* she said. The lights came on and started to brighten. *"Lights dim,"* she said, seeing Nick wince. The lights dimmed, to something resembling twilight. Ana stared at Nick. She wasn't used to seeing him like this. His blue eyes were red and puffy from a night of crying, and his blonde hair was sticking out in all directions. The sadness on his face made her heart hurt. She walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge, "What happened?"

Nick glanced at her and shook his head. "Please, tell me," she begged. He didn't move, his gaze still planted on the passing stars, "I miss home," he whispered. Ana watched as a tear slid down his cheek. He made no attempt to wipe it off. "Nick, I'm sorry," she said, suddenly feeling very guilty for his condition. "I just .... I wish I'd known the truth. Maybe had time to tell my friends and family goodbye .... something," he said, his voice breaking. "I'm truly sorry. I know you miss them," she said, "But what brought this on? I thought you were OK with this." "I went to the dining room last night. There were all these families and friends sitting with each other, laughing and having a good time. It just kinda hit me. I miss my brother and sisters, my mom and dad, and the guys ....." he answered, burying his face in the pillow. Ana reached out and ran her hand through his hair, trying to comfort him as he sobbed. If she had done this in public, she would be severely punished. But Nick didn't know it was against the rules, and right now she didn't care. Her breath caught in her throat as she felt the heat radiating from his

body.

"Nick, are you not feeling well?" she asked. He shook his head. "Tell me," she said, as he glanced at her. "I'm tired, and my head hurts ... but I think it's from crying," he admitted. She shook her head, "I don't think so. You have a fever." Nick pulled his arm out from under the blanket to feel his own forehead and gasped. His arm was covered in little blue whelps. "What the hell?" he asked, sitting up and pushing the blanket off him. Everywhere he looked, he had the blue whelps. "Ana, what is this?!" he asked, alarmed. She held his arm, looking at the offending little bumps, "Oh no." Nick didn't like the sound of that, "Ana?" She got up and headed to the door, stepping out and giving the guards some orders, then coming back in. Nick looked at her with wide eyes, "Ana, what is it?!" "It's OK," she said, coming back over, "It's like your chicken pox. I never even thought that you weren't immune yet. We all get this when we're young." Nick pulled his shirt up and looked at his stomach, "Oh this is just great! I look like a freakin smurf threw up on me!" "Smurf?" Ana asked. He looked at her, "Yeah, um 80's cartoon, little blue men, ya know, papa smurf, brainy smurf?" She laughed, "Oh do remember seeing something about that." "Oh God, now it itches," he whined, starting to scratch. Ana grabbed his hands, "Don't, it'll only make it worse. The doc is on his way." "How long will this last?" he asked. "In children only a few days, I'm not sure in adults," she answered.

Nick lay back in bed, Ana still gripping his hands. He sighed, taking comfort in her touch. Suddenly she realized she was still holding them, and let go, much to Nick's disappointment. He immediately started to scratch, and she grabbed them again, "I said don't." He smiled sheepishly, "Sorry, I can't help it." Moments passed with them staring at each other. Where was that doctor? "Nick, I noticed you mentioned God. Do you know Him?" Ana asked. He laughed, "That's what Krista asked me last night. I don't know Him personally, but something tells me your God and mine are different." "Could be," she said, "We know of God as our creator. The one that made the universe and the worlds, and us." Nick nodded, "So is mine, but why do you ask me if I know Him?" "We believe God to be a person, among us. And we don't mention him in normal conversation, He's too revered to," she said. "Oh, so when I do, you think I really know Him," Nick said. She nodded. "Those are expressions humans have. We have sayings, like when we're surprised or shocked or scared we might say, 'Oh my God!' or 'Oh God!' There's expressions for when you're angry or frustrated too, like 'God damnit'," he explained. Ana was blushing, "Oh I understand now." Nick blushed too, "Sorry, I was just explaining." "I know," she said, laughing. Nick smiled, "I'll have to be careful what I say, huh?" "Yes, I think if the queen heard that she'd faint," she said.

"Ana, the King and Queen are my birth parents, right?" he asked. She nodded. "Can I see them? What they look like?" he asked. Ana smiled, letting his hands go and grabbing the hologram machine from the table, bringing it over. She punched a few buttons and suddenly they were both standing in front of him. Nick studied them, finding himself in both their reflections. The King was tall, muscled. Nick had his

cheek bones and height. The Queen was shorter with long curly hair. Nick found his smile in hers, and the kindness that shown through her eyes, matched his own. "What are they like?" he asked. Ana smiled, "They are like you. Kind and gentle, and always fair. They have been very good for Celeste." "What's her name?" Nick asked, staring at his mother. "LaDonna," she answered. "Was she born into the royal family too?" he asked. Ana shook her head, "She was a member of the high class. It is permitted for royals to marry into that class, but rarely done." "Are you in that class?" Nick asked, blushing as soon as the words left his mouth. Ana blushed too, looking down, "No I'm not. I'm a few classes below." Nick sighed, staring to scratch again, "I'm never gonna get this class thing. How come there's classes anyway? Earth did away with that ages ago." Ana opened her mouth to answer, when the door hissed open and the doctor and a couple nurses came in.

Nick looked over at them, seeing the look on his face when he saw his arms. It was one of surprise and humor. This wasn't funny! Just because Nick was blue from his neck down, and itching profusely was no reason to laugh. Ana moved so the doctor and nurses could examine Nick and administer some well needed anti-itch medication. *"Doc, how long am I gonna look like this?"* Nick asked. *"Should only be a few days, unless you have the stronger virus,"* he answered. *"Stronger virus?"* Nick asked. The doctor nodded, *"Yes, there are two versions of this virus. The more common one, is the one the children get. But you could have the stronger version. If you do, it's more serious."* *"Like how much more serious?"* he asked. *"There have been some that have died from it,"* he answered. Nick looked at Ana, concern in his eyes. *"How will we know if he has this stronger virus?"* she asked. *"If he gets red whelps on the palms of his hands, he has it,"* the doctor explained. Nick looked at his palms, all clear. He breathed a sigh of relief. *"Your highness, it may take a while for the marks to show up. I will leave someone here to monitor you. If the marks appear, we will move you to the medical wing,"* the doctor said. *"I will stay,"* Ana told him. The doctor smiled and nodded, *"Let me know if you need anything,"* he said, leaving the room.

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Kevin finished washing the last of the breakfast dishes and dried his hands, walking over to Howie. "What are you doing?" he asked. "Trying to make this crap edible," Howie answered, as he dashed a few more spices into the mystery meal of the day. "Well don't let the 'chef' see you doing that, you'll get in trouble," Kevin warned. Howie laughed, "It'd be worth it if this stuff would actually taste like food."

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A.J. smiled, looking down at his freshly mopped, and shining floor. It looked clean enough to eat off of. He picked up his mop bucket and started to head to the next hall, when several soldiers marched through. Each of them glared at him as they passed, leaving a trail of dirty floor after them. A.J. sat his bucket down and stared at the boot tracked floor. "Dirty sons of bitches," he muttered, slamming the mop back down in the bucket and starting all over again.

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Brian stood below one of the transports, handing tools up to Bert, the chief mechanic. He knew Bert wasn't very happy that he was there. He could hear him muttering as he worked. "Hand me the 9/16ths conduit," Bert said. Brian looked down at the tools in front of him, "Um which one is that?" Bert stuck his head up from the engine and glared at him, "That one, by your hand." Brian picked it up and handed it to him. "You don't belong here, squirt," the man said. "I know that, but I'm trying to help. And don't call me squirt, my name's Brian," he said. Bert stared at him for a moment, "Spunky little squirt aren't cha? We might have some use for you yet," he laughed. Brian wasn't sure he liked the sound of that.

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Ana and Nick had spent the day in his room, going over lessons. They would work for a while, then Nick would sleep for a while. He had completely broken out in blue whelps, even getting a few on his face, and they itched like hell. Ana was constantly reminding him not to scratch, and Nick was constantly forgetting. Nick lay back in bed and shut his eyes. "Are you tired again?" she asked. He nodded his head, "My head hurts worse too." "I can call the doc and get you something stronger for it," she offered. He shook his head, bringing his hand up to run through his hair, and stopping in mid gesture. Ana watched as the color drained from his face, and he started to look panicked. "What is it?" she asked. Nick stared up at her and turned his hand around so she could see his palm. Several red whelps covered it. "Oh my," she said, "I'll call the doctor." Nick let his hand drop to his side and sighed, "Yeah, that's a good idea."

## Chapter 15

Nick settled himself in bed. He was back in the medical wing. The nurses were hooking him up to some sort of IV as the doctor examined him. Ana stood back, giving them room, but she was never far away. Nick sighed, looking around. He thought this looked like the same room he woke up in when he was first taken, but he wasn't for sure. All hospital rooms on Earth looked the same, so maybe they did here, too? He started scratching and the doctor grabbed his hand, *"Try not to do that. It'll make it twice as bad."* Nick nodded, needing to find something to take his mind off the constant itching. Ana seemed to sense it and walked over, "We can continue your lessons here if you like?" Nick glanced at the nurses and the doctor, "It's OK to in front of them?" Ana smiled, "Yes, they can't understand us, and they realize you have to learn about our world." "Alright," Nick said.

Ana sat down next to the bed facing him. Nick turned over on his side so he could see her better. "OK, I think we were on the council," she said. He nodded. "The council is made up of the rulers of the three provinces. They advise the King on matters of foreign policy and domestic disputes," she said. "So they're like the president's cabinet," Nick stated. Ana nodded, "Yes, they are. Your uncle, Count DeGrafe is one. Then there is Count Nathaniel Marcave. He's the ruler of Mardica. And Count Joseph Dupal, the ruler of Aqualystine." "Are we going to visit Aqualystine when we get there?" Nick asked. "I'm sure you will," she replied. He smiled, "Cool. I've never seen a city under water before, I can't wait to see it." "The cities there are breath taking," Ana said, "I miss them." Nick studied her for a moment, "Are you from there?" "Yes, I was born in Fremont and moved to Dacadia when I was still young," she answered. "So where do you live now?" he asked. "In Cystaleia near the palace. My job requires me to stay there most of the year," she said. "Oh .... do you get to go back and visit though?" he asked. "I haven't in a long time," she said, gazing down at her hands for a moment. "When I go, I want you to come with me," Nick said, "You can show me all the sights." Ana laughed, "Your own personal tour guide huh?" He shrugged, "Why not?"

She smiled, entertaining the thought for a moment, then nodded. "Alright, if I can, I will go with you," she said. "So what is the council like?" Nick asked. Ana thought for a moment, "They are like most politicians. They want what is best for their region, and sometimes that leads to long discussions that lead nowhere." "In other words they argue a lot," Nick said. Ana laughed, "You said it, I didn't." "So how do they ever get anything done?" he asked, settling more into his pillow and stifling a yawn. "Your father. He finds some way to make them compromise, and most of the time the compromise benefits them all. He is a good King, your father. He's always fair, and seeking the truth in everything," she said. "You said he was ill, right?" Nick said. She nodded. "So what's wrong with him?" he asked. "We don't know. He fell ill just before we left. The doctors aren't sure what it is, but he's steadily gotten worse. They fear he won't last until our return," she said, solemnly. Nick yawned, "I hope he does. I want to

meet him." "He wishes to meet you too," Ana said, as she watched Nick fight to stay awake. "Sleep now, we can continue this later," she said. Nick nodded, and closed his eyes, quickly falling asleep.

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"Bert, I really don't wanna do this," Brian protested. "Aww come on squirt, it'll be fun," the older man laughed. "Yeah I bet it will," Brian said sarcastically. "What are you chicken?" one of the piolets said, laughing at him. "No, but ...." Brian began. "Then come on. I bet you won't last a minute," the man taunted. Brian looked around, seeing a crowd forming. It looked like everyone that was in the docking bay was waiting to see if he would do it or not. He took a deep breath and looked at the cocky piolet, "Alright, what are we betting?" Several ohhs and awws came from the crowd. "If I win, I want that chain you have on," the piolet said. Brian reached up and fingered his gold chain. It probably cost more than this man's salary for an entire year. "And if I win?" he asked. The piolet laughed, "Like your gonna, I'm the best we have." "And if I win?" Brian asked, with more force behind his words. "If you win, you graduate from grease monkey to fly boy, how's that?" the man spat. "Fine," Brian said, none to thrilled, "So what are we doing?" "One run, me against you, anything goes," the man said, walking over to what looked like a large box on hydraulics.

One of the mechanics pulled Brian over to an identical box. "I don't guess you've ever flown one of these before?" he asked. Brian laughed, "Are you kidding? I've never even seen one before." "You better kiss that chain goodbye then," the man said, helping Brian into the simulator. As Brian strapped in, the man tried to explain the controls to him. He handed Brian a helmet, "Good luck, you're gonna need it." "Thanks," Brian said, wondering how he managed to get himself into this situation. He put the helmet on and glanced over the control panel, trying to remember what was what. "OK gentlemen," a voice said through his helmet, "Power up."

Brian punched the button and the panel came to life. Suddenly he was staring out into space. He forced himself to calm down, this was just a fancy video game, he kept telling himself. He pulled the straps holding him in his seat a little tighter and waited for his next instruction. "Move about six lengths from each other and wait for my signal," the voice said. "Um, what's a length?" Brian asked. He could hear laughing outside his box. "A length is about seven hundred feet," came the voice. "OK, that helps me a lot," Brian muttered, steering his ship away from that of the other piolet. He stopped where he thought he should be and turned it back around. "Alright, on my mark," the voice said. Brian said a quick prayer and took a deep breath. "Go!"

Suddenly the other ship was coming at him, firing its weapons. "Crap!" Brian yelled, banking his ship to the left then to the right. He frantically searched for his weapons, and found them. He armed them, feeling his ship shutter from a hit. Brian looked around, finding his attacker right behind him. He weaved back and forth, trying to make himself a harder target. "Shields! Are there shields in this thing?!" he asked. More laughter. "Yes," was all he heard. "Fine, don't help me!" he spat, as an idea formed in his head. He stopped weaving and lowered his altitude so he was just below his pursuer, then he slammed on the breaks. His ship stopped on a dime and the other piolet overshot him. Brian was back on the power the instant the other ship went over him. Now he was the pursuer. He fired mercilessly as the ship in front of him, not letting the other piolet shake him.

Brian felt his ship shutter from another hit and looked over. There was a third ship out there. "Hey! That's not fair!" he protested. "Anything goes," another voice said through his helmet. Now Brian was angry. "Fine, anything goes huh?! I'll show you anything goes!" he yelled, banking hard to the left. He pulled the stick as far as it would go. The G forces threatened to tear him apart, but he held on, forcing his ship to turn tighter and tighter until he was flying head on with the other ship. He found his missiles and fired just as he straightened out, then threw the stick in the opposite direction to move away from the doomed vessel. He heard an explosion, but didn't take time to look back. He was searching for the cocky piolet. He knew he'd hit one of his engines before the other ship showed up. He had to be around here somewhere. Brian saw him, sitting perfectly still. "Are you done, or do I have to finish you?" Brian asked. "Oh I'm not done," came the over confident voice. "I was afraid of that," Brian said, turning his ship toward his target.

Suddenly the other ship was racing toward him, firing again. Brian pulled the stick back and forced his ship straight up. The other piolet followed, right on his tail. Brian hit the power and pulled back, circling over the other ship. The other piolet broke his pursuit once he saw what Brian was doing, which is just what Brian was waiting for. As the other ship leveled out, Brian came from behind and fired. The light from the explosion was blinding, and Brian squinted as his ship flew through the fireball. Then the simulator went dark. After a moment, the door popped open and Bert helped him out, with an astonished look on his face.

Brian handed him his helmet and jumped down, looking at everyone, "Did I win?" "You not only won, you just bested two of our senior pilots," a man said. Brian grinned. He couldn't help it. "How did you learn how to do that?" another asked. "Many hours of playing video games with my best friend," he answered. The two pilots he flew against walked up. The cocky one didn't seem so cocky anymore. "So?" Brian asked. "You got lucky," the man said. Brian sighed, running his hand through his hair, "We can go two out of three if you want? I don't think it'll change the outcome though." Several of the men laughed. "Fine, you win," the pilot said, "Welcome to the flight crew."

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Kevin watched as Brian came into the dining hall with the pilots. They were laughing and cutting up as they walked through the line to get their food. A.J. leaned over, "What's up with that?" Kevin shrugged, as Brian came over and sat down. "Well you look like you made some new friends," Howie teased. "Yeah, the hard way," Brian said, taking a bite, "Oh my God! This actually tastes halfway decent." Howie beamed, "Thanks to me." Brian stared at him, "What'd you do?" Kevin laughed, "He got into it with the chef. Told him he didn't know the first thing about cooking, so he quit. Said if D knew how to do it, then he could just have the job." "You're kidding?" Brian laughed. "Nope," Howie said, "You're looking at the new chef." "Cool," Brian said, continuing to eat.

"Rok, fill us in on your newfound friends over there," A.J. reminded. "Oh, yeah," Brian said, "Well Bert started making fun of me. Calling me squirt and all. I couldn't stand it, so I kinda mouthed off to him. The next thing I know, I'm being challenged by one of the pilots. So they stuck us in the simulators and I ended up beating him." "No fucking way!" A.J. said. Brian laughed, "Way. Anyway, we had a bet and since I won, I'm now part of the flight crew." "That's great cuz," Kevin said. "Yeah Bri, good for you," Howie added. Brian looked at them, "We now have an opening for mechanic if any of you want it." Kevin and A.J. glanced at each other. "You take it Kev, I'm perfectly happy with my mop," A.J. said. "You're sure?" Kevin asked. "Yup," he said, "I have no desire to be picking grease out of my orifices, thank you very much." They laughed. "Alright, I'll take it," Kevin said.

# Chapter 16

Nick stirred, slowly opening his eyes. He blinked a few times, adjusting to the brightness, then looked around. He was still in the hospital room, but things looked different. There were more machines than he remembered, and he was hooked up to all of them. An IV was in each arm, and he could feel a mask of some sort over his nose and mouth. Then he realized that he wasn't itching anymore, he hurt. His arms and legs felt like heavy weights and it hurt to breathe. He tried taking a deep breath, but couldn't. His breathing was coming in short gasps, but the contraption on his face seemed to help. At least he thought it did.

A nurse was monitoring the machines and happened to look over, seeing he was awake. That realization seemed to startle her, and she headed out of the room at a fast pace. Nick turned his head and saw Ana asleep in the chair next to the bed. She looked as tired as he felt. She was wearing a different jumpsuit and her hair was braided, with tiny ringlets framing her face. Nick stared at her for a moment, wondering why everything seemed so different. Hadn't he just gone to sleep a few hours ago? The chair was close enough to the bed that Nick could reach out and touch her hand, which he did. "Ana?" he said through the mask. It even hurt to talk. His throat felt dry, his voice cracking as if it hadn't been used in days. She didn't stir, so Nick squeezed her hand as best he could, "Ana?" She opened her eyes and looked up, a look of amazement on her face as she quickly stood, looking for the nurse.

"She ... left," Nick managed. Ana looked back down at him, "How are you feeling?" "I hurt," he answered, "What .. happened?" Ana sat on the side of the bed, still holding his hand, "Your fever got really high, and the virus spread. You've been unconscious for several days now. We feared we would lose you for a time." Now Nick was immensely confused, "Days?" She nodded. "Where did it spread?" he asked. "To your lungs. That's why you're having trouble breathing normally," she told him. Nick stared at her for a moment, letting that information sink in. He'd been out for days? How long before they reached Celeste? He wasn't going to be ready in time. He felt a chill and moved his arm under the blanket, his eyes widening when he did. He moved his hand down his body, not feeling any clothes. When he got to his hips, there was nothing there either. He looked back up at Ana, "Where are my .. clothes?" he asked, somewhat embarrassed. She smiled slightly before she caught herself, "We removed them. You were sweating so much, it was easier to leave them off than to change them every hour." He stared at her, seeing her cheeks flush under his eyes. He looked away before he started to laugh. Somehow he got the feeling that she didn't mind that part of his illness. *OK, back on track, Carter,* he told himself, "How long before...?" "We have six days," she answered, before he even finished. He looked away, angry at himself for getting sick, "That's not long enough is it?" Ana shook her head, "No, but we will do our best with the time we have."

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Kevin looked over at the simulators from the transport he was working on. He could hear muffled yells coming from them. Bert glanced over too, "Who would've thought that little squirt would be a natural fly boy." Kevin laughed, "Yeah, he never ceases to amaze me." They went back to the engine they were overhauling. "So Bert, how long did you say you've been doing this?" Kevin asked. "Bout twenty years," the man answered, "Since we started inter planet travel." "Wow, I bet you've seen some interesting things," Kevin said. "I could write a book, if it was allowed," he laughed, "Maybe someday the government won't be so afraid of the public's reaction and let them in on our little secret." "Yeah, I think they need to before some planet tells them for us," Kevin agreed.

Bert looked at him for a moment, "So what was your friend like?" Kevin looked at him confused. "The one we're going after, the Angel. What was he like?" Bert asked. "Nick is just ... Nick. There's no way to describe him. He's kind, soft hearted at times, goofy, annoying..." he laughed. "And you never knew?" the man asked. Kevin shook his head, "Never. I mean he always had these strange little quirks, but that was just Nick." Bert was quiet for a moment, "He sounded like a nice kid." "Why do you keep referring to him in past tense?" Kevin asked. Bert sighed, "I know he's your friend, and we're going after him and all, but do you really think he's still gonna be alive when we get there? Think about it. They have two weeks on us. That's a long time to do whatever they want to him. We could be making this trip for nothing." Kevin looked down at his hands. He hated to admit it, but that very thought had been plaguing him since they left. "He has to still be alive," he muttered.

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"Brian you can't maneuver like that! This is a transport, not a fighter!" a very annoyed voice came through his helmet. Brian was on his third ship, learning to fly. The first two had been fighters, this was a twenty person transport. "Why not?" Brian asked, "If I can't maneuver like this, why is it letting me?" "You can maneuver like that if you want to make scrambled eggs out of your passengers," came the cocky piolet he'd flown against several days before. Brian sighed, "They have seat belts." Both voices in his helmet laughed.

"OK, start the run again," Brian said, "And Andrew, try to keep the fighters off me this time." "Hey, the object is for you to learn to fly, I already know how," Andrew, the cocky piolet, snapped back. Brian

laughed, "You coulda fooled me." "Alright you two, cut the chatter. Run is starting," the commander said. Suddenly Brian was sitting in space, in a convoy of transports. Several teams of fighters escorted them. They were heading to a large space station in the distance. Brian stayed in line, looking for the attack he knew was coming. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the ship appear. "Here we go," he said, still staying in the formation. The fighters went out to meet it, but as in the last four times, they didn't stop it. Brian broke formation and hit the power, ducking under the transport in front of him. He ran underneath them until they too began to take evasive action. Now he was on his own. Nothing to hide behind.

Brian glanced down at his instruments. The thing was right behind him. He started to flip the ship, then remembered he had passengers. Unless he wanted twenty people kissing the ceiling, he couldn't do that. He thought frantically. He was already taking hits, and increased his shields as much as he could. He pushed the stick down, and forced the ship straight down, then pulled the stick up, just as his pursuer started to follow him. The ship flew past him, and Brian banked hard left, coming around behind it. All he had were small lasers as weapons, but he fired them anyway. He was close to the station, he just had to hold out a little while longer. The ship tried to use Brian's tactic on him, but Brian just leveled out and ran for the station. He felt a few more hits, and then his aft shields went out. "Oh just great," he muttered, knowing one more hit would finish his ship.

Brian hit the right break at the same time pulling the stick all the way to the right. He did a complete 180, then threw all power to the front shields. He put the thing in reverse and went full speed backwards towards the docking bay, at the same time, firing with everything he had at the ship that was coming at him. Brian blinked at the white light that flowed over his windshield with each hit his ship took. He made it to the docking bay, slamming on the breaks just inside it, and carefully setting the ship down. His screen went dark, and Brian took a deep breath. He made it.

The commander and his assistant glanced at one another in shock and amazement. In all their time instructing, no one had ever done what Brian just did. Sure his passengers would have been shaken up, but they had made it relatively unharmed. Even Andrew was in awe. "OK Brian, that's it for today," the commander said. Brian climbed out of the simulator, exhausted. Flying took a great toll on his body, but he loved it. The adrenaline left him with a high that no drug could copy. He smiled at Andrew as they walked across the bay to the control room. "Kid, you are a natural," Andrew said. Brian laughed, "I dunno bout that. Nick would be the natural. He kicked my butt at every game we played." Andrew shook his head, "If he's better than you, I hope to God we don't have to fly against him."

The commander was motioning all the pilots to the control room. In curiosity, many of the mechanics

went in as well. Including Kevin and Bert. Everyone wanted to see what their new 'ace' had done today. Even Tamara and Tom were present. Without a word, the commander punched a few buttons and the run appeared on the screen at the head of the room. Brian's transport was highlighted in blue. It played out like a movie, the only thing missing was the pop corn. "Any comments on things you see wrong?" the commander asked. No one said anything. Brian raised his hand, "Um I think if Andrew had banked left instead of right, he could've ducked underneath the ship and knocked out its power source." The commander smiled, "That's exactly right." Andrew watched the run again, "Damn, you're right."

"I want everyone to keep Brian's tactic in your minds. It's one that's never been done, but it could come in handy," the commander said, "You're dismissed." Several of the pilots went over to talk with Brian. Kevin watched his cousin, smiling. Brian actually looked happy. He hadn't seen that look on his face since Nick was taken. The pilots drifted away and Kevin walked over, "Good flying cuz." "Thanks Kev," Brian said, "You ready to eat? I'm starving." Kevin laughed, "Yeah, let me put my tools up, and I'll be right there."

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Nick sat up in bed, trying to eat. He was still weak, but during the day had improved greatly. The doctor had taken him off most of the monitors, and he was down to just one IV. Ana had left to clean up and send a message to the queen. Nick felt a tinge of jealousy about that. Ana got to talk to her, but he didn't. He could understand why, he still didn't know how to address her, or how to act in her presence. But, she was still his mother, and he desperately wanted to meet her, talk to her. He leaned on the small table, taking another sip of his soup. It tasted wonderful, although it looked a little odd. He'd come to find out that most of their food looked odd, but the taste more than made up for it.

He had been given a t-shirt and a pair of pajama pants to put on earlier. He'd gotten up and put them on right there in front of the nurses and doctor, and Ana. He figured why not, since they'd all obviously seen him anyway. He couldn't help but notice the blush on Ana's cheeks when he'd turned back around. He had to force himself not to smile at her. The doctor came in to check on him, "*You look much better, my Prince.*" Nick nodded, "*I feel better.*" "*You should be well enough to go back to your room tomorrow,*" the doctor said. Nick watched him check his IV and the monitors. "*Doc, am I really the only one that looks like this?*" he asked. The doctor stopped and looked at him, "*Yes, your highness, you are.*" Nick looked down at his almost empty bowl, feeling awkward. He knew in his heart that it didn't matter what a person looked like, but what kind of person they were inside. But this race put so much importance on what was on the outside, he feared that he would never fit in.

The doctor looked at him, wondering what was going through his head. *"My Prince, being different isn't a bad thing,"* he said. Nick laughed, *"It's not a good thing either. Haven't you just ever wanted to fit in? Just be normal?"* The doctor thought for a moment, *"I guess. I've never thought about it."* *"Well I have. All my life, all I ever wanted was just to fit in. And now, even with my own people, I still don't,"* Nick said. *"But your people still love you, and still revere you,"* the doctor said. Nick sighed, looking at the man, *"Sometimes that's not enough."*

# Chapter 17

Nick stood in front of the mirror looking at himself. If it weren't for the fact that they were serious about him wearing the clothes he had on, he would've laughed his ass off. He looked ridiculous. He had on tan pants, that were more like tights. They hugged every inch of him, leaving nothing to the imagination. A long shirt that was royal blue in color, with long sleeves and a sash that went around his waist, and over the knee black boots. "Add a hat with a feather in it and I'd look like a damn musketeer," he muttered. A couple of attendants came over with a matching cape and put it on him. He laughed, "Oh yeah, this completes the dorkiness."

"Ana, I am not wearing this," he said, walking out of his dressing room. She smiled at him, "Nick, that is the traditional dress for a prince." He shook his head, "I look stupid." "You look perfect," she said before she caught herself. They both blushed for a moment. The last week had been hectic. Ana had tried to cram as much knowledge into him as possible before they arrived, and now they were here. In a matter of a few hours they would be in the capital city of Cystaleia. Nick was nervous, and the attire was not helping. "I'm really uncomfortable," he said, pulling at his pants/tights. "You will get used to them," she said, "Besides, you only have to dress like this when you're in public. You can wear whatever you want inside the palace." "Thank God," Nick said, pulling the front of his shirt down to cover his crotch. Ana bit her lip trying not to laugh. Nick could see her behind him in the mirror, and turned around, "You find this amusing don't you?" She shrugged. "Well pardon me for not wanting Thor to be the first thing this whole planet notices about me," he laughed. Ana grinned, "I thought you didn't like that name." "I don't, but it seems fitting considering the King Arthur outfit I got going here," he answered.

An attendant walked over to Ana with a case of some sort. Ana took it and set it on the table, opening it up. "There's one more thing you have to wear," she said. Nick rolled his eyes, "Please tell me it's a bag to put over my head." She smiled, "No, your highness, it's not." "Ana, I thought you weren't calling me that when ...." Nick said, looking over and seeing what she was holding. His breath caught in his throat as she pulled the crown out of its case. It was the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen. It was gold, with shining colored jewels in it. It wasn't gaudy looking at all, it looked .... majestic. "Ana, I can't wear that," he protested, as she walked to him. "You must," she said, holding it out for him to take. Nick just stared at it, too afraid to even reach out and touch it. "It is your birthright," she said. He stared into her eyes for a moment, unsure and feeling quite unworthy. Ana smiled at him, relieving some of the uneasiness. He took the crown and turned to the mirror, tentatively placing it on his head. It fit perfectly, and the jewels seemed to make his eyes shine even more than they already did. He blinked a few times, staring at them. "Ana, are my eyes glowing?" he asked. She nodded, "The crown has that affect."

He looked at her, "What if I forget something?" "I'll be with you, don't worry," she reassured. "I'm past worrying," he admitted. "Just take a deep breath and calm down," she told him, "All they want is for you to be yourself." Nick laughed, "Ana, this isn't me," he said, looking at himself again in the mirror. She took his arm and turned him to face her, "This is more you than you realize. Now I've got to go get ready, alright?" He nodded, watching as she crossed the room to the door. "Don't drive yourself crazy over this. Everything will work out," she said, then left.

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Kevin was carrying an armload of tools over to a transport when he heard screaming coming from the simulators. He stopped, watching the commander and several of the pilots running across the bay. They quickly pulled open the door and pulled Brian out. Kevin dropped his tools and ran over.

"Who the hell did that?!" Brian screamed, staring at them angrily. He was so mad he was shaking, and tears threatened to spill over his cheeks. "Who did it?!!" Brian yelled. The commander put his hand on Brian's shoulder and looked at the rest of the pilots, "If any of you did it, now would be a good time to confess." Kevin leaned over to one of the pilots, "What happened?" "Brian was in a fighter run. Someone added Nick's image into the enemy fighters, so it looked like Nick was flying against him," the pilot whispered. Kevin felt his blood start to boil.

Andrew cleared his throat, "Um, I did sir, but it was just a joke." Brian stared at him wide eyed. He and Andrew had become friends, or so he thought. "How could you?!" Brian seethed. "Brian, it was just a joke," Andrew defended. Brian lurched forward and knocked him to the ground, "What part of that was suppose to be funny?! How did you think I'd react, huh? I just killed my best friend in there! My best friend dammit!" Brian stormed across the bay and out the doors, slamming them in his wake. Andrew sat up, looking at everyone, "It was just a joke." Kevin glared at him, "Yeah, great timing, you asshole." "Huh?" Andrew asked. "Today's the day Nick gets to Celeste," Kevin explained. Andrew looked down at his hands, feeling mortified, "Oh fuck." Kevin brushed past him, leaving the bay to find his cousin.

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Brian ran through the halls of the ship, tears stinging his eyes. He was so blinded by them, that he ran

right into someone. He got up, "Sorry," he muttered, then turned to leave. A.J. grabbed his arm, "Rok, what happened?" "Oh J..." Brian cried, collapsing to the floor in tears, "I killed him!" A.J. was more than a little confused, "Bri, what are you talking about? You killed someone?" Brian nodded, holding his knees to his chest and rocking back and forth. A.J. heard footsteps and looked down the hall to see Kevin running toward them.

"Kev, what the hell is going on?" he asked. Kevin shook his head, "Bad simulator run," he whispered, "Andrew put Nick's image into the enemy fighters." "That.... that asshole!" A.J. said, shocked. "Bri, come on, let's get outta the hall, OK," Kevin soothed. Brian got up, still wiping away tears as Kevin lead him to the kitchen. Howie saw them walk in, "Hey guys, lunch isn't for another hour." A.J. glanced at him, and he saw the utterly pissed off look on his face, and followed them back through the kitchen and into Howie's small office.

Brian sat down, rubbing his eyes. Kevin offered him a tissue. He took it, "I'm fine." "Bri, you're not fine," he said. Brian looked away from his cousin, "It was so real. I can't understand why he would do that?" "He wasn't thinking," Kevin said, "And he's an idiot." Brian laughed, "Well that's true. I just .... I fired my missiles and looked up, right into Nick's face. Then the thing blew." Kevin patted him on the shoulder, "I'm sorry cuz. Of all days for this to happen .." Brian shrugged, "It's alright. We can't do anything about it anyway." "I'm sure Nick'll be fine," Howie said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt about that statement. Brian nodded, "He will be..... now we need to have a planning session." "For what?" A.J. asked. Brian looked at the three with fire in his eyes, "Cause I'm getting that asshole back," he laughed.

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Nick stared out the window of the transport. His guards had brought him down. He was getting nervous, Ana still hadn't shown up yet. He was definitely not going without her. Over the past few days they had become good friends. She was the only person he felt comfortable talking to, and the only one that didn't treat him like a prince, at least most of the time. He understood that in public she had to, but when it was just them, she treated him like any other guy. He liked that about her. Actually, he liked a lot of things about her. He smiled, realizing just how much.

He heard someone enter the transport and looked up, his mouth dropping wide open. Ana smiled at him. She was in a ball gown. That was the only thing fitting to describe it. It was a cream color, satiny material, with a form fitting corset, with off the shoulder sleeves. The rest of the dress poofed out at

the waist. It reminded him of the dresses you would see a southern bell wearing, like in *Gone With The Wind* or something. She had her hair in an updo, again with those adoring ringlets framing her face. He stood up when she approached him, "You look beautiful." She blushed, "Thanks," she said, sitting down.

Nick sat back down and fidgeted, as the transport took off. She looked over at him, "It'll be alright." He sighed, "Tell me again what's gonna happen." "We are going straight to the palace. There you will be taken to meet the King and Queen. After that, you will meet the council, after which, you will be presented to the public," she said. He nodded, glancing out the window. "Wow," he said under his breath. Ana smiled, as he marveled at the landscape. It was almost ethereal. Green fields gave way to a rocky, mountainous terrain. There were waterfalls everywhere, and large rivers. "This is Novaduel, right?" he asked. "Yes, the capital city is on the dividing line of the prairies and the mountains," she answered. Nick could see the city as they approached. Everything was clean, new. The streets looked like cobblestone, and the buildings were fashioned out of stone as well. "It looks like Naboo," he said. "What's Naboo?" Ana asked. He looked at her, "Star Wars. Movies, made by a guy named George Lucas. I actually got to meet him once. In the new Star Wars movies there's a planet called Naboo, and it looks just like this." Ana laughed. "Has he been here before?" Nick asked. "I don't think so," she said, grinning. "He has! Oh my God, wait till I tell the guys... they're gonna freak," Nick laughed, then realized what he said. The smile faded from his lips, and the sadness returned to his eyes. Ana quickly glanced around, making sure they weren't being watched, then took his hand in hers, "Maybe someday you will see them again." He nodded, "I hope so."

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"*My Queen, he is here,*" an attendant said. The queen stood up, fidgeting with her dress for a moment. She was nervous. For years she had wished for this moment, now it was here ... she was going to meet her son. She took a deep breath as the party began to enter the room.

Nick followed the guards, with Ana a few steps behind him. They had exited the transport on the roof and had been lead down several stories. Now they were walking down a hall. Nick saw the guards turn and go into a room. He took a deep breath, and followed them. He smiled as he walked toward her, he couldn't help it. There standing before him was his mother. The guards stopped, bowing to her and then stepping out of the way. Nick glanced back at Ana, and she gave him a reassuring smile. He took another deep breath and stepped forward. He kneeled in front of her, "Ma reine, je suis honoré pour vous rencontrer finalement" *My Queen, I'm honored to finally meet you.* The queen reached down and took his chin in her hand, pulling him up. She stared into his eyes, through her tears, then pulled him into a hug, "Je nous ai pensés ne vous trouverais jamais. Maison bienvenue, mon fils." *I thought we*

*would never find you. Welcome home, my son.*

Nick felt his own tears trailing down his cheeks as she released him from the hug. She gently wiped them away, then smiled at him as she touched his hair. *"You are just as I remembered,"* she smiled. Nick blushed, *"Only bigger."* The queen laughed, taking him by the hand and leading him across the room, the guards and Ana following. *"You were told your father is ill,"* the queen asked as they walked. Nick nodded. *"He is resting right now, so you will meet him later, alright?"* she said. Nick felt a tinge of disappointment, but nodded. The queen looked up at him, *"He wishes to meet you too, but he needs his rest."* *"Do they know what's wrong with him?"* Nick asked. She shook her head, *"It's a mystery. One day he was fine, the next he's bedridden."* Nick could see the sadness in his mothers eyes, and knew she must love him very much. *"We are going to meet the council?"* he asked, wanting to change the subject. *"Yes,"* she answered, leading him into the throne room.

It was a massive room, with a platform at one end. Two thrones sat atop it. The rest of the room was bare. Nick figured it could be transformed into anything at a moments notice. He looked above the thrones, noticing the family crest on a flag, hanging from the ceiling. He glanced down at his mark. It was glowing as brightly as the twin suns outside. His mother squeezed his hand, getting his attention. They approached three men, who were already on their knees. Nick recognized his uncle among them. *"My Lords, please rise and meet your Prince,"* the queen said. Nick watched as his uncle stepped forward. He was taller than Nick with a very intimidating presence. *"Your highness, I'm Mason DeGrafe, Count of Novaduel and your uncle. It is an honor to meet you,"* he said. Nick nodded, not liking the sound of his voice. It seemed forced, especially when he said he was honored to meet him.

The other two Counts came up and introduced themselves. Nick got the distinct feeling he was being scrutinized. But he'd expected it. He knew they wanted to see what kind of man he was, and he knew he'd have to prove himself to them if he was ever going to have their respect. *"Count Dumal, I look forward to visiting your province. I've heard great things about it,"* Nick said, as they were again walking down a hall. *"Thank you my prince. We would be honored to have you,"* Joseph said. The look that passed between Mason and Joseph didn't escape Nick, and he wondered what it was all about. There seemed to be a flash of anger, maybe jealousy in his uncles eyes. At any rate, it made him uneasy to say the least.

Suddenly a young man came flying down the hall after them. Nick looked back, seeing the man was around his own age. *"I'm sorry I'm late,"* the young man apologized to Mason, not even realizing that Nick had stopped walking and was staring at him. Mason gave the man a glare then glanced in Nick's direction. The young man looked over and immediately dropped to his knees, *"Forgive me your*

*highness. I didn't know you were here.*" Nick laughed, walking over to him, *"Please rise and introduce yourself."* The young man stood up, *"I'm Anthony DeGrafe, Count DeGrafe's son."* *"Then you're my cousin, right?"* Nick asked. Anthony nodded, *"Yes your highness."* Nick looked over at Ana, *"You didn't tell me I had a cousin."* *"I'm sorry, we didn't have time to get into that,"* she said. He laughed, realizing that everyone was looking at him, wondering what he'd been saying. *"Anthony, I'd like to talk with you sometime after all this formal stuff,"* he said. Anthony bowed again, *"Yes your highness, anytime you wish."* Nick motioned for him to get up, as the queen took his hand, gearing him back in the direction they were going.

Nick wasn't sure what to expect. He didn't know if they had TV or what. He just knew that the entire world was gonna get their first look at him in a matter of moments. As they turned a corner, he could hear the crowd. He hesitated for a moment, but the queen gently pulled on his hand, *"It's alright my son. Come out and meet your people."* Nick walked out onto the large balcony and was immediately overwhelmed with shock. Thousands and thousands of people filled the vast courtyard. He'd never seen so many people in all his life. The crowd was cheering at the sight of him. It was better than any audience at any concert he'd ever done. He scanned the crowd, smiling. He noticed several small metallic things floating in the air, and realized they were cameras. Then he noticed the screens about halfway through the courtyard. His face plastered on them all. Mason stepped up and raised his hands to quiet them. *"Mesdames et messieurs, peuvent je présenter prince Nickolas Carter!" Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce prince Nickolas Carter.* Nick smiled, *At least they let me keep my name,* he thought as he waved. The crowd cheered, threatening to split his eardrums.

The queen stepped up and the crowd quieted once again, *"This is a day of celebration. We have regained what was lost to us for so many years. Go, rejoice!"* The crowd erupted in cheers again, as she turned and lead Nick back inside the palace. He was a little confused as to what happening next, and glanced back at Ana again. She shrugged her shoulders, letting him know she was just as clueless as he was. He leaned down to whisper to his mother, *"Where are we going now?"* She smiled, *"There is a ball in your honor. Many of the families from the high class will be there."* Nick sighed, *"I'm not sure about all this."* *"You will be fine. They will present themselves to you, then we will eat,"* she said. *"When will I meet the King?"* he asked. *"After the ball,"* she replied.

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The ball was a little too formal for Nick's liking. There were too many families there, that were the epitome of high class. He'd never met more snooty people in his life. And every family that had a daughter around his age were practically throwing the girl at him. He tried to be polite, but at the same

time, letting them know he wasn't interested. He'd caught Ana laughing out of the corner of his eye more than a few times. He began to wonder if she had conveniently forgotten about this part. He was glad when the food was served and he could just sit down and eat. He was starving. He did notice that everyone waited until he and his mother began to eat before they did. Must be another one of those traditions. He settled back in his chair, having finished his meal. Suddenly he heard music. It sounded a lot like a waltz, and very similar to what Ana had used to teach him a few of their traditional dances. He watched as several couples filled the dance floor. The dance was beautiful to watch, it was almost as if they were gliding across the floor.

The queen looked over at him, *"You can dance if you like."* Nick shook his head, *"I'm not very good at it."* She smiled, *"You don't have to be good. No one expects you to be perfect. They all know where you've been all these years, and understand that you will have to get used to being here, and how we do things."* He watched the dance for a few more minutes, then looked over, *"Would you dance with me?"* She nodded, smiling as she took his hand, and he led her out on the dance floor. They started to dance, and Nick immediately stepped on her toe, *"Sorry,"* he said, embarrassed. She laughed, *"It's alright."* They danced for several minutes. Nick seemed to lose himself in the music, and his mother smiled in her own happiness. *"Nickolas, I'm getting tired. Why don't you dance with someone else,"* she said. He stopped, leading her back to her seat, *"I can dance with anyone here?"* *"Anyone you wish,"* she replied. He smiled, walking over to where Ana was seated and offering her his hand, *"Will you dance with me?"*

Ana was so shocked, she glanced behind her, making sure he was really talking to her. Of course she knew he was, he was speaking English. Nick laughed, *"I'm talking to you."* Ana blushed, taking his hand and letting him lead her onto the dance floor. She felt the eyes of all the high class on her as they moved across the room. Nick sensed it too. *"Are we not suppose to dance with each other?"* he asked. *"You can dance with anyone you wish. It's just that in their eyes, it should be someone of the high class. Not me,"* she answered. *"I don't want to dance with any of them. I only want to dance with you,"* he said. Ana couldn't hide the smile that curved her lips.

The queen watched them, a knowing smile on her face. She had suspected that they liked each other from the moment she saw them together. Now seeing them waltz across the dance floor confirmed her suspicions. There was a light in both their eyes that just wasn't there when they were apart. The fact that love between the two was forbidden, didn't seem to matter. She glanced around the room, seeing the stunned faces of many. No, this would not go over well. Even if they denied it, it was evident on their faces how they felt toward each other. But, she was the queen, and what good was she if she couldn't make her son happy? Rules and tradition could be damned.

Nick and Ana finished their dance, and he lead her back to her table. "Thanks," he said. "You're welcome," she replied, taking her seat. Much to the dismay of many of the young women in the room, Nick went back to his place beside his mother. The party continued on for a few more hours. Nick was getting restless. He wanted to leave, but wasn't sure what the proper protocol was for that. His mother looked over, "*Why don't we take our leave?*" He nodded, standing and taking her hand. Everyone stopped what they were doing, bowing as they left. Nick glanced back at Ana as they left the room. He'd been around her so much, that leaving without her was a little unnerving. "*I have asked Ana to stay in the palace to help you get settled. You will see her in the morning,*" the queen said. Nick breathed a sigh of relief.

The queen squeezed his hand, "*You are fond of her?*" Nick blushed. He wasn't sure he wanted to talk about this with his mother whom he'd known for all of a few hours now. "*Just be careful how you present yourself in public,*" she warned, "*Ana is a wonderful girl, but she's not part of the high class. You must be cautious of how you're perceived.*" Nick hung his head, "*I did something wrong?*" "*Not wrong, just not in the tradition,*" she corrected, "*But some traditions have outlasted their usefulness, if you ask me,*" she said, smiling at him. Nick chuckled, "*Where are we going?*" "*To meet your father,*" she answered.

Nick felt his nerves doing double time in his stomach as they stood outside a huge door. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. The queen smiled at him, "*Just be yourself. That's all we ever wanted.*" He nodded, as they walked through the doors and into the massive bedroom. There were several people in the room. Nick assumed they were doctors and nurses. His father lay in bed, with an IV in his arm. He looked very weak, even though he was a man of great stature. He could easily look down on Nick if he had been standing. Nick watched as the king motioned to several attendants and they helped him to sit up. The queen urged Nick forward, and he slowly approached the bed. When he got there, he dropped to his knees, with his elbows on the side of the bed. The king took his hand, causing Nick to look up at him. "*My son, you've come home,*" he said. Nick looked into the kind eyes of his father and felt like a child. Tears filled his eyes as the king took him in his arms and held him. Even as weak as he was, Nick couldn't have gotten loose from the hug if he'd wanted to. And he didn't. He felt his mothers arms around him now, his parents encircling him. He could feel how much they both loved him, and had missed him all these years. And suddenly he was filled with a loss. He'd missed all these years with them. He didn't know them, yet he loved them instantly. And he was angry that he'd been taken away and lied to for so long. He had so much to tell them. He wanted to share everything with them, and he wanted to learn. He needed to get to know them, who they were on the inside, away from all the formality. The king took Nick's crown off his head and tousled his hair, smiling at him, "*I'm so happy your home Nickolas.*" Nick smiled through his tears, "*So am I.*"

# Chapter 18

"*Nickolas, wake up,*" the queen said, gently shaking him. Nick opened his eyes and looked up at her. He had spent several hours with his father, talking. And when the king had fallen to sleep, so did Nick, sitting by the bed, his elbows resting on the side. His mother smiled at him, "*Come, I'll take you to your room.*" He nodded, standing up and stretching. He took one last look at his father before he left the room. He was sleeping peacefully.

Nick walked out into the hall and noticed that it was dark. "*How long did you let me sleep?*" he asked. "*A few hours. You looked so peaceful I didn't want to wake you,*" she replied. He smiled at her as she took his hand in hers, leading him down the darkened hall. There were small lights on each side, but they only illuminated it enough to keep you from running into something. Nick looked down at his and his mother's hands. She held his like she would hold that of a small child. He liked it, it felt warm and comforting. He could sense just how much she cared for him in that gesture alone. And he'd felt it with his father too. The entire time they talked, his father held his hand. Almost as if the two of them believed that if they let go, Nick would disappear.

The queen stopped outside a door and glanced up at her son, "*I hope you like it.*" Nick opened the door and stepped in. A broad smile lit up his face as he recognized his belongings. The room was large, with a huge bed, a sitting area, desk, walk in closet and bath. The carpet and the bed both held the family crest. Nick walked over to the desk area and picked up one of the framed pictures. It was his favorite one of him and Brian. He looked at the others. His brother and sisters smiled back at him, as well as Bob and Jane. The rest of the guys too. He walked over to his stereo and looked through his CDs. All of his favorites were there. He then stepped into the closet and almost jumped for joy. One side was filled with his clothes, the other with the more formal attire of a Celestian prince. He walked out of the closet and looked at his mother, "*How did you do this?*" "*Once we found you, we sent another team to retrieve your things,*" she answered. "*There were two ships?*" he asked. The queen shook her head, "*Three. The third has not returned yet.*" "*Why three?*" he asked.

She sighed, walking over and sitting down, motioning for him to join her. Nick sat down, waiting for her to answer. "*The third is trailing an Earth vessel. We believe they are coming to try and get you back,*" she said. Nick stared at her in disbelief, "*They're coming for me?*" "*Yes, and we believe that they will try to take you by force if necessary. The third ship is following them, making sure they don't rendezvous with someone before they arrive,*" she said. "*How long before they get here?*" he asked. "*It will be a few weeks. Even though we gave them the technology for space travel, we never shared our more up to date*

*information. Their ship is much slower and doesn't have the amenities that ours do," she said. Nick laughed at that thought. Even though Earth blackmailed them, they still had the upper hand. The queen looked at him seriously, "My son, your friends are with them." Nick's breath caught in his throat, and it took him a moment to find his voice, "The guys? Why?" "What better way to convince you to come home, than to have your closest friends plead their case," she said.*

*Nick shook his head, "But they think that you wanted to kill me. Why would they let the guys come, if they thought that when they got here I'd already be dead?" "Because someone knows the truth, and has all along. They may try to use them against you if you do not go willingly. They know what the situation is, and why we need you here," she said. Nick sighed, "But the guys don't. They don't know what they're walking into." The queen shook her head, "I'm afraid they do not." Nick stared at her with fear and anger in his eyes, "What do I do?" She looked at her hands for a moment, as if what she was about to say actually caused her pain. "You have a choice to make. If you want, we will let them take you back, but you understand what will happen here if you go?" she said. He nodded solemnly. "If you choose to stay, it is your decision on what to do with your friends," she told him. Nick ran his hand through his hair, "They can't stay here forever, but maybe for a while?" She smiled at him, "Whatever you wish, that's what will be done. Now try and get some rest." Nick stood as she got up and headed for the door, "Think about what you want. But don't make a decision based on duty or guilt, make it on what your heart says is right for you." He nodded, "Goodnight." "Goodnight, Nickolas," she said, leaving him alone with his thoughts.*

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Nick sat on his balcony, the warm night wind brushing his skin. He had changed into a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, feeling much more comfortable, but he couldn't sleep. He tried, but ended up tossing and turning, so he just got up and came out here. He left the lights off, wanting to sit in the dark unnoticed. He could see a great distance from the palace, into the city and the surrounding country side. Celebrations were still going on everywhere. He could hear the music, and the occasional loud cheerful voice. It warmed his heart that the whole planet was celebrating because of him. He smiled at the thought, looking up at the tiny moon.

The night sky here was foreign to him. His familiar night sky was a thing of the past. The moon was nothing like Earth's. It was smaller, and held many more craters, but it was it's color that was so different. It wasn't gray like the one he was used to, no this one was lavender. The exact same color as his eyes. It was sort of freaky, and oddly comforting. Nick gazed at the stars for a while, trying to pick out patterns of constellations. He sighed after a few minutes, when his mind brought him back to the

reason he was out here, the reason he couldn't find sleep. He had a choice to make, and even though it would be a few weeks before he needed to, he wanted to make it now. He needed the time to get used to whatever he decided, so he wouldn't be easily convinced otherwise.

He still had so many questions about this place, its history and who he was. It's hard to make a choice when you're not sure where you fit in. He knew his niche on Earth. He was a pop star, adored by thousands of fans. He had his family that loved him, and his friends. And here... he was a prince, adored by millions, also with a family that loved him. Both places he felt a connection to, and both places he felt something missing. He put his head in his hands, "Where am I supposed to be?" He knew what would happen to this world if he left, and he wasn't sure he could handle the loss of life that would come from that decision. He also wasn't sure if he could live here for the rest of his life, away from those he loved. Back and forth his mind went until he finally broke down. Silent tears left his eyes, as he watched the palace gates open and someone ride in on a horse.

He brushed the tears away, "They have horses here?" he asked himself. But as the figure got closer he realized it wasn't a horse. His mouth dropped open, "Unicorn," he whispered. The animal was the most majestic, beautiful creature he'd ever seen, and it seemed to know he was watching it. The man riding him, headed toward the stables. The unicorn tossing its head, obviously happy to be home. Nick made a mental note to ask to tour the stables in the morning. He felt drawn to the animal, and wanted to see what that feeling was all about. He watched them until they rounded the building, then something else caught his attention.

He had that feeling in his stomach, and knew someone was near. He quietly stood up and looked below him. Ana was several floors down from him, standing on her own, much smaller balcony. Her lights were on, and Nick knew she wouldn't be able to see him. He'd come to realize that his race had horrible night vision. His was much better, having adapted to a planet with a lot less light than his own. He watched as the warm breeze danced through her hair. She was in what looked like a pajama outfit, long pants and short sleeved shirt. She surveyed the city, taking in the sights and sounds, much as Nick had done. She seemed to just be relaxing after the long hectic day they'd both had. She rested her elbows on the railing and looked below her for a moment, then stood up. "Please let him feel at home here, we need him .... I need him," she whispered, then turned and walked back into her room, shutting the doors. Nick blinked a few times. He knew she'd barely whispered the words, but he'd heard them loud and clear, and she'd spoken in English. Maybe she felt him above her? She had that same ability, but somehow Nick didn't think she did. Those words were not meant to be heard by anyone, and if they were she didn't want them to know what she was saying.

Nick stayed on his balcony for a few more moments, then slowly walked back inside. He left the doors open. After being on the ship for two weeks he was glad for the fresh air. He crawled back in bed, and pulled the sheet over him. Taking a deep breath, he stared out the doors into the sky. He knew what he had to do, what his choice was. After not thinking about it for a few blessed distracted moments, it came to him. He knew exactly what he needed to do, he just hoped everyone would understand.

# Chapter 19

Nick was putting his shoes on when someone knocked at his door. He got up and walked over, opening it. "Your highness, I'm glad you're awake," the man said. "You speak English," Nick said, somewhat shocked. The man smiled, "Yes. I'm Rowland Newman, chief of security here at the palace, and as of this morning, your personal bodyguard." Nick stepped back, letting the man into his room. "I really don't need a bodyguard," Nick protested. Rowland just smiled at him. Nick looked him over. He had to be in his early forties, very fit. He wore a jumpsuit similar to those worn on the ship, and had a weapon at his side. Nick knew this man wasn't going to be ditched lightly. "I guess I don't have a say in the matter?" he asked. Rowland shook his head, "No, my prince. My orders come from the King himself." "I see. So, do I need to go somewhere?" Nick asked. "The queen would like you to join her for breakfast," Rowland said. Nick smiled, thinking of his mother. He'd known her less than a day, and already he loved her beyond words. He looked at himself in the mirror. He'd put on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, not expecting to have to appear in public. "Um, is this OK to wear? I'm not up on what's appropriate around here yet," he asked. Rowland smiled, "Yes, that is alright. We are pretty informal around here most of the time." "Oh good. I really hate those official get ups," Nick commented.

Rowland lead the way down a few flights to the formal dining room. Nick walked in, seeing his mother already seated at the other end of the table. "Good morning," she said, "Did you sleep well?" Nick walked over to her and hugged her, "When I finally went to sleep, yes I did." She looked at him, expecting an explanation. "I thought about what you said. I've made my decision," he told her. She nodded as they sat down and several servants brought out their food. Nick waited until they had all retreated back into the kitchen before he went on. "I will stay," he said. The queen sighed in relief, "I know how difficult it must be for you to do that. Thank you Nickolas." He nodded, taking a bite of his food. He still couldn't get over how good everything tasted to him.

The two ate in silence for a few moments, then Nick remembered. "Would it be alright if I looked around for a while? I saw someone come into the gates on a unicorn. I'd like to go see it, if it's alright," he asked. His mother smiled, "Of course. You can go anywhere you like." "When can I see the king today?" he asked. The queen sat her fork down and thought for a moment, "Afternoons are better for him. I'll tell him you'll come by." "Thank you. Is there anything that I need to be doing today?" he asked, not sure what would be expected of him. She shook her head, "No, not today. Take a few days, get settled in. I'll bring you into the daily activities in a few days." "So, are you making all the decisions now that...?" he started to ask. His mother sighed, "Not really. It is hard to explain. I'm taking care of a lot of things, but your father still has final say over everything." "Even when he's so sick?" he asked. She nodded, "I know you were raised under different beliefs, so I understand how hard it is for you to grasp. But it must be done this way."

He stared at his mother for a moment, studying her face. She was tired, he could see it. It had to be hard on her, trying to do what she could, and watching her husband struggle against this unknown illness. "Are you OK?" he asked, somewhat timidly. LaDonna smiled at her son, seeing his concern. "I am handling it. It's not easy though," she admitted. "Is there anything I can do?" he asked. She shook her head, "You are doing it. You're here, and you're accepting us and yourself for who you are. I'm not so sure, that under the same circumstances I'd be as accepting as you are." Nick laughed, "Well I sorta got my frustrations out before I got here. Ana unfortunately took the brunt of most of it." She smiled, "Ana did send a few reports at first that were .... um colorful to say the least." Nick blushed, remembering several times he'd blown up at her. He wasn't proud of it, but at the time it was the only thing he could do to release his frustration, anger and fear. "I should probably apologize to her," he said. "She understands," his mother told him. Nick glanced at his mother, wondering what exactly she and Ana had discussed. His mother had this knowing look in her eyes, and something mischievous lurked behind her smile. "I get the feeling you know a lot more that you admit to," he chuckled. His mother smiled, "Eat, before it gets cold."

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Nick walked across the courtyard towards the stables. Ana had joined him and Rowland as they left the palace. She and Nick talked quietly with each other, Rowland staying back a few feet. "So how was your first night?" she asked. He smiled, "Good. I couldn't get to sleep though. I guess all the excitement of the day and all." "I had the same problem," she said, looking toward the stables. Nick followed her gaze. Several men were in a round pen, trying to subdue a very upset unicorn. The animal was kicking, bucking, anything it could do to keep the men at bay. "What's going on?" Nick asked. "They are trying to tame it. It was caught in the mountains a few days ago and brought here," Rowland said. Nick stared at the animal. Its coat was pitch black, with a long mane and tail. Its horn was white, and seemed to reflect the sun's rays, making it shimmer. "It's scared," he said, looking at Ana, "How do I know that?" She smiled, "It's one of your abilities. You can feel their emotions." Nick looked back at the creature, just as it kicked one of the men completely out of the pen, "And it's hurt," he mumbled, quickening his pace.

Ana and Rowland followed Nick to the pen. He didn't ask, he just stepped in with the animal. "Your highness, you shouldn't..." Rowland protested, but Nick quieted him with one look. The men by now had realized Nick was there and bowed to him, still keeping an eye on the unicorn. "Get up, and leave the pen," Nick instructed. No one said a word, they just obeyed. Nick stared at the creature on the other side of the enclosure, it stared back. Nick was overwhelmed with a feeling of pain and fear. The unicorn moved nervously from one foot to another, tossing its head. Nick put his hands up and took a

step forward, "It's alright," he said calmly, "No one's going to hurt you." The unicorn whinnied and stepped away from Nick. "I know you're hurt. Let me help you," Nick said. The animal stared at him warily, but didn't move when Nick stepped forward again. "That's it, just let me get a little closer," Nick said. The creature lowered its head, still staring at him. "Your highness, be careful," Rowland called, "That's a defensive move. If he comes at you with his head down, he could use his horn to hurt you!"

Nick stopped and looked at the unicorn, "You don't want to hurt me do you?" As if the thing understood him, it shook its head, causing Ana to laugh. Rowland had his weapon drawn, aimed at the animal. Nick couldn't see him, but somehow he knew he'd done it. "Put it away Rowland, he's not going to hurt me," he said. "But ..." "Put it away," Nick said again, taking another step in the direction of the creature. Rowland glanced at Ana, not liking this, but did as he was told and put his weapon away. "See, no one wants to hurt you," Nick said, smiling. The unicorn took a step toward Nick, still wary, but also curious. Nick stood still and let the animal come to him, "That's it, now where are you hurt?" He carefully ran his hand down the unicorn's side, up under one of its front legs. He felt a warm liquid on his hand, and pulled it back. His fingers were covered in blood. The unicorn nudged him with its nose, careful of its horn. Nick laughed, "I know it hurts, but we'll get someone to take care of it." He turned to say something to Rowland when the animal stepped up and rested its head on Nick's shoulder, making a noise that almost sounded like a cat purring. Nick reached up and stroked the side of its face, "Do you have a vet here?" Rowland looked confused, "Vet?" "Yeah, um animal doctor?" Nick explained. "Ohh, yes we do," Rowland said. "Get him, he needs stitches," Nick said, showing everyone his hand.

Nick played with the unicorn while they waited for the vet. The animal that just moments before no one could lay a hand on, was now following Nick around like a puppy, purring loudly. "What's that noise he's making?" Nick asked. "They do that when they're happy," Ana said. "Oh so like a cat purring huh?" he asked. She nodded, "He likes you." Nick laughed, "I like him too. It's cool how he can understand me." Ana smiled as the vet climbed into the pen. Nick continued to pet the animal as the vet looked him over. "*I need him to stretch his leg so I can stitch it,*" the vet said. Nick looked at the animal, "Can you stretch your leg?" The unicorn cocked its head to the side, like it didn't know what that meant. "Like this," Nick said, stretching one of his legs in front of him. The unicorn stared at him for a moment, then stretched its leg out. Ana stifled a laugh. The two looked rather comical standing side by side with their legs stretched out. The unicorn stretched its head and nudged Nick, knocking him flat on his ass, then proceeded to make a noise that sounded an awful lot like laughter. "Hey!" Nick laughed, getting up and brushing his pants off, "Is he laughing at me?" Ana nodded, afraid if she opened her mouth to say something, the laughter she was holding in would escape.

Nick shook his head, laughing, "Alright smarty pants. You think that's funny huh?" The unicorn nodded as the vet finished up. "*He will be fine to ride in a few days,*" he said, gathering his things and leaving the pen. Nick walked over to the side of the pen, "So who's is he?" "Yours," Rowland answered, "He was to

be a gift to you once he was tame." "I can't take him. He belongs out there," Nick said, pointing at the mountains. The unicorn pushed him with his nose and purred. "It looks like he'd rather stay here," Ana said. Nick turned to the animal, "You want to stay here?" He nodded. "Alright, but if you want to leave, all you have to do is tell me," Nick said. "Your highness, what would you like to name him?" Rowland asked. Nick thought for a few minutes, "Well he's goofy and seems really happy. Reminds me of Brian, so ... how bout Thomas?" The unicorn nodded, seeming to like his new name. Nick laughed, "Alright, Thomas it is."

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Nick sat by his father's bedside, waiting for him to wake up. He seemed weaker today, and Nick glanced at his mother, worry in his eyes. She nodded, acknowledging his concern. Nick sighed, turning his attention back on the man in front of him. He stirred and opened his eyes, a smile forming as soon as he saw Nick. "*My son, how long have you been here?*" he asked. "*Not long,*" Nick answered, helping him to sit up. The king pulled Nick's shirt sleeve back and looked at his tattoos. Nick seemed embarrassed, knowing that was another thing that only he had on this planet. "*Interesting markings. They mean something to you?*" his father asked. Nick nodded. "*Tell me,*" the king prodded. Nick proceeded to tell his father the story behind each of his many tattoos, taking his shirt off and pulling his jeans legs up in the process.

The king laughed, "*Earth sounds like an interesting place.*" "*It is. Maybe when you get better we could go there. I could show you all the great places,*" Nick said. The king shook his head, "*Nickolas, I'm afraid I'm not going to get better.*" "*But you have to. There's so much I want you to tell me about your life, who you are. You have to fight this! I just found you, I can't lose you .... not yet,*" Nick pleaded, tears welling up in his eyes. The king took Nick's hand and squeezed it, "*I don't want to leave you either, but there are some things that even a king cannot control.*" Nick nodded, biting his lip as a tear rolled down his cheek. "*There are things that I need to tell you,*" his father went on, "*Things you must know before you become king.*" Nick wasn't sure he was ready to hear any of this, but he knew he may not get another chance. "*You must watch out for the council. They will test you. They are good men, but sometimes the power of their position clouds their judgment, especially your uncle. Do not be afraid of offending them with your decisions, and do not let them bully you. Do what you feel is right—not with your mind, but with your heart. Most decisions made with the heart turn out to be the right ones,*" he said.

Nick nodded. "*I'm sorry that it must be this way,*" the king told him, "*I wished for years with you before you took on this responsibly.*" "*I'll do my best,*" Nick said. His father smiled at him, "*I know you will. You*

*have a kind and fair heart, you will do well. And if you need advice, your mother will help you. Even though our world sees me as the ruler, she has helped me with all my decisions, just as she will help you until you find a queen of your own.*" Nick wasn't sure why, but he blushed at that statement. The king yawned, and settled back in bed, *"We will talk more after I've rested."* Nick nodded, still holding his father's hand, *"I'll be here."* The king smiled at him once more, then drifted to sleep.

## Chapter 20

The next few days blurred by in a whirlwind of activity. Nick was busy from suns up to well past dark, everyday. He'd fallen into a routine of sorts. Getting up before the twin suns rose, and getting dressed. He loved to watch the suns rise. The sky was filled with every color imaginable. It was breath taking. He used that moment to think about the day, and about those he loved that were galaxies away. It was a time just for himself, and though he'd never been an early riser, he cherished that time of the day.

Rowland would come get him not long after sun rise and they would work out. Nick was working on discovering his abilities, and Rowland had found someone with each to help him. He spent the majority of the morning learning to fine tune what he already knew. He was a fast learner, and soon wouldn't need to have these early morning lessons. But Nick enjoyed them. He was amazed at what had been hidden inside him all these years. He could do things he never thought possible. There was a whole other part of him that had been awakened, and he loved it. After his work out, he would clean up and meet his mother for brunch, then it was off with Ana to learn more about his world and its customs. They would either work in the enormous library, or they would take walks around the palace grounds. Nick looked forward to this time as well. He was quickly discovering that he felt more for Ana than just the friendship they showed to everyone else. And though he knew it was forbidden, he really didn't care. They'd never kissed, and barely held hands, but he cared for her so much, that it hurt sometimes. And he was sure she felt the same way. He could see it in her eyes when they talked, and in her smile.

When afternoon came, he was with his father. Nick admired him so much, and held on to the hope that maybe he would get better. The king had good days, and bad, but he always had time for Nick. He told Nick about his life, the things he and his brother used to do when they were younger. Nick shared with him that he'd done some of the same things to his parents. The king told of Celeste in the olden days, of his father, and his father before him. Nick drank in every word, wanting to remember everything. He would spend as much time as possible with his father, waiting until he fell asleep before he would leave and join his mother with the day to day activities in the late afternoon. Then after supper, he would take some time for himself. Most of the time he took Thomas out for a ride. He wasn't a great rider, but Thomas seemed to know that and never gave him a problem. Then he would come back and sit with his father well into the night. Sometimes they would talk some more, but most of the time Nick just watched him sleep. Then he would return to his room and collapse into bed, having only a few hours rest before he started all over again.

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*"Brian!" Nick screamed in horror. He watched as Brian was pulled out of the docking bay into the vacuum of space. The airlock had failed, and everything that hadn't been bolted down, ended up being sucked out of the ship. He watched as Brian struggled, sheer terror in his eyes. Brian blinked a few times, then let the breath he was holding out, giving up the fight. "No! God, someone help him!" Nick screamed, "Please!" But it was too late, Brian was gone.*

Nick sat straight up in bed, screaming. He was drenched in sweat and he couldn't catch his breath. Rowland was the first one into his room, followed by several guards, and the queen. "Your highness, are you alright?" Rowland asked, searching the room for some intruder. Nick nodded, taking a shaky breath, "I-I'm fine. I'm sorry I woke you." *"What happened?"* the queen asked, coming to sit beside him on the bed. *"Really bad dream,"* Nick answered, as the guards were ordered out of the room by Rowland. LaDonna smoothed his damp hair off his forehead, *"Son, are you sure it was dream, and not the future you were seeing?"* He shook his head, *"No, I'm not sure."* Nick had discovered that one of his abilities was to see the past and the future. Most of the time they would come as visions, but his teacher had told him that they could come as dreams also.

Nick got out of bed and walked out onto his balcony, looking up at the stars. He couldn't get Brian's face out of his head, and he couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen. His mother joined him, watching him with concern. *"It was Brian,"* he began, still gazing at the night sky, *"He couldn't breathe. He was ... sucked into space and he died."* The queen wrapped her arm around him, holding him close, *"Is this the first time you've had this dream?"* Nick shook his head, *"I've had it for the past few nights, but this one was so vivid. It felt like I was there. He looked right at me, like he was waiting for me to help him."* *"It's your call Nickolas. This could just be a dream, but what if it's not?"* his mother said. Nick bit his lip, nodding. "Rowland, have our ship move closer to the Earth ship. Tell them to have the rescue teams on alert, and to monitor everything going on," Nick said. "But, if we move closer they will know we're there," Rowland said. Nick looked at him, "I don't care. Move the ship closer. As long as we don't do anything that can be perceived as a threat, they have no reason to attack us." "And if they do?" Rowland asked. Nick sighed, "Then we will have no choice but to defend ourselves."

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Andrew walked into the docking bay to the hoots and hollers of everyone. He hung his head, making a

bee line for the control room. The commander saw him coming and turned to Brian, "I think this little vendetta you two have should stop." Brian nodded, "It has, that was the last of it." The commander laughed, patting Brian on the shoulder, "Very creative though." Brian grinned as Andrew came into the room, "Hey there, what's new?" Andrew glared at him, "Don't play innocent with me, you know what's new." Brian laughed, "If it's any consolation, it'll wash out in about two weeks." Andrews eyes widened, "Two weeks!" "Hey it could've been permanent ya know?" Brian laughed. Andrew laughed and shook his head, "Please say it's over. I'm really sorry Brian, I was an idiot." Brian sighed, acting like he was thinking it over.

Andrew waited for him to answer. The last week had been hell for him. He was constantly wondering what would happen next. First all his clothes went missing. It wouldn't had been that bad, except he was in the showers when they disappeared. He had to walk all the way to the command center, dripping wet, and covering his manhood with his hands. Then came the morning the anti-gravity in his room mysteriously went out. He woke up with his nose on the ceiling. And just as he was trying to push himself off the ceiling, the thing came back on and he plummeted to the floor. Not to mention that his food suddenly became very spicy. He'd taken to smelling of his food before he tasted it, but that didn't even help. And this morning he got out of the shower to realize that his shampoo had been replaced with dye, purple dye. He was now sporting one interesting head of hair. "Please Brian, I've learned my lesson," he pleaded. Brian laughed, "Alright, I'll stop." "Thank you!" Andrew said, grabbing Brian and hugging him. "Dude! Get off me!" Brian laughed, "Everyone is looking!" Andrew glanced out the windows to see the entire bay staring back at him. He quickly let Brian go, and stepped back, clearing his throat, "Um, sorry." Brian rolled his eyes, stepping out of the control room with Andrew. They were chatting about the upcoming run when Brian noticed something—a breeze. He stopped talking and looked around, wondering where it was coming from.

"Bri, what are you looking for?" Andrew asked. "You feel that?" Brian asked. Andrew stood still, then his eyes widened, "Oh shit!" They both saw it at the same time. The airlock was failing. They could see tendrils of electricity running through it. The breeze was getting stronger and they knew it wouldn't hold much longer. "Get everyone in the ships!" Brian screamed, turning and running back to the command room. Andrew started screaming at everyone to get into the ships they had docked in the bay. Several of the pilots started the life support systems on them. They waited for everyone to get aboard, then closed the hatches. Kevin looked around nervously. Then he realized he didn't see Brian. "Andrew, where's Bri?" he asked. Andrew suddenly realized he didn't know. He looked out the windows, "Oh God."

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Brian ran into the command room and over to the control panel. He hit the switch to close the bay doors, but nothing happened. He hit it again, realizing the remote must be shorted out. He hit the alarm on his way out of the control room. Suddenly the entire ship was filled with the sirens, and several automatic doors banged shut, including the doors leading into the docking bay. Brian ran across the bay, fighting the debris that was being sucked out into space. The airlock was on the verge of going, and he knew if he didn't get the doors shut he'd be a goner. He made it to the control panel on the far wall and opened it up. He was having to hang on to it as he pressed several buttons. He hit the last one, just as a large storage box hit him in the side. He lost his grip on the control panel and fell to the floor.

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Tamara and Tom were in the command center. The captain had called them up as soon as the Celestian ship came up on their radar. "What do you think?" the captain asked. "They've made no attempt to contact us?" Tamara asked. "No, they're just trailing us," he answered. "When was their last sweep?" Tom asked. "They're scanning us every forty-nine seconds," someone said. "Why would they ....?" Tamara started to say when the sirens filled the air. "Sir, the air lock in bay two is failing," a tech said. "Did they do this?" Tom asked. "No they couldn't have," the captain replied, moving over to a screen. He could see the bay. "Pan around, where is everyone?" he said. The tech panned the camera around. "There, in the ships," Tamara pointed out. "What are they looking at?" the tech asked. "Pan the camera in that direction," the captain instructed. "Sir, the Celestian ship has launched a class four transport," another tech announced. "Oh my God!" Tamara said, seeing what everyone was looking at, "Stop the doors!" "We can't," the captain said.

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Several of the pilots and mechanics were holding Kevin down. He was crying, trying to leave the ship to help his cousin. The airlock had completely failed, and the air from the bay was being sucked out into space, along with everything that wasn't clamped down. Kevin watched in horror as Brian struggled to hang on to the bay doors. He'd been swept out when the lock failed, but managed to grab one of the doors. Now he was desperately trying to pull himself back in as the doors slowly closed. "Hurry Brian," Andrew said under his breath. The doors were almost closed and he still hadn't gotten in.

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Brian glanced to his side, seeing the other massive door coming at him. He was out of air. He took one last look at Kevin, then let go, just as the doors closed.

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"Re-pressurize the bay, quickly," the captain ordered. Tamara was in shock. They'd just lost Brian. They couldn't mount a rescue team quick enough. He was already gone. "I don't believe this!" a tech said, "They're picking him up." Tamara pulled herself together and went over to the tech. The Celestian transport had managed to grab Brian just as he cleared the ship. They now had him inside and were on their way back to their own ship. "See if you can open a line of communication with them," she ordered, looking at Tom, "It's like they knew that was going to happen." He nodded. "They won't answer," the tech said. "Keep trying," she ordered. "I'll go get his friends," Tom said, quickly leaving the room.

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Nick ran into the vast control room. Every ship was monitored from right here in the palace. They'd sent someone to get him, quickly telling him that his worst nightmare had happened. *"Do they have him? Is he alright?"* Nick asked, frightened. *"We have him your highness. He's being taken to medical, but it doesn't look good,"* a tech said. Nick bit his lip, waiting for another report. By now the queen and Ana had come in. The queen saw how upset and concerned her son was and took action. *"Pull med up on the screen,"* she ordered. Nick glanced at her, then watched as the screen came to life. He watched in horror as the doctor and nurses worked on Brian. First to get him breathing again, then they transferred him to some kind of chamber. Brian looked like he'd been beaten. Bruises were forming all over his body. "What's happening to him?" Nick asked, almost in tears. "When you're exposed to the vacuum of space without a protective suit, your body tries to equalize the pressure. The oxygen in your body escapes through your cells," Rowland explained. Nick winced at the thought.

*"I want an update, now,"* the queen demanded. Nick watched as one of the doctors put on a headset, *"We have him in the oxygen chamber, but we aren't adequately supplied to handle his injuries. We must return home if we are to save him."* Nick looked at one of the techs, *"How long will it take them to get here?"* *"They can be here by tomorrow afternoon if they push it,"* the man answered. Nick nodded, *"Do it. Send a message to the Earth ship letting them know what's going on, and get him here."* *"Yes, your highness,"* the man said.

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A.J., Howie and Kevin sat in the control room in tears. Tom had explained to them what had happened, and they listened as one of the techs tried over and over again to hail the other ship. "Why won't they answer?" A.J. fumed. Kevin was so stricken with worry that he could barely sit up. Howie did his best to console him, but was consumed with worry himself. First Nick, now Brian. How many of his friends were these Angels going to take from him?

Just then they heard a voice come over the intercom, "Earth ship, this is Havendale 1. Your man is alive, but seriously injured. We are transporting him back to Celeste for medical treatment." And with that the communication was cut. Everyone in the control room watched as the massive ship came around them, then went to maximum speed. In a moment they were gone. Kevin, A.J. and Howie exchanged tearful glances, praying they made it in time.

# Chapter 21

Nick paced the library, Ana sitting at a table watching him. "Nick, maybe we should take a walk?" she suggested. He glanced back at her, "Huh? Oh sorry Ana. I'm just really worried." She gave him a comforting smile, "I know. They will be here soon though." Nick sighed, looking around the vast library for a moment, "I'd like to take a walk if you don't mind." Ana stood up and joined him, "Of course not. Besides it's not good for you to be cooped up in the palace all the time." Nick laughed, "Well, tell that to the council. I don't understand why they chose now to have all these sessions. The queen is exhausted, and I'm afraid I'm not being much help." "You are more help to her than you realize," Ana said, as they left the confines of the palace walls and headed towards the garden.

Nick glanced at her as he walked, "Something tells me that you and my mother talk with each other more than I know." Ana smiled, but didn't look at him. "Just what I thought," Nick laughed, "So what does she really think about me?" Ana stopped and looked at him, "She loves you with all her heart." Nick nodded, "I know. Every time I'm with her, I can feel it. From the king too. I don't understand it, but I feel the same way. I love them both so much, and I've only known them for a few weeks." Ana gave him a knowing look. "What?" Nick asked, not exactly sure what the look was for. "We haven't discussed this yet, but the feelings you have toward your mother and father are genetic. We are born with a sense of family, and love is a part of that. So even though you've never seen them in your life, the instant you saw them you loved them, right?" she said. "Yeah, I did," he said, thinking, "Um Ana, can I ask you something?" "Sure," she said, as they continued to walk through the garden. "Um, well .... it's kinda embarrassing," Nick admitted. She looked up at him and noticed the blush in his cheeks. Smiling, she motioned for them to sit on a nearby bench.

Nick sat down and ran his hand through his hair, building up the courage to ask his question. "What would you like to know?" she asked. "Well, all my life, when someone has kissed me, something happens to them," he started. Ana nodded, like she already knew what he was about to say. "Nick, our race is different than the human race. We are genetically geared toward our own kind," she said. He looked at her confused, "What do you mean?" "Like when you kiss a girl, you don't feel anything more than the contact of the kiss. There's no emotion with it, no feelings of love, or desire, correct?" she said. He nodded. "That's because the girl wasn't Celestian," Ana explained, "We feel immense emotion with another Celestian, but nothing with anyone outside our own race." "So that's how you keep the race so pure?" Nick asked. "Yes, we just don't have those kind of feelings for any other race," she said. "So what happens to them when they kiss us?" he asked. Ana shook her head, "I'm not sure." Nick looked across the garden, "A.J. said it was like I took his soul from him." Ana arched her eyebrow and looked at him, "A.J.?" Nick glanced at her, realizing what she was thinking, "Oh no! It's not like that at all. See I was having a nightmare, and they couldn't wake me up, so J decided to kiss me. Wait, that still doesn't

sound good does it?" Ana shook her head, laughing, "No, it doesn't." Nick blushed, "OK, I can't explain it, but I'm not like that, alright?" "Sure Nick, whatever you say," Ana laughed. "I'm serious! I'm as straight as they come," Nick protested, "I really like girls, honest!" She gazed at him, "Girls? How many girls?" Nick smiled, looking away from her rather timidly, "One."

Ana stared at him for a moment, but Nick wouldn't meet her eyes. Her heart was in her throat. He couldn't mean her, could he? Could they really have the same feelings for each other? She'd liked him from the day she saw him, but she knew it wasn't allowed, and so she pushed her feelings aside. But as much as she pushed, they pushed back. It was always in the back of her mind, and it was getting hard to hide the way she felt. The queen had already noticed and talked with her extensively about it. "Ana?" Nick said. "Huh?" she said, looking at him, "Oh sorry," she blushed. He laughed, "I see I'm not the only one distracted today." "No, I guess not," she said, "What did you ask?" "I wanted to learn about the courting practices," he said. "Which kind? Courting as in visiting dignitaries, or courting as in dating?" she asked. "Dating," Nick said. Ana stared at him for a moment, "Dating?" He nodded, and she suddenly became very uncomfortable under his stare. Nick offered her his hand, "Come on, let's walk." Ana took it, and together they walked down the trail. "You don't have to tell me now if it makes you uncomfortable," Nick said. "It's not that .... it's just ..." she started, then stopped, seeing someone ahead of them.

Nick followed her gaze, seeing Anthony sitting alone on a bench, looking very distraught. "Nick, why don't I go back? Let you two talk," she said. He nodded, "OK, but we're continuing this conversation." She smiled, "If you wish. I'll send someone when the ship arrives." "Thanks," Nick said, turning and heading up the trail toward his cousin. "*Anthony, are you alright?*" Nick asked. Anthony looked up, then dropped to the ground, kneeling. He frantically wiped the tears from his face, "*I'm sorry your highness, I didn't see you there.*" Nick laughed, "*That's beginning to be a habit. Get up, and tell me what's wrong.*" Anthony got back up and sat down, Nick coming over and sitting beside him. He waited for Anthony to say something, seeing he was having difficulty with what he wanted to say. "*Why are you crying?*" Nick asked. "*I'm sorry your high....*" Anthony started, but was interrupted by Nick. "*First of all, we're cousins, just call me Nick, alright? Now what's up?*" Nick said. Anthony brushed away another tear, "*I'm worried about the king. He's been more a father to me than my own, and I'm worried about him.*" This caught Nick off guard. The little he'd seen of Mason and Anthony it seemed like they got along. "*Tell me about yourself, and your life here,*" he asked.

*"Well, there's not much to tell really. My mother died when I was very young. She and the queen were very close, so when she died, the queen asked my father if I could come and live here. He didn't care. He was busy with his career and really didn't have time for me, so I came to live here when I was five. The king and queen treated me like I was their own, and always had time for me. The king even let me sit in on a few council sessions with him before he turned ill,"* Anthony said. Nick was in shock. He had no

idea that his parents had raised him. *"Anthony, have you been to see the king?"* he asked. *"No, not since you arrived,"* he answered. *"Why?"* Nick asked. *"You are their son, their real son. I didn't want to intrude,"* he said. *"Anthony, you are as much their son as I am. They raised you, that makes them your parents. In fact, you have more of a right to see them than I do,"* Nick said, *"This afternoon, you're coming with me to see them."* Anthony stared at Nick for a moment, *"I-I don't know what to say."* Nick smiled, *"You don't have to say anything. Now how bout we head back to the palace and you can tell me all about what it was like growing up here."*

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*"Ready, one, two, three..."* the doctor said. The team of nurses moved quickly, opening the chamber Brian was in and quickly moving him from it into another, more powerful one. They closed the hatch, bringing up the sensors on the chamber. Brian moaned as it pressurized, but didn't offer to wake up. He'd been unconscious for the entire trip, and the doctor was beginning to get worried. He didn't know that much about humans, and wasn't sure if his treatment of Brian was exactly right. Once the sensors were all reading his vitals, the doctor turned to one of the nurses, *"Stay here and monitor him. Call me if you need me."* The woman nodded, settling herself in a chair next to the chamber.

The chamber was clear except for the ends. Brian lay on a soft mattress inside it, his head on a plush pillow, and a blanket over him. The bruises that covered his entire body were the deepest black and blue in color. The nurse sighed, knowing how painful this would be if Brian did happen to wake up. She was amazed he'd made it this long. No one she'd ever treated had been exposed to the vacuum of space for as long as Brian, and lived. She stared at his face for a moment, wondering just what kind of person he was. Even through the bruises she could see his chiseled features. He actually looked a lot like a Celestian. The only difference was that he was blonde and bore no mark. The nurse was so lost in her thoughts that she failed to notice when Nick and Ana came into the room.

*"Marie?"* Ana asked. The nurse looked over, an elated smile on her face, *"Ana? I can't believe it!"* Nick watched as the two hugged each other. Ana looked so happy, he couldn't help but smile. *"Nick this is my best friend from childhood, Marie Lapool,"* Ana said. Marie by now was kneeling, having realized who Nick was. *"It's nice to meet you Marie,"* Nick said. She got up, *"Nice ...to ..meet you."* *"Oh you speak English,"* Nick said. She shrugged, *"Not very much. Ana taught me some when we were younger, I understand it better than I can speak it."* Nick smiled, *"So I guess I'll have to watch what I say huh?"* Both girls giggled. *"Marie, how is he?"* Nick asked. *"He is holding his own. He seems to be a fighter, that's good,"* she said. Nick sighed, *"He's always been a fighter. How long will he stay in there?"* *"It's*

*hard to say. He was exposed for several minutes. He has to stay in the chamber until all the nitrogen is out of his system. That could still be a while," she answered. "Nitrogen?" Nick asked. "Yes, it's like when a diver surfaces too quickly. His body can't handle the rapid change in pressure, so the nitrogen that's in your body turns to a gas and bubbles. We have to keep him at this high pressure until the nitrogen turns back into a liquid, then bring him back to normal pressure slowly," Marie said. "I didn't realize you could get the bends in space," Nick said, "But what about all the bruises? Divers don't get those." "Most of the bruises are caused from the oxygen in his system trying to equalize the pressure. Some of them are from being hit with debris. He has a couple of broken ribs. We assume he was hit with something in the docking bay," she explained.*

Nick walked over to the chamber and pressed his hand against the glass, near where Brian's hand lay. He stared at his best friend, wishing there was something he could do to help him. Ana and Marie watched, seeing the concerned look Nick had on his face. "Nick, if you'd like we could stay for a while and sit with him?" Ana suggested. Nick sighed, shaking his head, "I can't. I have to be in the council session in a few minutes." *"I will be here with him. If anything changes, I'll send for you,"* Marie offered. Nick turned to her and smiled, "Thank you. I'll be back tonight after the council has dismissed."

## Chapter 22

Brian slowly opened his eyes, blinking them against the brightness in the room. The first thing that registered was that he hurt, all over. That's how he knew he wasn't dead. You don't feel pain if your dead, right? At least he hoped not. After a moment his eyes finally adjusted and he looked around. A tinge of fear crept up his spine as he realized he was in some sort of tube. He moved his hand to press against the glass, confirming to himself that he wasn't dreaming. He really was in a tube of some sort. He lifted his head and looked at his chest. He didn't have a shirt on, and there were several mesh patches on his chest and wrists. He lifted one of his hands up and studied it. The mesh was made of fine wire, like some kind of computerized sensor.

He turned his head and peered out into the room. He knew he had to be in a hospital, simply because this room was the epitome of every hospital room he'd ever been in. The walls were so white they almost glowed. There was a bed on the other side of the room, and a lot of medical equipment scattered around in various places. But as much as this looked like a normal hospital, it was different. Something in the back of his mind was telling him that nothing was as it seemed. The last thing he remembered was letting go of the bay doors. He didn't know how anyone had managed to rescue him, or for that matter, exactly where he was. All he knew was that he was alive, and in a lot of pain at the moment.

Someone walked into the room and over to the monitors. Brian watched her, afraid to move, for fear that she would notice he was awake. He'd seen her mark as soon as she entered the room. His mind was reeling. How did the Angels get him, and for that matter, what were they going to do with him? He stared at the girl. She looked to be about his height, very trim and toned looking. Her shoulder length light brown hair hung loose, her long bangs framing her perfect face. Her eyes were just a shade lighter than his own. Brian suddenly realized he could hear his own heart beating wildly in his ears, and knew the monitors would be picking it up. He took a deep breath to try and calm down, realizing when he did that his side hurt like hell. He moaned, not meaning to, but it was too late. She saw him and walked over, a smile on her face.

Marie took one look at him and realized he was scared out of his mind. His eyes were wide, and his heart rate was increasing with every passing second. She placed her hand on the glass near his face, Brian instinctively moving away from it. Marie wracked her brain trying to think of the right words in English to calm him down. "Brian, you ..are safe here," she said, hoping that was right. He stared at her for a moment, "How do you know my name?" "Nick told .. um told us," she said. "Nick? Nick's here?"

Brian asked. She nodded, "Try and rest. I'll send for him." Brian watched her leave the room. Nick was here? They hadn't killed him? Now he was more confused than ever. And if he was here, where were the other guys? Surely they were here too? Marie came back into the room, "He will come as ... soon as he can." Brian nodded, settling a little more into his pillow. Hospital or not, this bed was comfortable. Marie smiled, seeing him relax. Brian stared at her, there was something about her that made it impossible to look away. She smiled at him again, and he realized he was obviously staring. "What's your name?" he asked. "Marie," she told him. "Where am I?" he asked. "On Celeste, in the capital city of Cystaleia," she answered. "How did I get here, and where are the other guys?" Brian asked. Marie sighed, knowing she couldn't answer all his questions with her limited knowledge of his language. "Brian, I ..do not know your language well. Nick will tell you," she said. Brian smiled, "I thought you were doing good, but I'll wait for Nick." Marie nodded, taking a seat in the chair next to the chamber. She looked over the monitors once more, then turned to say something to Brian, when she noticed he had drifted to sleep. She watched him for a moment, there was something about him that drew her to him. What it was she wasn't sure, all she knew was that she wanted to find out.

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Nick and Anthony sat on each side of the king's bed. The king was so weak that he couldn't speak. Both boys held his hands, letting him know they were there. LaDonna stood back, watching her two sons with their father. Anthony had ceased to be her nephew a long time ago. She considered him her own, as did the king. When Nick was found, she worried about Anthony. She didn't want him to feel neglected in any way, but she also needed time with Nick alone, to get to know him after all the years apart. She was proud of the man he'd become, and proud of how he stepped up and took on the responsibility that came with his birthright. He didn't have to, but he did. And now he and Anthony seemed to be getting along well. There was only one thing she wanted now, and that was for her husband to get well, but she knew that was just a wish. Over the last few weeks she'd watched the man she loved more than life itself deteriorate. Her only saving grace was that Nick was found, otherwise she wasn't sure how she would have made it this long. The king coughed, a horrible retching sound it was. LaDonna knew his time was near.

Rowland stepped into the room, "*Pardon me your highness, but the prince's friend is awake.*" Nick looked back at them, having overheard. He bit his lip, not knowing what to do. He wanted to go see Brian, but he was afraid to leave his father. The queen walked over to him, "*Go see your friend. We will call you if anything changes.*" Nick nodded, getting up, his mother taking his place. He headed to the door, but looked back. Anthony and his mother were talking quietly. That was the true family here, Nick knew it from the moment he saw them together. Sure he was their son by birth, but Anthony was their son by experience. "Your highness?" Rowland said, pulling Nick from his thoughts. "Lets go Rowland. I'm sure Bri's wondering what's going on," he said, leaving the room.

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Ana was waiting for them outside Brian's room. Nick smiled at her as he approached, "How is he?" "I haven't gone in yet. I was afraid of how he would react to me without you being there," she said. "Yeah, the last time he saw you, you were kidnapping me," Nick remembered, passing his mark across the door and walking in. Marie looked up, immediately kneeling. Nick laughed, he couldn't help it. The ritual of kneeling before a royal was on the verge of absurd to him. "Marie, get up," he said, walking over to the chamber, "I thought he was awake?" "*He was, he drifted back to sleep a little while ago,*" Marie said. Nick looked down at his friend, "Brian? Come on buddy, wake up."

Brian stirred, opening his eyes and squinting against the light in the room. Ana dimmed the lights, making it easier on Brian. He blinked a few times, then looked up, a relieved smile on his face, "Nick, God I missed you." "I missed you too Bri," Nick said, "You had me worried for a while." "Man, what happened to me? I feel like hell," Brian said. Nick laughed, "Well, you shouldn't go for a space walk without a suit, I thought you knew that." Brian laughed, holding his side, "Ow, man don't make me laugh, it hurts." "Sorry," Nick said. Brian looked past Nick, seeing Ana. "Oh this is Ana," Nick said, "You remember her don't you?" Brian nodded, "Nick, what's going on here? Are we in trouble?" Nick shook his head, "No Bri. The agents lied to us. Nothing they said was true." "Then why did they take you?" he asked. "They took me because I'm their prince. The king is ill, and I'm the only heir to the throne," Nick explained. Brian stared at him, "Nuh uh!" "It's true Brian," Ana said.

Brian stared at them. This was a little too much to take. Nick was a prince? "Bri, you OK in there?" Nick asked. He looked over, "Huh?" "You kinda drifted off there, you alright?" Nick said. "Yeah, um I'm just a little shocked," he answered. "Trust me, so was I," Nick said. "So what does that mean?" Brian asked, "We came to take you home." Nick sighed, "I am home Brian. I'm not going back." Tears formed in Brian's eyes, "But ..." Nick shook his head, "I'll explain everything once you're feeling better. Just rest for a while alright?" Brian wiped the tears from his eyes and nodded. "*Marie, how long before he can be taken out of the chamber?*" Nick asked. "*We started depressurizing it as soon as he woke up, but it will take several more hours before we can safely take him out,*" she answered. "*Alright, as soon as he's out, I want him moved to my floor,*" Nick said. Marie nodded. Nick looked back over at Brian. He was staring at him with his mouth slightly open. "It's OK," Nick said, "A lot of things have changed since you last saw me. I've learned my native language, and I have these amazing abilities I never knew existed, but I'm still me Bri. I'm still your best friend, OK?" "OK," Brian said, still not sure about the situation he was in. Nick seemed like Nick, but he was different too. Did they brainwash him? Brian wasn't sure, but there wasn't anything he could do about it until he was on his feet.

Brian watched as a man came into the room. He walked over to Nick and whispered something in his ear. Nick nodded, turning to Brian, "I need to leave for a while. Try and rest, Ana and Marie will be here if you need anything." Brian nodded, watching Nick hurry out of the room. "What's going on?" he asked. Ana smiled at him, but there was a deep sadness in her eyes, "His father is dying." "The king?" Brian asked. "Yes," she said. Brian glanced at Marie, she had the same sadness in her face. "Brian, try and rest. We will take you out in a few hours," Ana said. He nodded, closing his eyes. He knew he had to get better quickly, Nick was going to need him, he could feel it.

## Chapter 23

Ana and Marie sat in Brian's room talking. They hadn't seen each other in several years, so they had a lot of catching up to do. Ana told Marie of her position as ambassador to Earth, and her most recent position as Nick's teacher. Marie told of her time as a nurse, and how she came to be assigned to the palace. The girls were enjoying their time together, although both seemed to be distracted. Marie had noticed the way Ana talked about Nick, quickly realizing her friend had deep feelings for him. And Ana took notice of how enamored Marie seemed to be with Brian.

"Hello? Celeste to Marie," Ana laughed. Marie looked over at her friend, and blushed, *"Sorry Ana."* Ana shook her head, "In English, you're the one that suddenly took an interest in it, so use it." "Sorry," Marie said, "I was um ..." "Staring at the Earthling again?" Ana offered. Marie's face turned even brighter, "Ana!" "What? You've been doing it since Nick and I came in," she said. "I can't help it. There's something about him, I just can't not look," Marie admitted. "Well, if it's any consolation, it seems that Brian is having the same problem with you," Ana teased. Marie sighed, glancing over at Brian, making sure he was still asleep, "This isn't suppose to happen. Why do I feel like this towards him?" Ana shrugged her shoulders, "I don't know ..... what exactly are you feeling?" she asked with raised eyebrows. Marie rolled her eyes, "I um ... like him? Is that the word?" Ana stared at her for a moment, "Like as in have feelings for him?" Marie nodded, "I don't understand it Ana. I don't know him, we've barely talked, but I can't make my heart stop beating overtime whenever he looks at me."

Ana stared at her friend like she'd grown a third arm. "Stop looking at me like that," Marie said. Ana got up and walked over to the chamber, peering down at Brian for a moment. "He does look like us," she admitted, coming back over to her chair, "I admit that when we found them, I thought Brian was the prince. I was actually shocked when the mark showed up on Nick's arm, and not Brian's." "Do you think he could be one of us?" Marie asked. "He doesn't carry the mark, he can't be," she said. "Yeah, but we aren't born with the mark Ana, you know that. If he was born on Earth, he wouldn't have it," Marie countered. "Has he been scanned?" Ana asked. Marie smiled, "No, but we can fix that once he's out of the chamber." The girls smiled at each other, "Yeah, let's do that," Ana said. Marie grabbed Brian's chart and wrote the orders for the tests down, perfectly matching the doctors handwriting. "Oh you're good," Ana laughed. "I write most of his orders anyway. He hates doing the paperwork," Marie smiled. "Good for you, huh?" Ana asked. Marie looked over at Brian, "Right now, yeah it is."

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Nick stood near the door to his father's room. Anthony and the queen were still sitting with him, quietly talking to him. Nick didn't want to interrupt them. They'd spent their lives with each other, and they needed time to say goodbye. At some point, Mason appeared beside him. Nick didn't even notice when he came in, but now that he was here, he noticed something. There was no sadness in his uncle's eyes, no posture of grief. Mason stood there staring at his brother with no emotion whatsoever on his face. Nick was on the verge of tears, and his uncle was stone-faced? Nick sighed, telling himself that different people deal with death in different ways. Maybe this was just Mason's way of dealing with it, just not to let any emotion escape at all.

He watched as Anthony and then the queen hugged his father. They both got up, clinging to each other for strength. The king looked in Nick's direction, but motioned Mason over. Mason walked over to the bed and sat down, taking his older brother's hand. Nick couldn't hear what the king was saying, but judging from the expression on his face, it wasn't a heartfelt goodbye. It looked more like a warning. Mason only nodded, not the least bit phased. What good was a threat from a dying king anyway? Mason got up and glanced at Nick for a moment, before looking back at his brother. There was an exchange there, that set the hairs on the back of Nick's neck on end. It was almost as if they were conversing, without speaking. Nick was sure they were, having found out that was one of his abilities as well—to project his thoughts to others without having to verbalize them. Mason shook his head, then bowed, in a half-curtsy to the king. Nick glared at his uncle, feeling the gesture was one of defiance, not respect. Then without a word, Mason returned to his place near the door.

Nick glared at him for a moment, but Mason refused eye contact with him. Nick finally turned his attention back to his father, who was motioning for him to come over. Nick walked across the room and sat down by his father's side, taking his hand. *"Nickolas, there is so much I need to tell you... but there is no time,"* the king said. Nick's eyes were stinging from his tears, but he made no effort to wipe them away. *"Son, when I go, the planet will look to you for guidance. Lead them with your heart,"* the king told him. Nick nodded, *"I'll do my best to make you proud of me."* His father smiled, *"I'm already proud of you. You have become a good man and have accomplished many things already. I will always be proud of you Nick, and I will always love you."* The king reached up, and Nick took him in his arms, hugging him. *"Watch out for the council, especially your uncle. He stands much to gain if you fail,"* the king whispered in Nick's ear. Nick nodded, still holding his father, *"Please don't go, I'm not sure I'm ready for this."* *"I'm sorry my son, but I can no longer fight this battle. Remember what I've told you, and you will be fine,"* the king said. Nick nodded, biting his lower lip to keep it from trembling, *"I love you,"* he whispered. The king smiled, leaning into Nick's embrace, *"I love you my son .... always."*

It took a moment for Nick to realize that his father was no longer hugging him. Nick carefully lay him back on the bed, *"Father? Please don't go.."* he begged, as the doctors turned the monitors off. Nick looked up at them, wanting them to do something, but they just looked at him with sadness in their

faces. The king was dead. Nick looked back down at his father, tears streaming down his face. Suddenly he felt someone's hand on his shoulder and looked up into the loving eyes of his mother. She took him in her arms and held him as he sobbed, Anthony standing with them, offering his own support. Mason watched his family as they grieved. He sighed, looking over at Rowland, *"I will send the word."* Rowland nodded as Mason turned and left the room.

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Brian moaned as they lifted him from the chamber over to the bed. His bruises were looking much better, but he was still sore. He settled into the bed, as several nurses removed some of the patches from his chest, leaving others. One of the nurses came over with a needle in her hand, and reached for Brian's arm. He jerked it away, "What are you doing?" "It's alright Brian," Ana said, "We need to make sure you're OK. It's just a few tests to make sure we didn't miss anything." Brian stared at her for a moment, still suspicious. Marie walked over to his side, "It's all routine. We won't do anything to hurt you." Brian gazed into her crystal blue eyes for a moment, then nodded, letting the nurse take his blood. He watched as another nurse came over with some sort of hand held wand, and passed it over him. He wondered what that did. Then someone snipped off a small piece of his hair. "Hey! What's that for?" he asked, as the person walked out of the room. Ana and Marie smiled at each other. "Just some tests," Marie said, "You'd be amazed at what you can learn about a persons health from analyzing their hair." "Oh, OK, I guess," Brian said, still feeling uneasy. He wished Nick would come back in. He trusted Nick.

"So, how are you feeling?" Ana asked, when the nurses left the room. "Sore and a little tired," he admitted. "That's to be expected. You're very lucky to even be alive," she said. "How did you rescue me?" he asked. "We had a ship trailing yours. Nick ordered it closer and put the rescue teams on alert. He knew something was going to happen. So when we saw that your airlock was failing, we launched. They picked you up as soon as you cleared your ship," she explained. "But how did he know?" Brian asked. "It is one of his abilities. Sometimes he can see the past or the future. He saw you being sucked out of the ship," she said. "How many of these abilities does he have?" he asked, in stunned amazement. "He has all seven," Ana said. "Seven?" Brian asked. She nodded, "I will let Nick tell you what they all are."

"But, if you brought me here, where is my ship? Where are the guys?" Brian asked. "They are still on their way here. If they keep their rate of speed, they should arrive in two days," Ana said. "Oh," he said, not even thinking that they weren't there yet. "Brian, why don't you rest for a little while. We'll wait until we get the test results back before we move you to your room," Marie said. "My room? I thought

this was my room," he said. She smiled at him, "The prince wants you near him, on his floor." It took Brian a second to remember that Nick was the prince, "Oh, OK." Marie helped him settled into bed. Brian stared at her the entire time, he couldn't help it. He knew he was staring, but he couldn't make himself stop. As he was just closing his eyes to go back to sleep, bells started ringing. He opened his eyes and looked around. It sounded like every bell in the city was ringing. He looked over at the girls. They both had tears in their eyes. "What is it?" he asked. "It's the king," Ana said, "He's passed away." Marie walked over to a screen on the wall and flipped a switch. Brian watched as the screen came to life, filled with images of the king throughout the years. He couldn't understand what was being said, but he knew a memorial when he saw one. The girls wept as the story played on.

Brian felt for them. They obviously loved the king, and his death was painful. Then his thoughts went to Nick. This was Nick's dad, his real dad. He could only imagine how hurt Nick was right now. Brian sighed, leaning back in bed. None of this was fair. For Nick to be brought here and reunited with his family, only to lose his father in a matter of a few weeks? No, this definitely wasn't fair. His attention went back to the screen as a few pictures of Nick came on. "What are they saying?" he asked. Marie wiped her face, "That the funeral will be tomorrow, and Nick will be named King afterwards." Brian bit his lip, realizing that all hope of Nick coming home just flew out the window. He closed his eyes and shed his own tears of loss.

## Chapter 24

Nick sat on his balcony, in the dark, overlooking the city. Even in the middle of the night, there seemed to be a dark cloud hovering over the usually festive metropolis. He sighed, rubbing his eyes. He'd cried until he had no more tears. His mother and Anthony held him until he'd stopped. Nick collected himself, and made sure they were going to be alright, then left his fathers room and headed back to his own. He needed to be alone for a little while. He knew this day would come, but he never imagined that it would hurt so much. He was on a roller coaster of emotions, going all the way from heart retching sadness, to all out anger. He couldn't make sense of them, instead he rode them out. He couldn't understand why God would put him through this. Why would He allow him to find his true family, then take his father away from him? Nick had always held the belief that things happened for a reason, but he saw no reason in this. Maybe he wasn't suppose to yet? But it would have comforted him more if he could.

He stared up at the moon, thinking about what was going to happen in the morning. He wasn't sure if he was ready, but ready or not, it was going to happen. As he cried, his mother softly told him what would happen. They would leave the palace in the morning, a great procession marching through the city to the country side. There they would bury his father in an elaborate ceremony, then they would return. Later in the day, another elaborate ceremony would take place in the palace throne room. There Nick would be named King. It is suppose to be a time of celebration when a new King is named, but Nick just couldn't see celebrating when he felt so much loss. He didn't want to buck the system, especially right off the bat, but he wasn't entering this position on a happy note. And he wanted to make sure everyone knew that. He knew he didn't hold the complete trust of the people. Even though he was their prince, he was also an outsider. No one told him that, but he could feel it. He needed to prove to everyone, even himself, that he was capable of doing this, and that he was just like them.

Nick heard his door open and someone walk in. "Your highness?" "Out here Rowland," Nick answered. Rowland walked out to the balcony, "I'm sorry to bother you, but Ana wanted you to know that your friend is being brought up." Nick stood up, heading for the door. He'd been so consumed in his loss, that he'd almost forgotten that Brian was there. He now saw the reason for Brian's accident. It brought him to Celeste, just when Nick needed him the most. "Nick, before you see him, there's something you need to know," Rowland said, catching him at the door. Nick turned to his bodyguard turned friend, "What is it?"

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Brian sat in a hover chair of sorts. He supposed it was their version of a wheelchair, but it had no wheels. Instead it hovered. All of his tests had come back and the nurses had removed the remaining sensors and given him a shirt and robe to go along with the pajama pants he was already wearing. He wasn't sure where the pants came from, but from the way Marie had looked at him, he had a feeling she had something to do with it. Then they'd made him get in the chair, and were now escorting him down a massive hallway. Ana and Marie had been talking non stop since his tests came back, and even though Brian couldn't understand what they were saying, he knew they were talking about him. At first they had seemed shocked, but that quickly changed to excitement. He had no idea what it was, but it must've impressed the hell outta them, because it seemed that they told everyone they came in contact with. The big man that came and got Nick seemed rather stunned at what they told him. He had quickly rushed off, leaving them in the hall.

They reached a door and Brian watched as Marie passed her mark across a sensor and the door opened. So those things had a purpose other than denoting their class? Brian's mouth dropped open when they entered the room. He looked around in awe. The room was enormous, and more opulent than the finest of rooms he'd ever seen. They took him over to the bed and Ana and Marie helped him get settled. Marie then walked over and opened the balcony doors, letting in the warm night air. "This is beautiful," Brian commented. Ana smiled at him, "You are on the same floor as the royal family. Nick wanted you close to him." "Will I get to see him?" he asked. "I'm not sure," Ana said, as someone came in the room carrying a food tray. "Try and eat something," Marie said, taking the tray from the servant and laying it across Brian's lap.

Brian looked down at the food, biting his lip. Everything was the wrong color and texture. What he assumed to be the meat was green. It was all he could do not to get sick. "I know it looks different than what you're used to, but it's good," Ana said, noting the look on Brian's face matched Nick's the first time he'd seen their food. Brian closed his eyes and pushed the tray away, "I don't think I can." Ana and Marie exchanged glances. Brian needed to eat to regain his energy. Marie sat on the side of the bed, taking the fork and knife, cutting up the 'meat'. Brian watched her, thinking if she ate some of it, he'd lose what grip he had on his churning stomach. She smiled at him, "You will like this." He shook his head, "I don't think so." Marie laughed, "Close your eyes." "Marie, I ...." he started to protest. She reached out and cupped his cheek with her hand, "You need to eat, please." Brian stared into her eyes, seeing what looked like concern in them. He sighed, closing his eyes. Marie held the fork up to his nose, "Tell me what you smell." "It smells like steak," he said. "Now open your mouth," she said. He did, taking the food in and letting the flavor flood his senses. It was the best thing he'd eaten in his life. It almost melted in his mouth, leaving him craving more. He opened his eyes, staring at her in disbelief. "How can something that looks that awful, taste that good?" he asked. She laughed and shrugged her shoulders, handing him the fork.

Brian tried everything on the tray. Some of the food was a little too sweet for him, but he managed to eat about half of it. Ana stood near the door, watching Marie with Brian. They both seemed so taken with each other, almost like love at first sight. She smiled, happy for her friend, but she also felt a tinge of jealousy. Once word got out about Brian, his and Maire's relationship would be looked on as normal, not so with her. The only man she ever felt love for she couldn't be in a relationship with. It wasn't allowed, and never would be. She sighed trying to push her feelings to the back of her mind. There were more pressing things she needed to be thinking about. Like how to tell Brian what they found out, and how to help Nick through the transition from prince to king.

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Nick leaned against the door in shock, "Does he know?" "No your highness, we haven't told him yet," Rowland answered. "I-I can't believe this," Nick said, "How? I thought we weren't able to .... um you know." Rowland smiled, "We don't feel emotions, that doesn't mean we can't ...do the job." Nick started pacing the room, "Oh my God, he's so gonna freak." Rowland looked at him confused, "Are you talking to God?" Nick stopped pacing and looked at him, "Huh? Oh, no ... Earth expression." Rowland nodded. "So who's going to tell him?" Nick asked. "We thought it would be better coming from you," he said, "He trusts you." Nick laughed, taking a deep breath, "Well let's go enlighten him then."

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Brian stared at Marie. He still couldn't figure out why he was so attracted to her, he just was. He was feeling things he never thought possible, and it was beginning to worry him. Had they done something to him while he was asleep? He wasn't sure. He wished he could see Nick again, maybe he would tell him exactly what was going on. But then again, he might not. Brian still wondered about Nick, maybe they'd done something to him too? Marie took his hand, drawing him from his suspicions, "You look a million galaxies away." He smiled at her, "I was. All this is hard to take, ya know?" She nodded, "I imagine that it is." "Um, you never told me how my tests came out," he prodded. Marie glanced at Ana for a second. "Everything looked fine," Ana said. Brian looked from one to the other, "So what was all that talking about?"

Just then the door opened and Nick came in. Marie and Ana both knelt as he walked by. Brian wondered if he was expected to do that too. Nick came over and sat down next to him, "How you feeling?" "OK," Brian answered, "You alright?" Nick sighed heavily, "I'll make it." "You know if you need to talk, I'm here," Brian offered. Nick smiled at his friend, "I know, and I'll probably take you up on that

a little later. Right now though, I need to tell you something." Brian sat up a little more, seeing the serious expression on Nick's face, "What is it?" "Um, well after they took you out of the chamber they ran some tests..." Nick said. "Uh huh," Brian said. "Some genetic tests," Nick added. Brian looked over at the girls, both were staring at the floor. "And?" he asked, not sure he wanted to know. "You uh, you have some of the same genes that we do. You're not completely human," Nick said. "What?!" Brian yelled. "Bri, calm down," Nick said, "It's not a bad thing." "Not a bad thing!?! Nick are you nuts! How the hell did this happen? Who .... I .... oh my God," Brian muttered, trying to catch his breath.

Nick looked over at Rowland and the girls, *"Well this is going well."* All three smiled, afraid to laugh, knowing it would upset Brian even more if they did. *"Why don't you guys leave the room for a little while, let me talk to him alone,"* Nick said. They nodded, turning and leaving the room. Brian watched the exchange, then looked at Nick. His heart was beating so rapidly that he knew at any moment it would beat right out of his chest. "Bri, take a deep breath and calm down," Nick said. Brian held his side, "I can't...it hurts." "OK, then just listen to me," Nick went on, "This isn't a bad thing. You're mom didn't cheat on your dad or anything. It goes back further than that. Didn't you wonder why you look so much like everyone here?" "It never crossed my mind," Brian said. Nick smiled at him, "Well now I understand." "Understand what?" he asked. "Why we're such good friends. Why the moment we met we felt an instant bond with each other," Nick explained. "Because I'm part Angel?" Brian asked. Nick nodded, "See we are drawn to our own kind, that's why I never .. um kept a girlfriend very long."

"What are you saying?" Brian asked, confused. "Marie likes you," he said. "So? What does that have to do with anything?" Brian asked. "She couldn't unless you were one of us," Nick said, "That's what prompted them to do the tests in the first place." "But ... Nick you've had girlfriends you liked," he said. Nick bit his lip and shook his head. Brian stared at him, "You never had any feelings for them?" "No," he answered. "They why did you ...?" "Because it was the normal thing to do Bri. I couldn't tell you how I felt, cause no one else felt that way. It'd just be another thing that made me different. So I um, I did what I saw everyone else doing so I would fit in," Nick confessed. Brian ran his hand through his curls, staring at his friend, "God Nick, I never knew it was that bad." Nick shrugged, "Its OK." "No it's not, you should've told me," Brian said. "And what would you have done Bri? What would you have said if I came in your room and told you that I didn't feel anything when I was with my girlfriends?" Nick asked. Brian laughed, "I probably would've asked you if you liked guys instead." Nick laughed, "See, even if I'd explained it to you until I was blue in the face, you wouldn't have understood." "Until now," Brian said, "So is that why I feel the way I do about Marie? Because I'm drawn to her?" Nick shrugged, "Probably, but it could also be that she's hot and you've been single for how long?" "Shut up," Brian laughed.

Nick smiled at him, "Bri, you do have a decision you need to make." Brian looked at him, afraid of what was coming next. "Until they ran the tests on you, they believed that children between our races wasn't possible. Not that we couldn't do it, just that with no emotion involved, why would you, ya know? So

anyway the whole medical community is already buzzing about this..." Nick said. "They don't wanna do a bunch of tests on me do they?" Brian asked, a tinge of fear in his voice. "Oh no, not at all," Nick said, "The decision you have is about this," he said, gesturing towards his mark. Brian looked down at Nick's wrist, his mark glowing brightly. "See you are entitled to one, if you want it," Nick said. Brian looked up at him, "What do you mean? What does it do?" "It's how we move around. It not only lets people know who we are, but it's our access to everything. Its our security code so to speak," he said. "I um, I don't know," Brian said, looking back down at Nick's. Ever since they'd discovered what Nick was, Brian had thought his mark was interesting. Now they were offering him one of his own, just because he was part Angel? "Would it look like yours?" he asked, somewhat shyly. "No, yours wouldn't be like anybody else's," Nick answered. Brian thought about it. No one would have to know he had it, since it wouldn't be visible on earth. The only people that would see it, would be those here. He glanced back up at Nick, "What do you want me to do?" "This is your decision Bri. I would understand if you didn't want it, but it would be an honor to all of us if you did," Nick said. Brian glanced down at his own wrist for a moment, thinking. He knew if he did this, it would make Nick happy, and right now Nick needed to be happy. "OK," he said. "You'll accept the mark?" Nick asked, wanting to make sure. Brian nodded, "Yes." Nick smiled at him, and this time Brian saw it in his eyes as well, "I'll let them know."

"Wait, don't leave," Brian said. Nick held his finger up, as he walked to the door. He opened it and said something to those waiting outside, then he closed the door and came back over. "I'm here, so what do you want to talk about?" Nick asked. "You," Brian said, "I know you Nick. As much you're trying to be brave, you're hurting." Nick sighed, looking out the balcony doors for a moment. "Talk to me Nicky," Brian pleaded. "I'm angry Bri," he said in a whisper, "I'm so angry at them for keeping me away for so long. For denying me the chance to really get to know my dad. I can't get those years back, they're gone, and now so is he." "Oh Nick," Brian said, reaching out and pulling his friend into a hug. "I'm so sorry," Brian said as Nick broke down crying on his shoulder. "I can't explain what it felt like to finally meet him. It was like a piece of me that'd been missing my whole life just suddenly showed up. Now he's gone .... and I .. I have to be what he was," Nick cried, "I can't do it Bri."

"Nick, isn't there anyone else?" Brian asked. He shook his head, "I'm it Bri. If I don't do this ... this entire planet could be thrown into a civil war. The members of the council would fight for power..... they gave me an out, but I couldn't leave knowing what would happen. I couldn't live with it," Nick cried, "And my father ... he had such hopes for me. He told me he was proud of me..... proud of me Bri. Do you know how long I've wanted to hear those words? I can't leave ... I can't fail him like that." Brian held Nick tighter, feeling more admiration for his friend than ever. Brian couldn't do what Nick was doing. Nick had grown up so much in the month they'd been apart. He'd taken on an immense responsibility, one that Brian was sure it took years to learn. Nick had two weeks. "You won't fail him Nick," he said, "You know why?" Nick shook his head. "Because you have always let your heart lead you. You don't make decisions based on personal gain, you've always done what was right. You can do this, and I'll be here for as long as you let me to help you," he said. "Thank you Bri ...so much," Nick whispered.

The door opened, and Brian and Nick let go of each other. Nick frantically wiped away his tears, as the doctor, Ana, Marie and Rowland entered the room. Nick got up as the doctor came over to Brian. Ana stepped closer to him, reaching over and squeezing his hand. Nick smiled down at her, knowing she was concerned for him. "I'm alright," he softly told her. She nodded, turning her attention back to the doctor and Brian. Brian was a little nervous as the doctor spoke to Marie. The tray he'd brought in with him looked for lack of a better word, scary. Marie looked at him, "Brian, we will knock you out for this. Normally we get our marks when we are babies, so we don't remember the pain. We've never done this to an adult, so it's better to just sedate you before we start." "Um ... OK," Brian said, nervously glancing at Nick. Nick smiled at him, "It'll be fine Bri. You'll go to sleep and not feel a thing." Brian swallowed hard as the doctor approached him with a gun like instrument. Marie sat down next to him, "Lay back." Brian did as she told him, the doctor handing Marie the instrument. She gently turned his head and placed the cold metal against his neck, pulling the trigger. Brian jerked as the drug entered his system. It didn't hurt, it was just strange feeling. He looked back over at Marie as the doctor took his right hand and started cleaning his wrist. He was finding it hard to keep his eyes open, wanting nothing more than to go to sleep. Marie gently touched his cheek, "Don't fight it. Go to sleep, I'll be here when you wake up." Brian nodded, letting his eyes close and the peaceful bliss of sleep take him.

## Chapter 25

Nick stood in front of his mirror staring at himself. The twin suns had just risen, and he was already up. He had stayed with Brian for a few hours, watching him as he slept. Then he'd retired to his room, catching a few hours sleep. Now he was up, showered and already dressed. His mother had told him what to wear the night before, and now he looked at himself. He was completely in black, from the black long sleeved silk-like shirt, tight fitting black pants that were tucked into his over the knee black boots, to the matching silk-like sash tied around his waist. He noted how pale he looked, with his white hair spiked in all directions. He left the crown for last, not wanting to put it on.

He sat down on his bed, staring out the balcony doors. He couldn't shake the weight he felt on his shoulders. All he wanted to do was curl up in a ball and cry, but he'd already been doing that. And so far, it didn't seem to help any. He sighed, knowing that out of all the things that had happened to him in his life, today would be the most important. He was nervous, sad, angry, and worried. He wanted to make his father proud of him, to do the right thing.. but he wasn't sure he knew how. He'd grown up in a totally different world, with different beliefs. He knew that would cause him problems, especially with the council. But maybe that's what Celeste needed now? A new way of looking at things. He felt someone outside his door, and immediately recognized her. The door opened and his mother walked in.

She managed a smile as she walked over to him, *"How are you this morning?"* *"Nervous,"* he replied as she sat down next to him. She patted his knee, *"I know this is going to be a hard day for all of us. Why don't you come down for breakfast before we leave?"* Nick shook his head, *"I don't think I can eat right now."* LaDonna reached up and cupped his cheek, *"I understand. I'm not in the mood to eat either, but it is going to be a long morning. At least try."* Nick sighed, nodding his head, *"I'll be down in a minute. I want to check on Brian first."* His mother took his hand and walked with him to the door, *"I would like to come with you. I want to meet him."* Nick smiled, leading her down the hall to Brian's door.

He passed his mark across the sensor, then lead his mother into the room. Marie was asleep in a chair next to the bed, and Brian was in bed curled up, hugging a pillow, snoring slightly. Nick and his mother smiled at each other. They quietly walked over to the bed, looking down at Brian. *"He does bare a striking resemblance to us,"* the queen whispered. Nick nodded, *"He kinda freaked when I told him, but I think he's OK with it now."* Brian turned over in his sleep, letting go of the pillow. His mark glowed in the morning sun light. *"Wow,"* Nick said, seeing it for the first time. They had kept it covered for several hours after inserting it, to let it settle. *"The design is beautiful,"* the queen commented. *"Yeah it is,"*

Nick said. Brian's mark was unlike anyone else's. They had to design it just for him. It was a circle with the twin suns in the background, their rays shining outward to the edge of the circle, all glowing a brilliant golden color. But in the center was a replica of Earth. It glowed blue, making it seem alive with the waves of the oceans. Nick laughed a little, *"Ours seem plain next to that."* The queen smiled, *"That they do. I wasn't aware they had developed two toned ones."* *"Maybe we should have ours redone?"* Nick said. His mother shook her head, *"No thank you. I'm happy with the one I've had all these years."* Nick glanced at his, *"I'm still getting used to seeing mine all the time."* She looked up at him, then took his hand, *"Come, let's let them sleep. We will see them after breakfast."* Nick glanced at Brian once more, then let his mother lead him out of the room.

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Brian stood in the shower letting the water flow over his bruised body. He awoke to the smell of breakfast. Marie had just finished eating what they'd brought her, so she sat and talked to him as he ate his. He'd gotten up and headed into the bathroom, only to have to return and ask Marie how to work the shower. Now he stood in there letting the heat from the water sooth his sore body. His bruises looked better, although his ribs still ached. He wondered how long it would take them to heal. He stared at his mark again, for the millionth time since he'd woken up. He couldn't believe how beautiful it was, and that he really had it. His wrist was a little sore, but Marie assured him the soreness would subside in a day or so. He looked in the mirror that was in the shower, making sure he hadn't missed somewhere shaving. He hadn't realized just how scruffy he was looking until he climbed in the shower and saw himself. It was nice shaving in the shower, and he wondered how they kept the mirror from fogging up. He shook his head, realizing his mind was in a million different places at the same time. He shut the water off and grabbed a towel, drying off. He needed to focus. Nick would need his support today, more than any other time in their lives. He couldn't be wasting time wondering about petty little things like shower mirrors.

He wrapped the towel around himself and walked back into his room, "Marie, do I have any clothes here...?" he asked, stopping dead in his tracks when he realized it wasn't Marie he was talking to. Nick stood in the room, with another woman. Nick resembled her a lot, and Brian figured that was his mother, the queen. The Queen! Brian stood there in his towel, wide eyed, not knowing what to do. He remembered the girls kneeling when Nick walked in last night, so he dropped to his knees, praying to God the towel stayed on. Nick started laughing, "Sorry Bri, we didn't expect you to come out in a towel." Brian looked up at his friend, "What else am I gonna come out of the shower in?" The queen walked over and stood in front of him. "Nick, what am I suppose to do here?" Brian asked, completely embarrassed. "Take her hand when she offers it to you," Nick said, coming over to stand beside his mother. *"This is Brian Littrell, my best friend,"* he said. LaDonna offered Brian her hand, and he took it. She gently pulled him up, Brian hanging on to the towel for dear life as he stood. *"Tell him it is an honor*

*to meet my son's dearest friend,"* she said. "She say's it's an honor to meet you," Nick translated. Brian smiled at her, "Nice to meet you too." "*He say's he's honored to meet you as well,"* Nick said. LaDonna smiled, letting go of Brian's hand, "*Now, get your friend something to wear before he dies of embarrassment,"* she laughed, turning and heading out of the room. Nick laughed, as Brian stared at him, "What'd she say?" "She realized you were embarrassed and told me to get you some clothes," Nick said, "Come on."

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Brian stared at himself in the mirror, "No way." Nick laughed and nodded, "Way man." "I look like a freakin dork," Brian whined. "Welcome to my world," Nick laughed, "You actually get used to them after a while." Brian looked down at himself, "Uh, I don't think so." "Come on man, it's not that bad," Nick said. Brian looked at him like he'd sprouted wings, "You're kidding right? Nick this is horrible. You can see my ..... everything in this." "That's what the shirt is for silly," Nick said. "It's not long enough," Brian protested. "Hey, it's way longer on you than it ever was on me. Be thankful," Nick laughed. Brian stared at himself again, pulling his shirt down some more. He had on a black shirt, with very tight tan pants and over the knee black boots.

"This is appropriate for a funeral?" he asked. Nick's mood turned somber, "Yeah. You and Marie will be riding in the back of the procession, behind the council members and their families." "I wish I could ride with you," Brian said. Nick sighed, "So do I man, but this is one thing I have to do by myself." "Are we ready then?" Brian asked. "Almost," Nick said, getting up and walking over to his dressing table. He took a tube out of a drawer and opened it up, squirting some of the black goo onto his finger. "Close your eyes," he told Brian. Brian closed his eyes, and Nick ran his finger down the right side of his face, across his eyelid and down his cheek. "OK," he said. Brian opened his eyes and looked at himself, "What's this for?" "It is a sign of our loss. The entire planet will wear this mark for a week," Nick explained. "Oh," Brian said, "Do you need help with yours?" Nick nodded, handing Brian the tube. He bent down, Brian running his finger down his cheek. Nick looked in the mirror. It looked as if black tears were streaming down that side of his face. He sighed, grabbing his crown and walking out of the room.

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The two met Rowland, Marie and Ana in the hall, heading down to the stables. The girls were in black dresses, the black marks on their faces. Marie took Brian's hand as they walked behind Nick and Ana. "Here," she said, handing him something that looked like a hearing aid. "What's this?" he asked.

"Translator, so we don't have to tell you what's going on," she answered. "Thanks," he said, putting it in his ear. *"Do you understand what I'm saying?"* Marie asked. Brian looked at her amazed, "Yeah, that's cool. It was in your voice." She nodded, squeezing his hand.

As they walked out of the palace and towards the stables Brian gawked at everything. He'd never seen such a beautiful city, it kinda reminded him of the last Star Wars movie. Then he saw the unicorns. "Oh wow," he said. Marie tugged on his hand, so they wouldn't fall behind. Brian had to keep telling himself he could gawk later, he needed to be here for Nick, but then he'd see something else that just blew his mind. Nick stopped in front of a carriage, "Bri, this is your ride." Brian helped Marie into the open air carriage, then turned to Nick, "I'm here man, whenever you need me." "Thanks," Nick said, quickly hugging Brian, then heading on up the waiting procession. Brian climbed into the carriage and looked around, feeling awkward and out of place. Marie took his hand again, "It is an honor for both of us to be included in this procession." Brian nodded, "I just wish I could be closer to him. This is gonna be hard for him." "You are here, that's all that matters," Marie said.

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Nick walked up to his mother's carriage, seeing her standing outside. When he reached her, she lifted her hands and straightened his crown for him. *"Where's Anthony?"* he asked. *"He will be riding behind you,"* she answered. *"I don't want you riding by yourself,"* Nick said. *"I am not. Ana is riding with me,"* his mother said. Nick looked over at Ana and smiled, *"Good."* LaDonna hugged Nick, *"I will see you when we get there."* Nick nodded, offering her his hand as she climbed into her carriage. He then helped Ana in, catching her comforting smile as she sat down. He smiled back, then turned and headed to where Rowland was holding Thomas.

He took the reins from Rowland and climbed on Thomas's back. Thomas tossed his head a few times, purring softly. He could tell Nick was sad, and wanted to comfort him. Nick patted his neck, "I know you care Thomas, thank you," he whispered to the unicorn. Thomas tossed his head again, dancing around, anxious to get moving. Rowland had mounted his own unicorn, and was just behind Nick. "What are we waiting on?" Nick asked. "Count DeGrafe," Rowland answered. Nick sighed, "The man has no respect. Late to his own brothers funeral," he muttered. Rowland nodded, not wanting to voice his own opinion of the count. Anthony rode up, *"You aren't waiting on me are you?"* "No, your father," Nick said, seeing the Count just arriving. Anthony looked back, then to Nick with an apologetic look on his face. Nick shook his head, *"Don't apologize for him. He's not your responsibility."* *"Still, it shows a lack of respect to make the queen wait like this,"* Anthony fumed. *"That it does,"* Nick agreed, *"I'll handle it though, don't worry about it."*

Nick rode up to his mother's carriage. *"I saw,"* she told him, *"We will deal with it after the ceremony tonight."* Nick nodded, moving Thomas away from the carriage as it took off. He fell in behind it as the procession marched out of the palace gates. It was going to be a long ride through the city and out to the country side. Nick took the opportunity to think. Although thousands of people lined the streets, it was eerily quiet. Nick lay the reins over the saddle horn. Thomas wasn't going to do anything but follow the carriage, so there was no need to steer him. He rested his hands on the saddle and bowed his head as they rode down the street. He let the events of the past month replay in his head. From the moment he was told who he was, to the moment his father died in his arms. He let his tears fall down his face as the immense sense of loss overwhelmed him. He didn't care that everyone saw him crying, he only knew that it was the only way for him to release his emotions. He continued to think about his life on Earth. About his family, and how much they loved him, and about how no matter how hard he tried, he never seemed to fit in.

Then he thought about his life here. His mother and father had gone out of their way to make him feel welcomed, and loved. And he did. He loved it here. He loved everything about being in the palace, and his surroundings. And he loved the people. They all treated him as if he were some lost treasure. But still he felt like an outsider. Here too, he just didn't quite fit in. He was beginning to wonder if there was anywhere in the universe that he could call his own. That he felt completely at home in, and actually belonged. Then his mind took him to what would be his first decision as King. The Earth ship would arrive tomorrow, and it would be up to him what would happen. He had already somewhat planned what he wanted to do, but now.... he was just so angry at them. He didn't want his anger to cloud his judgement, but how could it not? It was their fault he was separated from his family. It was their fault he missed out on years of learning what he needed to, to become king. How could his anger not have a factor in what he decided?

Nick sighed, wiping his face. He looked around, realizing they were almost there. He noticed someone behind him crying, and turned around in his saddle. Anthony was behind him, lost in his own grief. Nick slowed Thomas down until he and Anthony were riding side by side. He reached over and touched Anthony's arm, offering him a half smile when he looked up. *"I'm not supposed to be...."* Anthony started. Nick shook his head, *"You are more his son, than I ever will be. Ride with me."* Anthony sniffed, wiping his tears away, staring at Nick. Nick patted his arm, then faced forward again. Anthony glanced back at Rowland for a second, then faced forward, riding the rest of the way next to Nick.

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Brian watched as they approached a massive wall of stone. It looked like the side of a mountain had been sheered off. As they got closer, he could see the ornate carvings in the rock. "This is the tomb?" he asked. "Yes, the King's mountain. Every King from the beginning has been buried here," she answered. Everyone had stopped and were getting out of their carriages. Brian jumped down, holding his side when he did. He turned to help Marie down, then they followed everyone inside. "What are the flying metal things?" he asked in a whisper. "Cameras, this is being broadcast live all over the planet," Marie answered.

They took their places in the back, behind everyone else. Nick and the queen sat in the front as the King's body was brought in and laid on a massive slab at the head of the room. His crown was resting on his chest, his arms at his side. Brian noticed that the King's mark had ceased to glow. It was still visible, but more like a scar now. An older man dressed in long flowing robes stood by the body. Brian assumed he was some sort of priest. He listened as the man began the ceremony, speaking of the great things the king had done during his lifetime. Brian watched Nick and his mother. They sat next to each other, holding hands, heads bowed. Every so often Nick would look up in the direction of his father, only to lower his head again, and a new batch of tears streaming down his face. Brian couldn't stop his own tears. He felt so bad for Nick, and everyone here. They all seemed so heartbroken, and Nick especially. He'd never seen such a look of utter loss on Nick's face in his entire life.

The ceremony went on, consisting of many rituals. Brian didn't know what all they meant, but he did them out of respect. Finally the ceremony was over. No one moved as Nick and the queen stood, walking up to the body. The queen stared at her husband's lifeless face for a moment, then bent down and kissed his forehead before stepping out of the way. Nick came closer, staring at his father. He'd never lost anyone he loved so much, and he was having a difficult time. His lip trembled as he took his father's hand and leaned down, whispering in his ear, *"I love you, and I will make you proud of me. I promise."* With that he too kissed the king's forehead and then turned, taking his mother's hand and leading her out of the massive tomb. One by one those present walked forward, paying their last respects to the beloved king.

Finally it was Marie and Brian's turn. They were the last people inside the tomb, beside the priest and a few guards. Marie just bowed her head for a moment, then stepped away, leaving Brian standing in front of the king. He stared at the man that resembled Nick in so many ways. He was sure that when Nick got older, he would look just like the king. "Um, you don't know me, but I'm Nick's best friend. He loves you so much, and all he wants to do is make you proud of him. I wish he'd had a chance to really get to know you, you sounded like a remarkable man. Nick is pretty remarkable too, and I know he'll do everything he can for this planet. And I'll be here to help him, for as long as it takes. Even if I have to spend the rest of my life here, I'm not going to leave him. I promise you that," he whispered, then stepped back, taking Marie's hand and leading her back to their carriage for the long journey back.



## Chapter 26

The procession entered the palace gates. Nick followed his mothers carriage to the stables then jumped down off Thomas and handed the reins to Rowland. All the way back he'd been fuming over his uncles lack of tack and respect. He just couldn't wait until tonight to confront him about it. He stormed back to his uncles carriage and caught him as he was getting out. Nick shoved Mason against the carriage, glaring into his eyes, *"How dare you act like this!"* Mason put his hands up in defense, *"My prince, I don't know what you're talking about."* *"Don't know what I'm talking about? I guess being late to your own brothers funeral is customary?!* *How dare you show such blatant disrespect to the crown!"* Nick fumed. Mason glared at his nephew, *"I'll show respect to the crown when it deserves it,"* he said through clenched teeth. For some reason, Nick felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. He stared at his uncle in disbelief for a moment, then the anger that had been at the boiling point, overflowed. Nick balled his hand into a fist and nailed Mason across the cheek. Mason stumbled to his knees holding his face, glaring up at Nick with an ice cold stare.

Nick moved to hit him again, when someone grabbed him. "Nick, don't man," Brian said. "Your friend is right your highness, the cameras are catching everything," Rowland said, moving Nick away from Mason. Nick was so angry he was trembling. He glanced around quickly, seeing several of the cameras floating above him. He reached up and pulled his crown off, shoving it into Brian's hands, "I never asked for this," he said, then took off at a run towards the palace. Brian looked down at the crown in his hands, then up at Rowland. "What happened?" Ana asked, running towards them. "Nick punched that guy," Brian said, pointing to Mason, who was still holding his face and talking to the queen. "That's his uncle," Ana explained, then looked toward the palace, seeing Nick run inside. "Maybe I should ...." Brian started. "No, let me go," she said, taking off at a brisk walk.

"I don't understand what's going on here," Brian said. "Nick was angry at the count for being late, and acting like he did through the procession and funeral. It showed a lack of respect for the king and the royal family," Rowland said. "Oh, but why would he do that? Wasn't the king his brother?" Brian asked. "He was. It goes back many years. The king and his brother didn't get along very well," he said. The queen approached them, *"Come, let's go inside,"* she said, reaching out and taking Nick's crown from Brian. He half smiled at her, then followed her into the palace.

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Ana pushed open the large double doors that led into the library. "Nick? Are you in here?" she called, slowly walking through the rows of book shelves. He didn't answer, but she could feel him. Then she heard a muffled cry. She stepped around a corner seeing Nick sitting in the floor, his knees pulled up to his chest, his head down, softly crying. Just the sight of him pulled at her heart. She walked over and sat down next to him, "Nick?" she said softly. He didn't say anything, he just leaned into her, letting her wrap her arms around him. "I don't think I can do this," he whispered. Ana ran her hand through his hair, "Yes you can." He shook his head, "I'm not ready for this. I don't know what's expected of me, I-I ....." "Shhh, Nick listen to me," Ana interrupted, "You were born to do this. It's in your blood. You can do this. I know right now you're overwhelmed, but it won't always be like this."

He took a deep breath and looked up at her, "Yes it will Ana. No matter how long I stay here, I'll always be seen as an outsider. I didn't grow up here, I don't know how I'm suppose to act." "Just be yourself Nick," she said. "What if I don't know who that is?" he asked, looking down at the floor. Ana reached out and took his hand in hers, staring into his lavender eyes, "You're Nick. You're kind and gentle, funny and smart, caring and courageous." Nick laughed, "You make me out to be some kind of hero or something." "You are, don't you see?" she asked, "Who else would do what you've done? You left your life, your world to stay here. You didn't have to, but you chose to. You're keeping this world from war. If that isn't a hero, I don't know what is." Nick shook his head as tears welled up in his eyes, "I'm scared Ana. I've never felt so much pressure in my life. What if I mess up?" "What if you do?" she said, "It wouldn't be the end of the world." He laughed, "It could be. What if I piss off some other planet and they attack us or something?"

She smiled at him, reaching up and brushing away a tear from his cheek, "You're worrying about things that may never happen. You will be a great king." "How do you know?" he asked. "Because there's too much of your father in you for you not to be," she answered. "Really?" he asked. She nodded. "I miss him," he whispered, as another tear trailed down his face. Ana pulled him into a hug, "I know, we all do." She held him as he cried, trying her best to comfort him. After a few moments he sat up, using the back of his hand to wipe his face. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself down, then looked at her, "I guess it's time I start acting like a king huh?" She smiled at him as he stood up, then offered her his hand, helping her up. "You've always acted like a king," she said. He chuckled, "Maybe that's why the guys always said I was spoiled?" "Maybe," she said, as they left the library.

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Brian sat on a couch in what seemed to be a parlor. He felt very out of place as the queen ordered several servants around. Marie squeezed his hand, bringing his attention to her. He smiled, "Sorry."

"It's a lot to take in," she said. He nodded, as the queen looked over at him. "Brian, I'm glad to see that you're feeling better," she said. "I am, thank you. I wouldn't be alive if you guys hadn't rescued me," he said. LaDonna nodded, "You are very important to my son. He cares for you like you were family." Brian laughed, "We are kinda. We've all always said we were more like brothers." "I'm glad that Nick had you while he was away from us," she said.

Brian watched as the queen's expression turned serious. "You do understand that once Nickolas becomes king he cannot go back to Earth," she said. Brian nodded, "I understand. Um, would it be alright if I stayed here? Just for a little while." LaDonna smiled, "I know that Nick would love it if you stayed. He needs his friends around him right now." "Does that mean that when the guys get here, they can stay too?" Brian asked. LaDonna nodded, "They may stay as long as they like." "Thank you," Brian said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go get ready for the ceremony," she said, standing and leaving the room. Marie stood up and pulled him with her, "Come on, we need to get ready too." Brian smiled, thoughts of them getting ready together flashing through his mind. Marie looked at him, arching her eyebrows, "I don't like that look on your face." Brian laughed, blushing, "Sorry." She smiled mischievously at him, then pulled him out of the room.

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Nick fidgeted with his shirt sleeves. He was no longer dressed as a Celestian prince, but as their king. He wore black boots and black tight pants. What his race had against baggy pants he'd never know. His shirt was white, with ruffled cuffs, and ruffled tie. Over that was a deep purple vest, and around his shoulders was a deep purple cape that went down to the floor. He wore no crown at the moment. His mother looked at him, smiling, "You look fine. Stop fidgeting." "Sorry, I'm nervous," Nick said. LaDonna cupped his cheek, "You're leaving the grief mark on?" He nodded. "It is tradition for the new king to wash his off," she explained. He shook his head, "I can't. I know this is suppose to be a happy occasion, but I'm not happy. I miss him, and I want the whole world to see that." His mother pulled him into a hug, "Then see it they will. I love you Nickolas." "I love you too mom," Nick said.

Rowland stepped into the small room, "They are ready your highness." Nick nodded, took a deep breath and grabbed his mother's hand. Together they walked into the throne room. The room was packed with members of the high class, guards, visiting dignitaries. Nick spotted Brian with Ana and Marie standing to one side of the room. Brian gave him a reassuring smile. Nick nodded in his direction, then turned his attention back to the priest standing before him. His mother stood to the side as Nick knelt in front of the priest. "This is a day that will go down in history. A day of sadness and a day of joy. For we say goodbye to a beloved king, and welcome another, just as beloved," the priest said, "Nickolas Carter,

*known to us as Frederick DeGrafe the fifth, the only son of the late king. You kneel before your people now as a prince, but you will rise before us as a king. Do you swear to rule for the good of the people. Not for your own personal gain, but to rule as a just king?"* Nick nodded, *"I will let my heart lead me in all matters. I will only rule for the good of the people, not for myself,"* he said, glaring at his uncle behind the priest. Mason lowered his head, unable to handle Nick's intense stare.

The priest took the crown from the queen and placed it on Nick's head, *"All bow to your new king!"* Nick stood up and looked around the room. Everyone was on their knees, from the lowest servant to the highest of the high class. Even his mother was kneeling. He reached down and took his mother's hand, pulling her up, *"All rise,"* he said. The room stirred as everyone got to their feet. The first thing Brian noticed was how much Nick's eyes were glowing, even more so than when he wore his prince's crown. *"Wow, how do they do that?"* he asked. *"It's the stones in the crown,"* Ana said, *"They reflect the light down towards his eyes. See the more light the more our eyes tend to glow."* *"That's cool,"* Brian said, moving with the crowd into the dining hall. There was to be a huge celebration, complete with dinner and dancing for all to attend. Nick sat at the head of the room with his mother, as everyone found a seat at the many tables.

Several people came over to talk with Brian during the meal. They were all curious, not ever having seen his kind of mark before. Then after Ana and Marie explained it, they were even more astounded. Nick ate silently, glad for once that all the attention wasn't on him. He could tell that Brian was somewhat uncomfortable with all the attention, but he seemed to be dealing with it. After the meal, the servants cleared the tables from the floor, and the musicians started to play. Several couples filled the dance floor.

Nick watched as Brian and Marie stepped out to the floor. Marie was trying to teach Brian the dance, and Brian was constantly getting it wrong. Nick laughed when Brian accidentally bumped into Count Dumal and his wife. He looked over to see Ana laughing as well. He wished he could dance with her, but now more than ever he couldn't. He knew what would happen if he did. And he couldn't afford a scandal right off the bat. Their eyes locked for a moment. He spoke to her with his thoughts, and she nodded, letting him know she'd heard him. The queen reached over and took his hand. Nick looked over at her. Her eyes were kind as she shook her head. *"I know, it's not allowed,"* he whispered, *"But someone forgot to tell my heart."* LaDonna smiled at him, *"You are King now Nickolas. I understand what it is to have to hide your feelings, but this cannot come to light. Not yet."* He nodded, glancing around the room again. Brian seemed to have gotten the hang of the dance. He and Marie were dancing across the room, smiling and laughing with one another.

He watched them for several moments. He knew that look in Brian's eyes. He was smitten. He and Marie seemed to be the perfect couple, both so obviously taken with each other, that nothing else existed in their world. Nick longed for the day that he could be that free with Ana. He loved her, he knew that, and he could tell she felt the same way. But he also knew that as long as he was king, they could never be free to express their true feelings. He rubbed his eyes before the tears had a chance to escape. *"Are you tired?"* LaDonna asked. Nick nodded, *"It's been a long day. I think I'm going to go to bed."* *"Alright my son, sleep well,"* his mother said, kissing him on the cheek. Nick smiled at her, *"You too. Goodnight."*

Nick managed to slip out of the party relatively unnoticed. Everyone was having such a good time that no one paid any attention. He slowly walked down the halls toward his room. The events of the day were starting to catch up to him. He sighed, turning and going down a different hall. A few moments later he was standing in the library, searching the shelves. He finally found the book he was looking for, taking it to a table and opening it up. It was the history of their planet, from the very first king, to his father. If there was a way to renounce his throne without the entire planet being plunged into war, it would be in this book. He thumbed through it for a moment, then grabbed it and headed to his room. Once there he sat his crown on the desk and put on a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt. He opened his balcony doors, and crawled into bed. He pulled the book over and opened it up, starting to read.

# Chapter 27

Nick walked down the hall toward his room. It was early morning, and he was just returning from his workout with Rowland. He passed Brian's door, and as he did, it opened. Nick ducked into a dark corner as Marie and Brian stepped out into the hall, both glancing around to make sure no one was there. He watched as they spoke softly to each other. Then Brian pulled her close and they shared one last kiss before Marie headed down to her quarters. Brian stood in the hall watching her go, until she turned the corner out of sight, then he turned and went back into his room.

Nick stood in the corner for several moments, shocked. His emotions played through him. He was happy for Brian. Happy that he'd found someone to fill the emptiness he'd had for so long. Marie did that. She completed Brian, like no one else ever did. Anyone that looked at the two could see it. They were both so in love, that it seemed to flow from them, filling the room. But mixed with the happiness was a longing. He wanted that with Ana, and he knew that it would never happen for them. The only way for it to would be to sneak around, and he just couldn't live like that. Always looking over his shoulder, praying they didn't get caught. He couldn't do that to himself, and he sure couldn't do it to Ana. For him the consequence of getting caught was nil. For Ana, it was a death sentence.

Nick took a deep breath, forcing the hurtful thoughts from his mind. He stepped out of the corner and walked over to Brian's door, knocking. It took Brian a few minutes to come to the door. Nick had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. Brian looked as if he'd just been woken up, and had the 'I'm half asleep' look on his face. "Hey Nick," he said, complete with yawn. Nick cleared his throat, "Hey, did I wake you up?" Brian nodded, "Yeah, what time is it?" "It's still early," Nick said, "Listen, can you meet me in about twenty minutes?" "I guess, what's up?" Brian asked. "I need to go over some things with you before the ship arrives," he said. "Oh man, that's today?" Brian asked. Nick nodded, "Meet me in the stables, OK?" "OK," Brian said, turning into his room. "Oh Bri," Nick said. Brian stuck his head back out the door, "Yeah?" "Make sure you wash the lipstick off your face before you come. I don't want the unicorns falling over laughing at you," Nick smiled. Brian's eyes widened and he touched his cheek with his hand. Busted. Nick started laughing, then turned and went into his room, leaving Brian alone in his embarrassment.

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Brian walked into the stable, seeing Nick with two unicorns. He seemed to be talking to them, and they

were bobbing their heads, like they understood him. "Nick?" He turned around, "Hey, come on over. I want to introduce you." Brian walked over standing in front of the two majestic creatures. "Brian, this is Thomas and this is Kena," Nick said. "Wow, they're beautiful," Brian said, looking at the jet black and blood bay creatures. "You feel up to taking a ride?" Nick asked. "Man, it's been ages since I rode a horse," Brian said. "Kena will be gentle, she already promised," Nick prodded. Brian stared at his friend, "She promised?" "One of my abilities is that I can understand what they're thinking," Nick explained. "Wow that's cool," Brian said. "So, we going or not?" Nick asked. Brian looked over at the blood bay unicorn, then back at Nick, "I guess."

A few minutes later the two friends were riding down one of the trails, leading up into the mountains. Nick was explaining what he needed Brian to do, once the ship arrived. "Nick, you know they're gonna freak," he said. "I know, but I can't help it. We can explain everything after the fact, but it has to be this way," Nick said. "But why?" Brian asked. "This is my first decision as king. The council and the entire planet are gonna be seeing this. I have to show complete unity to Celeste, otherwise everything I do will be questioned," he said. Brian sighed, "Man, that sucks." "Yeah, it does, but I can't do anything about it," Nick replied, "So, can I count on ya?" "Of course, you know I'd do anything to help you out," Brian said. Nick nodded, "I know, thanks." "No problem," Brian said, reaching up and holding his side.

Nick noticed, "Come on, lets go back." "I'm OK," Brian said. "Naw, we need to go back anyway. Breakfast is soon and mom hates it when I'm late," he said, turning Thomas around. Kena followed without Brian having to move the reins. They rode for a moment before Brian spoke, "Nick, um about this morning." "I won't tell if you don't want me to," Nick said, smiling at him, "It just kinda shocked me." Brian laughed, "Me too. I mean, you know me. I've never done anything like that before. I just ..... we were dancing and ....." "Listen man, I understand OK? You love her, anyone that looks at you can see it. Who cares if you've only known each other for a few days?" Nick said. Brian nodded, "I just ... I don't want to do something that will reflect bad on you, ya know?" Nick laughed, "It's fine man, really. I saw everyone's reaction to you at the dance. They like you two together. It's really OK, you don't have to sneak around, unless you want to."

"What about you and Ana?" Brian asked. Nick sighed and looked at the mountains, "That's complicated." "Why? I'm sure the look you're seeing on my face, matches the one on your own when you look at her. You love her don't you?" Brian asked. "Bri, it's... there's a lot of things that you don't understand. We can't ... it's not allowed," Nick said. "Not allowed?" he asked. Nick nodded, "A member of the royal family cannot have a relationship with someone who's not a member of the high class. Ana's not .... so we can't be together." "That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Brian said, "Who came up with that rule?" "King Leo the third," Nick replied, "He was the forth king. He made the rule so the royal blood line would stay pure." "Well King Leo was an idiot," Brian said. Nick laughed, looking over at his friend, "It's worked very well until now." "So, you're the king, change the rule," Brian

offered. Nick sighed, "I can't. I vowed to rule for the people. If I do that, everyone would see that it was for my benefit alone. I can't do it." Brian sighed as they neared the stables, "I guess sometimes it's not so good to be the king, huh?" Nick nodded, "Yeah."

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Kevin paced in the hanger, ready to go. Howie and A.J. watched as Tamara and Tom instructed a team of soldiers on what to do. A.J. leaned over to Howie, "I dunno about this plan. What if they find out about the second team? Then what?" Howie shrugged his shoulders, "I dunno." They watched as the second team got into a transport and took off. Tamara and Tom came over. "Alright, I want each of you to take one," Tom said, passing out a small caliber hand gun. "What's this for?" Kevin asked. "Just in case things turn ugly," Tamara said. The guys looked at each other for a moment, then took the guns. "But aren't we going in as a diplomatic team?" Howie asked. "Yes," she answered. "Then why the guns? Diplomats don't carry guns," he said. "When they are going into hostile territory they do," she said. "Now you understand your role in this, right?" Tom asked. All three nodded. "Alright, let's get going," he said, turning and walking up the ramp into their transport.

Once inside, Andrew started the engines and pulled the transport out of the hanger. Their ship had landed in a docking field outside the city. Their's was the only one there, which Andrew thought was quite odd. He flew towards the city, ready to get the mission over with and get back to their ship. He just hoped Brian made it here in one piece. He missed his new friend, and wanted nothing more than to get him and Nick and high tail it back to Earth. He glanced down at his radar, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. "Um guys, we got a big problem," he called. "What is it?" Tamara asked. "We've got three B-class fighters coming up fast," he said, flipping the switches for the shields and arming the small laser. Tamara walked up to the cockpit, "Whatever you do, don't shoot first." "I'm not planning on it, just getting ready in case they wanna play. You better go buckle up, this could get bumpy," Andrew said.

Tamara quickly went back to her seat, "Buckle up guys." "What's going on?" Kevin asked, seeing the fighters out his window. "Either this is our escort, or things are about to get ugly," she said. Just then the ship rocked with the blast from one of the fighters. "Shit, things are ugly!" Andrew yelled, doing his best to stay out of the ships target locks. "They knew we were coming, why do this?" Howie asked. "I dunno. Normally they receive diplomats no matter what the circumstances are. Then if they can't work things out that way, they attack. This is new," Tom said. Everyone grabbed their chairs as Andrew banked hard to the right, then almost immediately back to the left. "I can't shake them!" he yelled, as the ship rocked again, "Shit! They hit the engine, hang on we're going down!" Kevin looked at A.J. and

Howie, seeing the fear in their eyes, wondering what exactly they got themselves into.

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Nick and Brian watched the monitors from the control room in the palace. Nick cringed when the transport went down, praying everyone inside was OK. Brian looked at him with worry in his eyes, "You think they're OK?" "I hope so," Nick answered, then turned to the tech in front of them, "*Make sure they aren't hurt, then have the soldiers bring them here.*" "Yes, your highness," the tech said, calling the orders over the communication system. Brian breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the guys climb out of the transport. They had a few cuts, but looked alright otherwise. Nick pointed to the three on the screen, "*Do not hurt them. I don't care how much they struggle. Make sure everyone knows it. The soldier that disobeys that order will regret it dearly.*" The tech nodded, a tinge of fear in his eyes, then relayed that message as well. "Come on Bri, we need to go get ready," Nick said, turning and leaving the room. Brian looked back at the guys on the screen. They had their hands up, being patted down for weapons by several Celestian soldiers. "I hope this works," he muttered, turning to catch up with Nick.

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Kevin glanced over at Tamara as the soldiers bound his hands in front of him. "Just do as they tell you," she said. The soldiers lead the group to a large horse drawn wagon. The only thing was, it wasn't horses pulling it, it was unicorns. And the wagon was caged, with a door at the back. The soldiers motioned for them to climb in, so they did. A.J. watched as several soldiers mounted their unicorns and followed behind the wagon. "They have unicorns?" Howie asked, still in shock. Tom nodded. "Why are we traveling like this?" A.J. asked, "They have transports." "It's not allowed in the city. The only transports that run into the city are those of the royal family," Tamara said. "And something bad has happened," Tom added. "How do you know that?" Kevin asked, rubbing the bump on his head. "See the dark marks down all their faces. Those are grief marks. Something horrible has happened," he explained. "Oh great, now we're caught in the middle of it," A.J. said. "I'm afraid so," Tamara said.

As the wagon made its way through the city a crowd started to gather. The guys watched as they followed them, talking excitedly in a language they didn't understand. Tamara laughed. "What's so funny?" Kevin asked. "They know who you are. That's why they are following us," she said. "You understand them?" A.J. asked. "Yes," she said. "Then why haven't you tried to talk to them?" Kevin asked, angry. "Because they are taking us to the person I need to talk to," she said. "And who's that?" Howie asked. "The king," she answered.

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Nick placed his crown on his head and looked around, "Everyone ready?" Brian, Ana, Marie, and Rowland nodded. They were all dressed in military style jumpsuits, and all had weapons at their sides. Nick was in a more elaborate jumpsuit, and carried no weapon. He didn't need one. The guys had been brought into the throne room, and made to kneel. Nick could see them from where he was standing. They looked frightened. He hated that, but it was something that couldn't be helped. The council entered the room and took their places. Now it was time for Nick to go in. "Alright guys, let's go," he said.

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"What's going on?" Kevin asked, as three men walked into the room and took their places behind a large table near the thrones. "That's the council. The King and Queen will come in next," she whispered. All the soldiers in the room dropped to one knee as a group came through a side door. The guys watched as two girls came in, followed by a large military looking man, then Brian. "Oh my God, Brian!" Kevin said, trying to get up. He was forced back down to his knees. Brian didn't even look in their direction, he just kept staring back into the door he came out of. A.J. leaned closer to Kevin, "Look at Brian's wrist." Kevin looked, seeing his mark for the first time, "Oh God, what did they do to him?" Howie looked at them both, "I gotta bad feeling about this." One of the guards smacked him in the back of the head, "Shhh."

Brian and the group he was with knelt as an older woman stepped through the door, followed by Nick. Everyone's mouths were on the floor by now. Nick sat down on the throne, then motioned for everyone to stand. The guards stood up, but left Kevin and the rest of his group on their knees. Nick glared at Tom and Tamara, "*You lied to me.*" "I don't understand," Tamara said, "What's going on here?" "*You told me that I was part of the royal family. You neglected to tell me that I was the prince!*" Nick yelled. Everyone one in the room cringed. "Nick, I didn't know," Tamara said. "*You will address me in the proper manner!*" Nick spat. Tamara bowed her head, "I'm sorry, your highness. Forgive me." A.J. looked at Nick, "Your highness? What the hell is going on here?" Nick ignored him, "*How dare you come here trying to take me back, and how dare you bring them with you. You've denied me my entire heritage. You held me hostage all these years to gain what you are not equipped enough to handle. How many others have you done this to?*" Tamara looked at him in shock, "Please, you have to believe me. I didn't know!" "What the fuck is he saying?!" A.J. asked.

Tamara turned to tell him when she was interrupted by a group coming into the room. It was their second team. Tom and Tamara glanced at each other, wondering just how they were gonna get outta this one. Kevin glared at the two, "I told you this was a bad idea." Nick stepped down off his throne and walked toward the group. He looked down at the two agents, studying them. *"This offense could be a death sentence for you,"* he said, *"But I believe you didn't know."* Tamara sighed in relief, "Thank you." *"But that's not to say you won't be punished,"* Nick said, turning and looking at the new group of soldiers that had been brought in. He scanned their faces, looking for something. He almost smiled when he found it. *"Bring him here,"* he said, pointing to one of the soldiers. The man was brought forward, Nick stared at him, scenes flashing through his mind of the man's true identity. The scenes shocked him so much he slipped, speaking English for the first time, "You knew."

"Knew what?" A.J. asked angrily, "What the hell is he saying?!" Nick glanced over to Brian, *"Shut him up."* Brian nodded, stepping towards the group. He knew this might happen, so he was prepared for it. He took a deep breath and pulled his weapon, aiming it at A.J. A.J. threw his bound hands up, "Bri, don't! It's us man, don't do this!" Brian pulled the trigger. The room lit up with the golden waves as they engulfed A.J. for a moment, before he fell to the floor unconscious. Kevin looked at his cousin in horror, "What the hell are you doing?! We came here to get you!" Brian glanced at Nick, then moved his aim to Kevin and fired. Howie stayed quiet as Kevin collapsed in a heap. He stared at Brian with tears in his eyes, trembling with fear. Brian turned and motioned to Marie to come with him. He walked over and took Howie by the cuffs he had on, pulling him to his feet. *"Bring them,"* Marie instructed, as she and Brian left the room with Howie in tow. Several guards picked Kevin and A.J. up and followed them.

Nick turned his attention back to the soldier, "Who are you?" The man said nothing, staring straight ahead. Nick turned back to Tamara and Tom, *"He knows the truth, which means there are others in your agency that do. I will spare your lives, but you must work for me."* "Work for you? How?" she asked. Nick moved back up to his throne and sat down, speaking English so they would all understand him, "I want you to investigate your agency. I know there have to be others like me on Earth. Others that have been lied to, and are being held hostage so your world can get what it wants." "And if we don't?" Tom asked. "I could have you killed, but I don't think that would change anything. How bout this? Our entire fleet, along with several of the outlying worlds ships show up above every major city on Earth, uncloaked," Nick said. "You can't! The entire world would be tossed into chaos," Tom said. "Then you work for me," Nick said.

"What would you have us do?" Tamara asked. "You will be escorted back to Earth. Once there you will work with our team in your agency. To make sure you don't go back on your word, your ships will be rendered useless while our people are there," Nick said. "Rendered useless? How?" Andrew asked. "You don't think we gave you the plans for the ships without keeping a way for us to shut them down do you? We aren't that stupid," Nick laughed, "Once you complete your investigation, my people will

return any aliens that need to be, back to their home planets. Then all ties between Earth and Celeste are over. Your planet has held mine in its grasp for long enough."

*"My king, aren't you being a little harsh?"* Mason asked. Nick glared at his uncle, *"No, I'm not. Do not question what I'm doing here uncle. Unless there is some reason you want open ties with Earth? The planet that robbed this world of their dignity. That made us give them technology they aren't ready for, in hopes they would return me? If you have a reason, I'm sure the planet would love to hear it,"* Nick said, gesturing towards the cameras in the room. Mason lowered his head, knowing he couldn't voice any reason. The people of Celeste hated Earth for what they'd done, and if he voiced any reason, he would be looked upon as a sympathizer. He glared at Nick for a moment. His nephew was on his toes, that was for sure.

"Your highness, please reconsider. Don't cut ties between our worlds because of what a few did," Tamara pleaded. "I have no choice. You can't be trusted, and even if you could redeem yourselves, the people of this planet would never believe you are sincere. Go and do as I ask, you know it's the right thing to do," Nick said. "We know that, and we will find who was behind this," Tom said. "Start with him," Nick said, pointing to the soldier he singled out, "He knows the truth about me. He'll know who was behind it." All eyes fell on the man. He looked around for a moment, then lunged at one of the soldiers near him. He managed to pull the man's weapon, then turned aiming it at Nick. *"Stop!"* Nick called to the soldiers in the room. Most of them already had their weapons trained on the man, ready to shoot. The man looked around frantically. "You don't want to do this," Nick said, "You can't hurt me." "You bleed just like anyone else," the man spat. Nick reached out with his hand, and in an instant the weapon was yanked out of the man's hand and flew across the room into Nicks. "Like I said, you can't hurt me," Nick said, as several guards grabbed the man.

Tamara and Tom stared at Nick in shock. They knew the Angels possessed extra abilities, but they had never seen them displayed. Nick motioned to the guards, *"Take them back to their ship."* "Wait! What about the guys?" Tamara asked. "They will stay here," Nick said. "But how do we explain the biggest pop group in the world suddenly disappearing?" Tom asked. Nick shrugged his shoulders, "That's your problem. I expect a daily report once you get back. My team will keep you in contact with me." And that was it. The guards pulled them from the room, taking them back to their ship. "Well, that didn't go well," Tom said. "No, no it didn't," Tamara agreed.

## Chapter 28

Howie glanced around as Brian pulled him down a large hallway. They had gone down several floors, and now were making their way down the vast hall. He glanced back, seeing the soldiers carrying Kevin and A.J. He wasn't sure what was going on, or what had happened to Brian to cause him to do this. All he knew was that he was scared. He wanted to ask Brian what was going on, but he was too afraid to. Afraid that if he opened his mouth, he too, would be shot.

Brian turned a corner, yanking Howie behind him. Howie's blood ran cold when he realized they were in some kind of medical wing. The room they entered had three beds set up, complete with restraints. There were several doctors and nurses already there, waiting for them. The guards placed Kevin and A.J. on the beds, then took off their cuffs, and left the room. The doctors and nurses quickly went to work. Brian pulled Howie's hands up and unlocked his cuffs, "It's OK D, they won't hurt you." "What are they doing?" Howie asked, as several nurses guided him to his own bed. "Just making sure you weren't hurt in the crash, and checking to see if you're carrying any diseases that might harm them," Brian assured him. Marie looked at Brian, "*Why are you lying to him?*" Brian leaned over and whispered in her ear, "If I told him they were doing genetics tests on him, he'd freak. Trust me, it's better this way." She nodded, looking over at Howie and smiling at him.

"What did she say?" Howie asked, as a nurse cut off some of his hair. "Nothing," Brian said, walking over and sitting down next to Howie's bed. "How can you understand them? What happened to you? How'd you get that?" Howie asked, pointing to Brian's mark. "It's a long story D. I'll tell you everything once they wake up," he said, "But I can't understand them." "I have a translator in my ear." "But they understand what you're saying?" Howie asked. Brian shook his head, "Only a few do. Marie," he said, pointing to her, "she understands English, but doesn't speak it very well. Ana and Rowland, the other girl and guy that came in with us, they speak it fluently. Everyone else either has a translator, or they don't understand us at all." Marie came over with a syringe, taking Howie's arm. "What's she doing?" he asked, his eyes wide with fear. "It's OK D, she's just taking some blood," Brian said, "They aren't the bad people the agents made them out to be. They lied to Nick and to us." Howie cringed as Marie inserted the needle, "About what?" "Everything. About who Nick really was, and why he was on Earth to begin with," Brian answered. Howie looked at his friend, "They did?" Brian nodded, "They did. Although Tamara said she didn't know the truth, and Nick believed her. But that just means that someone in their agency does know, and is trying to cover it up."

Marie came back over with some supplies to clean the cuts on Howie's arms and face. "So if they lied,

what's the truth?" he asked. "I'll let Nick tell the whole story, but it comes down to this. Nick was the prince. Earth was keeping him hostage, demanding technology from Celeste for his return, but they never returned him," Brian explained. "God, that's awful!" Howie said. Marie looked at Howie with an awed expression on her face. Brian laughed, "No, he doesn't know Him. Remember the expressions Nick and I talked about?" Marie nodded, blushing. "What'd I say?" Howie asked, confused. "They revere God here so much that His name isn't mentioned. They believe He is a real person, and if someone mentions His name, that they must know Him," Brian said. "Ohh," Howie said, "So when I said that, she thought I knew Him?" Brian nodded. Howie laughed, "You better warn them about J then. He'll have them believing he's His best friend as much as he says it." Brian chuckled, holding his side, "Yeah he will."

"Are you OK?" Howie asked. "Yeah, still sore from the accident. I got a few busted ribs that haven't quite healed yet," Brian said. Howie looked at his friend for a moment, "Bri, why'd you shoot them?" Brian sighed, "I had to. See, Nick is the King now, and this was his first decision as king. He had to show complete loyalty to Celeste. That's why he wasn't speaking English, and why when J started mouthing off, I had to quiet them." "You coulda asked them to be quiet," Howie said. "D, this is J and Kev we're talking about. You know they wouldn't have shut up," Brian said. Howie glanced over at the two, "Yeah, true." Then it hit him what Brian had said. "Nick is the king?" he asked. Brian nodded, "He's had a rough couple of days. His father died shortly after I got here. Then yesterday they had his funeral and Nick was named King." "Oh man," Howie said, "How's he handling it?" Brian shrugged, "I don't know. He's not the same Nick that was taken from us. He's changed, kinda like, he knows who he is now, and what's he's supposed to do. He's grown up a lot."

Howie started to say something, but was interrupted by a loud moan. Brian looked over to see A.J. stirring in his bed. He got up and walked over, "J?" A.J. opened his eyes and stared at Brian for a second. "J, man I'm sorry for ....." Brian started, but never finished. A.J. lunged at him, grabbing him by the shirt and sending them both tumbling to the floor. "You fucking shot me! What the hell is wrong with you?!" A.J. screamed. Brian hit the floor hard, "Ouch! Shit, Alex, get off me!" Howie jumped out of bed heading for the two struggling on the floor, but Kevin started to wake up, and he knew he'd be just as angry as A.J. was, so he went over and kept Kevin from joining the fight.

A.J. was sitting on top of Brian, holding him down screaming at him. Brian couldn't breathe, and he knew the fall had re-injured his ribs. He had to do something to get A.J. off him, so he punched him. The only thing was, it wasn't hard enough, and it just managed to piss A.J. off even more. "I dunno what the fuck they did to you, but I'm gonna knock some sense back into that messed up brain of yours," A.J. spat, grabbing Brian by the head and slamming it into the floor so hard, Brian almost passed out. Just then Marie came back into the room, returning from her trip to the lab with the other nurses. She glared at A.J., walking over and pulling him off Brian, "Stop!" A.J. was so angry he pushed her aside,

heading back to Brian. But suddenly he stopped. He looked down, seeing that his feet were no longer on the floor, "What the hell?!" He looked over as Marie knelt next to Brian, making sure he was OK. "Put me down!" A.J. demanded. Marie glared at him, "NO! You hurt him. You prack!" Brian laughed, "It's prick, baby." "You prick!" Marie yelled, helping Brian sit up. "Oh ow," he said, holding his head and his side.

Just then Nick and Ana walked into the room. They both stopped in their tracks at the sight before them. Howie was holding Kevin back in his bed, both with confused, awed expressions on their faces. A.J. was hovering above his bed, madder than a wet hornet. And Brian was sitting in the floor with Marie, holding his head, and blinking his eyes trying to get them to focus right. And Marie was glaring at A.J. with a look that could kill, as she held Brian. "Um, do I even want to know?" Nick asked. Everyone looked over at him. Marie started explaining everything, pointing at A.J. The guys couldn't understand her but they knew she was angry just by the expression on her face. Nick laughed, "Put him down Marie." Marie sighed, releasing her hold on A.J. He plummeted to his bed beneath him, landing with a thud. "Damn," he muttered, sitting up.

"Guys, Brian only did what I asked him to. Don't be mad at him," Nick said. "You asked him to shoot us?" Kevin asked, beyond angry. Nick grinned, "Would you have shut up if I asked you to?" "No," they both said. "Then Brian did the right thing," he said, looking over at Brian, "You OK?" He nodded, but at the same time Marie shook her head. *"He's hurt. His pupils are dilated and his breathing is a little labored,"* she said. "I'm fine," Brian said. "Scan him," Nick told her. Brian started to protest but Nick interrupted him, "Don't argue with the King. Do it." "King?" Kevin and A.J. said at the same time. Nick bowed to them, "At your service." "Nick, what the hell is going on?" Kevin asked. He held up his hand, "I'll tell you everything, let's just make sure Brian's alright first." "Why? I didn't hit him that hard?" A.J. asked.

Nick helped Marie and Ana get Brian into a chair. Then Marie unzipped his jumpsuit and pulled his t-shirt off. "Holy shit," all three muttered, seeing the bruises on Brian's chest and sides. Marie took one of the scanners and ran it over his side, looking at the monitor across the room. "Rok, I'm sorry .... I didn't know, and I was so pissed that you shot me ... I just..." A.J. stammered. "It's OK J," Brian said. *"Take a deep breath,"* Marie instructed. Brian did, watching his lungs expand on the monitor, touching his three broken ribs before he let the breath out. Marie then ran the scanner over the back of his head, making sure there wasn't a more serious injury there. *"You have a headache?"* she asked. He nodded, "And my vision's a little fuzzy." She turned the scanner off, *"He has a slight concussion, and we should probably wrap his ribs to give them more support."* Nick nodded, letting Marie and Ana tend to Brian.

"What's wrong?" Kevin asked, more worried now than angry. "He's OK, J managed to give him a concussion, but he'll be alright," Nick answered, walking over to the three. "Nick, what's going on here? Where are Tamara and Tom?" Kevin asked. "I sent them back," he answered. "Sent them back? To Earth?" A.J. asked. He nodded. "Without us?" A.J. asked again. Nick laughed, "Yes. I don't trust them." "But why ...." Kevin started. Nick put up his hand, "I'll answer all your questions, but first let me show you guys around and to your rooms. Then we'll have some lunch and we can talk then, alright?" The three glanced at each other. "OK."

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Kevin stood on the balcony to his room looking out at the mountains, "Nick, this is so beautiful." Nick smiled, "I'm glad you like it." "It's just a little bright though," Kevin said, moving to go back into his room. "We're working on that," Nick said, following him, "The techs should have the contacts done by tonight." "Contacts?" "Yeah, they will shield your eyes from the suns. Make it so the lights won't bother you," Nick said. "Great," Kevin said, sitting on his bed next to his bag. Somehow they had managed to get all the guys things from the ship before it took off. "I still don't see how you guys got our stuff. I just don't see them letting you walk onto the ship and take it," he said. Nick laughed, "We didn't. It's kinda one of those Star Trek type things. I don't ask, I just accept it." Kevin chuckled, looking at his young friend. Nick had changed since the last time he'd seen him. He'd grown up, and Kevin had missed it. He'd always somewhat felt responsible for all the guys, but Nick especially. He always felt like he needed to take care of him, and it pained him that Nick had gone through all this alone.

"Yo Kev, why are you looking at me like that?" Nick asked, checking to make sure his fly was zipped. Kevin laughed, "I just ... You've grown up Nicky." Nick smiled, "I can't stay thirteen forever man." "I know. I just figured I'd be there when it happened, ya know," Kevin said. Nick walked over and sat down beside his older brother, "I guess I had to do it by myself. I never realized how much I relied on you guys till you weren't there. I thought I'd never see you again, so I ... I just did what I had to. I had to grow up and take responsibility for myself, cause you guys weren't there to do it for me. In a way, this was a good thing." Kevin patted him on the back, "I guess it was. I'm so relieved that you're OK," he said, pulling Nick into a hug. Nick laughed, "Kev, we've done this already." "I know, I'm just making sure it was real," Kevin said, letting him go. "Oh it's real. We're back together, and you guys can stay here as long as you like," Nick said. "But you can't come back with us, can you?" Kevin asked. Nick looked out the balcony doors, shaking his head, "No, not as long as I'm king." Kevin stared at him for a long time, not knowing what to say. Nick stood up, "Come on, it's lunch time and I'm starving." Kevin got up and followed him to the door, "I'm kinda hungry myself."

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Howie leaned over to Kevin, "I think I'm gonna be sick." "Just don't look at it man," Kevin said, trying to ignore the food on his plate. A.J. was picking at his with his fork, an awful look on his face. LaDonna laughed, *"It won't bite you Alexander. It just looks different than what you're used to."* A.J. sat his fork down, "Yes ma am, it is a lot different." "J, just try it. The taste makes up for the look," Brian said. A.J. picked his fork back up and speared a piece of some of the grossest looking food he'd ever seen and put it in his mouth, "Hot damn, that is good!" "You have got to be kidding?" Howie said. "No man, try it," A.J. said, putting another piece in his mouth. Howie and Kevin glanced at each other, then both took a bite.

"See, good right?" Nick asked. "Yeah," Kevin said. Howie nodded. "Well, now that we have the food issue out of the way," Nick said, "I guess you guys wanna know everything." All three nodded. Nick went into his story of what had happened to him since he'd been taken. The guys listened intently, asking questions here and there. They laughed so hard when Nick told them about Thomas pushing him over and laughing at him, that A.J. spit his drink across the table. Nick finished his story, telling them of his father's passing away, the funeral, and then his crowning ceremony. All three were in awe of their little brother, of who he was, and how he'd handled the whole situation. "So you understand why I have to stay here now?" Nick asked. They all nodded. "But we can stay for a while right?" A.J. asked. *"You may stay as long as you like,"* LaDonna said.

Nick looked at his mother, *"When Anthony gets out of school I want him to meet the guys."* She nodded. "Anthony?" Kevin asked. "He's my cousin, a few years younger than me. He grew up here," Nick said. "Yeah, he's a good kid," Brian said. "Cool," A.J. said, asking for seconds from one of the servants. "Um Bri, about your mark," Kevin said, "If you're part Angel, does that mean I am too?" Brian shrugged his shoulders, "I dunno yet. Some of the tests they did on you will say, we just have to wait for them to come back." "Wait, you did genetics tests on us?" Howie asked. Brian and Marie both nodded. *"Since we realized that Brian was descended from us, we want to see how many more there could be out there,"* Marie said. *"Brian and those like him are just as much a treasure to our planet as Nickolas is. We thought it was impossible for our kind and yours to have children, now we see it is not,"* LaDonna said.

"So Bri, are you and Marie like a couple or what?" A.J. asked. Brian and Marie looked at each other and smiled, "Yeah, um you could say that," Brian said. Nick glanced at Ana. They both shared the same look. It was one of longing and sadness for a love that would never be. "Wouldn't it be cool if you guys like had kids?" A.J. rambled on. Brian and Marie both blushed. "J, we've only been seeing each other for a few days," Brian said. Kevin laughed, "Man, you've only been here for a few days." "Um, that can be

explained," Ana said, tarring her eyes from Nick, "See we are genetically predisposed to our own kind." "Huh?" A.J. asked. "It means that we only have feelings for other Angels," Nick said, "That's why Brian was such a surprise." "Wait a sec, you mean that you could see the hottest girl on earth and not have any feelings for her?" A.J. asked, dumbfounded. "Yeah, that's what that means," Nick said, "And it also means that you can flirt with every girl on this planet, and it won't get you anywhere." Everyone laughed. "Damn that sucks," A.J. said, then looked at the queen, "Oh sorry." LaDonna laughed, "*It's alright Alexander. I've been known to say a few curse words myself on occasion.*" "So that's where Nick gets it," Brian said, laughing. LaDonna looked at her son, "*Nickolas gets a lot of things from me.*" Nick smiled at her, knowing there was a lot more to her than meets the eye.

"So, OK, if that's true then," A.J. asked, "Are you seeing someone too?" Nick stared at A.J., the pain filling his heart, "Um, I um ... I need to go ...excuse me everyone," he said, getting up and leaving the room. Ana stared down at her plate, afraid to look up. She didn't want anyone to see the hurt she felt. A.J. looked around, "What'd I say?" "It's alright J," Brian said, "Things are just complicated, that's all." Marie reached under the table and took Ana's hand, letting her know she was there for her. Ana felt her eyes brimming with tears, so she got up and left the room without a word. LaDonna watched her go, sighing in frustration. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset anyone," A.J. apologized. LaDonna looked at him and smiled, "*It's alright. You didn't know. My son's heart belongs to one that he cannot be with according to our laws and traditions. He is trying his best to abide by them, but I know it is hurting him dearly.*" "But if Nick is the King, can't he just change the laws?" Howie asked. "*It is more complicated than that. I'm working on it though,*" she said.

## Chapter 29

Nick slowly walked through the elaborate garden. His heart was aching, and he was on the verge of tears. "Why does this have to be so hard? Why does everything in my life have to be so hard?" he asked. He looked down, seeing a patch of Tsars Might growing next to the path. He bent down and picked one. The flower still amazed him, its fragrance having a calming affect on him. He took a deep breath and continued down the trail, carrying the flower with him.

He found one of the benches that lined the path and sat down, feeling exhausted. The events of the past few days were catching up with him. And trying to hide his feelings for Ana was becoming increasingly difficult. He couldn't be in the same room with her, without staring. She had captured his soul, his very fiber of being. He loved her with everything that made him, him. He couldn't imagine his life without her, and would give anything to be with her—even his kingdom.

Nick had been searching the Book of Kings for a way out. A way to renounce his throne without plunging the planet into chaos and war, but he hadn't found it yet. Albeit, he was only on the fifth king, and had barely made a dent in the enormous book. He sighed, looking around. There above him, floating silently was one of the cameras. Nick stared at the little thing for a moment, knowing they possessed some form of artificial intelligence. "Do you have to be here?" he asked. The camera blinked its lense and nodded. Nick laughed, shaking his head. And he thought his life on earth wasn't private? "I'd like to be alone, please," Nick said. The camera still didn't move. Nick sighed, resting his elbows on his knees and placing his head in his hands.

"You have to order it to leave," he heard a familiar voice say. Nick looked up into the crystal blue eyes he loved so much, and smiled, "I do?" Ana nodded. Nick looked back at the camera, "I order you to leave me alone." The camera swiftly turned and headed down the path to find someone else to spy on. Ana came over and sat down next to him. "I'm sorry J said that. Sometimes he just says stuff and he doesn't think about it beforehand," Nick said. Ana shook her head, "He didn't know." "But still, I'm sorry it made you uncomfortable," Nick said. Ana looked at him for a moment, "Maybe we should talk?" Nick didn't like the sound of that, "About?" "What's going on between us," she said. Nick bit his lip, waiting on her to start.

"Nick, I ..... I never meant for this to happen," she said, "And when it did, I tried to ignore it ....but...."  
"You can't," he said. She shook her head, looking deep into his eyes, "Nick, I love you. I'm not sure

when it happened, but all I know is that I can't be without you. I have to see you everyday or I feel lost inside .... I just ..." "I feel the same way," Nick interrupted her, "Everything you just said. I feel it too. Ana, I love you so much, but ..." "But we can't," she finished for him. Nick shook his head, tears threatening to fall, "This is so unfair! I wish I wasn't king. I wish I wasn't royalty at all! I hate this!" Ana cringed at his outburst, her own tears sliding down her cheeks, "Don't Nick. Don't regret your heritage because of this." "How can I not? I don't understand why we have to have this rule. What difference does it make if the king loves someone who isn't in the 'high class'? If the king is happy, that's all that should matter. Not if he married the right bloodline. We aren't dogs, Ana," Nick raved.

"I know," she said, looking down at her hands, "I never said our class system was perfect." Nick sighed, "Yeah, but the rules are in place, and we have to live with them." She nodded. They both sat in silence for a long time, afraid to look at one another. Afraid their emotions would become too great for them to handle. Finally Nick looked up, staring at the side of Ana's face. The sun's light gave her skin a radiant glow. He reached over and gently touched her cheek, turning her face to look at him. Love and sadness filled her eyes as they stared at one another. After a moment, Ana closed her eyes and pulled away from his touch. She had to before the temptation became too great and she did something they might both regret. "I should go," she said, standing up. "Wait," Nick said, taking her hand as he stood, "Please Ana, take this." She looked down at the flower in his hand, "Nick, you know I can't."

Nick pulled her hand up and placed the flower in it, "Please Ana, take it. Besides, how am I suppose to learn the art of courting, if I don't practice?" She laughed, shaking her head, "So this is practice?" He shrugged, "To the others it could be." Ana stared at him, "So what are you saying Nick? That you want to sneak around?" He shook his head, "No, I don't want to sneak around. I'm just .... I couldn't risk us getting caught. Not with the punishment you would have to endure. I could never live with myself if that happened." "So what then?" she asked. "I want a reason to spend time with you. I thought that if you were teaching me how to court someone that maybe ....." he started. "Maybe people wouldn't think anything about it?" she finished. He nodded. Ana looked down at the flower in her hand, "I would risk my life to be with you," she whispered. "Ana, no. I can't do that to you," Nick said. She stared at him, having made up her mind, "What good is living life, if you aren't happy? I'd rather have a day with you, than to live my whole life without you."

Nick took a step back and stared at her, "No Ana. As much as I want to, and believe me, I want to....we can't. You know what would happen if we got caught." She nodded, "I know." He bit his lip, his mind racing. When it was just him considering sneaking around, he was able to push it away. But now, with Ana standing in front of him telling him she was willing to risk it, the temptation was so great to just give in. He turned, sitting back down on the bench, his head in his hands. Ana came to sit beside him, peering down at his face, "You aren't forcing me to do anything. I know what the risks are, and I'm willing to take them. I love you Nick, and I can't go on pretending that I don't. I don't think I could stand

seeing you everyday and not be able to show you how much I love you. To me, that's more torture than I could ever endure if we got caught." "But what about the laws?" he asked, "I can't..." Ana pulled his hands from his face and smiled at him, "Do you think every king abided by the laws? They have been broken before." "You're making it hard to say no," he told her.

"I don't want you to say no. I'm tired of pretending that what I feel has no place with you. I'm tired of trying to abide by a centuries old law that was stupid to begin with. Nick, I love you, and if sneaking around is the only way we can be together, then I'm willing to risk it," she said. "But, I'd never forgive myself if we got caught," he protested. She smiled again, "Then we won't get caught." He watched as she cupped his cheek, then moved her hand to the back of his neck, pulling him to her. His mind was swimming as their lips touched for the first time. Everything he felt for her seemed to overwhelm them both. It was as if at that moment they ceased to be two different people, and became one person, body, mind, and soul. Nick wrapped his arms around her, and deepened the kiss. In all his life, he'd never felt such raw emotion, desire, and love. After several minutes they parted, breathless. "Oh my God," Ana said, trying to catch her breath. Nick laughed, seeing the shocked expression on her face at what she'd said. "See, that expression has its merits," he teased. She smiled at him, "That it does," then pulled him down into another fiery kiss.

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Mason sat in his office, fuming over the morning's events. *How could he sever ties with Earth like that?* he thought. He brought his attention back to his desk and tried once more to reach his contact on Earth. Still he couldn't get through. *"All the technology we have and I can't even make a call,"* he muttered. Just then a tall young man came into his office, *"You wanted to see me, my lord?"* Mason stood up and walked over to his young apprentice, *"Yes Devon. I want you to look into something for me. It seems our young king thinks he has everything covered. I want you to dig into his past on Earth, find out about his friends he so conveniently kept here. Anything I can use as leverage against him, understand?"* "Yes sir," Devon said, turning to leave the room. Mason watched him go, then turned back to his desk, *"I've worked too long to let this little whelp take what is rightfully mine."*

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Marie and Brian walked hand in hand through the garden. They had finished lunch, and the guys had all gone back to their rooms to settle in. "You are happy your cousin is here?" she asked. He nodded, "Yeah, I'm glad they're all here. I missed them." "I see it. You feel for them like they are family," she

noted. Brian smiled, "I do. We all basically grew up together, so yeah, we are family." Marie smiled, looking through the garden. "What's the smile for?" he asked. She shrugged, "Just what A.J. said, about us having children." Brian laughed, "Yeah, he kinda gets the cart before the horse sometimes."

Marie spotted a bench and lead Brian over, sitting down, "He says what he thinks." "Yeah, and most of the time he doesn't think before he says it," Brian laughed. "Do you want children someday?" she asked. He nodded, "Someday, yeah. Why are you asking?" She shrugged, "Just wondering." They sat in silence for a moment, "Brian, do you think they are OK?" "Who, Nick and Ana?" he asked. She nodded, "Ana was so upset when she left." Brian sighed, "So was Nick. I hate it for them." "I feel guilty," Marie said. "Guilty? Why?" he asked. "Because of what we have. We can show the whole world how we feel about each other and no one bats an eye. They can't," she answered. "Oh man, I never thought about it like that," he said, feeling guilty as well, "The last thing I wanna do is throw it in their faces."

"I think they know we aren't doing that. But still, I'm sure it's hard for them," she said. Brian reached up and rubbed his head. "You still have a headache?" she asked. He nodded, "I thought it'd go away by now, but it's still there." She stood up, pulling him up with her, "Come on, we'll take the short cut back. You can lay down and rest until supper." Brian walked with her for a moment, then laughed, "I can still see J's face when you picked him up and yelled at him." "He hurt you, I wasn't going to stand by and do nothing," she told him. "Thank you baby," he said, leaning down and kissing her cheek. Marie smiled as they cut through the garden and emerged on a different path. As soon as she looked up the trail she stopped, putting her hand over her mouth. Brian looked in the direction she was, seeing Nick and Ana sitting on a bench kissing. He smiled, as Marie quickly pulled him back through the garden so they wouldn't be seen. "Good for them," he said, when they were safely away. Marie shook her head, "No, it's not." "Why?" he asked. "The rules say that ..." she started. "I know, that they can't be together," Brian finished. "But that's not all," Marie went on, "They also say that if they are caught the woman can be executed for her crime." "Executed? You're kidding?" Brian asked, shocked. "I wish I were," Marie said, biting her thumbnail. Brian reached over and pulled her hand from her mouth, "Don't worry. We'll help them, and they won't get caught." "Are you sure?" she asked. Brian took her hand and kissed the back of it, "I'm sure."

## Chapter 30

"Dude, that is so much better," A.J. said, after getting his contacts in. Howie laughed, "Yeah, you wouldn't think extra sunlight would have that affect on ya." A.J. looked over, seeing Kevin standing on the balcony, looking out at the mountains, "Yo Kev, whatcha doing?" He shrugged, "Looking." Howie and A.J. glanced at each other, then joined Kevin. "You OK man?" A.J. asked. "Yeah, you're awfully quiet," Howie said. "Just thinking," he answered. "About?" A.J. prodded. Kevin turned to look at his friends, "I just can't get it through my head that we're here. That Brian is part Angel, and I could be too. And that Nick is the freakin king of the entire planet!" A.J. looked at Howie, "I think someone is on big brother melt down." Howie nodded, "Come on Kev, why don't you come in and rest for a little while?" Kevin laughed, "I don't need to rest, and I'm not having a melt down." A.J. raised his eyebrows, "Um, yeah, sure you're not."

Kevin glared at him, then went inside, plopping down on the bed, "I'm fine, I just need to think about this." "Kev, what is there to think about?" Howie asked, "We're here. And who Nick and Brian are, we can't do anything about. So just enjoy it." "Enjoy it?" he asked, "How can I enjoy this? Our families think we're in hiding, Nick's family thinks he was kidnapped. Who knows when we'll see them again, and to top it off, I could be a freaking alien!" "Ahhh, so we get to the real reason you're freaked out," A.J. said, "You don't wanna be an Angel." "I didn't say that," Kevin barked. "Well you might as well have," Howie said, "What difference does it make if you are or not?" "Yeah, look at Nick and Bri. They're still the same Nick and Bri we've always known. So what if they aren't completely human?" A.J. said. "And how much do you think it would hurt them if they heard you right now?" Howie asked. Kevin looked down at his hands, "You're right, I'm being stupid." A.J. put his hand over his heart, "Oh my Lord, Kevin admitted he was being stupid." "Alex," Howie said, sternly. Kevin laughed, "Naw, it's OK D. I am."

A.J. started laughing. "What?" Kevin asked. "I just .... I can't imagine how Brian reacted when they told him," A.J. laughed. Howie smiled, "I bet he freaked." "Yeah, probably so," Kevin chuckled. "But he seems really happy now," Howie noted. Kevin nodded, "That he does. More so than I've seen him in a long time." "Speaking of," A.J. said, motioning the two back out onto the balcony. Brian and Marie were walking towards the palace from the garden. They were holding hands and talking quietly with one another. Both were smiling and laughing. "Oh man, he's got it bad," A.J. said. Kevin nudged him, "Hey, he deserves it." "Yeah, so does Nicky," Howie commented. "What are we gonna do about that?" A.J. asked. "What can we do? You heard the queen, she's working on it," Kevin said. A.J. grinned, "Well, we could kinda help it along." Kevin and Howie stared at him. "J, I don't like that look on your face," Kevin said. A.J. smiled wider, "Just trust me."

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Tamara rubbed her forehead in frustration. She and Tom had been interrogating the soldier Nick had singled out since they left, and had gotten nothing. The man wouldn't even answer the simplest of questions. "Here," Tom said, handing her a cup of coffee. "Thanks," she said, taking a sip and grimacing. Since Howie's departure the old cook had taken over, much to everyone's disdain. "What are we gonna do? He won't talk," she asked. Tom shrugged his shoulders, "I dunno. I had no idea that's what we were doing. I thought we were protecting Nick, not holding him hostage." "So did I," she admitted. "Well, we've got to figure this out. If we don't Earth is in for one rude awakening," Tom said. "Not to mention that we'll take the blame for it. I don't even wanna think what the punishment would be for Celeste breaking all ties with Earth," Tamara said. "Why don't we start with his background? Find out what unit he came from, and track his history with the agency. See if we can find out anything from that angle," Tom suggested. She nodded, "Sounds like a plan."

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Nick walked down the hall to his room. He passed Brian's door, noticing that it was ajar. He stopped, turning back around and knocking softly on it, walking in. Marie smiled at him, "*Hello your highness.*" Nick smiled back, glad she didn't bow, "*Hey, how long as he been asleep?*" Marie glanced over at Brian who was sound asleep, curled up with a pillow, "*Bout an hour. His head was still hurting.*" "*Yeah, A.J. kinda clocked him pretty good,*" Nick whispered. Marie nodded, "*Brian puts on a good front, but he is still weak and sore. It will take him some time to completely heal from the accident.*" "*Well, as long as he has you to take care of him, I'm sure he'll be fine,*" Nick smiled. Marie blushed. "*I hope he feels better by supper, we're having a little party,*" Nick said. "*I'm sure he will,*" she replied. Nick smiled, "*Good, wear your dancing shoes,*" he said, walking to the door. Marie nodded as he left, a plan forming in her mind.

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"Alex, stop pulling at it," Kevin said. "Dude, this sucks! Who wears this?" A.J. asked, tugging at the tight pants he had on. "We do," Nick said, laughing at his friends. All three were decked out in the traditional Celestian dress, complete with uncomfortably tight pants and a shirt that didn't quite cover what you wanted it to. "I swear Nick, if we show up looking like this and no one else does, I'll kill you," Howie laughed. "Ohh threatening the king already?" Nick teased, "I could have you imprisoned for that." "Hey, how come your shirt is longer than ours?" A.J. asked. Nick smiled, "Because I'm the king. No one wants

to see the king's what nots and all." All three laughed. "What nots?" Kevin asked. Nick shrugged, giggling, "Anyway, they got to see all they wanted when I was prince." "Oh, glad we missed that," A.J. said with a relieved tone. "Shut up J," Nick laughed.

"Hey guys, you ready?" Brian asked, coming in the door, "Oh my," he said, laughing hysterically. "Oh shut up Bri," Kevin said, adjusting his shirt for the hundredth time. "Sorry Kev, it just that ...you look so ..." Brian started. Kevin pointed his finger at his cousin, "Don't even go there. You're wearing the same thing we are." Brian looked down at himself then back up, smiling, "Yeah, but mine fits better." "Oh God," A.J. laughed. "Yeah, you keep telling yourself that cuz," Kevin chuckled. Brian grinned, "Well, I know one person that likes it." They all rolled their eyes. "Yeah, yeah, just don't get all mushy on us already," A.J. groaned. "Sorry can't help it," Brian smiled. Nick put his hand on Brian's shoulder, "I'm happy for ya man." Brian stared at his friend, "Someday you will be too." Nick nodded, walking past him to the hall, "Come on guys, we're late."

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"Marie, please don't," Ana begged. "No one will notice, we just have to get them to trade partners, that's all," Marie said. Ana stopped her, "Listen, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but don't. Nick and I will handle this. We run a much greater risk of getting caught if you guys are helping us." Marie shook her head, "I don't think so. Brian and I can watch out for you. That has to help." Ana sighed, "Alright, but don't force anything. Don't draw attention trying to get us together." "We won't, I promise," Marie smiled.

Just then the guys came around the corner. "Evening ladies," A.J. said, smiling. They both curtsied, "Evening my lords." Brian took Marie's hand, leading her into the dinning hall. Nick glanced at Ana, knowing he couldn't escort her in. Howie stepped up, "My lady." Ana smiled, "Thank you," she said as they walked in. A.J. grinned at Nick as he followed them. "Kev, why am I getting a bad feeling?" Nick asked. Kevin smiled at him, "Don't worry, we got it covered." "That's what I'm afraid of," Nick mumbled as he took his seat.

The guys sat down to a large feast. Several of the high class were there to meet the kings friends. They were all amazed that they seemed to know who they were. Some even going so far as to sing a few lines of one of their songs. "Man if we get tired touring Earth, we could come here and go on tour," A.J. laughed. Howie nodded, as the band struck up and the tables were cleared. Nick escorted his mother out to the dance floor and the two seemed to glide across the floor. "That's a beautiful dance," Kevin

said. Ana nodded, "It's my favorite." Kevin held his hand out, "Teach me, and then we'll teach you one of ours." Ana smiled, taking his hand and leading him out to join Nick and the queen.

A few moments later everyone was dancing. Each of the guys had found a partner, and were quickly learning the steps. When the band stopped, Kevin pulled Ana over and had her translate for him. A few minutes later and they walked back onto the floor. "Nick, you know this one," he called. Nick stared at his friends, wondering what they were up to. When the music started Nick smiled. It sounded a lot like a ballad from their tour. The guys started their choreography, and Nick joined in. LaDonna laughed, "*What dance is this?*" "*It's from our tour,*" Nick told her, smiling as the guys smoothly changed partners. Marie smiled at him, "*It seems you have more help than I thought.*" Nick stared at her, wondering what that meant. Then it was time to change partners again. Ana smiled at him, "It seems we have some helpers." "Yeah it does," he said.

The guys moved to change partners again, but instead took the girl they each had and dipped her. Then began the dance again in the opposite direction, keeping the same partners. LaDonna watched her son dance with Ana, the smile on his face was undeniable. "*You are flirting with danger,*" she warned. Kevin sighed, "We're just trying to help. We want to see him happy." "*So do I, but if it is found out, the price would be dear,*" she said. "No one will find out," Kevin assured. "*I hope you are right,*" she said.

# Chapter 31

Nick and Rowland quietly walked down the hall heading to their morning work out session. The suns had just risen, and everyone was still sleeping from the party the night before. As they passed Brian's door, they could hear muffled giggling. Nick smiled. "It seems your friend is quite taken with Miss Lapool," Rowland whispered. "Yeah, I'm happy for him," Nick replied. "They make a good couple," Rowland said. "That they do. Seem made for each other," Nick said. "I just wish they'd be a little more quiet," Kevin said, stepping out of his room. Nick laughed, "You're the one that wanted the room next to his." Kevin ran his hand through his hair, "That was before I knew he wasn't staying by himself."

Nick and Rowland laughed. "Hey, where you off to so early?" Kevin asked. "Work out," Nick said, "Wanna come?" Kevin smiled, "Sure. I could use a work out." Nick and Rowland glanced at one another. "Um OK Kev, but our workouts are a little intense. You might just wanna watch," Nick said, as the three continued down the hall. Kevin glanced at his young friend, "I think I can keep up with ya." Rowland laughed, "*You aren't gonna tell him are you?*" Nick shook his head, "*He'll find out soon enough.*" "Um do I need my translator?" Kevin asked. "No man, you're good," Nick said as they entered the elevator.

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Kevin wiped the sweat from his forehead, "I feel much better." He, Nick and Rowland had been exercising for about forty-five minutes. Nick smiled, "Yeah, it's amazing what a little exercise will do for ya." "Hey, I tried to tell ya," Kevin laughed. "Your highness, swords or staffs?" Rowland asked. "Both," Nick replied. Kevin watched as Rowland retrieved the weapons handing Nick his. "Kev, this is where you're gonna want to sit out," Nick said. "Oh uh OK," Kevin said, taking his water and moving to the side of the room.

He sat down and watched as Nick and Rowland strapped the swords on, then took up the staffs, facing each other. Rowland moved first, trying to sweep Nick's legs out from under him. Nick jumped over the staff, countering with his own move, that Rowland barely blocked. The two fought as if their lives depended on it. Kevin watched in amazement, he'd never seen anything like it. Rowland managed to knock Nick's staff from his hands, sending it across the floor. Nick quickly pulled his sword, blocking the next blow. Rowland drew back, discarding the staff for the much preferred sword. Kevin cringed as the two exchanged blows. Rowland again relieved Nick of his weapon. Kevin ducked as the sword flew over

his head and clanked against the wall. Rowland had Nick backed into a corner, "You must learn to keep your weapons in your hands." Nick smiled, watching his friend closely. He knew the session wasn't over yet. "Nick!" Kevin yelled, as Rowland lunged at him.

Nick jumped straight up, letting Rowland run underneath him. On his way down he reached out, the sword flying across the room into his hand. As soon as he landed, he brought the sword up, blocking Rowland's blow. The two fought viciously. The sound of metal hitting metal filling the room. Finally Nick disarmed Rowland. "Very good your highness," Rowland said, trying to catch his breath. Nick sheathed his sword and walked over to Kevin, grabbing a drink. Nick had to laugh at the look on Kevin's face. His eyes were beyond wide, and his mouth was slightly open in awe. "I think that was our best one yet," Nick told Rowland. "Now if you can just stop losing your weapons we'll have it made," Rowland teased. "I dunno, I thought I did pretty good," Nick said, "What do you think Kev?" "That was ... just fucking amazing," Kevin said. Nick laughed, "Oh he's impressed. He doesn't say fucking unless it's really bad or really good." Rowland nodded, "I see."

"Nick, how did you do that?" Kevin asked. "Remember those extra abilities I told you about? Well fighting is one of them," Nick explained. "And the Jedi stuff?" Kevin asked. "Jedi stuff?" Rowland said, confused. "Yes that too Kev," Nick answered, "We have movies on Earth where people can move things without touching them. In the movies those people were called Jedi." Rowland furrowed his brow, "I would like to see these movies sometime." Nick smiled, "We can do that. I'm sure Brian still has his with him. Only thing is, we'd have to have a player." "Oh we can find a player," Rowland commented, heading out the door. Kevin grabbed Nick's arm, "What else can you do?" "Well um, I can tell when another Angel is near. I can fight, which you saw, and move things. I can kinda communicate with the animals. I can make you hear me in you head without verbally saying anything. Sometimes I can see visions. Some are the past, and some the future. That's how I knew the accident with Brian was gonna happen. And there's one more," Nick said. Kevin's mind was reeling, "What's that?" Nick held out his hand, palm up. A tiny ball of light appeared, just hovering over his palm. The ball grew to the size of a marble, the light getting brighter as it did. Kevin marveled at it, amazed at how it seemed to be spinning at a great rate of speed. "Wha..what does it do?" he asked. "This," Nick said, moving away from Kevin and throwing the ball of light across the room. It hit the opposite wall with a loud explosion. When the smoke cleared, there was a hole in the wall roughly the size of a mans head. "Holy shit," Kevin said, looking back at Nick. Nick smiled at him, "Cool ain't it?"

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Brian stretched, rolling over. Marie smiled at him, "Morning." Brian grinned, "Morning. What time is

it?" "Late," she answered, "The others have already gone down to the council session with Nick." "Oh man," Brian said, "I wanted to go." Marie laughed, "You still can. But you needed your rest." Brian sighed, "I'm fine baby." Marie raised herself up on her elbow and ran her other hand down Brian's chest, gently touching his ribs with her finger tips. Brian jumped. "You are better, you aren't completely well yet," she said. Brian sat up and ran his hand through his hair, "I'm OK." Marie laughed, "You certainly are stubborn aren't you?" He looked down at her and smiled, "I'm determined." "Oh that's what you call it," she laughed. Brian grabbed a pillow and flung it in her direction, then quickly got out of bed and headed for the shower. "Brian?" she called. He turned around, seeing the pillow floating in front of his face, "Uh oh." Marie laughed as the pillow smacked him in the face, Brian grabbing it and tossing it back to her, "If I wasn't late, you would soooooo pay for that." Marie sat up and grinned at him, "Is that a threat?" Brian smiled, "No baby, that's a promise."

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Nick sat on his throne biting his nails. He had been listening to possibly the hardest case he'd seen so far as king. He honestly didn't know what to do. The case had gone through every court, finally reaching the council. It was the last day of the council sessions, and they had held this case until then, simply because they didn't want to deal with it. There was no quick fix to this problem at all. Nick glanced over as Brian entered the room and took his seat with the guys. He mouthed the words, Sorry I'm late. Nick smiled, *It's OK, but I need help with this one*, he thought, seeing Brian nod.

"OK guys," Brian whispered, "Fill me in." Kevin and Howie told Brian what had happened up to that point. It seemed there were two families fighting over the same child. Both families claimed the child was their's, and each had evidence to prove as much. No DNA tests could be done because all Angels carried the same DNA, it wouldn't prove anything. Nick sighed as the testimony finished and everyone looked at him. He glanced over at Brian. Brian motioned that he wanted to talk with him. *"Give me a few minutes to consider,"* Nick said, getting up and walking over to the guys. "Help," he said, "I have no freakin clue what to do here." Brian smiled, "I do." Everyone looked at him. "You guys should read your bible more," Brian laughed, "This is just like a story in there." Nick looked over at the council. All three were staring at him, wanting to see how he and his new 'advisors' were going to handle this. "OK Bri, tell me," Nick said.

Brian quickly told him the story. Nick took a deep breath, "OK, I dunno how this is gonna fly but we'll see." He walked back over to the council table, *"Do any of you have any suggestions?" "I'm torn between the two,"* Count Marcave said. *"As am I. They both have convincing stories,"* Count Dumal offered. *"Uncle, do you have anything?"* Nick asked. Mason glanced at the two families, feeling the

entire case was a waste of time. *"Why not just pick one and be done with it? This case doesn't merit our time,"* he said. Nick raised his eyebrows, *"And why is that? Because these families are of a lower class?"* Mason shrugged. Nick glared at him, *"Need I remind you that you work for the people. That doesn't just mean the high class. You represent everyone in your provinces, from the high class down to the lowest. Every Angel deserves the right to justice, no matter what class they were born into."* Mason stared at his nephew, angry and awed at the same time. He didn't think Nick would pick up the responsibilities of king as well as he had. So far, he hadn't messed up. He said everything he needed to, and everything that was right in the eyes of the people.

Nick turned around and headed back up to his throne, sitting down. He looked over at his mother. She shook her head, *"I have no words to help. I am torn between them."* He nodded, looking back out at the crowd in the room, *"I have made my decision."* The room quieted down, everyone waiting. Nick stood up and walked to the head of the platform, *"Bring the child here."* A guard took the child from its nanny and handed her to Nick. Nick held the little girl for a moment, then lay her down at his feet. *"Since both families can not come to a compromise, I will make one for you. The child is to be cut in half, and a half given to each family,"* Nick announced. There was a collective gasp in the room, followed by the frantic and angry cries of the two families. *"Your highness, you cannot do this!"* Count Dumal called. *"It is barbaric,"* Mason added. Nick turned to them, *"This is my decision and it is made."*

Nick reached out and one of the guards swords flew into his hand. He stepped over the child and raised the sword. *"Wait! Stop please!"* one of the mothers called. Nick looked over at her. *"Please don't hurt the child. Give her to the other family,"* the woman cried. Nick lowered his sword, staring at the woman, *"You would give up your fight to save this child?"* She nodded, *"Yes your highness. Please don't hurt her."* Nick tossed the sword to the guard he took it from then bent down and picked up the child. He walked over to the woman who had just given her up and gave her the child. She looked at him confused. *"Only the child's real mother would give her up to keep her from harm. Take your little girl and go home,"* Nick said. The mother was so overwhelmed she pulled Nick into a fierce hug. Several guards moved towards them, but Nick held his hand up. *"Thank you,"* the mother said, after she let him go. Nick smiled at her, *"You're welcome."*

The throne room started to clear, and Nick turned toward the council. *"Now that the sessions are over, I would like to visit your provinces."* Count Dumal smiled, *"We would be honored to have you visit, my king."* *"Thank you Joseph,"* Nick said, *"I've not seen beyond this city. I'm looking forward to seeing my kingdom."* *"I know you will love the mountains,"* Count Marcave said. Nick smiled, *"I'm sure I will love them all. I'll call and arrange a visit with each of you soon. Give your families my greetings."* The counts nodded, leaving the room.

*"I must say, that was impressive,"* Mason said, falling into step with Nick. Nick glanced at him, *"Thanks."* *"How did you know that would happen?"* Mason asked. *"I didn't. But I can't think of any mother that would wish harm to her child just to win a fight,"* Nick noted. Mason nodded, *"I may have underestimated you, nephew."* Nick stopped walking and stared at him. *"Have a good time on your trip,"* Mason said, then turned and walked down the hall. Nick watched him go, wondering what that was about. LaDonna joined him, *"Don't let him get to you my son."* *"I'm not, but he just did a one eighty on me,"* Nick said. His mother gave him a confused look. *"He was just the opposite of how he's always treated me. He was almost cordial,"* Nick explained. LaDonna sighed, *"Watch him. He want's something, I can tell."* Nick nodded, continuing down the hall, *"Yeah, and I have a feeling its my crown."*

## Chapter 32

"Brian, let me carry it," Marie pleaded. He shook his head, "I've got it." Marie rolled her eyes, "Stubborn." Brian smiled, "That's determined," he laughed. They headed towards the awaiting transport. Kevin came out and took one of the bags Brian was carrying, "You shouldn't be lifting heavy stuff until your ribs heal." *"That's exactly what I told him,"* Marie said. Kevin laughed, "Bri has always suffered from the small dog complex." "Kev, shut up," Brian said, handing his bag to one of the attendants and walking into the transport. *"What's a small dog complex?"* Marie asked. Kevin handed the bag he carried to an attendant, "It's like all small dogs have to act like they weigh a hundred pounds. They have to be bigger than they really are. Bri's kinda like that, only he has to do things people tell him he can't." Marie laughed, *"That's him alright."*

The two walked up the ramp into the transport. "Don't believe him," Brian said. Marie laughed, sitting down next to him, "Even when it's true?" Brian rolled his eyes and sighed. "Man, this is cool," A.J. said, playing with the controls for the windows. "Yeah, the transport we were in didn't have all this stuff," Howie said. Nick stepped into the cabin, "That's because you were on an older model." "So where are we going first?" Brian asked. "Dacadia," Ana answered with a smile. "Where?" Kevin asked. "That's the cities under the ocean, right?" Brian asked. Nick smiled, "That's right. How'd you know that?" "Cause that's where Marie and Ana are from," Brian explained. "Well not Dacadia in particular, but yeah," Ana said, sitting down.

Anthony ran into the cabin, out of breath, *"I'm sorry I'm late."* Nick laughed, *"It's OK. We aren't on any time schedule."* A.J. burst out laughing. "What?" Nick asked. "I dunno, just we're never on a time schedule," he said. "Unless you wanna count Backstreet time," Brian giggled. Anthony sat down across from Nick, *"Backstreet time?"* *"Well, we were always late to everything we did, so the media or was it the fans? I dunno, anyway they came up with the phrase Backstreet time for us,"* Nick explained. *"Oh, cool,"* Anthony said. Ana glanced at Nick, "Cool? You're having a bad influence on the younger generation." Everyone laughed.

The pilot came over the intercom asking everyone to buckle up for take off. Marie and Brian were talking quietly, almost in their own world. A.J. looked at Howie, "Ya know there's something I can't figure out." "What's that J?" Howie asked, making sure his seatbelt was tight. "Why does she speak English to Bri, but to the rest of us, she speaks Angel," he said. Howie laughed, "I never noticed that. Maybe because she likes Bri, and she's probably still mad at you for hurting him?" A.J. shrugged. Rowland overheard their conversation and leaned back, "That's not the reason." "Oh what is?" Howie

asked. Rowland glanced at Marie, then back at the two, "She speaks our native language to you because that is the formal thing to do. She doesn't know you as well as she knows Brian, so she doesn't attempt your language with you." "But she speaks it really well," Howie noted. "She does, but she wasn't formally trained in it, so she is uncomfortable with it," Rowland said. "So she speaks English to Bri because she's comfortable with him?" Kevin asked, leaning over the seat. Rowland nodded, "And if she messes up, it's not as embarrassing." "Aww, that's cute," A.J. said. Howie rolled his eyes as the craft took off.

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LaDonna sat in the study, looking over some documents. She had seen her son off with his friends, then had come to try and get some work done. She felt him before she heard him. She kept reading the paper she had in her hand until he addressed her. *"My queen?"* he said, softly. She looked up, *"Good day my lord. What can I do for you?"* *"I wanted to see how you were doing,"* he said, taking a seat opposite her. LaDonna stared at him for a moment, *"That's the best you can come up with? You have been in this palace everyday since my husband died, and not once have you asked me how I was doing. I don't believe for a second that's why you're here."* He looked down at his hands, *"I'm sorry. But you know the bad blood between Frederick and I. After the funeral I wanted to give you some time."* LaDonna laughed, *"So you do everything in your power to hinder my son? I don't understand you, what is it you're after?"*

He peered into her eyes, *"The only thing I've ever wanted."* She sighed, *"Please don't start this again. Not after all this time."* *"I don't have a choice. The beliefs I had then, I still have. I cannot, in good conscience, do nothing about them,"* he said. LaDonna stood to leave, *"So you still haven't changed? And what will you do now? Hurt my son to get what you want?"* *"That is not my intent,"* he said. She raised her eyebrow, *"It may not be your intent, but something tells me it wouldn't bother you if you did."* *"LaDonna, please,"* he said, grabbing her hand. She jerked it away, *"No. You are not doing this again. Frederick did the right thing, all those years ago. And deep down you know it. Just let it be."* He shook his head, *"You know I cannot."* LaDonna stared at him with cold eyes, *"I'm warning you. If something happens to Nickolas or his friends, you'll be the first person I come looking for. If you are smart, you won't open up these old wounds. It's taken them too long to heal already."* She turned to leave, but he stepped in front of her, *"Everything I've done, was for you. Why can't you see that? I loved you ..... I still do,"* he whispered. LaDonna closed her eyes as a tear trailed down her cheek. She opened her eyes and stepped around him, heading for the door, *"Please just let it go Mason,"* she said before she walked out. He sighed, watching her go, *"I wish I could."*

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"Ana, this is beautiful," Nick said, staring out the window. She smiled, "It is. I love coming back here." "I see why," he said, looking back out the window. The transport had entered the ocean a few hours ago, and now was cruising along a great coral reef. The colors were breath taking as the sun's rays bounced off the coral. It almost gave them a neon glow. Several types of fish were swimming around. Some even following the transport as it slowly passed by.

Nick glanced over, seeing Anthony and Marie telling the guys all about the reef, pointing out landmarks. The looks on the guys' faces were priceless. Each in awe at what they were seeing, knowing that in all their lives they may never see anything like this again. He leaned back in his seat and looked over at Ana, "Too bad the palace isn't here." She grinned, "It is." He looked confused, "What do you mean?" "There is a palace in each of the provinces' capital cities. Long ago the kings wanted to be at home no matter what province they were in. So they built a replica of the palace here and in Gold Creek," she explained. "Cool," Nick said, "I want you to show me your house too." Ana laughed, "I don't live here anymore." "I know that, I wanna see the house you grew up in," he said. "The main one is in Fremont, that's a few hours from here," she said. "If the ride is like this, I don't mind," he told her, peering out the window again.

Just then the engine roared and the transport veered to the left. Everyone grabbed onto something to keep from being flung around the cabin. "What the hell is going on?" Nick asked, as the craft leveled out. "I dunno, we didn't go around anything," Rowland said, moving from one window to the next, looking for the cause. Everyone looked up as the door to the cockpit opened and the pilot staggered out. Kevin and Anthony caught him as he collapsed in the aisle. "Oh shit," A.J. said, glancing into the cockpit. Marie ran to help the pilot who was having a hard time breathing. "What?" Brian asked, looking up, "Oh shit!" The transport was heading straight for a wall of coral. Brian quickly ran to the front, strapping himself in the pilot's seat. "Nick! Get up here, I can't read this!" he yelled. Nick ran in and sat down in the co-pilot's seat, "What are you looking for?" "Auto-pilot, there has to be an off switch," Brian said. Nick skimmed over the control panel. Brian stared at the wall of coral coming at them, "Hurry Nick." "There!" he said, pointing to a switch. Brian flipped it and grabbed the stick, "Hang on back there!"

Everyone grabbed onto something as Brian hit the brakes and steered the craft to the right. Nick watching him in amazement. Brian expertly steered them around the wall and glanced at the monitor. "Is this Dacadia?" he asked, pointing to a dot on the screen. Nick looked down, "Um yeah." Brian got the craft on the right course, and hit the auto-pilot again. "Bri, how did you learn to...?" Nick asked. Brian wiped his hands on his pants, "What do you think I did on that ship for a whole month? I learned

to fly everything they had. It's almost the same cockpit, only this one has some extra stuff, and I can't read the instrument panel." "But you're afraid of heights? How the hell did you learn to fly?" Nick laughed. Brian shrugged, "I dunno, I just did."

Marie came up to the front, "We need to get there fast. I think the pilot is having a heart attack." "OK, tell everyone to buckle up," Brian said, flipping the switch and taking the stick again. Marie nodded, heading to the back. Brian let go of the stick for a moment and wiped his hand on his jeans again, "Nick get on the horn and call ahead. Tell them we're coming in fast and we need a doc when we get there." Nick grabbed a set of head phones and put them on, calling in. Brian hit the intercom, "Everyone buckled up?" "Yeah Bri, step on it," Kevin said, "He's not doing to good." "OK, hang on," Brian said, hitting the power. Nick grabbed onto the armrest of his chair as he was forced back by the sudden increase in speed. "They said to stay on this course," Nick told him. Brian nodded, weaving in and out of the reef.

"Nick, hand me the head phones," Brian said. Nick reached up and grabbed the other set, helping Brian put them on. "Can they understand me?" he asked. "Yes sir, I can understand you," a voice said through the head phones. "Good, listen ... I need a more direct course," Brian said. "Sir, the one you are on is the only safe route," the voice said. Brian took a deep breath, "It's not fast enough. I ... I need a faster route." "Brian, what's wrong?" Nick asked, seeing the panic in Brian's face. Brian glanced at him, "There's something on the stick. Like a greasy gel. If we don't ... get there soon, I'm afraid I ... won't be able to land the transport." "Oh God," Nick mumbled, "Tell us the fastest route!" he yelled. "Yes sir, um, vector two point four and then it's a straight shot. But be careful, that takes you over the abyss and there are some nasty things in there," the man said.

Brian changed course and threw all available power to the engines. Nick watched through the window as the light left them and the sea turned dark. Brian was strictly running on instruments as they were plunged into complete darkness. "Nick ... see if you can find the lights," Brian said. Nick leaned forward, squinting against the dim glow of the instrument panel. He found the switch and hit it. "Whoa," he said, as everything in front of them was suddenly lit up. Brian let go of the stick for a moment, again wiping his hand. "How long before we get there?" Nick asked. Brian glanced down at the screen, "Ten minutes?" "Are you gonna be alright?" he asked, seeing how pale Brian's face had become. "I'm ... uh .. It feels weird when I breathe," he answered. Nick bit his lip, worried for his friend, "Tell me what to do in case you can't land." Brian shook his head, "I'll land it." "Bri, it can't be that hard. Tell me," Nick said. Brian glanced at him, "No. I don't want you touching this. I'll ...do it."

A few minutes passed as they sped towards the city. Nick watched ahead, as Brian kept his eyes on the

screen. "What the hell is that?" Nick asked. Brian looked up, seeing something massive in front of them. "I dunno ...it's not on the screen," he said. They both peered through the murky water, trying to see. "What is that?" Nick said, pointing. Brian's eyes grew wide, "Teeth." Nick looked again, "Holy hell!" Brian forced the stick down as hard as he could, plunging the craft underneath the creature. Nick looked up, seeing the belly of whatever kind of monster it was. Brian jerked the craft to the right, barely missing a huge fin. Nick brought his attention back to what was in front of them, and then wished he hadn't. "Bri...." he said, nervously. "I see it," Brian said, flipping the craft upside down to avoid the massive tail. "Is it following ...us?" he asked. Nick looked as best he could through the side windows, "I don't think so. I can't see anything."

Brian nodded, putting all his energy into flying the craft. He couldn't think about how his lungs felt like they were closing up, if he did he'd panic. He steered the ship over what looked like a mountain under the sea. When they topped it, the city lay before them. It was huge. It seemed like millions of lights were shining out into the sea. Everything snug and secure under the massive bubble like shield. Brian cut the power to the engines, "Where ...do we ...go?" The voice came over the head set and Brian followed his instructions to a hanger just inside the city. They passed through the shield, leaving the water behind. Brian set the ship down, and shut off the engines. Nick quickly got up and unstrapped him, helping him up. "Don't touch ... my hands," Brian warned.

Nick helped Brian into the cabin. Kevin and Rowland had already picked up the pilot and were on their way out. Marie glanced back, seeing Nick holding Brian up. "*What happened?!*" she asked, running to them. "There's some kind of poison or something on the controls," Nick said, bending down and picking Brian up so he could walk faster. Marie followed behind them as Nick moved down the isle. "Brian, can you hear me?" she asked. He turned his head and weakly smiled at her. "Hang on," she told him. He nodded, those being the last words he heard as he passed out.

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LaDonna paced across the room. She had just been told of the incident and was awaiting word on Brian and the pilot's conditions. "*Your highness,*" the hologram of Ana said. LaDonna walked back over, "*Yes Ana, how are they?*" "*Brian is recovering. The poison affected him quicker than the pilot, but the doctor was able to flush it from his system,*" she replied. "*And the pilot?*" LaDonna asked. Ana sighed, "*He didn't make it.*" LaDonna sat down, saddened by the news, "*I want a full investigation.*" Ana nodded, "*Rowland is already on top of it. We'll find out who's behind this.*" "*Is everyone else alright?*" the queen asked. "*Yes. We're a bit shaken up, but OK,*" she answered. "*Nickolas is with Brian?*" she asked. "*Yes ma'am. He and Marie haven't left his side since we arrived,*" Ana said. "*Alright, I'll talk with him later.*"

*Let me know if anything changes,"* LaDonna said. *"I will,"* Ana said, then the hologram disappeared.

LaDonna walked out onto the balcony, staring at the mountains. She couldn't go through this, not again. She knew who was behind it, but how was she going to prove it? No one could ever find out what had happened so long ago. If they did ... everything would be ruined. She sighed, going back into her room. She sat down on the bed she once shared with her husband and looked around. *"What am I gonna do Frederick? I need your help here,"* she whispered.

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Brian slowly opened his eyes, blinking them several times. His eyes finally focused, revealing a white sterile room. He looked over, seeing an IV in his arm, and his hands wrapped in bandages. Then he noticed the oxygen mask on his face. He lifted his head a little, seeing more of the room. Nick and Kevin were sitting in one of the corners. They both seemed to be dozing off. Brian looked over seeing Marie sitting next to him. She too was asleep. He rested his head back on the pillow, just as Ana came into the room. She noticed him, and walked over, "How long you been awake?" "Just ..now," he replied through the mask, "What happened?"

"You and the pilot were poisoned," she replied. "How is he?" Brian asked. Ana shook her head, "He didn't make it. The poison was in his system too long." Brian sighed, feeling awful for the man's family. "Why ... would someone do that?" he asked. Ana shrugged her shoulders, "An attempt to kill the king? I'm not sure." Marie stirred in her sleep. "How long have I been here?" he asked. "Bout six hours," Ana replied, "She's been here the whole time." Brian smiled, looking at Marie as she opened her eyes. He waved at her, "Hi." Ana moved as Marie got up and sat next to Brian, bending down and hugging him. "I was so worried," she said, "Don't scare me like again." He smiled, "I'll try not to."

Marie raised up and brushed a few of his curls from his forehead. "Don't cry," Brian said, seeing the tears in her eyes. She smiled, "They are happy tears." Brian took her hand with his and pulled her close, "I love you." Marie leaned down and gently kissed his cheek, "I love you too." Ana glanced over, seeing Nick staring at her. He had woken up and heard Brian and Marie talking. Someday, he would be able to say those words to Ana, and not have to worry about who heard him. Ana smiled at him, knowing that's exactly what he was thinking. He stood up and walked over, standing next to her. "Hey Bri, how ya feeling?" he asked. "Better," Brian answered. "Good. Ya know, it wasn't my plan for you to see every hospital on the planet," Nick teased. Brian laughed, "Sorry." Nick shook his head, "Naw man, you saved our asses out there. If you hadn't been here .... well I don't wanna say what would've happened if you

hadn't been here." Brian smiled, "Just taking care of my little brother." Nick blushed, grateful beyond words. Brian yawned, moving closer to where Marie was sitting, "I'm tired." Marie ran her hand through his hair, "You should rest, then." He nodded, pulling her down next to him, "Stay with me?" She laughed, "Of course." They got comfortable. Brian resting his head in the crook of her neck, his arm around her waist. Nick and Ana watched as the two drifted to sleep.

## Chapter 33

"So, what is there to do around here?" Nick asked. Anthony shrugged, "Same stuff as home, just different scenery." Nick laughed, looking up. They were sitting in a large park, the shield shimmering above them. Several schools of fish swam around the shield, seemingly attracted to it. "I'll say. I've never seen anything like this. I love it," Nick said. "I'm more of a land person myself. Give me Tumacer any day," Anthony said. "Tumacer? Is that in Novaduel?" Nick asked. Anthony shook his head, "Mardica. I love the mountains." "Ohh, then why do you stay in Cystaleia?" Nick asked, as they got up and walked down the path. Anthony sighed, "I didn't want to leave Aunt LaDonna and Uncle Frederick. They gave me so much, I felt like I owed it to them to stay." "You know they love you like you're their own," Nick told him. Anthony nodded, taking a deep breath, "Nick, would you rather me leave?"

Nick stopped in his tracks, "No, of course not. What gave you that idea?" He shrugged, "I dunno. I just thought that you might not want me there. That maybe I reminded you of what you'd missed with them." Nick put his arm around his cousin, "You do. But that's not a bad thing. I can see how much they love you. How much my mother cares for you, and it makes me happy. I'm glad that you came into their lives after I was taken. You filled a spot in their hearts that was empty, and you still do. I am their son, yes, but we missed out on all the parent child experiences. They weren't with me when I was sick, or when we got our first record deal. They didn't travel with me through Europe, or watch me make a fool out of myself more times than I can count." Anthony snickered. "What I'm trying to say, is they did all that with you. I've said it before, you are their true son in every way that makes a family a family. I have my own family on Earth that I love and miss very much. And I'm blessed to have a family here that loves me just as much, but Anthony ..... you deserve to be king, not me," Nick said.

Anthony's jaw dropped open, "Nick, you can't say that." Nick nodded, "I can. I know my father was preparing you for the job. You've grown up here, you know how things go. I don't. I'm more an outsider here than I was on Earth. I don't know all the customs, what's considered proper or not. Dude, you were born for this, not me." "Nick, you're not an outsider here," Anthony protested. Nick laughed, "I'm the king. Do you think they're gonna tell me when I do something wrong?" Anthony smiled, "Good point. But why talk about this at all. I could never be named king, even if something happened to you and it went through the lines of succession and war between the Counts." Nick shrugged, "Just thinking I guess. That maybe if there was another way .... maybe things could be different. The right person put in the job so to speak." Anthony shook his head, "The right person is in the job."

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Howie laughed watching A.J. with a crowd of children. They had gone to the shopping center, and had quickly drawn a crowd. Everyone knew who they were, and asked them to sing and sign autographs. A.J. had found a store that sold hand puppets and was putting on a show for the small children. Leave it to A.J. to find something entertaining to do. Howie had given his translator to a local, who was translating A.J.'s show to the crowd. He laughed and clapped as the show ended, and A.J. tried to tear himself from the kids. The local gave him his translator back, and the two were back to shopping in a few minutes. "Miss the old puppet days huh?" he asked. A.J. grinned, "Man, I didn't realize how much til I started. That was just ... fun." "It's been a while for us hasn't it?" Howie asked. "Yeah, I can't say that the last year has been fun at all," A.J. said, looking through the window of a shop. "Well, you know touring is stressful," Howie said, following him inside. "I know, but dude ... when was the last time we all just had fun? Not counting this little adventure we've been on for the last month and a half," A.J. said. Howie laughed, "I'm not sure I'd even call this fun. More like exciting chaos." "Well it is Nick that got us into this. Captain Chaos himself," A.J. said.

"That's King Chaos, get it right," Nick laughed. A.J. jumped, turning around, "Dude, don't do that. You scared the shit outta me!" Nick grinned his goofy grin and looked over the clothes in the shop. "J, you gonna buy anything or you just waistin time?" A.J. shrugged, walking over to the women's section. Howie glanced at Nick, "Um when did he start wearing women's clothes?" Nick shrugged, "Don't ask me." "Shut up you two and come here," A.J. said. They walked over and A.J. held up a dress, "What do ya think?" "Um well, that's nice J, but I think the red one goes better with your eyes," Nick teased, as Howie burst out laughing. A.J. groaned, "It's not for me you ass. It's for Ana and Marie. For the dinner tonight, or did you forget?" "I didn't forget," Nick said, suddenly taking more interest in the dress. Howie looked at A.J., "He forgot." A.J. nodded. Nick looked at them, sticking his tongue out. "I like the purple," Howie commented. "You would dude," Nick laughed, walking up to the counter and talking to the clerk. He made arrangements with the clerk, and then they were out the door. "Man how do you know you got the right size?" A.J. asked, stepping into the transport. "All I had to do is give them their names. Everyone's sizes are kept in a like a computer or something," Nick answered. "That's creepy," Howie said. Anthony laughed at him, "*How else do you get the right fit?*" "*Lots and lots of trial and error,*" Nick laughed, as the transport took off.

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Brian stood on the balcony of his room, looking out over the city. He took a deep breath, looking down at his still bandaged hands. He'd spent the night in the hospital, and was released early in the morning. He and Marie had spent the majority of the day in the palace. Not that he minded the alone time with her, but he wanted to see the city as well. But Marie had promised him that if he took it easy today,

they would go out tomorrow. He looked up, watching in amazement as the hugest whale he'd ever seen slowly swam by the shield.

"It's a Bluenuk," Marie said, coming up behind him and wrapping her arms around his waist. "That thing is huge," Brian commented. Marie laughed, "That's a baby. The mother is over there," she said pointing. Brian looked over, his mouth dropping open, "Wow." "It's rare for a mother to bring her calf this close to the city," she said, "I guess this is your lucky day." He laughed, turning to face her, "Everyday I get to spend with you is a lucky day." Marie blushed, "Bri" "I'm serious. I feel like the luckiest person in the world," he said. She laughed, "And how many girls have you said that to?" "None," he told her. "Oh come on. I know you had girlfriends on Earth," she said. "But none that made me feel like I do when I'm with you," he said. She grinned, "It's the Angel in you." Brian shook his head, "It's the Angel in front of me. I love you." Marie smiled, her eyes lit with happiness, "I love you too," she said, leaning in and softly kissing him. After a moment she pulled back, "Now, um ... we need to take these off and get ready for the dinner." Brian groaned, "Do we have to go?" She laughed, "Yes we do. Now let's get the bandages off, then we can get a shower." Brian raised his eyebrow, "Ohh shower, that sounds fun." Marie rolled her eyes, "Come on silly." "Oh I go from hero to silly huh?" he asked, walking back into the room. "You're a perfect mix of the two," she replied.

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"...and then he just went off in a tirade. It was pretty funny in a morbid sort of way," Ana laughed. Kevin chuckled, "I bet. Even when Nick was really angry about something, it all came across as a big huge whine." Ana giggled, pulling Kevin over to a bench and sitting down. "Thanks for letting me tag along," she said. "No problem," he said, watching the people walk by. "I know spending the day with me wasn't your first choice," she went on. "Now who said that?" he asked, looking at her, "Ana, I had fun. Besides, I know Nick wanted to talk with Anthony, and that left you hanging out with the 'love birds.'" Ana laughed, "Yeah, I got the feeling they wanted some alone time." Kevin shook his head, "Don't take this wrong. I mean I love my cousin, but damn already. He's like the energizer bunny, for God's sake!"

Ana put her hands over her mouth and burst out laughing, "Oh I know! You wouldn't believe some of the things Marie tells me!" Kevin put his hands up, "No, please. I don't wanna know. I already know too much about my cousin's sex life by just being in the next room, I don't need details." Ana took a sip of her drink and sighed. Kevin nudged her, "Penny for your thoughts?" She smiled at him, "Nothing. Just that ... Marie and Brian... they have ..." "What you want?" he finished. She nodded. "Trust me, we'll do whatever we can to help," he said. "That's just it Kevin, you can't. No matter how many times you guys

sneak us around to be with each other, it's still something we have to hide. Don't get me wrong, I'll take the sneaking around over nothing at all, but ..." she said. "But it's no way to live," he said. She sighed, "I just want to be as open about it as Brian and Marie are, ya know?" Kevin laughed, "Well maybe not that open, but yeah I get ya."

Ana smiled, "They are kinda oblivious to the fact there are other people around most of the time." "That's what love does though. Makes you blind to everything but that one person. Nothing else matters," he said. "You sound like you speak from experience," she said. He shrugged, "I guess. There's always been this one girl that I seem to go back to. We break up for a while, but then we always find our way back to each other." "So, are you with her now?" Ana asked. Kevin shook his head, "No. We were together for about a year, then the tour started and all the hype. It's hard keeping up a long distance relationship, so we called it off a few months ago." "I'm sorry," Ana said. "Naw, it's OK. I mean, she's still my best friend. We always call and talk. I wonder what she thinks about me 'being in hiding'?" he mused. Ana patted him on the knee, "I'm sure she's worried about you. You know, we can send a message to her if you want?" "Naw we don't have to. Besides, that would kinda blow the whole, being in hiding thing now wouldn't it?" he smiled. "Yeah, I guess," she said, then laughed. "What?" he asked. "I was just thinking that it's too bad you aren't part Angel. I know several girls here that would sooooo be your type," she teased. Kevin laughed, "Yeah, Bri gets to keep that on his side of the family. Oh well." Ana stood up, "You sound so disappointed," she laughed. "Don't take this wrong," he said, getting up and following her, "But I'm kinda glad about that. I'm not sure I would've taken it well if I was." Ana laughed, "And you think Brian did?"

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*"Your highness, please come in,"* Count Dumal said. *"Thank you for inviting us to your home Joseph,"* Nick said, leading the group inside. *"It is an honor to have you,"* Joseph said, *"Please come into the dining room, dinner is ready."* The group followed him and took their seats. Ana took notice that her seat was directly across from Nick. This was completely unusual. Usually the host sat across from the guest of honor. *"My lord, there seems to be a mix up in the seating arrangements,"* she said. Joseph smiled at her, *"No Miss Coland, there's not. That is your right place."* Ana nodded to him and took her seat as Howie pulled her chair out for her. Nick glanced at her, *Do you think he know's something?* he thought. Ana raised her eyebrow slightly, biting her lower lip.

"Count Dumal, you have a beautiful home here," Brian said, sitting down next him. *"Thank you Mr. Littrell, it's been in my family for generations,"* Joseph replied. Brian laughed, "Please just Brian." Joseph nodded, *"Brian it is. I was told of the incident yesterday, I trust you are feeling better?"* "Much,

thank you. I just feel for the pilot's family," Brian said. *"As do I. I can't imagine anyone wanting to do his highness harm,"* Joseph said. "Well there has to be someone, otherwise it wouldn't have happened," Kevin said. *"But how do we know it was the king they were after? It could have been you guys,"* Marie said. "Us? Why would someone want to hurt us?" A.J. asked. "Because you're from Earth," Nick said. "Yeah, and so are you," Howie noted. "But I'm not an Earthling, there's a difference," Nick said. *"The king is right. I hate to say, but our planet doesn't hold Earth in the highest of regards,"* Joseph said. *"With good reason,"* Ana added. "But you can't blame an entire planet for something only a few did," Brian said.

Ana, Marie, and Joseph all exchanged glances. *"I'm afraid we can,"* Joseph said. "Guys, we haven't had the best experiences with Earth, and not just because of Nick," Ana said. Marie nodded, *"I see it everyday at the hospital."* "See what?" Kevin asked. *"The addicts,"* she answered. "Addicts?" Nick asked. *"Yes your highness. It seems quite a few years ago we started importing certain things from Earth. One of them being a drug we call Krystal. We brought it in for recreational use, but we soon found out it was highly addictive. There is a large portion of the population that uses it, and we cannot make it here. We tried, but for some reason, we cannot duplicate the original,"* Joseph said. "Who's responsible for bringing it in?" Kevin asked. *"The main company is called Interstellar Distributors. They are run by a board of trustees,"* Joseph said. "Can't you just shut down the company? Stop the shipments?" Howie asked. *"And risk a quarter of the population going into withdrawal?"* Marie asked. "Damn its that widespread?" A.J. asked. "Possibly more," Ana said. *"We hate what it does to our people, but it's grown so big, how do we stop it?"* Anthony said. Nick rubbed his eyes, *"So when I cut all ties with Earth, I'm gonna have a big problem."* *"Yes my king you will,"* Joseph said. "Unless you find some way to solve the drug problem before you do that," Ana said. Nick sighed, "How the hell do I do that?"

## Chapter 34

Nick sat down at the small desk and flipped the button on the consol in front of him. "Good morning your highness," Tamara said. Nick smiled at her hologram, "Morning. You find out anything yet?" She sighed, "Unfortunately no. It seems the soldier you pointed out decided it was best to kill himself than answer our questions. We found him last night in his cell." Nick ran his hand through his hair, "That's not good. What about his file, anything there?" She shook her head, "It's been altered. I have a team working on it though."

Nick leaned back and bit his lip, thinking. "I'm sure once we get back to Earth, we'll uncover something," Tamara said. He nodded, "I hope so. Listen, I have something else I want you to look into." "Ohh, what's that?" she asked. "It seems Celeste has been importing a drug they call Krystal. I need you to see what you can find out about it. Maybe who makes it, where it comes from? Who's shipping it out?" he said. Tamara scribbled a few notes down, "I've never heard of it, but I'll see what I can find out." "Also, see if you can find anything on a company called Interstellar Distributors," Nick said, "It seems that's the company here bringing the stuff in. They may have a sister company there." She nodded, "Alright."

"You're due back at Earth when?" Nick asked. "I'd say by the end of the week. I still can't believe your ship piggybacked us. I didn't think that was possible and still be able to travel at the speed we are," she marveled. He smiled, "Well, just because we gave you our technology, doesn't mean we shared everything." Tamara laughed, "I see that. Listen Nick, I want you to know we're doing our best. Neither Tom or me knew what was really going on." Nick waved his hand at her image, "I know you didn't. I could see it in your face when I walked out and sat down on the throne. I just had some things to prove to a few million people, and all this needs to be set straight." Tamara nodded, "I understand, and believe me, there's nothing Tom and I would like more than to find out the truth and who's behind all this. This is the reason I joined the Agency in the first place. I thought I was protecting those that couldn't protect themselves. Now I really am working toward that goal." He smiled, "I'm glad you see it that way. Let me know if anything changes." "I will," she said, ending the transmission.

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Mason sat in his office laboring over paperwork. He looked up as someone knocked on his door, "Come in," he called. The door opened and Devon walked in, "Good day my lord." "Aw Devon my boy, come in. Tell me what you've found out," Mason said, leaning back in his plush chair, looking at the young man

expectantly. Devon sat down in a chair facing the massive desk and looked at him, *"I'm afraid not much. It seems he lived his life in public. There's no scandals, no hidden secrets, nothing. Every mistake he made was aired all over their television sets for everyone to see."* Mason frowned, obviously disappointed. *"There might be one thing,"* Devon said. *"And what is that?"* the Count asked. *"His friends. Maybe we could use one of them to get to him?"* the young man suggested.

Mason considered the thought. His nephew did seem to hold his friends in high regard, much like he would family. He tapped his fingers on the desk for a moment, then looked at Devon, *"What do you have in mind?"* Devon smiled, *"Well, that's where we may be in luck. I may have an inside track to one of them."* *"Oh how?"* Mason asked. *"My sister seems to be seeing the half-breed,"* he laughed. Mason cocked his head to the side, *"The nurse is your sister?"* Devon grinned, *"Younger half-sister. We haven't talked much in the last few years, but I think I can get back in. Slide under the radar so to speak."* Mason laughed. This was perfect. He could coerce Nick into doing anything he wanted and not have to physically hurt him. And who cared if his friend was hurt? He knew LaDonna would be upset, but not like she would be if it was her son being harmed. Mason stared at him, *"Do it. Just make sure you aren't traced back to me."* Devon nodded, *"I have it all taken care of, no need to worry."*

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"Arbre," Brian said. Marie smiled, "Very good, but honey that's not a tree, it's a bush." Brian laughed, "It looks like a tree to me." Marie shook her head, "OK, how bout that," she said pointing to a store front." "Um ...magasin de bijoux?" he asked. She nodded. Brian smiled at her, "You wanna go in?" "To a jewelry store?" she asked. "Yeah, come on it'll be fun," he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her into the store. She was laughing as they made their way inside the store. "Oh wow," Brian muttered, seeing the exotic jewels. Marie started telling him what each jewel was. *"Can I help you?"* an older man asked from behind the counter. *"We're just looking, thank you,"* Marie said. He smiled at the two, *"I think I may have something of interest to you,"* he said, walking over to a different display case and pulling out an entire display of matching rings. Brian smiled, leaning closer to Marie, "Are those what I think they are?" She shrugged, "They are wedding sets." He nodded, "Yup, that's what I thought they were." "I'll explain to him that we aren't looking for those," she said. Brian shook his head, "No don't. Let's try some on." She stared at him for a moment. "I wanna see what they're like," he said, picking out one from the display and looking at it. Marie shrugged, "Alright then. No harm in looking I guess." "None at all," Brian smiled.

An hour later the two were still looking at the rings. Marie kept going back to the same set, picking them up and staring at the jewels. Then she would put them back and act like she was interested in a

different one. Brian could tell that she adored the one she kept glancing at when she thought he wasn't looking. He glanced at the man behind the counter and then looked at the rings. The man smiled, giving him a slight nod. Marie pushed the stool back she was sitting on and looked at Brian, "We should probably go if we're going to see everything today." He nodded, sliding down off his stool and walking with her to the door. He glanced back at the man who was holding the bag Brian 'accidentally' left on the counter. Brian shook his head, then left the store with Marie. The man chuckled, placing the bag behind the counter and taking the rings Marie was so interested in and placing them in a box.

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Brian walked down the sidewalk hand in hand with Marie. He couldn't hide the smile on his face, as she told him about a great restaurant just a few blocks from where they were. "That sounds great," he said, then stopped suddenly, "Oh great. I left my bag in the store." "Oh, well let's go back and get it," she said, turning around. "No, stay here, I'll go," he said, turning and taking off at a run, "Be back in a sec!" he called. Marie laughed, walking over to a bench and sitting down to wait.

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Brian quickly ran back into the store. The man pulled his bag from the counter and sat the box next to it. Brian smiled, "Do you speak English?" "Some," the man admitted. "Thank you," Brian said, "How much?" "Four thousand dofe," the man replied. Brian quickly thumbed through his cash, pulling out the correct amount and handing it over. "You are the king's friend? The blended one?" he asked. Brian stared at him, "Blended?" "You are part Celestian correct?" he said. Brian nodded, finally understanding him, "Yeah." The man smiled handing him the receipt, "You make a great couple." "Thank you," Brian said, shoving the box and the receipt into the bag he already had and heading to the door. The man watched him leave, smiling at the two. He had a knack for predicting the fate of those that came into his store and bought wedding sets. He figured those two would be together for a long time.

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"There you are!" Marie said, standing up, "What took so long?" Brian dawned his most innocent look, "We had to look for it. One of his employees picked it up and took it to the back." Marie took his hand as they began walking toward the restaurant they wanted to go to. "Well, it's not like we couldn't have

gone back and bought another," she said. Brian laughed, "I guess, but I liked this one." She laughed, shaking her head, "You are such the tourist." "Hey, I never get to do this kinda stuff at home," he protested.

Their walk took them by a favorite attraction. Brian stopped and watched the people on the outside of the shield, "That looks like fun." "It is," she replied, "Better than any water park your world has to offer." "Isn't this where the guys were going?" he asked, looking for them. "Yes," she answered. Just then Brian recognized Kevin as he swooshed by the shield, laughing and hollering at the same time. "Was that..?" "Yup, that was Kev," Brian laughed. "Ohh here comes Alex and Howie," she said, pointing. The two watched as they both whooshed by, A.J. with his arms in the air, screaming like a banshee, and Howie grinning from ear to ear, laughing hysterically. "How do they breathe out there?" he asked. "The film over their mouth and nose," she answered, "It acts like a filter. Keeps the water out and lets the oxygen in." "Ohh so it's like what they put over my mouth to keep me quiet when they took Nick," he said. She nodded, "Yes, only this one lets sound out." "WOOOOOOOOO HOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Kevin yelled as he zoomed by again. Brian laughed, "We gotta do that if we have time." Marie smiled, "OK, after lunch." "Um maybe later this afternoon. I'm not sure I could handle that right after lunch," he smiled. She laughed as A.J. and Howie came by again. Somehow A.J had managed to flip around and was going head first through the currents, screaming all the way. Howie still behind him, laughing so hard he could barely breathe.

Brian sighed, taking her hand and getting back on the sidewalk, "That's my bros, always out for a good time." Marie smiled, "They looked like they found it." The two rounded a corner and ran right into three young men. "Excuse us," Marie said, stepping around them. One of the men grabbed Brian's wrist and held it up, staring at his mark. "Look here, it's the half-breed we saw on the vid," he exclaimed. Brian pulled his hand back, attempting to walk around the men, trying his best to ignore the comment. One of the men laughed, "He probably doesn't understand you." "Yeah, how special does he think he is? Doesn't even learn our language and he gets a mark?" the other one said. Brian took a deep breath and kept walking. "Well when you're the king's friend I guess you can have anything you want," one said.

Brian turned around, "That's not true, and you shouldn't be talking about something you don't know anything about!" The three stared at him, not understanding a word he said. Brian rolled his eyes and turned back around, grabbing Marie's hand and quickly heading down the walk. The men kept yelling taunts at him, following the two. Marie held Brian's hand tight. She was afraid of what might happen if things came to a fight. They reached the restaurant and went inside. Marie quickly told the host what was going on and he in turn motioned to have the three men removed from the premises. Brian slumped down in his chair and sighed. "Baby, don't let them get to you," Marie said. "I've never experienced anything like that before," he whispered, "I mean I've been teased and made fun of, but that ..... that hurt." She took his hand and squeezed it, "I'm sorry. I guess every world has some idiots

huh?" He half smiled, "I guess." She reached across the table and lifted his chin with her finger, smiling at him. He smiled back. "Come on, let's eat and enjoy the day. Don't let them take that from you," she said. He nodded, knowing she was right. He shouldn't let a little teasing unnerve him the way it did. He leaned across the table and quickly kissed her, "So, what's good to eat?"

## Chapter 35

Brian walked into his room and stashed the bag with the rings in it inside his luggage. He knew Marie wouldn't look through his things, but he wanted to make sure no one else found them either. Then he headed into the bathroom. He and Marie had went to the water park and he was still dripping wet. It had served to relax him, but now, the taunts of the three young men were back in his head. He sighed, stepping into the shower and turning on the hot water. He tried to let the warmth of the water sooth him, but the hurt was still there. "I'm not a half-breed," he muttered to himself, turning around and letting the water hit him in the face. Why did those words hurt so much? Up until a few weeks ago, he had no idea he was nothing other than 100% human. Now to be called derogatory names about who he was cut to the core. He was trying to learn the Celestian culture, and their language. He wanted to know all about this world and its people that made up a part of him. But those three, with the look of disgust on their faces and the insinuation that he was 'given' his mark... he shook his head and stepped back from the water. "I'm earning this mark," he said, looking at his wrist. "I earned it by being who I am," he whispered to himself, "How dare they say it was just given to me."

He sighed, reaching down and turning off the water. He stepped out, grabbed a towel and quickly dried off. Wrapping the towel around his waist he stepped into his room. "Are you alright?" Rowland asked. Brian jumped, "Holy ... man don't you knock?" Rowland smiled, "I did, you were in the shower." Brian grabbed a pair of sweats from his luggage and put them on, tossing the towel on the bed. "Are you OK?" Rowland asked again. "Marie tell you what happened?" he asked. Rowland nodded. "I'm fine, I just wasn't expecting that at all," Brian admitted, finding a t-shirt and slipping it on. "I guess there will always be a few that don't understand what you are and what it means to Celeste as a whole," Rowland said. Brian chuckled, "I doubt I mean anything to the planet." "That's where you're wrong. You mean a great deal to this planet," he said. "How so?" Brian asked, sitting on the bed facing him. "You are a symbol to us," the man explained, "You represent the fact that even if you thought it was impossible, somehow it can happen. Do you know how many centuries we've been in contact with Earth? And in all that time no one like you has ever been discovered, or even thought to exist." Brian shrugged, "Lucky me huh?" He nodded, "Yes, lucky you, and your family. Now that we know there are those like you, we have something more to tie us to Earth than Nick and drugs."

Brian leaned back, supporting his weight with his elbows, "But what does that matter? Nick's gonna cut ties with Earth pretty soon." "He may not have to," Rowland said. "Ohh?" "If things work out. Maybe he will be able to go back on his word, allow us to keep in contact with Earth," he said. "That'd be nice, but wouldn't he look like a fickle king then? Not able to make up his own mind?" Brian mused. Rowland smiled, "There is always a way to save face. You just have to find it." Brian laughed, "That's where the problem lies isn't it?" "Usually," Rowland admitted, "So...back to the young men. We already know who

they are, do you want us to do anything about the incident?" Brian shook his head, "No. I think that would only add fuel to the fire. Just let it be." Rowland nodded, turning to leave. "Oh hey, while you're here, can I ask you something?" Brian said, sitting back up. Rowland looked at him, "Yes, what is it?" Brian glanced down at his hands, not really knowing how to ask his question, "Um, well. I need to know something about your culture, and I can't ask Nick cause I don't think he knows. And I definitely can't ask Ana, cause I'm afraid she might tell." Rowland was amused, "What is it you want to know?" "Is there a proper way to ask someone to um ... marry you?" Brian asked, rather shyly. Rowland grinned at the young man, walking over and sitting down, "Yes there is. Get comfy, it's gonna take a while."

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Nick stretched out putting his hands behind his head and looked up at the shield. He was laying in the small palace garden, taking a break from his study of the Book of Kings. He watched the shield flicker with a watery glow, still amazed that a place like this even existed. The water on the outside was a pure deep blue, so clear you could see the fish even before they got to the rim of the shield. He closed his eyes, taking in the sounds and smells of the garden. The first thing he noticed was the distinct scent of Tsars Might. He smiled, loving how the small flower could put him in a better mood. Then there was the countless other flowers in the garden, each with its own unique scent. He could hear the ocean gently beating against the shield. It reminded him of the sound the waves made as they touched the shore outside his home in Florida. He took a deep breath, relaxing even more. He could feel the sun's heat on his face, drawn in by the shield then radiated down to his skin.

*"Frederick, please," his mother cried. Nick looked around, realizing he was back in the palace at Cystaleia. He stared at his mother, she was at least twenty years younger, and strikingly beautiful. His father stared at her too, with hurt in his eyes. LaDonna was on her knees in front of him, not daring to look him in the face. "I'm so sorry, please forgive me," his mother begged. Nick walked closer to the two, trying to figure out what was going on. Frederick shook his head, the devastation apparent on his face, "I don't know if I can."*

"Nick? Nick ... are you alright?" He opened his eyes and looked up, a confused look on his face. "Are you hurt?" Ana asked, kneeling next to him, concern in her eyes. "Huh? Oh no," he said, sitting up and rubbing his face, "I think I fell asleep." Ana sighed in relief, "You scared me. I came around the corner and you were just lying here." He grinned at her, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." Ana smiled at him, but as she did, she studied his face. Something was bothering him, she could see it in his eyes. "Is something wrong?" she asked, sitting in the grass next to him. "I don't know. I think I had another vision, only this time it was the past," he said. "What did you see?" she asked. He shook his head, "I'm

not sure. It was my mother and father, but .... I dunno how to explain it. My mother was begging him for forgiveness ... but forgiveness of what?" he asked, looking at her. Ana took his hand in hers, careful that they were alone, "I don't know. From everything I've ever known of your parents, they did nothing but love each other." "Then why was my mother crying and my father looked so hurt?" Nick said, clearly troubled by what he'd seen.

Ana squeezed his hand, not knowing what to say to him, so she said nothing. Together they sat in silence, watching as the light began to fade. "It's getting dark," Ana noted. Nick nodded, "I miss the sun sets at home." Ana glanced at him, not sure which home he was referring to. "Sometime I want to take you there," he said, still looking up as the light faded from the shield. Ana smiled, "I'd love to see it." He looked over at her, a small smile creased his lips, "We're going to see your house tomorrow right?" She nodded, laughing, "If we must." "Oh we must," he teased, "I want to know everything about you. Where you came from, who your family is, everything." Ana blushed and looked straight into his eyes. As the light faded, his eyes lost some of their intensity, fading down to a pale lavender, and his hair looked almost blonde again. She mindlessly reached up and touched a strand of his hair, letting her fingers run down its short length to caress his cheek. Nick leaned his head against her hand, content to stay that way forever. He cherished each moment with her, and even the most simple of touches stirred his soul. He lifted his hand and covered hers, smiling as he leaned closer. Ana was about to close her eyes in anticipation of the kiss when Nick suddenly jumped back. He quickly grabbed the book he'd been reading and placed it on his lap, opening it up to a page.

*"There you are,"* Anthony said, coming around the corner. Nick and Ana were both feigning interest in the book, and looked up when Anthony called to them. *"I've been looking everywhere for you,"* he said. *"Ohh? What for?"* Nick asked. *"Dinner is ready. We're waiting on you,"* Anthony said with a slight smile. Nick laughed, *"For once it's me that is late huh?"* Anthony nodded as Nick and Ana got up and brushed the grass from their backsides. *"What are you doing out here anyway? It's too dark to read,"* Anthony asked. Nick glanced at Ana, *"Well, it's not too dark for me. I can still see pretty well."* *"Yes, Nick's eyes are accustomed to a dimmer light than ours are,"* Ana added. *"Oh, forgot about that,"* Anthony said, walking ahead of them on the trail. Nick and Ana both breathed a sigh of relief, as they headed into the palace.

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".....so then Kev flips over and off they go!!" A.J. hooted. "Oh my God Kev!" Brian laughed, "How many people did you moon?" Kevin shook his head, his face a bright red, "I dunno, can we talk about something else now?" "No," everyone said at once. "Come on man, it's not everyday that the mighty

Kev embarrasses himself in public," A.J. said. "Yeah, let us cherish this moment," Howie teased. Kevin glared at them, "I'll give you a moment to cherish alright." Everyone snickered.

Nick, Ana, and Anthony entered the room. "Hey, what'd I miss?" Nick asked, sitting down. "Ohh nothing. Just Kevin mooning everyone at the water park," A.J. beamed. "No!" Nick laughed, "Really?" "Yes really," Howie laughed, "You shoulda been there." Marie leaned over to Ana and whispered, "*I wish I was.*" Ana burst out laughing as Brian hit Marie's arm, "Hey, one cousin at a time." Marie shook her head, "One cousin period." Brian grinned, "That's better." Kevin cleared his throat, "OK enough. I'm sure no one wants that image in their head before they're about to eat." Ana and Marie glanced at each other then burst out laughing again. Kevin just rolled his eyes, and started eating.

"So Bri, how was your day out?" Nick asked. "Good," Brian said, suddenly taking great interest in his food. "Just good?" Howie asked. Brian shrugged, "We went shopping, ate at a nice place, and went to the water park." Marie reached over and squeezed his knee. Brian glanced at her, and half smiled. "OK, what's up?" Nick asked, "I know that look Bri. That's the 'something is really bothering me and I don't wanna talk about it look'." Brian shook his head, "It's nothing. Just some teenagers mouthing off." Kevin stared at his cousin, "What'd they say?" "It doesn't matter .....", " Brian said softly. "*Yes it does,*" Marie said, "*It was hurtful, stupid idiots.*" Nick looked at his friend, "Tell us what they said." Brian sighed, "They said I was a half-breed. That I didn't deserve my mark and the only reason I got it was because I was friends with the king..... you happy now?!" he asked, getting up from the table and leaving the room.

They all looked at one another in shock. "Why would someone say that?" Howie asked. "That's just stupid," A.J. said. "Some people just don't understand things that are different," Kevin said sadly, "So they lash out at it." "*Those words hurt him badly,*" Marie said. "I imagine so," Ana said. Anthony looked at them, "*It's sad that they don't see him for what he is.*" Everyone nodded. "Someone should go get him," Howie said. Marie started to get up but Nick shook his head, "I'll go."

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Brian stood on the balcony overlooking the city. "Just great Littrell, yell at your friends. It's not their fault you can't handle a little teasing," he muttered to himself. "That wasn't just any teasing Bri," Nick said. Brian glanced back at his friend, "I don't understand why it hurts so much? They're just words." Nick walked out, leaning on the railing next to him, "Sometimes words hurt the most. Believe me I understand." Brian sighed, thinking of all the times Nick had come to his room upset over what some

magazine article or news person said about him. "I guess you do huh?" he said. Nick nodded his head, "And this hurts more because it's a slam on who you are. Like what you are isn't good enough." "Yeah, exactly," Brian whispered.

Nick put his hand on his friend's shoulder, "Dude, you are though." Brian took a deep breath, "I keep telling myself that, but I dunno sometimes." "Man are you kidding? I sooo wanna be like you when I grow up," Nick teased. Brian laughed and looked at him, "Yeah right." "No man, really. In all the time I've known you, you always kept everything together. You were always secure in who you were and your beliefs and you weren't going to let anyone change you. I admire that about you, always have," Nick said. "Yeah, but that's when I thought I knew who I was," Brian protested, "Now I'm not that sure anymore." Nick grinned, "Again, been there already. I'm not saying I've got all this figured out, but it does get a little easier with time." "I hope so," Brian said. Nick nudged him, grinning, "Just be glad you aren't having to rule the world. Talk about a thankless job," he laughed. Brian burst out laughing. "Ah ha, the Bri I know," Nick smiled, "Can we go eat now, or do you want to wallow some more?" Brian rolled his eyes, "Let's eat."

## Chapter 36

"Man I thought we'd never convince him to let us go," Nick said, sitting down in the co-pilot's seat. Brian laughed, "I'm still not sure he's convinced you're fine without him." "I know, so take off before he changes his mind," Nick said, strapping in, and looking out the window at Rowland. He smiled and waved as the transport lifted off and headed in the direction of Fremont.

Nick watched as Brian maneuvered around the coral reef. "I still can't believe you can fly these things," he said. Brian glanced at him and smiled, "It's really easy once you get the hang of it. Wanna try when we get off the reef and out in the open?" Nick's eye's lit up, "Yeah!" Brian flipped on the intercom, "You guys might wanna stay strapped in for a while." "Why's that?" Ana asked. "Well, Nick's gonna take a few flying lessons," Brian said. Ana and Marie glanced at one another, then both tightened their seatbelts. "OK, just let us know when it's safe," Ana laughed. "Hey! I can't be that bad," Nick protested.

"So where was Anthony taking the guys today?" Brian asked, as he flew through a large hole in the coral. "Um, to the theater and then the museums," Nick answered, looking back at the hole they'd just come through. Brian chuckled, "I'm sure A.J.'s gonna love that." Nick looked back at Brian, "You never know. He might find something interesting." Brian looked at him and raised an eyebrow, "In a museum? This is J we're talking about." Nick laughed, "Well if anything he can make it interesting. He's got the weirdest imagination of any human being I've ever seen." "Ain't that the truth," Brian agreed, clearing the reef and heading out into the open sea.

"OK Nicky, this is where you take over," Brian said. Suddenly Nick was nervous, "Um what do I do?" "Feet on the petals, hand on the stick, other hand on the lever," Brian said, "Your feet control your pitch, the stick steers and the lever is like your gas pedal." "OK," Nick said, glancing around him making sure he had a hold of everything. Brian took his feet off the petals and let go of the stick, "Alright man, it's yours." Nick concentrated on looking ahead and keeping the ship in the upright position. When he started off course Brian would tell him what to do to correct it. After a few minutes Nick glanced over, "This is pretty easy." Brian nodded, laughing, "Yeah, going straight tends to be." Nick stuck his tongue out at him, then put all his concentration back into flying.

Brian let Nick fly for the better part of an hour. He had to keep himself from laughing at his younger friend. Nick was so nervous and biting his lip as he flew. Brian looked down at the screen and saw they would be hitting the reef again soon. "OK lessons over," he said, taking the controls back. Nick let go

and relaxed, "Man, I'm tired." Brian laughed, "Well next time remember to breathe, it helps a lot." Nick laughed, "All I could see was news headlines reading, king steers transport into underwater mountain." Brian laughed, "Speaking of, take a look." Nick looked out the window seeing the largest mountain he'd ever seen, "Whoa, do we go over that?" Brian grinned, shaking his head, "Through." Nick looked at him like he was crazy. Brian just smiled, flipping the lights on and heading into the enormous cave.

Nick held onto his chair arms so tight his knuckles were white as they raced through the cave and out into the reef. Brian seemed to enjoy seeing just how close he could get to the enormous reef without actually hitting it. And every time Nick would grip his seat a little tighter. Finally they could see the city ahead of them. They got clearance to enter the shield, then headed in the direction of Ana and Marie's neighborhood. "Man, there's a lot of traffic," Nick said. "It's not to bad. Reminds me of LA," Brian said, veering down to the neighborhood. He sat the ship down in front of Marie's parents house. "We're here," he called as he flipped the switches and shut down the transport. Ana and Marie waited on the two before stepping out. "Please tell me you weren't flying when we went into the cave," Ana said as Nick followed her down the ramp. He laughed, "Um no, I was hanging on for dear life." Marie laughed, "So was I." Brian took her hand and smiled, "What? You don't like my flying?" She grinned, "I love you're flying. I'm just not fond of going through caves at warp speed."

"*Marie!*" someone called from the house. Marie looked up to see her mom and dad come out to greet them. "*Why didn't you tell us you were coming?*" her mother asked. "*Your highness,*" her father said, kneeling, dragging his wife down with him, "*We are honored to have you here.*" Nick smiled, motioning for them to get up, "*Thank you. Marie is a good friend of mine, and I'm honored to meet her family.*" Marie grinned as her parents shot her the 'you never told us any of this' look. "*And Ana, it's been to long,*" Marie's mother said, hugging her. "*It has, you look great,*" Ana replied. "*Mom, dad, this is Brian Littrell,*" Marie said, introducing him. Brian stepped up and shook her fathers hand, "Nice to meet you." Her father nodded, but Brian could tell he didn't understand him. "Um .. *Good to meet you,*" he said, glancing at Marie to make sure it was right. She nodded as her father smiled, "*Good to meet you too Brian. I'm Maurice and this is Cathy.*" "*Well, come in,*" Cathy said, ushering them into the house, "*No since standing outside all day.*"

The group went in and got settled. Cathy had them all something to eat and drink in no time and they were all catching up with each other. Maire told her family all about running into Ana again and then meeting Nick and Brian. Brian listened, not really being able to join the conversation that much since he only knew a few phrases in Angel. Pretty soon Cathy had Ana and Marie in the kitchen, leaving Nick and Brian alone with Maurice. The three glanced at one another and smiled, not sure what to say now that the girls were out of the room. Brian took a deep breath, knowing this would probably be his one and only chance to do this. "Nick, can you translate something for me?" he asked. "Sure," Nick said. Brian looked at Maurice, "Sir, I know you just met me, and you don't know anything about me, but I want to

tell you that I love your daughter. I've loved her from the moment I saw her, and I can't imagine my life without her in it. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I want to marry her, and I'm asking for your permission to ask her." As Nick translated he slowly moved his gaze to Brian, complete shock registering on his face.

Brian bit his lip waiting for Maurice to say something. He had the same look as Nick, and it worried Brian. If he said no, that was it. Their customs demanded the blessing from the parents, without it the marriage couldn't happen. Maurice took a deep breath and let it out slowly, looking straight into Brian's eyes. *"You've only known my daughter for a short time, are you sure about this?"* he asked. Brian nodded, *"Yes sir."* *"And if you marry, where will you live? Here or on Earth?"* Maurice asked. Brian panicked, he hadn't thought about that at all. He just assumed that at some point he would go back to Earth. *"I don't know,"* he admitted. Maurice glanced at Nick as he translated. *"And how will you support her?"* he asked. *"I sing in a group. We're pretty famous on Earth, we've done very well for ourselves. Supporting her won't be a problem,"* Brian said. Maurice rubbed his forehead as he thought, after a moment he looked back to Brian. *"Marie has called home a few times and told her mother of a young man she was in love with. I'm assuming that young man is you. She told of how he made her feel complete and that she wanted nothing else than to be with him for the rest of her life. Who am I to take her happiness from her?"* he said. Brian's heart caught in his throat, *"Then I can ask her?"* Maurice nodded, *"You may ask her."* *"Thank you!"* Brian said, almost coming out of his seat with excitement. Nick laughed at his friend, but felt a pang of jealousy at the same time. Maurice smiled as Brian blushed, *"Just continue to make her happy."* *"I will sir,"* Brian said, with the happiest smile Nick had ever seen on his friend.

After a little while the girls returned. *"What's everyone smiling about?"* Marie asked. *"Nothing,"* all three said. The girls looked at one another then giggled, obviously having shared their own secrets. Marie sat down beside Brian as the console in the center table beeped. Maurice reached over and hit the button, smiling as a young man appeared, *"Devon, how are you?"* Devon smiled, *"Good dad, I was just wondering how you and Cathy are."* *"Doing well, you sister is here too. Surprised us with a visit,"* Maurice said. Devon smiled even wider, *"Really? Hey sis, long time huh?"* Marie moved to where the camera's would pick her up, *"Yeah it is. Funny how we live in the same city and don't see each other for years,"* she said rather unenthusiastically. *"Now sis, you know I'm busy and I'm sure you are too. But I wanna remedy that. Let's get together when you get back, you can catch me up on what's going on. I saw you on the vid .... hanging out with the king now, fancy stuff,"* Devon said, sounding impressed. Nick laughed, then clamped his hand over his mouth. Marie shot him a glance. *"Is someone else there? I'm interrupting something aren't I?"* Devon asked. *"No son you aren't. Listen, when are you gonna come for a visit? I'd love to see you,"* Maurice asked. *"Soon I hope. I'll let ya know. Anyway, I've gotta get to work, so I'll see you soon,"* Devon said, *"And sis, call me when you get back."* Marie nodded as the transmission ended.

"You have a brother?" Brian asked. She shrugged, "Half brother. We don't see much of each other."  
"Oh," Brian said, taking her hand and smiling at her. She looked at him, wondering what he was up to. He had that look in his eyes. The one that said, 'I know something that you don't'. "What?" she asked. He shook his head, "Nothing." "Uh huh, is that gonna be your answer for everything today?" she asked, nudging him. He grinned, "I dunno, depends on the question I guess." Marie rolled her eyes, laughing. Cathy had sat down next to her husband and he quietly filled her in on his conversation with Brian. Nick had also told Ana, so when Marie looked back over at everyone they were all grinning like the Cheshire Cat. "What?" she asked. "Nothing," they all replied.

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The group had stayed at Marie's the better part of the day. When they left they walked down the street to the house that Ana grew up in. The family that lived there was more than happy to let them in to see the place. More like flabbergasted that the king was standing on their doorstep. After they saw the house they got back in the transport, and Brian followed Ana's instructions until they reached a large park at the edge of the city. Once there they got out and headed down a trail.

"What is this place?" Brian asked, looking around. "Cemetery," Marie said quietly, slowing down. Brian watched Ana and Nick disappear up the trail, "Why are we here?" "To see Ana's family," she answered. "Oh, I didn't know," he stammered. Marie nodded, "This is the first time she's been back since it happened." "What happened?" he asked as they found a bench and sat down to wait. "Krystal," she said. Brian was confused, "The drug?" She nodded, "Her father got hooked on it. One night his supplier cut him off because he couldn't pay for it, so in a rage he came home and tore the house apart. Ana's mom tried to stop him, but he pushed her away. She tripped and fell down the stairs, the fall killed her instantly. When her father realized what he'd done, he killed himself." "Oh my God, how awful," Brian said, his heart going out to Ana. She nodded, "I still can't believe she came back. She said nothing would ever make her come back here." Brian smiled, "I guess she didn't count on falling in love huh?" Marie shook her head, "No she didn't."

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Nick blinked back tears as Ana softly told him the story. They were standing in front of two small markers. "Ana, I'm so sorry," he apologized, "If I'd known I would have never asked you to bring me

here." She shook her head, "It's alright. In a way I needed to come back. I missed this place." "I never wanted to cause you pain though," he said, stepping closer and taking her hand in his. "You didn't Nick," she said. Nick lifted her head, making her look at him instead of the markers, "Tell me about them, before the drugs." She smiled, "They were the best parents anyone could ask for. Mom always made me an after school snack, and dad would always take us somewhere on the weekends. They always told me how much they loved me, and I never had to ask for anything. It was almost like their whole lives revolved around my wants and needs." "They sounded like great parents," Nick said. Ana nodded, "They were. I miss them a lot."

Nick wrapped his arm around her and held her as she fought to keep her tears at bay. After a few moments she wiped her face and cleared her throat, "We should get back. It'll be late before we get back to Dacadia." She turned to leave when Nick gently pulled her back, and quickly kissed her. "Thank you for sharing this with me. I know it was hard for you," he whispered. Ana smiled, nodding her head. If she tried to say something she was sure her voice would break. Nick took her hand and they slowly walked back to the transport, ready for the ride back.

## Chapter 37

Kevin woke up and looked around. Everyone around him was asleep. He glanced out the window, seeing the mountains in the distance. The group had left Dacadia early that morning, heading for the mountainous region of Mardica and its capital city Gold Creek. They had been traveling for hours and everyone had settled in. He stretched and got up, walking to the back of the transport. Nick looked up as he came closer, "I thought I was the only one awake." Kevin smiled, "You were, I just woke up." Nick nodded, "It's a long trip." "Yeah," Kevin said, taking the seat next to him, "What are you reading?" "The Book of Kings," Nick replied, "It's the history of every king Celeste has had." "Must be interesting," Kevin said, thumbing through the pages. Each page was ordained with elaborate art work. Intricate borders surrounded the words and every other page or so there was a picture of the king being discussed in that particular chapter. "It is, but I'm not finding what I'm looking for," Nick said sadly. Kevin looked up at him, "What are you looking for?" He sighed, "A way out."

Kevin stared at him, "What do you mean?" Nick glanced around making sure they were the only two awake. "A way to hand over the crown without causing a war," he whispered. "Do you know there is a way?" Kevin asked. Nick shook his head, "I'm just hoping. But as old as this planet is, and with all the kings it's had, surely this has happened before?" Kevin shrugged, "It's possible I guess." Nick looked back at the book, "I just gotta find it." Kevin glanced down at the book, noting Nick was only about a fourth of the way through it, "How long have you been looking?" "Since the day I became king," Nick admitted. "I wish I could help, but I can't read Angel," he said. Nick smiled at his older friend, "It's OK. I'll find it eventually." Kevin patted him on the shoulder and stood up, "I hope so Nicky." Nick watched as Kevin walked to the back of the transport and disappeared into the bathroom, "I hope so too. I wanna go home," he muttered, resuming his reading.

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*"There it is," Anthony said, pointing out the window, "Gold Creek." Everyone looked out the windows, in awe of the beauty they saw. The city was unlike any they'd seen so far. The buildings seemed to blend with the landscape, making it hard to tell where the city ended. And right through the middle of the city ran an enormous river. The sun's reflections on it, causing it to shimmer a brilliant golden color. "It's beautiful," Howie said. Anthony smiled, "It's one of my favorite places. I can't wait to show you guys around." Nick smiled at his younger cousin, "I hope we can rest first. That was one long trip." Anthony grinned, "Well I suppose so. I forget I'm traveling with those of the 'older' persuasion." Everyone laughed. "I am not old," Nick protested, "I just don't sleep well on these things."*

In no time the transport had landed at the palace and the group was exiting the ship. Nick smiled as he walked off, seeing Count Marcave. *"Nathaniel, good to see you,"* he called. Nathaniel bowed, *"It's an honor to have you here my king. If you and your friends will follow me, we have a meal ready for you."* *"Great, I'm starving,"* A.J. said, flipping his bag over his shoulder and following the count.

Once inside the palace, several attendants took everyone's luggage from them, and they were lead to the formal dining hall. The table was set with the finest of china, and their meal was enough for two armies. "Count Marcave, you shouldn't have gone to all this trouble for us," Kevin said, sitting down. *"No trouble at all,"* Nathaniel said, taking his seat across from Nick. Howie pulled Ana's chair out for her, as did Brian for Marie. *"We weren't expecting this my lord, thank you,"* Ana said. Nathaniel smiled at her and nodded. Nick looked over seeing Rowland talking with one of the guards, "Rowland, you can take a few minuets and eat. I'm sure I'm quite safe inside the palace." The burly guard walked over to Nick, bending down and whispering in his ear, "I cannot eat with you. It'll look like I'm being given privileges to the other guards. I will eat with them later." Nick nodded, not even thinking that it could be perceived that way, "I understand. Do what you have to." Rowland nodded, then went back to stand with the other guards in the room.

Throughout the meal, Nathaniel told the group about Mardica, and all the attractions it had to offer. They had a number of things to do, including skiing. Kevin's eyes lit up at that, "I love skiing, but I don't get to go that often." Nathaniel smiled, *"Then we must go to White Cap first thing."* Everyone agreed. *"Then after that we have to go to Tumacer. They have the most amazing hot springs,"* Anthony suggested. "Sounds great," Brian said. Maire smiled, *"I've always loved the hot springs. It's just the most romantic place ever."* Brian grinned at her, "Then we'll have to spend some extra time there." Nick and Ana exchanged glances, instantly knowing what Brian was thinking. Neither one could hide the smile on their faces. Howie nudged Ana, "What is this?" Ana looked down at his plate seeing the purple meat. "That's kicchnue. It's like chicken," she answered. A.J. laughed, "Doesn't everything taste like chicken?" Howie took a bite, "Wow, this really does taste like chicken." A.J. looked at him, "Really?" Howie nodded, taking another bite. A.J. dove into his, "Hot damn, chicken!" Everyone laughed. *"You'll have to excuse my friends, the food here still amazes them sometimes,"* Nick laughed. Nathaniel smiled, *"I'm just glad they like it. Not many from Earth tend to like our food."* "That's because of the color," Kevin noted, "Not the taste." "Yeah, once you get past the look of it, it's really good," Brian said.

The rest of the meal was spent in small talk. Once finished everyone retired to their rooms to rest, except Nick. He had asked to speak with Nathaniel in private, so they went to one of the many sitting rooms. Nick sat down and yawned. *"You are tired my king. Surely this can wait until you've rested,"* Nathaniel said. Nick shook his head, *"I'm fine. I wanted to ask you about Krystal."* Nathaniel sighed, "I

*knew it wouldn't be long before you learned of it." "Tell me what it's done here in Mardica, and what you know of the company that's bringing it in," Nick said. Nathaniel looked out the window for a moment, collecting his thoughts, "It's devastated my region. Our crime is up, the companies here can't keep workers on the job. It's taken over. When it first arrived I knew it was trouble, so I outlawed it here. It didn't help though. Instead of getting it off the street, our jails were overflowing, and we weren't equipped to handle that many going through withdrawal. So I repealed the law."*

Nick ran his hand through his hair, *"There's no way to get it off the street?"* Nathaniel shook his head, *"The company that's bringing it in is very powerful. Anyone who's ever went against them has met an untimely end."* Nick stared at the older man, *"What do you mean? They kill anyone that gets in their way?"* *"Basically, yes,"* Nathaniel answered. *"But what about the council, couldn't they go against them?"* Nick asked. *"We've all talked about it, but as soon as we did, we all received threats on our families. I have two young daughters your highness, I will do anything to protect them,"* he said. Nick nodded, *"I understand. What about the king? Has a king stood up to them before?"* Nathaniel sighed, *"Yes. Your father was determined to find a way to stop the shipments in. He hated what the drug was doing to his people, but then he fell ill."* Nick stared at him for a moment, *"But you don't think that's all that happened do you?"* *"No your highness. I've always thought that somehow they got to him, that his illness wasn't natural,"* Nathaniel admitted. Nick closed his eyes for a moment, letting the count's words sink in. Could they really have murdered his father? And if they did, how the hell was he going to stop them? *"Your highness, I know this is difficult for you to hear, and I don't have any proof to back up my beliefs. It may not have been that way at all,"* Nathaniel said. Nick shook his head, *"I want to find out the truth Nathaniel. I have to. Any information you can give me, I'm grateful for. And I will make sure that you and your family remain safe."* Nathaniel nodded, standing up, *"I will give you what I have, but even you can't keep my family safe. I will send them into hiding until this is over, it's the only way."* Nick stood, searching the man's face. He could tell he desperately wanted to help, but was still afraid for his family. *"I'll do everything in my power to keep you out of this,"* he said. *"I know you will my king,"* Nathaniel said, heading for the door. He stopped and turned back around, *"Oh, I would keep a close eye on my friends. If they find out you're investigating them, they may try to use them to get to you."* Nick nodded as Nathaniel left. He stood there for a moment, then headed to his room. Being king wasn't turning out how he thought it would.

## Chapter 38

Brian bit his nails as he looked out the window. The group had spent the last two days at White Cap, skiing and enjoying the freshly fallen snow. Now they were nearing Tumacer. He could see the steam rising from the springs, and with each passing second he became more nervous. He'd never felt the way he did about Marie with anyone else, and he didn't want to screw up when he proposed to her. He had practiced the words over and over in his head, and had even had Rowland listen to him to make sure he was pronouncing them correctly. He smiled, remembering the look on the guards face when he said them. Brian was sure he saw a tear form in the man's eye, but Rowland had quickly hidden it. If those words could make him cry, he knew Marie would cherish them forever.

He felt someone squeeze his hand and looked over. Marie smiled at him, "What's wrong?" she asked. He shook his head, "Nothing." "You're biting your nails, something's bothering you," she said. Brian sighed, making a point of putting the hand he was chewing on down on the armrest, "I was just thinking about things." "Are you going to tell me or do I have to drag it out of you?" she asked, with a smile, but with concern in her eyes. Brian interlaced their fingers as he looked deep into her crystal blue eyes, "Just about us, and being here, and what's going on back home. See, nothing to be concerned about," he assured. "You miss Earth don't you?" she asked. Brian shook his head, "I miss my family and my friends, not really Earth itself." Marie nodded, retreating into her own thoughts for a moment. Brian nudged her, "Don't worry. I don't want to go back." She stared at him, "But your home is there." He shook his head, "My home is here, with you now."

Marie smiled as tears filled her eyes. Brian cupped her cheek and pulled her in for a soft sweet kiss. As they parted A.J. leaned over the seat in front of them, "Ya know I love you guys, but get a room already!" Everyone around them chuckled as Marie and Brian both blushed a little. "Hey, lay off," Nick said from behind them, "It's sweet." A.J. sighed dramatically, "You can die from too much sweetness." Nick giggled, "Not us, we thrive on it." "Oh shut up," A.J. called, plopping back down in his seat.

*"Here we are guys, Blue Mist Resort,"* Anthony said, looking out the window. "Oh cool," A.J. said, watching as the blue steam rose from the various buildings. "What makes it blue like that?" Kevin asked. "The minerals in the water," Ana replied. "It's gorgeous," Howie said as the transport slowed for its landing. *"I see why you love it here so much Anthony,"* Nick said, as the transport touched the ground with a thud. Anthony smiled at his older cousin, as he grabbed his bag and headed down the ramp, eager to show everyone around.

They headed to the lobby of the resort. Everyone was trying to take in as much as they could. The scenery was outstanding. Mountains all around, some with enormous waterfalls. Then the valley the resort was in was breathtaking. Greener than green grass filled it, with an array of wild flowers. Then the hot springs themselves, surrounded by rock that had been polished to a high shine. "Absolutely beautiful," Nick said, taking it all in. "*Come on, lets get to our rooms, so we can decide what we want to do first,*" Anthony called. Everyone followed him in and up to the desk. Of course Nick had to tell everyone in the lobby to stand back up after they saw him. He still wasn't used to that.

Marie sat down on one of the plush couches, waiting as Brian and Nick seemed to be making arrangements for something with the desk clerk. Everyone else had already gone to their rooms, planning to meet back in the lobby in an hour. Finally they finished, and Marie stood up as Brian approached her. "What was that about?" she asked, as he grabbed her bags and lead the way to their room. "Oh some kind of mix up with the rooms. We got it straightened out though," he said. She laughed, "How can they mix up the King's rooms? That's not good for business." Brian smiled, "I dunno, but we got upgraded for the hassle." She smiled as they left the main building and walked down a covered path to their room.

Brian glanced at his key, then at the numbers on the door. "I think this is it," he said. Marie looked, "Yeah, suite 102." Brian opened the door, letting Marie walk in first. "Oh my..." she said, looking around, "Bri this is a honeymoon suite." He grinned at her, "Really?" "Yes really," she said, going over and checking out their own private heart shaped hot spring. She sat on the edge and tested the water with her fingers, "Oh it's just right." Brian finished putting their luggage in the bedroom and walked over, "Wanna test it out?" She giggled, "I'd love to, but we're suppose to meet the others in a few minutes." Brian shook his head, "How bout we do our own thing today and catch up with them tomorrow?" She looked at him suspiciously, "And what exactly are we gonna do by ourselves?" A slow, mischievous smile formed on his face, "Oh I'm sure we can think of something."

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'OK, *is everyone here?*' Anthony asked. "Nope, we're missing the love birds," Kevin said. "They aren't coming," Nick said, grinning like the Cheshire cat. "And just why not?" Howie asked. Nick rolled his eyes, "Do I have to draw ya a picture D?" Everyone chuckled. "Ohhhh," Howie said, "Dang, they should like give them an award or something. No normal person has that much sex." Ana walked over and covered Anthony's ears with her hands, "Howard, there are children present." "*Hey, I'm not a child,*" Anthony protested, moving his head so Ana's hands were no longer covering his ears. "*I have you to know that I've had plenty of girlfriends, thank you very much,*" he said. "Really?" A.J. asked, putting his arm around

the younger man's shoulders, "Why don't you enlighten us during our hike." Anthony's eyes widened as they walked out the door, and he looked back at Nick. "A.J.'s always been a stickler for details," he said with a laugh.

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"Umm this feels so good, I don't want to get out," Brian said. He was sitting in the hot spring, leaning against the side with his eyes closed. Marie was next to him, her head on his shoulder, drawing imaginary pictures on his chest. "Then let's not," she said, looking up at him. He opened his eyes and glanced down at her, "We should though. I know, let's get dressed and go for a walk. The valley looked beautiful on the way in, then we can get some lunch." She smiled as she moved in front of him straddling his legs, "Or we could stay here and order room service." Brian bit his lip, as he gazed into her perfect features, "Um ...that sounds so tempting, but um, I really wanna go for a walk." Marie stared at him for a moment. He was up to something, but she couldn't quite figure out what. She sighed, "OK, a walk it is," she said, standing up and climbing out of the hot spring. Brian watched as she walked to the bedroom, the water dripping from her naked body. He looked at the ceiling, "God give me strength. If she keeps teasing me like that, we may never leave."

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"Wait," A.J. said, bending over and resting his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. "Come on J, you aren't that out of shape," Kevin teased. A.J. looked at him, "We've hiked like ten miles, I'm pooped." "Actually, we've only gone three," Anthony said. A.J. waved his hands to take in everything around him, "Yeah but they were straight up!" Everyone laughed. "Come on Alex, just a couple more then we stop and eat, then it's straight down," Ana urged. A.J. straightened up, "OK, but if you end up carrying me, don't say I didn't warn ya."

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Brian quickly glanced into the bedroom to make sure Marie wasn't on her way out, then he flipped the switch on the console. The image of the desk clerk appeared on the table. "Bonjour. Nous sommes sur le point de partir. Nous devrions être allés pendant quelques heures." *Hello. We are about to leave. We should be gone for a few hours*, he said. The desk clerk nodded, "Ne vous inquiétez pas, nous aura tout préparé avant que vous reveniez." *Don't worry, we'll have everything prepared before you return.* Brian

nodded, "Merci." *Thank you*. He switched off the console just as Marie walked out, "OK I'm ready." He smiled, "Great, let's go." He took her hand and together they walked out of the room and down the path to the valley.

They walked slowly, talking as they always did. That was one of the things Brian loved about her. They could talk about anything. Nothing was off limits, and everything that was said came from the heart. It was honest and straightforward. As they walked, Brian made sure to pick a few Tsars Might flowers without her really noticing. After he had about six, he stopped walking and pulled her to him. She smiled as he leaned in and gently kissed her. As they parted he held up his bouquet, "For you." Marie looked at the flowers, then at Brian. Surely he didn't know what they meant, did he? And how did he pick them without her seeing? "Brian, do you know what these mean?" she asked. He nodded, "I asked. It's the flower you give someone that you love, that you're courting." She took the flowers from him, shocked and impressed at the same time, that he would inquire about their dating customs. "Thank you," she said, as they continued walking. He smiled at her, squeezing her hand.

They spent a few hours in the valley, walking, talking and enjoying the scenery. Now they were walking into the restaurant, both famished. They were seated near the back, in a beautiful candle lit room. Marie looked around, noticing they were the only ones in that part of the restaurant. They ordered their food, and engaged in small talk as they waited. Brian reached across the table and took her hand, holding it. Marie loved it when he did that. It was the small things with him that mattered the most. The way he held her, the way he took her hand when they were in public. And the way his eyes lit up when he looked at her, full of love and happiness. Their food came, and they took their time eating. But as they paid the bill and left, Marie could tell that Brian was nervous again. She'd seen it that morning on the way in, but as the day passed it had left him, now it was back. She squeezed his hand, "You have that look again." "What look?" he asked, trying to play innocent. "The I'm thinking way to hard about something look," she replied as they turned down the path to their cottage.

Brian didn't get a chance to reply. Marie noticed the petals lining the path and gasped. Brian grinned as she looked at the hundreds of Tsars Might petals, then looked at him with utter awe and confusion. He took her hand and lead her the rest of the way, opening the door for her. "Brian..." she said, walking into their cottage and seeing the table set up on the balcony. "Shhh, come on, there's something I want to show you," he said, taking her out and pulling the chair out for her. Marie had tears in her eyes as she sat down. She kept telling herself that he didn't really know what this meant. He couldn't. Brian looked up as a clap of thunder roared through the valley. A storm was coming, and his heart sank. It couldn't rain, not now. This was the most important day in his life, and it was going to rain. He took a deep breath, then started.

Marie watched as he prepared her tea. He took his time, making sure that everything was done in the exact order it should be. Every movement meant something, and he had them down pat. He placed her cup in front of her just as the rain started to fall. He looked at her, his eyes filled with love, as he knelt down in front of her. "Marie. Je me présente vous. Je demande que vous preniez cette tasse, comme vous je. Je t'aime, et elle me ferait l'homme le plus heureux au monde si vous seriez mon épouse. Buvez svp de cette tasse comme acceptation de mon offre. Laissez-moi vous chauffer et vous remplir comme le fait le thé, laissez-moi vous aimer pour le reste de ma vie." *Marie. I present myself to you. I ask that you take this cup, as you would me. I love you, and it would make me the happiest man in the world if you would be my wife. Please drink from this cup as acceptance of my offer. Let me warm you and fill you as the tea does, let me love you for the rest of my life.*

Marie took the cup and drank the tea, her tears mingling with the rain. When she finished, she placed the cup back on its saucer, and looked down at him. He smiled, taking her hand and placing the ring on her finger, "I love you." Marie stared at the ring, shock registered all over her face. "How did you ....?" Brian smiled, "I saw how you looked at it. I knew you liked it, so I left my bag there on purpose so I could go back and get it for you." She smiled as she stood up, pulling him up with her. "I love you. I love you. I love you," she whispered, pulling him into a hug. Brian held her tight as the rain poured down. They were both soaking wet, but neither cared. Marie pulled back and stared at him, "Brian, je marcherai avec vous pour le reste de ma vie. Je promets de vous accomplir en tant que vous complet je. J'ai pris votre tasse, et accepte votre offre. Je t'aime, pendant que vous aimez moi et la volonté pour le reste de mes jours." *Brian, I will walk with you for the rest of my life. I promise to complete you as you complete me. I have taken your cup, and accept your offer. I love you, as you love me and will for the rest of my days.*

Brian pulled her in and kissed her. He was so happy he couldn't express it with mere words, he had to show her. He ran his hands up her back and into her rain soaked hair. Marie touched his cheek, and moaned into the kiss. After a moment, they parted. Brian looked up and held his hand out, the rain pouring down. "I love the rain," he giggled. Marie laughed, taking his hand, "Come on, let's take this inside." Brian smiled as she pulled him into the cottage, out of the rain.

## Chapter 39

"Morning," Ana said, slipping into her chair at the table. "Morning," the guys mumbled, their mouths already full of food. She filled her plate, then settled back, taking a bite, "Everyone sleep OK?" "Yup," A.J. said. She glanced around, noticing that Nick, Brian and Marie hadn't come to breakfast yet. She knew why Brian and Marie weren't there, but Nick's absence concerned her, "Where's Nick?" "Still sleeping I think," Kevin answered, taking a sip of the Celestian version of coffee. It was purple in color, and sweet to the taste. "I don't think he slept well," Kevin continued, "I heard him a few times during the night. Like he was having a nightmare or something." "Oh," she said, taking another bite.

*"Here he comes,"* Anthony said, seeing Nick come into the restaurant, followed by Rowland. Nick made his way through the main dining room, everyone leaving their seats to kneel as he passed them. He came into their private room and sat down with a heavy sigh, "Morning." Ana noticed how tired he looked, and wondered what had caused it. She watched as Nick picked at his food, not really eating. The guys noticed it too, exchanging glances with each other. Eventually the glances landed on Kevin, naming him the official spokesperson. He cleared his throat, "Um Nick, is something wrong?" Nick looked up from his plate, seeing everyone staring at him, "No, why?" "You're not eating," Kevin noted, "And you look like hell." Nick half smiled, "I'm OK, just didn't get much sleep last night. The storm kept waking me up." "Is that all?" Howie asked. "Uh huh," Nick said, taking a bite of his food. The guys and Ana exchanged one more glance, knowing that wasn't all, but if Nick didn't want to talk about it there was nothing they could do.

Ana looked up as Brian and Marie came into the room. Both had the biggest smiles on their faces she'd ever seen. They were almost glowing with happiness, as Brian pulled Marie's chair out for her, then sat down next to her. "Isn't it a beautiful morning?" Brian asked, grabbing his coffee. "Well, at least someone had a good night," Kevin laughed. Brian grinned even wider, handing Marie the eggs before she even asked for them. When she reached to take them, everyone noticed her ring. "Holy hell, that's gorgeous," A.J. said, grabbing her hand and pulling it over so he could see the ring better. Marie laughed, "Thank you." Nick smiled at them both, "Congratulations guys." "Thanks man," Brian said, "I couldn't have done it without you." Kevin, Howie and A.J. looked at each other with raised eyebrows. "That's an engagement ring?" Kevin asked. Brian nodded, "Yup, Marie and I are engaged," he said with a smile.

Howie smiled, "Well congrats! When's the big day?" *"We don't know yet,"* Marie said, as Ana inspected her ring. "You have to tell me everything," she said to her friend. Marie blushed, nodding. *"You did the*

*tea ceremony?"* Anthony asked. Brian nodded, "Yeah, and it started raining right in the middle of it." Anthony smiled, amazed that Brian had taken the time to learn their ritual. "Oh that had to suck," Nick said. Brian and Marie glanced at one another, then back at their friends, "Naw, we kinda liked it," Brian said. Kevin smiled at his cousin, but he couldn't help but wonder if he was rushing into this. He'd have to get him alone and talk with him. I mean who really meets someone and not even a month later asks them to marry you? Brian looked over at him, seeing that look in his eyes. He knew a lecture was coming as soon as Kevin could get him by himself. He looked back over at Marie, leaning in and kissing her cheek before he continued eating his breakfast. Let Kevin talk, it wouldn't change anything. He loved Marie with every fiber of his being, and not even the mighty Kevin could take that away.

The group continued to eat and talk. Brian and Maire's engagement was the hot topic, and Nick listened, glancing at Ana every so often. Brian and Marie's happiness was infectious, but he still felt a tinge of jealousy. Brian was living the life he wanted more than everything. He was so in love, and didn't care who saw it. Nick wanted that. He knew he had to find something in the book to help him soon, or he'd go insane. How he managed to keep his hands off Ana this long he didn't know. Every time he saw her, the only thing going through his mind was to touch her, kiss her, love her. He glanced over again, catching Ana staring at him. He could see the love and longing in her eyes, and knew it matched his own. He was so lost in her stare that he didn't even hear the group that came into the room.

*"Your highness."* Nick looked over, seeing Nathaniel and several guards kneeling before him. *"Count Marcave, what brings you here?"* he asked. *"I'm sorry to intrude my king, but you are needed back at Cystaleia,"* Nathaniel said. Nick sat up, *"Is something wrong with the queen?"* *"No my king, there is an emergency in the Rothgar system. If we don't intervene the entire system could be at war. I came to escort you back, and brief you on what's happening. Their dignitaries will arrive shortly,"* Nathaniel said. Nick ran his hand through his hair, images of his dreams from the night before playing through his mind. Ana noticed his hands were shaking, but could do nothing to comfort him. Nick looked at his friends, "Sorry guys. Duty calls. You guys stay as long as you want, then come back when you're ready." "No, we're going with you," Brian said, standing up, "We might be able to help." Nick glanced at Nathaniel, then back to Brian, "Fine. I don't have time to argue. Get your things and meet us in twenty minutes at the ship." Everyone nodded, hurriedly leaving the table. Nick looked back at Nathaniel, *"It's bad isn't it?"* The man nodded, *"I'm afraid so."*

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Brian smiled at Ana when she looked over at him. Marie was telling her about his proposal, and it was the tenth time Ana had looked over at him, amazement and tears in her eyes. He glanced back, seeing

Nick still talking with Nathaniel. Their mood was serious, and Brian wished there was something he could do to help. Nick already looked stressed and they weren't even back to the palace yet. He looked back up the ship. Howie, A.J., and Anthony were asleep, and Kevin was staring at him. Crap. He sighed, getting up and stretching before making his way over to sit next to his cousin. He plopped down in the seat and looked over, "OK, spill it." Kevin looked at him, "Huh?" Brian laughed, "Cut the crap Kev, I know you wanna say something about Marie and me, so say it."

Kevin sighed, and ran his hand through his hair. He'd been thinking since they left about what he wanted to say, what he wanted to ask Brian, but now he couldn't think of anything. "I just ..." he started. "Think it's to soon?" Brian offered. "Yeah, I mean, you've only known her for what? A few weeks?" Kevin said. "So," Brian said, "Time is irrelevant. It's how I feel about her that matters. I love her Kev." "You're sure it's love and not infatuation?" the older man asked. "I'm positive. I've never felt this way about anyone. Not even Courtney," Brian said. Kevin's green eyes got wider, "But you loved Courtney. You guys were so close to getting married." Brian shook his head, "That didn't hold a candle to what I feel with Marie. She's my life Kev. When I'm with her I feel whole, complete. No one's ever done that for me. She's the first thing on my mind when I wake up, and the last thing I think about before I go to sleep. If I had eternity to spend with her, it wouldn't be enough. Please Kev, you're the only family I have here, please take this for what it is and be happy for me." Kevin sighed, looking into his cousin's pleading eyes, "Alright, as long as you're happy, I guess that's all that matters." Brian smiled, pulling him into a hug, "Thanks Kev."

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"...so that's where it stands," Nathaniel said. Nick closed his eyes and sighed, "All this over a mining claim?" "It's more than just a mining claim. To each world it would make a huge difference in their economy, their standing among the surrounding systems," Nathaniel said. "What am I suppose to do? No matter who I decide gets the claim, the others will always resent it. It won't solve anything," Nick said. Nathaniel shook his head, "We have always been able to come to a peaceful solution. That's why they came to us. They don't want to fight this out. They're looking to you for the answer. Whatever you decide will be followed, be assured of that. They know the consequences if it's not." Nick looked up at the older man, "That's what I'm afraid of. I don't want to drag us into a war that's not ours to fight. It leaves us vulnerable." Nathaniel cocked his head, staring at Nick, "What are you saying?" Nick shrugged, "Just that the timing is odd don't you think. Just when I start asking about Krystal, this happens. It's just a little coincidental to me. Either that, or I'm just paranoid." Nathaniel laughed, "That may be a good thing in your position. Speaking of, here's the information you asked for," he said, handing Nick a small chip. Nick put it in his pocket and nodded, "Thank you. I know how hard this is for you. You're family is safe?" "Yes, they won't be found," he replied. Nick patted the man on the shoulder, "Good. I need to rest a little before we arrive. Wake me when we land." Nathaniel nodded, leaving Nick to his thoughts,

and hopefully some sleep.

## Chapter 40

"Nick," Kevin said, shaking the younger man, "Hey wake up, we're here." Nick's eyes fluttered open and he stared at Kevin for a moment before sitting up and rubbing his face, trying to clear the cobwebs. He glanced out the window, seeing the transport approaching the palace. He took a deep breath and stood up, stretching. Everyone was gathering their things as the transport touched down with a slight bump. Nathaniel and his guards exited first, followed by Ana, Marie and the guys. "Anthony," Nick called, catching up to him, "I want you to come to the negotiations with me." Anthony's eyes widened in shock, "Are you sure?" Nick laughed, "Yeah, I need you there. You've seen how this is done, I need your expertise." "I'm no expert Nick," Anthony protested. Nick shrugged, "At least you've seen it done. That's one up on me."

The pair exited the transport together, seeing the queen waiting on them. She smiled as they approached, but they could see the concern in her eyes. Nick hugged her, "I missed you." LaDonna hugged him tighter, "I missed you as well. I'm sorry to call you back so soon." Nick shook his head as they parted, "Don't be. It's my job now." Anthony hugged his aunt and together the three walked into the palace. "The dignitaries from Kholath have already arrived. They are settling in," she informed them. "What about the Jeptimian dignitaries?" Nick asked. "They will arrive within the hour," she said. Nick sighed, heading towards his room, "Alright, greet them and let them get settled as well. We will start the negotiations one hour after they arrive." LaDonna nodded, and turned back down the hall. Nick looked at Anthony, "OK, what do you wear to negotiations?"

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Brian stretched out on the bed, watching as Marie went about putting their things away. "Baby, we can do that later," he said. She smiled at him, "I'm almost done." He laughed, glancing over at the console, it was flashing. He sat up and walked over to it, pressing the button. A man Brian didn't know appeared before him. "Marie, call me when you get in. I want to catch up with you, see how things are going," the man said, then disappeared. "Is that your brother?" Brian asked. Marie sighed, sitting on the bed, "Yeah, that's him. The mighty Devon Lapool," she laughed. Brian walked back over to sit with her, "You don't like him?" She shrugged, "He never had much use for me, so I never had much for him." "Ohh," Brian said, "Are you gonna call him?" "Yeah, eventually. Otherwise he'll keep bugging me until I go insane," she laughed. Brian chuckled. "Besides, he needs to meet his future brother-in-law," she smiled, "But I'm calling mom and dad first. You need to ask my father if ....." "Already did," Brian grinned. Marie stared at him, "You did? When?" "When we were there. I had Nick translate for me. I knew if I

didn't ask him then, that it may be a long time before I saw him again," he said. Marie pulled his face to hers and planted a playful kiss to his lips. "I love you," she said, "Now lets call mom and dad. I'm sure they're wondering if I accepted." Brian laughed, "I'm sure they know what you said." She giggled, "Yeah, probably so. But mom's gonna want details!"

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Nick sighed, adjusting his crown one last time before walking into the throne room. He was already not looking forward to this, and his first impressions when he walked in didn't help matters any. He sat down on his throne, Anthony taking a seat slightly behind him. Two tables had been set up, and each contained the dignitary from that planet and his assistant. Standing behind them, where their own guards, armed to the hilt. Nick caught the icy glares that shot between the tables, and he thought they were going to rip each other's heads off when both stepped forward at the same time to introduce themselves.

Nick glanced over at the council who were seated at their table and rolled his eyes. He got knowing smiles from each of them, even his uncle. Nick looked back at the two dignitaries, each unwilling to let the other go first. Nick stood up and walked up to the nearest table, the dignitary and his assistant kneeling in front of him. He motioned for them to get up, then stuck his hand out, "*I'm Nick Carter, king of Celeste. And you are?*" The man looked shocked, glancing at the council for a moment before answering, "*Tunk James, your highness. Ambassador of Kholath.*" Nick shook his hand, nodding at the man. He was Nick's height and build, with large, deep brown eyes and jet black hair, that fell to his shoulders. His skin was olive in color, giving him an exotic look. "*Good to meet you, and you speak our language,*" Nick noted. "*Yes, your highness, the entire system learns your language,*" Tunk replied. "*How nice,*" Nick said, walking over to the other table.

"*Nick Carter,*" Nick said, sticking his hand out to the short, stocky man in front of him. The man took it, "*Kelah Hatch, Ambassador of Jeptim.*" Nick nodded, regarding the man. He was older than Tunk, with gray eyes and short sandy blonde hair. His skin was fair, like it hadn't ever seen the sun. The two men couldn't have been any more different. "*Good to meet you Ambassador Hatch,*" he said, then turned and went back to his throne. He sat down looking around, not liking the set up. Everyone had to look up to him, and the two tables right next to each other just wasn't going to cut it. The fact that Kelah had pushed his table up closer to the dias the throne was on was proof of that. He needed a set up where everyone was on equal ground, so they could dispense with the petty bickering of who was more important, and get down to the real business at hand.

Anthony leaned forward, *"What are you looking for?" "I don't like this set up. We'll never get anything done like this,"* Nick said. *"This is how it's always set up,"* Anthony replied. Nick bit his bottom lip, wondering how his father ever got anything accomplished. He stood up and walked over to Rowland, *"We need to change the room." "How?"* Rowland asked. *"I need equal seating for me and the ambassadors. Something like .... a round table. Please tell me we have a large round table,"* Nick said. *"Yes, your highness we do,"* Rowland answered, having to hold back a smile at the look on Nick's face. *"Great! Move these tables out, push the dias back against the wall, and move in the round table,"* Nick said. Rowland nodded, quietly giving several of his men the orders. Nick walked back up to the waiting ambassadors, *"Please excuse us for a moment. I'm having them change the tables."* Both men nodded, picking their things up and moving out of the way as the tables were taken and the round table brought in. Kelah and Tunk glanced at each other, not knowing what to think about this. It seemed the council was as baffled as they were. The three men whispering among themselves.

When the table was set up, Nick gestured towards it, *"Please, take a seat."* The two men slowly sat down, each with their assistants by their side. Nick sat down, Anthony coming to sit next to him. The table was large enough, they could all spread out without the fear of encroaching into the other's space. *"Now, that's much better,"* Nick said, taking his cape off and draping across the back of his chair. He settled in and looked behind the ambassadors, seeing their guards eyeing one another. *"I must ask that you have your guards wait outside,"* Nick said. The look on the two men's faces told him that wasn't going to go over well. Nick looked at them sternly, *"I will not have them disrupting our work, and by the looks of them, if someone sneezed, we'd all be dodging fire. You may keep one man with you, but the others must leave."*

The two ambassadors glanced at one another again. Nick could tell they were not used to being told what to do, or to this style of negotiation. Finally both men conceded, sending all but one guard out. Nick motioned to Rowland, having the guard lean down so he could whisper to him. *"Have your men keep an eye on the guards. I don't want them running into each other in the halls and starting something,"* he said. Rowland nodded, instructing his men of Nick's wishes. Nick looked at the two guards, still feeling uneasy with the amount of weaponry they displayed. *"I require one more thing,"* he said, looking at each of the ambassadors, *"I want this room to be a safe zone. No weapons of any kind should pass through these doors. That includes my guards as well."* *"But your highness, we must be able to defend ourselves,"* Kelah protested. Nick grinned at him, *"If there are no weapons in the room, there should be no need to defend ourselves."* Count Dupal leaned over to Mason, *"Good point."* Mason raised his eyebrow, nodding. His nephew had just broke a long standing tradition and already had everyone in the room thinking it was a good thing. How did he do that?

Nick waited patiently as the two ambassadors thought about his order. After a few moments he could see that neither was going to be the first to disarm. Figures. *"Rowland, please designate two guards to*

*take their weapons," Nick ordered, watching as Rowland pointed out two men in the room. The two men walked over and began taking each of the guards weapons from him. When they had finished Nick turned to Rowland, "You may stay, all other guards I wish to leave, and have one of them take your weapons as he goes." Rowland nodded, handing over his sword and gun to one of his men as he exited the room. Nick waited until the massive doors were shut, then looked around. The council was seated at their table, and he and the ambassadors at the round table in the middle of the room. Each man's respective guard pulled up a chair to sit behind him. Nick smiled, taking his crown off and laying it on the table in front of him, "Now gentlemen, let's get down to business."*

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Brian sat next to Marie as she made the connection. Suddenly the man he'd seen earlier appeared before them on the console. *"Marie, you're already back?" he asked. "Yes, you wanted to see me?" she asked, getting straight to the matter at hand. "Yeah, it's been too long sis. How bout we have lunch tomorrow? And are you going to introduce me or do I get to guess who the nervous looking young man is next to you," Devon smiled. Brian quickly put the hand down he was chewing on as Marie introduced him. "This is Brian Littrell, my fiancé," she said, taking Brian's hand. "Your.....well congratulations," Devon said, recovering quickly from his shock, "Then we must have dinner tomorrow to celebrate." Marie glanced at Brian and he nodded. "Alright, we'll meet you at Brown's," she said. Devon smiled, "Great sis, can't wait. It was nice meeting you Brian." "Nice to meet you," Brian said. Devon looked impressed, "Ohh you speak the language." "I'm learning," Brian replied. "Good, well see you tomorrow then," Devon said, breaking the connection. Brian looked at Marie, "Well that wasn't so bad." She laughed, shaking her head, "Just wait, you don't get the full jerk affect unless you're in person." Brian laughed, leaning over and kissing her cheek, "Well he can't be all bad. He's related to you, that has to count for something." "You'd think," she replied, laughing.*

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Ana slowly unpacked her clothes and souvenirs. She had gone to her room and slept for a while, before getting up and putting her things away. She knew she wouldn't get to see much of Nick until the negotiations were over with. She sighed, wishing for just a moment with him. She already missed him. She picked up a small figurine that Nick had bought for her in Dacadia. She gazed at it, remembering the kiss they had shared when he gave it to her.

*"That's lovely," LaDonna said from behind her. Ana turned around, quickly kneeling, "I didn't realize you*

*were there." LaDonna smiled at her, gesturing for her to stand, "I wanted to see how your trip was."*

*"Good," Ana replied, smiling, "We saw a lot of things. I think the king was impressed." LaDonna sat on Ana's bed, perusing her souvenirs, "You went to the springs?" "Yes ma'am," she said. LaDonna nodded, standing back up, "Nickolas will be in negotiations for some time. Why don't you come and work with me until you are able to resume his lessons." Ana stared at the older woman, seeing a glint of something in her eye, "If you wish." LaDonna smiled at her, heading for the door, "See you in the morning then."*

*"See you then," Ana said, wondering what she was up to.*

# Chapter 41

Kevin walked through the garden, admiring the beauty. He still had a hard time believing he was actually in this wonderful place. He sat down on a bench and enjoyed the warm morning suns. Everything was happening so fast. Brian was engaged, and by the looks of it would be married soon. Nick was in heavy negotiations, trying to stop an almost certain war. When did he grow up anyway? Kevin chuckled to himself, remembering some of the utterly stupid things Nick had done growing up. Now he was ruler of a planet. God must really have some sense of humor.

Kevin heard the galloping of unicorn hooves and looked towards the stables. Nick was coming in from his morning ride with Thomas. Kevin noted the younger man's posture and manner. Both spoke of stress and worry. He got up and walked toward the stable as Nick jumped down off Thomas and patted his neck, talking to him. Thomas purred loudly, tossing his head, as Kevin approached, "Hey Nick." Nick turned around and half smiled, "Morning. You're up early." Kevin shrugged his shoulders and placed his hands in his front jeans pockets, "I love this time of morning. It's peaceful." Nick nodded, "Yeah."

The older man watched as Nick unsaddled Thomas and proceeded to brush him out. "You've gotten good at that," Kevin said. Nick filled Thomas's feed basket with fresh hay, then came out of the stall, "It's really the only time during the day I have just for me, ya know?" Kevin nodded, walking towards the palace with him, "Yeah. Is there anything any of us can do to help?" "Naw, just you guys being here helps me. I know that you guys support what I do, and that means a lot," Nick replied. Kevin glanced over at him, "And the others don't?" Nick sighed, "I dunno. They don't say anything to me, but I know they disapprove of some of the things I've done, or how I do them. Of course no one's gonna tell me, cause I'm the king. But I can see it in their faces ... the looks they send each other." "What'd you do?" Kevin asked. "I changed the room around to suit me better. Apparently that's a no no. But it works better Kev, I don't understand why they have to be so against change, even a little one," Nick said, frustrated. Kevin put his hand on Nick's shoulder, "Change is hard for some people. Especially when no one's bucked the system for hundreds of years, like it is here. Just give it time, kiddo. Things will work out." Nick stopped and stared at his older brother, "I knew there was a reason you guys were here. I dunno if they'll ever get used to me, but just hearing you say it gives me hope." Kevin grinned, pulling Nick to him in a half hug as they entered the palace, "That's what I'm here for Nicky, instant support." Nick laughed, "Thanks Kev, but um, don't call me Nicky, it's disrespectful to the king." Kevin shook his head and chased the younger man down the hall, laughing the whole way.

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Marie took Brian's hand, keeping him from gnawing on another fingernail, "Baby, don't worry, you don't have to make a good impression with him." He smiled at her, "We need to at least get along. We are gonna be related soon." Marie shrugged as their carriage arrived in front of the Brown's restaurant. Brian jumped down and helped Marie out, "This place is nice." She grinned mischievously, "Well if he's paying, we might as well take advantage of it, don't you think?" Brian laughed, opening the door for her, "You're bad." She raised her eyebrow, leaning in and whispering to him, "Wouldn't you like to know how much." "Oh I think I do," he laughed, as someone approached them to take them to their seats.

As they walked through the restaurant, Brian noticed several people pointing to him and whispering. He did his best to ignore it, knowing his mark was the reason for their curiosity. They were seated and the waitress scurried off to get their drinks. Brian cleared his throat and pulled his shirt sleeve over his mark. Marie reached over and took his hand, "Don't hide what you are. Eventually the curiosity will wear off, besides, I thought you were used to people staring at you and whispering." He smiled, "I am. It's just that this is different." "How so?" she asked. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, "Well, on Earth people did that because I was a Backstreet Boy. They were seeing a so called celebrity, and it was exciting for them." "And here people are whispering because of who you are. You are a celebrity, and it's exciting for them," Marie smiled, "See? No difference." Brian smiled and looked down at his mark. It was glowing brightly, the blue earth shimmering against the golden suns. "I guess you're right. It's all in how I define myself. On Earth I'm a Backstreet Boy, and here I'm .....what am I?" he asked. "You are a treasure," Marie answered, leaning over and kissing his cheek.

*"Ah hem, excuse me," Devon said, smiling at the two when they looked up, "Hey sis, great to see you."* Brian stood up, waiting until Devon had hugged Marie before shaking his hand. *"Brian, nice to meet you,"* Devon said. *"You too,"* Brian said as they sat down. *"So, it's been a while,"* Devon said, taking a sip of his water. Marie nodded, *"It has. You know Devon, I can't help but wonder why you wanted to see me. I mean why after all these years are you so interested in my life?"* Brian glanced between the two siblings, wondering if this was the end of dinner. Devon smiled, *"I'm sorry Marie. I know that we haven't been close the last few years, but I've been busy with my work. I'm finally to the point that I have some leisure time. Time that I want to spend getting to know my little sis again."* Marie stared at him for a moment, wondering if what he was telling her was really true. *"Um, what do you do?"* Brian asked, needing to fill the silence. Devon looked at him and grinned, only happy to talk about himself, *"I'm in the import business. We cover the entire galaxy and bring in only the finest goods available. I'm very proud of my company, I've been there since the start. We are even rivaling the largest import company on Celeste now."*

Brian nodded, *"That's great."* *"Yes it is,"* Devon said as the waitress came and took their order, leaving

their drinks. *"Now sis, tell me what you've been up to the last few years,"* Devon said. Brian listened intently as Marie told Devon of her work in the hospital, then of her assignment to the palace. He loved hearing her talk, especially about her accomplishments. *"So what do you do all day then? Surely the palace infirmary isn't that busy,"* Devon said. *"We actually are. You have to remember that all the staff and guards also live within the palace walls. There's a mini city in there, complete with families. I stay quite busy,"* Marie defended. *"I see, and Brian I heard on the vid that you were in an accident. Is that how you two met? In the hospital?"* Devon asked. Brian took a drink and nodded, *"Yes. She was the first person I saw when I woke up."* *"Oh really? Well, I guess it was love at first sight then?"* Devon teased, as their food came. Brian chuckled, *"Well almost, yeah."*

The three ate for a moment, enjoying the food. Brian had let Marie pick his meal and was having to ask her what things were. Devon couldn't understand him, and cursed himself for not thinking to bring a translator with him. He needed to know all he could about the king's friend. *"So Brian, what is it that you do?"* he asked. Brian quickly chewed the bite he had just placed in his mouth, *"I'm a singer. The group I'm in is very popular on Earth."* *"I see, and so when you two get married, where will you live? Here or there?"* Devon asked. Brian looked at Marie for a moment, *"We haven't really discussed it yet, but where ever Marie wants to be is where we'll live."* Marie smiled at him, taking his hand in hers. Devon couldn't help but notice Brian's mark, *"You're mark is beautiful, unlike any I've seen."* *"They created it just for Brian and those like him,"* Marie said proudly. *"Ahhh yes, you are part Celestian. Very interesting indeed,"* Devon mused. Brian laughed nervously, *"Yeah, that was um quite a shock, but a good one."* Devon nodded, taking another bite, *"I bet it was."*

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Ana sat down to a late dinner with the queen. They had been working on the day to day activities that keep a palace going all morning. Ana found the queen to be a fascinating woman, and liked spending time with her. She looked around, seeing a third place set, *"My queen, who else is eating with us?"* "I am," Nick said, walking through the door and sitting down, rubbing his head. Ana smiled at him compassionately. Nick looked so tired. The negotiations were taking their toll on him, and it was only the second day. *"Are you through with the ...?"* LaDonna started to ask. Nick shook his head, *"No, not by a long shot. We have recessed for a few hours. I needed a break, and we were at a stand still anyway."* "So it's not going well?" Ana asked. Nick sighed, "Not really. Those two wouldn't agree that a pink elephant was pink at this point. Neither is willing to compromise on anything. I have a feeling it will be some time before we make any headway at all." *"Nickolas, is there anything we can do to help?"* his mother asked. He looked at her lovingly, *"No, I wish there was, but there's not. Even the council and Anthony are at a loss as to how to get them to start agreeing."*

Ana stared across the table as Nick ate. She couldn't help it, she missed him. He glanced at her and smiled. The only thing he wanted to do was be with her. Talk to her, hold her, and have her tell him that things would work out. He sighed, going back to his dinner. LaDonna watched the two as she ate. She could tell how much they both ached to be alone with each other. She made a decision that she was sure she'd regret, but she couldn't take the look on her son's and Ana's faces any longer. She stood up, *"I'm really not that hungry. I'm going to retire to my room for a little while. Ana when you've finished eating, please go back to my office and start on those papers,"* she said, leaving the table and exiting the room. Nick and Ana looked around, seeing they were alone.

"You think she did that on purpose?" Nick asked. Ana shrugged her shoulders, "I don't know, but I'm thankful for it. I've missed you." Nick smiled, moving to the seat his mother had vacated and taking her hand, "I've missed you too." Ana studied his eyes, "You don't feel well?" Nick shook his head, "I have a headache, it'll go away." She reached out and smoothed his hair, letting her hand softly trail down his cheek. Nick licked his lips, leaning in and capturing hers in a kiss. Ana wrapped her arms around his neck as he pulled back. She guided his head to her shoulder and held him, somehow sensing that's what he wanted. "I don't know how to help you, but everything will work out. It just takes time," she whispered. Nick melted into her embrace, wrapping his arms around her and not ever wanting to let go.

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Maire helped Brian out of the carriage and into the palace. He stumbled and started to laugh, "Oops." "Come on baby, just a little bit more and you can go to bed," Maire urged, trying to steady him. "You know, I rrrreeeaaaaallllyyyy like your ...brother," Brian laughed. "Well, maybe you should have stopped at two glasses of Manwa," she said, "I think you had a little to much." Brian stared at her, "I'm not drunk." Marie laughed, "Um yeah baby, you are." Brian stepped away from her swaying on his feet, he pointed his finger at her, "I am not. I'm perfectly .... whoa," he said, losing his balance and grabbing the wall. He giggled, "Well, maybe I am, just a little." Marie let him lean on her as they walked slowly down the hall, "OK, no more Manwa for you," she grinned. Brian laughed, "Aww, it tasted good." "I know baby, but it affects you differently than it does us," she said, seeing A.J. and Howie come around the corner.

"Hey girly, what's up?" A.J. asked, looking at Brian. "I'm drunk!" Brian proudly announced. Howie and A.J. glanced at one another with amused faces. "Oh, and Brian, it's not even late afternoon yet," Howie tiskted, shaking his head as he and A.J. took him from Marie. *"Apparently one of our wines has an increased affect on your kind. He only had four glasses, normally that's not even enough to get a good buzz,"* Marie said, leading the group down the hall. "It was soooooo goooooood," Brian sing songed,

"Like a sweet ... um sweet thing." "OK, lets get you into bed," Howie laughed, as they finally reached his room. Brian looked outside, "It's still daylight. I don't wanna go to bed," he whined. A.J. chuckled, grabbing the older man and pushing him into the bed, "Lay down and go to sleep." "Nuh uh, not sleepy," Brian said, crossing his arms over his chest while Howie and Marie took his shoes off. "Listen Rok, I know you aren't sleepy, but just close your eyes OK?" A.J. said, "You might like what you see." Brian raised an eyebrow, "Oh? What am I gonna see?" "I dunno, that's the fun part, you get surprised," A.J. said, sounding really excited. Brian pondered that for a moment, then smiled, "OK, but if .. if I don't see anything good, it's your fault." "OK Rok, whatever you say," A.J. laughed as Brian closed his eyes. After a few minutes he was fast asleep. A.J. smiled at Marie, "You gotta point out that wine the next time we're out."

## Chapter 42

Nick rolled over and groaned at the bright sunlight coming through the balcony doors. He had skipped his morning ride with Thomas, sleeping in instead. Contrary to his beliefs, his headache had not gone away. It was still there, a dull throb in back of his head. He sat up and rubbed his face, taking a deep breath. "It's stress, it has to be stress," he said out loud. He heard a beep and looked over, seeing the light on his console flashing. He got up and walked over to the desk, sitting down and hitting the button.

"Morning your highness," Tom said, "Oh is this a bad time?" he asked, seeing Nick's appearance. His hair was sticking out everywhere and his t-shirt was beyond wrinkled. "No Agent Neely, it's not. I just got up," Nick laughed, "So you guys find out anything yet?" Tom nodded, "A few things. We found a name that we're looking into. Someone that was with the agency during the time you were brought here. We're trying to track him down as we speak." "Great," Nick said, "I'd be interested to hear what he has to say." "So are we. It took a lot to even find this much. Whoever covered this up, did a really good job of it," Tom said. "Yeah, makes you wonder why don't it? I mean there has to be more to it than just me, ya know?" Nick said. Tom nodded his agreement, "I think you're right about that. Which brings me to something else. Since we've started looking into this Krystal, um some strange things have been happening."

Nick stared at the man's hologram, "Like what?" "Well, like we go to a business one day and ask around, then we go back the next day and it's not there anymore. We've both gotten threats, and some of the higher ups in the agency have come to us and asked us to stop snooping," Tom said. Nick sighed, nodding, "I see. Um don't put yourselves in danger for this, OK? If you have to stop looking into that, I understand." Tom shook his head, "No, we're continuing. Everything that's happening just proves that there's something out there. We'll find it, whatever it is." Nick bit his lip, "Alright, just be careful. I'd feel awful if you guys got hurt because of something I asked you to do." Tom smiled, "Thanks for your concern, but that's why we're here. We're finally doing the thing we thought we were doing all along. It should be me that's thanking you." Nick smiled, seeing the time on the display, "Listen, I've got to go, but keep me posted alright?" "Will do Nick," Tom said as the hologram disappeared.

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"Oh my God," Brian mumbled, pulling the pillow over his head. Marie laughed, tapping him on the shoulder, "Baby, drink this. It'll make you feel better." "Nothing's gonna make me feel better. This is

the worst hangover I've ever had," he muttered from under the pillow. Marie sat on the edge of the bed, "Brian, it'll get better if you drink this." He pulled the pillow down just enough to peek over it at her. He almost wished he hadn't. The contents of the glass she was holding made his stomach churn. It was a dull gray in color and looked extremely thick. He replaced the pillow, "I can't drink that." "Yes you can," Marie countered, pulling the pillow away from his face. Brian groaned, "Baby, it's too bright in here."

Just then A.J. came into the room, "Morning sunshine!" Brian grabbed his head, "Oh God don't yell." "What?" A.J. asked, laughing, "Why don't you want me to yell!" he yelled. Brian sat up glaring at his friend, "I'm gonna kill you when I feel better." A.J. snickered, "Is that a promise Rok?" "Oh yeah," Brian said, taking the glass from Marie, "You can bank on it," he said, tipping the glass and taking a drink. The look on his face was priceless. A mixture of disgust and surprise. He quickly handed the glass back to Marie and raced to the bathroom. A.J. looked at Marie, "What's in that?" She smiled, "*You don't want to know.*"

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Mason watched as Devon paced in front of his desk. He smiled, liking making the young man wait to address him. "*Alright, what's so important that you had to risk being seen here?*" Mason asked. Devon turned on his heel and faced him, "*Did you know the half-breed was engaged to my sister? ENGAGED!! I can't believe she's going to marry that .... that freak!*" Mason raised an eyebrow, "*Engaged huh? Very interesting.*" "*Yeah, interesting,*" Devon muttered sarcastically. "*This changes nothing, other than your personal feelings,*" Mason noted. Devon stared at the man, "*This changes everything. I want to kill that freak for even laying a hand on my sister, and I don't even like her that much.*" Mason sighed, "*You will do things according to plan, understand? When you get him, I don't care what you do to him as long as you don't kill him. We need him alive, don't forget that.*" Devon bit his lip, casting his eyes to the floor, "*I won't forget. But I'm not sure I can do this.... be friends with him,*" he said, cringing in disgust. Mason glared at him, "*I'm not paying you to bond with him, I'm paying you to gain his trust so he doesn't suspect anything.*" Devon nodded, "*Just tell me when you need him.*" "*Not yet, but I want you ready. That means buddy-ing up to him. I want him to go with you in a moments notice, so get him used to it. Now leave before someone sees you,*" Mason instructed, watching the younger man storm out.

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Howie and Kevin wandered through the enormous library. "Wow, look at all these old books," Howie said, pulling one from a shelf. Kevin nodded, engrossed in the one he was holding. Even though he

couldn't read the words, the artwork was astounding. He flipped though page after page, admiring the work it took for someone to hand draw all the borders and illustrations.

Ana walked in with her arms full of papers, "Hey guys." They both looked up, walking over to help her. "What are you doing?" Kevin asked, setting the papers on one of the large tables. "I'm helping the queen with a few things," Ana replied, spreading her work out, "What are you two doing?" "Admiring the books," Kevin said. "Yeah, we didn't have anything to do, so we thought we'd come down here for a while," Howie added. Ana nodded, "You want to read any?" Kevin laughed, "Don't know the language, remember?" Ana chuckled, taking the book from his hands and walking over to a workstation. She sat the book into the recess in the table, attaching a small chip to it, "*Milky Way, Earth, English,*" she said. Kevin's mouth dropped open as the words changed to English before his eyes. "Cool," Howie said, taking his own book to another station and repeating the words Ana had used. "Thanks," Kevin said, sitting down. "No problem," Ana smiled, walking back over to her work.

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Nick squinted his eyes, trying to focus on the papers in front of him. Everything was blurry and his head was now pounding. He rested his elbow on the table and held his head, blinking several times. "*Your highness,*" Tunk said, looking at him. Nick looked up, "*Huh?*" "*I asked what your opinion of paragraph four was,*" Tunk repeated. Nick looked down at the paper, still not able to make his eyes focus on the words. A searing pain shot through his head, and he tensed, stifling a cry. Anthony leaned over, "*Nick, are you alright.*" Nick shook his head, looking over at his cousin. Anthony could see the pain in his face. "*Please, have someone go find Kevin, and get me out of here,*" Nick said. Anthony nodded, looking to the ambassadors, "*I'm sorry gentleman, the king is not feeling well. We will continue in the morning.*" Kelah sighed heavily and left the room with his assistant. Tunk looked at Nick, "*Is there anything I can do to help?*" Nick managed to shake his head no, "*I'm sorry,*" he said, his voice strained. Tunk held his hand up to dismiss the apology, "*Don't worry about it.*"

Anthony sent Rowland to find Kevin, while he stayed with Nick. Nick had laid his head on the table, shielding his eyes from the light in the room. The council walked over with Ambassador James, looking on, and wondering what was wrong. A few minutes passed, then Rowland returned with Kevin, Howie and Ana in tow. Kevin knelt down next to Nick, trying to look at his face, "Nicky what is it?" "Migraine," Nick managed, his own words echoing in his head. "OK, let's get you to your room," Kevin said, helping Nick stand up. "What is it?" Ana asked, trying to maintain her 'place' but needing know what was wrong. "He's got a migraine," Kevin answered, "He hasn't had one in a long time. I actually thought he'd grown out of them."

Nathaniel looked at them, *"What is wrong?"* Ana proceeded to explain the problem to the group, seeing the sympathetic looks on all their faces save one. Guess who. Mason rolled his eyes and turned to leave the room, when the commotion caused him to turn back around. "Shit," Kevin said, as Nick collapsed and he and Rowland quickly caught him. Rowland looked to the other men in the room, *"My lords, a little help would be appreciated."* Howie, Nathaniel, Joseph and Tunk all came over to help carry Nick. They got him situated and headed to his room. Ana and Anthony following them. *"Go find Marie and tell her what's going on. Have her meet us in his quarters,"* Ana told him. Anthony nodded, running ahead.

The group got Nick to his room and into bed. He woke up a few seconds later, tears streaming down his cheeks, holding his head. His breathing was shallow, as the pain increased. Ana quickly shut the balcony doors and pulled the heavy drapes, then dimmed the lights to the point it was hard for her to see. She went into his bathroom and came out with a wet cloth, going to the side of the bed and holding it to Nick's forehead, applying pressure as she did. Nick kept his eyes closed tightly against the pain. Every sound echoed louder and louder in his head. Even the small amount of light in the room was enough to make him cringe, and he felt like his head was going to explode any second. He moaned, reaching up and placing his hands over Ana's, trying to press the cool material down harder. Ana glanced up, seeing the eyes of the council and the ambassador on her. She turned back to Nick, *"Your highness, Marie will be here in a moment with some medicine."* Nick nodded, letting her know he heard her. She tried to pull her hands free, but Nick was pressing on them too hard. *"You must let my hands go, my king,"* she said softly. Nick opened his eyes and looked at her for a moment before letting her hands go, taking the cloth from her and pressing it back to his forehead.

Brian and A.J. came into the room with Anthony. A.J. walked over to Kevin, "Damn, he hasn't had one of these in years." Kevin nodded. "Where is Marie?" Ana asked. "She's coming," Brian said, "She ran down to Medical to get a few things." Brian walked over to the bed and gently sat down next to Nick, placing his hands over the younger man's eyes, helping him press the cloth into his forehead, "Nick, just take steady breaths alright. The medicine's on its way," he whispered. "Hurry up," Nick said through clenched teeth, "I feel like I'm gonna die." "I know," Brian said, "Just try and relax." Nick moaned, wanting nothing more than for someone to cut his head off so he wouldn't have to feel the pain he was in any longer.

Finally Marie came in, going straight to the bed. Brian moved out of the way as she gently turned Nick's head to the side. *"This will sting for a moment,"* she said, placing the shot gun to his neck and pulling the trigger. Nick winced as the drug entered his body, stinging like a mother, as promised. After a few moments the stinging subsided, as well as some of the pain. Nick opened his eyes, staring at Marie,

"Thank you." She smiled, *"You're welcome. The drug will make you sleep for a while,"* she said, seeing it start to take affect. Nick nodded, relaxing a little and closing his eyes. Marie looked at the room full of people, *"My lords, I must ask that everyone leave. He needs a quiet, dark environment until he is feeling better."* The members of the council and ambassador James nodded, turning and exiting the room, followed by the guys. Ana turned to go, but Marie called her back. *"I'll need someone to help me monitor him. This drug generally does very well, but it has been known to cause bad reactions in a few,"* she said, loud enough for the men to hear. Ana nodded, going back into the room and shutting the door. Kevin glanced at the men, wondering if they thought anything about Ana going back in. No one seemed to think anything was wrong with it.

Tunk approached him, pulling a translator from his pocket and placing it in his ear, *"Excuse me, we haven't met. I'm Tunk."* Kevin smiled, shaking the man's hand, "Kevin Richardson." *"I don't wish to be noisy, but who was the young woman with you?"* Tunk asked. "Um, that's Ana. She's Nick's teacher, and friend," Kevin answered, rather hesitantly. *"His teacher? They are the same age, are they not?"* Tunk asked, confused. Kevin put his hand on the man's shoulder, "Well, it's a long story. See Nick grew up somewhere else, and when he was brought here, he had to be taught everything. Ana was on the team that found him, and it is her job to teach him." Tunk looked very interested, *"Ohh, you must tell me this story."* Kevin smiled as the two walked down the hall. He wasn't sure why, but he felt he could trust this man. His instincts had never let him down, why would they now? "Alright, it all started when we were on tour....."

## Chapter 43

Brian followed the guard down the massive hallway. He glanced out, seeing the twin suns beginning to set. Marie was still in with Nick, and from the looks of it, would be for some time. He sighed, turning his attention back to where he was going. The guard led him to a small parlor, opening the door and stepping inside with him. Brian was surprised to see Devon sitting in one of the chairs, waiting. He turned when Brian walked in, smiling at him, *"Hello Brian. I trust you're feeling better today."* Brian blushed, nodding, *"Yeah, I am."* Devon pointed to his ear, *"I've got a translator today, so you don't have to worry about speaking our language."* Brian sat down, "Oh OK. Um Marie is busy with a patient right now.." Devon waved his hand, *"That's fine. Actually I came to see you."* Brian was a little shocked, "Me?" *"Yes, see I have tickets to a nachtk game, and I was wondering if you'd like to go,"* Devon said, brandishing the tickets in his hand. "What's nachtk?" Brian asked. Devon thought for a moment, *"I believe your baseball compares to it."* Brian's eyebrows went up, "Oh really, sounds cool. When is it?" Devon looked at his watch, *"In about an hour. If we leave now we can make it."* "Oh OK, let me run and get a jacket and I'll be ready," Brian said, getting up and heading out of the room. Devon smiled, nodding to the guard still in the room with him. This was to easy.

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Ana held the cloth to Nick's head as he moaned. "This isn't working," she said, looking up to her friend. Marie bit her lip. Normally the drug she gave Nick would knock the person out, letting them sleep off the headache, but it wasn't doing that with Nick. He had woke up after only being asleep for an hour, and was now in worse pain that he was before. Marie walked around the bed to the door, "I'll go down and get something else. Just try and keep him comfortable until I get back." Ana nodded as she left the room, shutting the door behind her.

Marie walked swiftly down the hall, trying to think of what else she could give Nick. "Hey baby," Brian said, bounding up behind her. Marie jumped, turning around, "You scared me!" Brian smiled, pulling her into a quick kiss, "I'm sorry. How's Nick?" She shook her head as they continued walking, "Not well. I'm going down to find some more medicine for him." She looked down, seeing Brian had his jacket with him, "Where are you going?" "Well, your brother came by and he wants to take me to a nachtk game. Can I go? Please, please," he begged, batting his eyelashes dramatically. She laughed, turning the corner, "Yes, go have fun, but Bri..." "What?" he asked. "Just um, be careful OK. I know he's my brother and all, but um, I just feel like something's off," she admitted. He smiled at her, leaning over and softly kissing her, "I'll be fine. See you later," he said, turning and bounding down the hall. "Oh and Bri... no Manwa

at the game," she teased. He waved his hand, laughing as he turned the corner at the opposite end of the hall.

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"Ana, it hurts," Nick said, clutching his head. "I know, Marie went to get you some different medicine," she said. Nick moaned as another white hot searing pain coursed through his head. He rolled around in the bed, trying to find some position that offered even a little relief, but he couldn't. He finally sat up, holding his head with both hands and rocking back and forth as painful tear after tear streaked down his face. Ana sat next to him, pulling him to her so he could rest his head on her shoulder. She gently rocked him, running her fingers through his hair at the back of his head. "Shhh, I know," she whispered. Nick wrapped his arms around her, holding on for dear life, "God, please make this go away," he cried. Ana glanced at the back of his head, wondering if he was really talking to God, or just using the expression. Nick looked up at her and smiled through his tears, "Yeah, I'm really talking to Him." Ana smiled, gently pushing his head back down to her shoulder and continued rocking him.

Nick closed his eyes, letting himself be lulled by the gentle rocking movement, and the feel of Ana's fingers in his hair. He felt someone outside his door, but didn't bother to move. The door opened, and Ana turned to see LaDonna come into the room. Ana didn't know what to do as the queen came in and sat on the other side of the bed, so she continued rocking. Nick let one of his hands fall from Ana's back and reached over to take his mother's hand. "*The medicine's not working?*" LaDonna asked. Ana shook her head, "*Marie went to get some more.*" "*Nickolas, why don't you lay down,*" the queen suggested. Nick shook his head, turning his face towards Ana and closing his eyes. The queen and Ana exchanged glances. LaDonna could see the fear in Ana's eyes, knowing that if it had been a member of the council or anyone else for that matter that had come in, she would be in serious trouble. Ana saw compassion in the queens eyes, and that let her relax somewhat.

Nick moaned, causing the two to turn their attention back to him. He was trembling, as more tears escaped his lavender eyes. LaDonna pulled one of the blankets up and covered Nick's back. Nick held on to Ana tighter as another wave of pain shot through him. He tried to focus on anything but the pain, finding it hard to do. He blinked his eyes, brushing his eyelashes against Ana's neck. Her skin was so soft, and her hair smelled of Tsars Might. Nick leaned into her more, letting go of his mothers hand and bringing his arm back to hold Ana. He could hear her heart beating, mixing with the sound of his own in his ears. He cringed as another sharp pain hit him, and felt the familiar lightheadedness that always came before he passed out.

Ana looked down as Nick suddenly went limp in her arms, "Nick?" LaDonna reached over and moved Ana's hair out of the way so she could see his face, *"I think he passed out,"* she said. LaDonna helped Ana lay Nick back down and pulled the covers over him, then she reached across the bed and took Ana's hand. *"You must be careful. If you were seen just now... there's not much I could do to help you,"* she warned. Ana nodded her head, *"I understand, but I can't let him suffer like this without helping him."* LaDonna stared at the young woman, seeing much of herself in her, *"You love him,"* she stated. Ana looked down at Nick's face and nodded, tears stinging her eyes, *"With all my heart."* The queen squeezed her hand and smiled at her as the door opened and Maire came in with the doctor.

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"This is unbelievable," Brian said, taking in the arena. He felt like he was back in Rome during the times of the gladiators. There were thousands of people in the stadium, all chanting for their favorite team. The game turned out to be similar to baseball, but was full contact. There were no words to describe the spectacle going on down on the field. Devon smiled, *"I'm glad you like it."* Brian nodded, taking a sip of his drink before returning it to the drink holder. He looked around, spotting the bathroom up the stairs. "I'll be right back," he said, standing up and making his way out of the seats. Devon grinned to himself after he was gone. If only all things in life were this easy, he'd accomplished his goals a long time ago.

Brian made his way in to the crowded bathroom and waited his turn. When he was done he walked over to the sinks to wash his hands. He caught someone approaching him out of the corner of his eye, and looked over. The young man staring at him looked rough. Like he'd spent the better part of his life living on the street. *"Hey, you want some sparkle?"* the man asked. Brian stared at him confused, *"Some what?"* *"Sparkle, blue, you know Krystal,"* the man said, annoyed. Brian looked down, seeing the vial the man was holding. It was full of a clear blue liquid. *"Um, no thanks,"* he said, quickly drying his hands and walking around the man to the door. That's when the man saw his mark. *"Well bless my stars! You're the king's friend, the mixed one!"* he proclaimed to the entire bathroom. Brian sighed and nodded, still backing his way to the door. *"You tell the king that if he ever want's any, I have the purest around. That's right, Jimmy Csar is the one to call. You tell him that,"* the man said, pointing at Brian. Brian nodded, leaving the bathroom and quickly finding his seat.

He sat down, still shocked. He'd never had anyone offer him drugs like that. Devon looked over at him, *"Hey, you alright?"* Brian nodded, "I uh, I just got offered drugs in the bathroom." *"Oh, well you get big crowds of people together and the dealers come out of the woodwork,"* Devon said, dismissing it as if it happened all the time. "I guess," Brian said, focusing back on the game. Devon glanced over, *"You*

*didn't take any did you?" Brian stared at him, "Of course not." "Good, that stuff is really bad. It takes one time using it and you're hooked," he said, shaking his head, "I've seen so many friends hit rock bottom on that stuff." Brian nodded, "I can't see why people would ruin their lives, just for a feeling that doesn't last." Devon shrugged, turning his attention to the game below, a plan forming in his mind.*

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LaDonna walked down the hall, headed to her office. She sighed, feeling him walking behind her, "Yes?" "My queen, how is Nickolas?" he asked. She walked into her office, leaving the door open for him, "He is resting now, but you didn't come here to ask me that did you?" she said, turning to face him. Mason stared into her blue eyes, until he couldn't take the daggers she was sending him any longer and looked away. He sighed, walking over and picking up a photograph of Frederick, staring at it. "Mason, I have things to do, so if you don't mind..." she said, taking the picture from his hand and placing it back on the desk.

He grabbed her wrist and held it, "But I do mind. I wish to speak with you." LaDonna pulled her hand back and glared at him, "Then make an appointment, I'm busy." He laughed, stepping closer to her, "I remember a time when you would have dropped everything to see me." "Don't," she warned, turning around so she wouldn't have to see his face. "Don't what my queen? Remind you of a time when you were happy? Remind you what a mistake it was to go back to him?" Mason said. LaDonna turned around, "I asked you before not to bring this up. What happened is in the past, and that's where it stays." He shook his head, "I can't keep it there LaDonna. You know what we had, how can you dismiss it like it was nothing?" She bit her lip and blinked back tears she wasn't aware were there.

She looked up at him, "Because the person I fell in love with isn't the person standing in front of me. I loved Frederick, not you." Mason nodded, "I see. So is that why you came to me? Why you spent every moment you could in my arms? Because you loved him?!" LaDonna jumped at his outburst, quickly going over and shutting the door, "You idiot do you want someone to hear you?" Mason shrugged, "Maybe I do. Maybe I'm tired of this lie we all agreed on years ago. Maybe I want people to know the truth?" "NO! You can't Mason. You gave your promise that no one would ever know, I'm holding you to that," she said, desperately.

Mason sighed heavily, walking over to a mirror and looking at himself. "Everyday I am reminded of what I promised. Every time I look in the mirror and see this," he said, gesturing towards his scar, "I remember it all as if it were yesterday." "Mason, please drop this," LaDonna said, "It's been twenty years." "Twenty

*one to be exact," he said, turning back towards her, "Funny coincidence, that's exactly how old your son is." LaDonna's eyes went wide and anger flashed in them, "Don't even go there." Mason laughed, heading for the door, "You can't ignore me forever. Sooner or later the truth will come out, and when it does, who do you want telling him the truth? You or me?" he asked, leaving the room.*

# Chapter 44

Brian quietly walked down the halls. He was tired and ready to crawl in bed. The nachtk game had gone into extra innings making him hours late getting back. He knew Marie would be worried sick about him, and he'd probably hear it too. He laughed to himself, realizing he wanted to hear it. He loved having someone that cared about him so much that they would be worried if he was late. As he passed several doors he could hear faint sounds. He slowly crept closer, listening. It was the sound of someone crying. The door was ajar, so he carefully pushed on it, opening it up enough that he could see who it was. He was shocked to find the queen sitting behind her desk in tears. He knew he shouldn't, but something compelled him to walk into the room.

He walked closer to the desk and knelt, *"Your highness, is something wrong?"* he asked in a soft voice. LaDonna looked up, quickly wiping the tears from her face, *"Brian, I didn't hear you come in."* He smiled, standing back up, *"I just got in. What's wrong?"* She smiled at how much her son's friend seemed to care. *"It's nothing you need to be concerned about,"* she answered. He nodded, *"If I can help, please let me know."* The queen smiled again, motioning for him to sit down. As he did, he noticed the picture of Nick's father on her desk. LaDonna saw him glance at it, *"It was taken in White Cap, not long after we were married."* *"Nick looks just like him, well, except for the eyes and hair,"* Brian said. She nodded, *"He does look a lot like his father. So, what keeps you out so late, that you are walking the halls at this time of night?"*

Brian smiled, *"Marie's brother took me to a nachtk game."* *"Ohh, enough said. Those can last forever,"* she smiled, *"So tell me, when are you two getting married?"* Brian sat up straighter, *"Um, I'm not sure. We really haven't discussed it."* *"Well when you do, you are welcome to use any of the facilities here. It's been ages since we had a wedding inside these walls. It'll be a welcome celebration,"* she said. Brian nodded, biting his lip, *"I guess it would be on the vid too?"* LaDonna laughed, *"You are the only one of your kind here. The people are interested in you."* Brian laughed, *"And I thought being a Backstreet Boy was an invasion of privacy."* *"If you don't want it to be broadcast, all you have to do is say the word,"* LaDonna offered. *"Thank you. I'll talk to Marie, and see what she says,"* he said, standing up. *"Please do,"* she said. Brian got to the door and turned back around, *"Um, I meant what I said. If I can help ...."* The queen smiled, *"I wish you could, but this is something that I must handle myself."* He nodded, turning and leaving the room. LaDonna sighed, *"I just wish I knew how,"* she muttered.

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Brian stepped through the door to his room, seeing Marie in bed. He quietly took off his jeans and jacket, crawling into bed. She turned over and snuggled up to him, "How did you like the game?" she asked sleepily. "It was good. I'm sorry I woke you," he said, kissing the top of her head. "I wasn't asleep. I just left Nick a little while ago," she admitted. "How is he?" Brian asked. "Better. It took a few tries, but we finally found a drug that worked. He should sleep through the night," she said. "Good. He must be really stressed, cause he hasn't had one of those in years," Brian said. Marie nodded, resting her head on his shoulder, "So, my brother behave himself?"

Brian laughed, "Yeah, we had a good time." She lifted her head and stared at him, "Really?" He nodded, "Yeah, he's a pretty nice guy. Why are you looking at me like that?" Marie shook her head, "Sorry, I just ... maybe he's changed since the last time I saw him." Brian wrapped his arms around her, "Maybe. It's been known to happen." "Well I'm glad you two are getting along," she commented, closing her eyes. "Um baby, I need to ask you something," Brian said. She looked up at him. "I just ran into the queen, and she wanted to know when we were getting married. I think she wants us to have the wedding here, like a big huge celebration type thing," he said. "She does? Wow, Bri that's such an honor to be allowed to have it here," Marie said, her eyes gleaming. He laughed, "I know that, but um ... I dunno bout the big huge part of it. I mean, I already feel like a spectacle as it is." She pushed up and kissed him, "You are not a spectacle. But I'm sure if we didn't want the whole world to see it, that could be arranged." "Yeah, that's what she said," Brian smiled, "So now I guess we just have to pick a day." Marie nodded, laying back down, "I really don't care. All I want is to be yours for the rest of my life, and the sooner the better." Brian chuckled, "My sentiments exactly." "I'll talk to the queen tomorrow," she said, yawning, "We'll find a day." Brian nodded, closing his eyes, "OK, sounds good."

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Tamara looked at the directions again, then glanced at the house at the end of the long dirt drive, "This has to be it." Tom nodded, turning the car up the drive, "I hope he doesn't mind visitors this early." "I hope we're not here for nothing," she said, biting her lip. He nodded, stifling a yawn. They'd both been up all night, traveling. They tracked Mr. Michael Sussing to a small farm in Montana. If the man had wanted to hide, this was surely the place to do it. He was fifty miles from the nearest anything. You had to know he was out here to find him, and even that proved difficult. Tom had driven in circles a few times, missing the small road that led to Michael's place.

He stopped the car, and they got out, making their way to the door. As they approached the yappy bark of a house dog could be heard. Tom knocked on the door, stepping back to wait. Tamara panned the windows. Someone peeked out, quickly shutting the blinds again. She looked at Tom, wondering if

their man was going to run. Tom knocked again, "Mr. Sussing?" Another moment passed before someone unlocked the door and opened it. The little terrier bouncing at his feet, Michael Sussing inspecting his visitors. "Mr. Sussing, I'm Agent Tom Neely with AIP, this is my partner Agent Tamara Dawson. Could we have a word with you?" Tom said. Michael looked at him, wary, "What's this about? I haven't heard from the agency since I left." "Sir, it's about Nick Carter," Tamara said. "Nick Carter? I don't remember that name," Michael mused. "Um Frederick DeGrafe the fifth," Tom offered. Michael's eyes went wide and the color drained from his face. He glanced down the drive, opening the door wider, "Get in quick before someone see's you."

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Nick walked into the throne room, taking his seat at the table. *"Good morning your highness, you are feeling better?"* Tunk asked. Nick nodded, *"Much better. I must apologize for yesterday. I'm not sure what happened, but I haven't had a headache like that in years."* Tunk nodded, *"No apology needed. Many of the Kholathians suffer from severe headaches. Soon we will have to start filtering our atmosphere I'm afraid."* *"Now that his highness is better, we must proceed,"* Kelah said, not wanting Nick and Tunk to get into a friendly conversation. He didn't come here to make friends, he came here to gain control of the mines. Nick nodded, taking the papers in front of him and beginning where they had left off.

Mason watched his nephew, intent on finding something he could use. It was hard to focus though, his mind going back to the conversation he'd had with LaDonna the night before. He sighed, flipping the pages in front of him, feigning interest. When was she going to realize that what they had, she could have again? He shook his head, knowing she wouldn't. She had made a vow when they were found out, and he knew she would die before she broke it. He sighed again, looking over at Nick. He was listening to Kelah go on and on about why he couldn't agree to whatever paragraph they were on. Mason watched as Nick took everything the man said into consideration, asking the appropriate questions. He smiled, remembering a time that he himself was that interested in everything brought before him. A time when he was passionate about his work. Maybe that's why he loathed Nick, because he reminded him of himself when he was young and had his whole life in front of him. Now most of his life had passed, and he still had nothing to show for it. In fact, he'd lost everything he cared about over twenty years ago. And now here was life, slapping him in the face again, in the form of a nephew he hadn't seen since the first day he was born.

He sighed, remembering that day. It was raining, a storm the likes they had never seen before, nor since. LaDonna had gone into labor in the wee hours of the morning, but it was the middle of the night before

Nick had been born. He had waited impatiently all day to see her. Watching as his brother paced back and forth with worry. Mason was consumed with his own worry, knowing that if his brother were to find out about his relationship with LaDonna that they both would be in danger. Finally the doctors let them in. Mason stood back as Frederick saw his son for the first time. He remembered how awed his brother was, and he felt the same way. When Nick had opened his eyes, and those lavender orbs looked out at the world, he felt a chill. The realization that the prophecy might actually be true, staring him in the face. Mason looked up at Nick, seeing the man that child had become. He had to stop it. He couldn't let the prophecy come to pass, he just couldn't.

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Michael sat down, taking a sip of his coffee. Tom and Tamara had told him why they were there. Told him about Nick becoming king, and his desire to find out the truth. Michael shook his head, still not believing it. "Mr. Sussing, we need your help. You are the only person we've found that was with the agency then. You must know something," Tamara said. Michael stared down into his coffee for several moments, contemplating. If he helped them, his life could be in danger. But he'd always felt that what had happened was wrong, and maybe this was his way of making it right. "Alright, I'll help," he said. Tom and Tamara smiled at each other. Finally a break!

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Kevin, Brian, Howie and A.J. walked into the dining room for lunch. Ana, Marie and the queen were already there, chatting a mile a minute. Kevin raised his eyebrows, nudging Brian, "Looks like a planning session to me." Brian laughed, going over and taking his seat. "So, what are you lovely ladies discussing?" A.J. asked, grinning. "*We are talking about our wedding,*" Marie answered, taking Brian's hand. "Oh great," Brian said, "Do we have a day?" Ana laughed, "Not only do we have a day, but we've pretty much already planned the whole thing." All the guys looked at Brian. "So when is it?" he asked, getting excited already. "*Two weeks,*" Marie answered.

"Wow, two weeks. That's soon," Howie said. Marie and Brian both shook their heads. "It's not soon enough," he said, "I can't wait!" The group laughed. "*We'll have everything taken care of,*" LaDonna said, "*We will announce it to the public, but no cameras will be allowed.*" "Thank you," Brian said. LaDonna smiled, "*No, thank you. I never had a daughter to help plan a wedding. Thank you for the opportunity.*" "Well, this deserves a toast," Kevin said, raising his glass, "To the two most in love, caring, wonderful people I know...." "And to the party of the century ... um I mean the wedding," A.J. laughed.



## Chapter 45

Michael looked at the two agents, seeing the smiles on their faces. He knew they were happy to get some information, but he wasn't sure just how much he could help them. He took a deep breath, knowing they were waiting for him to tell them the story. "Now, this has been quite a while, so I may not remember everything," he said. "Any information you can give us is appreciated," Tamara said. Michael nodded, scratching his head, "It seems like it was in the winter when we got the call." "What call?" Tom asked. "A transmission from Celeste," he answered, "The woman was frantic and needing a place to claim asylum." "Woman? Can you remember anything about her?" Tamara asked. Michael shook his head, "Not really, no." Tamara was disappointed, but nodded for him to continue.

"Well, anyway, she told us that her son was in danger, and she needed to get him off the planet. We agreed to harbor them until we could find out what was going on. She arrived a few weeks later with the child," he said, taking a sip of his coffee. "What was the reason the child was in danger?" Tom asked. "She told us that since the child was different, that he was to be killed. That the king declared him unfit to live, which always baffled me," he said. "Why?" both agents asked. Michael looked at them, "Because I had been in meetings with the king before. He was young, but was one of the most fair, tolerant, understanding men I've ever met. Everything the woman told us was the opposite of how I perceived him." Tom and Tamara glanced at each other, intrigued.

"The woman also said that the child was a member of the royal family. Something like the king's nephew.... I think. It's been so long ago," Michael went on. "What happened after she got here?" Tom asked. "Well, we put her and the boy into hiding. It wasn't long after she arrived that a Celestian ship arrived, unauthorized. We quickly found out it was a search party, and moved the woman and child into the general population," he answered. "Did you have contact with the search party?" Tamara asked. Michael sighed, "Yes, that's how I got the limp." "They attacked you?" Tom asked, surprised. He laughed, "Well, I think the fight was mutual. They asked where the child was. We told them we didn't know anything about it. They called us liars, we called them a few choice words, then the guns and lasers started going off."

"So, were you ever able to confirm the woman's story?" Tamara asked. Michael shook his head, "Not really. We learned of the prophecy, and that the child fit the description. We just assumed what she said was true from that. Plus, we were getting gifts from them now. Things our government was years away from developing on our own. So the higher ups swept everything under the proverbial rug and let it go. As far as we were concerned, we'd never heard of Frederick DeGrafe the fifth." "You don't

sound to happy about that," Tom noted. "I wasn't. Something always struck me as being off about the whole thing. And when the queen herself inquired about the child, I knew what we'd done was the wrong thing. But it was too late to do anything. If I had spoken up, I would've been killed. I'm not sure I still won't be after talking to you. But the look on the queen's face..... I remember it like it was yesterday," he said, sighing into his coffee.

"So it was the queen that was looking for him?" Tamara asked. Michael nodded, "Yeah, at first it was the queen. Then a few years later, the king started asking about it. The government always knew where the kid was, but they wouldn't give him up. They had grown accustomed to getting things from the Celestians. It was easier to hide the child and demand this or that, than it was to just give him back and figure out the stuff on our own." "So we did hold him hostage," Tom muttered. Michael nodded, "That's exactly what we did."

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Marie stood in the infirmary, looking over some test results from one of the guards' children. The child had a particularly bad case of the kitchnue whelps. The poor thing was covered in blue whelps from head to toe. The doctor walked over, and she handed him the chart. He scanned the tests, *"I heard of your wedding plans. Congratulations."* Marie smiled, *"Thank you. I can't wait."* The doctor smiled at her, writing his orders in the chart. *"He seems to be a very nice young man,"* he commented. Marie took the chart from him, *"He's wonderful. I couldn't ask for anyone better."* *"Good. I trust you'll still be working for me then, or will you leave for Earth?"* he asked. She shook her head, *"I honestly don't know. We've made no permanent plans."* *"Well, you always have a place here, Marie,"* the doctor said. Marie bit her lip, feeling a little lightheaded. She took a deep breath and grabbed onto the table in front of her. The doctor looked at her, seeing the color drain from her face, *"Marie, are you alright?"* She nodded, taking a deep breath as the feeling passed, *"I'm fine, just a little lightheaded for a moment. I think it's all the excitement over the wedding,"* she smiled. The man considered her for a moment, *"Have you felt this way before?"* She shrugged, *"I don't think so, why?"* *"Just curious. If it happens again, I want to check you out, alright?"* he said, sounding very much like her father would. She laughed and nodded, knowing that saying no was a lost cause. He patted her on the shoulder, *"Alright, I'm going on rounds,"* he said, turning and walking out of the room.

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Nick sighed as Tunk and Kelah argued. He looked at Anthony. The young man shrugged his shoulders,

not knowing what to do. Nick looked back as the two men's voices rose. *"How dare you even suggest a third split!"* Kelah yelled, pointing his stubby finger at the other man, *"That is an insult to my entire race!"* *"A third split is more than generous, especially since my planet is having to furnish all the machinery,"* Tunk countered. *"But my people are the ones risking their lives. I don't see your kind coming down and doing the manual labor,"* Kelah spat. Tunk stood up, glaring at the man, *"Are you insinuating that my people don't work?!"* Kelah stood up, *"If the shoe fits....."* *"Gentlemen!"* Nick yelled, causing them both to jump and look at him.

Nick stood up so he was on their level, *"Must I remind you of where you are? Did you or did you not come here to reach some sort of agreement?"* Tunk and Kelah glared at one another for a second, then turned back to Nick, nodding. Nick shook his head, stepping away from the table and pacing around the room, *"Well neither of you act like it. Every time we come up with some kind of compromise, one or both of you shoot it down without even giving it a thought. I'm tired of this petty arguing back and forth. If you aren't willing to compromise, then you might as well leave now!"* he yelled, stopping and staring right at them.

Mason looked from Nick to the Ambassadors. He was impressed at how forceful Nick could be when he wanted to. He watched as both the ambassadors fidgeted under Nick's glare. *"Now, I suggest you two think about why you're really here. Do you want to avoid a war? Or are you just wasting my time?"* Nick said, walking back to the table, *"And here's another thought to consider. Your two planets are not the only ones wanting these mines. If you don't reach a settlement soon, you may not have anything to fight over. We will resume in the morning. Good day, gentlemen,"* Nick said, turning and leaving the room. Everyone stared at one another, baffled and impressed. And in some cases in fear. Mason smiled to himself, gathering his things as the room emptied. Nick was becoming more intriguing to him. He looked up, seeing the room empty, save him and Kelah, who was staring at him angrily.

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"Mr. Sussing..." Tom started. Michael held his hand up, "Michael please." Tom smiled, "Michael, you mentioned the prophecy. Do you know anything about it?" Michael stood up and hobbled over to his kitchen counter, pouring himself another cup of coffee. He offered the two a refill, then sat back down. "I'm not sure I remember it all. Something about an Angel that was perfect. That didn't look like the rest. He would become king.... and it seems he would be instrumental in saving the planet somehow. I really don't recall all the details," he said. "Well he is already the king, so if the prophecy is true ..."  
Tamara mumbled. "Then Nick may need some help," Tom finished. Michael tapped his mug, wracking his brain for the rest of the prophecy. "I'm sorry guys, there's more to it, but I can't remember it," he

said.

"That's alright, you've been a great help," Tom said. Michael shrugged, "I don't know about that, but if I think of it, I'll let you know." "Thank you," Tamara said, standing to leave. The two walked toward the door, when Tom turned back around, "Oh one more thing. You wouldn't happen to know about a drug we ship to Celeste called Krystal would you?" Michael stared at him for a moment, "Krystal? I don't think so. I do know that early on we were working on some drugs that would affect them. The government wanted a form of protection I guess you would say. We knew that we couldn't win in a war with them, but if we had something they couldn't live without, and could only get here ... well it assured us a little bit of safety." "What were they wanting the drug to do?" Tamara asked. "I'm not sure, but I think they were working on mind control at that time. I'm not sure what the actual drug became, or it's affects," Michael said. Tom nodded, opening the door, "Thank you." Michael smiled, "I hope it helps. You two be careful. They have spies everywhere." Tamara glanced at Tom, then smiled, "We will." Michael watched from the door as the two got in their car and left. When they turned onto the road he shut the door and looked down at the little dog at his feet. "Well Frank, I think you and I better take a little trip. No sense staying here and waiting for them to come and find us," he said, heading to his room to pack.

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Mason shook his head, turning to leave the room. *"I thought you said he would be easy to manipulate,"* Kelah spat, following him. Mason glared at the man, *"I underestimated him. He's not exactly what I thought he was."* "Well..." Kelah asked. Mason stopped walking and looked down at him, *"Just wait. I'm working on something that will assure you the mines, but I need a little more time."* "I'm not sure how much longer I can stall. You heard him, he's willing to let us fight it out rather than to listen to us argue," Kelah said. *"He won't do that,"* Mason countered. *"And how do you know? You said yourself you underestimated him,"* he asked. Mason sighed, *"Because it's not the right thing to do. Just trust me. Soon we'll have him wrapped around our fingers."* *"You had better be right. I've got to much riding on this to fail,"* Kelah warned. Mason nodded, *"I understand."*

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Nick ran his hand through his hair, looking at the mountains in the distance. He had gone to his room and changed into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. He was still angry that the two ambassadors couldn't seem to find a middle ground. He was worried too. He knew what would happen if he couldn't get them to compromise. His dreams were filled with the gruesome reality he was facing. He couldn't let Celeste be pulled into a war, he wouldn't.

He left his room, wondering the halls. He needed to think. Maybe there was something he was missing? Some ingenious idea that would be beneficial to both the ambassadors. He turned the corner and slammed into someone, knocking them both to the ground. He looked up, seeing Ana rubbing her arm. "Oh shit, Ana, I'm sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going," he exclaimed, quickly helping her up. She laughed, taking the papers he was picking up off the floor. "It's OK Nick, no harm done. You're not done with the.....?" she asked. He shook his head, "I wish. I got mad and dismissed them for the day. I just can't take the constant bickering back and forth." "I imagine," she said, as they continued down the hall.

"Where you headed?" he asked. "Your mother's office. She's been keeping me quite busy," she said. Nick smiled, glancing around before he spoke, "She's probably trying to keep your mind off me." Ana laughed, "I'm sure she is. It's not working though," she said as they entered the office, "I miss you." Nick closed the door, walking over to her, "I miss you too." The two stared at each other for a moment before their lips crashed into one another. Nick ran his hands up Ana's back, tangling them in her hair, causing her to moan. Ana pulled Nick closer, their bodies pressed together tightly. After a moment, they had to come up for air. She shook her head, moving away from him, "We'll get caught here." Nick took a deep breath, nodding, "I know, I just ..." "I know," she said, taking his hand and smiling at him, "I know."

He smiled at her, pulling her toward the door, "Why don't we take a walk in the garden?" Ana smiled, "Alright." The two headed down the hall, walking close, but not touching. They turned a corner, seeing Marie coming their way. Ana looked at her, seeing how pale she looked, "Hey, you alright?" Marie bit her lip, staring at her friend, "*I'm not feeling well.*" Nick glanced at Ana, seeing her concern, and feeling his own. Marie was shaking slightly. He took her by the arm, "Come on, we'll make sure you get to your room." Marie smiled at him, "*I'm sure I'm fine. Just stress or something.*" Ana started to say something to her, but didn't get the chance. Marie collapsed in Nick's arms. He caught her, hoisting her up and heading back to medical. "I'll go get Brian," Ana said, turning and running down the hall.

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Brian paced back and forth as the doctor examined Marie. He had kicked everyone out of the room except Ana, and Brian was going nuts with worry. He stopped pacing and looked through the window into the room. Marie was sitting up talking with the doctor. She looked fine now. Nick put his hand on Brian's shoulder, "I'm sure she's fine." Brian nodded, chewing on another fingernail. Kevin reached over and pulled his hand from his mouth, "Stop that." "Sorry," Brian muttered, stepping back as the doctor came to the door and motioned for them to come inside.

Brian made his way to the side of the bed and pulled Marie into a hug, "Is everything OK?" he asked. She nodded, smiling at him. He looked at her, seeing tears in her eyes. "You're crying. What's wrong?" he asked, looking from her to the doctor. The doctor smiled at him, but didn't say anything. "Baby what's going on?" he asked. "Brian, I'm fine," she said, ignoring the other people in the room. "But you passed out... something's wrong," he said. Marie shook her head, "Nothing's wrong. The reason I passed out is ...um that I'm pregnant." Howie and A.J. looked at one another, their mouths dropping wide open in surprise. Ana smiled at Nick and Kevin, seeing the joy on their faces as well.

Brian blinked a few times, "You're pregnant?" Marie nodded. Brian stared at her, in shock, "You're pregnant." "Yes baby," she said laughing, "We're gonna have a baby." Brian looked at the guys and smiled, "I'm gonna be a daddy." "We heard cuz," Kevin said, "Congratulations!" Brian looked back at Maire, grinning, "We're gonna have a baby! I can't believe it!" "Well as much as you guys have sex, I'm shocked it wasn't sooner," A.J. laughed. Howie slapped him, "J! God!" "What? I'm just saying what you all were thinking, admit it," he said. Everyone laughed, looking back over at Brian. He was up pacing, chewing on a new fingernail. "Oh my God, I'm gonna be a daddy. There's so much we have to do ....." he muttered, turning to look at the group with panic in his face, "I'm not ..... I need to ....." he mumbled. Nick watched as Brian's eyes rolled back in his head and he fell to the floor. The guys hurried over and picked him up, laying him on the other bed in the room. Kevin laughed as the doctor tried to revive him. "What's so funny?" Ana asked. He looked at her trying to stifle his laughter, "I'm sorry. It's just that our family has this little um thing about finding out the wives are pregnant. Everyone in the family has passed out when they were told. I thought for a minute there that Bri was gonna make it," he said, bursting out laughing just as Brian woke up. He groaned, "I didn't." "You did," Kevin laughed. Brian laughed, "Well at least I didn't pass out in my mashed potatoes like dad."

## Chapter 46

Anthony took a drink of his water, glancing around the table. It'd been several minutes and no one had said anything. Each person staring down at the papers in front of them, including Nick. Over the last two weeks the proceedings had been somewhat better, more talking and less arguing. Nick's outburst had made a difference. Both ambassadors seeing they were about to lose the one thing they both wanted. Now they had a new deal on the table. Anthony watched as Nick read over the pages. He admired his cousin in more ways than he could ever say. Nick had come here and stepped into his role like he'd had years of experience. Anthony knew that being king wasn't what Nick wanted, he could see it, but Nick did it anyway. Nick also didn't let tradition get in his way, and Anthony admired that. He was glad Nick was there, bucking the system and shaking things up. That's what this planet needed, someone to ask why. He smiled to himself, thinking of all the times in school he'd asked that question. Why they did things the way they did, and his teachers looking at him, not knowing the answers. Seems noone had bothered to ask why in so long, everyone had forgotten the real reasons things were done.

Nick cleared his throat and set the papers on the table, *"Gentlemen, you've looked over the deal in front of you. I must say that personally, I don't like it, but my say is not the one that matters here. I want to dismiss for a few days, give you both time to look over it in private and consider it. Call your councils and discuss it with them. I want you to have an answer when we reconvene. If you accept it, fine. If not, I want valid reasons and possible solutions. With that being said, my best friend's wedding is tomorrow. You are both invited to the reception, as the wedding will be family and close friends only."* Nick stood up, *"I hope to see you both there."* Tunk nodded, taking his things and leaving the room. Kelah hesitated, wanting to say something but decided against it. He too nodded and left. Anthony looked over at Nick, *"Why don't you like it?" "It's too one sided,"* Nick said, turning to walk out of the room.

*"My king, may I have a word with you?"* Mason asked, coming around the councils table. Nick stopped, Anthony by his side. *"In private,"* Mason said, glancing at Anthony. Nick could see just how much that hurt his cousin. He didn't know why, but Anthony still wanted a father/son relationship with Mason. And each time Mason treated him like a servant, it crushed the young man. Nick handed Anthony his papers, *"Can you take these to my room? Look over them and we can discuss what's wrong with it when I get there."* Anthony nodded, taking the papers and leaving the room. Mason gestured towards the round table, and Nick walked over and took a seat, waiting for whatever his uncle had to say.

Mason sat down and sighed dramatically, looking at the young man, *"Nickolas, you shouldn't have said that."* *"Said what?"* Nick asked. *"That you didn't like the deal. That sours it,"* he replied. *"But I don't like*

*it. It's way too one sided," Nick defended. "That is for the ambassadors to decide, not you. You can't be doing this all the time," Mason warned. "Doing what?" Nick asked. "Going against tradition," Mason answered, "You've been doing it since you got here. It's about time someone told you." Nick sighed, running his hand through his hair, "Listen, I don't know what the tradition is here, but if it doesn't suit me, I'm gonna do what does. And not you or anyone else can tell me different." Mason held his hands up, "I'm just trying to help Nickolas. Tradition has been our staple for hundreds of years. It has helped this planet become what it is today. It's something that Frederick upheld to the fullest." Nick glared at Mason when he mentioned his father, but stayed quiet.*

*"I know you are trying, and you are doing a good job," Mason went on, "But consider the ramifications here. Tradition is all this world knows. When you go against it, you throw our society into chaos. We can't allow that." Nick stared at his uncle in shock. The man actually was giving him advice? Ok, who was this man, and what happened to the real Mason? "Thank you for the warning, but I made a promise to the people of this planet that I would rule with my heart. If my heart tells me to do something that's against our traditions, that's what I'm gonna do," Nick said. Mason nodded, "I understand. Is that why you've taken Anthony under your wing? Or do you just feel sorry for him?"*

Nick looked at the older man, wondering where that came from. *"I think Anthony has a lot to offer. He knows the politics around here, and he's a big help. My father saw the same thing in him. I'm just continuing in his steps,"* he answered. Mason laughed, shaking his head, *"Your father,"* he muttered. *"Excuse me?"* Nick said, not quite catching what he'd said. Mason shook his head, standing up, *"Nothing, sorry to keep you."* Nick stood up, studying the man. He knew there was no love lost between him and his brother, but somehow, looking at Mason now, he could tell that the wounds ran deeper than he ever thought. *"Mason, what happened?"* he asked before he even knew it. Mason looked confused, *"What?" "What happened between you and my father?"* Nick asked. Mason stared at his nephew for a moment. Here was his opportunity, but somehow he couldn't take it. He shook his head, turning to leave, *"I can't talk about it."* Nick hurried after him, *"Why? What happened?" "Ask your mother,"* was all he said before he headed down the hall at a brisk pace, leaving Nick even more confused.

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Marie ran her hands over her dress, looking at herself in the mirror. Ana smiled, walking over to her, "Do you want your hair up or down?" Marie bit her lip, thinking, "Um, I think down. Brian likes it that way." Ana laughed, taking the veil and placing it on Marie's head, "You look absolutely beautiful." Marie grinned, "I can't wait until tomorrow." "I know," Ana said, straightening the lace veil. Marie turned and looked at her friend, seeing tears in her eyes, "Ana, don't." "I can't help it," she said, "I'm so

happy for you." Marie sighed, "You and I both know that's not the only reason you're crying." Ana looked down at the floor, closing her eyes against the tears. Marie pulled her into a hug, "Someday, somehow, you guys will work this out. You just have to have faith." Ana nodded, "I know, but ...." "Shhh, no buts," Marie said, smiling at her, "It will happen."

Ana nodded, wiping the tears from her eyes, "When are your mom and dad getting here?" "In the morning," Marie said, "Dad had some last minute work thing, but they should be here a few hours before the wedding." "That's good," Ana said, looking through the royal jewels the queen let them borrow. "Ohh this is perfect," she said, holding up a stunning necklace. Marie stared at it, "Ana, that's the necklace the queen wore when she got married." Ana looked at it for a moment, "It is, isn't it. Well, it's still perfect." She walked over and put it around Marie's neck, "See." Marie looked at it, a sparkle in her eyes, "It is perfect."

Both girls jumped when the door swooshed open and Brian, A.J., and Howie walked in laughing. Ana quickly moved in front of Marie, "Get out!" A.J. and Howie quickly turned Brian around so he couldn't see Marie. "What?" Brian asked, trying to turn back around. "Marie's in her dress," Howie answered, a smile plastered over his face. "She is? I wanna see," Brian said, again trying to look over his shoulder. A.J. put his hand over Brian's eyes and pulled him to the door, "Sorry ladies," he smiled. "But I wanna see..." Brian whined as the door shut. Marie and Ana looked at each other, then burst out laughing.

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Nick made it to his room, still confused over his uncles behavior. When he walked in Anthony was at the desk, thumbing through the papers. "*So what did dad have to say?*" he asked rather sarcastically. Nick kicked his boots off, and plopped down on the bed, "*Oh the same ole stuff. You can't do this, you can't do that... it's against tradition, yadda, yadda, yadda.*" Anthony laughed, turning back to the papers as Nick got up and changed into his jeans and t-shirt. He favored them over any of the 'king's' attire. After he was dressed, Nick walked over and pulled up a chair, "*So what do you think?*" "*I think you're right. There's no way they'll agree to this,*" Anthony replied. Nick nodded, "*So why did they suggest it?*" Anthony thought for a few minutes, "*To stall?*" "*That's what I think, but why are they stalling? And which one is doing it? Or are they both?*" Nick asked.

Anthony shrugged, turning in this chair to look out the balcony doors. It was a beautiful day. He stared at the mountains for a moment, thinking. "*Which one does this favor?*" he asked. "*Tunk,*" Nick said. "*So lets look at this from Kelah's point of view then. Why would he put this deal on paper, knowing Tunk was*

going to reap the benefits?" Anthony asked. Nick shook his head, "I'm not sure. He's the one that was adamant about getting the mines. Unless ....." "Unless what?" Anthony asked. Nick looked at his cousin, "Unless he's the one stalling. Then he comes back and rejects the deal, saying it's not fair, and we end up starting over again. But why?" Anthony thought for a moment, "Nick, do you know what's in the mines? What it is they're after?" "Some minerals, I can't remember which ones," he answered. Anthony sighed, "Let me look into this. See exactly what it is they both want. Maybe that'll shed some light on what's going on." "Alright, how long do you need?" Nick asked. "Shouldn't take to long. I should be done by the time we resume talks," he said, standing up. "OK cuz, knock yourself out," Nick said, smiling. Anthony nodded, grinning, "Don't mind if I do."

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LaDonna stood in the banquet hall, looking over the decorations. Everything looked perfect. She wanted the wedding to be something special. Something that Brian and Maire would remember the rest of their lives. She smiled, thinking that she had accomplished that. The palace hadn't seen a wedding since her own, so long ago. She sighed, the memories coming back. She had been so nervous and scared. Things had been so different then. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to force the memories back down. There were some things she didn't want to relive, and that memory was one of them.

She felt someone come into the room, thinking it was one of the servants. "Everything looks good," she said. "Yes it does," Mason said, startling her. She turned around, staring at him. "Reminds me of your wedding," he said, looking around. "Mason, I..." she started. He held his hand up, "I didn't come here to fight. I wanted to warn you." "Warn me? Of what?" she asked, as he came closer to her. "Nickolas just asked me what happened between Frederick and I," he said in a hushed tone. LaDonna sucked in a breath, "What? Please Mason, please tell me you didn't say anything." He gently put his hand on her shoulder, facing her, "I didn't. I wanted to so much, but ....." I couldn't. I told him to ask you." LaDonna stared at him in disbelief, "You did?" He nodded, "You can tell him as little or as much as you want. I'll go along with whatever you say."

LaDonna stared at him for a moment, shocked. Then she became suspicious, "Why are you doing this?" "Doing what?" he asked. She slipped out from under his touch, "Acting like you care. You haven't cared since ....." "Since I lost you," he finished for her. "I didn't mean it like that," she said. He shook his head, "I don't blame you for being suspicious. If I were you, I would be too. It's just that I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. All this time, the anger and resentment over what happened has ruled my life, to the point that I only exist. I haven't lived for a very long time. And I realized that all it was doing was

*hurting the one person I loved. I'm sorry Donna. I promise to make it up to you, and to Nickolas.*" The queen stared at him, speechless. She honestly didn't know what to say, whether to believe he'd changed or not. In that moment he was the person she remembered, the man she loved so long ago.

*"Please Donna, just give me a chance to prove myself,"* he asked, staring deep into her eyes. LaDonna turned from his gaze, giving him a slight nod, *"Alright. Thank you for the warning."* Mason nodded, reaching down and taking her hand in his. She watched as he lifted it to his lips, and gently kissed the back of it, *"Whatever you decide to tell him is OK. Thank you for giving me another chance."* All she could do was nod as he turned and left the room. She looked at her hand, in shock, wondering what just happened.

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Brian walked into the parlor, "Devon, glad you could come." Devon stood up and smiled, *"Thanks for inviting me. So tomorrow is the big day, huh?"* Brian nodded, his smile lighting up the room, "Yup, I can't wait!" Devon laughed, as they walked down the hall to the room they were having the party in. *"So Marie is doing alright then?"* he asked. Brian nodded, "The docs check her everyday." *"Everyday? Is something wrong?"* Devon asked concerned. "No, they just aren't sure how the baby will develop, since Angels develop much faster than humans. They just wanna keep an eye on her," Brian explained. *"That's good, you can't be too careful,"* Devon said, as they entered the room.

He looked around. The room was set up with a table and chairs, and a large white sheet hanging on the wall. "Everyone, this is Devon, Marie's brother," Brian announced. All the guys walked over, shaking hands and introducing themselves. Devon dropped to his knees when Nick walked over. Nick laughed, *"Please get up. You're about to become family, so you can dispense with the kneeling."* Devon smiled, standing up and nodded, *"So what are we doing?"* "Pizza and movie night," Brian said. Devon raised his eyebrows, *"For a bachelor party?"* Brian laughed, "Well, it's about as wild as I wanna get." Everyone laughed as the servants brought out the food. All the guys dug right in. Devon looked at the food for a moment before taking a small bite. *"This is pretty good,"* he noted. Howie grinned, "We had to substitute some ingredients, but it's pretty hard to mess up pizza."

The guys ate, joking around and laughing. Despite Devon's best efforts not to, he was having a good time. The group of guys Brian surrounded himself with, seemed like good people, even though they were Earthlings. He sighed, as they all settled down for the movie. He couldn't let himself get emotionally involved, it would screw up everything. But try as he might, Brian was growing on him.

They had spent a lot of time together the last few weeks, and as much as Devon wanted to hate him, as he got to know him, he found that becoming harder and harder to do. He looked over at Brian, *"What movie is this?"* "It's Star Wars, my all time favorite," Brian said. Devon shrugged as the movie started. He glanced around, seeing Nick's body guard sitting behind them all. He seemed very interested in the movie. He panned around to each of the guys, landing on Anthony last. The young man seemed more interested in him than the movie. Devon smiled at him, Anthony nodding. Devon looked back at the screen, still feeling Anthony's eyes on him. There was something about the boy's stare he didn't like. Like the kid knew him from somewhere, but couldn't place where. Devon thought back, trying to remember if he'd ever met Anthony.

Anthony walked over and sat down next to Devon, *"How do you like the movie?"* "It's good," Devon said. *"Sorry for staring at you, but you look so familiar to me. Have we met before?"* Anthony asked. Devon shrugged, *"I'm not sure. Do you go to the university?"* Anthony nodded, *"I started last fall."* *"That's it then. I took a few classes last fall,"* Devon said. Anthony nodded, *"Small world huh?"* Devon laughed, *"Yeah. Whoa, what is that?"* Brian laughed, *"That's Darth Vader. He's the bad guy. Well in this one he is, see he was a good guy before, then something happened and he turned bad."* Devon grinned, *"Sounds like someone I know,"* he muttered. "... but in the end, he turns good again," Brian finished. Devon nodded, doubting very seriously that would ever happen.

## Chapter 47

Maurice walked over and gently pulled Brian's hand away from his mouth. Brian blushed, biting his lip, "Sorry, nervous habit." Maire's father nodded, smiling at him, "It's alright. I remember when Cathy and I got married. I was a nervous wreck. I distinctly remember getting sick several times, and then during the ceremony, I passed out." Brian laughed, "No, really?" He nodded, "It wouldn't have been so bad, except we were in the middle of the ceremony. They had just tied our hands, and I took Cathy down with me." Brian put his hand over his mouth, laughing, "Oh wow!" Maurice chuckled, "Makes for a memorable ceremony. The bride and groom in a heap on the floor." "I bet," Brian said, feeling much less nervous.

"I swear, I look like a fucking clown," A.J. whined. Brian looked over at his friend, stifling a laugh. A.J. was clad in the traditional wedding attire for a groomsman, complete with tight pants, long silken shirt and sash. But the hat is what topped it off, straight out of some Three Musketeers movie, wide brimmed with a fluffy feather. "Come on J, it's not that bad," Brian said. A.J. stared at him like he'd lost his mind, "Not that bad? Look at me!" Brian stared at him for a moment, not able to keep his laughter in any longer, he cracked up, "OK, maybe it is that bad. But you only have to wear it for a little while." "A little while is too long," he said, putting his hat on. Howie and Kevin walked into the room, dressed like A.J. Kevin sat down, "Well this is something I thought I'd never see." "What's that?" Brian asked. He gestured to himself, A.J. and Howie, "The Three Musketeers. All I need is a sword." Brian and Maurice glanced at one another and laughed. "Oh no," Howie said. Brian nodded, pointing to the corner. "Aw hell," Kevin said, seeing the swords.

~~~~~

"Baby, you look beautiful," Cathy said, looking at her daughter. Marie smiled, looking at herself in the mirror. Her dress was made of silk, crystal blue in color, matching her eyes. It had spaghetti straps, and went down to the floor, the back tapering down into a long train. The necklace she had borrowed from the queen matched the dress perfectly. The jewels sparkled, reflecting the light into her eyes, making them glow. The crystal blue lace veil topped it off. She had left her hair down, just pulling the sides back. The veil was encrusted with the same jewels as the necklace, especially around the hem. Marie ran her hands down the front of the dress, letting them rest on her stomach. Never in her life had she felt like a princess, until now.

Ana walked over and gave her bouquet to her. Maire took it, admiring the flowers. It was filled with Tsars Might, and another favorite flower, White Ghanda. Brian had said it reminded him of a flower they had on earth called lily's. She took a deep breath and looked at her mom, *"I guess I'm ready."* Cathy smiled, taking her hand and leading her out of the room.

~~~~~

Nick stood in the garden looking toward the mountains. The clouds were gathering, and the faint sound of thunder could be heard in the distance. "Man, I hope it doesn't rain," he said, looking over at his friend. Brian looked in the direction Nick was, and smiled, "That would be our luck. It rained when I proposed, it's only fitting that it rains when we get married." Nick laughed, patting him on the back, "Only you can see the good in that." Brian shrugged, as the rest of the guys made it out. "Hey, how come Nicky's not dressed like us?" A.J. asked. Nick grinned, "Cause I'm the King, that's why." "Yeah, yeah, rub it in," A.J. muttered, "King gets all the nice clothes." Nick laughed, walking over to talk to the priest.

LaDonna made her way to her seat, as Brian walked over to her. *"Thank you so much for this,"* he said. She smiled, *"Don't mention it."* *"If we can all take our places,"* the priest asked. Brian walked back to stand beside the priest, Nick as his side. The guys sat down in the chairs that had been set up. Devon sat behind the queen, next to Cathy. Brian looked down the path, waiting for Maire and her father to step around the corner. He noticed a few of the cameras flying around and leaned over to Nick, "I thought this wasn't going to be on the vid." "It's not. They are taping for you and Maire, like a home video kinda thing," Nick answered. Brian smiled, looking back down the path as the music started.

His breath caught in his throat as Ana came around the corner and walked up the path. Brian glanced at Nick, seeing he couldn't take his eyes off Ana. He nudged Nick with his elbow and smiled at him when he looked over. Nick grinned, blushing slightly as Ana took her place. Then the music changed and Marie and her father stepped out. Brian had to consciously keep his mouth shut. He'd never seen Marie look so beautiful. He smiled at her as she neared him. Marie smiled back, never taking her eyes off Brian. Once they were in place, Maurice kissed his daughter on the cheek and went to sit next to his wife.

Marie and Brian turned to face one another, holding hands. They stared into each others eyes as the priest started the ceremony. Neither thought they could ever feel this happy, this whole, before. They both listened as the priest described what marriage should be. Then came the vows. They both

repeated after the priest, promising to love, honor and cherish each other until their dying day. They exchanged rings, Marie having a little trouble getting Brian's on his finger. It seems he was so nervous that his fingers were swelling. They both chuckled as she forced the ring onto his finger. The priest moved back, allowing Nick and Ana to come forward. They each took one end of a long golden ribbon. *"Please hold your marks together,"* the priest said. Brian and Marie placed their wrists together as Nick and Ana wrapped the ribbon around them. As they stepped back a loud burst of thunder roared through the garden and it started to sprinkle. The priest stepped up, *"As the ribbon binds you, let your love for one another carry you through life. Together, never apart. Lord Littrell, you may kiss your bride."* Brian stepped closer to Marie, cupping her cheek with his free hand. They stared at one another for a second, then both leaned in. The rain started to fall as they kissed, but they made no move to leave the garden. The thunder clapped once more, as A.J. stood up, "Good God man, you can do that inside. I'm getting soaked!" Brian and Marie parted, laughing. As everyone ran for the palace, they lagged behind. Holding hands, Brian looked up, the rain hitting him in the face, "I love the rain."

~~~~~

Everyone milled around the banquet hall, waiting for the guests of honor. After the wedding, they had to go and dry off before the reception. Devon made his way over to Mason, feigning interest in the food that he was standing by. *"You're sure about this?"* he asked. Mason glanced at him for a moment and sighed, *"Yes. You aren't backing out are you?"* Devon shook his head, *"No, I can't."* *"Neither can I,"* Mason said, leaving the table and finding his place as Nick and the guys came in.

Nick walked over to his mother and hugged her, *"Everything looks wonderful."* LaDonna smiled, walking with her son to their table, *"Too bad it rained."* Nick laughed, *"I think Bri and Marie like the rain."* His mother laughed, as they took their seats. A moment later Brian and Marie made their entrance. They were seated at the head of the table, the place normally taken by Nick and his mother. Marie's family was seated to their side, as Nick and the guys were seated on the other side. Everyone had a great time, eating and laughing. The cooks had outdone themselves with the meal. Then they brought in the cake. There were no words to describe how enormous the thing was. Brian and Marie did the traditional cutting of the cake, and feeding it to each other. The cake was absolutely delicious, almost melting in your mouth. As soon as they were done, the band struck up, and couples filled the dance floor.

Brian led Marie out, and they shared their first dance as husband and wife. Marie smiled as they waltzed across the floor, "Everyone is staring at us." Brian grinned, "They're staring at you. You look amazing." She blushed, glancing down for a moment. Brian gently brought her head up and kissed her lips, "I love you Mrs. Littrell." Marie smiled, as Nick approached them. He tapped Brian on the shoulder,

"Can I cut in? It's tradition ya know, the king gets to dance with the bride." Brian laughed, stepping back, "I thought you were the tradition breaker." "Not today," Nick giggled, taking Marie and dancing away from his best friend.

Ana watched as Nick cut in and he and Marie danced across the floor. She sighed, trying to keep her emotions in check. *"My lady, would you do me the honor?"* Tunk asked, holding his hand out to Ana. Ana bit her lip, then took his hand. He led her out to the floor, *"It is a wonderful reception,"* he said. Ana nodded, *"Y-yes it is."* *"I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm Tunk James, Ambassador to Kholath,"* he said. Ana nodded, *"Ana Coland. I'm the king's teacher."* Tunk smiled, *"His highness is very lucky to have such a beautiful instructor."* Ana blushed, looking across the floor, seeing Nick doing the same. Their eyes locked for a moment, and Ana's heart fluttered. Tunk glanced in the direction she was looking, nodding as he met Nick's gaze. *"The king is taken with you,"* he stated. Ana looked up into his brown eyes, *"I don't think so."* He laughed, smiling at her, *"Come now, he looks at you with love in his eyes."* Ana shook her head, *"I don't know what you're talking about. We are friends, and he is my student. Nothing more."* Tunk looked into her eyes, *"If you say so my lady. Shall we?"* he asked, gesturing towards the dance floor. Ana nodded, and he took her hand, sweeping her into his arms and waltzing into step with everyone else.

Brian and Kevin walked up to the band. Kevin took a seat behind the piano, and Brian took the mic in his hand, *"Excuse me everyone, can I have your attention please."* Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked up. Howie grabbed a chair and placed it in front of the stage. A.J. walked over and took Marie's hand, "Your throne awaits," he said, as he led her to the chair. Brian smiled at her as she sat down, *"I um, I wanted to do something special for Marie. Something to show her how much I love her. In all the time I've been here, I've not sang to her .... so Marie, this is for you."* Marie watched as Kevin started playing the piano. She already had tears in her eyes, as Brian started to sing.

*She's got a way about her,*

*I don't know what it is*

*But I know that I can't live without her.*

*She's got a way of pleasin'*

*I don't know what it is*

*But there doesn't have to be a reason*

*Anyway*

*She's got a smile that heals me*

*I don't know why it is*

*But I have to laugh when she reveals me*

*She's got a way of talkin'*

*I don't know what it is*

*But it lifts me up when we are walkin'*

*Anywhere*

Nick looked over at Ana. She was standing in the middle of the dance floor, tears in her eyes. She looked over at him, wanting nothing more than to run into his arms and stay there forever. Nick sighed, wanting the same thing. 'Soon', he told himself. He'd find a way for them to be together, he had to.

*She comes to me when I'm feelin' down*

*Inspires me without a sound*

*She touches me and I get turned around*

*She's got a way of showin'*

*How I make her feel*

*And I find the strength to keep on goin'*

Mason walked over to LaDonna. He smiled at her when she looked up. LaDonna nodded, as he stepped closer. "Lovely song," he commented. "Yes, it is. Brian has a wonderful voice," she said. Mason glanced at her, taking a chance and reaching out, touching her hand. LaDonna looked down at their hands, then up to his face. She noticed he was nervous, but his eyes were filled with something she hadn't seen in them in years..... love. She swallowed hard, and cleared her throat, "Mason, this isn't ..." He removed his hand from hers, stepping back a little, "I'm sorry," he stammered. She couldn't help but smile, seeing the man she knew so long ago in his actions, and demeanor. "It's alright," she said, glancing at him one last time before turning her attention back to Brian.

*She's got a light around her*

*And everywhere she goes*

*A million dreams of love surround her*

*Everywhere*

*She comes to me when I'm feeling down*

*Inspires me without a sound*

*She touches me and I get turned around*

*She's got a smile that heals me*

*I don't know why it is*

*But I have to laugh when she reveals me*

Devon stood next to his father, watching Brian serenade his wife. He bit his lip, knowing what he had to do was going to be hard. He glanced over, seeing Mason standing next to the queen, then to the dance floor where Kelah and Tunk stood. He sighed. There was no backing out of this, no matter how much it hurt his sister, or his new brother-in-law.

*She's got a way about her*

*I don't know what it is*

*But I know that I can't live without her*

*Anyway*

Brian sat his mic down on the stage and walked over to Marie. She was hastily wiping away tears as he pulled her up, "I love you." She smiled, grabbing him by the face and pulling him into a fierce kiss. The room exploded with cheers as they parted, both blushing. Brian took her hand, "Come on, lets dance." Marie laughed as he pulled her to the middle of the floor, the band striking up again. "I hope the baby inherits your voice," she said, "You sounded wonderful." Brian smiled, "Well, I hope she inherits your looks." "She?" Maire asked. He nodded, "I think it's gonna be a girl." She chuckled, "Why do you think that?" He shrugged, "I dunno. I always wanted a little girl." Marie hugged him, "Well in that case, I

hope it's a girl too."

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Anthony sat in his room, looking over the mine claim. He had left the reception early, knowing he needed to work on this. He sat at his desk, puzzled. The minerals in the mine were not that uncommon. Both worlds could easily stake a hundred claims that contained the same minerals. So why were they fighting over this one? He ran his hand through his light brown hair, a trait he had picked up from Nick. *"Ok, if they can get these anywhere, why here?"* he asked himself. He picked the hologram machine up again, and turned it on. It led him through a mini tour of the mines and the surrounding area. As he watched, he looked for something besides the obvious. A reason that that site was so special. Something caught his eye, and he stopped the hologram. He backed it up and played it again in slow motion, his eyes widening, *"Oh my God!"* he said, then looked up, *"Sorry, I've been hanging around Nick too long."* He grabbed his papers and the hologram and headed off to find Nick.

~~~~~

Nick leaned against the wall, watching the party. Everyone was having such a great time. People were dancing and laughing. He couldn't remember a time when he'd had this much fun. But still, a dark cloud loomed over him. He had managed to stay away from Ana, not wanting to spark any rumors. But when he saw her dancing with Tunk, his temperature rose a bit. He knew it was silly to be jealous, but he couldn't help it. He wanted to be the one she was dancing with, not Tunk.

He glanced around, noticing his uncle talking with his mother. He watched them for a moment, curious. Their friendly smiles sparked his curiosity. He had always thought there was a rift between them, but it no longer seemed to be there. His question to his uncle came back to mind, and he wondered just what had happened so long ago. He made a mental note to ask his mother when he got the chance. Something inside him told him he needed to know. Needed to find out the truth, whatever that may be. Plus, Tom's call that morning had just filled him with new questions. He wondered why his father didn't ask about him until a few years after he was taken, why it was his mother that started the search, and who the woman was that traveled with him. Nick sighed, taking a drink. He decided he was too young to have all this burden and mystery around him, but yet, there it was. Isn't life grand?

Anthony came in, making his way over to Nick. Mason watched his son as he spoke to Nick, pointing to

the papers and then holding up the hologram machine. The look on Nick's face was one of shock and surprise. Mason glanced at Kelah, the ambassador returning his gaze. They both watched as Nick quietly left the party with Anthony. Kelah made his way over to Mason, looking around to make sure no one was paying attention to them. *"What do you think that was about?"* he asked. Mason shook his head, *"I'm not sure, but from the looks of it, it's not good."* *"We must act fast then,"* Kelah said. Mason sighed, nodding, *"It is planned already."* Kelah glared at the taller man, *"Move it up. We can't risk something happening before the talks resume."* Mason looked over the dance floor, finding the newly married couple. For a moment he felt a twinge of guilt, but pushed it aside. Too much was at stake for him to back out now. *"Alright, I'll take care of it,"* he said.

## Chapter 48

Brian ran down the hall of the medical wing. He quickly found the room and rushed in, seeing Marie sitting on the bed, the doctor talking to her. "What's wrong?" he asked, crossing the room in two steps. Marie took his hand, "Nothing's wrong." "But you called and said come down right away?" he asked, confused. She grinned, "Listen." Brian looked over at the monitor, seeing something moving. He could hear a strong heartbeat. He looked at Marie and smiled, "That's the baby?" She nodded. He sat down next to her, his eyes glued to the screen, "Oh wow." The doctor smiled seeing Brian's awed expression, "*The baby is developing normally. I think we can safely put Marie's due date in six months.*" Brian glanced at the doctor and nodded, his attention going back to the screen. "*When will we know the sex?*" Marie asked. "*I think in a few weeks, we may be able to see,*" he answered. Brian looked at Marie, smiling, "Great. This is so cool." Marie laughed as the doctor removed the sensors from her stomach and she got up.

Brian took her hand and they walked out of the room. He was still grinning. She nudged him, "So, what is my husband doing today?" "Devon called. He wanted to talk with me. I guess now that I'm part of the family, we get to do the brotherly male bonding," he laughed, "I think we're gonna take a ride." "That sounds nice," she said walking into the office she normally worked out of. "What about you? You aren't gonna work all day are you?" he asked. "Most of it. We are kinda busy down here ya know," she said. Brian pulled her to him, resting his hands on her waist, "I know, but I don't want you to over do it." Marie leaned in and kissed him quickly, "I won't, I promise. Besides, I'm in the medical wing. If something goes wrong, I'm right here." Brian stared at her for a moment, "Alright, but if you get tired, promise me you'll go lay down." "I promise," she said, smiling. "OK, I should be back by lunch, we can meet up then," Brian said. "Alright, lunch it is," she said, kissing him again. They parted and Brian turned to leave the room. "Have fun," she called. "I will," he said, leaving the room.

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Nick stared at the hologram for the hundredth time since last night. All this time he thought it was the minerals themselves the ambassadors were fighting over, only to have it turn out to be the location. He stared at the building in the background. Interstellar Distribution. Now he just had to figure out the link between Kelah and the company, and why the company was so interested in that location. Anthony had gone down to the library to do some more research. Nick got up and walked to his balcony. He hadn't slept much, and he needed to think. He decided that he would go for a ride. Maybe the fresh air would help him clear his head. He glanced toward the stables, seeing Brian and Devon heading up one of the

trails that led into the mountains. He watched as the two disappeared down the trail.

Just then someone knocked on his door. "Come in," he called, walking back into his room. The door opened and Kevin walked in. "Hey, what's up?" Nick asked. "Not much. I was just wondering if you had any plans," Kevin asked. "I was about to go for a ride, you wanna come?" he asked. Kevin smiled, "Yeah, sure." "So where are D and J?" Nick asked as they left his room. "Went to some show in the city," he said. "And you didn't go?" Nick asked. Kevin shook his head, "Naw, I just felt like hanging around here." Nick smiled, "They're getting on your nerves aren't they?" Kevin laughed, "Oh yeah, big time."

~~~~~

Brian shifted his weight in the saddle, looking over at Devon. He had been unusually quiet, and seemed to be bothered by something. "So, *how is work going?*" Brian asked, trying to break the odd tension that had built up between them. Devon looked over, "Oh *it's going very well. We just added another system to our routes.*" "That's good," Brian said, looking out at the towering mountains. They had gone onto a trail that was rarely used, and were now on the side of the mountain. "Man, *I still can't get over the view,*" Brian commented. Devon looked over, "Yeah. *I don't notice it much anymore. Guess I'm always too busy to take the time and look.*" Brian looked back over at the man, "So *what did ya wanna talk about?*" Devon sighed, "Well, *just about what your plans for the future are. Dad would never say anything, but with the baby on the way, I think it would break his heart if you guys moved to Earth.*" Brian nodded, "I know. *To tell you the truth, I don't know what we're gonna do. I mean, my career is there, and so is my family, ..... but, I love it here. I wish there was some way to combine the two, maybe stay there part of the time, and here the rest.*"

Devon nodded as they turned a corner. Up ahead the trail narrowed, flanked by huge boulders on each side. Brian grabbed the saddle horn, when Kena started shifting around nervously. Devon's unicorn was doing the same thing, both looking up the trail and acting like they didn't want to go through the rocks. Brian patted Kena on the neck, "What's wrong? Something up there you don't like?" Kena bobbed her head up and down, pulling at her reins a little. Devon forcefully turned his unicorn up the trail, giving it a swift kick, "Come on, *they just don't like the narrow opening they have to go through. I know for a fact that it widens out once you pass it.*" Brian nodded, urging Kena on. The two passed through the opening, and just as Devon said it widened back out, rocks flanking both sides. Still the unicorns were uneasy. "Maybe *we should go back,*" Brian said, Kena's fear making him nervous, "There's obviously something out here they don't like." Devon stopped his unicorn and considered the situation, "I guess you're right. No since in making them nervous. Fidgety unicorns aren't that desirable to ride," he smiled, turning his unicorn around.

Brian waited to follow Devon through the opening, but a growl behind him caught his attention. He looked back, the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. Standing behind him was something straight out of a monster movie. It stood on all fours, and resembled a wolf. The only problem was it was twice the size, and its teeth were like daggers. Brian was afraid to move, having locked eyes with the creature. Kena lowered her head, waiting for the creature to make a move. *"Devon,"* Brian whispered. Devon looked back, *"Oh no, don't move."* *"Not planning on it,"* Brian muttered, *"What the hell is that?"* *"It's a war dog,"* Devon answered, scanning the rocks, *"We should be Ok, we can outrun one."* *"What about five?"* Brian asked, seeing the others step out of the rocks. Devon swallowed hard, *"We're dead."*

~~~~~

Ana sat in the garden, her head in her hands. She needed some air, but it wasn't helping. Her head still hurt, and she had a horrible sinking feeling in her stomach. Maybe she drank too much at the reception? Or maybe she was feeling guilty for spending much of the evening with Tunk. He was a nice man, but her heart was definitely somewhere else. She longed for the day when the ambassadors would leave and she could resume her lessons with Nick. At least then she would see him on a regular basis. She heard someone approaching and looked up, groaning inwardly.

*"Ms. Coland, how nice to see you,"* Tunk said. Ana nodded, *"You too Ambassador."* Tunk smiled at her, *"Please call me Tunk."* *"Ok,"* she said, scooting over as he sat down next to her. *"The gardens here are beautiful,"* he noted. *"Yes they are,"* she said, wishing he would go on about his walk. He looked at her, *"Are you troubled?"* Ana shook her head, *"No, just trying to rid myself of a headache. I thought the fresh air would do me good."* Tunk nodded, staring across the garden, *"Looks like the king is leaving."* Ana watched as Nick and Kevin took off from the stables and headed up the trail at a slow leisurely pace. *"He likes to ride. It helps him think,"* she said. *"I see,"* Tunk said, glancing over at her, *"Would you care to have lunch with me?"* Ana looked over at him, surprised, *"Um, I'm very flattered, but ....."* *"You had other plans,"* he smiled. Ana looked down at her feet and nodded, timidly. *"Very well, another time perhaps,"* he said, standing up. *"Perhaps,"* she said as he gave her one last smile and moved on down the path. Ana put her head back in her hands and groaned. Now what was she gonna do?

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Brian held on for dear life as Kena reared up, the war dogs moving to circle them. Devon was having his own problems staying in the saddle as his unicorn kicked and stomped at the creatures. *"Brian, we gotta get to the rocks!"* he yelled, trying to move his steed closer. Brian looked around him, three of the dogs had Kena surrounded. He took the excess reins and tried to hit the dogs with them, as Kena kicked and bucked. Two of the dogs had Devon's mount pinned against the rocks. Devon quickly stood up on the saddle and pulled himself up onto the large bolder. He watched helplessly as Brian did his best to fend off the dogs. Kena already had deep bite wounds on her legs, but the unicorn fought with all she had. Devon's mount turned and ran through the opening, the two dogs on its tail.

Devon watched as Kena reared up. At the same time one of the dogs leapt, hitting the unicorn hard and sending her toppling on her side. Brian jumped at the last minute, rolling free of the saddle. He jumped to his feet and ran for Devon. *"Hurry!"* Devon yelled, flattening himself on top of the rock and reaching for Brian. Brian climbed up the rock as much as he could, looking up he stretched out his hand. Their fingertips touched just as one of the dogs clamped down on Brian's ankle. Brian screamed as the dagger-like teeth sank into his flesh. He grabbed onto the rock as the animal tried to pull him down. *"Brian, give me your hand!"* Devon screamed, trying to reach him. Brian looked up, their eyes meeting. Devon could see the pain in Brian's face as the dog shook his head, doing even more damage to Brian's ankle. *"Devon, help!"* Brian yelled, trying to reach the other man's hand. Again their fingers touched. *"Just a little more,"* Devon urged. Brian stretched, all his attention on Devon's hand. Suddenly the dog planted his feet and jerked his head, pulling Brian down with so much force that he flew across the trail and slammed into the rocks on the other side.

*"Brian!"* Devon screamed, *"Brian, wake up!"* He watched helplessly as Brian lay unconscious, the dogs circling around him. Kena jumped in, trying to put herself between the dogs and Brian. She charged them, one of the dogs being too slow. Her horn sank deep into the creature's side, eliciting a shrill yelp. Kena quickly turned, only to be facing the two dogs that chased Devon's unicorn. She looked around. All five dogs were facing her, snarling. Her legs were shaking, and her energy was almost gone, but she lowered her head, ready to fight to the end.

*"Whooo, get out!"* someone yelled. Devon looked up the trail, seeing two men in a transport speeding in their direction. One of the men pulled out a gun and began firing close to the dogs. *"Go back to hell, you damn dogs!"* he yelled. The dogs quickly fled, not wanting to face this new foe. Devon jumped off the rocks, running to Brian's side. He carefully turned him over, seeing a large knot on his forehead. *"Brian? Brian, wake up,"* he tried, not getting any response. The men ran over to help. *"Come on, lets get him in the transport,"* one said. Devon helped them pick Brian up and carry him to the transport. *"Man, he got it good,"* the other man said, looking at Brian's bloodied ankle. Devon looked at the two, then glanced at Kena. She was watching everything, but she was trembling, and having a hard time staying on her feet. *"What took you so long? We could've been killed,"* Devon spat, quietly. *"Sorry, we*

*got held up,"* one of the men said. *"Get him outta here, and make sure you clean that,"* Devon said, looking at Brian's ankle, *"We need him alive."* *"As you wish,"* one of the men answered. Kena stepped closer to the transport, trying to see Brian. *"Come on, we've got to get him back,"* Devon said, starting to climb in the transport. Kena watched as one of the men pulled his gun, aiming it at Devon, *"Not so fast."* Devon backed up, looking shocked, *"What are you doing?"* The man smiled, and pulled the trigger. Kena watched as Devon collapsed in the dirt, then the transport took off. She tried to follow, but only made it a few steps before her legs gave out, and she ended up on the ground. She gave out a sad whine as the transport disappeared from view.

## Chapter 49

Kevin glanced at Nick. The younger man was being very quiet. "The talks getting any better?" he asked. "Huh?" Nick said, looking over at him. Kevin smiled, "The talks. Are they what's got you so preoccupied?" Nick nodded, "Yeah, I was just thinking. Anthony found something last night that kinda raises my suspicions." "Ohh? What's that?" Kevin asked. Nick shook his head, "It's kinda sensitive. Probably better if you don't know." Kevin looked up the trail, "OK, but if I can do anything, you let me know." "I will," Nick said, following Kevin's gaze. He could hear something, a pounding. He realized he was hearing the sound of a unicorn running. He pulled back on Thomas's reins, stopping him. Kevin stopped too, "What is it?" "Listen," Nick said.

The two sat and listened as the sound came closer. Suddenly a riderless unicorn came tearing around the bend. Nick quickly turned Thomas to block the trail and held his hands up, "Whoa! Whoa there!" The frightened creature slid to a stop, breathing hard, fear still in its eyes. Nick reached over and took hold of its reins, "Easy," he said in a soothing voice, then looked over at Kevin, "This is the unicorn Devon was riding." "Devon? He was here this morning?" Kevin asked. Nick nodded, "He and Brian went ....oh shit," he said, turning Thomas up the trail, "Come on!"

Kevin kicked his unicorn, hurrying after Nick. He was going as fast as Thomas could run up the trail. They passed through the narrow opening, and Nick jumped down before Thomas even stopped. He ran over to Devon, turning the unconscious man onto his back, "*Devon? Devon, wake up,*" he urged as Kevin knelt beside him. Nick looked around, seeing Kena laying in the middle of the trail, blood covering her legs and chest. "Oh God, ....Brian!!" he yelled, scanning the rocks, "Brian, where are you!!" Kevin stayed with Devon, as Nick hurried to the injured unicorn. Kena lifted her head and let out a small sad neigh. Nick bent down and held her face, "It's Ok girl. Shhh, can you show me what happened? Where's Bri?" he asked. Kena stared at him, and suddenly Nick's vision faded, replaced by what Kena had witnessed. Nick watched in horror as Brian was bitten, then knocked unconscious. He saw the men arrive and carry him to the transport, then stun Devon and leave.

Nick blinked his eyes a few times, looking back at the unicorn. Kena had tears in her eyes, and Nick knew she felt responsible for not protecting Brian. He stroked the side of her face, "It's alright. You did your best." "Nick, what'd she say? Where's Bri?" Kevin asked. Nick stood up and pressed a button on the bracelet he was wearing, then walked back over to Kevin, "Bri's gone. Two men took him." "Took him? What do you mean took him?!" Kevin asked, confused and upset. Nick sighed, looking up the trail, "He's been kidnapped."

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LaDonna and Ana entered the control room. *"What happened?"* LaDonna asked. *"The king's alarm has gone off,"* one of the techs answered, *"We are dispatching a team now."* Ana watched the screens nervously, fearing the worse. She had seen Nick leave with Kevin. What if he had taken a nasty fall? She stepped closer, wanting to see what was going on. LaDonna glanced at her. The two women held their breath, waiting for the team to call back. *"Base, this is rescue one,"* a voice said. *"Go ahead rescue one,"* the tech answered. *"We have an all clear on the target. Request medical on standby. Oh, and we also need a lift and a vet, over,"* the man said. The tech looked confused, *"Rescue one, affirmative on medical, can you repeat the last, over?"* *"We need a vet and a lift. We have a unicorn down,"* the man clarified. *"Roger that, rescue one. It's on its way,"* the tech said.

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Marie waited outside the palace for the transports to come in. She was nervous, not knowing who was hurt. She prayed it wasn't Brian. She looked up, seeing the first transport come into the courtyard and up to where she was standing. She could see Nick and Kevin sitting in the transport. Once it landed, a couple of guards slid the stretcher out. Marie gasped, seeing her brother. She looked at Nick, *"Where's Brian?"* She notice the look Nick gave Kevin, and she didn't like it one bit. Nick walked over to her, pulling her over to the side as Devon was carried into the palace. Marie's lip was trembling, and tears were already trailing down her cheeks. *"Honey, Brian was kidnapped,"* Nick said, watching as the color drained from Marie's face. *"What?"* she asked, in shock. *"They were ambushed by war dogs, and Brian was taken by the men that chased the dogs away,"* Nick explained, trying his best not to cry with her.

Marie shook her head. This couldn't be happening. She looked at Nick, *"War dogs? Was he bitten?"* Nick nodded. Marie covered her face with her hands, *"No! Please no!"* Nick pulled her close trying to comfort her. He wrapped his arms around her, rubbing her back, *"It's gonna be OK. We'll find him."* Marie shook her head and stepped back, *"You don't understand."* Nick looked at her confused, *"Understand what?"* *"A war dog's bite is poisonous. If it's not properly treated, he could die,"* she cried. Nick felt his heart sink into his stomach, but he had to stay strong, for Marie, and for himself. He pulled her close again, *"We'll find him. There's a reason he was taken. Whoever has him wants something, and I'm sure they wouldn't hurt him."* Marie cried on his shoulder, hoping beyond hope that he was right.

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Brian slowly opened his eyes, blinking them. The first thing that registered was the pounding of his headache, closely followed by the throbbing of his ankle. He groaned, bringing his hands to his face. Closing his eyes for a moment, then trying to make them focus. He realized he was laying on something hard and cold. Slowly he sat up, wincing as he did. He looked at his ankle. His jeans were in shreds where the dog had bitten him. He carefully pulled his jeans up, seeing his wound had been wrapped, but the dressing was already soiled with blood. He looked up, taking in his surroundings.

The room he was in was very small, and drab. Stone floors gave way to stone walls and ceiling. There was a metal door on the opposite wall. It had a small, bar-covered window at the top and what looked like a small opening at the bottom. Brian looked down, seeing he was sitting on a stone slab that jutted out of the wall. He looked over, seeing a small sink and toilet. He didn't know where he was, but he knew he was in trouble. He glanced above the bed, seeing a small window near the ceiling. He carefully got to his feet and stood on the bed. He could just barely see out, but what he saw scared him. None of the scenery looked familiar. He grabbed the bars and pressed his face as close to them as he could get, trying to see down each side of the building. He made out the stables and just past that sat several transports. He looked up, seeing the suns just disappearing behind the mountains.

Brian let himself back down, and sat on the cold bed. He shivered as a chill ran down his spine. He leaned against the wall and weighed his situation. He didn't know where he was or how he got there. He was hurt, and locked in some sort of jail. He bit his lip, knowing that where ever he was, he was in trouble. He was the king's friend, that alone would warrant a hefty ransom. He lay back down, his head pounding to hard to let him remain sitting upright. He shivered again, the cold stone pressing against his back. He closed his eyes, praying this was just a dream, hoping that when he woke up it would be in his own bed with Marie next to him.

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Nick paced in the control room, listening to the search teams as they called in. He had every available man out looking for Brian, but so far, no one had seen anything. He glanced over, seeing Ana sitting with Marie. Ana looked up at him as she held her friend, trying to tell her that things would be alright, but not entirely convinced herself. Nick sighed, glancing over at Kevin. He was pacing, his face stricken with worry. A.J. and Howie were seated with Marie and Ana, alternating between looking at Kevin, then to Marie. LaDonna walked over to Nick and took his hand in hers, *"Come, I need to talk with you."* Nick

nodded, and followed her to a corner of the room.

*"What has happened is very serious," she began, "Whoever took Brian has to know who he is. They may think that they can get something from you, for his safe return." Nick nodded, "I thought of that. But what would they want?" "I don't know, but Nickolas, you must be careful," she warned, "If you give in to their demands, it opens the door for more acts of this nature. If a demand is made, you must disconnect yourself. You can't be Brian's best friend, you must be the king. You cannot do anything that will put this planet or its people at risk." Nick bit his lip, knowing that would be hard to do. He was worried sick and would give everything he had to get Brian back. LaDonna could see the struggle her son was having. She herself wasn't sure if she could do what she had just told Nick. She squeezed his hand, "I know this is hard." Nick nodded, a tear leaving his eye and trailing down his cheek. He quickly wiped it away, not wanting anyone to see him cry.*

*"Your highness, we are receiving a transmission," one of the techs announced. Nick quickly walked over to the console, "Bring it up." The tech punched a few buttons and suddenly a hologram appeared in the middle of the room. "Brian!" Marie cried, seeing her husband laying in some kind of cell. "Where's it coming from?" Nick asked. The techs worked furiously, trying pin point where the signal was coming from. "It's bouncing," one said. Ana looked over, "Bouncing?" "Yes, it's randomly bouncing from one satellite to another. It's impossible to tell where it originated," the man answered, frustrated. The group watched in fear as the door to Brian's cell opened and two men entered the room.*

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Brian woke to the sound of the door opening. He turned his head, seeing two men come in. Both had masks on and had their marks wrapped, so as not to be identified. Brian sat up, looking from one to the other, not knowing what to expect. *"Stand up,"* one of the men instructed. Brian stared at him, wondering if he could get away with acting dumb. The man grabbed him by the front of the shirt and yanked him up, *"Do as I tell you! And don't look at me like that, I know you can understand me!"* Ok, playing dumb was out of the question. Brian glared at the man, trying to ignore the piercing pain in his leg.

The second man in the room laughed, moving closer to Brian. Brian looked over at him, wondering what he was doing. *"Hurts doesn't it?"* the man asked, gesturing to Brian's ankle. Brian stared at him, determined not to let the pain he was in show through. The two men glanced at one another, then the one kicked Brian right where he'd been bitten. Brian screamed and fell to the ground. He felt like he

was gonna pass out or throw up. The pain shot through him, making his muscles cringe. He looked up, seeing two sets of hands coming towards him. The next thing he knew, he had been pulled back up to his feet, and was enduring blow after blow to his face, sides, stomach and back. He tried to shield himself with his hands, only to be punched in a new place. Brian fell to his knees, now enduring the kicks to his legs. Once again one of the men managed to kick his wound, sending waves of unbearable pain through him.

Brian fell to his side, holding his leg to his chest, trying to shield it between the floor and the rest of his body. The men proceeded to kick him in the back and side until Brian cried out. *"Stop! Please!"* he begged. The men stopped and stepped back, satisfied. They left the room, laughing. Brian lay in the floor for several minutes, trying to muster the energy to move. He slowly sat up, trembling from the beating he'd just received. His head was swimming as he crawled over to the bed and pulled himself up. No longer could he put any weight at all on his injured leg. He moaned as he made it onto the bed, trying to find a position that offered him some relief. He coughed, holding his side. He trembled as he closed his eyes and gave in to the searing pain, welcoming the darkness that overtook him.

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Not a sound could be heard in the control room. Everyone was in shock. They were staring at Brian as he passed out, then the hologram ended. Nick stared at the place in the floor where Brian's figure had been just moments before, stunned. He wanted to cry, to scream, do anything that would relieve the horrible emotions running through him. Slowly the rest of the room made itself known. He looked up, seeing Howie and Ana holding Marie as she cried uncontrollably. Then he heard Kevin scream, and looked over, just in time to see his older brother slam his fist into the wall. Nick winced, hearing a loud crunching sound. "Fuck!" Kevin spat, holding his hand to his chest.

A.J. calmly walked over and inspected Kevin's hand, "I think you broke it." "No shit," Kevin said, annoyed and frustrated. Nick walked over, looking at the older man, "Kev, come on, let's go down to med and get that checked out." "I don't wanna go to med!" Kevin screamed, "Brian isn't getting any medical attention! Who the fuck do these assholes think they are! I swear if I get my fucking hands on them I'll kill them! You hear me, I'll fucking kill 'em!" LaDonna walked over, taking Kevin by the elbow, *"Come. We'll get that looked at."* Kevin looked embarrassed for a moment. He didn't mean to lose it, but he couldn't help it. LaDonna gave him a comforting smile, *"I know you're angry, but refusing treatment isn't going to get Brian back any sooner. Come."* Kevin sighed, and reluctantly followed the queen out of the room.

Nick looked over as Ana and Howie helped Marie up. She was still sobbing uncontrollably. "We're gonna take her to her room and see if we can't get her calmed down," Ana said. Nick nodded, turning to A.J. as they left. He was surprised the man hadn't cussed up a storm or destroyed something by now. A.J. stared at him and shook his head, "I-I can't believe it. It has to be a dream." Nick sighed, "I wish it was bro." A.J. bit his lip and sighed heavily, "I'll go make sure Kev is Ok." Nick grabbed his arm, "Are you alright?" A.J. shook his head, "No, but like the queen said, getting upset isn't going to help anything. But I promise you, if I ever get my hand's on who did this, I'll kill em," he said through gritted teeth, "I'll mess them up so bad not even their mommas will recognize them." Nick nodded, feeling the exact same way.

# Chapter 50

Nick stepped into Brian's room, giving Ana a half smile. Marie was asleep on the bed, and Howie was asleep in one of the chairs. "How is she?" he whispered. Ana shook her head, "Not good. She's so upset. We had to call the doc up to sedate her." Nick looked over at the sleeping woman, his heart breaking for her. Ana reached out and touched his hand, "How are you?" He shrugged, not knowing how to answer. So many emotions ran through him, he couldn't define them in words. Ana could see the worry and sadness in his eyes. She pulled him into a hug, "We'll find him, I know we will." Nick wrapped his arms around her, "I'm so scared Ana. He's hurt, and its my fault. I should've sent them all home .... if something happens to him I'll die." "Shhh, nothings gonna happen," she soothed, pulling back and looking at him, "Whoever has him will make their demands and we'll get him back." Nick sighed, running his hand through his hair, "That's just it Ana. What if I can't give them what they're asking for? What then?"

She stared at him, that possibility never crossing her mind. "Then we'll find another way," she said, determined to be positive. Nick nodded, looking down at the floor, "I have to go back into the meetings and act like nothing's wrong." "You can't suspend them?" she asked. He glanced up at her and shook his head, "No. Until something happens, I'm to go on as if everything is just peachy," he said frustrated. "Who's decision was this?" she asked, stunned. "The council and mom," he answered, "They think it would be best." "And what do you think?" Ana asked. Nick shook his head, "I dunno what to think. All I want is my friend back." Ana squeezed his hand, "You know anytime you need me, all you have to do is say the word." He smiled at her, "I know, thank you."

They both felt someone approaching and stepped apart as the door opened. Devon walked in, a worried expression on his face. "*Is she alright?*" he asked. "*She's very upset. It's not good for the baby,*" Ana answered. Devon walked over and sat on the side of the bed, looking down at his sister. "*How are you feeling?*" Nick asked. He looked up, "*I'm fine, just stunned. The doctors wouldn't listen to me though. They thought some of the scrapes I got were from the dogs so they kept me until just now.*" Nick nodded, turning to leave. He was already late for the meeting. "*Your highness,*" Devon called. Nick stopped and looked back. "*I'm sorry about Brian. I feel responsible.....*" he started. Nick shook his head and held up his hand, "*It's not your fault. You did everything you could under the circumstances. It's my fault for keeping him here,*" he said, then walked out the door.

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Three men walked into Brian's cell, the two that had given him the beating and an older, portly man. The older man looked at Brian, not happy with his condition. His face was bruised and swollen. Dried blood ran from his nose down one of his cheeks. Bruises graced his arms, and his ankle was swollen and bloody. He glared at the two men, *"This is what you call taking care of him?! I told you to send a message to the king that we were serious, not beat him senseless! Has it escaped you that we need him alive?"* the man scolded. The two men said nothing, staring at the floor. The older man walked over and felt Brian's forehead, looking back at the men, *"He has a fever. You were told to clean the bite!"* Both men jumped, not wanting to look the man in the eyes. *"Get him cleaned up, and get some medicine in him. If he dies before we've gotten what we want, I'll hold you both responsible. Understand?!"* the man seethed. "Y-yes sir," they both mumbled. "You have an hour, get to it," the man growled, leaving the cell.

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Kevin sat on his balcony watching the morning suns rise. He'd spent most of the night out here trying to get a grip on his emotions. He looked down at his hand and shook his head. He'd broken it in three places, and now wore the cast to prove it. He knew better than to punch a wall, but at the time it was the closest object to him, and he had to hit something. He hated this ... just sitting and waiting. He needed something to do, something to keep him occupied until they heard from the kidnapers. He got up and walked through his room. He set out down the hall in search of Nick.

Nick was just stepping into the elevator. Kevin ran to catch up, "Wait!" Nick held the doors as Kevin ran in. "You hear anything yet?" he asked. Nick shook his head, looking very stressed and worried. Kevin sighed, "Ok, can I do anything to help with the search?" "No man, my people have it covered," Nick said. "I can't just sit around Nick, I need something to do," Kevin almost begged. "I'm sorry Kev," Nick said. Kevin thought for a minute, "What about the talks? Can I do something there?" Nick adamantly shook his head, "No. I have a bad feeling that's why Bri was taken. No, I'm not risking your safety just to occupy you." "Nick, I'm a big boy, I can take care of myself. Besides, If you don't let me do something I'll be forced to annoy you," Kevin said in all seriousness.

Nick laughed as the doors opened and the two stepped out. Anthony was waiting on Nick, his arms full of papers. "Please Nick, I don't care what it is, just give me something," Kevin begged. Nick looked down the hall seeing the council and the ambassadors, then looked back to Kevin, "Alright, but you will not leave the palace, understand? That goes for the rest of the guys too." "Done," Kevin said, "What do you want me to do?" Nick took some of the papers from Anthony, "Find out what Kelah's connection is to Interstellar Distribution. I need to know what he's getting out of all this, and why's its so important."

Kevin took the papers and thumbed through them, "Alright, I'll do what I can." "Thanks," Nick said, turning to Anthony, "*Come on, the frustration awaits.*" Anthony smiled as he followed Nick down the hall and into the throne room.

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"Ouch!" Brian jumped as one of the men scrubbed his ankle. He had woken up while the men were cleaning him up. The man didn't even act like he'd heard him, continuing to scrub the raw flesh. Brian gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, forcing himself not to scream. Finally the man stopped, wrapping the wounded area with fresh bandages. Brian glanced back and forth between the two, wondering why they were suddenly taking care of him. They had brought him some food, which he picked at. He felt nauseous and tired, not having much of an appetite. He did drink the water he was given. He could tell he had a fever just by the way he felt, and wondered how he'd gotten sick. Brian then passed it off as his ankle getting infected. That had to be it, by the way the man was scrubbing it.

The other man approached him, a shot gun in his hand. "*What's that?*" Brian asked. "*Medicine,*" the man answered, grabbing him by the hair and yanking his head to the side. Before Brian could even get his hands up, the man had given him the shot and let go. Brian rubbed his neck for a moment, glaring at the man. Just then the door opened and an older portly man walked in. Brian stared at him. He was a little taller than Brian, with graying hair. Brian glanced at his mark, recognizing it as one of the high class. The man stepped up and handed Brian a blanket, "*I'm sure you can use this.*" Brian slowly reached out and took it, not sure what to think about the man's kind gesture. "*Thanks,*" he said as he wrapped the material around him.

The man looked over at Brian's food tray, "*You haven't eaten.*" "*I'm not hungry,*" Brian replied. The man sighed, "*You must eat or the poison will affect you faster.*" Brian felt a chill run down his back, "*Poison? You poisoned me?!*" The elder man laughed, "*No. The war dog's bite is poisonous. That's why you have a fever.*" Brian looked over at the two men. They were standing back, awaiting further orders. "*Why am I here?*" Brian asked, looking back at the elder man. "*You are here to assure we get what we want. When the king meets our demands, you will be released,*" he answered. "*And what if he doesn't?*" Brian asked. The man chuckled, "*I believe you don't want to know the answer to that.*" Brian swallowed hard, pulling the blanket around himself tighter. The man looked at his watch, then glanced at the two men, "*Bring him, it's almost time.*"

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Nick sat in the throne room, seething. Just as he had expected, Kelah had refused the deal, saying it was one-sided and not fair. He listened as Kelah ran through his so-called solution. He had completely turned the deal to his favor, and Tunk was fuming. It was only by some miracle that the man hadn't jumped up and strangled Kelah. Nick glanced at Anthony, seeing the same expression on the young man's face. Where did Kelah get off demanding seventy-five percent of everything? His world was only supplying the labor. Tunk was the one bearing the majority of the expense.

"Stop .. Stop," Nick said, annoyed. Kelah stopped talking looking at him. Nick glared at him for a moment. "Why are you here?" he asked, shocking the man. "Excuse me?" Kelah asked. "I asked why you were here," Nick repeated, "Cause it's not to compromise on this deal. You agreed to this when it was proposed, now you come back and find it unfair. Why? Why must you send us back to square one? Are you stalling?" Kelah's mouth dropped open in shock and anger, "I would never....." "Then what are you doing?" Nick asked, interrupting him. Kelah glared at him, "How dare you insinuate that I ....." "Oh I'm not insinuating. I'm flat out asking, what's in it for you? Why do you want this so bad? And why are you stalling?" Nick spat.

"Your highness," Mason said in a stern voice. Nick looked over at his uncle, "Don't tell me you don't see it? He's been stalling the entire time, and I wanna know why." The room sat in silence, waiting for Kelah to reply. Luckily the door opened and a servant walked in, "Pardon me your highness, but you are needed in the control room." Nick shot Anthony a look as he quickly got up and left the room, leaving the council and ambassadors staring at each other.

Nick ran down the hall, sliding around the corner into the room. LaDonna was there waiting on him. "What is it?" he asked. "The message is encrypted. Only you can open it," his mother said. Nick sighed, walking over to one of the stations and sitting down. He passed his mark over a sensor and watched as the screen revealed the image of Brian sitting at a desk, a piece of paper in his hands. He watched as Brian fidgeted with the paper, then cleared his throat and began to read. "By now you realize my kidnappers are serious. If you don't do what they ask, they will kill me," Brian read, stopping to glance into the camera. He sighed, looking back down, "You are to give the mine to the ambassador of Jeptim. No bargains, no compromises. One hundred percent of the mine is to be turned over. Failure to comply by the end of today's session will have disastrous results." Nick bit his lip, staring at his friend. He was so bruised and pale looking. He watched as Brian fumbled with the paper, then stared right at the camera, "Nick, don't do this. I'll be fine," he said before the camera cut off.

Nick put his head in his hands, trying his best not to cry. "Fuck!" he yelled, looking over at his mother.

She sighed, shaking her head. *"I can't do it,"* Nick said, *"I can't give them what they want."* LaDonna walked over and took his hand in hers, *"You're right, but maybe we can stall. Suspend the meetings, maybe fake being ill? That could possibly buy us some time."* *"I've gotta tell the council what's going on. I'll never stall without their help,"* he said. She nodded, as he headed for the door. He grabbed a tech, *"Go to the throne room and instruct the council and Anthony to meet me in my chambers."* *"Yes your highness,"* the man said, quickly leaving the room.

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Brian was on his hands and knees on the floor, holding his head. A swift punch in the temple was his punishment for his outburst. He tried to make the room stop spinning by closing his eyes for a moment. *"Take him back to his cell,"* the older man instructed. Brian winced as the two men grabbed him and drug him back down the hall, only to open the door to his cell and push him inside. He hit the floor hard, looking back as the door shut. Brian struggled to his hands and knees and crawled to his bed, wrapping the blanket around himself, trying to will away the pain and the cold.

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Nick stared at the council members, awaiting their reply. He had told them of the demands, and of his suspicions that Kelah was somehow involved with Interstellar Distribution. *"I'm sorry your highness, but we cannot give in to these demands,"* Joseph said. Nick nodded, *"I know, but can we stall? Do you think that would work?"* *"I don't know,"* Nathaniel said. Nick looked at his uncle, he was being awfully quiet. *"Do you have any suggestions?"* he asked. Mason shook his head, *"I'm afraid not."*

Nick rubbed his face with his hands, the pressure eating at him. *"What if I remove myself from the negotiations? Maybe appoint someone in my place?"* he asked. The entire council shook their heads. Nick rolled his eyes, *"Let me guess, it's not tradition?"* *"No,"* Joseph answered. *"You know what? I don't give a fuck about tradition right now! All I care about is getting my friend back in one piece. There is no way I can go back to the talks and not be influenced by this. I have to take myself out of the picture,"* Nick said. *"But if you do that, won't that put Brian at risk?"* Anthony asked. *"Yeah, if they realize they can't influence you, they may decide they no longer need him,"* Nathaniel said. Nick sighed, looking at them, tears welling up in his eyes, *"Then what am I suppose to do? I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't."*

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Tunk and Kelah watched as Nick and the council came back into the room. Tunk could tell that Nick was deeply troubled, and wondered what had happened. Nick stepped up to the table, *"Gentlemen, an urgent matter has arisen, and I'm afraid that I can no longer take part in these negotiations."* *"What?!"* Kelah asked, shocked. Tunk just sat there, studying the young king. He wasn't lying to them, but he wasn't telling them everything either. Nick sighed, doing his best not to just rip Kelah in two. *"I apologize, but this cannot be helped. Justice wouldn't be served if I stayed, my mind would be elsewhere. You may resume the negotiations without me. Anthony would serve as my proxy, or you may suspend them. That is up to you,"* Nick said.

The two ambassadors glanced at one another, then looked at Anthony. *"I have no problem with going ahead,"* Tunk said. *"Well I do,"* Kelah spat, glaring at Nick, *"I realize you are a young king, but this is highly unorthodox. My people will not negotiate with a servant."* Nick slammed his fist on the table and Anthony grabbed his arm, keeping him from doing anything else. Nick took a deep breath, *"Anthony is a member of the royal family and you will treat him as such. If you wish to move forward, you will deal with him. If not, you may leave anytime,"* he said as calmly as he could. Kelah glanced around the table, very agitated. *"Fine, we move on,"* he finally said. Nick nodded, patting Anthony on the shoulder, *"Stand your ground,"* he whispered. Anthony smiled and nodded. Nick left the room as Anthony sat down, *"Now, since Ambassador Hatch disagrees with the deal before us, let's get started on a new one."*

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Nick stood in the control room, his head in his hands. The guys milled around nervously, while Ana and the queen sat with Marie. Nick didn't want them here, but he couldn't tell them no. They all loved Brian too, and they had a right to see what would happen. It had been hours since Anthony had dismissed the days session. Nick asked him not to come, knowing that Anthony liked Brian and if he saw him hurt, it might influence him as well. Nick glanced over and looked at Marie. She looked pale and wracked with worry. She had her hands on her stomach, rubbing it every so often. Nick shook his head, this wasn't supposed to happen. Brian was supposed to be here to witness his child as it grew inside Marie. He closed his eyes again, willing away the tears. He had to keep it together.

*"Your highness, we are receiving a message,"* a tech said. Nick sat up, *"Bring it up."* The image of Brian laying in his cell appeared in the middle of the room. *"Since you refuse to meet our demands, let me stress the seriousness of your actions,"* a voice sounded through the room. Nick bit his lip as the two

men entered Brian's cell. Brian sat up as they approached him. One of the men had a small vile in his hand. "*Oh no,*" Ana said, seeing the crystal blue liquid. "What is it?" A.J. asked. "*It's Krystal,*" Marie answered, tears streaming down her face.

The group continued to watch as the men grabbed Brian and held him down on the bed. Brian struggled, kicking and fighting as much as he could. One of the men grabbed his arms and held them down, while the other grabbed his hair, forcing his head back. Brian clamped his mouth shut when the man tried to pour the liquid into it. The man holding his arms was almost sitting on his chest, making it hard for Brian to breathe. The man holding his head climbed up on the bed and positioned Brian's head between his knees while he moved his hand down to Brian's nose and held it shut. Brian's face turned red as he held his breath, still struggling. Finally he couldn't take it anymore and had to breathe. He opened his mouth to suck in some air, and the man poured the liquid down his throat, then forced his mouth shut so Brian couldn't spit it out.

Brian coughed and gagged as the man held his mouth shut. "*Swallow it!*" the man growled. Brian had tears running down his face. The man wasn't going to let him breathe until he'd swallowed the foul liquid. He squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed. The man grinned at the other as he let Brian go. Brian gasped for air, holding his throat. The liquid burned on its way down. Almost instantly, Brian began to feel the affects of the drug. He blinked his eyes several times, trying to make them focus. He broke out in a cold sweat and started shaking. The elation took over and Brian relaxed, giving in. Nick watched in horror as Brian closed his eyes, smiling, then he started to giggle. "*Think about what you have done. We will be in contact soon,*" the voice said, then the image faded.

Nick looked down at his hands, closing his eyes. He could feel the others stares on him. His decision had done this. He was the sole cause of the predicament Brian was in right now. Marie got up and left in tears. Everyone following after her, wanting to make sure she was OK. Nick heard them leave the room, but still didn't look up. He couldn't. He couldn't face them, knowing the pain he'd just caused. He jumped when LaDonna touched his shoulder. She cupped his chin in her hand and slowly pulled his head up to look at her. Nick's chin was trembling as he stared at his mother. "*Let it out baby,*" she said. Nick blinked several times, tears leaving his eyes and sliding down his cheeks. LaDonna pulled him to her, holding him tight as he broke down.

# Chapter 51

Brian pulled the blanket tighter around him and shivered. He moaned as the pain returned. The drug was wearing off, and he wanted nothing more than to retreat back into the bliss he'd experienced. He pulled his knees in closer to his chest, trying to find some warmth against the chills he was having. He wiped his face with a shaking hand, a cold sweat pouring off him. "It has to be the poison," he muttered. He tried to sit up, only to lay back down again, the room spinning out of control. He held his eyes shut for a moment, trying to will away the nausea that came with the spinning room. He knew in his mind that he needed to escape. He had to get back to Marie and get some proper medical attention. But his body wasn't a willing participant. Even when the room wasn't spinning, he could barely stand on his own. There was no way he was going to escape.

Slowly he sat up, looking around the dark room. The only source of light was the faint glow of the small moon. Brian sighed realizing there was nothing in the room that he could use to help him. A sharp pain hit his stomach and he winced. Almost instantly he could taste the Krystal he'd been given hours ago, and a fresh craving washed over him. He rubbed his face, remembering what Devon had said about the drug, that it only took one time to get addicted. Now he knew it was true. Even as sick as he was, the only thought he had was how he was gonna get some more Krystal. Brian shook his head, "No! Stop it! You can beat this... you just need ....air," he told himself, suddenly finding that it was getting hard to breathe. He stood up on the bed, putting all his weight on his good leg, and grabbed the bars of the small window. He pressed his face as close to them as he could and took in deep gulps of air.

After a moment his breathing calmed down. He looked across the courtyard. There were still a few transports there, but several guards stood around them. He glanced over towards the stables, not seeing anyone. Maybe there were no unicorns there to guard? He looked towards the mountains, seeing their shadows against the night sky. As far as he could see was darkness, which meant they were no where near a city. If they had been, he would've been able to see the lights. His strength was giving out and he sank back down to the bed, pulling the blanket over. His ankle was killing him. He carefully pulled his jeans up and felt of the bandage. The heat coming off it scared him. He sighed, laying back down. He had to fight this, the poison and the drug, or he knew he'd never see Marie or the guys again. He closed his eyes, "God help me, please," he mumbled as he fell asleep.

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Nick wandered through the garden. He couldn't sleep, and he couldn't stay cooped up in his room. His mind was going a mile a minute, all the 'what if's' raising their ugly heads and plaguing him with every step. He still couldn't get it out of his head that if he'd sent Brian home, none of this would've happened. He sighed, stepping off the trail and wondering through the thick brush and trees. He sniffed as the tears threatened to come back, the vision of Brian being forced to swallow that nasty drug playing over and over in his head.

He stepped out of the trees only to be faced with a wall of rock. He looked up, not able to see the top of it. Nick then looked from side to side, noticing something, he turned and headed toward it. As he approached, he realized it was the opening to a cave. He glanced around for a moment, wondering if some animal lived in it. Then he shrugged his shoulders and ducked in. As he stood up on the other side, his breath caught in his throat. The cave was massive, going on as far as the eye could see. There were crystal like formations hanging from the ceiling, and they glowed, like tiny lanterns. Nick scanned the walls, noticing the faint colors of some ancient drawings. He walked over and inspected them. What he saw sparked his interest. All across the main wall was drawn a massive battle scene. Unicorns with riders and thousands of footmen were portrayed. Nick walked down the length of the wall, studying the art. When he reached the middle he gasped. There at the head of the army was the king.

Nick stared at the drawing, a chill running down his back. The king was on a black unicorn. He wore armor of gold and had a massive sword in his hand. The most shocking thing was that the king didn't look like the others. He had white hair and lavender eyes. Nick stepped back, shaking. This couldn't be him, it just couldn't! He took a deep breath and continued on, studying the opposing army. They were a mixture of races, some Nick had seen, and some he hadn't. He recognized the Jeptimians, and the humans. "No," Nick whispered, in shock and fear. This couldn't be the future that was pictured, could it?

He turned from the wall, not able to face it any longer. He stared across the chamber, seeing an opening. He walked across and peeked in. It was a smaller chamber, filled with weapons. Nick walked in, looking through the ancient swords and bows. From the looks of them, they had to be centuries old. He milled through the room, until he'd reached the far wall. There he stopped, staring. In the corner was the armor pictured on the wall outside. Nick walked over and ran his finger across the shoulder, revealing the golden shine, from under all the dust. Nick stared at the suit in awe. After a while his curiosity got the best of him and he reached out, grabbing one of the metal covered gloves. He put it on, flexing his hand. It was a perfect fit.

The glimmer of something caught his eye and he looked over, seeing the sword. He bit his lip,

wondering if he should or not, but finally picked it up. As soon as his hand touched it, it began to glow. Nick held it up, seeing the engraving running down the blade. He wiped it with his hand, trying to read the faint markings. That's when he realized they weren't in his language. He stared at them, puzzled. If Celeste had always been one race and one language, then where did this come from? After a few moments he put the sword back and took off the glove, returning it to where he'd found it. He walked out of the room back into the main chamber, his mind full of more questions.

He was going to leave, but something pulled at him to stay. He wandered to the back of the main chamber, finding several more rooms. Some were filled with more weapons, while others looked like living quarters. He made it all the way to the back, staring at the wall. His mark graced the entire back wall. The paint seemed to shimmer, making it look alive. It almost seemed as if the raven was staring at him. Nick shivered under the beings stare, and looked down. "What the hell?" he said, seeing a familiar sensor. He brushed the dust from it, then thought why not? He passed his mark across it, and was rewarded with a loud rumbling noise. Nick stepped back as the wall separated and opened into another room. He coughed as the dust flew around, the doors not having been opened in centuries.

When the dust finally settled, Nick stood there in shock. He'd found the king's chambers. He walked in, noting that nothing in this room was dusty. Everything gleamed with cleanliness. The marble like floors reflected the lights from above, making the room bright. Nick walked over to the bed and felt of it. The blankets were the softest he'd felt, even softer than his own in the palace. He sat down on the bed and looked around. There was a desk on one side with elaborate carvings down the legs. A table and chairs, and even a bathroom. Nick checked everything out, surprised that it all still worked. The desk was full of papers, all in the same language as the engraving on the sword. As much as Nick would've liked to stayed, he was getting really tired. His body finally giving out. He contemplated laying down on the bed, but knew better. If morning came and he was nowhere to be found .... well he didn't want to cause that kind of panic. He took a small piece of paper from the desk and folded it up, placing it in his pocket. He needed to find out what language that was. Nick took one last look and then stepped back into the main chamber. He passed his mark over the sensor and waited until the doors were shut before making his way out of the cave. Once he was out, he took notice of the moon. It was going down, and the faint light of dawn could be seen. He hurried back through the trees towards the palace.

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"Marie, please eat," Howie begged. Marie sat on her bed staring at the food tray he'd brought her. She shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes. Howie sat down next to her and took her hand, "I know you don't want to. Neither do I, but we have to take care of ourselves. And you have to take care of

your baby. Brian's gonna need us when he comes back, and if we're sick we can't help him." Marie bit her lip and looked at him. She could see his worry and concern in his chocolate eyes. "*I'll try,*" she said, picking up her fork. Howie smiled, staying with her as she ate what little she could.

When she pushed the tray away, he stood up and took it, "I'll take this back. Can I get you anything else?" "*No thank you,*" she said, laying back in bed and staring out the balcony doors. The suns had risen not long ago and the day was turning out to be warm and beautiful. Howie sighed, watching her. She was so broken hearted, almost like the life had been torn out of her, leaving an empty shell. He shook his head and turned towards the door. A.J. walked in, just as Howie reached to open the door. Howie grabbed the tray before he dropped it. "She eat?" A.J. asked. Howie glanced down at the food, "Not much." A.J. nodded, walking into the room as Howie left.

He sat down on the side of the bed and gently brushed the hair from Marie's face. She glanced at him. A.J. smiled down at her, "Hey, why don't I take you somewhere. You know, get out of the palace for a bit?" She shook her head, looking back out the doors. A.J. sighed, "Ok, we can stay here then. Would you like to play cards, or we could watch the vid?" Marie laughed, wiping the tears from her eyes, "*I don't need a babysitter Alex.*" A.J. grinned, "I know you don't, but until Brian gets back, it's our job to look after you." She sat up and looked at him, "*Our job?*" He nodded, "Mine, D's, Kevin's and Nick's. See it's an unspoken agreement we all have. It started when Brian had his heart surgery. We kinda agreed to take care of things for him until he got back on his feet. That meant being there for his family. Just like now, we're here for you until he comes back." Marie smiled, the first real smile since Brian had been taken. She knew the guys were all close, but she didn't realize that when she married Brian, she gained four brothers as well. "*Thank you Alex,*" she said, reaching out and hugging him. A.J. held her as her emotions took over and she began to sob. He stroked her back, soothing her, "Shhh, it's gonna be Ok." After a few moments she pulled back, wiping her face, "*I'm sorry.*" "Hey, it's alright," he said, "Come on. Why don't you get dressed and we'll go down for your check up. Then if you feel like it, we can take a walk in the garden, get some fresh air." She sniffed, "*You aren't gonna take no for an answer are you?*" "Nope," he said with a smile, causing them both to laugh. "*Alright,*" she said, crawling out of bed and heading to the bathroom, "*Give me a minute.*" A.J. sat back on the bed and crossed his arms over his chest, "Take your time, I've got all the time in the world."

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Nick sat in front of the console, watching as the computer ran through all possible matches to the writing on the paper. He was getting impatient, as minute after minute went by with no match. He felt someone coming and quickly shut off the computer and hid the paper, just turning around as the door

opened. Rowland stepped in, "I'm sorry to bother you, but ..." "You found Brian?" Nick asked hopefully. Rowland sighed, "No your highness. The unicorn is dying. I thought you might want to know." Nick's heart broke a little more as he nodded and walked past Rowland, heading for the stable.

When he walked into the stable, sadness washed over him. He knew it was the other unicorns in the building, and took a deep breath, walking to Kena's stall. He stepped in, seeing Kena laying on her side, struggling to breathe. The vet stood up and shook his head, "*The poison was to strong. There's nothing I can do.*" Nick nodded, keeling down next to the creature. He ran his hand down her face and neck, "I'm sorry girl. I never wanted any of this to happen." Kena stared at him with her large brown eyes and purred. Nick smiled. She was dying but she made sure she made him feel better. He shook his head as a tear trailed down his cheek, "What is it they say? When a unicorn dies they go to a beautiful field, full of their favorite grass, with flowing streams of clear water." Kena blinked, gasping for air. Nick stroked her neck, "Don't fight anymore girl. You lived a good life here .... go to your field." Kena stared at him for a moment. Then as if she'd understood him, she closed her eyes and grew still. Nick stayed by her side until she was gone, letting his tears fall.

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Brian woke to the glare of the sun in his room. He sat up, noticing a tray of food sitting in the floor next to the door. He slowly got up and hobbled over to it, sitting down in the floor next to it. He took a shaky breath, seeing the small vile sitting next to the glass of water. Instantly he craved it, and had to will himself not to grab it. He quickly ate as much as his churning stomach would let him. Not that he was hungry, but he remembered what the man had said about the poison. He then drank the water, staring at the vile. By the time he sat the glass down, his hands were shaking. He closed his eyes, willing all the strength he could muster and shoved the tray back through the opening at the bottom of the door. He couldn't let the drug take over, no matter how much he wanted it. Slowly he got back to his feet and hobbled back to his bed. He already regretted what he'd done, his craving getting stronger. He was near tears when he heard someone outside the door. He watched as they pushed the vile back through the opening.

"No," he cried, covering his face with his hands. How was he suppose to fight this when they wouldn't let him? He looked at the vile again, his mouth watering. Brian licked his lips, his body screaming at him to go get it. He took a deep breath, coughing when he did. Another chill ran through him, and he stared at the ceiling. Maybe if he didn't look at it, it would help? After a minute he'd abandoned that idea, getting up and making his way to the small container. He picked it up and turned around. Waves of dizziness came over him and he grabbed the sink to steady himself. Leaning on the sink he stared at the

liquid, his body and mind in a duel. He was in so much pain, he just wanted it to stop. He opened the vile, careful not to spill it. If he just took a little, just enough to dull the pain, it wouldn't hurt would it? It wouldn't be like taking the whole vile and getting high. He raised the container to his mouth, his hand shaking so badly he knew he was going to drop it. He took a sip, quickly replacing the lid and setting the container on the back of the sink. Instantly he found relief from his pain, but it wasn't enough. He wanted more. "No I can't," he scolded himself, pushing up from the sink and stumbling back to the bed. He wrapped the blanket around him and lay back. If he could just stay strong, just take enough to dull the pain, maybe he had a chance? At least that's what he'd keep telling himself.

## Chapter 52

Kevin sat in front of a console, scanning the pages he'd looked up. He'd done a search on Interstellar Distributions, and came up with tons of information. Unfortunately none of it was what he was looking for. He even searched the company's affiliates, surprised that they had branch company's all over the universe, even several on Earth. He'd saved a lot of the information on a chip, knowing Nick would forward it on to Tom and Tamara to help them in their search.

He looked up when someone came into the library, smiling. "Hey Ana," he said. She looked over, "Hey, what brings you here?" "Doing some research for Nick," he answered, "You?" "Looking up some things for the queen," Ana replied. Kevin nodded, going back to his search. Then a thought hit him, "Ana, can you come here a sec?" She got up and walked over, "Yes?" "Um, do you know someone that can hack a computer system? Someone we can trust not to talk about what we find?" he asked. She raised her eyebrows, "This sounds interesting. What exactly are you doing?" Kevin smiled, "Trying to figure out what Interstellar Distributions has in common with Ambassador Hatch." Ana smiled, a mischievous grin on her face, "Well, in that case, grab your stuff and come with me."

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"Come on, come on," Nick said impatiently. He was sitting in front of his console again, trying to find the origin of the mysterious language from the cave. His nerves were shot and he'd had a shitty day. Kena's death was hard on him, and he had stayed to comfort Thomas and the rest of the unicorns, before returning to his room. Still there was no word from the kidnappers, and Nick could only imagine what Brian was having to endure. That was the worse part, not knowing.

He jumped when the screen blinked and stopped. He stared at it, his mind filling with more questions. The language was from another planet, called Aklazh. He looked at the solar system, finding that it was about as far away from Celeste as you could get. He sat back reading the translation of the paper.....Marques, I understand your concern, but I am right when I tell you this will come to pass. I see it as clear as the mountain streams. Do not lose faith, for our time is near. William.

Nick sighed, wondering just who William and Marques were, and what they were talking about. He wondered if anyone knew of the cave, or if they did, why were they keeping it to themselves. The one

person he thought might know, he didn't want to ask. Mason had changed towards him in past few weeks, but he still didn't trust him. Something was going on, especially with him and his mother. He never had gotten the chance to talk to her about that. Now with Brian missing, he needed to be concerned with other things. Briefly he wondered how the talks were going, feeling guilty for leaving Anthony to the wolves. But there was no way he could be in there. He couldn't agree to Kelah's terms, no matter how much it hurt Brian. He shook his head, being king was definitely not all it's cracked up to be. Not by a long shot.

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Anthony glanced at Tunk. The older man was seething, and honestly Anthony didn't know how he was restraining himself. Kelah wouldn't agree to any compromise, no matter how small. He went on and on about how his people demanded that they receive the mine, and he wouldn't settle for anything less. Anthony really didn't see the talks ending on a good note. There was no pleasing the ambassador from Jeptim. He sighed, flipping the page as Kelah read his latest 'amendment' to the deal. *I hope Nick is doing better than me*, Anthony thought.

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Kevin sat in the control room, watching as the young tech went through pages of scrolling text. It was going so fast Kevin didn't know how he was keeping up. *"Well, well, what have we here...."* the man said, intrigued. Kevin and Ana glanced at one another. The tech turned to them and smiled, *"We're in. So what do you wanna know?"* "Pull up anything they have on the import of Krystal, and also see if you can get into their payroll. Let's see who works for them," Kevin said. *"Also look up any legislation they have lobbied for in the past couple of years,"* Ana added. Kevin looked at her. She shrugged, "I'm sure they have some of the local government in their pockets too." Kevin grinned, "You ever thought about working for the FBI?" "Naw, they're a bit to plain for me," she smiled.

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Marie sat on a bench, the afternoon suns warming her skin. She had to admit that she did feel a little better. A.J. had been with her all day, talking and making her do things even when she didn't want to. He was right, she couldn't sulk in bed all day. It wasn't good for her or the baby. She ran her hand over her stomach. She had to stay strong, to keep it together. Brian was going to need her when he returned.

It was hard coming off the drug, and he'd need her strength and support. *"That's it Marie, stay positive,"* she told herself, *"Brian's coming back, and everything will be alright."*

"It certainly will," A.J. said, sitting down next to her, handing her a glass. She took it, taking a long drink. He laughed, "Damn woman. I've seen chugging contests that didn't go that fast." Marie blushed, *"Sorry, the walk made me thirsty."* "I'd say," he smiled. Marie reached out and took his hand, *"Thank you for doing this."* "Doing what?" he asked, sipping his drink. *"Looking after me. Not taking no for an answer. I have to admit that we didn't get off on the right foot, and I always kinda thought you were a jerk,"* she said. He gave her an offended look, "Gee thanks." *"No, wait,"* she said laughing, *"You didn't let me finish. That was until now. I see how much you really care, and even though you're hurting too, you take time to make sure that I'm Ok. Thank you Alex."* He smiled, staring into his glass, "You're welcome."

*"There you are,"* Devon said, walking up to them. A.J. nodded, getting up, "I'll leave you two alone." Marie watched as he headed back towards the palace. Devon sat down in his place, *"Are you OK?"* She glared at him, *"No I'm not Ok. My husband is gone. He's hurt and they forced Krystal on him! How do you think I feel?!"* she spat. Devon bit his lip, the hurt expression on his sisters face tugging at him. *"I know Marie. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry this happened,"* he said. She sighed shaking her head, *"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you. I'm just really worried Devon. He looked so sick ... and now he's fighting the drug too. How much can he take?"* He wrapped his arm around her, letting her lean against him, *"I dunno sis, I dunno."*

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Brian rocked back and forth, his arms wrapped tight around himself. He'd ran out of Krystal earlier in the day and he was suffering. The cravings wouldn't let him rest, and the pain was unbearable. He'd started crying a few minutes ago, not able to keep the tears from falling. He hated this. Hated the way he felt when the drug wore off, and hated what the poison was doing to him. He knew his fever was high and he was dehydrated. He'd wobbled over to the sink a few times, turning the water on and taking a drink. But he couldn't stand for long, the weakness and dizziness haunting every step.

He looked over when his door opened. The older man was back, this time coming into the cell alone. He looked over at the sink, the empty vile sitting on the back of it. *"I see you've taken your dose,"* he commented. Brian wiped his face, *"W-why did you do that?"* The man sat down on the other side of the bed and looked at him, *"The king refused our demands. I wanted him to see what his decision did to you."* Brian glared at him, *"He saw that?"* The man smiled, *"Yes he did. Now we are giving him time to*

*think about what he did before we approach him again."* Brian shuddered, the chills were back. He grabbed the blanket and wrapped it around himself, *"Please just let me go. I-I don't know how much longer I can take this."* The man stared at him, as if he were pondering the idea. Brian coughed a horrible deep retching cough, followed by him gasping for air. The man stood up, heading for the door, *"I will have them bring you some more medicine."* Brian watched as he left, his hopes sinking a bit more.

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Kevin sat with his mouth open, in shock. "I can't believe this," he said, then the anger hit him, "I'm gonna kill him!" Ana reached out and grabbed his arm, "Let Nick take care of this." Kevin sighed, looking back over the payroll sheets the tech had gotten. They'd only managed to get a partial list before the company's security system locked them out. The tech was working on getting back in, but he was having to bounce his signal, and it was taking longer.

Nick and Rowland walked into the room. "What's up?" Nick asked. Kevin shoved the papers in his hand, "Interstellar's payroll. I think you might find it interesting." Nick looked down at the sheet and read through it. Flipping the page he stopped, looking back up at Kevin with anger in his eyes. "Yeah," Kevin spat. Nick looked back down at the paper, finishing the list. Sure enough Kelah's name was on the list, but so was someone else's. Someone he had never expected. He turned to Rowland showing him the paper, "I want him brought in, but keep it quiet. I don't want word getting out about this." Rowland nodded, "No problem, he's already here." "He's here?" Nick and Kevin asked at the same time. "Yes, he came in a little while ago to visit his sister," Rowland replied. "Alright, post someone at all the exits. Don't let him leave, but do not let Marie see you take him. I can't risk her getting more upset," Nick said. Rowland nodded, heading out of the room. "I can't fucking believe this," Nick said, running his hand through his hair. "I know, I'm gonna kill him!" Kevin spat. Nick held his hand up, "Let us get where Brian is from him first, then you can kill him."

## Chapter 53

Devon walked down the hall, making his way out of the palace. He'd spent a few hours with Marie, leaving her in her room. He sighed, hating what the whole situation was doing to her. He laughed inwardly, never thinking of himself as a soft hearted person, but somehow it was turning out that way. He had let his personal feelings get the best of him, and now he was paying for it. Feeling the guilt every time he saw his sister. Never in a million years had he expected to get as close to Marie as he had. And Brian, well he was a whole different story. He'd started out hating the man, but after he got to know him, he found he couldn't do that anymore. Now his sister was carrying Brian's child, and mourning his disappearance.

Devon shook his head, pondering a new feeling—regret. He knew he had no choice in the matter. Once the plan was started, there was no stopping it. Not if he valued his livelihood and life. He was slowly coming to realize just what a pawn he really was. He was ordered to do certain things, and he did them, without question. Well now he was questioning it, and it sucked. Never had he felt this way about anything he'd been asked to do, and he never wanted to feel like this again.

He turned the corner and saw a guard standing next to the door. As he approached the man stepped in his way. *"Mr. Lapool, the king requests your presence, please follow me,"* the man said, leading him down the hall to Nick's office. Devon followed, wondering what Nick wanted to talk to him about. He figured Nick would ask what he remembered of the men that took Brian since no one had asked him yet. The guard stopped at the door, motioning for Devon to walk in. He did, stopping in his tracks. Nick was sitting at his desk, Kevin standing next to him. Ana was standing near the door with Rowland, and there were two more guards in the room. Nick looked up as Devon walked in, anger in his eyes.

Devon kneeled, *"You asked to see me your highness."* *"Yes I did, take a seat,"* Nick said, pointing to the chair in front of the desk. Devon sat down, seeing Kevin glaring at him. He was starting to get nervous as the door closed and Rowland positioned himself in front of it. Nick looked down at the papers in front of him and sighed, *"Where is he?"* *"Who?"* Devon asked, confused. Nick closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to stay calm, *"Brian, where is he?"* *"I don't know,"* Devon said quietly. *"Bullshit!"* Kevin boomed, making him jump. Nick glared at him, *"Devon, I'm giving you a chance to come clean here. We know you work for Interstellar Distributions, and we know that they want the mines. Just tell me where Brian is and I promise your punishment won't be as strict."*

Devon glanced around. There was no leaving the room. He sighed, looking down at his hands, *"I-I honesty don't know."* "You fucking liar!" Kevin yelled, making it to Devon's seat in two steps and backhanding him across the face. "Kevin!" Nick yelled, standing up. Devon held his hand to his cheek, looking up at the two, *"I really don't know where they took him. I was just the bait to get him ... I-I'm so sorry,"* he said, looking back down at his lap. "You can't honestly thing we're gonna buy that load of shit do you?!" Kevin spat. Devon said nothing. Nick walked around the desk and stood in front of Devon, *"Look at me."* Slowly Devon looked up, locking eyes with Nick. *"Tell me what part you played in this. I wanna know everything,"* Nick demanded. *"My superiors wanted a way to influence you. I told them I had a connection and so they appointed me the bait. I was suppose to buddy up with Brian until the time came that they needed him. I did that, but....."* Devon trailed off.

"But what?!" Kevin asked, making him jump again. *"I-I got to know him, and I .... um...I realized that he wasn't such a bad person. I hated him at first, because of what he is and where he was from, but then I got to know him. I didn't want to do this ..... please you have to believe me! I'd give anything to take it all back now,"* Devon pleaded. Nick stared down at him, a tired expression on his face, *"And you don't know where they took him?"* "No," Devon said shaking his head. *"And who are your superiors?"* Nick asked. Devon looked down at his feet. Kevin grabbed him by the arm and shook him, "Tell him you asshole!" Nick reached over and took Kevin's hand from Devon, "Don't man." Kevin stared at his younger brother for a moment, "Nick, he knows. He has to." Nick shook his head, "No Kev, he doesn't." "And just how do you know?" Kevin demanded. "I know, now drop it," Nick said, agitated, looking back down at Devon, *"You refuse to name your superiors?"* *"I can't, I'm sorry,"* Devon said softly. Nick sighed, looking over at Rowland, "Take him to his cell. Maybe after he thinks about it, he'll tell us what we want to know."

Rowland walked over and placed Devon in cuffs, taking him by the arm and leading him to the door. Devon stopped, turning back around, *"Please look after Marie."* Nick nodded, *"It's being done."* Devon nodded, turning back around and letting Rowland escort him out of the room. "Well, that went well," Ana said, plopping down in the chair Devon had vacated. "Yeah," Nick said, "Just great." "Now what?" Kevin asked, "We've gotta find Bri." "I know," Nick said, looking at the two, "Go back and see if the tech has found anything else. And get the routes they run, I wanna see where they go." Kevin sighed, frustrated, "Alright, let me know if the traitor decides to talk." "I will," Nick said as he left the room. Ana got up to follow him but stopped, looking back, "You Ok?" Nick shrugged, "Got a lot on my mind." "I'm here ya know," she said, giving him a reassuring smile. He nodded, "I know." She turned to leave when he called her name. "Yes?" she asked. Nick started to say something, but then stopped, shaking his head, "Never mind. We'll talk later Ok?" "Ok," she said, staring at him for a moment before turning and leaving the room.

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LaDonna stood on one of the many balconies, looking towards the mountains. She sighed as the suns went down. Still there was no word about Brian, and she was worried. Nick was taking his friends disappearance hard, blaming himself for the whole thing. As much as she tried, she couldn't convince him otherwise. Seeing Nick so hurt, pained her. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, letting the gentle breeze tousle her hair.

*"Your meetings over with so soon?" she asked, not bothering to open her eyes. "Yes, Anthony dismissed the Ambassadors after they got into a fight," he answered. She looked over, raising an eyebrow, "A fight, as in a fist fight?" He nodded, standing next to her, looking at the mountains. "So things aren't going very well," she noted. "No I'm afraid not," he said softly. "And do you have any words for your son? Are you helping him at all?" she asked. Mason looked at her, "I don't know what to say. There's no solution to this problem other than to give Hatch what he wants." "You know we cannot do that," she said. He nodded, looking down at his hands on the railing next to hers. LaDonna studied him for a moment, then moved her hand to cover his, "What has you so bothered?" Mason looked up for a moment, then back down, "I'm fine." LaDonna smiled, "No, something is bothering you. What is it?" He sighed, "I'm just tired and stressed. The talks aren't going anywhere, and Nickolas's friend is still missing." "And you care about that?" she asked, surprised. He looked at her, "I'm not completely without a heart. I see how much Nick hurts ... and you." The queen sighed, "And what can we do? Give in and turn over the mines? Then what? It opens the doors for too much Mason. We can not let them influence us, no matter how much it hurts." "I know, but I'm afraid your son will lose his friend if he doesn't," he said. She bit her lip, "Then he must lose him."*

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Brian lay on the cold stone slab, staring at the ceiling. The men had come in earlier and given him another shot, but it didn't seem to be helping. In fact, Brian thought he felt worse. Every breath was a struggle, the air burning his lungs. His cough hadn't subsided at all, and each time he coughed, he gasped for air, which only made him cough more. His hands were shaking and he knew if they didn't bring him some Krystal soon he'd go insane. The craving was so strong, it was maddening.

He heard the lock to his door clank. Sitting up he watched as the two men entered his room. One carrying a food tray, the other a new vile. *"You look like hell,"* the man with the vile said. Brian reached for it, but he jerked it away. *"Please,"* Brian begged, the craving hitting him hard, *"I don't ...think I can take... this any longer,"* he panted. The men glanced at each other, knowing the poison was in full force. The man handed Brian the vile and Brian quickly took a sip. Some of the pain left him, but not all, and it

did nothing to ease his breathing. The man with the food tray sat it down and walked over, feeling of Brian's forehead. Brian moved away from his hand, reaching for the glass of water. He couldn't quite grab it, his vision blurring and wave upon wave of dizziness hitting him. He moaned, cradling his stomach. *"Maybe we should move him?"* one of the men said. The other nodded. *"No, please,"* Brian begged, not knowing what they wanted as they approached him. *"Come on, we'll take you down, let the doc look at you,"* one of the men said. Brian looked at him as he grabbed him by the arm and hoisted him up. *"You have ...a doc? Why do... you ...care?"* he asked as the men drug him down the hall. *"Because if you die, it's our ass',"* the other man said. *"Good,"* Brian said, laughing. His laughter turned into a heavy round of coughing, followed by gasps for air. The two men hurried their pace as Brian passed out.

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Nick stood in front of Brian's door, debating on whether to knock or not. It was late, well past dark, and he didn't want to disturb Marie if she was sleeping. Finally he got the courage and lightly rapped on the door. After a second, he passed his mark across the sensor and stepped inside. Howie was sitting on the bed, watching the vid. "Hey Nick," he said, looking over. "Hey, is Marie around?" he asked. "Yeah," Howie said, pointing towards the balcony, "Out there." Nick walked through the room and out onto the balcony. He stood back, watching. Marie seemed to be lost in her own thoughts, the slight wind playing with her hair. After a moment she sighed, *"Still no word?"* she asked, her gaze never leaving the mountains. Nick walked up, standing next to her, "No I'm sorry." She nodded, trying to will the tears from coming. Nick reached over and wrapped his arm around her, "We will find him Marie, I promise you that." *"I know,"* she said, looking up at him. Nick could see the tears in her eyes, but she wasn't allowing them to fall.

He smiled at her, trying to reassure her. After a moment he cleared his throat, "How's the baby?" Marie instantly put her hand to her stomach, *"She's fine, growing just like she should."* "It's a she?" Nick asked. Marie shrugged, *"I don't know yet. I just call it a her, cause .. um, Brian wanted a little girl."* Nick tightened his arm around her, "Well, then I'm sure it's a girl, cause Bri always gets what he wants." They both laughed for a moment, then became quiet again. *"He should be here Nick. This isn't right, he should be here for her,"* Marie said as a tear slipped down her cheek. Nick gently wiped it away, "I know, and he will, I promise."

# Chapter 54

Nick sat in the garden, his head in his hands. The afternoon suns beat down on him, warming his skin to the point of overheating, but he didn't care. It had been days since they'd heard from the kidnapers, and with each passing day, he grew more and more uneasy. The talks were basically stalled. Kelah still demanding everything, and Tunk and Anthony frustrated beyond words that the man wouldn't at least try to compromise. Nick had avoided the men and Anthony. He didn't want Anthony to see how much he was hurting, afraid that it would influence the younger man into giving Kelah what he wanted just to get Brian back.

Everyone was in a somber mood, frustrated and biting each other's heads off at every turn. They all knew they didn't mean what they said, it was just so hard going about the day's activities when God knows what was happening to Brian. Nick sighed, a sinking feeling in his gut that he couldn't shake. He was afraid something had already happened, that that was the reason they hadn't heard from the kidnapers. He tried to stay positive, but it was an act, and he was sure everyone could see it. His mind wandered to Marie. With each day passed she grew more and more depressed and upset. It was a chore to get her to come out of her room now, and she barely ate a thing at meal time. Nick was worried about her. She didn't look well, and he was afraid for the baby.

Devon had still not talked, even though Nick had gone to talk with him several times. He could tell the man wanted to tell him, but fear stood in the way. He saw it in Devon's eyes each time they talked. Nick had made up a story of Devon going out of town on business when Marie had tried to contact him and didn't receive a reply. He hated lying to her, but she was in no condition to handle the truth. Nick sat up and looked toward the clear blue sky, "What am I gonna do? How am I suppose to fix this?" he asked, hoping something came to him before it was too late, if it wasn't already.

~~~~~

Slowly Brian opened his eyes, becoming aware of his surroundings. He was confused, looking around the room. He didn't know how he'd gotten there, or for that matter exactly where he was. The last thing he remembered was the two men dragging him down the hall. Now he was laying in a bed, an IV in each arm and an oxygen mask over his face. He looked around the room, relieved to see a window with no bars. Maybe he'd been found and he was back at the palace? His stomach growled, like it hadn't seen food in days, and when he tried to move, his muscles balked. The pain was still there,

throbbing up his leg, but it was manageable. He felt almost like he did when he'd taken the Krystal, and wondered if they were giving it to him through the IV's.

The door to the room opened and the portly man walked in, Brian's hopes sinking as he did. The man walked over to the bed and stared down at him. Brian decided to play a little sicker than he felt, hoping the man would leave him where he was for now. *"So you finally wake up,"* the man said, sounding annoyed. Brian blinked a few times, acting confused. *"You've put us days behind schedule,"* the man went on, *"But I guess that's alright. Maybe the king has come to his senses by now."* *"H-how l-l-long?"* Brian whispered. The man laughed, *"You have been out for the better part of four days. I was beginning to wonder if you'd make it. I'm glad you did, otherwise I would have had to start over with another one of the king's friends."* Brian closed his eyes, letting out a soft moan. *"Ohh no, you aren't going back to sleep, we have work to do,"* the man said, shaking Brian. Brian stared at him through tired eyes, wondering what was up the man's sleeve now.

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"Marie, please just try," Ana begged. Marie shook her head, staring out the balcony doors. Ana sighed in frustration, setting the food tray aside. "You can't do this, I won't let you," she said. Marie glanced at her, "What?" "Drift into this depression. It's not good for you or the baby. You've gotta snap out of this and take care of yourself," Ana scolded. "I can't," Marie said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Yes you can!" Ana yelled. Marie jumped, and gave Ana an icy stare. "You have no idea what I'm going through! Just leave me alone!" she yelled.

"Marie..." Ana started. "NO! Just stop telling me what to do or how to feel! I'm tired of everyone treating me like a child! My soul has been ripped out .... do you understand?! Brian was my life, my joy, my ...everything! And now he's .....he's..." Marie sobbed. Ana pulled her friend into her arms and let her cry, "Shhh, it's gonna be Ok." Marie's head shot up, "No it's not! If Brian doesn't come back, I'll die!" Ana stared at her for a moment, then pulled her back into the hug. Marie cried on her shoulder as Ana gently rocked her. She'd never seen her friend so broken, so desperate and scared all at the same time. Her heart broke for her, knowing that if something were to happen to Nick, then she would feel the same way.

"What if ...what if he doesn't come back?" Marie asked after several moments. Ana hugged her tighter, "He will, you have to believe that." Marie sat up and wiped her face with the back of her hand, shaking her head, "It's been too long Ana. Something's happened, I know it. What if he ...?" "Shhh, don't think

that way," Ana said, taking her hand. "I can't help it. He was so sick from the poison, what if he couldn't fight it? I can't go on without him," Marie cried. "You wont," Ana said, patting Marie's stomach, "You have a part of him in here. Brian will live on in this child." Marie looked down, placing her hand over Ana's. "Please Marie, you need to take care of yourself and this baby," Ana tried again. Marie looked up at her friend, a sadness beyond belief in her eyes, she nodded, reaching out for the tray. Ana handed it to her. Marie forced herself to eat. She had to keep the baby healthy, knowing it may be the only thing she had left of Brian.

~~~~~

Nick walked down the hall, headed to his office. He needed to study the trade routes that Interstellar used. Maybe there was a clue there as to why they wanted control of the mines so badly. "*Nick!*" Anthony yelled, running down the hall towards him. "*What is it?*" he asked, seeing the urgency in the young mans face. "*There's a message for you,*" Anthony said, as Nick took off at a run to the control room, Anthony on his heels.

As soon as Nick reached the room he sat down at a console and passed his mark over the sensor, allowing him access to the message. What he saw made his heart leap into his throat. Brian was struggling to sit up in a bed, IV's in his arms, an oxygen mask on his face. He looked like death, his skin pale and dark circles under his eyes. Brian grabbed the rail on the side of the bed for support as he looked at the camera, "Nick," he croaked, flying into a horrendous coughing fit. Nick's chin was trembling, and tears welling up in his eyes as he watched his friend struggled to breathe. Finally Brian calmed a bit, "Nick.... if you don't ...give Kelah the mines ... before the .....the end of the week ....." Brian's eyes filled with tears as he struggled with the words, "they'll kill ....me."

Brian coughed, this time so hard he could no longer sit up. He fell back in the bed, wheezing as he tried to get enough air in his lungs. Nick blinked, a few tears escaping and falling down his cheeks. "*Take a good look at your friend. The only thing keeping him alive is the medicine and the oxygen. You have until noon on Friday to comply. If you refuse, we take that away. Your friend will die a slow agonizing death,*" a voice from off camera said. Nick watched as Brian stopped gasping for air, his eyes rolling back in his head, and passing out. "Oh God," Nick whispered, as the video faded.

Nick stared at the blank screen for a moment. He blinked the tears away and slowly turned around. Anthony and LaDonna were standing behind him, both with tears in their eyes and concern etched on their faces. Nick looked up at them, a determined expression on his face, "*Anthony, arrange a meeting*

*with Tunk. Keep it private. I don't want anyone but us knowing about it." "Nickolas, what are you doing?" LaDonna asked as Anthony left the room. Nick stood up, staring her straight in the eyes, "I'm getting Brian back."*

# Chapter 55

Nick moved to walk past his mother, but she grabbed his arm, staring at him, *"You can't do this Nick. If you give in, it opens the doors for others to do the same."* Nick sighed, looking down for a moment, before returning her stare, *"I know that. But if I don't do something, he's gonna die!"* LaDonna winced at Nick's outburst, glancing over and seeing some of the techs looking at them. She pulled him out of the room and down to her office, closing the door behind them. Nick sat down in the chair in front of her desk, as she walked over and stood in front of him. *"Nick, I understand your love for Brian. I care for him a great deal too. But, you cannot give in to their demands,"* she said. Nick started to protest, but she stopped him with a glare, *"When you were crowned, you promised to rule for the people, not for your own personal gain. Nick, if the mines being in Kelah's hands will hurt your people, you must let Brian go. You can't trade one life, for the lives of many, even if that person is a loved one."*

Nick stared at his mother in shock. He couldn't do it. He couldn't leave Brian to die like that. Tears made themselves known in his eyes, and he did nothing to hide them. *"I can't leave him mom. I can't,"* he sobbed. LaDonna bent down and pulled him into a hug, trying her best to comfort him, even though there was no comfort in this situation. Nick pulled back, trying to get control over his emotions. He cleared his throat and wiped his eyes. *"I promise that I will make everything right, once Brian is back and safe. Kelah won't keep the mines, I give my word on that. But I can't sit here and do nothing, knowing that because of me, he'll die,"* he said. LaDonna stepped back and looked at her son for a long moment. He was baring so much pressure, she wasn't sure how he was making it. Nick waited for her to say something. *"Your decision is made then? You are going to do this,"* she asked. He stood up and nodded, *"I have to, I don't have another choice. If Brian dies because of me, I'll never forgive myself, and I might as well die along with him."* The queen sighed, looking out the window towards the mountains, *"Alright,"* she said looking back at him, *"Tell me what you need me to do."*

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A.J. held Marie's hand as they walked through the garden. She didn't want to come, but there was no telling Alexander James McLean no. He'd pestered her until she gave in, thinking it better to just go for the walk instead of listening to his pleading and whining. The suns were setting and a few clouds were starting to roll in. *"Beautiful sunset isn't it?"* A.J. asked. Marie glanced up and nodded. They walked on a few more steps before A.J. stopped, facing her, *"Are you angry with me?"* *"No,"* she said, speaking English to him for the first time. This made him smile, feeling that she finally felt comfortable enough around him to do so. He took her hand in his, *"Please talk to me. Tell me how you're feeling. I'm a*

good listener, and maybe talking about it will help."

Marie looked down, shaking her head, "I can't Alex." A.J. squeezed her hand, leading her over to a bench and both sitting down. He looked at her, noticing for the first time that her tummy was a little poochy. He smiled, "Are you already showing?" Marie stared at him for a moment, confused, until he glanced at her stomach. She grinned, placing her hand protectively over it, "A little. Just over the last couple of days." "Wow, that's cool," he said, "It takes a while for humans to do that." Marie laughed, "Well you are kinda slow in everything." A.J. chuckled, "Compared to you guys, yeah we are."

Another round of silence fell over them as they watched the clouds roll by in the failing light. A.J. could see how much she was hurting, her eyes clouded with pain and sorrow. Only when she spoke of the baby, did the clouds seem to lift. He thought that maybe she was like Nick, and if given enough time would eventually tell him how she felt. A.J. had gotten pretty good over the years at waiting Nick out. Even though they weren't as close as he and Brian, Nick still confided in A.J. on occasion. Marie unconsciously rubbed her stomach as she watched the sky. "It looks like rain," she said quietly. He nodded, "Yeah it does." She looked over, waiting until he met her eyes. "I'm scared he's not coming back," she whispered, tears welling up in her eyes. A.J. wrapped a protective arm around her and pulled her close, "He is, and you know why?" She shook her head. "Because Nick won't let anything happen to him, and he has you and your baby. Brian would walk through hell to get back to you, that I know for sure," he said. "But what if....?" she started. "Shhh, no what if's. Brian's a fighter, always has been. I mean look how many times he's beaten death already. His heart surgery, the accident coming here. He'll beat it again," A.J. said confidently. "I hope so," Marie said. A.J. shook his head, smiling at her, "I know so."

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Brian slowly opened his eyes, making a quick check of the room to assure he was alone. When he found noone there, he lifted his head. His clothes were on a chair next to the window, his shoes underneath it in the floor. He pushed himself up to a sitting position and looked out the window. He could see the stables across the courtyard, and his heart soared when he glimpsed a few unicorns in the pen. He lowered himself back down and stared at the ceiling. He had to get out of here. He wasn't sure how or when, but he had to escape, and soon.

The door opened and one of the men came in a syringe in his hand. Brian watched him as he walked over and injected the light blue liquid into one of his IV lines. So that was how he was getting the Krystal.

The man looked at him as Brian started to cough again. *"Damn, I hope you make it to Friday,"* he muttered as he turned and left the room. Brian gasped for air, as the familiar feeling took over his body. He relaxed, letting the drug run its course. As much as he hated how dependant he was on the drug, it was his only saving grace at the moment. Relieving the pain when nothing else could, and relaxing him enough for him to sleep. He reached up to adjust the mask, noting how his arms felt like lead weights. If he was still that weak, he didn't know how he was gonna make it to the stables, only that he had to. He closed his eyes, letting the drug lull him to sleep, the last thing on his mind was getting home to Marie.

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Tunk walked through the darkness to the stables. It was the middle of the night, and he was heading to his secret meeting. Anthony had not told him who he was meeting, only that he was needed. Tunk suspected that it had something to do with the reason the king had bowed out of the talks, but he was still surprised to see Nick standing in the stables, whispering to a black unicorn. *"Your highness,"* he said, nodding as Nick looked over. *"Evening,"* Nick said, gesturing for Tunk to come further into the stables. *"I apologize for getting you out so late, but there is something important I need to discuss with you,"* Nick said, sitting down on a bale of hay. Tunk sat down as well, staring at the young king, *"You are still troubled."* Nick nodded, looking down at his hands for a moment. *"Tunk, how do you feel about Interstellar Distributions?"* he asked. *"Well, frankly, I don't like them,"* he answered, *"I know they've been involved in some shady business deals on my world. They came in and basically took over the shipping businesses, it wasn't pretty."*

Nick nodded, *"What if I told you that Kelah works for them?"* Tunk's mouth dropped open in shock, *"What?"* *"He works for them, and the reason he wants the mines so badly is that Interstellar needs a base in that part of the galaxy,"* Nick said. *"Then Kelah must be dismissed from the negotiations,"* Tunk said, trying to control his anger. Nick slowly shook his head, *"He can't."* *"Why not?"* Tunk asked. Nick leaned over and rested his elbows on his knees, holding his head with his hands, *"Because they kidnapped Brian and are threatening to kill him if Kelah doesn't get what he wants."* Tunk stared at Nick, disbelief and shock written all over his face, *"No."* Nick nodded, looking back up, *"I need your help to get him back."*

*"What is it you need?"* Tunk asked. *"I need you to relinquish your claim on the mines,"* Nick announced. Tunk sighed and rubbed his face with his hands, *"Your highness, I don't think I can do that."* *"It wouldn't be forever, just until we get Brian back. Then I promise to help you get the mines,"* Nick said, looking at him expectantly. Tunk got up and walked over to one of the stalls, petting the unicorn that occupied it,

thinking. *"You know fighting them will be difficult, they have supporters all over the galaxy,"* he said. *"I know,"* Nick answered, the vision of the painting on the cave wall flashing into his head. Tunk turned around and looked at him, *"Are you prepared for that? A possible war?"* *"I am,"* Nick said. Tunk walked back over sitting down, considering Nick for a moment, *"You are much too young to have this burden put upon you. A possible war, or to lose a friend? What does your council say about this?"* *"They don't know. If we do this, it stays between us. I would rather bare the retaliation, than to put anyone else in danger,"* Nick said. *"But aren't you doing that? If this goes to war, your soldiers, your people would be in danger,"* Tunk suggested.

Nick looked away, tears welling up in his eyes. He fought for control of his emotions, not wanting the other man to see him upset. After a moment he had composed himself, and looked back over, *"I'm doing the only thing I can. It may not go to war, but I can't let Brian die. Not if I can stop it."* Tunk looked down, pulling a piece of straw from the bale he was sitting on and rolling it between his fingers. *"I'm sorry to put such a decision on you. I know you have backers that will question what you do, but believe me I wouldn't ask if I could've avoided it,"* Nick said. Tunk looked up, dropping the straw to the ground, *"When must you decide?"* *"They want an answer by Friday,"* Nick informed him. *"Two days,"* Tunk muttered, biting his lower lip. Nick watched as the man considered his decision. He was afraid he would say no. If he did, Nick didn't have a back up plan, he'd lose Brian forever. *"Can I give you my decision in the morning?"* he asked, pulling Nick from his thoughts. *"Y-yes, that would be fine,"* Nick said, as they got up. Tunk nodded and left the stables. Nick turned to Thomas and stroked his neck, *"Well boy, at least he didn't say no.....yet."*

# Chapter 56

*Wash away the thoughts inside*

*That keep my mind away from you*

*No more love and no more pride*

*And thoughts are all I have to do*

*Remember when it rained*

*I felt the ground and looked up high and called your name*

*Remember when it rained*

*In the darkness I remain*

*"Brian Thomas," Marie said laughing. Brian grinned, looking into her crystal blue eyes. They were walking in the garden, hand in hand. The day was clear and warm. Brian stopped walking, pulling her to him. Marie glanced around, "What are you doing?" "This," he whispered, leaning in and kissing her.....*

*"The rain was pouring down as Brian waited. He was on his knees in front of Marie, he'd just asked her to marry him. His heart soared when she picked up the cup and drank it. He smiled, taking her hand and placing the ring on her finger, "I love you." He watched as Marie's eyes grew wide and tears brimmed them, "How did you...?" "I saw you look at it. I knew you liked it, so I left my bag there on purpose so I could go back and get it for you," he said. Marie stood up, pulling him with her, she pulled him into a hug, murmuring I love you over and over again. He smiled at her with tears in his eyes as she pulled back, uttering the formal answer to his question. "Brian, I will walk with you for the rest of my life. I promise to complete you as you complete me. I have taken your cup, and accept your offer. I love you, as you love me and will for the rest of my days," she said. He pulled her in, taking her lips with his, the rain pouring down.....*

*He sat down on the bed looking at Marie, "Is everything OK?" She nodded but there were tears in her eyes. That scared him. "You're crying, what's wrong?" he asked, glancing over at the doctor. The man*

*only smiled at him. "Baby, what's going on?" he asked, looking back at Marie. "I'm fine," she said. "But you passed out.....something's wrong," he said, fear etching its way up to the surface. He watched as she shook her head, "Nothing's wrong. The reason I passed out is ...um that I'm pregnant." It took a moment for the words to sink in, but when they did, his emotions overwhelmed him. He was so happy!.....*

*Brian stood in the garden, hearing the thunder come closer. His heart was in his throat as he waited for his bride to walk down the aisle. Finally the time had come, and Marie and her father walked toward him. He couldn't hide the joy he felt, as he smiled at her. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He listened as the priest went through the ceremony. His voice shook as he said his vows, and his hands as he placed the ring on her finger. The rain started to come down as he leaned in to kiss his wife .....*

A loud crash of thunder startled Brian from his dreams. He jerked awake, blinking his eyes rapidly. Then it finally hit him that he'd been dreaming. Darkness surrounded his soul and tears brimmed his eyes. He lifted his hand to his face, wiping away the tears. Another clap of thunder startled him, and he raised up, looking out the window. Through the darkness he could see the rain was pouring down. He sat up, the memories flooding his mind. He had to get back to Marie, he missed her so much. Silently he wept, rocking back and forth, listening to the rain outside.

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Tunk silently walked into the throne room. He hadn't slept all night, thinking about the proposal the king had made. His heart went out to the young man, knowing it must have taken a lot for him to come and ask him what he did. He sat down in his chair, waiting for the day's session to begin. A clap of thunder could be heard from outside. Tunk sighed, wanting to get this over with. He knew he would take heat for what he was about to do, but he felt compelled to do so. Something in the king's eyes haunted him, and his decision could only be the right one. He hadn't talked with the king this morning, thinking it best not to. The less people that saw them together, the better for both their sakes.

Kelah entered the room, followed by Anthony and the council. They all took their seats. Anthony cleared his throat, *"I call today's session into order. Now when we left yesterday, we were discussing ....."* "Excuse me my lord," Tunk said, *"But I have something to say before we get started."* Anthony nodded, *"Alright Ambassador James, go ahead."* Tunk looked down at his papers for a moment, taking a deep breath. He then looked up, talking directly to Anthony, *"I wish to relinquish my claim on*

*the mines." Anthony's mouth dropped open before he could get a grip on his composure, "Are you certain?" "Yes my lord. I've given this much consideration and I believe that my people could do better elsewhere. The time it is taking for these discussions, we could be looking for another site. I also believe that the compromise reached between us, would not serve my people well, so I relinquish Kholath's claim on this land," Tunk said. The council whispered back and forth between each other at this unexpected event. Anthony was stunned, wondering what Nick said to the man to get this kind of response. "Well, if that is the case, we will draw up the papers giving 100% of the mines to the people of Jeptim," Anthony said, "The ceremony will be Saturday night, followed by the traditional banquet. Gentlemen, you are dismissed." Tunk got up and left the room quickly, not wanting to stay around. He had done his duty, now it was up to the king to keep his end of the bargain.*

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*Tears of hope run down my skin*

*Tears for you that will not dry*

*They magnify the one within*

*And let the outside slowly die*

Marie stood in front of her balcony doors, watching the rain pour down. She felt uneasy, a nervousness in her gut that she couldn't shake. She took a deep breath, touching the glass with her hand, her mind taking her back to her most treasured memories of Brian. The first time they kissed, the first time they made love. His smile, and the way it lit up his eyes. She closed her eyes, letting the tears fall as it played in her head like a movie. She didn't want to watch it, it hurt too much, but her mind wouldn't stop. Scenes of them walking in the garden, talking, laughing. Brian on his knees in the rain, asking her to be his wife. The look on his face when she told him they were pregnant, and the joy on his face at their wedding. It was all too much. She felt as if she would explode right then and there. Over and over the memories played, torturing her mercilessly.

A.J. and Howie came into the room. "Morning princess," A.J. said, "We got breakfast here." Marie didn't turn around, she couldn't. All she could do was stand there and cry. Howie and A.J. glanced at one another. A.J. walked over and touched her shoulder, "Aww Marie, come here." She turned and fell into his arms sobbing. Howie was there, rubbing her back as A.J. softly talked to her, trying to calm her down. "Shhh honey, it's gonna be alright," he cooed. She shook her head, "It won't stop." "What?" he asked. "The memories," she cried, "I see him everywhere! Please make it stop!" she begged, clinging to

him for dear life. A.J. stroked her hair, starting to lead her over to the bed, "Come on, lets sit down." He felt her tense in his arms, and looked down. Pain etched her face, and fear sprang up in her eyes. "What's wrong?" Howie asked, seeing it also. "Pain," she managed, grabbing her stomach as another wave hit her, "Ow!" A.J. and Howie glanced at each other, both on the verge of panic. "Honey, is it the baby?" Howie asked. Marie grimaced, leaning forward, her arms around her stomach, "I-I think s-s-so," she panted, tears streaming down her face. A.J. bent down and picked her up, heading to the door, "Get the doors D!" he yelled, when Howie wasn't right with them. Howie ran ahead opening doors. Marie leaned on A.J.'s shoulder as he carried her down the hall, "I can't I-lose it. It's all I-I have I-left of Brian," she cried. "You won't baby," A.J. said, as he ran down the hall.

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The lightening blinded him as a crashing thunderous sound filled the room. Brian blinked, wiping away his tears. He took a deep breath, and instantly regretted it, coughing profusely. Slowly he gained his composure again, able to breathe in short shallow breaths. The storm outside was raging, but it was nothing compared to his emotions. He didn't know why, but he felt like he had to leave. He couldn't get Marie off his mind, and he had an uneasy feeling. He glanced over at his clothes again, contemplating if he could make it.

Suddenly the lights went out as another rumbling of thunder hit. This was it, probably the only opportunity he would have. Brian quickly pulled the IV's out of his arms and flung off the oxygen mask. He slid down to the floor, holding onto the bed for support. His legs were weak and he could barely hobble over to the chair. His eyes were adjusting to the darkness in the room as he pulled on his jeans and slipped his feet into his shoes. He winced as he pushed the foot of his injured leg into the shoe. He grabbed his shirt, slipping it on, then turned towards the window. Holding the wall he staggered over, opening it up and pushing out the screen. Mustering all his strength, he pulled himself through the opening, dropping several feet to the ground below.

He lay there for a moment, trying to get his bearings. His muscles were already shaking with fatigue as he struggled to stand up. Leaning against the stone wall, he glanced from side to side, making sure he was the only one out in the rain. When he was satisfied that he was, he breathed a silent prayer for strength, then started toward the stables. Gritting his teeth as the pain flared up in his leg, he pressed on. The stables weren't but maybe a hundred yards from the building, but it seemed like a hundred miles to Brian. He stopped once, when his legs felt as if they would give out on him. With a shaky hand he wiped the rain from his face, and continued on.

Finally making it to the stables, he leaned against the building, panting for air. He swallowed hard, forcing himself not to cough. He knew if he did, someone might hear him. Using the building for support, he made his way inside. Several unicorns were in their stalls, all seemed nervous. Brian passed a few stalls, the unicorns in them backing as far away from him as they could. "Please," Brian begged, reaching out to one. The unicorn shook its head, turning its back to him. Brian sighed, moving on to the next stall. He was met with a solid white unicorn. The creature had golden hooves and a golden horn. But its eyes were what struck Brian the most, they were the palest blue he'd ever seen. He stared at the creature, captivated. Those eyes seemed to hold a knowledge in them, an understanding almost. Brian shivered, grabbing onto the stall as his legs finally gave out. He held himself up, leaning on the half door, "Please help me." The unicorn slowly walked over and nuzzled his face, purring. Brian smiled at the friendly gesture. He got his feet back under him and slowly transferred his weight back to them. The unicorn watched him intently. "I have to get to Cystaleia, do you know where that is?" he asked. The unicorn nodded its head. "Oh thank God!" Brian breathed, "Will you take me?" Again the unicorn nodded.

Relief washed over him as he flipped the latch on the stall, opening the door. The unicorn walked out, looking at Brian curiously. Its eyes fell on the tattered leg of his jeans, then it looked at him as if it knew he was hurt. Brian looked around for some tack and a saddle, but didn't get very far as he flew into a coughing fit. He sank to his knees, holding his chest as he coughed. The unicorn walked to him, pushing his head with its nose, all the while purring. Brian reached up and touched the creature's face as he struggled to get enough air to calm his breathing. After a moment he had finally calmed down, and tried to stand back up. He didn't make it, slinking back down to the floor as his muscles gave out. He sat there, leaning against a stall, spent. He closed his eyes, despair filling his soul at the realization that he was stuck there. He didn't have enough strength to get up, let alone saddle the unicorn. He knew at any minute they would discover he was missing, and not long after they would find him here. As much as he didn't want them, tears streamed down his cheeks, as the exhaustion set in.

The unicorn watched him for a moment, then walked over and nudged him, letting out a quiet whine. "I can't," Brian cried, looking at him. The unicorn nudged him again. This time the only reply he got was Brian sinking to the floor, laying on his side, shivering. The creature looked up when it heard voices. Men were shouting to each other and lights could be seen sweeping across the courtyard. "Shit," Brian mumbled, hearing them too. As the men drew closer, the unicorn knew it had to do something to help this hurting soul in front of him. He quickly lay down next to Brian. Brian lifted his head as the unicorn lay down next to him. With the last of his strength, Brian scooted closer to it and grabbed a fist full of mane as he swung his leg over the creature's body. Brian held on as it rolled upright and stood up. "Thank you," he whispered as he adjusted his weight on the unicorn's back and leaned forward onto its neck. With both hands he grabbed its long mane and wrapped it around his wrists, tying himself to the creature so he wouldn't fall off if he passed out, which he was feeling like doing. The men's voices were getting closer as the unicorn stepped out of the back of the building, heading into the woods at full

speed.

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"What the fuck are they doing in there?" A.J. asked, for the millionth time. Kevin and Howie just shrugged their shoulders as another scream could be heard from Marie. Nick ran down the hall, seeing the three standing outside the medical ward. "What's going on?" he asked, panting to catch his breath. "Marie started having pains," Howie answered, wincing as another scream filled the air. Nick looked at them in shock, "Its way too soon." "No shit," A.J. said, pacing back and forth. "Does Ana know?" Nick asked. Kevin nodded, "She's with her. The docs kicked us out."

The four hovered around the door, moving as nurses ran back and forth from the room. With each passing second, they became more and more worried. The amount of equipment being hauled into the room gave them chills. After a while Marie's screaming had stopped, this beyond anything else worried the men. "God I can't stand this," A.J. said, trying to peer into the closed shades on the window, "Why won't someone tell us what's going on?" Kevin put a hand on his shoulder, "They will when they have things under control." Nick leaned against the wall, doing his best not to cry. He felt like this was his fault. That Marie was so upset about Brian, that this happened. Howie walked over and looked at him, "Hey." Nick sniffed, blinking away his tears, "Hey." Howie stared at him for a moment, "You aren't blaming yourself for this are you?" Nick shrugged. "Nick, none of this is your fault. No one's blaming you for Brian being taken, and whatever is wrong with Marie, that's not your fault either," Howie said. Nick shook his head, "It is D. I was selfish to keep you guys here. If I'd sent you back, none of this would've happened." Howie sighed, "Yeah, I guess not. But you know what else wouldn't have happened? Brian wouldn't have met the love of his life. He wouldn't be married, and happier than I've ever seen him. Sure you can say this wouldn't have happened, but if you had sent us back, they would've just taken someone else close to you, like your mom, or Ana."

Nick rested his head in his hands, knowing what Howie said was right. Even if the guys hadn't been here, they would've found someone else to carry out their plans. He looked up when a nurse left the room, only to come back a few minutes later with clean linens. Nick glanced at Kevin, seeing the same worried expression in the older man's eyes. Several minutes passed, the tension of not knowing what was going on eating at them all. A.J. was cussing up a storm, pacing back and forth. Pretty soon they knew he would explode and go tarring into the room demanding to know what the 'his choice of expletive' was going on. Just as he was about to do just that, the door opened and Ana came out. All four gathered around her, seeing the tears in her eyes. "What happened?" Kevin asked. Ana bit her lip as a few tears slid down her cheeks, "She....she um," taking a deep breath she finished, "She lost the baby."

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Remember when it rained

I felt the ground and looked up high and called your name

Remember when it rained

In the water I remain

Running down.....

Brian held on as best he could, leaning on the unicorn as it flew through the woods. He was shivering non stop, and each breath was a struggle. He closed his eyes, resting his head on the creature. The moment his eyes shut, Marie filled his vision. He had to get back to her, had to let her know he was alright, even if he wasn't. He cringed as another wave of pain hit his stomach and filled his senses with the taste of Krystal. Moaning he buried his face in the unicorns mane, shielding it from the relentless rain, "Please God, help me," he murmured. As he breathed in, his lungs clenched and he started coughing. He struggled, gasping for air as his vision blurred. The last thing he saw before the darkness took him was a vision of Marie, begging him to come home.

## Chapter 57

The white unicorn made its way through the trees. It was tired, having run as fast as it could for most of the day. It was also worried. The poor soul on its back hadn't moved in quite a long time, and the unicorn could sense its heart beat and breathing. Neither were what it remembered as normal. Something about this creature on its back tugged at its heart. There was a desperation in his eyes, a longing the unicorn couldn't explain. The rain had finally stopped, making the path easier. Picking up its pace a little, the unicorn trotted out of the trees into a clearing. He remembered this place from when he was little. The unicorn trotted across the clearing to the house on the other side. Everything seemed the same, down to the tattered barn behind the house. Slowly walking to the door, the unicorn hoped the same people still lived here.

Upon reaching the door, the creature turned around and kicked it with its back leg. He looked back, waiting for someone to come out. Another moment passed, and the unicorn kicked the door again, this time harder. Hearing someone coming, he turned to face the door. He watched as the door flew open, a young man coming out. *"Who is banging on my....?"* he said, stopping mid-sentence seeing the unicorn standing there. The man cautiously walked forward, not knowing if this was some kind of trick, or the man riding the unicorn was really in need of some help. The man looked up at Brian, *"Hey, you alright?"* Getting no answer, he reached up and shook him, noting how hot his skin felt, *"You awake?"* The unicorn turned its head and let out a pitiful whine. *"Aubrey, come help me!"* the man called, trying to untangle the unicorn's mane from Brian's wrists. A young woman came out of the house, *"What is ..... oh my,"* she said. *"Help me get him untangled,"* the man said, finally freeing the hand he was working on. Aubrey ran to the other side, unwrapping Brian's hand. She gasped when she uncovered his mark, *"Cameron, come look at this!"* The man walked over, taking Brian's limp hand and looking at his mark, *"Well, bless my lucky stars. This is the king's friend, the blended one."* Aubrey looked at him, *"What's he doing way out here?"* *"I don't know, but let's get him in. He's not sounding to good,"* Cameron replied, reaching up and pulling Brian down off the unicorn. He carried him into the house and deposited him on the bed.

*"We need to get him out of those wet clothes,"* Aubrey said. Cameron nodded, helping her disrobe Brian and get him settled. *"He's burning up with fever,"* he noted, as he unwrapped the dressing from Brian's injured leg, *"Oh shit!"* Aubrey looked down, grimacing at the wound. Cameron got up heading to the door, *"I'm going down to the clinic to get a few things. Try to keep him warm."* Aubrey nodded, watching her husband head out the door. As the door shut she looked down, seeing how matted Brian's hair was, and his unshaven face. *"Let's get you cleaned up, shall we?"* she said, going to get the supplies she needed.

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A.J. sat in the hospital room watching Marie sleep. He'd been there all day. He knew the doctors had sedated her, but still he stayed, just in case she woke up. He didn't want her to be alone, and he felt somewhat guilty. He'd promised her that nothing would happen to the baby, and it had. He knew he didn't have any control over the situation, but he still felt like he'd broken his promise. He sighed, resting his head in his hands. This whole situation was just too much to take. After hearing the news, all the boys had cried. Then Nick took off in a hurry, not telling anyone where he was going. Kevin had taken Ana out to the garden to get some air, and Howie had gone to get A.J. something to eat. He wasn't about to eat what the medical ward was serving, knowing that all hospital food, whether you're on Earth or Celeste tasted the same, tasteless.

He raised up, staring out the windows. The suns were making their descent. It had rained for most of the day, the clouds only clearing an hour ago. As twilight fell, he wondered where his brother was. Wondered what Brian was having to endure, if he was still alive. He hated to admit it, but he was losing hope of ever seeing him again. But he would never let Marie see that. For her he would hang onto the last shred of hope there was, just to spare her the pain of the alternative. He looked over at her sleeping form. Even in heavy sedation, her face still looked pained. A.J. shook his head, trying to make the tears that welled up dissolve. He had gotten close to Marie since Brian's disappearance. They had gotten to know each other better, and had become good friends. It pained A.J. to see his friend like this, haunted even in her sleep. He looked up as Howie came in carrying a tray. "I grabbed this from the kitchen," he said, setting it down. A.J. walked over and picked at the fruit. "She still out," Howie said. "Yup," A.J. answered. "You wanna take a break? I can stay," Howie offered. "Naw man, I feel like I need to be here when she wakes up," he said. Howie nodded, sitting down and scanning through the vid for something to occupy his mind.

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Nick sat in the cave, staring at the picture on the wall. He'd been there for hours, but he couldn't make himself leave. He felt awful. Knowing he was needed back at the palace, but not having the heart to go. He knew Marie would be angry with him. How could she not? It was his fault Brian was taken, and because of the stress that put on her, she lost their baby. If Marie never spoke to him again, he'd completely understand. He didn't feel much like talking to himself either.

He stared at his image on the wall, chills running down his back. He knew it was the future he was seeing. The only problem was, it didn't portray how it ended. There were no paintings of a victorious king. Nor were there images of a defeated one either. He sighed, trying to push his anger away. None of this should be happening. He knew being king wasn't all a bed of roses, but no man should have to endure what he was. The stress was weighting him down, clamping his soul and smothering him. Realizing he was getting nowhere sitting here feeling sorry for himself and his situation, he got up, leaving the cave in a hurry. He needed to vent, and he knew just where to go.

He ran through the garden and quickly entered the palace. Storming through the halls, his anger building. He passed several guards and servants, saying nothing to them. Thankfully they were all smart enough not to address him. The look on his face said it all. The king was royally pissed! He made it to his destination, ordering a guard to open the cell. Once the door was open he rushed in, glaring at Devon. Devon stood up, realizing something had happened by the look on Nick's face. *"Do you want to know what your silence has done?"* Nick growled. Devon stared at him, afraid to answer. He'd never seen Nick this angry before, and didn't know what to expect from the younger man. *"I'll tell you! Your beloved sister lost her child!"* Nick yelled. *"What?!"* Devon said, in shock. *"She lost the baby. You could've prevented this! If you'd just told us who your superiors were, we might have found Brian by now!"* Nick seethed. Devon looked down at the floor, tears stinging his eyes, *"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,"* he uttered. Nick grabbed him by the shirt and shoved him into the wall, *"Sorry doesn't cut it you asshole! Now who are they?!"* Devon cringed with each word, still looking down, *"I-I can't, you don't understand."*

Nick let go, glaring at him, *"What? Tell me what I don't understand, other than you're too worried about your sorry ass to do anything to help your sister!"* Devon shook his head, *"I'm doing this to protect her!"* Nick sighed, still glaring at him, *"You're what?"* *"I'm staying quiet to protect her. These people are very powerful, if I ...if I tell you who they are, they'll hurt Marie and my dad,"* Devon cried, letting the tears he was holding back fall. Nick stepped back, considering him for a moment, *"So all this time you really did care about your family?"* *"Yes, I um I never thought I needed them, but lately we've gotten close again. I can't tell you what you want, they wouldn't be safe,"* he answered. *"I would protect them,"* Nick offered. Devon shook his head, *"Not even you could keep them safe."*

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Aubrey added another log to the fire. She had washed Brian from head to toe, even shaving his face. He looked much better, but his breathing was worrying her. He wheezed with every forced breath, and she silently prayed for her husband to hurry back. She sat down, picking up her knitting project, looking around the old house. Her husband had inherited the home from his father, who during his lifetime was

the local doctor. Cameron had followed in his father's footsteps, taking over the practice when he passed on. Aubrey had grown up in the next village, and the two had recently been married. She glanced over when Brian coughed in his sleep. Getting up she walked over and sat on the edge of the bed, gently stroking his face as he wheezed. She knew Brian had recently gotten married too, and wondered how he'd gotten so far away from the palace.

Just then Cameron walked through the door, his arms full of supplies from his clinic. Aubrey got up and helped her husband. Cameron immediately started an IV and rolled the portable oxygen tank over, setting it up and placing the mask over Brian's face. *"What do you think is wrong with him?"* Aubrey asked. *"I'm sure that's a bite from a war dog, which means he's fighting the poison,"* he answered. Brian coughed again, making them both wince at the sound. Cameron looked at his wife, *"Right now the poison's winning."*

*"Did you try to contact the palace?"* she asked after Cameron finished working on Brian. *"I tried, but I think the storm knocked out the satellites. I'll try again in the morning,"* he answered. *"Did the unicorn tell you what happened?"* she asked, going into the kitchen to prepare supper. *"He told me as much as he could. That unicorn knew dad, that's why he stopped here for help,"* Cameron mused. Aubrey smiled, *"Well, your father was well known in these parts."* Cameron laughed, *"I suppose so."*

Brian's moan caught both their attentions. Cameron walked over as Brian began coughing. He noticed how badly Brian was trembling, and the tiny beads of sweat on his forehead. *"Honey, can you get another blanket?"* he said, sitting down next to Brian, trying to calm him. Brian's eyes fluttered open, then closed again. Aubrey spread the blanket out over him as his eyes opened. Cameron leaned into his line of vision, *"Hey there, how are you feeling?"* Brian stared at him for a moment, looking confused. He opened his mouth to say something, but coughed instead. *"Easy,"* Cameron said, *"You're safe now."* Brian nodded, then closed his eyes. Aubrey glanced at her husband as Brian drifted back into unconsciousness, *"He's not doing well is he?"* Cameron shook his head, *"No, he's not."*

## Chapter 58

A.J. woke up, blinking his eyes. He was hunched over in a very uncomfortable chair in Marie's hospital room. He lifted his arms over his head and stretched, yawning at the same time. He then stood up, needing to stretch his legs. That's when he noticed Marie staring at him. He sat down on the side of the bed and smiled at her, "Hey, how long you been awake?" She shrugged, looking down at the blanket. A.J. bit his lip, knowing her heart was broken. "Honey, how are you feeling?" he asked. Marie shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes, "Our baby's gone," she whispered. A.J. took her hand in his, "I know sweetie. I'm so sorry."

Marie wiped her tears with the back of her hand, trying to stay strong, "I-I don't understand what happened. Everything was fine." A.J. sighed, "I know. I guess things like this just happen sometimes, and no matter what you would've done, it wouldn't have changed anything." She nodded, taking a deep breath to calm her emotions. A.J. squeezed her hand, "Are you OK? I mean, are you in pain or anything?" She half smiled, "I'm OK, just um sore and ....." she trailed off, looking back down at the blanket. "And what?" he asked. "Sad ...disappointed .. I don't know how to describe it," she said softly, "What am I gonna tell Brian? He was so happy when he found out ..... and now....." The tears were back in her eyes and A.J. pulled her into a hug, "Shhh, honey, it'll be alright. I'm sure Brian will be just as happy to know that you're Ok." Marie shook her head, silently weeping against his shirt, "It was a little girl....Bri wanted a little girl....." A.J. fought to hold back his own tears, gently stroking her back, "I know honey. Shhh it's gonna be Ok....."

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Cameron stared at his patient, trying to remember what his name was. Brad, Brent ...something like that. He'd been up most of the night with him, trying to keep his fever down and get enough fluids and medicine in him to turn the tide in his favor. So far he'd been rewarded, as Brian's fever had gone down some, and he wasn't coughing as much. Cameron rubbed his face, fighting the sleep that so desperately wanted to come. He looked up as Brian started mumbling in his sleep. He'd been doing it all night, but it was in a language that Cameron didn't understand. The only word he did understand was Marie. He knew this was his wife's name, and he wondered just what had happened to the man in front of him.

"*You stay up all night?*" Aubrey asked, wrapping her arms around her husband. Cameron nodded, "*Most of it. He's had a rough time.*" "*Is he getting any better?*" she asked, looking over. "*Maybe, his*

*fevers gone down a little. His breathing still worries me though,"* he answered. Aubrey kissed her husband on the cheek, *"Well I'm sure with your help, he'll be good as new in no time."* Cameron smiled as Aubrey kissed him again, then heading into the kitchen to make breakfast.

Cameron checked on Brian once more before going into the kitchen to help his wife. They ate in silence, both keeping an ear trained on the room their patient was in. Aubrey stood up to clear the table when a scream pierced the house, followed by fitful coughing. She was so startled she dropped the plates back on the table, and followed her husband into the room. *"Easy,"* Cameron said, sitting on the bed next to Brian, *"Slow short breaths."* Brian followed his advice, and in a few minutes had calmed down. He looked around the room, not knowing where he was, or who these people were. He licked his parched lips, *"Where ..am...I?"* *"Bowman's Pass,"* Cameron answered. Brian looked at him confused. *"We're about fifty miles east of White Cap, right on the boarder between Mardica and Novaduel,"* he explained. Brian nodded, *"How far to .....Cystaleia?"* *"It's a hard days ride from here through the mountains,"* Cameron said.

Brian sat up, swaying as a round of dizziness swept over him. *"Whoa there,"* Cameron said, reaching out and steadying him, gently forcing him back in the bed, *"You aren't up to moving around just yet."* Brian grabbed his stomach as the craving hit. He grimaced, trying to will the taste from his mouth. Cameron watched him with concern, *"Are you in pain?"* Brian shook his head, *"No ... I uh I'm ... having withdrawals."* Cameron shot his wife a glance. Brian relaxed as the craving left, feeling embarrassed. He looked down, not wanting to see their faces, *"I was ... kidnapped. They .... um forced me to ..... take Krystal."* Aubrey put her hand to her mouth in shock. *"How much were they giving you?"* Cameron asked, even more concerned. Brian shook his head, *"I-I don't know. They .... gave it to me in the IV's."* *"How bad is the craving?"* he asked. Brian reached up with a trembling hand to wipe his face, *"It's bad,"* he answered.

*"Alright, I'll head into the village and see what I can get,"* Cameron said, starting to stand up. Brian grabbed his arm, *"Don't. I ...have to get to Cystaleia."* Cameron looked at him for a moment, *"Why are you in such a hurry?"* Brian opened his mouth to answer, but flew into a coughing fit. Cameron sat back down, laying a hand on Brian to help steady him as he coughed. Aubrey left the room, coming back with a glass of water. Cameron took it from her and helped Brian drink. *"I have to stop them,"* Brian said, after he regained his composure. *"Stop who?"* Aubrey asked. *"Nick ...I have to stop him from .... giving the mines to Jeptim,"* Brian answered. *"They already settled that,"* Aubrey said, *"It was on the vid before the storm knocked it out. They're having the signing ceremony tomorrow night."*

Brian sat up again, trying to get out of bed, *"I have to go."* Cameron grabbed him by the shoulders and

forced him back down, "You are in no shape to be traveling." "But ... you don't understand," Brian begged, not having the strength to force his way back up. Another craving hit him and he grabbed his stomach, moaning in pain. Cameron stood up again, "I'm heading into the village. Promise me you'll stay here until I get back." "I have ...to go," Brian said. Cameron looked at his wife for a moment, then back to Brian. "I'll help you get to Cystaleia, but I've got to get you some Krystal first," he said. Brian shook his head, "I can manage .. without it." "No you can't. You can't just stop taking Krystal, it'll kill you. You have to be weaned off it. Just stay here until I get back," Cameron said, heading to the door, his wife following him. He opened the door, turning to his wife, "I'll be back as soon as I can. Don't let him leave, and keep the doors locked. Whoever took him may still be looking for him." Aubrey nodded, locking the door after him.

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Nick paced the control room, glancing at the techs every so often. Ana watched him. "Nick, why don't you come down for breakfast?" she suggested. He looked up at her, "They should've called by now. They know the mines are theirs, they should've called and arranged a drop off or something." Ana moved closer to him, "They'll call. But you staying here isn't going to make that happen any faster." He sighed, bringing his hands up to his face and rubbing it. "I'm scared Ana, what if something happened?" he said through his hands.

She sighed, looking down. She didn't have an answer for that. "They'll call," she said, "But in the mean time, you need to eat." "Alright," he finally agreed, "If anything comes through, send for me immediately," he told the techs. They all nodded, as he turned and left the room. Ana walked next to him in silence. She didn't want to admit it, but she had the same fear as Nick. The kidnapers should have called already, and she feared what caused them not to. She felt Nick step closer to her, and smiled when he slipped his hand into hers. She looked up, seeing an uncertainty in his eyes. She squeezed his hand, silently letting him know she was there for him. He nodded slightly as they reached the dining room. Reluctantly, they both dropped their hands as they entered the room.

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"Ahhhhhhhh!!" Brian screamed, as Aubrey tried her best to ease him. "Shhh, I know," she said, gently rubbing his back, "Cameron will be back soon." "It hurts," Brian panted, clutching his stomach, his eyes tightly shut, tears streaming from them. Aubrey glanced toward the door, wishing for the hundredth time that her husband would hurry up. Brian shivered, trying to pull the blankets up around his neck.

Aubrey helped him, then took a damp cloth and wiped his forehead and face. *"Thank you,"* Brian said, desperately trying to force the taste out of his mouth. Aubrey seemed to sense this, and offered him some more water. She helped him drink, then sat the glass back on the bed stand.

She heard the door unlock and got up, to help her husband. A moment later Cameron came into the room, a syringe in his hand. Brian had to force himself not to grab it out of the mans hand. Cameron injected the liquid into Brian's IV, then sat down next to him. *"I tried to contact the palace, but the grid is down. I'm not sure when it'll be back up,"* he told him. Brian nodded, feeling the drug as it eased him. *"I need to leave,"* he said, trying to sit up, only to fall back again. *"We will, but you need to rest a little more,"* Cameron said. Brian started to protest but Cameron stopped him, *"You have time. You need to rest now, or you'll never make the trip."* Brian stared at him for a moment, wondering if he could be trusted. But that soon flew out the window. Cameron could have turned him in anytime he wanted, but he hadn't. He'd stayed up with him all night, keeping an eye on him. If he couldn't be trusted, who could? *"Alright,"* Brian agreed, *"But not too long."* Cameron smiled at him, *"We'll leave in a few hours, try and get some sleep."* Brian nodded, closing his eyes and swiftly falling into slumber.

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Ana peeked around a tree, seeing Nick disappear down the trail. She crept down the path, not wanting to get to close. Nick would sense her if she did. For days Nick had been disappearing in the garden, only to return hours later. No one knew where he went, or what he was doing. Today was no different, and Ana decided to follow him. She was worried about him, about the stress he was under, and how down he seemed now. She had to make sure he was alright. She topped a small hill, ducking behind a tree when she saw Nick standing in the middle of the path ahead. She watched as he seemed to be looking for something. He took a few more steps forward, then turned off the path and ventured through the trees.

Ana stepped out, slowly making her way to the spot where Nick left the trail. She looked down, seeing two rocks, one stacked on top of the other. She smiled at the obvious marker, stepping over it and making her way through the trees. She lost sight of Nick, and wondered if she hadn't just gotten herself lost, when she stepped out of the trees, facing a wall of rock. She glanced to the side, just in time to see Nick duck into an outcropping of rocks. Slowly she made her way to the rocks, then peered inside. She couldn't see him anywhere, so she ducked in.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim light, but when they did, her mouth dropped open.

How could she live here for as long as she had and not know this was here? Slowly she walked through the massive room, taking it all in. The far wall caught her attention and she walked over, staring at the painting. She felt chills as she looked at Nick's image. A loud rumbling from the back of the cave pulled her attention from the painting. She turned, making her way along the wall to where the noise came from. She stopped, watching as Nick sat down on the bed and heaved a large sigh. He had a sword in his hand, and he was turning it this way and that, looking at the blade. She took another step, trying to get a better look.

"You can come in ya know," he said, not looking up. Ana winced at being caught. Stepping from her spot, she walked into the kings chambers and sat down next to him. "I'm sorry, I didn't want to disturb you. I was just worried," she said. He glanced at her and smiled, "It's alright. I was gonna show you this place anyway." Ana looked at the sword, "What are you doing?" "I'm trying to figure out what this says. I traced it, but I must've done it wrong because it doesn't translate right," he said, fingering the engraving. "What language is that?" she asked. "Aklazhian," he answered. Ana thought for a moment, trying to place it, "What's it doing here?" "That's what I'm trying to find out. It has something to do with the painting on the wall, and all the weapons in here. Like they were planning on world war three or something," Nick said, laying the sword down next to the bed. "But this stuff is ancient," she mused. "Yeah, it is," he said, looking around, "It all still works though."

The two sat in silence for a while. Nick took a deep breath, "Ana, do you know exactly what the prophecy says?" "Not word for word, no," she answered, "It's centuries old ... kinda like this stuff," she said looking around. He nodded, "Yeah, I was thinking that maybe this is where it came from. I need to know exactly what it says, cause I have a feeling it's a lot more than I've been told." Ana studied his face, seeing how exhausted he looked, "You didn't sleep did you?" He shook his head, "I've got too much going on in my head to sleep." Ana reached over and took his hand in hers, "I'll do whatever I can to help you." Nick stared at her for a moment, afraid to say what he wanted to, but at the same time, needing it. "Ana ...um," he stammered, looking down at the silken comforter, suddenly feeling embarrassed. She watched his cheeks blush and smiled. Reaching out she took his chin in her hand and lifted his head up, slowly she leaned in and kissed him. Nick wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him, savoring the feeling of her lips on his. After a moment they broke for air, both so entranced they knew there was no going back now. Nick suddenly got up and walked to the massive doors that separated his chambers from the rest of the cave. He passed his mark over the sensor, turning back to Ana as the doors rumbled shut.

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Cameron secured the saddle bags to his saddle, mentally making sure he'd packed everything he needed. Aubrey came out, handing him another bundle. *"You might need some food ya know,"* she smiled. *"Right,"* he said, frustrated with himself that he packed everything but. He looked up, seeing the suns were already on their way down for the evening. He knew that Brian would be mad at him for letting him rest all day, but Cameron knew he needed it. Brian was far from being well, and Cameron feared he wouldn't make this journey. But he had promised to help him, and that he would do. He sighed, looking at his wife, *"I guess we need to wake him."* Aubrey nodded, following Cameron into the house.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, gently shaking Brian. *"Hey, it's time to go,"* he said as Brian slowly opened his eyes. Brian nodded, sitting up, trying to get his bearings. He coughed violently, holding his chest and wincing in pain each time his body shook. Cameron helped to steady him, *"Is it hurting when you cough?"* Brian nodded as he gasped for air. *"Brian, you'll never make this trip. You need to say here and rest, get some more medicine in you. I can try to reach the palace in the morning again,"* he said. Brian shook his head, *"I ...have..to go."* *"You don't understand. The poison's causing your lungs to constrict. Pretty soon you won't be able to breathe, you'll suffocate and die,"* Cameron said, doing his best to convince Brian to stay.

Brian struggled to get out of bed, *"I have..to stop them. I'm going ..... no matter what."* Cameron sighed, not believing the stubbornness of this man. He watched as Brian slid his feet to the floor, looking around for his clothes. *"Alright, let me help you get dressed,"* Cameron said, grabbing Brian's freshly washed clothes. He sat them down next to Brian and proceeded to take out his IV. Brian got dressed, grabbing his stomach as another craving shot through him. He moaned, trying to will away the persistent need for the blue liquid. *"Here,"* Cameron said, holding up a smile vial of the substance. Brian grabbed it, quickly taking a drink. *"Careful, not too much,"* Cameron warned, *"I've got two more vials. It has to last the whole trip."* Brian nodded, handing the half empty container back to him, and trying to get to his feet.

With Cameron's help, he made it outside. The white unicorn was standing next to the door. It had a saddle on, and looked ready to go. *"Ok, one, two, three..."* Cameron said, pushing Brian up into the saddle. *"Here Brian,"* Aubrey said, handing him a hooded poncho, *"It'll be cool tonight."* Brian put it on, pulling the hood over his head, *"Thank you."* Aubrey smiled as Cameron mounted his unicorn. *"I'll be back as soon as I can,"* he said, leaning down to give her a kiss. Brian picked up his reins, leaning heavily on the saddle horn. *"You ready?"* Cameron asked. He nodded, *"Yeah, lets ...go."*

# Chapter 59

Cameron looked up at the full moon, wondering just what he'd gotten himself into. Here he was, traveling through the mountains in the middle of the night, just because of a promise he'd made to a man he barely knew. He looked over, seeing Brian hunched over his unicorn's neck, asleep. He'd been sleeping for most of the trip so far, and Cameron wondered how he stayed in the saddle. Cameron reached over and felt Brian's forehead, frowning when the heat met his hand. Brian was wheezing again, and even in the moonlight, he could tell his color wasn't good.

Cameron sighed, debating on what to do. He'd taken a lesser traveled trail, still afraid that whoever took Brian in the first place would be watching the main road. They were hours from any village, and just as far from Cystaleia. He looked over when Brian coughed, the sound making him cringe. He had to stop and get some more medicine in Brian, or he wouldn't make it to Cystaleia. Cameron halted his unicorn, jumping down and pulling his blanket from his saddle. He lay it in the middle of the trail, then walked over and carefully pulled Brian from his saddle. Brian moaned, but didn't wake up as Cameron drug him to the blanket, laying him down. He then pulled his medical supplies from his saddle bag and grabbed Brian's blanket. Covering him, Cameron set up a makeshift IV, inserting the needle into Brian's arm.

The doctor then pulled a fresh syringe out and filled it with some of the Krystal he was carrying. He injected it into the IV tube, watching as Brian seemed to instantly react to it. His muscles relaxed, letting him fall into a deeper sleep. Cameron sighed, rubbing his face. He was tired, but he needed to stay awake. He was the only thing standing between Brian and death right now ....sleep could definitely wait. Brian moaned, shifting in his sleep. Cameron saw how badly he was trembling and pulled his blanket up further. He was afraid to light a fire, for fear it would attract unwanted guests. He got up, searching his and Brian's saddle bags for something else to keep Brian warm with. When he found nothing, he pulled his own poncho off and lay it over him. He sat down next to Brian, leaning against a rock. The suns would be up in a few hours, they could leave then ... that is if Brian made it through the night.

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Nick sat on his balcony, staring at the stars. He couldn't sleep, and decided to come out and get some fresh air. He was worried about the ceremony. Worried that even though he was doing what the kidnappers wanted, that he may not get Brian back. Maybe they were waiting to see the ceremony to

its end, wanting to make sure that no one could back out at the last minute. Whatever it was that was causing the kidnappers not to call, it was eating at Nick.

He took a deep breath, closing his eyes and leaning back on the lounge he was on. His mind took him back to the afternoon he'd spent with Ana. He smiled, still able to feel her body against his, the smell of her hair, the taste of her lips, the warmth and tenderness that flowed around them as they made love. He didn't know how he was going to hide his feelings now. He knew that every time he laid eyes on her now, the image of that afternoon would fill his mind. He loved her with all his heart ... it was going to be hell having to hide it.

He opened his eyes and looked to the heavens. Millions of stars greeted him, in patterns he was beginning to recognize. He bit his lip, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had to pull off the acting job of the century to keep his and Ana's relationship a secret. The costs were too high if they got caught, and he would die before he subjected Ana to that punishment. He settled back into the lounge, his body finally giving in to the stress and worry. He fought to keep his eyes open, but quickly lost the battle. He slipped into a dream filled sleep, full of his stars and Ana.

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Cameron jerked and looked up. The sun's rays shining into his face. He suddenly realized he'd fallen asleep and quickly looked over at Brian. To his relief he was still sleeping. He gently touched his cheek, noting his fever was still high. He rummaged through his medical supplies, finding the medicine he wanted. He injected it into the IV, then got up and stretched. He looked over the mountains, the suns just peeking over the tops. They needed to leave if they had any hope of making it to Cystaleia on time. Reluctantly Cameron knelt down and shook Brian, "*Hey, wake up.*" Brian moaned, turning away from him. Cameron shook him harder, "*Wake up Brian, we need to get going.*" Brian opened his eyes and looked over at the young doctor, "*We stopped?*" "*I had to. I thought I was gonna lose you last night,*" Cameron replied. Slowly Brian sat up, looking around. Cameron went about packing up their supplies, then came over with a small bundle in his hands. He sat down next to Brian and opened it up, revealing the food that Aubrey had packed for them. He tore apart a piece of bread and handed it to Brian, "*Try and eat. We still have a long way to go, so we won't have time to stop.*" Brian took it and ate as much as he could. He was feeling nauseous, and already needing a hit of Krystal. It was all he could taste as he ate.

The two ate in silence, then Cameron got up and packed the rest of their things. He waited until the last

minute to take the IV out of Brian's arm. He debated on leaving it in, but decided it wouldn't be good if it got snagged while they were riding. *"Ok, you ready?"* he asked, holding his hand out for Brian to take. Brian nodded, taking his hand and standing up. His legs shook underneath him, and he swayed. Cameron was right there, helping to guide him to the white unicorn. Just as they reached him, Brian's legs gave out and he sank to the ground. Cameron knelt down next to him, a worried expression on his face, *"Are you alright?"* Brian nodded, trying to will his strength back, *"Y-yeah I'm just ... weak."* Cameron gave him a moment to recuperate, then helped him back up and into his saddle. Brian immediately lay across the unicorn's neck, letting his feet hang loose from the stirrups. As he had done during his escape, he wrapped the creature's mane around his wrists, insuring he wouldn't fall off. Cameron mounted his unicorn and looked over, seeing Brian already drifting back to sleep. *"Brian?"* he said, gently shaking him. Brian blinked a few times, then looked up at him, *"Just ..go. He'll follow ... you."* Cameron nodded as Brian closed his eyes, moving ahead of the white unicorn, he looked back, *"You can feel his breathing?"* The unicorn nodded. *"If it changes, I want you to stop. Otherwise, stay with me. We've got to get there as fast as we can,"* he said, kicking his unicorn and galloping down the trail, the white unicorn right behind him.

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"Marie, please just let us bring you something," Howie pleaded. She smiled at his concern, "I'm tired of this room. Please just let me do this," she said. "But honey, you should stay here and rest some more. They just let you out of the hospital last night," A.J. said. Marie sighed, walking over to the door and stepping into the hall, "Yes they did. And I need to get things back to normal. That means going down for breakfast." A.J. and Howie glanced at each other as they caught up with her in the hall. They walked in silence for a moment, both men thinking Brian had found his match in the stubborn department. There was no telling this woman no if she had her mind made up. A.J. smiled, thinking how perfect the two were together. Marie glanced over, catching his grin. "And what's so funny?" she asked. "Nothing, just that .... well I never thought I'd met anyone as stubborn as Rok," he answered. She smiled for a moment, then the smile left her face. "Oh honey, I'm sorry," A.J. said, not wanting to upset her. She shook her head, "It's alright Alex."

Just then Nick stepped out of his room, meeting them in the hall. He looked down at the floor, not knowing what to say to Marie. He turned to go ahead of them, but she stopped him, *"Your highness, can we talk?"* Nick cringed, knowing he deserved every bad thing she said to him and more. He swallowed hard and nodded, turning back around, "Guys, go on. I'll bring her down." A.J. and Howie looked from Marie to Nick, knowing this talk needed to happen for the both of them. The two went on ahead, leaving them in the hall.

Nick stared at the carpeted floor, not able to meet her stare. All the guilt he'd felt over Brian's disappearance and the loss of his child swept over him. *"I-I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry. Everything that's happened is my fault, and I can never make it up to you. If you hated me for the rest of your life, I'd understand,"* he muttered. Marie stared at him for a moment in shock. She had been so consumed with her own emotions, that she had no idea Nick blamed himself for this. *"Please look at me,"* she said softly, afraid her voice would break. Nick bit his lip and slowly looked up at her. Tears brimmed both their eyes. *"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you blamed yourself for this. Nick, this isn't your fault, no more than it's mine or Kevin's. This happened, and yes it's sad, and it'll take a long time to get over .... but none of this is your fault. You can't bare the burden of this by yourself. Brian's coming back, I have to believe that, and he would hate it if he knew you felt this way, and you know it,"* she said. Nick smiled through his tears, *"Yeah he would. He'd get mad at me for taking everything on myself."* *"Then don't. I don't blame you for any of this,"* Marie said. Nick reached out and pulled her into a heartfelt hug, surprising her. *"Thank you Marie,"* he said, letting her go. She smiled, wiping away her tears.

Nick cleared his throat, swiping at his own face. The two headed towards the dining room, not speaking for a few moments. Nick gently put his hand on her back as they walked, *"Are you ... um .. are you sure you're alright?"* Marie nodded, *"I am. My heart hurts, but I'm sure it'll get better with time. At least that's what everyone tells me."* Nick nodded, *"I've heard that too. It gets easier with time. I'm sorry you had to go through that though."* *"So am I. When Brian comes back, I uh I don't know how I'm going to tell him,"* she said, blinking the tears from her eyes. Nick rubbed her back as they walked, *"Yeah..."* he said, his thoughts trailing off to the ceremony that night. Wondering if he would get Brian back at all. Marie glanced up at him, *"Has there been any word?"* Nick looked down at her, sorrow in his face, *"No honey, there hasn't."*

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Cameron looked ahead, seeing the capital city in the valley below. The suns were setting, and he had pushed to get here. The unicorns were visibly tired, but wouldn't stop until he ordered them to. All day they had traveled as fast as they dared through the mountains, only stopping once so Cameron could inject some more medicine into Brian. Cameron kicked his unicorn, *"Lets go,"* he said as they started their decent.

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Nick fidgeted with his crown. The suns had just set and soon it would be time for the ceremony. He

dreaded it with a passion. The last thing he wanted to do was sign that treaty, but he had to. There was no getting around it. If he was ever going to see Brian again, he had to do this. He sighed, turning and making his way to the throne room.

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"Brian, Brian wake up," Cameron urged, shaking him. Brian coughed, his whole body shaking. Cameron quickly glanced down both sides of the alley they were in, making sure the sound didn't get someone's attention. They had made it into the city just after sun down, and now stood in an alley near the palace gates. "Brian please. You need to wake up," he begged. Brian slowly looked up at him, barely able to lift his head. "We're here," Cameron said. Brian blinked a few times, looking around the best he could, "T-the ... palace?" "Yes, we're just beyond the gates," Cameron answered, "I was afraid to go ahead. The guards don't know me, and there's a possibility that whoever took you is watching for you to show up too." Brian nodded, untangling his hands and pushing himself up to a sitting position. He grimaced with pain as a strong craving hit him.

Cameron reached around and pulled two syringes from his bag. "Give me your arm," he instructed. Brian held out his arm, letting the doctor inject the blue liquid into his body. "Now, I'm gonna give you a shot of adrenaline. It'll give you a bit of energy," he said. Brian nodded, enduring that shot as well. As soon as the needle was out of his arm, Brian kicked his unicorn, and headed towards the gates. He got about halfway there, then turned into another alley. "What is it?" Cameron asked. Brian looked at him with fear on his face, "One of the men guarding the gate. He's one of the men that took me." "You're sure?" Cameron asked. Brian nodded, heading down the alley, "I know a ... back way in."

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Nick sat on his throne, bored and antsy at the same time. He didn't understand why they had to go through all these formalities. The ceremony started thirty minutes ago, and no one had signed anything yet. First there was a presentation from Kholath, then from Jeptim. Then to top it off, school children were brought in to sing, as Celeste's presentation. Nick looked over at the choir and smiled. The children looked so happy to be there, so unlike him. He sighed as the song went on, hoping for it to be over with soon.

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Brian and Cameron snuck down the halls, hiding behind columns as they went. The adrenaline had given Brian a burst of energy, and he was able to walk on his own. He hurried down the hall towards the throne room. Suddenly he stopped, ducking into a room. Cameron followed him, shutting the door. Brian held it as long as he could, when he heard the door shut, he let go, coughing. The doctor glanced around nervously. Someone was going to hear them. Brian leaned against the wall, trying to get air into his lungs. He glanced at his hand, chills running down his back. "*Cam ..eron,*" he panted. Cameron looked over, seeing the blood in Brian's hand, "*We've got to get you to the hospital.*" Brian shook his head, wiping the blood on his poncho, "*Not yet,*" he said, opening the door and glancing out at the hall. He steadied himself, and set out again, the doctor following behind him.

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Nick watched as Tunk took the pen and signed his name. A servant took the treaty and carried it to Kelah's table, and he too signed it. Nick glared at the man, wanting nothing more than to stick his sword in the man's gut. If anything happened to Brian, he just might. The servant picked up the papers and made his way to Nick. He stopped and knelt before him, then handed him the papers. Nick looked down at the signatures and sighed. This was it. He licked his lips and picked up his pen. Nick situated the papers on the table before him and sighed again. He pressed the pen to the paper .....

"*Stop!*" someone yelled from the back of the room. Nick looked up, seeing a commotion in the crowd as several of his guards moved to see what was going on. "*Stop the ceremony!*" a man yelled. Nick watched as two men stood out in the crowd. One was a young, tall Celestian he'd never seen before. The other was shorter, and wore a hood concealing his identity. The shorter man seemed to have trouble walking as the guards pushed through the crowd to get to them. Nick stood up, "*Guards,*" he said sternly, stopping them in their tracks. Nick stared at the tall young man, since he seemed to be the spokesman of the two, "*Why do you interrupt this ceremony?*" "*Because you're doing it for the wrong reasons,*" Brian said as loudly as he could, pulling the hood off. "Brian!" Nick said, watching as Kevin, A.J. and Howie ran to their friend, engulfing him in one large hug.

Kelah glanced at Mason, anger written all over his face. This wasn't supposed to happen. The half breed was supposed to be dead by now. Mason turned away from the ambassador's stare, watching as the guys walked Brian through the crowd. Nick grabbed the papers and tore them in half to the surprise of everyone, "*This treaty is now null and void. Guards arrest ambassador Hatch for kidnapping, and blackmail.*" "*You can't do this!*" Kelah screamed as the guards seized him. Nick glared at him as he was lead out of the room. The crowd looked around, stunned at the events. "*By my order the mines are to*

*be given to Kholath. Jeptim is hereby banned from entering the Kholathian system or any of its colonies. Celeste now holds guardianship of such system and to disobey these orders will result in Jeptim baring the brunt of my anger. That is all, you are dismissed,"* Nick said, quickly leaving the throne and going over to Brian.

He hugged his friend, "I thought I'd never see you again." Brian smiled weakly, the adrenaline wearing off, "Me ...too." *"Please, we need to get him to a hospital,"* Cameron said. Brian started to protest, but flew into a coughing fit instead. Kevin looked at Nick, extreme worry on his face as Brian shook with each retching sound. Nick was about to order some of the guards to take Brian down to medical when Brian's legs gave out and he collapsed to the floor. Cameron was there instantly, turning Brian over as he gasped for air, spattered blood on his hands. "Jesus," A.J. said. Cameron looked up at the men standing around him, *"Quick, we don't have much time....."*

## Chapter 60

Marie sat in the hospital room staring at her husband. He'd been near death when they brought him in. He had ceased to be able to breathe on his own, so they hooked him up to a respirator, letting it do the work for him. He had an IV, and several metallic mesh monitors attached to him in various places. His bite wound had been cleaned and re-bandaged. Now all Marie could do was sit and wait. She didn't get to see him when he was still conscious, having stayed in her room to watch the ceremony on the vid. As soon as Brian appeared, she and Ana had run down to the throne room. By the time they got there, Brian had already been taken down to medical.

She had tried to help as the doctors worked on him, but her colleagues had pushed her out in the hall to wait. She understood why. The patient was her husband, and she had just been released from her own hospital stay. It still frustrated her though, to see her husband so sick and helpless and not be able to do anything about it. She got up and walked to the bed. Gently she touched Brian's cheek, noting how hot it was. His fever was raging, and he was so pale. Marie sighed, walking into the small bathroom and coming back with a wet cloth. She carefully wiped the cool material over his face and then folded it, laying it across his forehead.

*"He still out?" Nick asked, walking into the room. Marie nodded, a sad expression on her face, "I'm afraid he may be for a while. His fever is really high." Nick walked over to her and put his hand on her shoulder, "Why don't you go get some rest? I can stay with him tonight." "No, I need to be here," she said, shaking her head. Nick stared at her for a moment, "Marie, you haven't recuperated from your ordeal. You should be resting." "I can't rest knowing he's so sick. I need to stay," she said, sitting down on the side of the bed, flipping the cloth over on his forehead. Nick was about to protest again when Marie looked up at him, "I couldn't do anything to help our child. I can help Brian. Please don't ask me to leave." Nick bit his lip, seeing she needed to be there, for her own sanity. "Alright honey, just don't over do it. If you need anything, let us know," he said. She smiled at him, "Thank you, I will."*

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LaDonna sat in her chambers, looking across the room to where Mason sat. It was very late, much too late for him to still be here, but something was wrong. He'd said nothing, as he walked into her room and sat down, staring out the balcony doors. She knew he wanted to talk, and would eventually spill what was on his mind, if she just stayed quiet and let him figure it out. She grinned to herself, realizing

that Nick had inherited that trait as well.

Mason sighed, catching her attention. *"Just say it,"* she said. He looked over at her, then back out the balcony doors, *"I'm not sure I can."* *"You obviously need to talk, so talk,"* she said, *"We used to tell each other everything."* He smiled for a moment, *"Yeah we did. But this .. I'm not sure how you'll take it. I know it'll hurt you."* LaDonna shifted in her seat, suddenly uncomfortable, and afraid of what he had to say. She watched him struggle with his thoughts for a few more minutes, then she got up and walked over to him. She knelt down next to the chair he was sitting in and took his hand in hers, *"Just say it."*

Mason nodded, taking a deep breath. He still couldn't look at her though. *"I've been involved with something that I'm not proud of anymore. I um..."* he closed his eyes, dreading her reaction, *"I'm responsible for the kidnapping."* *"What?"* she said, in shock. He glanced at her, the look on her face tarring at his heart, *"I was approached by some very high ups in Interstellar. They wanted the king's ear, and told me if I helped them get it, I'd be rewarded. I was stupid Donna, I was just looking for a way to ruin Nickolas and take over. That's all I wanted, so I agreed. I'm the one that arranged the kidnapping, although I had nothing to do with what happened after he was taken,"* he confessed.

LaDonna stood up and walked over to the balcony doors, looking out at the night sky. She willed herself to stay calm, forcing the tears back. She felt so betrayed. That all his talk of second chances was just an act to get what he wanted. She shook her head, fighting to believe that the man she remembered was truly back, and not just an act. He had to be back, right? Otherwise why confess? Why not just keep quiet and let things pass? *"Donna, please say something,"* he begged, fearing the worse. She'd been quiet too long. Slowly she turned around, anger evident in her face, *"What do you want me to say? How could you do this? What happened to 'give me a second chance'? Has this all been an act, or are you just feeling guilty?"*

Mason cringed at her accusations, knowing he deserved each and every one of them. *"Donna I'm sorry. All I saw then was a way to get ahead. That's all I cared about, getting as much as I could to make up for ..... well you know. But I swear, I never thought it would go this far, or be as bad as it is,"* he explained. *"What did you think it was gonna be like?!"* she asked, throwing her hands up in frustration, *"Did you honestly think nothing bad was going to happen?"* He looked down, shaking his head, *"Please Donna, I've changed since this all started. I don't care about monetary gain anymore, I only care about you. I'm sorry."* *"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to! If you mean what you say, you should ask Brian and Marie for their forgiveness. Tell them you caused all his suffering, that you killed their unborn child! See how forgiving they are!"* she screamed.

Mason stood up and faced her, *"I will as soon as he's better. I promise you that."* *"Don't make promises you can't keep,"* she said, glaring at him. *"This one I'm keeping. I uh, I cut my ties with Interstellar after the ceremony tonight. Needless to say, they weren't pleased. I just wanted to let you know, in case something happens....."* he said, forcing the tears that threaten to spill over away, *"I'm truly sorry Donna. I realize now how much harm I've caused everyone. I can't ever make up for it, but this is a start."* He turned to leave, his head down, slowly walking across the room. LaDonna watched him, torn in her emotions. He reached the door, lifting his hand to pass his mark across the sensor. *"Will they hurt you, because you quit?"* she asked. *"Probably,"* he answered, still facing the door. The queen bit her lip, staring at his back, *"You have to tell Nickolas."* Mason nodded, dreading that conversation even more. LaDonna took a step towards him, *"Stay in the palace. You'll be safe here. We can talk to Nickolas in the morning ... let him decide what should be done,"* she offered. He took a deep breath, *"If you wish."* *"I do,"* she said, watching as he looked back at her. Their eyes locked, and in them she could see his regret. *"Very well, I'll see you in the morning then,"* he said, passing his mark across the sensor and quickly leaving the room.

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Nick yawned as the elevator took him to his floor. He had stayed with Marie for a while, and now he was exhausted. He was worried about Brian, but he also felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. His friend was back, and the mines were in the right hands now. Now all that needed to happen was for Brian to get better. Then he could concentrate on finding a way to pass on his crown and go home.

He stepped off the elevator just in time to see Mason leaving his mothers room. Nick stopped in his tracks as Mason went down the hall, his back to him. What was he doing here so late? He watched as his uncle went past the rooms the guys were staying in and found an unoccupied room. Quietly he let himself in. Nick stood there for a moment, not knowing what to think. He looked from his mothers door to the door Mason had disappeared into. When did his uncle start staying here? And why is he in his mothers room at this time of night? The last question really bothered him, so he made his way to his mothers door and softly knocked.

The door swooshed open and he smiled at his mother. *"Nickolas, you're still up?"* she asked as he walked in and sat down on her bed. *"Yeah, I've been keeping Marie company,"* he replied. *"How is Brian, any change?"* she asked, coming to sit next to him. He shook his head, looking at his lap. *"Well I'm sure he'll pull through. He's strong,"* she encouraged. *"Yeah, um, can I ask you something?"* he stammered. She took his hand in hers, seeing he was bothered by something other than his friends health, *"What is it?"* He looked at her, feeling stupid but needing to ask, *"I saw Mason leave just now. Is something going on? Is he bothering you?"* LaDonna laughed before she could stop herself, *"No ... no he's not bothering*

*me. We were talking about today's events." "Oh," Nick said, staring at her suspiciously. The laugh held more in it than just a routine conversation. "When did he start staying here?" he asked. "Tonight," she said, glancing at him, "He will explain in the morning." "Explain what?" Nick asked. LaDonna sighed, patting his hand, "He has something he needs to discuss with you. I can't say anymore, it needs to come from him." Nick studied his mothers face, "I'm not going to like it am I?" She bit her lip and shook her head, "No my son, I'm afraid not."*

# Chapter 61

Nick sat in one of the parlors. It was early morning, the suns just beginning to rise and shine through the windows. The queen had summoned him here, wanting to get everything out in the open and over with as quickly as possible. Mason sat across from him, and his mother sat next to him, her hand on his knee. Nick was gripping the side of the couch for all he was worth, trying to keep himself calm. It wasn't working though. He glared at his uncle, fury in his eyes, and incapable of speech. He was completely stunned. Sure he never trusted his uncle, not as far as he could throw him, but he never thought he was capable of doing something like this. Never!

Mason glanced at LaDonna, receiving a sympathetic smile. He then looked back at Nick, who was still glaring at him. If looks could kill, he'd have been dead ten minutes ago. *"Nickolas, I can never make up for this. I know that. I just want you to know that I'm truly sorry for my actions,"* he offered. Nick blinked a few times, flexing his hands. The next thing Mason knew, Nick was on top of him, his hands around his throat, screaming. LaDonna tried to pull Nick away, but he pushed her back, drawing the dagger he always wore and bringing it across Mason's face before he could even blink. It was then that LaDonna stepped in between the two men, *"Nickolas, stop!"*

Nick stood in front of his mother, trembling with anger, the dagger still in his hand. LaDonna turned and looked at Mason, *"Are you alright?"* He nodded, holding his hand to his bleeding cheek. Turning back to Nick, she reached out and pulled the knife from his hand, *"Please give him a chance."* Nick stared at her, wondering when she suddenly started to care about anything Mason did. *"What do you want me to do? Because of you Brian almost died! He lost his child, for Christ's sakes!"* Nick yelled. Mason looked at the floor, still holding his face. *"You have betrayed us all!"* Nick seethed. *"I know,"* Mason said quietly.

Nick walked around the couch, afraid to be that close to his uncle when he was still so angry. He paced across the room, Mason and LaDonna watching his every move. Suddenly he stopped and faced them, *"I know the laws uncle. You could be executed for this."* LaDonna's face went pale, *"No, you can't!"* Mason stood up and put his hand on her shoulder, *"He is the king, it's his decision."* *"But..."* LaDonna said. Mason stared at her, the love she'd seen before back in his eyes, *"I deserve whatever punishment he gives me. Don't fight him on it."*

Nick stared at the two, completely confused. The exchange between them was one of those that were in love. A partner protesting the punishment of their beloved. He put his hands on his hips, *"What the*

*hell is going on here?"* The two looked at him, a guilty expression on both their faces. Nick looked from one to the other, waiting for some sort of explanation, *"Well? I'm waiting."* *"What do you mean?"* his mother asked. Nick looked to the ceiling and sighed, then looked back at her, *"I mean this,"* he said, gesturing at them both, *"When did you two start giving a damn about each other? It's almost like you're in love or something."* Mason and LaDonna both glanced at each other, then cast their eyes to the floor. Nick's mouth dropped open, *"Nuh uh! No fucking way in hell did that happen!"* LaDonna walked over to her son, *"Come, there are some things I need to tell you."* Nick took her hand, glancing back at his uncle as she pulled him from the room.

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Kevin walked into Brian's hospital room. Marie was asleep in the chair next to the bed, her hand laying across Brian's on the bed. He walked up to her and gently tapped her shoulder. She stirred, looking up at him. "Hey, I came to take you to breakfast," he whispered. Marie sat up in the chair and ran her hands through her hair, *"Thanks, but I need to stay here."* Kevin looked over at his cousin, his heart in his throat. Brian looked so ill, pale as the sheets, a slight gleam of sweat on his face. He scanned all the monitors, taking in their haunting beeps. And the sound the respirator made as it pumped air into Brian's lungs made his skin crawl.

Marie reached up and took his hand, pulling him from the sight of his cousin. Kevin smiled at her briefly, "He's still the same?" She nodded. He squeezed her hand, "Alright, I'll go get us something and bring it back here. How does that sound?" Marie smiled, *"Sounds good. Thank you."* "No problem," he said, turning to leave, silently praying that Brian would pull through.

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Nick let his mother lead him down the hall and into a smaller sitting room. She closed the door, gesturing for him to sit down. Nick took a seat on a small couch and watched as his mother walked over and sat across from him. She was looking down, picking at an invisible spot on her dress. She shifted uncomfortably, and took a deep breath. Nick watched her with concern, having never seen her this nervous before. His heart went out to her when she looked up at him with tears in her eyes. He immediately reached out and took her hand, *"What is it? What's wrong?"* She smiled at him, brushing away the tears, *"I don't know how to tell you this. We've kept it a secret for so long .... I'm not sure I can say it."*

He squeezed her hand, worry on his face, "Say what?" She took another breath, looking back down at her dress, "I need to start from the beginning." Nick nodded, even though she wasn't looking at him. "When I was young, the doctors told me I might never have children. So when Frederick asked me to marry him, you can imagine how stunned I was. I mean what king would take a wife that couldn't bare him an heir? Right? We barely knew each other when we were married, see back then marriages weren't based solely on love. It was more of a business thing. My father was of the wealthy high class, and our marriage was what sealed a deal between the royal family and my father's company....." she explained. "So you didn't love him?" Nick asked. His mother sighed, and looked at him, "I cared for him, but I was in love with someone else. We had been seeing each other secretly, not wanting to attract any attention because of who he was. No one knew of our relationship. When Frederick asked me to marry him, I couldn't refuse. My father made it very clear that the marriage was what he wanted." "That's awful," Nick said. She shook her head, "That was how things were done then. I knew that Frederick was a kind and loving man, and that eventually I would come to know him and love him, which I did. But....."

"But there was still this other guy," Nick finished for her. "Yes, there was. At first he stayed away, knowing that if we were caught, the consequences would be dire. But after a while, it got hard to avoid each other. Frederick was just named king, and he was so busy with all the daily activities that he barely had time for me. I wasn't privy to the goings on back then, so I spent my days alone here in the palace," she said. "That must have been very lonely," Nick said. LaDonna nodded, "It was. That's when we started seeing each other again. Frederick never knew anything was going on. I hated what I was doing, but I couldn't stop it. I didn't want to feel the loneliness again, and I truly loved him."

Nick bit his lip, afraid to ask, but he did anyway, "So what happened?" LaDonna licked her lips, and looked down again, "I got pregnant." Nick stared at her with his eyes wide. She smiled at him, "Imagine my surprise. I'd been told all my life that I couldn't bare children. Needless to say I was frantic. Frederick was so happy. He beamed at me every time he looked at me, and I felt so awful. I had no idea wether the child was his or not." "Um, what did the other man say?" Nick asked shyly. "He was convinced the child was his. He wanted to tell Frederick about us, hoping that maybe he would see how much we loved each other and release me to be with him," she answered, "I begged him not to. I knew if Frederick found out, it wouldn't end well. So we kept quiet..... and I had you."

Nick felt the tears stinging his eyes, and blinked them away. Slowly they slid down his cheeks as he stared at his mother. She reached out and gently wiped them away with her thumb, "I'm sorry Nickolas. I know this isn't the life you imagined we had." Nick sniffed and shook his head, looking down at his and his mothers hands, "What happened after I was born?" LaDonna sighed, and Nick felt her hand trembling in his, "We were found out. Frederick wanted to surprise me. He had the servants set up a beautiful candle light dinner for us. He walked in on us kissing ....." she said, tears trailing down her face. Nick looked up, and as his mother had just done moments before, he wiped her tears away. "What did

*he do?" he asked after a moment. She closed her eyes, seeing the memory play in her head, "He was so hurt. If I live ten lifetimes I will never forget the look on his face. His trust was betrayed, and his heart shattered. He wanted to know why ... how long. We ... we told him everything from the beginning," she shuddered, "He was so angry. He walked over to the crib and picked you up and just stared at you for the longest time. He loved you so much, but at that moment when he looked at you, all he saw was pain. He demanded to know if you were his ... and I couldn't answer him."*

Nick squeezed her hands, seeing she was having trouble telling him the rest. *"He punished us in his own way. He didn't want the people knowing about what happened. He was a new king, and he didn't want this to mark him. So everything was kept quiet,"* she said. Nick reached out and lifted her head so she was looking at him, *"What was the punishment?"* The queen shook her head, *"It's not important."* *"Please, I need to know,"* Nick begged. LaDonna thought for a moment, then nodded, swallowing hard, *"The man was given a scar. One that marred his appearance ... that he would see every time he looked at himself, so he would remember what he'd done. We were banned from seeing each other unless it was in a public setting, and then we couldn't speak to one another ... and I was ...."* she trailed off, closing her eyes and letting the tears fall. Nick moved to his knees in front of her, pulling her into a tight hug as she cried. After a moment she found her voice, *"I was given scars too."* Nick pulled back and looked at her perfect face, *"Where?"*

LaDonna wiped her face and stood up, her back to Nick. She unbuttoned her dress and let it drop to her waist, revealing her back. Tears filled Nick's eyes as he gazed at his mother's back. It was covered in scars from where she had been whipped. "Jesus," he muttered, as she pulled her dress back up. After a moment she turned to face him, sitting back down. *"How could he do that?! He loved you,"* Nick asked. She shook her head, *"He was so hurt Nickolas. He lashed out at what hurt him. He ... he lashed out at you too,"* she said, looking back down at her lap. Nick bit his lip, *"I wasn't kidnapped was I? I was sent away,"* he whispered. She nodded, looking up at him, *"I'm so sorry. He didn't tell me where he sent you, but I cornered some of the servants and found out. I started looking for you immediately, but ... you were already hidden by that time."*

Nick rested his elbows on his knees and covered his face with his hands, sobbing. *"He hated me because of what I reminded him of,"* he wept. LaDonna moved to sit next to him, taking him in her arms, *"For a time, yes he did. But it didn't last Nick. He soon realized the mistake he made, but it was too late to get you back. Frederick loved you, you have to believe that. The man you met when you first came here, that was your father, kind and loving, and willing to give anything to have you here."* Nick closed his eyes, remembering all the talks he'd had with his father before he died. He showed nothing but love for him, and that's how he had to remember him. Nick nodded, sitting up and wiping his face with the back of his hand, *"I know he loved me."* The queen smiled, watching as Nick took in everything she'd told him. He coughed, then sniffed, looking at her, *"So the man you were in love with. It was Mason?"* She

nodded. Nick sighed, *"But wasn't he married? I mean he had Anthony...."* LaDonna looked down at her hands, *"Anthony isn't his."* *"What?!"* Nick asked in shock. She looked at him, *"Anthony isn't Mason's son. He's Frederick's."*

## Chapter 62

Cameron walked into Brian's room, a syringe in his hand. He had stayed, wanting to see his patient through. Marie and Kevin were talking, and both looked up when he entered. "Morning," Kevin said. Cameron nodded, "Morning. How was he last night?" Marie sighed, "The same. His fever is at a constant 102 and nothing I've tried has brought it down." Cameron injected the blue liquid into Brian's IV then made a note on his chart. "How long will he get that before he's weaned off it?" Kevin asked. "Well, I discussed that with the other doctors here, and we felt it better to keep him on a constant dose until his body has healed and he's no longer in danger. Then we can start taking him off it gradually," Cameron answered.

Kevin sighed, running his hand through his hair. "It's better this way Kevin," Marie said, "He couldn't deal with the withdrawal right now. It'd kill him for sure." Kevin nodded, "I understand. I just hate it that we have to keep feeding his addiction." "It's only temporary," Cameron said. "Hey, we missed you guys at breakfast," Howie said, as he, A.J., Ana, and Anthony came in the door. Kevin looked up, "We stayed here." "How is he today?" Ana asked. "The same," Marie said sadly. Ana walked over to her friend and hugged her, "He'll get better, I know he will." Marie smiled, nodding her head. "Hey man, we never got to thank you last night for what you did," A.J. said, slapping Cameron on the back. "Well, I made a promise to him. I had to keep it," he replied.

Anthony listened to the small talk, not really paying attention. Something had caught his eye in the hall, and he stepped back to get a better look. Mason was talking to one of the doctors, holding a bandage to a still bleeding cheek. The doctor motioned for Mason to follow him, and they disappeared into an exam room. Anthony quietly slipped out of the room and headed to the door he saw them enter. Mason looked up when he came through the door, then turned back to the doctor, who was preparing to stitch his cheek. "What happened?" Anthony asked. Mason sighed, not wanting to deal with questions right now, "Nothing, it was an accident." Anthony came closer, inspecting the deep cut across his father's cheek, "What kind of accident? That looks really bad." Mason jumped as the doctor inserted the needle for the first stitch, and glared at the man. "I'm sorry my lord," the doctor apologized.

"Father, what happened?" Anthony asked again, more frustrated that his father wouldn't answer him than concerned. Mason closed his eyes and let out a deep breath, "Your cousin and I had a disagreement." Anthony's mouth dropped open, "Nick did this?!" Mason nodded. "What did you do to him?" the young man asked bravely. Mason waved the doctor off and glared at his son, "I did nothing to him. He's perfectly healthy. Why do you think that this is my fault?" "Because it usually is," Anthony

shot back. *"That is no way to speak to your father,"* Mason said through clenched teeth. This brought on laughter from the young man. *"My father.."* he laughed, *"Since when have you ever considered yourself my father!"* he yelled, his anger dripping from every word. Mason sat there stunned, not believing the boy's attitude.

Anthony saw he had his attention for the first time in his life, so he decided now was as good a time as any to get things off his chest. He glared at Mason, pointing his finger at him, *"You never cared about me at all. Never even acknowledged I existed unless it benefitted you in some way. What did I do to make you hate me so much? Huh? Just tell me that! What could I have done to make you want nothing to do with me?! All I ever wanted was for you to love me. Why is that so hard?!"* he screamed, tears running down his face. He furiously wiped them away, waiting for Mason to say something. *"Anthony, I never hated you,"* he said so softly the boy almost didn't hear it. *"Then why? Why do you treat me like a servant, and not your son?"* he asked. Mason looked down, he had no answer for that. If he told him the real reason why, it would turn his world upside-down. Anthony saw he wasn't going to get an answer. His anger rose, expecting as much from the man, *"Fine! You know what, I'm done! I'm finished caring what you think about me. I have no father..... the only father I ever knew is dead! You can just sit back and relax, cause I don't need you! You .... You asshole!"* he screamed, then turned on his heel and stormed out of the room. Mason sat stunned for several moments. He deserved this too, wondering why it took the boy so long to do it. He shook his head and sighed, defeated, then motioned for the doctor to resume his work.

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Nick stared at his mother in shock, *"What do you mean Anthony is Fredericks?"* LaDonna bit her lip, thinking of the best way to explain this. *"After Mason and I were found out, Mason left for a time. He went to Mardica and stayed in the palace there. While he was there he met a young girl. She was of the high class, and very beautiful. Supposedly they started seeing one another. Frederick found out about it and paid them a visit,"* she said, taking a deep breath. *"This wasn't long after everything happened, and he was still so hurt and angry. He barely looked at me then, only speaking to me in a public setting. It took him a long time to forgive me, and I'm not sure he ever forgave Mason. Anyway, he cornered the girl and seduced her."* she said, looking back down at her dress.

Nick felt like someone had just punched him in the stomach. He couldn't believe she had kept this a secret for all these years and not broke under the pressure of it all. *"H-how could he do that?"* he whispered. The queen took his hand and gently rubbed the back of it with her thumb, *"He was the king. You don't tell the king no. So she slept with him, and ended up pregnant. Out of duty, Mason married*

her, knowing full well the child wasn't his." "How did he know? It could've been," Nick mused. LaDonna shook her head, "They were just friends. They never ....." Nick nodded his head, "I see. So all this time, you knew too?" "Yes, Frederick made a point of telling me what he'd done," she said. Nick bit his lip, "I never thought he could be so cruel. All the way here everyone kept telling me what a loving, caring, wonderful king he was." "He was Nickolas. It just took him some time to deal with everything, and in that time, he made several mistakes that he regretted until the day he died. This was one of them," she said.

Nick leaned back on the couch and rubbed his head, he was getting a mother of a headache, "How could you bring him here and raise him, knowing what happened?" LaDonna sighed, "I needed to. Losing you was still so fresh in my heart, even though it had been several years since you'd been taken. I still longed for a child, I missed you terribly. So when his mother died, I asked Frederick to bring him here. I knew that Mason wasn't capable of taking care of him. He'd changed from the man I knew, grown bitter and hard hearted. I think he did it so the grief of what happened wouldn't take over, like a defense mechanism. He was going to get you before you got him. Not wanting to ever feel that vulnerable, or get hurt like that again. So he closed himself off to everyone, even me. Just recently have I seen the man I loved so much back then. He's opening up now, trying to set things right."

Nick leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, "Anthony doesn't know does he?" "No, and we can never tell him," she replied. Nick looked up at her, "Why not? He deserves to know the truth." "I know, and I hate keeping this from him, but it cannot be. No one can know about what I've just told you. If it got out it would ruin everything," she said. He shook his head, "I don't understand." "If the public found out that they'd been lied to by the king and the royal family for all these years, it would cause chaos. The people would distrust us, and soon, stop following the laws we set for them. Our world relies on one principle, and that is, your king doesn't lie to you. If they find out that's not true, it could lead to all out mutiny. Plots would be formed to overthrow you, different factions would form, and our world would be torn apart. That is why the three of us kept this a secret all these years Nickolas," she explained. He sighed, "I understand that, but why can't we just tell Anthony? He wouldn't leak it out, I know that for a fact." "I'm sure he wouldn't, but you are king Nick. If he found out he was Frederick's son, and not Mason's, how long would it be before he decided that he was the rightful heir to the throne and not you," she said. Nick half smiled, "Who's to say he wouldn't be right?" LaDonna sighed. "Listen, I understand that, but you know Anthony's heart. He wouldn't do that," he said. She shook her head, "We can't risk it. You are the rightful heir to the throne in the public's eye. If he did challenge you, everything I just told you would come out. I can't let that happen Nick. I can't go through the humiliation and the scrutiny again. It was bad enough coming from one man, I don't want to see what it would be like coming from the entire planet." Nick rubbed his temples again, letting her words sink in. As much as he loved Anthony, and wanted him to know the truth, he couldn't risk putting his mother through that again, "Alright, I won't say anything." The queen pulled him into a hug, "Thank you." He smiled at her, then winced as a sharp pain ran through his head. "You have another headache?" she

asked. He nodded. *"Come, we'll go down to medical and get you something for it,"* she said, standing up and offering him her hand. He took it, standing up and walking to the door with her, *"I love you mom,"* he said. LaDonna looked up at her son and smiled, *"I love you too, always."*

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Mason stood in the hall, peering through the window to Brian's room. The entire group was there, minus Nick and Anthony. All talking, trying to keep each other's spirits up. He sighed, his heart in his throat looking at Brian. The young man looked near death, and his wife didn't look much better. Her face was stricken with worry, and she looked as if she would collapse from exhaustion at any second. He bit his lip, knowing their pain was because of him. He closed his eyes and sighed, feeling so much regret for what he'd done. It'd been years since he felt this hurt, this emotionally open. Slowly he was letting his guard down, and facing the pain. Gradually coming back to the man he was before the scar. He had to admit, he didn't know if he could be that man again. It'd been so long since he let himself feel anything, he wasn't sure he still could. Looking at Brian's ashen face, he knew the answer. So much regret and guilt. It flooded through him like a raging river.

Quickly he turned from the sight, not wanting anyone to see him. He wasn't ready to tell them what he'd done. He looked up when he heard footsteps coming down the hall. LaDonna and Nick approached him, Nick holding his head. LaDonna saw him and smiled, *"You are alright?"* *"Yes,"* he replied, as Nick looked up at him, *"But you are not. Another headache?"* Nick nodded, not sure what to say to the man now. Before he was so angry, now his emotions were all over the place. He felt sorry for him, hating what he went through just because of love. Then there was the burning question in the back of his mind.... was he really his father? But above all else there was disappointment. Disappointment in the way he handled everything, and what he let himself become because of it.

Nick stared at the newly stitched wound on his face, realizing he had cut him exactly where his old scar had been. *"I'm sorry,"* he said. Mason nodded, *"It's alright. Let's get you to a room before you get ill."* Nick didn't know what to think as Mason took his other hand and the two lead him to a room. Soon a doctor was in, giving him a shot of the medicine that helped so much the last time. He watched as his mother leaned close to Mason, *"I told him,"* she whispered, not thinking Nick was paying attention. A wash of emotion flashed through Mason's eyes, *"Everything?"* She nodded. Mason looked over to see Nick staring at them. Nick could have sworn the man blushed. Suddenly Mason didn't know what to say, gazing down at the floor. The drug was starting to take affect, and Nick leaned back on the small bed. *"Nickolas, do you want to go back to your chambers?"* his mother asked. He shook his head, barely awake, *"Stay here,"* he mumbled. Mason watched as LaDonna sat down on the edge of the bed, taking

Nick's hand as he fought to stay awake. He sighed, walking over and sitting on the other side of the bed. Nick glanced over at him, fighting to keep his eyes open. Mason smiled meekly at him, reaching out and taking his other hand, "*Go to sleep.*" Nick blinked a few times, swearing that he saw love in the man's eyes as he looked at him. Finally it became too much, and he closed his eyes, drifting to sleep under the watchful care of the two.

## Chapter 63

LaDonna looked over at Mason. He was still holding Nick's hand, staring at the young man. She reached over Nick and touched his arm, pulling him from his thoughts. *"What is bothering you?"* she asked. He looked back down and smiled as much as the new stitches in his cheek would allow, *"You always could tell when something was wrong."* *"Yes, so what is it?"* she asked. He sighed, still staring at Nick as he slept, *"Anthony. He came in while I was getting stitched up, wanted to know what happened. Then he wanted to know what I did to cause it. We got into an argument, he told me he was done with me. He asked me what he did to cause me to hate him so much."* *"Oh Mason,"* she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her, pain and regret in his eyes, *"I can't tell him Donna. I can't even make up something that would be believable. How can I tell him that every time I see him, I see what Frederick did to us. The lengths he went to to cause us pain. He would never understand without knowing the whole story, and we can't tell him that."*

LaDonna bit her lip, staring at him. She could see how much Anthony's words hurt him. Even though Mason never showed it, he did care for the boy. He was the child of the woman he married, the woman he was friends with. Mason did care for Anthony, but the memories of what happened got in the way. He could never call the child his own, and never thought of him that way. Still, that didn't mean he held no feelings at all for him. LaDonna had kept him informed of the goings on in Anthony's life. He knew of his girlfriends, and friends. He knew the boy's hobbies, and passions in life. Still, it didn't make up for the one thing that Anthony wanted ... his love. The boy never knew he had it, because he couldn't see it. All he ever saw was Mason looking down on him, no matter what he did.

Mason looked up at her, *"Now I know where Nickolas gets that from."* She looked at him questionally, as he pointed to her lip. She smiled, *"He does do that a lot, doesn't he?"* He nodded, looking back down at Nick, *"I messed so many things up Donna. You, Nick, Anthony ... how can I ever set them straight?"* She sighed, pulling his hand from Nick's, and squeezing it tightly, *"You are. It took a lot to admit what you'd done. And it'll take even more to face the others."* Mason nodded, *"Speaking of, I should go and find Anthony. See if maybe I can smooth things over."* *"What are you gonna tell him?"* she asked. He shrugged his shoulders, *"I don't know, but I can't let him think that I don't care. I know that's all he's ever seen from me, but I can't let him think it's his fault."* *"Do you want me to come with you?"* she asked, as he stood up. *"No, stay with Nickolas. I'll come find you when we're done,"* he said, heading to the door. *"Good luck,"* she called. He turned back to her and smiled, *"Thanks, I'm gonna need it."*

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Kevin sat next to Brian's bed, holding his hand and talking to him. The guys had agreed it would be best to take turns, wanting Brian to know that someone was with him all the time. Cameron had agreed it might help, since Brian didn't seem to be responding to anything. He knew in cases like this, the patient often could hear what was going on around them, just not able to move or wake up. The thing that concerned him the most was that Brian's mark had started to dim. Marie had pointed it out to him quietly, not wanting to alarm the others. She knew all too well what that meant. A person's mark was also connected to their health, and when they started to dim, it only meant one thing. That person was dying.

Kevin sighed, running his hand through his hair, "Ya know cuz, I never did like hospitals that much. I guess I've seen my share of them though, with dad, and now you. You gotta come out of this Bri, Marie is waiting on you to wake up. You know she hasn't left since you got here? Ana just convinced her a few minutes ago to go up and get a shower and change clothes. She's gonna try and get her to sleep a bit before she comes back down, but I really doubt that's gonna happen," he laughed. "I never thought I'd see it, but she's as stubborn as you ever thought about being. She's truly a force to be reckoned with, that's for sure," he said. Then a memory came to mind and he laughed, "I'll never forget watching her scream at A.J. when we first got here. Making him float above the bed and yelling at him for hurting you. You know, since you've been gone, they've become really good friends. J wouldn't let her mope around. He just kept buggin her until she gave in. You know how J is, the kid can be damn annoying sometimes."

"Hey! I resemble that," A.J. said, walking into the room. Kevin laughed, turning to look at him, "Ana convince Marie to sleep?" A.J. shook his head, "Naw, you knew there wasn't a chance in hell that was happening. She'll be back down in a few minutes." "I'm worried about her," Kevin admitted, "She's so tired." A.J. nodded, "I know, but we can't make her leave Kev. I think this is her way of dealing with ... everything." Kevin nodded, standing up so A.J. could sit down, "I'm gonna go see if I can find Nick." "You don't have to go far. He's a couple rooms down the hall, out cold," A.J. said, "Another headache." Kevin shook his head and sighed, "He's under a lot of pressure." "No shit Sherlock," A.J. grinned, "I know I wouldn't wanna be him. I couldn't do what he's done." "Neither could I, J," Kevin said, "Neither could I."

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Mason stood outside Anthony's room, trying to get up enough nerve to go in. Finally he passed his mark across the sensor and walked in. Anthony was laying on the bed, face down. He'd long since stopped sobbing, but he still had wet streaks down his cheeks. The boy glanced up, then returned his head to

the pillows, *"If you came to yell at me for embarrassing you in front of the doctor, just save it."* Mason sat down on the foot of the bed, his back to Anthony, *"I didn't. I came to talk."* Anthony sat up and wiped his face. This was the first time ever that Mason had come on his own to speak with him. *"K, talk,"* he said, still angry, but curious at the same time.

Mason sighed, *"I'm sorry Anthony. I know I've not treated you well, and you didn't deserve that. You never did anything to make me hate you, and I don't hate you. I never have."* *"Then why?"* Anthony asked, wishing Mason would turn around and look at him. *"I can't explain it. Some very bad things happened before you were born, and when I look at you ... that's all I see. It's not your fault, it's mine. I just ... I couldn't deal with the memories. Even now it's difficult,"* he admitted. Anthony sat in silence for a long time, wondering just what happened, and wishing his father had told him this sooner. He moved off the bed and walked around to stand in front of him, shocked when he saw tears in his fathers eyes. *"What happened?"* he asked. Mason shook his head, and quickly wiped the tears away, *"I don't think I can ever tell you. It's too painful, and just thinking about it is too much right now. I just didn't want you to think you'd done something to cause me to act this way. You never did anything, it's been me the whole time."* Anthony put his hand on the older man's shoulder, *"I wish you'd told me this sooner."* *"I know, I'm sorry,"* Mason said. Anthony stared at him for a long time, until Mason couldn't take it anymore and turned away, standing up. Anthony grabbed his arm, keeping him from leaving, *"Dad, about what I said ...."* Mason waved his hand, *"It's alright. I deserved it for not realizing what I was doing to you. I really am sorry Anthony."* The boy smiled, pulling his father into a hug. Mason stood there in shock for a moment, then wrapped his arms around the boy and returned the gesture.

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Ana walked into Nick's room, and smiled as the queen looked up at her. *"Have you been here all day?"* she asked. LaDonna nodded, looking back at Nick as he stirred in his sleep. *"How is Brian doing?"* she asked, as Ana sat down. *"Not good. He's not responding to anything ..... and his mark his dimming,"* she answered. Sadness filled the queens face, *"How long?"* *"Marie noticed it this morning. We've been watching it all day,"* she said. *"Do his friends know?"* LaDonna asked. Ana shook her head, *"We didn't want to upset them, and there's still a slight chance he could pull through."* *"And Marie, how is she?"* the queen asked. Ana sighed, *"She's remarkably strong. Keeping it together for the guys, I think. I went with her to her room this morning, I could hear her crying in the shower."* LaDonna shook her head, *"This should have never happened."*

Ana watched the queen for a moment, *"I can stay with Nick if you want to go see them."* The older woman looked up at her, then at Nick, *"Alright, I'll be back in a few minutes."* Ana nodded, as she got up

and left the room. Nick stirred again, moaning. Ana moved to the side of the bed and took his hand, "Nick? Are you awake?" Slowly he opened his eyes, letting them focus on her. A smile creased his face, "Hi." "Hi, how are you feeling?" she asked. He took a deep breath and sat up, "Better, where's mom and Mason?" "I don't know where your uncle is, but your mother went to see Brian," she answered. Nick ran his hand through his hair, "How's he doing?" Silence. He looked over to see Ana staring at the floor. "Ana?" he asked. She looked up at him, "He's dying Nick." "What?!" he asked, in horror. "Shhh, the others don't know. His mark has been dimming all day, he's not responding to any of the medications," she told him. Nick closed his eyes, a few tears trailing down his face, "This can't happen. He can't die, not if I have anything to do about it." "Nick?" Ana said, as he quickly got out of bed and left the room.

## Chapter 64

Marie looked up as Nick entered the room. Their eyes locked, and she could see the worry and panic in his. He crossed the room, not acknowledging the others as he passed them. Even his mother was ignored as he made his way to his best friend. He sat down on the side of the bed and took Brian's right hand. He turned it over, inspecting his mark. A tear slid down his cheek as he realized how dim it was. Nick looked up when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Marie stared at him, with so much loss in her eyes. He took her hand in his, squeezing it. He didn't want to ask this question, especially in front of the guys, but he needed to know. "*How much longer?*" he asked, his voice soft, afraid if he spoke any louder it would betray him. "*Not long,*" she admitted, tears forming in her eyes.

Nick closed his eyes and let the tears fall. He didn't care that the others were seeing him cry, this wasn't about him. He couldn't lose his best friend, not after he fought so hard to get back to them. He held Brian's hand tightly, leaning close to his ear, "Bri, you can't do this. You have to fight, you hear me? You didn't fight so hard to get back here just to give up now. You can't! I won't let you! I know it must be really nice where you are right now, but you have to come back Brian. I can't do this without you ... I need you here ... Marie needs you here. Bri, if you can't do this for yourself, fight for her man. She loves you so much, you have to come back to her. She needs you Brian, more than you can know right now. Don't you dare give up!"

Kevin looked at Howie, then at A.J. Nick's begging was unnerving him, and the looks passed between Marie and the queen sent chills down his back. Something was going on that they weren't informed of, he knew it. Quietly he stepped over and nudged Ana, "What's going on? Why is Nick so upset?" Ana sighed, glancing over at the queen and Marie. She wasn't sure she should tell them, Brian could still pull through .... maybe. Marie nodded, giving her the permission she was silently asking for. Ana turned to the guys and ushered them to a corner of the room. Tears welled up in her eyes, as Nick's sobs grew louder. "Ana?" Kevin asked, his face full of fear. She took a deep breath, "Guys, Brian's not doing well. His mark is dimming." "So what does that mean?" Howie asked. She looked down, not able to meet their concerned expressions, "It means he's dying." "What?!" Kevin roared. "Damn," A.J. whispered, looking over at his friend. "He could still pull through, but its ..... it'd be a miracle if he did," she said. "How long have you known?" Kevin asked, trying to keep as calm as possible. "Marie noticed it this morning. We've been watching it all day," she admitted. "Why didn't you tell us?" Howie asked, somewhat hurt. Ana looked down again, "We didn't want to upset you. And there was still a chance he could get better." "But now?" A.J. asked. She shook her head, "I don't know. It doesn't look good."

Kevin heavily sat down in the nearest chair, covering his face with his hands. He couldn't take it anymore, couldn't be strong for everyone else. He broke down, his body shaking as he sobbed. LaDonna moved over and sat next to him, rubbing his back and trying her best to comfort him, though she knew no words could do that. Howie stood there staring at Brian, a lost expression on his face. He didn't know what to do, his emotions running rapid. Ana watched as tears formed in his eyes and trailed down his cheeks. She stepped forward and took him in her arms, holding him as he finally let go, crying on her shoulder. A.J. sniffed back his tears and walked over to the bed, sitting on the opposite side as Nick. He took Brian's hand, as Nick looked over at him. "Dude, you can't leave us yet," he said, "You fucking can't do this!" Marie walked over and pulled him from the bed, placing her hands on his shoulders and shaking him, "Alex, please don't be angry. He can't fight it anymore." A.J. stared at her, "You can't give up on him." She shook her head, "I'm not. I want him to open his eyes so bad it hurts, but..... I don't want him to suffer. He's suffering right now Alex. I can't ask him to come back to this, not when it hurts him so much." A.J. stared at her for a moment, then pulled her into his arms, "Aw baby, come here," he said, holding her tight as they both wept.

Nick looked around the room, then back down at Brian, "Man, so many people love you so much. Marie, us, your family back home, all the fans. Bri, please. I know you've had way more than your share of fights, but man, you can't give up, not now. Cheat death one more time Brian, I know you can do it. Hell by now you're a fucking master at it. Please Brian, don't leave us here without you," he cried.

The minutes that passed seemed like hours. The only sound in the room was the muffled sobs of everyone, and the beeps of the monitors. That's what caught Nick's attention. At first he thought he was hearing things, that maybe his lingering headache, coupled with his emotions were making the sound echo in his head. He looked up, just in time to see the line on the monitor jump twice, then pause, then jump twice again. He looked over at Marie, who was still in A.J.'s arms, "Marie?" She looked up, following Nick's gaze on the monitors. For a moment the entire room froze, seven pairs of eyes watching the little blue line. Marie took a step closer, not believing her eyes, "*It's increasing. His heart rate is increasing!*" "I'll go get the doctor," Ana said, quickly leaving the room. Marie looked at Nick, "*Keep talking! I dunno what you said, but keep doing it!*" Nick smiled through his tears, squeezing Brian's hand tighter, "That's it Bri! Keep fighting!"

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Cameron checked the monitors for the tenth time since he'd been called into Brian's room. He didn't know how, but Brian's vitals were perking up. Maybe all the medicine they'd been pumping into his body finally took hold? But he suspected it was something else. The doctor looked around the room,

seven hopeful faces peering back at him. He didn't know if it was just him, but he could have sworn he could feel the love in the room. Like a tangible cloud that engulfed him the moment he walked in, and filled every nook and cranny of the small room. This, he believed, was why Brian had suddenly turned the corner.

He suddenly realized everyone was waiting on him to say something. Clearing his throat, *"His vitals are steadily improving."* "So he's getting better right?" A.J. asked. Cameron nodded his head, *"It looks as if he's on his way, yes. But he still has a long hard fight ahead of him."* "Can we stay with him?" Kevin asked. *"Yes, in fact I recommend it. Keep talking to him, encouraging him. That's what he needs right now,"* the doctor answered. Kevin smiled, moving to the bed and sitting across from Marie. They both had a hand, taking turns encouraging Brian to keep up the fight.

Nick had moved to the back of the room, his mother standing next to him. She quietly took his hand, smiling up at him as he looked down. Nick returned the smile, glancing out the door into the hall. He saw Mason and Anthony approaching the room. Silently he stepped into the hall to meet them. *"How is he?"* Anthony asked. *"He's doing better. Go on in,"* Nick answered, watching his cousin enter the room. He then looked up at Mason, motioning for the older man to follow him down the hall.

Nick found an unused room and slipped inside. Mason followed him in, closing the door behind them. *"Brian is really doing better?"* the older man asked. *"Yeah, his vitals are improving,"* Nick said, sitting on the bed. Mason found a chair and sat down, *"So, have you thought about my punishment? I assume that's why we're here."* Nick nodded, looking down at the floor. Mason watched as Nick's eyes seemed to unfocus, and for a moment, he was somewhere else. *"Your punishment is in two parts,"* Nick started, blinking his eyes and looking up at him, *"The first being this. Go back to *Interstellar* and resume whatever post you had with them."* Mason cocked his head to the side, knowing he heard that wrong. *"You want me to go back?"* he asked. Nick nodded, *"I do. I need someone on the inside, and you uncle, are that person."* Mason sighed, *"It may not be that easy Nickolas. They may suspect my reasons for coming back. They are always on the look out for a spy."* *"I understand that you may not get back in, but I need you try,"* Nick said.

Mason studied the younger man for a moment, *"What do you see?"* Nick shook his head, *"It's not what I see. It's just this feeling I have. I need as much information on them and how they operate as possible. I know this may put you in danger, but I need you to do it."* *"Alright,"* Mason said, *"I'll try."* *"Thanks, and um ... you may stay in the palace as long as you like. You'll be safer here,"* Nick mumbled. Mason tried to hide his amusement, *"That's alright, I'm sure I'll be fine."* *"No, you're staying,"* Nick demanded, *"Mom wouldn't be happy if something happened to you."* A smile creased the older man's face, *"No, I guess*

*not."*

Nick got up and headed to the door. *"Nickolas, you said my punishment was in two parts. What's the second?"* Mason asked. Nick turned to face him, *"I don't know. That is up to Brian and Marie. When you confess to them, they will decide."* Mason looked to the floor and nodded, knowing that was only fair. They were the ones suffering from his actions, so it was only fitting that they decided his fate. Nick turned to the door once more. *"Nick, um your mother said she told you everything....."* Mason called, wanting desperately to talk things out with him now that he knew. Nick held up his hand, *"Don't. I can't do this right now."* The older man said nothing, but the hurt in his eyes registered with Nick. *"I don't know what to think right now. I need time to sort this all out,"* he explained. *"I understand,"* Mason said. Nick turned back to the door and passed his mark across the sensor, the door swishing open. Without turning around he spoke, *"Ask me another time,"* he said, quickly leaving the room. Mason watched him go, hope and fear mingling in his heart.

## Chapter 65

The next several days seemed to meld into one another. Mason had gone back to Interstellar and after some convincing of his loyalty was allowed to return. He and Nick spoke often about the goings on in the company. Nick had released Devon, knowing now that he was protecting Mason. He advised him to find other employment and told him he would be under surveillance. Nick didn't trust him, no matter how much he apologized, and having him in the palace with Marie and Brian was unnerving.

Nick had contacted Tom and Tamara, telling them to drop their search for what happened to him and concentrate all their efforts on Interstellar. He wanted to know where the Krystal was being manufactured and shipped from. Wanted to know how it was made, what was in it, and if there was an 'antidote'. Every poison has a cure, so why couldn't Krystal? They promised to get back with him soon, both wondering why he'd given up the search for what happened to him, but neither one wanted to ask.

The council sessions had started again, much to Nick's dismay. He wanted to spend more time with Brian, but alas, duty calls. He brought Anthony in as an assistant, giving him several duties. He wanted the boy to get as much experience as he could, just in case. Nick had noticed the iciness between Mason and Anthony had lifted somewhat, and was extremely relieved about it. His day consisted of his morning exercise, followed by the council sessions, after which he would go and sit with Brian. He still hadn't woke up yet, though his vitals were almost back to normal and his fever was down.

The guys had once again busied themselves around the palace. They each spent a lot of time in Brian's room, but they could only take so much. None of them knew how Marie stayed day after day, refusing to leave for more than a few minutes at a time. Ana had taken to staying most of the time with her and had gotten her to open up a little. Most of the time she acted as if nothing was wrong, but Ana could see how much pain she carried. Marie had put all her effort into Brian, and had not dealt with the loss of her child yet. Ana knew that she was waiting for Brian to wake up, so they could both grieve together. But the loss was eating her up inside.

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Ana took her attention from the vid and looked over at Marie. She was sitting next to Brian's bed, quietly reading him a magazine. She held Brian's hand as she read the pages, describing the pictures as

she went. After a moment Marie felt her eyes and looked up, "What?" Ana smiled, shaking her head, "You. You amaze me." Marie put the magazine down and sighed, "I'm not that amazing." "Yes you are. You've been here for nine days straight. I'd have gone crazy by now," Ana smiled. Marie looked down at Brian's face, "I have to be here. He's my life." Ana watched as she brushed the curls from Brian's forehead before looking back up at her, "Besides, if this was Nick, you know you'd do the same thing." Ana blushed, looking around to make sure no one was within hearing distance of them. When she was satisfied they weren't, she got up and walked around the bed, sitting next to her friend. "You're right I would do the same thing," she whispered, a smile forming on her face.

Marie studied her friend, then nudged her, "There something you aren't telling me?" Suddenly Ana had a guilty expression on her face, looking down at the floor. Marie laughed, "There is isn't there? What is it, you know I won't say anything." Ana couldn't help but smile at her friend's curiosity. "Come on Ana, spill," Marie prodded. Ana rolled her eyes and took one more look around just for good measure. "Nick and I um ... well we ...." she stammered, her face turning ten different shades of red. Marie clasped a hand over her mouth, "You did it?" she asked. Ana nodded, trying not to smile, but not having any success at it. "When?" Marie asked. "The day before the ceremony," Ana answered, "And a few times since," she added with a giggle. Marie arched her eyebrow, snickering, "Ohh, Bri and I are gonna have competition huh?" Ana laughed, shaking her head, "Oh God, you did not just say that." "Ana!" Marie said, shocked at her expression. Ana's eyes grew wide, "I've really been hanging around Nick to long. I didn't even know I said it until it was out of my mouth." Marie giggled, "Yup, sounds like Nick."

"What sounds like me?" Nick asked, walking into the room. Both girls jumped, then glanced at each other and laughed. Nick watched them with amusement as Ana blushed profusely and Marie laughed at her. "Well, I dunno what I missed, but it must've been good," he laughed, walking to the bed and sitting on the edge. He took Brian's hand in his, "Hey Bri, you gotta wake up and tell me what they said. My ears are burning." "Your what are burning?" Ana and Marie both asked. "My ears," Nick said, "It's an expression. Means um, like I know you were talking about me." "Ohh," they both replied, then quickly fell into the giggles again.

Nick shook his head, turning his attention back to Brian. "When are they gonna take him off the ventilator?" he asked. Marie cleared her throat, "Um, I'm not sure. I think they want to wait until he's awake for a few days." "How was council?" Ana asked. He shrugged, "The same, It gets mundane after a while." "That why you got Anthony in on it?" she asked. "Yeah, he alleviates the boredom," Nick smiled, "His reactions to everything are interesting to watch." "I bet," Ana said. Silence filled the room for a moment as Nick and Ana became aware they were being stared at. Both looked in Marie's direction, seeing her smiling at them. Nick looked at Ana, lowering his voice to just barely a whisper, "You tell her?" Ana bit her lip and smiled, causing Nick to blush just as much as she had been. Marie laughed at them both, "Young love, isn't it grand?"

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Mason watched the store fronts pass by as his carriage meandered down the street. He sighed, as it stopped in front of his destination. Getting out he took in the large office building, then made his way inside. He paid no attention to the secretary as he passed her, just like he'd done a thousand times before. He caught the elevator and rode to the top floor, stepping off and entering the only office there. A young man looked up from his desk and smiled, *"He's expecting you Count DeGrafe, go on in."* Mason nodded, walking to the huge double doors and stepping inside.

*"You're late,"* came a voice from behind the desk. Mason sat down in a chair across from the desk, *"Council session went over, couldn't be helped."* *"I see, so how is the king these days?"* the man asked, disdain in his voice. *"Annoying as always,"* Mason replied. The man turned his chair around and faced Mason, *"I'm not happy with this situation. His friend should have never lived, let alone stop the ceremony. Hatch's incarceration is deplorable, and I will not be told where my ships can and cannot be by anyone!"* Mason sighed, staring at the man, *"Nickolas doesn't do what you expect. Somehow he's always coming up with something new. I never expected he'd put Kholath under his protection."* *"Well he has, so what are we to do about it?"* the man seethed.

Mason shifted uncomfortably in his seat, *"I can speak with him. Try to change his mind."* The man shook his head, *"I'm tired of talking. I want action."* *"Such as?"* Mason asked. The man grinned, sending chills down Mason back, *"I've got a little surprise brewing. May be just what we need."* *"Ohh, what kind of surprise?"* Mason asked, deeply interested. The man waved his hand, *"It's of no concern to you. You will know when it happens."* Mason nodded, knowing better than to push the man for an explanation. He watched as the man leaned back in his oversized chair and laced his fingers over his large chest, *"I hear you're staying in the palace now. Care to tell me what that's about?"* Mason nonchalantly leaned back, *"I seem to have gained favor with the queen. She asked that I stay. I believe she misses her husband, and finds comfort in having family near. Either way, it offers me the opportunity to stay close to the king, find out what his plans are, maybe gain some information that would be useful for us."*

The man stared at him for a long moment before he spoke, *"Count Degrafe, do you believe your nephew to be the fulfillment of the prophecy?"* Mason was taken aback by the question, but quickly covered it, *"Some believe him to be. I'm not sure."* *"We can't have that prophecy come to pass, you understand that don't you?"* he asked. Mason scoffed, *"Of course."* *"Good, I'm glad we're on the same page. See you soon,"* the man said, turning his chair back around. Mason got up and headed out of the office, glad to be leaving.

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"Hey girly," A.J. said, walking into the room. Marie smiled, "Hey." A.J. plopped down next to her, looking over at Brian, "Still sleepin huh?" She nodded. He took her hand and smiled, "It can't be much longer. I mean how much can a person sleep anyway?" She smiled, "I hope you're right." "Trust me," he grinned, "I know these things."

"Don't believe a word he says," Kevin teased, coming in. "Hey now old man!" A.J. protested. Kevin raised his eyebrows, "Old? I am not old." A.J. leaned close to Marie, "That's what old people say." She laughed, looking up at Kevin. "Yeah yeah, just wait Bone. You'll be old someday," Kevin chuckled, sitting on the edge of the bed, "Ain't that right Bri?" "Kev, I don't think he's gonna answer ya," A.J. said. "He might, never know. He's probably tired of hearing your sorry ass voice anyway," the older man teased. "Sorry ass voice? I have you know my voice is sexy," A.J. protested. This caused both Marie and Kevin to double over with laughter. "Yeah, laugh it up. You know it's true," A.J. smiled.

Kevin suddenly stopped laughing, feeling pressure on his hand. He looked down and watched Brian's hand in his. Slowly, deliberately his fingers closed around his hand and squeezed. "Oh my God! Bri? Bri, open your eyes!" Kevin pleaded. Marie and A.J. quickly moved to the bed. "What is it?" A.J. asked. Kevin looked at them, tears in his eyes, "He just squeezed my hand." "Alex, go get Cameron," Marie instructed, sitting on the other side and taking Brian's other hand in hers. A.J. ran from the room in search of the doctor.

"Brian? Baby, can you hear me?" she asked, searching his face. Slowly she felt his fingers close around her hand. "Oh baby, please open your eyes," she cried, tears flowing freely down her cheeks. "Come on Brian, open em, you can do it," Kevin urged. Time seemed to stand still as the two watched his face, praying his eyes would open to the two seas of blue they loved so much. Marie almost screamed when Brian scrunched up his nose and moved his head to the side. "Come on cuz," Kevin pleaded. Marie leaned closer to his face, gently stroking his cheek, "Brian, it's time to wake up honey." Ever so slowly his eyes opened. He blinked a few times before his eyelids fell shut again. Marie smiled, "You always were hard to wake up. Come on baby, look at me."

Brian fought to open his eyes once more. His vision was blurry and he wasn't sure where he was. He blinked a few times, his vision clearing. Marie was there, smiling at him through her tears. He stared at

her for a moment, wondering if he was still dreaming. He tried to talk, but couldn't, becoming frightened and squeezing her hand tighter. "Shhh, it's alright," she soothed, "You're on a ventilator, that's why you can't speak." Brian felt the tears leave his eyes, running hot down the side of his face. He tried to reach up, wanting to hold her in his arms, but was too weak. His arms only making it a short distance before falling back to the bed. Marie leaned down, scooping him into her arms and holding him tight, "I love you so much," she whispered.

Brian wanted so much to wrap his arms around her, tell her how much he loved her, but the only thing he could do was relax in her embrace. He glanced over, seeing Kevin sitting next to him smiling like the Cheshire cat and wiping away his own tears. Marie finally relinquished her hold on him, moving so Kevin could lean down and hug him. "I'm so glad you're back Bri," he said, his voice breaking. After Kevin released him, Brian moved his hand to Marie's taking it in his. All he could do was stare at her, thanking God in his heart that they were back together.

A.J. and Cameron came into the room, stopping in their tracks as Brian stared at them. Cameron smiled, walking over, *"Good to see you awake Brian. Are you in any pain?"* Slowly Brian shook his head. *"Good, you've had us all a little worried,"* Cameron admitted, as he checked over Brian's monitors, *"I'll be back in a little while. Call me if he starts hurting before it's time for his next dose."* Marie nodded, as Cameron left the room. "Dude, you have no fucking idea how glad I am to see you!" A.J. smiled. Brian tried to smile, but found it hard with the tubes in his mouth. He lifted his hand a little from the bed and pointed at A.J. A.J. grinned, "See he's glad to see me too!" Kevin glanced over his shoulder at the younger man, "I think he was pointing at the door. As in, you annoy me, get out," he teased. Marie giggled, watching Brian as he tried to laugh, but couldn't. A.J. flipped Kevin the bird and walked over next to Marie, "You weren't kicking me out where ya?" Brian stared at him for a moment, a mischievous look appeared in his eyes as he nodded. Kevin and Marie burst out laughing at the shocked look on A.J.'s face. After a moment he realized Brian was joking with him, and laughed, "Yup Rok, you're definitely back. I'll go find D and Nicky, let them know the good news."

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Mason walked around a corner, seeing Nick, Howie and A.J. hurrying down the hall. He ran to catch up, *"Nickolas, can I speak with you?"* Nick stopped, turning around, *"Can it wait? Brian just woke up."* Mason shook his head, *"No, it's important."* Nick sighed, turning back to the guys, "Go on, I'll be there in a minute." Howie put his hand on Nick's shoulder, "Don't let him keep you too long." Nick smiled, "I won't, promise." He watched as the two hurried on down the hall towards the medical ward.

*"I won't take long," Mason started, speaking in a whisper, "I just needed to warn you." Nick turned to face him, "Warn me?" "Yes, the higher ups in Interstellar are planning something. A surprise for you, they said," Mason whispered. "What kind of surprise?" Nick asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer. His uncle shook his head, "I don't know. They wouldn't tell me, and I couldn't ask without raising their suspicion. Just be careful. Keep Rowland with you, even in the palace." Nick ran his hand through his hair, "I can't keep him with me all the time, but I'll be careful. Thanks," he said, turning to go down the hall. Mason watched him go, frightened for his safety.*

## Chapter 66

Ana walked into Brian's room, smiling. Marie looked up at her, "Hey, what's got you so happy?" Ana grinned, blushing slightly, "Nothing," she sing-songed. Brian watched the two friends, wondering what the looks between them meant. It'd been days since he'd woken up. Cameron had taken him off the ventilator, and he was improving greatly. He was still weak, and slept often, but he felt better than he had in a long time. "You're blushing," he pointed out, only making Ana blush more. Marie laughed, scooping up some more soup for Brian, "Finish your soup baby." Brian looked at her, "You two are keeping something from me aren't you?" Both girls smiled, and giggled. "It's a girl thing," Ana laughed. Brian smiled, looking between the two before he took the spoonful Marie offered him, "Honey, you should eat too," he said, looking at her with concern. Marie shook her head, "I'm not hungry." "But you've barely eaten all day. That can't be good for the baby," he protested.

Marie bit her lip and looked down, her emotions coming to life. Ana glanced over at her, shocked that she hadn't told Brian yet. "Um, I just remembered I need to go finish something for the queen. I'll come back later," she said, giving Marie a 'tell him' look as she left the room. Brian watched her leave, "That was odd." Marie looked up at him, trying her best to hide her emotions, "What?" "That Ana would come in and just leave like that. She always stays," he said, looking at his wife. "Well she forgot to do something for the queen, you heard her," she stammered, scooping up another bite for him. Brian pushed the spoon away, staring deep into her eyes, "What's wrong?" "Nothing sweetie, now finish your soup," she answered, looking back down. Brian pushed himself to sit up more in the bed and took her chin in his hand, gently lifting it, "You're upset. Please tell me why."

Marie averted her eyes from his piercing blues as a few tears escaped and trailed down her soft cheeks. Brian took her hand in his and squeezed it. Her behavior was scaring him, "Marie honey, what is it?" She sniffed, wiping the tears from her face. She had to tell him. She'd been avoiding it until now, but she couldn't keep it from him any longer. "Um ... I need to tell you something," she started, her voice soft and small. Brian watched as she struggled with her words, more tears flowing down her face. "Something happened when you were gone," she whispered. He squeezed her hand tighter, searching her eyes, "What baby?" Marie stared at him with so much loss in her eyes, "I um ..... I lost our baby." Brian felt his heart sink to his stomach and hot tears stung his face. He stared at his wife for a moment, so shocked he couldn't find any words. "I'm sorry Brian," she apologized through her tears, "I'm so sorry."

Brian forced himself to move. He grabbed her and pulled her to him, holding her tight as they both cried.

"Honey, it's OK. It's not your fault," he whispered. "I-I don't know what h-happened," she bawled, "Everything was fine .... then it happened." Brian smoothed her hair, "Oh honey, I'm so sorry. You're alright though?" he asked, suddenly frightened for her health. Marie pulled back and looked at him, nodding. He managed a smile through his tears, "Then we'll be OK." She looked back down, biting her lip, "It was a little girl." Brian leaned down, catching her eyes with his, "Then we'll have another little girl someday," he smiled. She nodded, feeling a sense of relief come over her. Silently she'd been dreading telling Brian because she thought he might blame her in some way. She knew it was stupid to think that, but she couldn't help it. Brian reached up and wiped her tears away, "I love you Marie." She smiled, falling into his embrace, "I love you too Brian."

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Nick sat in his office, staring at the paperwork on his desk. He and Ana has spent all morning in the cave, and now he couldn't concentrate on a thing. His mind kept taking him back to their time together. A wide grin plastered itself on his face, as he chewed on his lower lip. "Looks like someone had a good morning," Kevin teased, walking in. Nick jumped slightly, then blushed, "Um .. Yeah it was nice." Kevin grinned at the younger man, "Nice huh? So what'd you do this morning?" Nick shrugged, looking everywhere but his older brother's eyes, "Nothing really. Took a long walk in the garden, just enjoyed my day off, ya know." Kevin laughed, sitting down on the edge of the desk, "I think I do know, and it has nothing to do with taking a walk."

Nick looked up at him, arching his eyebrows, "Just what do you think you know?" Kevin shook his head, and moved to sit in the chair across from the desk, "Nick, it's not that hard to figure out. I just ran into Ana in the hall. She had the same goofy smile on her face that you had when I walked in here," he laughed, "So, how long you two been doin the happy dance?" Nick's eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open. Quickly he waved his hand and the door to his office slid shut. "Jesus Kevin, just fucking announce it to the world why don't ya?!" he said, flustered. Kevin laughed, "Sorry man, but it's not gonna take a genius to figure out what's going on. All anyone has to do is look at you two." Nick sighed, "That obvious huh?" The older man nodded, "Clear as day."

Nick shook his head, "What am I suppose to do Kev? I love her." "I know that kiddo, but you know if you guys get caught....." Kevin started. "I know, believe me I know," Nick interrupted. "All I'm saying is just be careful," Kevin said, "Love can blind you, and you guys are starting to really be obvious. I just wanted to warn ya. If I've noticed it, who else has seen it?" Nick nodded his head, "K, thanks. We'll be more careful." Kevin grinned at him, "On a more personal note, I'm happy for ya man. She's a great girl." Nick laughed, "Thanks ... and Kev? The happy dance? Really dude, you gotta get a better saying,"

he giggled.

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Brian lay in his bed, Marie in his arms. She had told him everything that had happened, eventually crying herself to sleep next to him. He held her close, hating what she'd gone through without him. He should've been there for her, but was glad that A.J. had been. He made a note to thank his friend the next time he saw him. If A.J. hadn't been there, he wasn't sure how Marie would've gotten through it. He seemed to be her safety when Brian was gone.

Cameron walked into the room, a syringe filled with blue in his hand. He smiled at the two as he injected the liquid into Brian's IV. *"Cameron, how long before I get off this stuff?"* Brian asked. The doctor sighed, *"It will be a while Brian. You're still too weak to start weaning you off just yet."* Brian's face fell, *"Please Cameron. I don't like being on this stuff. I hate knowing that I'm depending on that shot every four hours to make me feel better."* *"I know Brian, but you're still too weak. You wouldn't be able to handle the withdrawals right now,"* Cameron replied. Brian sighed as the drug hit his system, washing him with that familiar relaxing feeling. *"Get some rest,"* Cameron said, heading for the door. Brian watched him go, then wrapped his arms around his wife and settled next to her. He was asleep in moments.

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Nick sat straight up in bed, gasping for air. Slowly the images from his dream left him and he looked around. It was the middle of the night, the moon hidden behind the clouds. He wrapped his arms around himself and fought to calm down. He was trembling with fear as tiny beads of sweat trickled from his forehead. Taking a deep breath, he got up and walked out to the balcony, staring up at the clouds. He frowned, not being able to see the stars. He grabbed the railing and looked out over the city lights. He was calming down, but the fear was still there, just like it'd been for the past several nights. Again he was left to determine if this was just a dream or something more. He prayed with all his heart it was just a nightmare, otherwise .....

The sound of his console beeping drew his attention back inside the room. He crossed the plush carpet and hit the button. Tamara's image met him, "Nick, I'm sorry to wake you." He shook his head, "I was awake. What's up?" "We've found the manufacturing plant," she said. "Where?" he asked, the ever

present fear tingling down his spine. "It's in the Keys," she answered, "Tom and I are going to check it out in the morning." "The Keys? The Florida Keys?" he asked. "Yes, from what we've gathered, there's an ingredient that only grows in the waters here," she said. Nick nodded, "Be careful." The agent smiled at him, "We will. We'll call as soon as we can and let you know what we found out." "Thanks," he said. "Nick, are you alright?" she asked. "Yeah, just tired. Haven't gotten much sleep lately," he admitted. "Alright then, I'll let you go. Talk to you tomorrow," she said. "K, night," he said, switching off the console.

Nick leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face. He was trembling again. "Get a grip Carter.. It's just a damn dream," he told himself, going back over to the bed. He sat down and stared out the balcony doors, "Please let it be a dream," he whispered, before grabbing a pillow and hugging it to himself, laying back down.

## Chapter 67

Tamara stepped out of the car into the cool Florida morning. There was a stiff breeze, and it played havoc with her hair. She glanced at the building as Tom rounded the car and they made their way inside. Together they walked up to the secretary and flashed their badges. "Agents Dawson and Neely. We'd like to speak with the person in charge," Tom said. "Y-yes sir, just one second," the young brunette said, grabbing the phone. After a moment she hung up, looking back at them, "If you'll take the elevator to the top floor, Mr. Lawrence will see you." Both agents nodded as they walked to the elevator.

Tamara glanced back at the secretary before stepping onto the elevator, she was already on the phone. "Probably already spreading the news," she surmised. Tom smiled, "Probably." "So we playing this the way we talked?" she asked. He sighed, "I guess. I see no reason to deviate from the plan." "What if we're wrong?" Tamara asked. He shrugged, "We blame old files and get the hell out," he said as the doors opened and they stepped off.

They walked to the office at the end of the hall. They once again flashed their badges and waited while the secretary there called into her boss's office. "Mr. Lawrence will see you now," the woman said. Tom opened the door, letting Tamara walk in first. "Hello, to what do I owe this unexpected visit," the tall man behind the desk asked as he stood up offering his hand to the agents. Tom shook it, "We've been looking into some old files. Our supervisor wanted us to check on the manufacturing, see what's going on these days." "I see," Mr. Lawrence said as he sat back down, gesturing for the two to do the same, "It's been a long time since anyone from the 'agency' has paid us a visit." "Well, we're here to remedy that," Tamara smiled, "Forgive us, we're working with old information here, but you're still manufacturing Krystal, is that right?"

"Yes," Mr. Lawrence answered. "And how often do you send a shipment?" she asked. "Twice a month," he offered. "I see," she said, writing in her notebook. "Now this Krystal, is it strictly for recreation, or are there still properties of mind control in it?" she went on. The man laughed, "You do have old information don't you?" The agents glanced at one another. "Yes, I'm afraid we do," Tom admitted, "I assume the mind control aspect didn't work out?" Mr. Lawrence shook his head, "No. Never could perfect it. What we send now is just a drug, like any other. It keeps them happy, and gives us some security." Tamara smiled, "They won't attack us cause we're the only suppliers." "Exactly," he affirmed.

"Mr. Lawrence, is there an anti-Krystal available?" Tom asked. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Say

someone is addicted to Krystal. Do we have a drug that will pull them off it quicker than them just de-toxing?" he clarified. "We developed one, but we don't manufacture it," he answered. "Why not?" Tamara asked. "No use for it," he said. Tom bit his lip, "I think we have a use for it now." "Ohh?" Lawrence asked, raising his eyebrow. Tom nodded, "It seems that Krystal doesn't just work on Angels. We've recently found out that it's hit the markets here, and it's becoming an epidemic." "That's impossible," Mr. Lawrence said, "We ship everything out. Nothing is kept here." "We believe some of it is being shipped back in," Tamara added, "We need to get the antidote distributed before it really becomes a problem."

"Well those double-crossing aliens," Lawrence muttered, "Trying to hurt us with the very stuff we invented." Tom smiled, "It seems so. How soon can you get a batch of the antidote ready?" The man sighed, "I'm not sure. I'll have to consult the techs, and then we'll have to add some lines." "Is there a way to make the antidote look like the real thing? We need these people to take it, but not realize that they are," Tamara asked. Lawrence nodded, "I think there is, yeah." "Alright, get with your people and I'll be in contact with you," Tom said, as the two stood up. "How many people are we talking about here?" Lawrence asked. Tom and Tamara glanced at one another. "A lot. We don't know how it got this bad without us catching it, but we'll need you to make just as much antidote, as Krystal," Tom replied. "Damn," the man muttered. "Indeed," Tamara said, "We'll contact you tomorrow." Lawrence nodded, seeing them to the door. "And Mr. Lawrence, you cannot let anyone know about this. We aren't sure how the stuff is getting back in, but this has to be strictly between the three of us," Tom said. "Oh of course," Lawrence said, "I should have what you're looking for when you call." "Thank you," Tamara said as the two left the office.

They waited until they were in the privacy of their car before speaking to one another. "Did that seem a little to easy to you?" Tamara asked. Tom sighed, "Yeah." "That's what I thought too," she said, pulling her cell phone out and dialing a number. "Agent Dawson here, the seed is planted. Keep your ears open," she said, then hung up. "If he tries to contact anyone, we'll know," she said as they pulled out of the parking lot. "I hope this works," Tom muttered. She smiled at him, "You doubt our acting skills?" He chuckled, "I knew that school play was preparing me for things to come." She shook her head and smiled, "I hope it works too, otherwise we're screwed." He nodded, "And so is Nick."

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Nick stumbled and dropped his sword. "You alright?" Rowland asked. Nick wiped the sweat from his forehead and walked to the side of the room, grabbing a bottle of water and taking a long drink before he answered. "I'm OK. I'm just tired, I guess," he said. Rowland stared at him, "You aren't sleeping?"

Nick shook his head, lifting his hand. His sword rose from the ground and floated across the room, landing perfectly in his outstretched hand. "Is something wrong?" Rowland asked, going over and getting his own drink. Nick sighed, sliding down the wall and sitting in the floor, "I keep having nightmares. They're really freaking me out." Rowland arched his eyebrow, "Are you sure that's all they are? Nightmares?" Nick shrugged, biting his lower lip, "I dunno."

The older man sat down next to him, "What are they?" Nick shook his head, "I can't talk about them." Rowland could see the fear in his eyes, and the tremble that suddenly appeared in the young man's hands. "They disturb you that much?" he asked. Nick sighed, looking down at his hands, "Yeah. They scare me to death." "Have you talked with the queen about them?" the guard asked. "No, I don't want to worry her," Nick admitted. "Your highness, if I may. The queen has a great deal of knowledge about a lot of things. She could help you determine if this is real or just a dream," Rowland said. Nick smiled, looking up at the man, "You've known her for a long time?" Rowland nodded, "Years. She can help you with this." "Alright, I'll speak with her," Nick said, standing back up, "You want to finish?" The guard smiled, standing, "Only if you want to get beaten again." Nick laughed, "Hey now! I'm doing as good as you." Rowland smiled at the younger man, lifting his sword to the ready, "So you are, my king."

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"Easy," Kevin said, following Brian down the hall. Brian looked up at his cousin, "Kev, how am I suppose to do this with you hovering over me?" "Sorry, I just don't want you to fall," he said. Brian rolled his eyes, "Kev, I'm a big boy. A fall is not gonna hurt me." "Depends on where you fall," Kevin protested, always having to have the last word. Brian smiled, as he pushed his IV down the hall in front of him. Cameron had just started letting him out of the bed to take short walks, and though he was glad to get out of the room, Kevin was driving him nuts! He understood the older man was just concerned, and his heart was in the right place, but still. Enough was enough.

"Hey cuz, isn't there something else you could be doing besides babysitting me?" he asked, a smile on his face. "You don't want me here?" Kevin asked, a hurt expression on his face. "Uh, it's not that man. It's just that, um, you're turning into my dad," Brian said as he rounded the corner to his room. "It's not that I don't appreciate it, cause I do. It's just that it gets to be a little overbearing sometimes," he went on, sitting down on the edge of his bed. Kevin took the IV cart and put it back where it belonged, "Sorry Bri, can't help it. I feel responsible for ya, being the only family you got here. Besides, you know if Jackie and Harold were here they'd do the same thing." Brian laughed, settling himself in the bed, "Yeah they would. Just um, try not to be so fatherly on me, K? Save that for when you have a kid of your own." Kevin laughed, sitting down, "I'll try cuz, but I'm not promising anything." Brian smiled,

"Wouldn't expect ya to."

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"Isn't this nice?" A.J. asked. Marie smiled, "Yes Alex, it is." The two walked through the garden, admiring the many plants. "I don't see how you stayed all cooped up in the palace," A.J. went on, "I'm glad you came out with me." "Well it was either this, or listen to you whine for hours on end," she laughed, "this was easier." He smiled, "I guess so. So Bri seems to be doing a lot better." "Yeah, pretty soon they'll move him," she said. A.J. stopped and faced her, "Move him where?" "Detox," she answered. "Ohh," he said, continuing on, looking down at his shoes.

Marie watched him for a moment, "Alex? Is something wrong?" He looked up, "Uh, not really. I was just thinking." "Bout what?" she asked, pulling him over to a bench and sitting down. He sighed, looking up at the cloudless sky, "What I went through." Marie looked at him confused, "What you went through?" He nodded, "See, back home I kinda went through an addiction. The fame and all the pressure kinda built up and I just couldn't handle it. I started drinking and partying, anything to fill that void I had inside. It got way outta hand, and I ended up in re-hab for a while." "Oh Alex, I didn't know," she confessed. He smiled at her, "It's OK. Probably the best thing I've ever done. Got my life back. But, going through it was hell. I hate that Bri's gonna have to face that."

Marie nodded, "I'm not looking forward to it. It's gonna be hard on all of us." "Yeah, I remember begging and pleading with anyone who would listen to just give me a drink. Just a little bit to get me through," he said, "It's gonna be hard to see him like that." "Yes it is," she admitted. He reached over and took her hand, "He'll get through it though. And I'll be here when it gets to hard for you, K?" "Thanks Alex," she smiled, "Bri's gonna need you too." "I know," he said, "And I'll do whatever I can for him." She squeezed his hand, "Bri's so lucky to have you all as friends." A.J. beamed, "Yup he is, ain't he?"

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"You think it'll work?" Nick asked. "We hope so," Tom said. Nick sighed, "It'd be great if it did. Yeah, keep me posted on what happens." "We will Nick," Tom said, "Talk to you soon." Nick nodded as the hologram of Tom disappeared from his console. He leaned back in his chair letting the agents idea sink in. If it worked, it'd be the answer to his problems. Well, most of them anyway.

He checked his watch, seeing he was late for dinner. Quickly he got up and headed out of his room. "Hey Nick, wait up," Howie called. Nick held the doors for the elevator as Howie sprinted towards him. "What's up D?" Nick asked, once the doors closed. "Not much, been working with the cooks a little," he answered. Nick laughed, "Ohh, so I have you to blame if the foods bad huh?" "Nope, you have me to thank if it's good," Howie smiled.

Nick sighed, leaning against the wall. "You tired?" Howie asked. "Yup," he replied, "Being king kinda sucks in the sleep department. I keep thinking about what I need to do the next day, and all the things I'm responsible for." "Yeah I bet," Howie said, "Nick, I don't think I've said this, but what you're doing here ..... I'm amazed." Nick smiled as the doors opened and the two headed down the hall, "Yeah right D." "No man, I'm serious. I could never do this, and I guess I never wanted to think of you as anything other than my little brother, but man, you're so much more than that. You've grown up, and you're wise beyond your years here. The things you've done, the decisions you've made, it's like you were born to do this," Howie said. Nick blushed, "Thanks D, but ruler of a planet was definitely not on my list of career opportunities." "Well, you're damn good at it," the older man replied. Nick put his hand on Howie's shoulder as they entered the dining room, "Well, let's just hope I stay that way."

## Chapter 68

"Stay what way?" Kevin asked, turning in his seat as the two sat down. Nick grinned, "Why, good looking, of course." Everyone at the table laughed as the servants started placing the first course on the table. Nick noticed Mason and Anthony were eating with them. For some reason that brought a smile to his face. The only ones missing were Brian and Marie.

Nick dug into his soup, listening to the small talk. Everyone seemed relaxed. He wished he could feel that. Even in the daytime his dreams haunted him. A vision here and there, just a second of one, would unnerve him completely. He put his elbow on the table and leaned into his hand, holding his spoon with the other. LaDonna noticed his posture and leaned closer to him, "*Something wrong?*" He looked up at her and smiled, "*No, I'm just tired.*" His mother studied him for a moment. Nick shook his head, "*Don't worry, I'm fine. Just got a lot on my mind.*" She grinned back at him, "*Don't lie to me Nickolas. Rowland came to see me today.*" Nick bit his lip and sighed, "*Ohhh.*" "*Yes, you want to talk about the dreams?*" she asked. He shook his head, "*Not here. Maybe later, K?*" "*Alright,*" she said, going back to her own meal.

Nick went on automatic pilot. He listened as Ana and A.J. were talking to Anthony about a new club in the city. Howie was listening intently to that conversation as well. Kevin was talking to Mason about the council sessions, his mother chiming in every so often. Nick sighed taking another bite of his soup. He had to get some rest, he was starting to feel overworked, exhausted. And come to think of it, a bit nauseous too. He put his spoon down and sat up a little as a wave of nausea came over him. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to will the sickness away. Opening them back up he blinked a few times, staring down at his half eaten bowl of soup. Something caught his eye and he picked his spoon back up and began digging through the bowl until he got the object on the spoon. The nausea was getting worse, as he finally realized what it was he was looking at. A piece of asparagus. "Oh God," he said, looking up at everyone, "Stop eating!"

Everyone stopped their conversations in mid sentence and looked up at him. "What is it?" Kevin asked, seeing the beads of sweat appearing on his forehead. "There's asparagus in this," he announced, biting his lip as the nausea grew worse. "So," A.J. said. Howie clamped his hand over his mouth, reaching over and slapping A.J. on the side of the arm, "It's poison to them you idiot!" A.J. looked back at Nick, fear on his face, "Oh fuck. How much did you eat?" Nick shook his head, already standing up to leave the room, "I-I don't .....make sure no one else has any ...." he blurted before darting out of the room.

Immediately LaDonna, Mason, Kevin and Ana all got up to go after him. *"Ana, come with me,"* LaDonna instructed, leaving the men at the table. Ana quickly followed her out of the room. "You guys aren't feeling sick are you?" Kevin asked. Both Mason and Anthony shook their heads, as they looked through their soup for the offending vegetable. "D, you were working in the kitchen, you didn't put that in there did you?" A.J. asked. Howie furiously shook his head, "No. I never even saw any the whole time I was in there." "Then how did it just get in Nick's and no one else's?" Kevin asked, having dug through his own bowl and Ana's, not finding any. Mason closed his eyes, thinking of the surprise Interstellar was cooking up. It couldn't be this could it? To poison the king? He stood up, *"I'm going to go see how Nickolas is doing."* Kevin watched him go, a little suspicious, "Anthony, how are Nick and Mason getting along these days?" *"Well, why do you ask?"* the young man replied. Kevin shrugged, "No reason."

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Mason walked down the hall. He didn't have to look far for Nick. He had found the closest facility and was hunched over the toilet, Ana on one side of him and the queen on the other. Mason cringed as Nick wretched violently. A servant came in carrying a wet cloth and handed it to Ana. She took it and proceeded to wipe Nick's face with it as soon as he had stopped emptying his guts into the bowl. *"Is he alright?"* Mason asked. LaDonna looked up and half smiled, *"He'll be alright. I think he got rid of what he'd eaten."* Mason grimaced at the thought, not one to handle being around sick people very well, *"OK, if you need me I'll be in the hall,"* he said, leaving the room.

The queen turned back to Ana and smiled, *"Men."* Ana laughed, as Nick leaned over and started getting sick again, *"This is why women are the caretakers."* *"Very true,"* LaDonna replied, rubbing her son's back as he heaved. Nick leaned his head on the cool toilet seat, having heaved until there was nothing left. He was freezing, and wanted nothing more than to just go to sleep right there. "Nick, are you done?" Ana asked. "I think," he replied hoarsely. "When you feel like it, we'll take you to your room," she said. Nick nodded, as his mother knelt down next to him, gently brushing a few sweaty strands of hair from his forehead, *"We'll find out who did this."* *"I think I know,"* he said, pushing himself up, just to lean on the nearest wall. Ana and the queen exchanged glances, "Interstellar?" Ana asked. Nick nodded, closing his eyes. *"Nickolas, you can't go to sleep here,"* his mother said. He groaned, holding his hand out for them to help him up. He got to his feet and walked slowly out of the room, meeting Mason in the hall. The older man's face was full of worry, *"Here, let me help you,"* he offered.

Nick was so tired, he didn't care. He leaned on Mason as they entered the elevator to go up to his room. Closing his eyes, he sighed. Mason looked over at LaDonna as he held onto Nick. *"He's going to sleep,"* he whispered, as Nick leaned more heavily on him. The queen nodded as the elevator opened to their

floor. *"Nickolas, you have to walk,"* she coaxed, as they stepped off. Half asleep, Nick walked down the hall, Mason supporting most of his weight. They entered his room, and got him settled in his bed. *"Ana, can you stay with him?"* LaDonna asked. *"Yes, your highness,"* Ana answered, sitting on the edge of the bed, facing a sleeping Nick. *"Good, I'll have one of the servants bring up your meal,"* the queen said as she pulled Mason from the room. Once out in the hall, Mason stopped her, *"Why did you ask her to stay? I could've stayed with him."* LaDonna smiled, *"She is his friend Mason. He feels comfortable with her. He'll tell her if he's not feeling well, whereas with you, he might not just yet."* Mason considered her answer, still feeling like there was something more. LaDonna took his hand in hers and squeezed it, causing him to look up at her, *"Come, let's go finish our meal. He'll be fine."* Mason didn't protest, letting her lead him down the hall, her hand in his.

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Brian sat in his bed, rocking back and forth. He tried to concentrate on the vid, but couldn't. One of the nurses had brought his and Marie's supper in, but the smell of the food just triggered a craving for Krystal. The taste was in his mouth, his stomach churning. He took a shaky breath, looking over at Marie. She had fallen asleep a while ago, and he didn't have the heart to wake her. She'd been so tired, he wanted her to sleep for as long as she could.

He rubbed his face, still rocking back and forth. Why was the craving so bad? He'd just had a dose not that long ago. He shouldn't be feeling this. His eyes darted around the room, looking for something to take his mind off the constant need. He found nothing. Biting his lip, he pushed the button for the nurse, hoping they weren't too loud when they answered. *"Can I help you?"* a voice came over the speaker. *"Yeah, um, can you send Cameron in here please,"* Brian said, steeling a glance at Marie. She stirred, but didn't wake up. *"Yes sir, right away,"* the nurse replied.

Brian pulled his pillow over and hugged it as he rocked. *"Come on Cameron,"* he muttered, as he broke out into a cold sweat. He gripped the pillow tighter, trying to keep his hands from shaking. A wave of pain shot through his stomach, eliciting a whimper from him. Cameron walked in, hearing it. *"Are you alright Brian?"* he asked. Brian shook his head, still rocking back and forth, *"I-I dunno why, but I'm craving it so bad. Please Cameron, I can't take this."* The doctor frowned, pulling Brian's chart from the end of the bed, looking at how long it'd been since his last dose. *"You got the full dose didn't you?"* he asked. *"Y-yes,"* Brian managed. Cameron sighed, causing Brian to look at him. *"I don't like the sound of that. What's going on?"* he asked. *"Your addiction seems to be escalating. You're craving more to do what the lesser doses did. You're building up a tolerance for the drug,"* he explained.

Brian winced as another wave of piercing pain shot through him, *"I don't care what I'm building Cameron, you gotta give me some more. I can't take this."* *"It will be harder to pull you off the drug,"* the doctor said. Brian closed his eyes, trying to find some source of strength to help him. He swallowed hard, glancing over at Marie. Cameron touched his shoulder, bringing his attention back to him. *"Try and lay back,"* he instructed. Brian did as he was told, still squirming around in the bed. He couldn't lay still. He felt like his heart was going to burst out of his chest at any second. Cameron ran a scanner over Brian, seeing his heart rate was increasing with every passing moment. As much as he didn't want to give Brian anymore, he was still too weak. His body was drained of any resources to fight the withdrawals. Brian stifled a moan, looking up at the doctor, *"Please Cameron."* *"Alright, I'll be back in a minute,"* the doctor relented, quickly leaving the room. Brian sat back up and commenced rocking again, *"Hurry, hurry,"* he muttered over and over. He'd never felt so much like dying than he did at this very moment. His skin was crawling, the taste so strong in his mouth.

"Baby?" Marie said, sitting up and noticing Brian's situation. He cringed, not wanting her to see him like this. "Honey, what's wrong?" she asked, moving next to him. "Craving. It's really bad," he replied, not looking at her, "Cam-cameron went to get some more." Marie was worried. It was still another hour before his scheduled dose. She knew what was happening, she'd seen it before. Cameron came back into the room and quickly injected the blue liquid into Brian's IV. Instantly he could feel the drug, and began to calm down, *"Thank you,"* he said, ashamed. Marie pulled her husband into her arms and took up his slow rocking. She could feel his tears on her shoulder, knowing he hated this. "It's alright baby, try and rest," she murmured. Cameron stayed with them, keeping an eye on Brian's heart rate. As Brian drifted to sleep, it returned to normal. Marie gently lay him back in the bed, and situated the blanket before looking up at the doctor, *"This isn't good."* Cameron shook his head, *"He was already on a high dose. This makes his detox that much more difficult."* *"I know,"* she said, her heart dropping, *"If he can detox at all."* Cameron put his hand on her shoulder, not knowing what to say. Finally he shook his head and moved toward the door, *"I'll reschedule his dosage. Call me if you need anything."* Marie nodded, staring at her husband's sleeping face, willing the tears not to come.

## Chapter 69

Ana sat at Nick's desk, looking at his pictures. She'd been with him for a few hours now, and was trying to find something to do to keep from falling asleep herself. She picked up a framed picture and looked at it, smiling. Nick's adoptive family. She was amazed at how much his little brother looked like him, almost the spitting image. So the United States Government could do something right after all. No one looking at that family would've thought that Nick didn't belong. She sat the picture down, picking up the next one. She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing out loud. Nick and Brian together making goofy faces at the camera. Now that was a classic. Nick looked so happy and carefree. She hadn't seen that look on him in a long time. His normal posture now was one of worry and exhaustion. Ana knew he hadn't been sleeping well for some time. She knew he was having horrible nightmares, but he wouldn't discuss them with her. Just the mention of them unnerved him.

She looked up when the door opened and Rowland came in. She placed her finger over her mouth and nodded towards the bed. Rowland nodded, "How is he?" he whispered. "Alright. I haven't seen any ill affects from the food," she answered. "Good, we found the servant that did it," he informed her. Ana's eyebrows raised, "Really? You get anything out of them?" The guard shook his head, "He refuses to talk." Ana put the picture down and sighed, "You know who did this, even Nick knows." "Yes, but we have no tangible proof. We can't just walk into Interstellar headquarters and start arresting people," he replied. "Why not? They deserve it just for what they've done with the Krystal," she smiled. "I agree, but we do still allow free trade," he grinned. "I knew that free trade law was going to come back to haunt us," she said. Rowland laughed, "You were what? Five when that passed?" Ana shrugged, "Six I think." The guard smiled at her and shook his head, he was about to say something when Nick moaned.

Ana walked over to the bed, watching as Nick writhed, mumbling in his sleep. His forehead was damp with sweat, and his breathing erratic. Suddenly he flinched like someone had hit him, "No stop!" he panted. Rowland approached the bed, putting his hand on Nick's shoulder, "Your highness, wake up," he said in a stern voice. Nick flinched again, his eyes flying open and looking wildly around the room for a moment. "It's OK Nick, you were having another nightmare," Ana said, sitting on the edge of the bed. Nick sat up and ran a shaky hand through his hair. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself down before attempting to speak. "How long have I been here?" he asked. "You've been asleep for a few hours," Ana answered. He looked at her confused, "How did I get here? The last thing I remember is puking." "Your uncle brought you up," she said, "Are you feeling better?" "Yeah, I think so," he said, standing up.

"Your highness, we have the servant responsible in the dungeon," Rowland informed him. Nick nodded, "Are they talking?" "No sir," he replied. "Figures," Nick muttered, heading into the bathroom to check his appearance. He came back out a moment later, "Well, why don't we go pay them a visit," he said moving towards the door, Ana and Rowland following close behind.

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"I'm telling you there's something off," Kevin said, sitting on the edge of his bed looking at A.J. and Howie. "Like what?" A.J. asked. The older man shook his head, "I dunno, but there's something fishy about Mason." Howie laughed, "And you're just now noticing that? He's been giving Nicky a hard time since he got here." "That's just it though. Lately the two seem to be getting along," Kevin said. A.J. plopped down in the chair next to the bed, "And that's bad why?"

Kevin thought for a moment, "I don't know, all I know is my gut says something's not right." "Maybe you've just got indigestion," A.J. said, "Ya know old people get that pretty often." "J, will you be serious," Kevin said, annoyed. A.J. shook his head, "Listen Kev, if Nick and Mason are getting along, let it be. Maybe they worked some things out? We don't know. Let's not go sticking our noses in where they don't belong." "I think J's right Kev. If Nick wants to tell us what's up, he will. Otherwise, let's just steer clear," Howie said. Kevin looked up at the two, "Ganging up on me huh?" A.J. playfully slapped his arm, "Naw, just talking ya down. You're too paranoid for your own good man." Kevin laughed, standing up, "I guess. What would I do without you?" "Be bored," Howie said, grinning. "And probably a hell of a lot more sane," A.J. added. "So true," Kevin said, heading for the door, "Let's go down and see Bri for a bit."

The three headed out of the room and down the hall. The elevator opened before they reached it, revealing Mason and LaDonna. They were smiling and holding hands as they stepped off, not realizing the boys were there. When they both looked up, Mason immediately dropped LaDonna's hand. "*Evening boys,*" LaDonna said, as they passed one another in the hall. "Good evening your highness," Howie said. "Lord DeGrafe," Kevin said, nodding. "*Evening,*" Mason said, a guilty expression on his face. "*So where are you off to?*" the queen asked. "Going to see Bri," A.J. replied, "What are you guys doing?" Kevin immediately kicked A.J., glaring at him. "Damn Kev, what crawled up your....?" A.J. started, but was cut off as Howie and Kevin pulled him into the elevator. "Sorry your highness," Howie apologized, "We don't let him out of his cage very often." LaDonna laughed, as the doors closed. "God damnit J, do you even think before you speak?" Kevin asked. A.J. grinned, "Yup. I just wanted to see their reaction." "Reaction? J what the hell are you talking about?" Howie asked. A.J. rolled his eyes, "Don't tell me I'm the only one that saw the hand action there." "No, but what about it?" Kevin said. "I'm tellin ya man, if those two aren't knockin boots they will be soon," A.J. said as the doors opened to the medical ward,

and he stepped off. Howie glanced at Kevin, "You think...?" Kevin shook his head, "I don't even wanna know man."

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Nick stood in the middle of the cell, looking down at the servant. The man was on his knees, his face to the ground in front of him, visibly shaking. Nick bit his lip for a moment, wondering what to do. "Are you afraid?" he asked. "Y-yes your highness," the man replied. "Do you think I'm going to harm you?" Nick asked. The man looked up, then back down again, "I don't know." "Stand up," Nick ordered. Slowly the man got to his feet, his eyes still downcast. "You've been here since I arrived. You do good work, were you not happy here?" Nick asked. "Yes my king," the man said. "Your family lives here in the palace complex, have you not been taken care of?" he asked. The man looked up at him, "Yes your highness, we have." "Then why?" Nick asked. The man looked down again. "Was it money?" Nick asked, watching as the man shook his head. "You will address the king properly," Rowland admonished. Nick held his hand up to the guard and shook his head, then turned his attention back to the man, "Tell me why you did this."

The man shifted his weight back and forth from one foot to the other. Nick stood patiently waiting for him to answer. Finally the man looked up, "I'm sorry my king, but they have my daughter. If I didn't do what they asked, she would be hurt." Nick glanced at Mason, "Who is they?" The man looked back down at his shoes. "I cannot help you if you don't answer my question. Who is they?" Nick asked again. The man sighed, "Interstellar." Nick looked up at Mason, "Release him and find his daughter. From this moment on, no one leaves the palace without a guard, I mean no one. Not the servants, their families, no one." Rowland nodded, leaving the cell. Nick looked back at the servant, "You are free to go. Your daughter will be found and returned to you." The man's mouth dropped open in shock, "You're letting me go? But what I did ... you could have died." Nick smiled, "But I didn't. I don't blame you for wanting to help your daughter. I understand. Now go back to your family." "Y-yes my king," the man said, bowing, then heading for the door, "Thank you."

Nick watched him leave, then sighed. "That was very honorable of you," Ana said. Nick shook his head, "I couldn't punish him for that. Hell I did the same thing when Brian was taken." "Yes, but no one knows that," she said, walking down the hall with him. "I know it, that's enough. I couldn't punish him for something that I was willing to do too," he replied as they entered the elevator. "That's what makes you a good king," she said. Nick shrugged, "I dunno bout that." "You are a good king Nick. Not many would have done what you just did," she told him. Nick shrugged and stared at the doors as the elevator rose. "So what's next?" Ana asked. He bit his lip, looking over at her, "I think it's time I paid a

visit to our friends at Interstellar."

## Chapter 70

Brian stretched and opened his eyes. It was early morning, the suns hadn't even made an appearance yet. He wondered why he was suddenly wide awake, then he noticed him. Brian glanced around the room, seeing Marie was no where in sight. Silently he hoped she had gone back to their room to get some much needed rest. He sat up in the bed and ran his hand through his hair, "How long you been here?" he asked quietly. Nick shrugged, "Awhile." Brian stared at his young friend, the moonlight coming through the window and giving him an eerie glow, "What's wrong?" Nick looked out the window and bit his lip, a trait Brian had come to know as Nicks way of stalling. "*Lights on, dim,*" Brian said, blinking as the lights came on in the room. "Damn Bri," Nick blinked, "Warn me next time." "Sorry," the older man said, adjusting his pillow, "So you gonna tell me what's bothering you, or do I gotta pull it out of ya?"

Nick sighed, looking down at his shoes, "They tried to kill me last night." Brian sat straight up in alarm, "What?! Who's trying to kill you? Are you OK?" Nick held his hands up, "Calm down. I'm fine." "Damn Nick, you don't just walk in here and tell me something like that," Brian said, "Give me a heart attack why don't ya?" "Sorry B," Nick said, with a half grin. "Now tell me what's going on," Brian demanded after he got his heart back under control. "Interstellar. They kidnapped one of the servants' daughters, made him put asparagus in my soup. I got sick, but it wasn't enough to really do any harm," Nick explained, "I just can't figure out why they're doing it." "Trying to kill you?" Brian asked. "No, toying with me," Nick said, shaking his head. Brian rubbed his face, "Wait. You said they tried to kill you, now you're saying they're toying with you? I know I'm blonde Nick, but I'm confused." Nick laughed, despite the seriousness of the conversation, "They're doing both Bri. What they did last night wouldn't have killed me, even if I ate the entire bowl and had seconds. I think they're playing with me. Trying to, I dunno, throw me off something. Kinda like if they keep me worried about what's gonna happen next, then I won't see whatever it is that they're really doing."

Brian nodded, "K, that makes sense. So what do you think they're doing?" Nick stood up and walked over to the window, peering out, "I don't know, and that's what scares me." "So what are you gonna do?" Brian asked. Nick turned around and leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest, "I'm going to see them." "What?! Are you nuts Nick?! That's like walking right into their trap," Brian protested. "I don't have any other choice Bri. I have to show them that they're wasting their time. That whatever it is they've got cooking, I'm gonna find it, and I'm gonna stop it," Nick said. Brian sighed, picking at a stray thread on his blanket, "I understand that Nick, but this could be dangerous for you." "I know," Nick said, walking over and sitting on the edge of the bed, facing his friend, "But staying here and just waiting for what comes next... I think that's even more dangerous." "I don't like this Nick. I've got a bad feeling about it," the older man said. Nick looked down at his hands, not wanting to meet the two

blue pools of concern staring at him. "You've got a bad feeling too, don't you?" Brian asked. Again Nick bit his lip, and silently nodded.

Brian reached out and grabbed his arm, "Then don't go." Nick looked up, "I have to." Brian shook his head, "You're the king, you don't have to do anything if you don't want to." "Bri, I have to do this. It scares me, yes, but everything in me tells me this is why I'm here," Nick explained. "Why you're here? Are you talking about the prophecy?" Brian asked. The younger man shrugged, "I don't know. No one even knows what the damn thing says ...but I feel it in here Bri," he said, covering his heart with his hand, "Dad told me to lead with my heart, and this is what it's telling me to do. Right or wrong, good or bad, I have to do this."

Brian stared at him for several moments, then finally nodded. "I wish I was well enough to go with you," he said. Nick smiled, "Not this time bro. You concentrate on getting better. You can't help me now, but I know you will in the future." Brian raised his eyebrows, "Did you see something?" Nick half smiled, getting up from the bed, "I've seen a lot of things Brian. Now get some sleep." "Nick?" Brian said, stopping him from leaving. "Yeah?" he asked. "Be careful," Brian said. Nick nodded, "I will man, I'll come see you after I get back," he said, turning and walking out of the room.

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Nick stared out the window of the carriage as it meandered through the city. The streets were busy, people on their way to their jobs. As his carriage passed by, many people stopped what they were doing to watch it. *Probably wondering where I'm going*, Nick thought. He sighed, wondering what in the world he was going to say to these people. He looked over at Rowland. He was scanning the crowd, looking for any signs of danger. Always the consummate guard. When the carriage stopped, it was too soon. Nick still didn't know what to say. I mean what do you say to a company that's made it its goal to hurt you? Nick waited as several guards surrounded the carriage before he stepped out, Rowland right behind him.

Several people in the street bowed as he walked past them to the large office building. "Well, this is it," he muttered to himself as he walked into the large lobby. He noticed the secretary behind the desk, and walked up to her, *"I'd like to speak with the person in charge."* She looked up from her work, her face going pale as she quickly dropped from her chair to the floor, *"Your highness! No one said you were coming,"* she stammered. Nick motioned for her to get up, *"That's because no one knew. Now, if I could see the person in charge please."* "Yes, right away," the woman said, quickly making a call and then

leading Nick and his guards to an elevator.

Nick bit his lip as the elevator rose to the top floor. "You're going to make it bleed if you don't stop," Rowland whispered, giving Nick a smile. "Sorry," Nick mumbled, as the doors opened and the group stepped out. They were lead down the hall and into a large office. A young man sat behind a desk. He immediately got up and bowed, *"Your highness, it's an honor to have you. Please go right in."* Nick walked past the man and through the large double doors. It was a large office, making his own at the palace look small. The guards positioned themselves in various places around the room, Rowland staying beside Nick as he approached the desk.

*"To what do I owe this unexpected visit?"* the portly man behind the desk asked. It did not go unnoticed that the man failed to bow to Nick, or address him properly. Nick stood in front of the desk, looking down at the man. He had to be in his early fifty's, his hair greying. The man looked at him impatiently. *"You do know who I am?"* Nick asked, annoyed at the man's attitude. The man stood up, *"The crown tends to give it away. Now, what can I do for you?"* *"You can start by showing your king some respect,"* Nick seethed. *"Oh forgive me,"* the man said, bowing. Nick waited a moment before he gestured for the man to get up. When he finally did, it took the man a couple of tries to get back on his feet. Nick took the opportunity to walk around the man's desk and nose through the papers he had laid out. He could tell the older man was greatly annoyed by this, but he kept quiet.

*"So,"* Nick said, looking at several holograms on the wall, *"care to tell me why you're trying to kill me?"* The man looked stunned, but covered it quickly, *"I don't know what you're talking about."* Nick laughed, *"Really? That's interesting considering my guards retrieved one of my servants' daughters from a house belonging to this very company. Care to explain that?"* *"Your highness, I have no idea what you're talking about. We are a law abiding corporation..."* the man started. *"That makes its money from the downfall of its own people,"* Nick spat, *"You are nothing but drug pushers and bullies."* The older man's face turned red with anger, *"And you are nothing but an outsider!"* Nick had his back to the man, and was thankful for it. It gave him a moment to will away the emotion that heartless statement brought up. Nick cleared his throat and turned around, *"I may be an outsider, but I am still your king. Do not mess with me. Whatever it is you're planing, it would be wise to stop, otherwise your company, and its people will feel my wrath. Is that understood?"*

The man glared at Nick for what seemed like hours. Then a small smile formed on his face, *"Crystal clear, my king."* Nick tossed the papers he was looking at back on the man's desk and headed to the door. *"By the way your highness, how is your friend doing?"* the man asked. Nick turned back. *"Tell me, has he detoxed yet, or is he still addicted?"* the man gloated. Nick could feel his blood pressure reach the

boiling point. With a sweeping gesture of his hand, the man flew into the wall behind him, knocking the breath out of him. Nick crossed the office in two steps and wrapped his hand around the man's throat, squeezing for all he was worth. *"If you so much as mention any of my friends, I'll kill you myself you son of a bitch!"* Nick said through clenched teeth. The man gasped for air as Nick held on for a moment longer, before letting go, and letting the man drop to the floor. *"Stop what you're doing before this turns ugly,"* Nick warned, storming out of the office, his guards following behind him. The man struggled to his feet, rubbing his neck, *"Oh, you don't know how ugly it is, you little prick."*

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Ana ducked through the opening to the cave. Nick had disappeared as soon as he had returned, and she was worried about him. Rowland told her what happened, and she knew he would be here. Only the two knew of the cave, and Nick went there to think. She spotted him sitting on the ground in front of the large painting, staring up at the image of himself. Even from a distance, she could see his tear stained cheeks, and the utterly lost look in his eyes.

Slowly she walked towards him, kneeling down next to him and placing her hand on his shoulder. He didn't move, just kept staring up at the painting. After a few moments he took a shaky breath, "He's right ya know. I am an outsider here," he said in a small voice. "Nick," Ana chided, "You are not. You belong here." He shook his head, looking down at his hands, "I don't belong anywhere." "That's not true," she said, trying to get him to look at her. He sniffed, finally wiping his face, "It is true Ana. I'm too Celestian to fit in on Earth, and I'm too human to fit in here. All my people see is a freak. I don't look like them, and I grew up on the one planet they despise. There is no fitting in here," he argued.

Ana reached over and took his hand in hers, "Not all your people see you as a freak. They see their king, Nick. Most of them adore you." He shook his head, "They adore me because of the prophecy." "They adore you because you are a good king," she corrected. Nick sighed, knowing there was no point in continuing with the conversation. Ana was a lot like his mother, she wouldn't let him degrade himself. Always lifting him up, and telling him how much he meant to her, and to the planet. "I'm sorry Ana, I'm just tired. It's hard acting like I know what the hell I'm doing all the time," he said. She smiled, "We don't expect you to know everything Nick." "Yeah, but you know what I mean," he said. "Yeah," she agreed.

He lay back, suddenly too tired to even sit. Ana looked down at him, "Are you alright?" He nodded, "I'm just really tired, and I can't sleep." "The dreams?" she asked. There was that look again, overwhelming

fear. Nick nodded, averting his eyes. "Tell me," she pleaded. He shook his head, "I can't. I can't even bring myself to say it." "Maybe if you talk about them, it'll help?" she suggested, concern deep in her eyes. Nick shook his head, "I can't. I'm afraid if I say it out loud, that somehow it'll happen." "What if it's the future you're seeing? There may not be a way to stop it," she said.

He sat back up, "I can't Ana, I don't even want to think about them." Gently she reached up and brushed a few stray hairs from his forehead, "Alright, but you know I'm here anytime you need to talk." Nick smiled, "I know. I don't know what I'd do without you." Softly he cupped her cheek, pulling her in for a kiss. As the kiss deepened, their hands found their way around each other. Nick pulled back, staring at the beauty in his arms. He smoothed her hair back, then unzipped her jumpsuit. Ana let the material fall from her shoulders, and sighed as Nick planted soft kisses down her neck. She pulled on his shirt, and he raised up just enough for her to pull it off, then he went back to his sweet torture. Carefully he lowered her down to the cave floor. Nick tugged on her jumpsuit, and she raised her hips, allowing him to pull the garment off. "You are so beautiful," he murmured, as he gazed at her. She smiled, and reached for him. Nick let her pull him down, welcoming her tongue into his mouth. He let his fingers glide over her skin, barely touching it. Ana moaned as he ran his hands up her arms and interlaced their fingers. "I love you so much," Nick said, staring deeply into her eyes. Ana smiled, her body tingling at the words spoken, "I love you too Nick, always."

# Chapter 71

Ana opened her eyes and looked around. Nick was still asleep next to her, his arm over her waist. She stared at his face, knowing it was only a matter of time before the nightmares haunted him again. She lay back on the pillow, a smile crossing her face. At some point in their love making, they had ended up in the king's chambers, trading the cold cave floor for the warmth of the king's bed. It still amazed her, the love she felt from Nick. It was pure and endless. Somehow she knew that they would be together forever, nothing could part them now. Nick moaned, and she looked over. His face was contorted in a frown, his breath becoming haggard. Ana's heart hurt for the torment he was going through. "No, look out!" Nick mumbled, as his body shook with what Ana could only believe was sheer terror.

She reached out and shook him, "Nick, wake up." He writhed in the bed, so consumed in his dreams that he didn't hear her. "Nick, please... wake up," she said, shaking him harder. "No!" he screamed, sitting straight up in the bed, gasping for air. Ana sat up and gently ran her hand up his arm, letting it rest on his bare shoulder, "Shhh, it's OK." He looked at her, calming a bit as he caught his breath, "How long have we been here?" "I don't know, I just woke up myself," she admitted, "Are you alright?" He half smiled at her, "As Ok as I get these days." "Nick, you really need to talk to someone about those dreams," she told him. He sighed, and nodded, "I know....they're getting worse." Concern filled her eyes, as he tried to cover his own fear with a smile, "Come on, we don't want anyone wondering where we are," he said, pulling the covers back to get out of the bed. Suddenly he froze, looking back at Ana. She had the same look in her eyes. "Someone's here," she whispered.

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Brian grabbed his pillow and squeezed with all his might. He was hurting, but he didn't want anyone to know. They'd already upped his dosage once. He couldn't let them do it again, not if he had any hope at all of getting off the drug. He had convinced Marie to take some time for herself. She'd spent almost every waking hour with him since he'd returned, and he knew that had to be draining on her. So he told her to leave and gave her strict orders to do something fun, and not come back for a few hours. He was so glad she'd agreed. At least she wasn't here to see him like this.

He winced as a wave of pain ran through his stomach, and the ever present taste was back in his mouth. He had to do something to get his mind off how much he needed another hit. He threw the blankets off himself and sat up. Slowly he slid from the bed to the floor, holding onto the side of the bed until he got

his bearings. He grabbed his IV cart and headed out of his room. Slowly he walked down the halls, managing to smile at the nurses he passed. He could do this, act like nothing was wrong. He'd done it a million times before. When the guys were on tour and he was sick, or just didn't feel like being social, but he had to. Along with the rest of the guys he'd mastered the art of smiling through his pain. He laughed, remembering the time he had the stomach flu, but still was made to perform, a puke bucket on each side of the stage. Those were the bad times, and he'd gotten through them, he could get through this ... he hoped.

He rounded the corner, running right into A.J. "Whoa, where's the fire bro?" A.J. asked. "Nowhere," Brian replied flatly. A.J. stared at his friend as he continued down the hall. As much as Brian was trying to hide it, he could see the tell tell signs of someone in need. Brian's hands were shaking, and he kept licking his lips. His eyes seemed glazed and wild at the same time. "Bri, you alright?" he asked, walking beside him. "I'm great J, how bout you?" he said sarcastically. A.J. held his hands up, "Jeeze, just asking a question Rok, no need to jump all over me," he laughed, trying to lighten the mood. Brian winced, holding on tighter to the cart. His knuckles were white. "Bri, how long before your next dose?" A.J. asked. "Too long," Brian panted, desperately trying to keep his legs from buckling underneath him. A.J. saw his struggle and wrapped an arm around his waist, "Come on, lets get back to your room."

Brian pulled away from A.J.'s grasp, "Just leave me alone!" "Brian, you need help," A.J. said. The older man shook his head, backing away from him, "No, I need a damn drug J! I hate this!" he screamed, tears spilling over his cheeks. A.J. sighed, his heart breaking, wondering if this is what the guys went through when he was drinking. "I know Bri, but you won't always need it," he said calmly. Brian sank to the floor, hugging the bottom of the cart, "At this rate I will." The younger man knelt down next to him, "What do you mean?" "They keep upping my dose. I keep needing more. I might not get off it," Brian cried. "Fuck," A.J. muttered. "Yeah fuck," Brian sniffed, "I want off it so bad, but I can't take feeling like this. I feel like I'm gonna die." "I know Bri, I've been there, remember?" A.J. said, reaching out and helping him up, "Come on, lets get back to your room." Brian grabbed his stomach and grimaced as another piercing wave shot through him. A.J. shouldered his weight, "I got ya, easy." "You gotta help me J," Brian pleaded. "I will Bri," the younger man promised, "Now come on, we'll get there one step at a time."

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Nick rushed around the chamber quickly getting dressed. He said a silent thank you for remembering to shut the massive doors to the chamber and bringing their clothes with them. Ana zipped up her jumpsuit and looked for a place to hide. "In here," Nick said, ushering her into the bathroom and shutting the door behind her. Quickly he glanced in the mirror. "Oh yeah, wrinkled clothes, just fucked

hairdo, this is gonna be convincing," he muttered, trying to straighten his hair. He gave up on the hair and turned to the bed, quickly throwing the blankets back up and trying to smooth them out. He could feel the person getting nearer, and decided that was as good as it got. He walked over to the doors and took a deep breath before he passed his mark over the sensor, walking through the doors and, hitting the sensor on the other side to close them before they had even opened all the way.

He headed to the front of the cave, seeing his 'intruder' staring at the painting. *"So, you are here,"* Mason said, still staring at the image of Nick on the wall. *"H-how did you find me?"* Nick asked. Mason turned to face him, *"You think you're the only one that knows about this? Frederick and I used to play here when we were little. I always wondered what this painting meant ... never thought I'd see the embodiment of it,"* he mused. *"Yeah, how bout that,"* Nick said, shoving his hands in his pockets. *"So, what are you doing here?"* Mason asked. *"Nothing, I just needed some time to myself,"* Nick answered, probably a little too quickly. The older man smiled, *"I can understand that. How did your meeting go this morning?"* Nick sighed, *"Not real good. That pompous asshole pissed me off, and I threatened him."* Mason's face grew into one of concern, *"Nickolas, that wasn't a wise thing to do. Interstellar has a lot of support from other planets. You could have just made things worse."* *"Tell me something I don't know,"* Nick said, leaning against the cave wall.

The older man nodded, his attention going back to the painting. *"Amazing isn't it? It has to be centuries old, but it looks like it was just done .... and so detailed,"* he marveled. Nick pushed himself off the wall and walked over next to his uncle, following his gaze. The man was staring at his image, a far away look on his face. *"What are you thinking?"* Nick asked, curiosity getting the best of him. Mason shook his head, *"It doesn't matter. You should come back soon, your mother is worried about you."* Nick watched as Mason turned to go, *"Uncle, can I ask you something?"* The older man turned back around, *"Yes."* *"What made you change?"* Nick asked. *"What do you mean?"* he asked. *"When I got here it seemed you were determined to do everything you could to hurt me. What made you change your mind? Why do I see love in your eyes when you look at me now, instead of the hate I saw before?"* Nick asked.

Mason looked down at his boots, considering how to answer. *"I got tired of trying to act like I didn't care. All these years I shut myself off from the things I loved, vowing never to be hurt again. When you showed up, you didn't fit into my plans. Long ago, I'd given up on ever finding you .... and even if I did, by all rights you were Frederick's son. I had no claims to you as my own. So at first I hated you for showing up....for bringing back all the awful memories I've been hiding from for so long. But when Brian fell for Marie, it hit to close to home. All the love you could see on their faces only reminded me of what I lost with your mother. I just couldn't run anymore. I couldn't hide my feelings for her, or for you ....it was killing me inside."* Nick stared at the man, shocked that he'd been so honest with him. *"I'm sorry for bringing up bad memories,"* he apologized. Mason shook his head, *"You are not to blame. I should have handled things differently, if I had, maybe you would have had a different life."* *"You would have raised*

*me as your own?" Nick asked. Mason smiled, "Yes, I've always believed you to be mine Nickolas."*

Nick bit his lip, trying to will the sudden tears from falling. He wiped at his face and cleared his throat, "Um, can I ask one more thing?" "Anything," Mason replied. "When my fath...um when Frederick died, what did he say to you?" Nick asked. Mason smiled, "He told me to take care of you. Said that he was sorry for what he'd done, and asked me to forgive him." "Did you?" Nick asked. The older man shook his head, "Not then. My head was still too far up my ass to even consider it." "And now?" Nick asked. "I'm not sure I'm ready yet, but I'm closer than I was," he replied, honestly. Nick nodded, chewing on his bottom lip. Mason smiled at him, "Don't be long," he said, as he turned and headed out of the cave. Nick stared at the cave entrance for a long time, not sure what to make of their conversation. He felt closer to Mason now, felt like he understood him better, but still ..... he wasn't ready to call him dad yet. He didn't know if he'd ever be able to do that. He sighed, turning back to the king's chambers. Ana was probably wondering what was taking so long.

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Marie watched helplessly from the hall as A.J. held Brian. He was screaming at the top of his lungs, and A.J. was doing his best to calm him down. Cameron stood next to her, offering his silent support. Brian had refused his offer of upping his dose, and had actually demanded that Cameron lessen the dose when it was given. He admired Brian's determination, but was still worried about him. He was still weak, and knew that added extra weight to the burden he was now carrying. But in the end, he saw Brian's point, and agreed.

Kevin, Howie, Nick and Ana came down the hall, concern growing on their faces as they approached and realized the voice they heard was Brian's. "What's going on?" Kevin asked. "He's started detoxing," Marie answered, forgoing her habit of only speaking Angel to them. Right now the only thing on her mind was Brian. "Isn't there something you can give him?" Howie asked. Cameron shook his head, "No there's not, I'm sorry. This is something he's gonna have to endure." "If only he'd waited a couple of weeks," Nick muttered. The group looked at him. "What are you talking about?" Marie asked. Nick glanced up and down the hall, making sure they were relatively alone. He motioned the group closer, whispering, "There's a drug that helps pull you off Krystal. Tom and Tamara found it, and it's being manufactured as we speak. The first shipments should be here in two weeks."

Cameron stared at the young king in disbelief, "Can you trust them?" "With my life," Nick replied. "Can we get Brian back on the drug until this shipment arrives?" Kevin asked. Sadly Cameron shook his head,

*"I don't think so. He's already going through the worst part. I don't think he's gonna want to quit and then start all over again."* "Damn," Howie muttered, staring in at Brian, "This isn't fair." Marie wiped a tear away, listening to her husband beg A.J. to make the craving stop, "No it isn't fair at all."

## Chapter 72

Marie walked into Brian's room and sat down next to A.J., "He's finally asleep," she whispered. A.J. nodded, rubbing his temples, "Yeah. I thought he'd never stop screaming." Marie grabbed his hand and smiled at him when he looked up, "Thank you. Thank you for helping him." A.J. smiled, "That's what friends are for. Besides, he and the other guys went through hell with me, so it's time I did something to pay them back for it." "Can I get you anything?" she asked, "You haven't eaten since lunch." "Not hungry," he replied, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes, "Don't let me sleep too long." "I won't," she said, watching as he immediately fell into a light sleep.

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Nick walked down the hall to his mother's room. It was about time he talked with her about the dreams that haunted him. He hoped she was still up, knowing deep down that he had purposely waited this late in the hopes she was asleep. He didn't want to talk about the nightmares, but they were driving him insane, and he knew eventually he'd have to tell her. He took a deep breath and lifted his hand to knock, but stopped. He stepped closer to the door and listened, hearing giggling coming from inside the room. Nick stepped back and glanced up and down the hall, wondering what he was going to do. He started to turn and go back to his room, but the weight of the dreams stopped him. If he didn't get it out soon, he was going to lose his mind. So, he turned back and knocked.

It took a minute for his mother to come to the door. He could hear things moving around, and wondered what he was going to find. Finally LaDonna came to the door, in her robe, her hair down, "Nickolas, is something wrong?" she asked, surprised to see him. He bit his lip, "Um no, I just wanted to talk, but if you're busy we can talk in the morning." LaDonna reached out and pulled him into the room, "Something is bothering you, is it the dreams?" she asked. He nodded, stepping inside and stopping in his tracks. Mason was sitting on the edge of the bed, his clothes wrinkled, hair in disarray, and looking very guilty. Nick looked from him to his mother, his face turning red, realizing what he must've interrupted. LaDonna bit her lip, as Nick looked between them, "You were bound to find out sometime," she smiled, her face red as well. Nick help up his hands and shook his head, "Not another word, I don't wanna know." They both laughed, as LaDonna joined Mason on the edge of the bed, "Now, talk."

Nick sat down in one of the many chairs and sighed, looking down at his shoes. "I can leave if you want," Mason offered. Nick shook his head, still trying to decide where to start. Chills ran down his

back, and his hands had already started to shake. He swallowed hard, *"I-I can't stop it."* *"Stop what?"* his mother asked. Nick looked up, tears in his eyes, *"It's an attack, an invasion. I see it over and over in my dreams, but I can't do anything. Innocent people are dying and I can't stop it."* Mason and LaDonna glanced at one another, worry in both their faces. *"Do you know where it is? Is it our people?"* she asked. Nick shook his head, *"No, they aren't Celestian. I don't know where it is. The terrain is unfamiliar to me, and the people are a mixture of species."* *"What does it look like?"* Mason asked. Nick shivered, bringing his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around his legs, *"At first it's a country side. There's all sorts of odd looking grasses and plants. Then it turns into a rocky terrain. The ships come out of nowhere...the people never had a chance,"* he whispered, closing his eyes and willing himself to continue, *"Then it turns into a city. The buildings look very modern, not like ours. It's crowded and heavy with traffic. Lot's of smog and pollution. Again the ships seem to just appear, shooting everything in sight. The people are screaming and running for safety, but there isn't any. I can feel their fear, I hear their thoughts. 'Why weren't we protected? He promised to protect us!' I know it's me they're talking about. I failed them, and I don't even know who they are!"* Nick cried, quickly brushing away the tears that were falling down his cheeks.

LaDonna got up and moved to the edge of Nick's chair, wrapping her arms around him. He leaned into her embrace, *"I can feel it like it's happening to me. I'm so scared, and angry, and confused. I don't know what to do."* *"Shhh, calm down, it's alright,"* she soothed, looking at Mason with worried eyes. The older man sighed, *"I think I know the place you're describing."*

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It was the wee hours of the morning, but the top office lights of the Interstellar building were still on. The portly man paced back and forth, impatiently waiting on a call. When the console buzzed, he almost jumped, he was so deep in his thoughts. He quickly sat down and punched the button, *"Yes."* *"Mr. Sterling, I'm pleased to inform you that the fleet is ready,"* the muddled aged Jeptimian said. Sterling let himself smile for the first time that day. *"Wonderful. You have your assignment, I want a full report once the mission is complete."* *"Yes sir,"* the man replied, then the hologram faded. Leaning back in his chair he grinned, *"Jack Stirling you are a genius. Our young king won't know what happened, and he'll be knee deep in angry foreign dignitaries so fast his head will spin,"* he laughed to himself.

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Nick quickly wiped his face and looked at his uncle, *"Where?"* *"I believe the city to be Nactibque. It's the*

capitol city of Kholath," he answered. Nick sat up straight, "Are you sure? There were so many different races." "Not every world is like ours Nickolas. Most are comprised of several different races, we are an exception to the rule," Mason reminded him, "Besides, Kholath is an industrial center, there are always many different races there from every part of the galaxy." "If it is Kholath, then I've got to warn Ambassador James," Nick said, standing up and heading to the door. Mason got up and followed him, "Wait Nickolas, I'm coming with you!"

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Tunk walked into his office, greeting his secretary. "Ambassador, an urgent call just came through. I was about to page you," she said. "Thank you Kay," he replied, quickly going into his office and sitting down. He punched the button, surprised to see Nick and Mason staring back at him. "Your highness, Count Degrafe, this is an unexpected surprise. What can I do for you?" he asked. "Tunk, I know this is going to sound strange, but I need you to listen," Nick started. "Is something wrong?" the ambassador asked. Nick nodded his head, "I believe so. I have reason to believe that someone is planning an attack on your capitol city. I've already dispatched two of our X class ships to your planet. They should arrive in a few hours. I need you to alert your security to the danger." "I will your highness, but I assure you we are quite safe. The city is protected by one of the most technologically advanced shields there is. Nothing can get through it without our permission," Tuck assured him.

"Please Tunk, don't take this lightly," Nick warned, "The lives your people are at stake." Tunk stared at the young king. If he didn't know better, he'd say that Nick was scared to death. "You have seen something," he said. Nick nodded. "It's bad isn't it?" the ambassador asked. Nick bit his lip, "Yes my friend, it is."

## Chapter 73

Tunk had alerted the security forces, and then gone about his daily routine. His day was full of meetings and paperwork. The work of an ambassador was never done. The Kholathian work day started early and ended late. He had just come in when Nick had called. He knew it was the middle of the night on Celeste, and for the king to call at that time, it had to be urgent. Tunk leaned back in his chair, feeling stuffed. He had just gotten back from a business lunch, entertaining foreign members of the Industrial Alliance. He was trying to convince them that Kholath was the best place to build their next factory. He thought he'd made great progress with them.

Suddenly a noise filled his office. He bolted upright and turned looking out his massive office windows. Chills ran down his back, his eyes growing wider by the second. The sound he heard was the alarms on the shield that protected the city. The shield had been breached, and several war ships were entering the city's airspace. Tunk looked down, seeing the people on the streets running for cover. Looking back up, he caught the sight of the ships' lasers firing. Quickly he grabbed his briefcase and fled the office, dragging his secretary with him.

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A.J. ducked as a tray of food sailed over his head and slammed into the wall behind him. "OK," he said calmly, "I guess you're not hungry." Brian glared at him, "No I'm not hungry you stupid prick!! All I want is that fucking drug!" A.J. sat down in the chair next to the bed, doing his best to stay calm. Brian was definitely not himself, and it wasn't his fault. He kept reminding himself of that, over and over. "I know you do Brian, but you're gonna get through this," he said, as encouraging as he could. Brian huffed, shaking his head, "I doubt that." "Don't doubt yourself Brian. You're strong, you can do this," A.J. admonished. "I don't want to fucking do this!!" the older man screamed, "I want it J. I want the drug so bad, I'd do anything to get it! Don't you understand?!"

A.J. closed his eyes, his mind going back to his own rehab. He remembered saying those exact words. At that moment in time he would have killed for a drink, so he knew what Brian was feeling. "I do understand Rok," he said quietly, "I said those same words. I've been where you are bro." Brian ran a shaky hand through his hair and sighed. He knew A.J. was right, but he didn't want to care. All he cared about was that clear-blue liquid, and how much of it he could get. He looked over to see A.J. kneeling, trying to clean up the mess he'd made. Brian grabbed his pillow and hugged it to him, rocking himself

back and forth. "I-I'm sorry J," he sobbed. A.J. looked up, his heart breaking for the millionth time in the last eighteen hours, "It's OK Bri. I know you didn't mean it."

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Anthony nudged Nick, "*Hey, we can end the sessions early if you want?*" he whispered. Nick stifled a yawn, doing his best to listen to the man in front of him. He shook his head, knowing he needed to do this. Otherwise, he would be pacing the halls, worried to death. For once the council sessions were a welcome distraction. The man finished presenting his case and waited for Nick's decision. Nick looked at Anthony, "*What do you think?*" This took the young man by surprise, "*Um, well ..... I think he should split the property and each get half. It's the only fair way to do it.*" Nick nodded, "*I believe so to. Do the honors?*" he smiled, seeing the excitement in the young man's face. Anthony stood up and cleared his throat, "*It is the king's decision that the property be split equally and each party shall receive half the proceeds.*" The two men that had presented their case looked at Nick for confirmation. He nodded, and both turned to leave. Neither looked happy, but it was a livable compromise.

A guard was about to announce the next case when one of the techs from the control room came running in. "*Your highness, you are needed in the command center immediately,*" he said, out of breath. Nick quickly got to his feet, "*Mason, Anthony, come with me,*" he ordered as he ran from the room.

Nick ran as fast as he could, reaching the control center well ahead of the others. He slid to a stop, his heart in his throat. A life size hologram of Tunk was standing in the middle of the room. His clothes were dirty and torn, and in some places bloodstained. He was holding a bandage to his left temple. Nick stepped onto the pad facing the image, "*Tunk, are you alright?*" The ambassador nodded, "*I'm fine. It happened your highness. They breached the shield, the city is in ruins ..... hundreds if not thousands dead and injured.*" "*Oh God,*" Nick muttered, as his tears overflowed, "*Tunk, I'm so sorry. I was too late.*" Tunk shook his head, "*No your highness, without your warning many more would have been killed.*" Nick was doing his best to keep his composure, "*The ships, did they get there in time?*" "*They arrived as the attackers were leaving. One followed them, the other landed and they are giving aid,*" the older man answered. Nick took a deep breath, "*Alright, I'll send as much help as I can, hang in there, alright?*" "*Will do,*" Tunk said, the image fading.

Nick took a moment to collect himself before he looked around the room. Everyone was waiting on him to do something. He glanced at one of the techs, "*I want to speak to the captains of both the ships we sent, now.*" The tech nodded and staring pressing buttons on his console. Mason walked over to

another tech and began the preparations for sending aid to Kholath. Nick nodded at him, giving him a silent thank you. *"My king, they are coming up,"* the tech announced. Nick watched as the two commanders appeared before him. *"Captain Lane, what is the status of the pursuit?"* he asked. *"We followed them out of the system, but they jumped before we could get a lock on them,"* the man answered. *"Do you know who it was?"* Nick asked. The man shook his head, *"I've never seen ships like those before. They're something like a hybrid between a Jeptimian cruiser and a Kholathian war ship. I'm sending you the images now."* Nick looked over at the screen as the image came up. There were five ships, as large as their X class. He watched them for a moment, when something caught his eye, *"Stop it and replay that part,"* he ordered, looking closer. He waited until the ship came into view, *"Pause it there."* The tech did as he was told. *"Son of a bitch,"* Nick muttered, pointed at a symbol on the side of the ship, *"Enlarge this."*

The tech worked at top speed, enlarging the image. Mason looked over, *"What is that?"* *"It's Interstellar,"* Nick answered, *"I saw this symbol when I was in their offices,"* he said, turning back to the captain, *"Distribute this to the entire fleet. If you encounter anything with this marking, destroy it,"* he ordered. The man nodded. *"And Captain Sander, I'm sending more ships to help. Stay there until they get their shields up and are no longer in need of assistance. I'll send for you if I need you sooner,"* Nick said. *"Yes, your highness,"* he said, and both holograms disappeared.

Anthony looked at his cousin, *"Now what?"* Nick bit his lip, thinking. He wasn't sure what to do now. He did know that Interstellar had to pay for what they'd done, though just how to make them was a mystery. He shook his head, *"I don't know, got any suggestions?"* Mason came over and ushered Nick and Anthony to a relatively quiet corner, *"Don't do anything rash. Not just yet. Maybe we can make them believe they've accomplished what they wanted. See what happens next,"* he suggested. *"You mean wait them out?"* Anthony asked. The older man nodded, *"They've made their first move, they're trying to accomplish something with it. We just have to figure it out and stop it."* *"But what would that be? What's the purpose in attacking Kholath?"* Nick asked. Mason shook his head, *"I'm not sure, but I'm due back at Interstellar soon. Maybe I can find out something. And in the meantime, we wait."* Nick considered the idea. What other choice did he have? He couldn't forcefully shut the company down ... not when they were shipping in the cure to his planet's drug problem. The only thing he could do was wait and see what happened next, hoping he could stop them before more innocent people lost their lives. *"Alright, we wait,"* he said, praying he was doing the right thing.

## Chapter 74

Kevin sat in Brian's room, giving A.J. a much needed break. Brian had been asleep for hours, and Kevin had convinced A.J. that he could handle him for a while. Reluctantly the younger man had agreed, warning Kevin of Brian's behavior before he went to his room. Kevin didn't want to believe that Brian could act that way ... not his cousin. Brian was the nicest guy around, always putting others before himself, and even though he was fighting the withdrawal of the drug, he still couldn't believe Brian could do the things A.J. had said. He shook his head, no A.J. had to be mistaken.

Kevin looked up as Marie and Howie came into the room. "Hey," he whispered, "What's up?" They both sat down. "We wanted to see how he was doing," Marie answered, staring at her husband. "Still resting .. he needs it though," Kevin smiled. Marie nodded her head, her eyes never leaving Brian's face. Howie nudged Kevin, "I think something's happened. There's a lot of activity in the control room, and Nick's been in there all morning." Kevin furrowed his eyebrows, "What do you think it is?" Howie shrugged, "I don't know. I was in the kitchen earlier, there's rumors of some kind of attack, but no one knows for sure." "That doesn't sound good," the older man said. Howie shook his head, "No it doesn't."

Brian groaned, drawing their attention. Marie got up and moved to the edge of the bed, taking his hand, as he opened his eyes. She smiled at him, and Brian did his best to smile back at her, even though he didn't feel like it. He licked his lips, and took a deep breath, already the craving consuming him. "Where's A.J.?" he asked, his voice strained. "He's resting for a little while," Kevin answered. Brian looked at the three, disappointment filling his face. He needed A.J. there, he was the only one that really understood what he was going through. "He'll be back soon, honey," Marie soothed, seeing his disappointment. Brian nodded, doing his best to cover his shaking hands, as he sat up in the bed. Marie watched him with concern, seeing the beads of sweat appearing on his forehead, and his desperate attempt to act like nothing was wrong.

Brian closed his eyes, biting his lip. The pain was excruciating, the craving so strong. Kevin came over and put his hand on Brian's shoulder, "Can we get you anything?" Brian looked up at him, like he'd lost his mind. "Yeah Kev, there is," he said flatly. "What?" his cousin asked, not catching the looks Brian was sending him. Brian rolled his eyes, his patience gone, "How bout some Krystal Kev? All of it you can find, that'd help a lot!" he screamed. "Brian," Kevin said sternly. "Don't Brian me!" he spat, "Just get out! You don't understand .... just leave!" Howie glanced at Kevin as Marie got up and backed away from the bed. "Brian, you're right, I don't know what you're going through, but that doesn't give you the right to act like an ass," Kevin said as calmly as he could.

Brian gripped the sheets tightly, it seemed as if the walls were closing in on him. He had to get out of there. He frantically looked around the room, his breathing becoming erratic. "Brian, you need to calm down," Maire said gently. He gave her a hard glare, but held his tongue. She was the only thing between him and the door .... and he needed out, now! He pulled the blanket off him and quickly got to his feet, with one yank he pulled the IV out. "Brian, stop!" Kevin said, coming around the bed. Brian started to run for the door, but Marie refused to get out of the way. She grabbed him, trying her best to slow him down. "Let go!" he screamed, prying her hands off him and pushing her back. Marie stumbled and started to fall. Thankfully Howie got there and caught her before she hit the floor. Brian sprinted from the room and down the hall. "You OK?" Kevin asked. "Yes, go get him," she replied. Kevin gave her a nod and out the door he went in pursuit of his cousin.

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Nick rubbed his temples. He didn't know how much more of this he could take. After the attack calls started coming in immediately. Rulers, Presidents, ruling councils of planets he'd never even heard of, all with dead and injured on Kholath, and all wanting to know what he was going to do about it. Nick looked up at the hologram before him. The man was yelling at him, threatening to pull his support from Celeste, and all but telling Nick he was inept. Nick sighed, *"Mr. President, I understand your anger. I assure you I am doing everything in my power to catch those responsible. I have sent more aid to Kholath, and several of my warships are there providing protection."* *"Where was your protection this morning!?!"* the man seethed, *"You gave your word. You said Kholath was under your protection! Where was it?!"* Nick flinched, knowing the man was right. He should have already had ships there. He'd been having those nightmares for weeks, he should have done something sooner.

Slowly a tear trailed down Nick's cheek, blending into the grief mark he had already adorned. *"You're right, I should have already had ships there,"* he admitted, taking the man by surprise. *"This attack could have been prevented, and it wasn't. I bare the responsibility for that. But I assure you, I will find who did this, and I will make them pay,"* he said. The older man studied Nick for a moment, his anger subsiding a little. *"You do that your highness, because I'd hate to see what happens if you don't,"* he said, then disconnected.

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Brian ran down the hall as fast as his legs would carry him. He wasn't sure just how he was outrunning Kevin, but he was thankful for it. He pushed a nurse out of his way and rounded a corner. Frantically he searched for the room he knew was on this hall. After spending so much time with Marie down here, he knew where the medicines were kept. He just had to find the right room. Ahhh, there it is! Brian skidded to a halt and ducked inside the room, quickly locking the door. He scanned the glass cabinets looking for what would ease his craving. A smile creased his lips as he found it. Now he just had to figure out how to get the cabinet open.

Banging on the door caught his attention. He could hear Kevin, yelling on the other side for him to open the door. "Fat chance cuz," he muttered, trying to pry the doors open with his fingers. He whimpered as a wave of pain coursed through him. He had to get that drug now! Glancing around the room, he found nothing he could break the glass with. It was a room full of locked cabinets, nothing else. He looked back at the door as the banging grew louder. He knew the lock wouldn't hold much longer, as whoever was outside with Kevin was now trying to force their way in. Taking a deep breath, Brian clinched his fist and drew back.

He hit the glass with every ounce of strength he had left. It shattered, sending shards of glass into his hand and arm, but he didn't care. Quickly he reached in and grabbed a vile of the precious blue liquid. He stared at it, his hands shaking. Suddenly nothing else existed but him and that vile. The pounding on the door faded, as he sank to the floor, suddenly feeling very weak. He winced as he pulled the cap from the vile with his bloody hand, then brought the container to his lips .....

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Kevin looked at Cameron in horror as he heard the glass breaking inside the room. "*We have to hurry,*" Cameron said, as he, Kevin and a few guards got ready to rush the door. "One, two, three..." Kevin said. The men rushed the door, the lock finally breaking. Kevin quickly scanned the room, finding Brian sitting in the floor lifting a vile to his lips. He ran over and swatted it out of his hand, "No Brian!"

Brian watched helplessly as the vile sailed across the room and shattered against the wall. He looked down, for the first time seeing his bloody hand. He was sitting in shards of glass, wanting nothing more than to end the pain he was in. Before anyone could help him up, Brian grabbed a large piece of glass, and thrust it out, "Get away from me!" Kevin stepped back, lifting his hands, "It's OK Brian, please put that down." Brian shook his head as he struggled to get up, glass crunching under his bare feet, "NO IT'S NOT OK!! I CAN'T TAKE THIS!!" he screamed, backing away from the men that were surrounding him.

One of the guards drew his gun, aiming it at Brian. Brian saw this and held the broken glass to his own neck, "Don't! I swear if I see your finger move I'll cut myself!" The guard glanced at Cameron. The doctor motioned for him to put the weapon away, which he did.

Brian had backed himself into a corner, no where to go. He frantically looked back and forth at each person, keeping them at bay, thrusting the sharp glass at them. "Brian, please put it down," Kevin said, "You don't have anywhere to go." Tears stung his eyes as he shook his head, "NO! Stay away from me Kev, I swear I'll hurt you!" "Brian?" a voice from across the room said. He looked over, seeing Marie and Howie come in, followed by Rowland and Ana. They joined the group surrounding him. "Honey, please, we're trying to help you," Marie said calmly. Brian stared at her, every muscle in his body was shaking with fatigue. He was getting light headed, and knew it was from the massive amount of blood dripping to the floor. Marie took a step forward, and Brian lashed out with the glass, barely missing her. "No! Get away from me!" he screamed, backing further into the corner. Ana glanced at Rowland and nodded, as Marie once again stepped closer, drawing Brian's attention. Rowland drew his weapon, watching to see if Brian noticed. He didn't. His attention was on his wife, and keeping her away from him. Again he slashed through the air with the glass, causing Marie to jump back or else get cut. Rowland took the opportunity and fired.

Golden light filled the room and consumed Brian. His body stiffened for a moment, before he collapsed to the floor unconscious. Marie was the first one to him, gently rolling him over and inspecting his wounds. The glass shard he was holding was imbedded in his hand, a result of the involuntary muscle contraction. Cameron inspected his other arm. Several large pieces of glass protruded from it. His hand was the worst, open cuts and a deep cut along his wrist. The source of most of the blood. His feet were cut too, where he had walked across the glass strewn on the floor. "*Lets get him into an exam room,*" Cameron ordered, as several of the guards picked Brian up and hurried out of the room. Ana pulled Marie into a hug, "Are you alright?" Marie shook her head, tears streaming down her face, "He ....he tried to hurt me," she cried. Ana rubbed her back, trying to sooth her, "I know honey, but you have to remember .... that wasn't Brian doing that. It was the drug. You know he would never hurt you, he loves you." Marie nodded against her friends shoulder, she knew that ...but still, the image of Brian coming at her with the broken glass gave her chills. "Come on, let's go see how he's doing," Ana urged. Marie stepped back and wiped the tears from her face. Ana gave her an encouraging smile, and wrapped her arm around her shoulders. Howie had stayed behind and took Marie's hand as they left the room.

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*"Nickolas, come. There's nothing more you can do today,"* LaDonna urged, pulling at his hand. Nick sighed, letting her lead him from the control room. It was late evening, but it felt like years since that morning. He hadn't eaten all day, and was stressed beyond the max. Footage of the attack had reached the vid hours ago, and Nick had watched it over and over. His heart breaking each time. It was his fault those people were dead and injured. The foreign leaders he'd been talking to all day, made sure to let him know that. LaDonna squeezed his hand, *"I know you are upset, my son. But what happened is not your fault."* Nick shook his head as they walked down the hall, *"How can it not be? I announced that Kholath was under my protection. I didn't have any ships there to back up my word. I should have acted on the dreams sooner instead of ignoring them. This IS my fault!"*

His mother shook her head, *"This is Interstellar's fault, not yours. Whatever they are planning, or thought they could accomplish by this ..I don't know."* *"I think I'm getting an idea,"* Nick said, his voice tired, *"Our entire side of the galaxy is blaming us for this. Every planet that once looked to us for stability, is now threatening us. They knew exactly what they were doing when they hit Nactibque. Every major planet had a population there. I think they're trying to turn the galaxy against us."* *"But what would they gain by doing so?"* she asked. Nick thought, biting his lip. Suddenly he stopped, fear consuming his eyes. The painting in the cave flashing in his mind. "Oh God," he muttered. *"What is it?"* the queen asked, concerned. Nick looked at her, *"I think they want to start a war."*

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Cameron checked Brian's bandages and his restraints. He had managed to remove all the glass and close all the open wounds. He had sedated Brian after they got him into the exam room, not wanting him to wake up for a while. Now he was back in his bed, restraints on his arms and legs. Brian wasn't leaving his bed anytime soon.

A.J. had come back down, and was quickly filled in on what happened. To say he was disappointed in his older brother, would be an understatement. And to say he was angry at Brian for trying to hurt Marie, well ..... you get the drift. Cameron cleared his throat, *"I'm going to go check on some other patients. He'll be waking up soon, but do not under any circumstances undo his restraints, no matter how much he begs. We can't have another incident like we did today."* Everyone nodded and he left the room, promising to come back in a little bit to check on him.

A.J. brushed a stray hair from Marie's face, "Are you sure you're alright? He didn't cut you?" She smiled at his concern, "I'm fine, just got a little scratch that's all." A.J. looked at her arm, seeing the small

scratch. "I know it's the addiction that made him do this, but I still wanna knock his brains out for doing that to you," A.J. said. Marie smiled, nodding, "I might let you this time," she said quietly. A.J. hugged her, "I know this has to be hard, but you know under normal circumstances he would never have done it. He'll hate himself when he wakes up and realizes just what he's done." "I know," she whispered.

"Guys, he's waking up," Howie said. Everyone's attention went to the bed as Brian moaned. They all got up and stood around the bed, waiting for him to open his eyes. It took him a moment, but finally he was awake, staring at them. He looked confused, and as he tried to lift his arm, he realized he was tied to the bed. "Wh-what happened?" he asked, his voice cracking. "What do you remember?" Kevin asked. Brian glanced around the room, confused by some of the stares he was getting. It was a mixture of anger and disappointment. And then there was Marie. She was standing back from the others, hurt in her eyes. He looked back at Kevin, "I don't remember anything." His cousin sighed, looking away from him. Like he was ashamed of him or something. "Kevin, what did I do?" Brian asked, knowing it had to be bad.

Kevin started to say something, when Marie interrupted him. "You forced your way out of the room and ran down to the supply room. You locked yourself in and busted into the cabinets. Kevin stopped you before you could drink any of the Krystal, but you grabbed some broken glass and tried to fight your way out again. I tried....um I tried to stop you and you turned on me," she choked out. Brian stared at her in horror, bits and pieces of what happened flashing in his mind. Tears rolled down his cheeks to the pillow below, "I'm so sorry ...Oh God, I didn't mean it ...I'm so sorry!" he sobbed. Marie looked away, letting her own tears fall. A.J. caught Kevin's attention and gestured for him to take Marie and the others and leave. Without a word, he did just that. Leading them all out into the hall and shutting the door behind him.

"J, I didn't mean it," Brian cried, "I didn't mean it!" "I know Brian, and deep down so do they, but ...." he paused, "It's gonna take some time to get past it." "You're angry with me too," Brian sniffed. A.J. nodded. He couldn't lie now could he? "Yeah Rok I am. You could have really hurt her," he said. Brian closed his eyes and shook his head, "I didn't even know what I was doing. All I could see was that drug, and then all I wanted was to end the pain. God, J, what if I'd cut her?" A.J. clinched his jaw, trying to keep his calm, "You did Brian. It's just a scratch, but it could've been worse." Brian felt his heart sink into the pit of his stomach. He'd hurt his wife ...the one woman he vowed he would never hurt. He loved her more than life itself, and now he'd done the worst thing he could've done. He'd attacked the one person that trusted him completely. He'd broken that trust ... all for a drug.

Brian looked away from the younger man, the weight of what he'd done hitting him hard. "Listen Rok, it

was a mistake. Eventually everyone will move past it .. but we need to concentrate on getting you off this drug first," A.J. said. Brian shook his head, "I can't do it J. What if I get like that again and do something worse?" "That won't happen, because you aren't coming out of the restraints until you're over this," he answered. Brian looked over at him. "That's right bro," A.J. grinned, "You're stuck there until you're better." "But what if I gotta ..." Brian started. A.J. laughed, "That's what catheters are made for. Keeps things nice and neat," he chuckled. Now that A.J. mentioned it, Brian could feel the tube, and grimaced. A.J. patted him on the shoulder, "I know it ain't pretty, and it's not how you wanted to do this, but you're sticking to this. Ain't no backing out now, you've already come to far." Brian nodded, settling back in the bed as best he could. Moments passed in silence before he spoke, "J, do you think she will forgive me?" "I'm sure she will man, she loves you," he said, flipping on the vid, "Let's watch some TV, see if there's a game or ....." His words caught in his throat as the images of the attack filled the screen. Both men sat there stunned as the events played out. The news anchors read a statement from Nick, asking that the planet wear their grief marks in remembrance of those who lost their lives, and assured the planet that they would catch who was responsible. Both men looked at each other in shock. "I gotta get better J," Brian said, "Nick's gonna need us."

# Chapter 75

"Everything went as planned?" Nick asked. "Yes, the shipment is on its way as we speak," Tamara answered, "Now what's this we hear about an attack?" Nick sighed, rubbing his face with his hands, "It's bad guys. At last count over two thousand dead and even more injured. I've got this whole side of the galaxy ready to kick my ass." "Do you know who it was?" Tom asked, shocked. Nick nodded, "I do, and our entire fleet is looking for them." "Well, that's all you can do," Tamara said. Nick shook his head, "I'm responsible for it. I should've done something sooner ... but..." "Nick, listen, you can't stop everything. The agency has been getting reports of your rule there. So far you've done amazingly well. Don't fault yourself for one mistake," Tom encouraged.

Nick sighed heavily, looking very tired. "Guys, my one mistake cost two thousand people their lives. I ... I don't know how to handle that," he said, his voice breaking. Tom glanced at Tamara, finding the same worried expression on her face as he was sure was on his own. "Nick, ruling a planet is hard. Sometimes you have to make the hard decisions, and sometimes you have to deal with the consequences of them. You are a good ruler, and this will work itself out," Tamara said. Nick shook his head, "I don't think it will guys. I think I'm in trouble here." "If you need us to do anything, tell us. We're here to help," Tom offered. "Thanks guys, but I don't know what the two of you could do," Nick said. "Not just the two of us Nick," Tamara corrected, "The entire agency." Nick looked at her confused, "I thought the agency was um less than pleased with me." "Well, they were at first. But as time passed, some of the higher ups have been reassigned. We're under new management I guess you could say," Tom chuckled. Nick raised his eyebrows, "Oh really? What brought that on?"

Tamara smiled at him, "You did. See the higher up's of the higher up's caught wind of your case. They weren't pleased at the way it was handled, so they launched an internal investigation to go along with the one we were doing for you. Where we hit a dead end, they apparently found something. Not that they're gonna let us in on it, but several influential people are no longer with us, and the agency is ready to help in any way it can." "I guess it's their way of making up for what happened," Tom added. Nick leaned back in his chair and smiled, "Guys, that's the first good news I've heard all day." "So, your wish is our command, your highness," Tom smiled. Nick chuckled for a moment, then looked at them a grin on his face. "You guys have four ships right?" he asked. "Yes," Tamara answered. Nick looked over at his computer screen, punching a few buttons. The two agents waited, wondering what he was doing.

Nick smiled, "OK, I've got two X class ships a couple days from there, and the one that piggy backed you is still with you right?" "Yeah, they are," Tom answered. "Great, how do you guys feel about taking a

little trip?" Nick asked. The two glanced at each other. "Um, we could do that," Tamara said. "Great, get three of your ships ready. As soon as my two get there, they'll piggy back you and head this way," Nick said. "But what can we do, we're only three ships," Tom asked. Nick sighed, "If things go the way I think they're gonna. I'm gonna need every ship I can get."

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Ana quietly stood up and walked softly across the room. She had brought Marie back up to her room and stayed with her until she fell asleep. She was still upset over what had happened with Brian, and Ana couldn't blame her. She knew if it had been Nick, it would have broken her heart for him to turn on her. And even if it was the drugs causing him to do it, it would still take some time for that hurt to heal. Marie had cried for a while before settling down and drifting to sleep. Ana reached the door and took one last look back at her friend before passing her mark across the sensor and slipping out into the hall.

It was very late, and it had been one incredibly long day. Ana was looking forward to taking a hot shower and getting some much needed sleep. She passed by Nick's room, hoping he was resting. The muffled sobs coming from the room told her different. She stopped, stepping close to the door. Leaning her ear to the door, she listened. Tears formed in her eyes as she heard him crying. For some reason it reminded her of when they'd first taken Nick. The image of him sitting in the floor of his quarters staring out the window, tears streaming down his face filled her mind. Ana debated on whether to knock, or just leave him alone. She wanted to comfort him, tell him everything would be alright, but if they were found together in his room alone at this time of night .... well it wouldn't look good for sure.

As she was standing there, still trying to decide what to do, the door quietly slid open. Ana jumped back, the movement startling her. Cautiously she glanced up and down the hall before she entered the darkened room. As soon as she stepped inside, the door slid shut behind her. Ana blinked her eyes, trying to get them to focus in the dim light. The heavy drapes that ran across his balcony doors were pulled shut, just a tiny sliver left open to let in the moon light. She could feel him in the corner, and looked over, "Are you alright?" Nick shook his head, as she walked over and sat next to him. He was leaning against the wall, his knees pulled up to his chest, arms wrapped around his legs, his forehead resting on his knees. She reached out and touched his arm, "Talk to me. What's wrong?"

He sniffed and shook his head, "I'm just .... stressed. I don't know what to do." "About the attack?" she asked. He nodded. "You're doing it Nick. There's nothing else you can do," she told him. He sighed, looking up at her. As soon as his eyes met hers, a fresh batch of tears emerged and trailed down his face.

"There's something else isn't there?" she asked, knowing that look. He bit his lip, looking down at her hand on his arm. "What is it Nick?" she asked, his behavior scaring her. He swallowed hard, still not looking up, "I saw something." "What?" she asked. He looked up into her concerned eyes, "I-I can't tell you," he cried, breaking down in hard sobs. Ana pulled him to her, wrapping her arms around him and holding him tight. She was scared, not knowing what had Nick this upset. Whatever it was, she knew it was bad .. and somewhere deep down, she was glad he didn't tell her. Nick's sobs grew harder, as he wrapped his arms around her and rested his head on her shoulder, his whole body shaking with his sobs. "Don't let go Ana," he cried. Ana held him tighter, fear gripping her heart, "Never. I'll never let go," she said, her own tears trailing down her cheeks.

# Chapter 76

The week after the attack was the worst week Nick thought he'd ever had. His days were filled with calls from the affected planets. Their leaders demanding justice. In between the calls, he started receiving anonymous death threats. They were never able to trace them, having bounced over several satellites in several systems before reaching their destination.

Rowland had stepped up security in the palace, and Nick was rarely left alone. He understood their concern, but was frustrated by it too. He could no longer take long walks in the garden by himself, which meant that he and Ana were back to where they started. Wanting so much to be with each other, but not able to do so.

And then there were the dreams. Every night they haunted him, and scared him to death. He couldn't tell anyone about them. Somewhere deep inside he knew it had to happen ... that that was what he was here for, and if anyone found out, they would most definitely try to stop it. So he suffered alone, growing more solemn by the day. Everyone had noticed his change in behavior, but they attributed it to the stress he was under and the constant threats to his life. They didn't know the true reason, and Nick vowed that they never would.

Brian was steadily getting better. As the week progressed he was finding it easier to fight the cravings, and his mood improved greatly. Still, there was a distance between him and Marie. She was still hurt by his actions, and he was at a loss as how to fix it. He'd apologized over and over, and every time she told him it was forgiven, but..... the distance between them still remained. A.J. had taken it upon himself to play the mediator between the two, telling both that it would just take some time, and encouraging them not to give up. Brian knew he couldn't. So much was happening, he knew he had to get better fast. He wanted his life back, and by God he was going to get it.

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Marie wiped Brian's mouth with a napkin and sat the food tray aside. "Thanks," he said, wishing for the millionth time that Cameron would let him out of his restraints. He hated the fact that someone had to do everything for him. Feed him, bathe him, scratch his itches. Although that last one had turned out to be quite humorous. You really find out who your friends are when you have an itch in a very

undesirable place, and they have to scratch it for you. "Your welcome," she said, straightening his blanket for him.

Brian bit his lip, watching her. She seemed to be doing everything she could not to look at him. Even when she was feeding him his supper, she had barely looked at his face, and when she did, he could see the hurt in her eyes. Marie rested her hand on the bed rail, and Brian was able to twist his hand around and grab her fingers, "Baby, please look at me." Marie stared down at their hands for the longest time before she looked up. The hurt in his wife's eyes brought tears to his own, "I'm sorry Marie. I know I hurt you, and God I wish it had never happened. I love you more than life itself. I would do anything for you ..... I'd die for you. Baby, if we live a thousand years, I'll still hate myself for what I did. I know I can't make up for it, but please .... can we try? I don't want this to tear us apart. I want us back to the way we were. Please, can we try?"

His heart was in his throat, tears slowly sliding down his cheeks. Marie stared at him for what seemed to be a lifetime. He tried to read the emotions in her eyes, but couldn't. It was a mixture of so many things. But finally the emotions passed and he saw what he had been longing to see ..... love. Marie gently wiped the tears from his face, "I love you too Brian, and I don't want this to hurt us either. I'm sorry for being so distant. I just ..... you scared me, and I didn't know how to handle it. I never thought anything like that would happen, so when it did, I just .. I got scared, and angry. I'm sorry honey, I love you with all my heart, you know that don't you?" Brian smiled at her, "Yes, I do." She smiled, leaning down and softly kissing him. Brian desperately wanted to wrap his arms around her and hold her, but the reality set in when he tried to and his arms wouldn't move. Marie pulled back and giggled, making him blush. "Please, I just want to hold you," he begged, giving her his best puppy dog face. Marie considered it for a moment, then undid one of his arms, "Just one." He smiled, "One's all I need," he mumbled as he pulled her to him, their lips crashing together, his hand tangling in her hair.

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Nick lay in bed staring at the ceiling. It had been a hideous day, and he was so tired. But he didn't want to go to sleep. He knew what would happen in his dreams, and couldn't handle going through it again. He glanced over at the Book Of Kings, lying on the table near the bed. He'd been so busy lately, he'd almost forgotten about it. He got up and retrieved it, opening it up to where he had left off. He knew there was no way he'd ever finish reading it, so he decided to try another strategy. Flipping to the back he went through the index, finding the kings with the shortest rule. Then he would flip back and scan that king's section.

"Died," he muttered going to the next one. "Murdered ..... Died ..... Wait a second," he said, reading more closely. Nick settled himself better on the bed and started to read. "King Jatiel DeCossey ruled only two years. He fell ill with a mysterious disease, and having no heirs of his own to inherit the crown, adopted his nephew Micha Grenique ..... You can do that?" he asked himself, looking down to make sure he'd read it right. He had. "If only I had a nephew.. or a brother ....." he muttered, getting out of bed and walking over to his desk. He pulled out a piece of paper and stared at it. He sighed, knowing what he had to do. Picking up his pen he started to write , Dear Anthony .....

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LaDonna walked out onto her balcony and nudged Mason out of his thoughts. He smiled at her as she handed him a drink and sat down next to him. *"Need I ask what has you so troubled?"* she asked. He grinned, *"I'm sure you know."* She sighed and nodded, *"I'm worried about him too. He's been so somber and distant lately. He used to talk with me, tell me his feelings, now all I get are sad looks."* Mason nodded, *"I've noticed. He's taking all this in on himself and he's not letting any of it out. How long before he breaks under the pressure?"*

The queen shook her head, *"I don't know, and I don't know what to do to help him."* Mason took her hand and squeezed it, *"You are helping him by being so supportive. He's lucky to have you as his mother. And I'm sure when he feels he can, he will talk to you. He's probably trying to sort things out before he does."* LaDonna smiled, *"How can you be so sure?"* *"Because that's what I would do in his situation,"* he smiled. She gazed at him for a moment, for the first time noting how much Nick was like him. Mason looked over at her, *"What?"* *"Nothing, just thinking,"* she said, looking up at the stars. Mason waited for her to finish, but realized she wasn't going to. He let it go and looked up as well. It'd been a long time since he had just sat and looked at the stars. It was something he and LaDonna used to do, and now they were getting back into the habit. *"Donna, do you get the feeling that Nick's not telling us something. Not just that he won't talk to you or me about the stress, but that maybe there's something else bothering him?"* he asked, looking back over. She stared at him and nodded, *"Yes I do, and it scares me."*

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Nick folded the last letter and placed it in the envelope, then stamped his seal on it. Gathering the letters he placed them inside the Book of Kings for safe keeping until he needed them. He had only meant to write one, but quickly found himself writing to the guys, Ana, his mother, and to Mason. He

wasn't sure if he would get the chance to say what he wanted to, and the letters made sure he could. He made his way to his bed and turned the lights off. It was the middle of the night. No one in their right mind would be up at this hour. Nick had to chuckle at himself, thinking he'd probably never been in his right mind.

He still didn't want to sleep, but his body was so incredibly tired, there was no keeping from it. He rolled over on his side, his back to the balcony. Taking a deep breath he closed his eyes, letting himself start to drift to sleep. He was almost there, when something made him open his eyes. He blinked a few times, making sure the feeling in the pit of his stomach was really what it was. It was. Someone was standing on his balcony, slowly, silently making their way into his room. Nick stayed still, wanting the person to think he was asleep. He didn't recognize whoever it was, and by the time the person made it into his room, Nick's heart was pounding so hard it was all he could hear.

Slowly Nick let his arm drop down the side of the bed. His hand stretched out and the sword he had hidden underneath flew into his palm. The person was in his room now, slowly approaching his bed. Nick pulled the sword up, hiding it under the blankets. Closing his eyes, he lay still .. waiting. He listened, over the beating of his heart, hearing the person round the bed to stand in front of him. He could make out the distinct sound of a sword being pulled from its sheath, and he had to force himself to stay still. Nick tightened his grip on the sword as he felt the person raise theirs.....

## Chapter 77

Nick waited until the very last second, then threw the blankets back and rolled out of the way. His assailant's sword sliced into the bed next to him. Nick quickly brought his sword up and blocked the next blow, then rolled completely off the bed and hit the floor with a loud thud. He pushed himself up and to his feet, turning to see his attacker closing in on him. Again Nick blocked the first strike, and the two exchanged a ferocious series of blows. They both seemed to be equally matched, so neither took the upper hand.

The room was shrouded in darkness, the only light coming from the open balcony doors. Nick could see alright, but he was wondering how his attacker could see him. In this light Angels couldn't see much. Between matching strikes and the clanging of metal on metal, Nick noticed the man was wearing some sort of night vision goggles. Nick grinned, thinking this was the man's first mistake. The man was relentless, and soon had flipped Nick's sword out of his hand. Nick watched it fly across the room and land on the floor near his desk. The man moved in for the kill, and Nick did the only thing he could. "*Lights on full!*" he yelled, closing his eyes as the room was suddenly awash in the golden light. The man screamed and pulled his goggles off, blinking against the sudden invasion.

Nick took the opportunity to punch him as hard as he could, then moved past him towards his desk. On his way he pressed the button on his bracelet. Nick was halfway to his desk when the man ran up behind him and tackled him, sending them both to the floor. Nick managed to flip over and grabbed the man's knife-wielding hand just as it was coming down. The two struggled, the knife coming closer to Nick's chest. Nick stared at the man, his lavender eyes shining in the light and seeming to intimidate him a bit. Nick kept staring at him, hoping it would unnerve him enough for the man to make a mistake.

The attacker used his body weight to press the knife closer to Nick's body. Nick was struggling to keep the blade away from him, and knew his strength was going to give out pretty soon. His body was just too tired to put up with this kind of fight for long. Quickly he glanced around the room, looking for anything that would help him. His eyes settled on a heavy vase in one of the corners. It would have to do. Nick half-closed his eyes, as the vase lifted from the floor and flew across the room at lightening speed. It crashed into the side of the man's head, just as Nick's strength gave out. The man was still pushing with all his might when he was hit, so he fell in that direction. Nick was able to push him to the side, but not enough. The knife came down slicing through his upper arm.

Nick screamed in pain, trying to push the stunned man away from him. Finally he got untangled and up to his feet. He reached out with his good arm and his sword flew into his hand. As he turned back around, the man was standing right in front of him. He blew some kind of powder into Nick's face. Nick tried to close his eyes, but he was too late. The scarlet colored powder invaded his eyes, nose and mouth. Immediately his vision blurred and his eyes felt like they were on fire. He dropped his sword and tried to wipe the infernal dust from his eyes. Blinking rapidly, it got no better. He stumbled backwards, losing sight of where his attacker was. Nick coughed violently, the powder now going to work on his throat. He could feel it tightening, and panic started to set in when he realized he was gasping for air. He tried to call out for help, but couldn't. Darkness started to close in around him, and he collapsed to the floor.

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Rowland ran down the hall as fast as he could, sliding to a halt outside Nick's door. Several more guards were with him, and Rowland wasted no time opening the door. The sight awaiting him made his heart stop. As the door opened Rowland watched as Nick collapsed, his assailant hovering over him, ready to finish him off. Quickly the guard pulled his weapon and fired. The attacker stiffened for a second, then collapsed next to Nick.

Rowland ran to Nick, turning him over. His eyes widened in fear as he saw the scarlet residue on the young king's face. *"Go get Marie, quick!"* he yelled to one of the guards. The man ran out of the room as another ran into the bathroom, coming back with several cups of water. Rowland took one and poured it over Nick's face. Then took another and pried his eyes open, flushing them out.

*"What happened?"* the queen demanded as she and Mason entered the room. Several of the guards had bound the attacker and were dragging him from the room as they came in. *"He used Vacelia dust,"* Rowland explained. LaDonna froze with fear as Mason took her hand. *"Is..is he breathing?"* she asked. Rowland shook his head, *"I can't tell."*

Just then Marie came into the room, still in her pajamas. She took one look at Nick and rushed to the console. Calling down to the medical floor she barked out orders for supplies to be sent up and a doctor. Just as soon as she was done the supplies appeared on a pad next to the console. She grabbed them and hurried over to Nick. *"Get him up on the bed,"* she ordered as she started preparing a shot. The guards did as she said, lifting Nick up to the bed. Marie injected the shot, then went to work, threading a tube down Nick's throat to ease his breathing.

Everyone stood back and watched her work. With lightening speed she set Nick up on the portable ventilator, then started to clean the wound on his arm. By the time the doctor arrived she had it taken care of, and was re-flushing Nick's eyes. She filled the doctor in on what she had done as he double checked everything. The doctor helped her place a bandage around Nick's head, covering his eyes. *"You should have become a doctor,"* the doctor commented, as they finished. Marie smiled, *"Doctors are a little too boring for me. I like being a nurse, we get all the exciting work."* The man chuckled, then turned to face the queen.

By now word had spread of the attack, and the guys were standing in the room along with Ana. The doctor talked directly to LaDonna, but loud enough that everyone could hear. *"He should be fine, thanks to Marie's quick action. We will leave him on the ventilator until he wakes up, and his eyes will remain covered for a few days. The cut to his arm was deep, but I don't believe there will be any permanent damage,"* he noted. LaDonna nodded, walking over and sitting next to her son. Marie gave her a reassuring smile, then stepped back to stand with Ana. She knew her friend would need her, just as she had when Brian was so ill. And she was right, as soon as she put her arm around Ana, she broke down. "It's alright, he's going to be OK," she soothed. Ana nodded her head, trying to get control of her emotions.

"What happened?" Kevin asked, looking at Rowland. The guard sighed, "The alarm in his bracelet was triggered. When we arrived he had just collapsed. We'll interrogate the assailant, try and find out who sent him," he answered, leaving the room with the remaining guards. A.J. walked over and ran his finger along the dust covered floor, looking at it, "What the hell is this stuff anyway?" Marie looked up, "Don't!" she yelled, quickly grabbing his hand and washing the dust off with one of the towels she had used on Nick. "Don't touch it," she scolded, "It's Vacelia dust. It's a flower that's very poisonous. It can cause blindness if it's in your eyes too long, and you could die by breathing it in." "Damn," A.J. muttered, "Is Nicky gonna be OK?" She nodded, "He'll be fine. He got the antidote quickly and it was removed from his eyes in time as well."

"Thank goodness," Howie said, gazing at Nick with concern and relief in his face. Kevin sighed, sitting down in one of the chairs, "This was too close. What if Rowland hadn't gotten here in time? We could've just lost him." *"But we didn't, we have to focus on that right now,"* LaDonna said, looking over at the young man. Mason spoke with the doctor for a few moments, before the man left. Then he took his place next to LaDonna, his hand on her shoulder. A.J. glanced at Howie, then back to the two, grinning. Howie felt his face flush, as he tried hard not to laugh. A.J. had been right after all. A.J. turned to see the queen staring at him, smiling. He smiled back, then quickly found great interest in his bare feet. He should have put on shoes, then he would've had more to study.

"When will he wake up?" Kevin asked, still worried over his youngest charge. "It will be a while," Maire answered, "The antidote itself tends to knock people out for several hours." *"Boys, there's nothing more you can do tonight. Go back to bed, get some rest. You can see him in the morning,"* Mason said. The guys glanced at each other, knowing he was right. Nick would probably sleep well into the next day, and there was no sense staying up with him. Kevin sighed, standing up, "You're right, I just don't want to leave him." LaDonna smiled, *'I know you don't, neither do I. But there's no sense in all of us staying up.'* Kevin glanced at Marie, "He's really gonna be alright?" She nodded, "Yes." "Alright then, I guess we'll try and get some sleep," he said, gesturing A.J. and Howie to the door. The three left, leaving Ana standing at the foot of the bed, feeling very unsure of what to do.

LaDonna motioned for her to have a seat, which she did. *"Ana, you are welcome to stay with him. He'll be confused when we wakes up, and a friendly voice will ease him,"* she said. Ana nodded, on the verge of tears. Somehow Nick's mother understood just how desperately she needed to be there. If she had been sent away like the guys, she would have died with worry. Somehow LaDonna sensed that. *"Mason, go on, we'll stay with him,"* the queen said. Mason looked at the three women, smiling, *"I guess if I wanted to stay I'd be outnumbered huh?"* The queen grinned and nodded, *"Yes you would. I'll see you in the morning."* Mason leaned down and gently kissed her on the cheek, *"If you need anything, just call." "I will,"* she said as he left the room. LaDonna looked back to the stunned faces of the two girls, and blushed. Marie sat down, *"When did this happen? And where was I?"*

## Chapter 78

Brian struggled against his restraints, "Untie me J," he demanded. A.J. sighed, "Bri, he's fine. There's nothing you can do." "I can be there for him," Brian replied, still tugging, "Please Alex." "Brian, listen, he's asleep. Has been since it happened. The queen, Ana and Marie have been with him all night. In fact they kicked us out, so don't worry. He's in good hands," A.J. explained. Brian stopped pulling at his ties and leaned back in the bed, "You're sure?" A.J. nodded, then smiled, "You should have seen Marie at work. Even the doc said if she hadn't done what she did, it might have been worse. You got some woman there Rok." Brian grinned with pride, "Yeah I do."

A.J. sat down, making himself at home, "So, you two work things out yet?" Brian nodded. "Really? When?" the younger man asked, intrigued. "Last night," he answered. A.J. raised an eyebrow, "And? What happened?" Brian laughed, "That's between us J." A.J. grinned profusely, "You got some didn't you?" Brian nearly choked, "Alexander James! God man, everything you think of involves sex." He shrugged, a knowing look in his eyes, "So tell me I'm wrong." "J, I'm tied to the bed," Brian pointed out. "So? Just makes for some interesting making up," he laughed. Brian laughed, blushing slightly. This did not go unnoticed. "Damn man you two are freaky," A.J. said, laughing hysterically.

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Anthony sat on the edge of the bed staring at Nick. He had slept through all the commotion the night before, and was shocked to hear what had happened. The queen had assured him that Nick would be fine, but he was still worried. Everything was happening so fast. It just seemed that each day after the attack got worse, and he was afraid to see what was coming next. He looked up to Nick so much, he didn't want anything to happen to him.

Ana sat across from him in a chair next to the bed. She gave him a reassuring smile, "*Once he wakes up, he should be fine Anthony.*" "*I know, but .....*" the young man started, then stopped, looking back down at his cousin. "*But you're still worried,*" she offered. He nodded. "*I'll let you in on a little secret,*" Ana said, "*So am I.*" Anthony smiled at her, then looked back at Nick as he stirred. Kevin had just walked in the door, and Ana looked over as she made her way to the bed, "Kevin, go get Marie." "Why? What's wrong?" he asked, fear suddenly taking a firm grip. "He's waking up," she answered, calming him. Kevin nodded and headed out of the room.

Nick stirred again. He could hear voices, but they sounded far away. He tried to open his eyes, but found he couldn't, or if they were open, everything was dark. His heart started pounding, and he realized he didn't know where he was, or who was with him. He felt someone take his hand, and he recoiled back, knowing it was a man's hand that had touched him. He tried to call out, but found he couldn't do that either. What the hell was wrong with him? Someone else touched his face, and finally the voices sounded clear. It was Ana! Nick instantly calmed down.

"Shhh, that's it, just relax," she soothed, "You're safe." Nick tried to reach out to her, but when he did, a shooting pain ran through his arm. "No, don't move," she said, "Your arm is injured." He turned his head in her general direction, *Why can't I see?*, he thought. "Because your eyes are bandaged," she answered, "The man that attacked you blew Vacelia dust in your face. It can cause damage to your eyes if not treated in time." *Why can't I talk?*, he thought. "The dust also affects your lungs. You're on a ventilator," she answered.

Anthony squeezed Nick's other hand, and he jumped. "It's me Nick," the young man said. Nick squeezed back, as Marie entered the room and walked over. "Afternoon Nick, I guess you're wondering what happened huh?" she said. Nick tried to smile, but found it difficult with the tubes, so he nodded. "Well first off, why don't we take you off the ventilator. Then you can talk," she said, preparing to take him off the machine. Nick could hear her moving around, and could feel where she was in the room. He felt Ana move and Marie take her place. "Alright, I'm going to unhook the tube first. I want to see that you're breathing alright before I pull it, so just breathe through your mouth, OK?" she said. Again he nodded. Marie reached over and unhooked the tube from the machine, "Alright Nick."

At first Nick took short shallow breaths. He wasn't sure how his lungs would react, and didn't want to end up coughing with the tube in. After a few moments he was breathing normally. "You're doing great. Give me just a sec and we'll pull the tube. You might feel some pulling on your skin, that's just me pulling the tape away," Marie explained. Nick waited, and sure enough he felt the tape that held the tubes in place being pulled off. Marie tried to take it slow, not wanting to yank the stubble off his face along with the tape. "OK, now when I tell you, I want you to cough," she instructed. Nick waited, somehow glad he couldn't see this. "Alright, cough," she said. As Nick coughed, she quickly pulled the tube from his throat.

As he coughed, he could hear Anthony make a disgusted sound and could only imagine what the boy's face looked like. He smiled, reaching in the boy's general direction, "*Hey, you're not getting soft on me are you?*" he asked, his voice scratchy. "*No, just um a little grossed out. I could never be a doctor,*" the

young man admitted. "How are you feeling?" Ana asked, back at his side. "OK, except that I can't see shit. When is this coming off?" he asked. "Probably tomorrow. We need to give the solution time to work," Marie answered, disposing of the used equipment. "Who else is here?" Nick asked, sensing another person in the room. Kevin stepped up, "It's me kiddo." Nick smiled, "I thought I told you not to call me that." Kevin chuckled, "Old habits die hard. You really alright?" If Nick could have rolled his eyes, he would have, "Yes Kev, I'm fine. My arm hurts some, but I'm OK."

Nick pushed himself up in the bed, sitting up. "Whoa, where are you going?" Maire asked. "I have work to do," Nick said, trying to get up. He felt several pairs of hands push him back, "Not today you don't," Kevin said. Nick sighed, "Kev, just because I'm hurt doesn't mean that my work stops." "I know that Nick, but you need to rest," the older man said. "*Kevin is right,*" Mason said, walking into the room, "*The council can take over today.*" Nick shook his head, "*I'm fine, just let me work from here if you want me to rest so much. I'll stay in bed, but bring my work to me.*" Mason stared at him for a moment. He admired Nick for his perseverance, but wondered if it was the right thing to do. "*Please Mason. I can't let them think they won,*" Nick said. Mason sighed, "*Alright, we'll move up here,*" he conceded, then left the room.

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Nick reached for his drink, and Anthony carefully guided his hand to the cup. The council had gathered around his bed, going over the days agenda. "*We have heard nothing from the fleet,*" Joseph said. Nick sighed, shaking his head, "*They have to have a base, a hiding place, somewhere. Have they investigated all the places that could hide such a thing?*" "*Yes my king, they've come up with nothing,*" Nathaniel answered. Nick chewed on his lip, thinking. "*What about outside the system?*" Anthony asked, "*Have they searched there?*" Nick looked up in his direction, "*That's a good idea. I know we monitor everything inside the system, but what about out of it?*" "*We have some satellites beyond the system boundaries, but not many. We don't see that far past the first few planets,*" Mason admitted. Nick reached up and tugged on his bandages, Anthony gently reaching over and pulling his hand back. "*Marie said not to bother it,*" he reminded him. Nick smiled, "*Sorry, I forgot. It itches ... anyway, can we launch some remote probes or something? Get a look inside the next system without having to send our people there?*"

The council glanced at one another, ashamed they hadn't thought of it first. "*Yes, your highness, that can be done,*" Joseph said. Nick nodded, "*Good, I want it done immediately. They could be hiding just outside the system, ready to strike again and we just can't see them.*" The room grew quiet, and Nick realized what he'd just said. He smiled, "*Listen guys, I'm fine. This comes off tomorrow, no harm done.*"

The men nodded, even though Nick couldn't see them do it. He was relying on his senses, and could feel their movements. *"Now with that settled, let's discuss what we ....."* he started, but was interrupted by the beeping of his console. Anthony reached over and pressed a button on the night stand, *"Yes?" "I'm sorry to interrupt, but Ambassador James wishes to speak with the king,"* a tech said. Nick already had the blankets pulled back and was getting out of bed, *"I'll take it,"* he said, as Joseph took his hand and lead him to his desk.

Nick flipped the button, *"Hello Tunk."* Tunk stared at him for a moment, *"Your highness, what happened? Are you alright?"* Nick smiled, *"I'm fine, this is just temporary. How is the reconstruction going?" "It's a slow start but we are getting there. Listen, the reason I'm calling, is that I've heard some things you need to know,"* he replied. Nick leaned forward in his chair, *"Like what?" "That several of the planets are unhappy at how you are handling this. They don't think you are doing enough to find the perpetrators. They've banded together, and are forming a united army,"* he explained. Nick felt the familiar cold chill run down his back, *"I see. Is it safe to assume that this united army isn't going to look for the attackers?"* Tunk lowered his head, *"Yes, it's safe to assume that. They are angry, and they want justice. If they can't get the people that did this, they're coming after Celeste."*

Nick ran his hand through his hair and sighed. He could hear the mumbling behind him. *"Please tell me that Kholath isn't part of this army,"* Nick asked. *"Not yet, but I don't know how much longer I can keep it that way. I'm sorry Nick, I didn't want it to come to this,"* Tunk said. Nick nodded, *"I know my friend, neither did I. Thank you for telling me, and if I can do anything to help you, please let me know."* *"I will, and I'll do everything I can to keep Kholath out of this,"* Tunk replied. *"Alright, talk to you soon,"* Nick said. Tunk nodded, then the screen went blank. Nick turned around in his chair, *"Launch the probes, then gather the fleet. Alert the generals of what's happening, and issue a statement to the people to prepare themselves. I will not start this war, but if it comes, we're gonna be ready for it."*

## Chapter 79

Cameron walked down the hall, on his way to do his morning rounds. A nurse ran to catch up with him, *"Doctor, it's here!"* He turned around, surprised, *"The shipment? Already?"* *"Yes, sir. The pilots pushed it when they heard of the tension building in this part of the galaxy. I guess they didn't want to get caught in the middle of something,"* she explained. The doctor nodded, *"Has it been tested yet?"* *"Doing it as we speak. It should be ready to give by this afternoon if all goes well,"* she replied. *"Good, let me know,"* he said, going on down the hall.

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Nick fidgeted impatiently. *"Nick, if you don't stop moving, I'm gonna cut you with the scissors,"* Marie stated. *"Sorry,"* he said, trying his best to stay still as she cut the bandages around his eyes away. *"OK, I want you to keep your eyes closed until I tell you,"* she said, *"Lights, dim."* Marie pulled the gauze away from Nick's eyes. *"Alright, slowly open them,"* she instructed.

Nick started to open his eyes, blinking rapidly as the dim light in the room invaded his senses. He reached up to rub them, and Marie caught his hands, *"Don't rub."* He sighed in frustration as he continued to blink, each time opening his eyes a little bit more. They felt gummy, like he'd slept for days. At first things appeared blurred and distorted, but with each passing moment, his vision cleared. He glanced around the room, seeing everyone there. Even the council was there, awaiting his verdict. Marie looked at him expectantly, *"How is it?"* He smiled lightly, *"It's good. Little blurry at first, but it's better now."* She nodded, *"Lights up, two minutes."* Nick looked at her confused. *"The lights will be up to full in two minutes. Gives your eyes time to adjust,"* she said. *"Oh,"* he laughed as he noticed the lights start to brighten.

He threw his legs over the side of the bed, standing up. *"Nickolas, maybe you should rest for just a while longer,"* his mother suggested. He turned to her, *"I can't. There's too much to do."* Then he turned to the council, *"Give me twenty minutes to get cleaned up and we'll get to work."* With that he headed into his bathroom to shower. The queen looked over at Mason, and he shrugged. Everyone started to file out of the room, leaving the king to get ready. As they walked past the guards stationed in the hall, Mason caught up with LaDonna. *"Let him do this his way,"* he told her. *"He's so tired. I can see it in his face. Pushing himself like this isn't good for him,"* she said. *"I know. But he's determined to do this. Just let it ride for now. I'll watch out for him. If it gets to be too much, I'll make him take a break,"* he

assured. The queen nodded, as Mason turned and took the elevator down with the rest of the council.

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Nick stood in the shower letting the hot water ease his tired body. His arm was a little achy, but nothing like what he thought it would be. He would have a small scar, but nothing too noticeable, thanks to Marie. He sighed, turning around and letting the water hit his back. Closing his eyes, he prayed. "Hey God, it's me Nick. I know that I don't talk to you like I should, but I really need some help here. Please let me get this right. The safety of this entire planet rides on me getting this right. Please don't let me screw up, not this time. This is too important. Probably the most important thing I'll ever do ..... so um ..... let me get it right. And please let everyone understand," he sighed, fighting the tears he felt coming.

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Brian sighed. He was bored to tears. Even though the guys were in the room with him, they weren't talking. Everyone was watching the vid, wanting to see what the newest news was on the threat against Celeste. Brian was interested in it too, but he'd been watching since early that morning, and it was showing the same stuff. He sighed again, catching Kevin's attention. "What's wrong cuz?" he asked. "I'm tired of being in this bed," Brian replied. Kevin nodded, but didn't say anything. Brian stared at him, waiting, but when Kevin turned back to the vid, he gave up. Resigning himself to stare at the ceiling.

He had just finished counting about half the bumps on the ceiling when Marie and Cameron came into the room. Brian smiled as Marie came over and kissed him. "Hey sweetie," she said. "Hey, I missed you," he told her. She smiled as Cameron approached his IV with a large syringe. Brian eyed it, instantly knowing it was much larger than the doses he had been receiving lately. "*Cameron, that's too much,*" he pointed out. The doctor smiled, "*This isn't Krystal, it's the antidote.*" Brian glanced over at Marie and she nodded. "How will it work?" Howie asked. The doctor and Maire exchanged unsure glances. "*That's what we're about to find out,*" he said, injecting the liquid into Brian's IV, "*Brian, we're gonna hook you up to several monitors, just to make sure everything is OK.*"

Kevin stood up, "You mean you're giving that to him and you don't know what it's gonna do?" "We have an idea, but it hasn't been given to anyone yet. Brian's the first," Marie answered. Brian laughed, "Oh great, I'm the guinea pig." Cameron looked at him, "*What's a guinea pig?*" "Small little rodent used in

fucking lab tests," A.J. replied. The doctor chuckled, *"Ohh I see. Then I guess you are. Tell me if you start to feel funny."* Howie and Kevin glanced at one another, not so sure about all this. Marie was busy hooking a few monitors to her husband when Kevin nudged her, "You sure about this? What if he has a bad reaction or something?" he whispered, not wanting to offend Cameron. She smiled, "He will be fine, but if he does, the monitors will catch it."

Brian settled back in the bed as Cameron untied his hands from the rail. *"Your feet stay,"* he said, seeing the hopeful look in his patients eyes. Brian nodded, happy to have even that much freedom. *"Cameron, am I suppose to feel all warm and tingly?"* he asked after a few minutes. *"I'm not sure, you feel that way?"* the doctor asked, jotting down a few notes in Brian's chart. *"Yeah, I do. It feels good though ... kinda like the high from Krystal but a little more subtle,"* Brian explained. A few more minutes passed, and Brian was finding it very hard to keep his eyes open. They drifted closed for a moment, but then he quickly opened them again, reaching up and wiping his forehead. He was sweating, but it wasn't that hot in the room. "What are you feeling?" Marie asked. "Tired," he replied, his eyes drifting shut again for a moment. Marie smiled at him as she took a cloth and dabbed the sweat from his face, "Then go to sleep honey. Hopefully when you wake up, you'll be much better." Brian nodded, letting his eyes drift shut again. This time he didn't fight to open them.

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Nick stood in the control room, the council and Anthony behind him. He was listening to one of his ships as it directed its fighters. Apparently the ship stumbled across a couple of the vessels that had attacked Kholath, and was now engaged in a battle. The techs were furiously working to get an image up as well as the audio. Finally the image appeared in the middle of the room. Nick watched as his fighters were locked in a fierce battle. They were outnumbered, and he knew if help didn't come soon, he was going to lose a lot of people.

*"How far is the nearest ship?"* he asked, impatiently. *"It should arrive in five minutes, your highness,"* one of the techs replied. "They don't have five minutes," Nick muttered, glancing back at the council. Mason met his eyes for just a moment, and what he saw there frightened him. He couldn't explain it, but there was a knowing there. It gave him chills. *"Call them back,"* Nick instructed. Every tech in the room turned and looked at him in shock. *"Call them back. Tell them to bring their fighters in and get the hell outta there, now!"* Nick ordered.

The techs snapped back to work, and soon the commander of his ship appeared, *"Your highness, we can*

*beat them. Just give us time." "General, I will not lose any lives unnecessarily. I have given my orders, now follow them," Nick said in a stern tone. The general looked offended, "I have never retreated in my life." Nick sighed, "What good is winning the battle general, if you lose the war. This battle isn't necessary, we are just killing our own people by staying there. Let them go for now, we'll get them in the end."* The general looked as if he was contemplating Nick's words for a moment, then nodded, his image vanishing, replaced by the battle.

Nick watched as his fighters quickly went back to their ship and then the ship turned and sped away, the two ships on his heels. Nick sighed in relief as his ship finally jumped, leaving its pursuers to wonder where it went. *"How many did we lose?"* he asked. *"Twelve,"* a tech answered. Nick sighed, his shoulders slumped. Twelve fighters. Twelve people who wouldn't be going home. *"Notify their families, and give them my deepest condolences,"* he said, turning and leaving the room. The three council members glanced at one another before following him down the hall. All three were worried, and none of them knew what to do.

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"Here, let me," Kevin offered, taking the cloth from Marie. "Gloves," she reminded him. He nodded, pulling on a pair of gloves before taking her place by Brian's side. He wiped the sweat from his cousins face, wondering how long this was going to take. Brian had been asleep the entire time, and sweating profusely. They had already changed his bedding and clothes twice, and they were needing it again. Cameron had hooked up a second IV to help replace the fluids Brian was losing.

Maire stretched, walking over to the window to see the suns setting. *"It's just what I thought,"* Cameron said, coming through the door, *"It's ridding him of the toxins. That's why he's sweating so much."* "So we gotta keep the gloves on then?" Howie asked. Cameron nodded, *"Just to be safe. If you had a small cut on your hand and you touched him, some of the toxins could enter your system. Better safe than sorry."* "No shit," A.J. said, "I do not want to be going through what he has, that's for sure." "So how much longer is this gonna take?" Kevin asked. The doctor shook his head, *"I'm not sure."*

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Nick sat alone in the throne room. The council had long adjourned for the day, and he had sent Anthony on to supper. He sat on his throne, his knees pulled up to his chest, feeling very small the large chair.

He rested his head on his knees and closed his eyes, his mind a whirl with what was happening. He knew he had to accept it, but he just couldn't get his head around it yet. It was too much to ask of a twenty-one year old. Too much pressure. How the hell was he suppose to protect Celeste now? Nothing but angry calls came in after the altercation. Rulers accusing him of letting the attackers go. He knew they were right, he did let them go. "Please let this be right," he murmured.

"*Nickolas, are you alright?*" came a voice from the back of the room. Nick looked up to see his uncle walking towards him. He slid his legs down to the floor, "*Yeah, just thinking.*" Mason stood in front of him, "*You should eat, why don't you come with me? Everyone is finished, but the staff saved you a plate.*" Nick smiled, "*Thanks, but I'm not really hungry.*" Mason moved closer, studying him, "*You are exhausted. A tired king tends to make mistakes ya know?*" Nick sighed, "*Do you think I made a mistake today?*" he asked, looking down at the floor. Mason thought for a moment, "*I don't know. I saw your point. The other ship wouldn't have gotten there in time, and we would have lost many more lives, but.....*" "*But we've never backed down from a fight until now,*" Nick finished for him. The older man nodded.

"*Are you doubting your decision?*" he asked. Nick shook his head, "*No ... at least I don't think so.*" Mason reached over and pulled Nick's chin up so he was looking at him, "*You've seen something. Tell me.*" The young man pulled away from his grasp, shaking his head. "*Nickolas, I see it in your eyes, and it scares me. Tell me what you saw,*" Mason begged, "*Maybe I can help you.*" Nick took a deep breath, "*I wish you could, but this is something I have to do on my own. No one can help me.*" Mason's heart filled with sorrow at Nick's words. They sounded so void of hope, so final. Nick stood, resting his hand on his growling stomach, "*I guess I am hungry after all.*" Mason nodded, "*Mind if I join you?*" Nick shook his head, giving him a half grin. Mason couldn't help but note that the smile didn't reach his eyes. "*Just promise me no more talk of what I've seen,*" Nick said, as they crossed the massive room to the double doors. "*If you wish, but if you need to talk, I'm willing to listen,*" the older man offered. Nick glanced at him, a true smile crossing his face, "*Thanks.*"

## Chapter 80

Howie stood up and stretched. He rubbed his face for a moment, then looked around the room. A.J. was stretched out in a chair, his head leaned back, snoring. Kevin was next to him, slumped down, his elbow on the chair arm, his head resting in his hand, asleep. And Marie was across the room, her legs curled up underneath her and her head resting on the side of the high backed chair. He sighed, walking to the windows and looking out. The twin suns were just rising beyond the mountains. The group had spent all night in Brian's room, taking turns sitting with him. He had sweated for most of the night, only in the last few hours had he stopped. But he was still sleeping. Howie wasn't sure if he should be grateful or worried.

"Hey D," someone whispered. Howie jumped, then turned around to find Brian staring at him, a smile on his face. He crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed, "Hey, how you feeling?" "Great, is it morning already?" Brian asked, sitting up to look out the window. "Yeah, suns just rising. So you feel alright?" he asked again. "Yeah, I feel like I could run a marathon. I haven't felt this good since. .... wow, since the wedding," he replied. Howie smiled, "That seems like ages ago." Brian nodded, "Yeah it does. Too long. I really didn't mean to sleep this long, what's happening on the news?" The older man shrugged, "Not sure. We haven't watched it since last night." "Has Nick been down?" Brian asked. "No, he had a lot to deal with yesterday, but I'm sure he'll try to come today," Howie answered. "Ohh, Ok," Brian said, sounding somewhat disappointed that his best friend hadn't been down to see him.

Both men looked up as Ana came into the room. She smiled when she saw Brian awake and walked over, "Hey, you look much better than you did last night." Brian laughed, "Thanks, I feel better." "Good," she said. "So what brings you down this early?" Howie asked. Ana shifted her weight, "Um, I wanted to see how Brian was doing before I started work." "The queen still got you busy?" Brian asked. She nodded, "Yeah, we're doing what we can to help. The techs are working overtime, and we've been going in and relieving them." "So anything new?" Howie asked. "Not really. After the brawl yesterday, nothing but angry politicians," she said, looking nervous. "So what's that look for?" Brian asked. She sighed, "I'm worried. Several of the planets are massing a fleet .... they're angry at us, making threats. It doesn't look good." The two men looked at each other, exchanging worried expressions. "If we can do anything to help, let us know," Howie offered. "Yeah, I'm hoping to get out of here sometime," Brian smiled. Ana grinned, "You need your rest." "I've rested enough for three people, I'm ready to get out of here," Brian replied. "I'm sure you are," Ana said, moving towards the door, "I'll see you guys later." "Later," Howie called after her, then looked at Brian, "Why am I worried?" "Same reason I am, if Celeste doesn't do something soon, we may be facing a war," Brian said. Howie sighed, nodding, "I really wish I didn't know that." "Me too bro," Brian said, "Me too."

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"No general I will not reconsider," Nick said, frustrated, "If you are fired on, then you protect yourself, but we will not start this." "Your highness, it's best to strike first. Take the offensive," the general argued. Several more agreeing with him. Nick closed his eyes for a moment, trying to keep his cool. He couldn't have a tantrum, not in front of the generals that lead his army. He looked back at the holograms. Each man well his senior and with years of experience in their fields. "We will not fire first, is that understood?" he asked, his voice low and stern, "Celeste will not take the blame for this war, if it comes to that. We will defend our home, and those we have allegiance to. Nothing more. If one of my ships fires first, I will personally see that commander imprisoned and his crew relieved of their duties. Do I make myself clear?" Several of the generals muttered a yes. Nick could see they were unhappy with his decision, but none of them wanted to be on his bad side either.

"Now that we have that settled, keep monitoring them. I want a report every hour, and I want to be the first person to know when they move," Nick instructed. The men nodded. "Alright, dismissed," Nick said, flicking off his transmission. "So they are gathering strength," Joseph asked. Nick turned in his chair to face the council, "Yes. They are starting to mass near one of Jeptim's's moons." "Do we know who is involved?" Nathaniel asked. "Jeptim, and several of the outlying planets. A few of the industrial sectors ..... almost the entire system this side of the Great Cloud," Nick answered. The three men glanced at one another, stunned. "Nickolas, we cannot fight such an army. They are too many," Mason said. Nick gazed at them with immense sadness in his eyes, "I know, but we may not have a choice."

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Kevin chuckled, listening to Brian sing in the shower. He was so happy, and bouncing off the walls. Brian hit Cameron up as soon as he walked into the room that morning, asking him if he could leave. The doctor wasn't so sure, not wanting him to leave too early and have a relapse, so he ordered several tests. They were awaiting the results. "Dude, I don't remember him singing in the shower like that," A.J. smiled. "He's happy and he feels good, what better reason to sing?" Howie laughed. Marie sat in her chair, listening to her husband's voice. It had been so long since she heard anything happy come from him, and now she just wanted to revel in it.

Brian walked out of his little bathroom, still towel drying his hair. He'd changed into a pair of his sweats

and a t-shirt, happy to be out of the breezy hospital gown and unhooked from everything. He hummed the rest of his song as he found his comb and started to brush his hair, curls going everywhere. "Man, I need a haircut," he commented, trying to tame the wild tufts of hair. He finally gave up, running his hand through his sandy blonde locks and messing them up, "I give," he said with a laugh. Marie settled beside him and kissed his cheek, "I like your curls." He grinned, "Good, I'll give them to you when I get them cut off," he teased.

Cameron walked into the room with Brian's chart in his hands, reading as he walked. "*So Cam, do I get to leave?*" Brian asked, so anxious to hear the answer he was swinging his legs and bouncing where he sat. The doctor looked up at him and smiled, "*Well aren't you chipper?*" "*Yeah, so can I? Huh? Please?*" Brian begged, making everyone laugh. Cameron shut the chart, "*All your tests came back OK. There's no trace of the toxins in your system. You, my friend, have a clean bill of health.*" "*So I get to go?*" Brian asked. "*Yes, you're free to leave,*" the doctor replied. "Yippee!" Brian yelled, springing to his feet and grabbing Marie's hand, pulling her toward the door. "*Thanks Cam, for everything,*" he said as he drug his wife out of the room. A.J. stood up and clapped his hands together, "We all sleeping in different rooms tonight?" "Oh yeah," Kevin said, "As far away from those two as we can get."

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Nick walked into the dining room expecting to eat once again by himself. The day had been long and tedious. He was surprised to find Kevin, A.J, and Howie waiting for him. "Hey guys, what are you doing here? Nothing's wrong with Bri is it?" he asked, getting worried. Kevin held his hand up, "No, he's fine. Cameron let him leave today." Nick sat down as a servant placed his plate in front of him, "Thanks. So he's better?" "Yeah, you could say that," A.J. laughed, causing Howie to blush. Nick glanced at him, wondering what he meant. "Dude, he jumped up and grabbed Marie and practically ran out the door with her," A.J. laughed. Nick smiled, "Man I miss all the good stuff. So I guess we're sleeping elsewhere tonight?" All three nodded. "Did someone tell mom?" Nick asked. "Yeah, we vacated the entire floor," Howie answered, still blushing. Nick chuckled, "Good, I could just see mom wondering what the hell was going on down the hall." Everyone laughed.

Nick took a few bites of his food, knowing his brothers were here for more than just to warn him of Brian's release. He looked up, finding three sets of eyes plastered on him. "So ... tell me why you're here," he said. The three glanced at each other, Howie and A.J. silently appointing Kevin to speak. What else is new? "We wanted to see how you were," he started, "I know what's been going on has to be hell. Can we do anything? Do you need anything?" Nick stared at his food and smiled. There they were, being the protective big brothers he loved so much. Just that small act filled Nick with so much emotion,

he felt tears brimming. He quickly blinked them away before looking back up. "I'm alright guys. There's nothing you can do. I have to deal with this on my own," he said, feeling his heart break. He knew what those words meant, the guys didn't, and they could never know.

"You're sure?" Howie asked. Nick nodded, "Yeah, but thanks." "For what," asked Kevin. "For being here, for believing in me, for caring about me .... just everything. I love you guys," Nick said, the words in his letters flashing through his mind, threatening to bring more tears. Howie got up and walked over, giving Nick a huge hug. "We love you too Nicky," he said, smiling as he let go. Nick brushed the vile tear away that slipped down his cheek and smiled, nodding, he didn't trust his voice. "Hey, I got a great idea," A.J. announced. The three looked at him. "Let's all bunk together tonight. Ya know, like the old days. We can watch movies and just hang out," he said. "J, that's a great idea and all, but I'm sure Nick has things to do," Kevin said. A.J. looked at Nick, disappointment in his face, "Oh yeah, I forgot." Nick shook his head, "Naw man, that sounds cool." "You sure Nick? Don't you need to get some rest?" Howie asked. Nick smiled. Big brothers till the end. "I'm good. I'm used to a lot less sleep now anyway. Besides, I need this ... It'll take my mind off what's going on for a while," he said. "Great then it's settled," A.J. said, standing up, "I'll go see if I can get us some movies." "Stop right there," Nick said, making A.J. jump and look at him. Nick grinned, "Take D with you. I don't wanna be watching porn all night." A.J. rolled his eyes as Howie joined him and they left the room. Kevin smiled at his youngest brother, "Thanks, I don't think I could watch porn all night either." "Welcome," Nick said, taking another bite, "What's the fun in watching if you can't do it anyway?" Kevin laughed out loud, "True that kiddo." Nick glanced up from his food. "Um I mean Nick," Kevin said. Some things never changed.

# Chapter 81

Rowland stepped into the room the guys had occupied and almost laughed out loud. The place was a mess. Clothes and food everywhere, the vid still on playing some infomercial. Yes, even in space those vile things exist. The guys sprawled out in various parts of the room, all snoring. He quietly walked past Howie, noting the food plastered to his face, apparently the object of a prank. Kevin and A.J. were in the floor, sitting up against the couch, leaning on each other. The guard stared at them for a moment, wondering how they could sleep like that. Shrugging his shoulders he made his way to Nick. He was sitting sideways in a chair, his long legs dangling over one of the arms. Rowland reached down and shook him, "Your highness." Nick jumped and looked up, his eyes focusing on the man.

"Wh-what is it?" he asked, pushing himself up, bringing his legs around and realizing they were both asleep. The pins and needles sensation creeping down them to his toes. "We have one of the ships," the guard said. Nick looked up, surprised, "One of the Interstellar ships? How?" "It crossed one of our patrols. We knocked out its main engine, they're basically dead in space," he answered, "We're pulling them back to one of our stations for questioning." Nick stood up and grimaced, taking a moment to shake first his right, then left leg, "OK, I'll be down as soon as I get cleaned up." Rowland nodded, grinning, "Looks like you had fun." Nick chuckled, "Yeah we did. Tell them I had to leave will ya?" The guard nodded as Nick headed out of the room.

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Brian lay in bed watching Marie sleep. He'd been awake for nearly an hour, but didn't dare move. It had been so long since he'd gotten to watch his wife sleep, and it was one of his favorite things to do. He often wondered what she was dreaming, especially when a small smile creased her lips, as it just did. He settled more into his pillow, not knowing a time when he was more happy. Finally things were back on track. He was back with the woman he loved more than life itself, and rid of his addiction. It still amazed him that he wasn't craving the once precious blue liquid. He'd lived so long with the craving he thought it would never stop. Now that it had, he felt ....free.

"Where are you?" Marie whispered, pulling him from his thoughts. Brian looked over, staring straight into her pale blue eyes, "Just thinking." She raised her head and gently kissed his cheek, "What about?" Brian pulled her into his arms, loving how they fit together so perfectly, "Life, us....everything we've been through, and how happy I am right now." Marie grinned, "I'm happy too." Brian leaned in and

kissed her lips gently, then pulled back, "Je t'aime, Marie. Vous êtes mon soleil, la lune et des étoiles... vous êtes mon tout." *I love you Marie. You are my sun, the moon and stars ..... you are my everything.* Marie's eyes pricked with tears of joy. How did she ever get this lucky to have Brian in her life? "Je t'aime tellement." *I love you so much,* she said, returning his kiss.

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Nick glanced at Ana as he waited for word on the interrogation. The ships had arrived at the station more than two hours ago, and Nick was growing impatient. Ana gave him a slight smile, then went back to her work. That seemed to be the definition of their relationship now, just smiles and nods. Nick wanted to just grab her and kiss her, tell the entire world how much he loved her, but he couldn't. They had barely seen each other in the last few weeks, and he missed her terribly. He missed her friendship more than anything. He'd come to rely on their daily talks. She never treated him like a king, or a freak ... just a friend, and he missed that. Sure they saw each other, but it was always in the company of others. Since Nick's death threats started coming in, he'd rarely been left alone. Always accompanied by a guard, even when he slept. If the guard wasn't in the room, he was stationed outside the door.

Nick stared at her again, *I miss you,* he thought. He watched as Ana stopped her work for a moment, closing her eyes as if she were fighting back tears. She never looked back, only giving a slight nod before continuing on. Nick bit his lip, the sadness he glimpsed from Ana making its home on his face. He knew what was coming, when no one else did. No matter how all this tension played out, it only had one ending. The one he saw every night in his dreams. The one that scared him to death, and filled his soul with sadness. The one that he would have to face alone.

"*Your highness, it's coming up,*" a tech said. Nick cleared his throat and moved to the pad in the middle of the room. A hologram of one of his generals appeared before him. "*General, what have you learned?*" Nick asked impatiently. "*The captain refused to speak, but some of the ship hands did. They are employed by Interstellar. The attack on Nactibque was ordered from here. None of them know who actually gave the orders, but they believed they were acting with your approval until it was posted on the vids,*" the man said. "*My approval? What would make them think that?*" Nick asked, totally stunned. "*Their orders came with the royal seal,*" he replied. "*I see,*" Nick said, at a loss for words. How did someone get his seal? It couldn't be copied, there was no way.

"*What do you want us to do with the prisoners?*" the general asked. Nick thought for a moment, "*Hold them at the station. Leave enough personnel to guard them and continue on your route. There's still*

*four more ships out there somewhere." "Yes my king," the man said, nodding and ending his transmission. Nick sighed, turning to face the council that had been waiting with him. "Prepare a statement to the media. Tell them that Interstellar was behind the attack, and that the company has been seized. From now on, nothing Interstellar comes in or out of this system without my approval," Nick said, heading to the door, "Uncle, let's you and I pay Mr. Sterling a visit." Mason followed Nick out of the room and down the hall, "Are you sure this is the way to handle this?" Nick stopped walking and faced him, "Yes. When you were with them, did you ever give them one of your seals?" Mason shook his head. "How many do you have?" Nick asked. "Two," he answered. "And I have two. What about mom and Anthony?" Nick asked. "They each have two," the older man answered. Nick nodded, turning and continuing down the hall, "When we return, all of us need to look and make sure we still have them. One of the servants could have taken one without us knowing." Mason nodded, nervous about this change in events. He wasn't sure how the king seizing Interstellar was going to play out, and he was afraid for Nick.*

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Jack Sterling made his way up to his office. He was in a good mood, and that was a rare occasion. Things were going his way, and if he was a betting man, he'd bet that soon he'd have no menacing young king to deal with. If the assassination attempts didn't get him, surely the impending war would. Either way, he'd be free of his troubles. No more worrying over an ancient prophecy coming to pass. For how could it, if the chosen one was dead?

He entered the foyer to his office, puzzled that his assistant wasn't at his desk. He shrugged, making a mental note to fire the boy when he showed his face again. He crossed the room and opened the large double doors to his office .... and froze in his tracks. Nick was sitting at his desk, glaring at him. Those damn lavender eyes boring a hole right through him. Sterling jumped when two guards pulled him into the room and closed the doors behind him, blocking his escape. Nick leaned back in his chair, *"You've been a busy man. Building warships, attacking innocent cities, importing drugs, and trying to kill your king....oh and let's not forget trying to start a war."* Sterling crossed his arms over his large chest, *"You have no proof."* *"Do I?"* Nick asked, leaning forward, arching his eyebrows. The two stared at one another for a long time. Nick finally broke the competition, holding his hand out palm up. Sterling watched as a tiny ball of light appeared in his hand, growing to the size of a golf ball. He grew nervous, not knowing what Nick was planning next. Nick rolled the ball over to the back of his hand and ran it along his fingers, back and forth. Much the way he would twirl his drum sticks when he was playing. This went on for several minutes, and when Nick finally rolled the ball back into his palm and extinguished it, even some of the guards were nervous.

Nick looked up, *"You are a traitor. You have put the welfare of your people at risk just to earn money. Now, tell me where the rest of your ships are, and your punishment won't be as severe."* Sterling laughed, *"You think you can hurt me? You are more naive than I thought. If you kill me, hundreds of planets will come after you. I run this part of the galaxy, or have you not been told? Commerce runs a planet, and I own them all. Kings and politicians are just figures for show. I control what comes in and goes out."*

*"Not anymore,"* Nick said, nodding to the guards. They seized the large man, placing him in cuffs. Nick got up and walked to him, *"Now I run them all. Take him away."* *"You can't do this!"* Sterling yelled, as the guards drug him out of the office, *"You just signed your death warrant!"* Nick sighed, glancing back at his uncle who was standing in the corner of the room. Sterling never even saw him there. *"I want you to appoint a committee to run this place, they will answer to you,"* Nick instructed. Mason's mouth dropped open, *"You're giving me Interstellar?"* Nick grinned, *"Yeah, why not? I think you'd make a great businessman. Besides, I trust you."* Mason smiled back, but it only lasted a minute. *"Nickolas, speaking of trust. Brian is well now, and I need to .... um....."* Nick nodded, putting his arm over his uncles shoulder as they walked out of the room. *"We'll talk to him tonight,"* Nick said. *"We?"* Mason asked. *"Yeah, unless you wanna do it alone? But trust me, he's small, but that don't mean he won't kick your ass. Just thought I'd referee, ya know, keep things fair,"* he laughed. The older man grinned, *"Thanks, I think."* *"Come on, we have a lot to do,"* Nick said, heading down the hall. Mason sighed, *"That we do."*

## Chapter 82

"*You should have seen the look on his face,*" Mason laughed. "I bet," Kevin smiled, "You can be pretty intimidating nowadays." Nick smiled and shook his head, taking a bite of his supper. "So what now?" Howie asked, "Will that solve the problems?" Nick and Mason glanced at one another. "Um no it won't," Nick answered. "Why not? You got the bad guy," A.J. said. Nick sighed, putting down his fork and looking at his friends, "It's not that simple." "*Dealing with other cultures and governments is never simple,*" LaDonna added. "So does that mean we're still looking at a possible war?" Kevin asked. Nick bit his lip and nodded. "Damn," A.J. muttered. Anthony nodded his agreement to the simple statement.

"Hey guys," Brian said as he and Marie came through the door, hand in hand. A.J. feigned a heart attack, "Holy hell, they are still alive!" Everyone chuckled, causing the two to blush as they took their seats. "Bri, you look good man," Nick commented, slapping his friend on the shoulder. "Thanks," he said, "You look tired." "What else is new," Nick joked, going back to his food. LaDonna smiled across the table at the couple, "*It's good to see you well again Brian.*" "*Thank you, your highness. I was beginning to wonder if I ever would be,*" Brian replied. Mason looked down at his food, immense guilt filling him. LaDonna noticed this and gave his knee a squeeze under the table. He looked up and she gave him a reassuring smile.

Nick glanced down the table at Ana. She had been very quiet tonight, and she had a far away look on her face. Their time apart was taking its toll. Everyone had engaged in small talk, ignoring him, so Nick took the opportunity. *Ana, are you ok?* he thought, glancing back down at his plate. *I miss you,* was her only reply. Even in his mind, her voice sounded sad. *I miss you too. Can we meet?* he asked, still not looking at her. Not wanting anyone to even think they were talking. *What about your guards?* she asked, continuing to eat. *I'll take care of it. Meet me in the library tonight,* he thought. He chanced a glance at her, just as she looked up. She nodded slightly and smiled. They had a date.

"Yo, you awake?" Brian asked, waving his hand in front of Nick's face. Nick snapped back to reality, "Huh?" "Spacing out again?" Brian asked, grinning mischievously at him. "Sorry, I've got a lot on my mind," Nick said, "What were you saying?" "I wanted to know what I can do to help," Brian said again. Nick sighed, "I don't know. It's a waiting game now." "We could use some help in the control room," Ana suggested. "Great, just tell me when to show up," Brian grinned, happy to have a 'job' again. He'd been down so long he felt useless. Now he could contribute something to helping out. "How bout tomorrow morning," Ana said. "I'll be there," he replied. "What about the rest of us?" Kevin asked, "Can we help out too?" "I wish you could, but you don't speak the language, and not all our ships are

equipped with translators," Ana said. Kevin looked disappointed. "I know," Nick said, "You guys can help Anthony and the council." "What would we be doing?" A.J. asked, a little skeptical. *"You would be assistants to us,"* Anthony said, excited at the idea of getting an assistant. "You mean gofers?" Howie asked. Anthony and Mason glanced at each other. *"What's a gofer?"* Mason asked. Nick laughed. For a planet that monitored everything, they sure didn't know much about Earth and its species. *"A gofer is a small rodent, or in this case, someone that does whatever you ask them. Like run and get you things, stuff like that,"* he explained. *"Ohh I see, then yes, you would be a gofer,"* Anthony announced. "Great," A.J. muttered, then got a swift kick from Kevin under the table. "That would be fine. Anything we can do to help out," the older man said.

The rest of supper went by uneventfully. Everyone talked about the day and what was going on. As they finished and started to get up to leave, Nick cleared his throat. "Hey Bri, Marie, can you guys stick around for a minute? I need to talk to you," he said. "Sure," Brian said, sitting back down next to his wife. Nick waited until everyone else had left, and the servants had shut the doors. Brian glanced at Marie, wondering what this was about, and wondering why Mason was still there, staring at the floor.

"Bri, um Mason has something that he wants to tell you," Nick said, looking over at his uncle. The older man fidgeted in his seat for a moment, trying to find the right words. He didn't dare look at the couple. *"Brian ... Marie.. I want to say that I'm sorry,"* he started. *"Sorry for what?"* Brian asked, confused. Mason took a deep breath, finally looking up, *"Sorry for what you went through. The kidnapping, your addiction, the loss of your child....it's all my fault."* The couple glanced at each other. *"My lord, what do you mean it's all your fault?"* Marie asked. Mason looked at Nick, needing some support. He got it in the form of a smile and a nod. *"I am the one that set up the kidnapping. I was working for Interstellar then, and they wanted a way to get to Nickolas. I employed Devon to earn your trust so he could lead you into the trap. I'm so sorry .... I had no idea they were going to do what they did. I-I didn't know that you would lose your child, and almost lose your life. I didn't care then, but I do now, and nothing I can say will ever make up for it, I'm sorry,"* he finished, looking back down at the table.

Brian felt Marie's hand slide into his, giving it a squeeze. He didn't know what to say, how to react to this. So he just sat there staring at Mason across the table, in shock. Marie was doing the same, a tear streaking down her cheek every so often. Nick reached over and put his hand on his friend's shoulder, "Bri, Mason came to me while you were in medical and told me what he'd done. I have punished him in part, but the last part of his punishment is up to you and Marie. I do want to say that since then, he's changed. He's been helping me, gathering information from Interstellar ... and risking his life to do so. He's not the same man that did this to you, and I want you to consider that." Brian looked at his friend, "You knew?" he whispered. Nick nodded, "For some time now. We didn't want to tell you until you were well. We both knew this would upset you both very much."

Brian took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves. He was trembling with anger, and as he looked over at Marie, he noticed she was too. *"How could you?"* Brian asked in a voice so low it almost wasn't heard, *"How could you do this to us?"* Mason bit his lip, trying to fight the tears he felt welling up, *"I have no excuse Brian, other than my own greed."* Brian stood up and slammed his fist on the table, *"That's not good enough!! How could you do this to us?! What the hell did I ever do to you?!"* Nick reached out and touched Brian's hand, "Brian." Brian pulled it away, "Don't Brian me Nick! What he did was unforgivable! We lost our child .. I almost died, not to mention the hell I went through, the hell Marie went through! How could you keep this from us?! Why isn't he in prison?!" he screamed.

A guard stepped inside the door, *"Is everything alright?"* he asked, glancing around the room. Nick nodded, *"Everything is fine, go back outside."* The guard nodded, leaving the room. "Brian, sit down," Nick said, giving his friend a stern look. Brian glared at him, but did as he asked. "I know you are angry, and his punishment is up to you both, but I need him now Brian. I'm looking at a war that I don't know how to deal with, I need his help and yours," Nick said. Brian looked down at the table, at a loss as to what to do. He wanted to jump over the table and beat Mason senseless, but that wouldn't solve anything. Marie squeezed his hand again, and he looked up at her, "Come into the hall with me," she said. They both got up and left the room.

Nick half smiled at Mason, *"Well that was better than I thought."* *"Really?"* the older man asked. He nodded, *"Yeah, I was expecting him to jump over the table and beat the shit out of you."* *"I almost wish he had,"* Mason said, sighing heavily. *"I know this is odd coming from me and all, but I'm proud of you,"* Nick said out of the blue. *"Proud of me?"* he asked. Nick nodded, *"You're doing the right thing, knowing it could hurt you. I've watched you change into a decent person these last few weeks. The old Mason would have never let on that he had anything to do with this. I'm glad that you are taking responsibility for what you've done."* The older man smiled, *"Thank you."*

Just then the door swished open and Brian and Marie walked back in. Both looked somewhat calmer. "We have decided what his punishment is," Brian announced. "Alright," Nick said, gesturing for Brian to tell him. Brian swallowed and glanced at Marie. She smiled. He looked back at Mason, *"Aside from your duties on the council you will also work in the medical ward two hours a day for the next year. You are to work in the nursery, helping the nurses out with the newborn babies. I hope every time you hold a child, you think of the one we lost,"* Brian spat, doing his best not to start yelling again. Mason looked down and finally let the tears he was holding back fall. "That is a fair punishment," Nick said, looking to his uncle, *"You will start tomorrow."* Mason nodded, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "Thanks Bri," Nick said. Brian nodded, taking his wife's hand and quickly walking from the room. Nick knew he was angry at him as well, but hoped with time it would fade. Mason stood to leave. *"You alright?"* Nick

asked, walking out with him. He nodded, *"Brian is right. Every time I hold a baby I'll think of theirs."* *"Appropriate punishment, don't you think?"* Nick asked. *"The worst I can imagine,"* Mason replied.

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Nick walked into the library, slowly walking through the isles of books. He felt her there, it was just a matter of finding which isle she was standing in. Finally he found her, near the back of the room in the corner. He ducked into the isle and pulled her into his arms, hugging her and not wanting to let go. "I missed you so much," he whispered. "So did I," she said, pulling back and gently kissing his lips. She pulled back again, looking past Nick, "Where is your guard?" "In the hall," Nick answered, "I couldn't get rid of him," he said dejected. Ana smiled, "Well they are suppose to be protecting you." "I can take care of myself," he countered. "Oh like you did the other night? If Rowland hadn't gotten there ....." she trailed off. Nick cupped her chin in his hand, "Let's not talk about that, K?"

Ana nodded. "So tell me how you are?" Nick asked, sitting down in the floor, pulling her with him. "I'm OK ...worried," she replied. "About?" he asked. "You," she said, staring right into his eyes, "You're still having the nightmares?" He nodded, and she saw the fear flash in his eyes. "Talk to me Nick. What scares you so much?" she asked, taking his hand. He looked at the floor, "I-I can't Ana. This is something that I have to deal with on my own." "Why? Why do you have to face this on your own?" she wanted to know. He sighed, "Because I'm the only one that can do it." She stared at him for a moment, "This has something to do with the prophecy doesn't it?" He looked away from her, and she had her answer. "Did you find it? What it says in full?" she asked. He shook his head, "No. I just know it, in my heart." Ana pulled his chin around making him look at her, "You're scaring me Nick. You look so distant, so sad. Please let me help you." He half smiled, tears brimming his eyes, "You are helping me. Knowing you love me keeps me going," he said, as a tear trailed down his cheek. Ana pulled him into her arms, letting her own tears fall. Whatever he was dealing with, it frightened her. Nick wrapped his arms around her, "Hold me Ana. Just hold me," he almost begged. She nodded, pulling him tighter.

## Chapter 83

Nick walked out into the small field the unicorns were grazing in. It was early morning, and he'd had a restless night. The dreams plagued him. Even if he did manage to sleep, he never rested. Always fighting, worrying, struggling in his dreams. He took in a deep breath of the cool morning air, closing his eyes for a moment. He needed this. This quiet, calm. He'd left his guards at the fence, making it very clear he wanted this time to himself. Opening his eyes again, he smiled as Thomas trotted up to him. "Hey boy, miss me?" Nick asked, as the unicorn nuzzled him with his nose and purred. Nick laughed, "I know, I missed you too. Everything's so complicated now ...so hard. I miss our rides, the days I didn't have all this shit to deal with." Thomas nodded as if he understood Nick's pain, staring through him with his big chocolate eyes. Nick stared back for a moment, lost in them, then he pushed the unicorn's face away from him, "Stop that, I'm not dead yet," he laughed.

Nick looked over to see the white unicorn grazing not far away. "Who's your new friend?" he asked Thomas, walking over to the unknown animal. Nick approached him slowly holding his hand out, "Hey there." The white unicorn looked up, then sniffed Nick's hand before he let him pet him. "So where did you come from?" Nick asked. The creature bobbed its head and neighed. Nick's eyes grew wide, "You did? How come Brian didn't tell me that?" Again the unicorn neighed and grunted. Nick laughed, "Well I guess he was kinda out of it at the time. Thank you." The unicorn nodded again, then trotted off to a new patch of grass.

Nick slowly walked around, greeting all the unicorns. It'd been ages since he'd been down to the stables, and he wanted to stay as long as possible. Somehow these creatures calmed him, made him see things in a new light. Thomas followed along like an obedient puppy. Nick welcomed his company, as he and Thomas made their way to a vacant part of the field, far away from the others. As he walked he absently stroked the unicorn's neck, his mind drifting. All his memories seemed jumbled together. His family on earth came into the picture ... scenes of their vacations, and holidays, arguments, and bonding. He missed them so much. He shook his head and sighed... the lies they had been told, just to protect what he was. They thought he was kidnapped, what a hell they must be going through, not having any word, or hope, for months.

Then his mind drifted to his family on Celeste. His dad, or at least who he thought was his dad, smiling at him. Trying to teach him what he needed to know in the short time he had. The grief he felt when he passed away. Sometimes he still felt it, even after everything he had learned. And then, his mother. She was always there, supporting him in her own quiet way. He had a newfound respect for her, for

what she had to endure in her life .... all for him, and love. And then there was Anthony, he was a brother to him .... more than just a cousin. He deserved what Nick had, and Nick was going to make sure he got it in the end, no matter what. Mason flashed through his mind, and Nick was surprised to feel a warmth towards the man. He had started out loathing Nick, and the feeling was mutual, but now ..... now there was a love there, where hate once lived. It was awkward at times. The way Mason would look at him, and then his confession that he'd always thought Nick was his son. That tends to unnerve a person. But Nick was slowly warming to the idea. He didn't know if he could ever call him dad, but there was a mutual love and respect between them now, and he had to admit he liked it that way.

Thomas nudged him from his thoughts, and Nick looked over. If there was ever concern in the creature's eyes, it was now. Nick half smiled and stroked his nose, "I'm fine, just thinking." Thomas stepped closer, bending his head down to rest on Nick's shoulder, purring softly. Nick hugged his neck and buried his face in Thomas's black hair. "Everything will work out, it has to, otherwise I did all this for nothing," he whispered, "I could've gone home when mom gave me the choice..... but I stayed for this. Please let it work, please."

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Howie walked into the control room and over to Ana. "Hey, morning," he said. She pulled her headphones off and smiled, "Morning, what brings you down?" "The council wants the daily reports," he answered. Ana rummaged around and found the papers, handing them over, "So that gofer thing very interesting?" Howie grinned, "I dunno bout that, but at least we know what's going on." She nodded, "True."

Howie glanced over and watched Brian at another console. He was in heavy conversation with someone on the other end, and working the controls like he was born to. "He amazes me," Ana said, "It's like he can just pick anything up and do it." "Yeah, he's always been that way," he replied. Brian looked over and waved, never missing a beat in his conversation. Howie smiled, "Well, I better get back, see you tonight." "See ya," Ana said, placing her headphones back on.

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*"So the shipments are coming in as scheduled?"* Nick asked. Mason nodded, *"Yes, we're due to receive*

another in a few days." "Good, I want as many as we can get before this thing turns ugly," Nick said, "The less people we have to worry about being on the drug the better." "I still can't believe you found the cure," Joseph said. Nick smiled, "I had a lot of help. Speaking of, the ships from Earth should be here in a few days." "Do you really think it's gonna make a difference? I mean we're facing half the galaxy here," Nathaniel commented. Nick looked down at the table and shook his head, "I don't know, but it can't hurt."

Mason looked across the table at his 'nephew' and wondered if he really didn't know. Something in the boys eyes was telling he did and just wasn't saying it. Nick glanced up, catching his eye for a moment, then he looked away. "I believe that is all for today," he said, getting up to leave, "Mason, don't forget your obligation." Mason nodded dutifully and without a word, headed down to medical.

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Marie stood at the nurses station working on some paperwork for the doctor she worked for. She had seen Mason go down the hall, and tried everything to avoid him. When he spotted her, his eyes went directly to the floor, a pained expression on his face. Good, Marie thought, *He deserves to feel that way after what he did.* She was just as angry as Brian over the entire incident, and it was her idea to make him work here. Maybe seeing the babies everyday for a year would teach him a lesson. She had no idea.

Finally, curiosity got the better of her, and she went down to the nursery. She stood back, unnoticed, and watched. Mason was sitting in a rocking chair, holding a newborn. He stared into the child's face, tears evident in his eyes. Marie stepped into the room, nodding at another nurse that noticed her. Mason was humming a song, gently rocking the sleeping infant. He seemed to be lost in his own thoughts, tears slowly trailing down his cheeks.

Mason looked down at the little boy they had given him. Such a sweet innocent face stared back at him, reminding him of what Nick looked like all those years ago. Things should have been different. In a perfect world, he and LaDonna would have married, and had their son to raise and love. But he wasn't in a perfect world. Things got messed up, he and LaDonna were ripped apart and their son was taken from them. Sent to be raised by someone else. He took a deep breath, trying to gain his composure. It was futile though. The child in his arms jumped in its sleep, causing Mason to cuddle it closer to him. He hadn't realized he was humming, until then. It was an old lullaby, one he once hummed to Nick.

Mason shook his head, regretting the majority of his life. He gave in to greed and hate, and left love on the sidelines. If he had just been stronger, stood up for what he loved .... things would be so different. He would be different. Not this shell of a man he once was, grasping to find himself again. He stared at the child again, wondering if Brian and Marie's child would have looked like this one. He would never forgive himself for what they went through ...never. And he never expected them to forgive him either. He had ruined their lives along with everyone else's.

One of the nurses stepped up and took the sleeping baby from him. "Your time is up for today my lord," she whispered, so as not to wake the child. Mason nodded, standing up and wiping his tear stained cheeks. He turned to leave, and stopped, noticing Marie standing in the corner of the room. He bit his lip, not knowing if he should say something or not. She had tears in her eyes, and a curious expression on her face. He wasn't sure what she was thinking, her demeanor hard to read. The two stared at one another for a few awkward moments, then Marie turned and left the room. Mason watched her go, his heart breaking once again at the pain he had caused her, and so many others.

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*Nick looked across the fields, his heart in his throat. Thomas pranced around underneath him. Nick tightened the reins, trying to keep him still. He glanced back, seeing his army behind him. Thousands of men, ready to fight at his order. Suddenly a loud boom filled the air and he looked towards the blue sky, knowing the battle there had already started. Nick swallowed hard, this was it, there was no going back now. He took a deep breath and raised his hand. His golden armor shining in the light from the twin suns. With one gesture, his army was advancing.*

*Nick took a moment to glance from side to side. Rowland was next to him, and next to Rowland was Kevin, riding the white unicorn. Nick looked ahead, into the eyes of his enemies. All different races were marching towards him, all out for blood. Nick lifted his sword and kicked Thomas, speeding their pace. All too soon he was fighting his way through a mass of bodies. Swords were flying everywhere. He lost track of everything but what he was doing. It seemed like a never ending supply of foes came to face him. Once one was dispatched, another took his place. Hours of fighting passed, at least it seemed that way to Nick, and still he was facing yet another foe. This man stood above all others, muscles abound. Nick took a deep breath and swung his sword. The man blocked his blow, then pulled him off Thomas before he knew what was going on. Nick scrambled to his feet and turned just in time to block a deadly blow. The man was relentless, and Nick knew he couldn't win. Faintly he could hear Kevin's voice, but he couldn't make out what he was saying. Nick stared the man in the eyes as he lost his grip on his*

*sword and it clanked to the bloody ground. The man smiled, then plunged his sword into Nick's chest.*

"NO!" Nick screamed, sitting straight up in bed, heaving for air, his hand on his chest. He could feel the pounding of his heart, and tried to calm himself. His door flew open and two guards rushed in, weapons drawn. *"My king, are you alright?"* one asked. Nick nodded, running his hand through his hair, *"I'm fine ... just a bad dream. Sorry guys."* The guards nodded, and left the room. Nick pulled the covers back and dropped his feet to the floor, resting his elbows on his knees, he covered his face. He was still shaking, his chest still hurting where the sword had penetrated it in the dream.

His door opened again. Nick didn't bother to look up, he just held his arms out as his mother sat next to him and pulled him into a comforting embrace. Nick rested his head on her shoulder. This was the only place he felt safe these days ... in the arms of his mother. He knew he was acting like a child, but he didn't care, he just wanted the fear and dread to leave. *"Do you want to talk about it?"* she asked. He shook his head. LaDonna ran her hand up and down his back, soothing him. *"Son, don't keep things bottled up inside, it makes them worse,"* she said. *"I can't tell you this,"* Nick said, his voice small. LaDonna pulled back and stared at him, *"You are so frightened. Please tell me why."* A tear left Nick's eye and his bottom lip trembled. He closed his eyes and sniffed, *"I wish I could mom, but I can't. I have to deal with this on my own."* She nodded, pulling him back into the hug, *"I understand, just know this ... I love you Nickolas. No matter what happens, I love you."* Nick hugged her tighter, and wondered if somehow she knew what he was struggling with. The queen kissed the top of his head, *"Come now, try and sleep."* Nick lay down and she placed the covers back over him, bent down and kissed his cheek before turning towards the door. *"Mom,"* Nick said, and she turned around. *"I love you."* LaDonna smiled then left the room.

## Chapter 84

Nick wandered down the hall, his mind taking him a million places at once. The council was on a break, and he needed to get out of the stuffy throne room for a while. He stopped at a window that overlooked the mountains, staring out. It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. He closed his eyes and let the heat of the suns coming through the window warm him. He was so tired, yet he couldn't sleep, for sleep meant the dreams. After he'd woken his mother the night before, he lay staring at the ceiling until the suns broke over the horizon. Mason's words kept repeating in his head, 'a tired king tends to make mistakes.' He prayed he wasn't doing that, cause if he did, it was all for nothing.

"Something interesting out there?" Nick jumped, not realizing that someone had walked up next to him. He turned around, a smile instantly on his face, "No, just thinking. What are you doing?" Ana shrugged, "I'm on a break, thought I'd take a walk around, try and wake up a little." Nick laughed, "It's still morning." "Yeah, and working a console can put you to sleep," she grinned. Nick glanced down the hall, seeing his guards leaning against the wall. He glanced at Ana, "Come, walk with me then." "OK," she said, taking a peek behind them. The guards were dutifully following several feet behind.

"Ya know, this reminds me of the walks we used to take on the ship on the way here," Nick said. "Yeah it does," she replied, the memories coming to her. Nick shook his head, "That seems like ages ago." Ana watched his face as they walked. He seemed so far away ...distracted. "Do you regret it?" she asked. He looked down into her eyes, "No, not for an instant." "Even with what you're facing now, you still don't?" she asked. He shook his head, "No, this is where I'm needed now .... and I have you. I can't regret that," he smiled. Ana returned his smile. They walked in silence for a few moments, just enjoying each others company. No words were needed, both knew how the other one felt. Before they knew it, they were standing in front of the door to the throne room. "Well, I better get back.... got a kingdom to run, ya know," Nick grinned. Ana laughed, "See you at lunch?" "Hopefully, if the sessions don't run over," he replied. He could see his guards out of the corner of his eye, and silently cursed them for being there. "Well, see ya later," he said, *I love you*, he thought. Ana smiled, "See ya," *Love you more*, she thought. Nick shook his head and laughed as he walked back into the council session.

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Marie sat in the control room waiting for Brian's replacement to come so they could go down to lunch. She smiled as Brian gave her a cheesy grin from across the room. Then his console beeped and he was

back to work. Ana walked over to sit with her friend, "Man, what a morning." Marie nodded, "Yeah, it's been busy downstairs too."

Brian turned in his chair and frantically motioned another tech over, still talking to whoever it was on the other end of the line. He wrote a note and handed it to the other man. The man's eyes widened, then he raced from the room. "What's going on?" Marie asked. Ana shrugged, getting up to go see.

*"I'm bringing you up right now,"* Brian said, punching several buttons. An image filled his display, giving him chills. "Holy mother of God," he muttered, several techs gasping behind him. *"Please tell me they can't see you,"* Brian asked, as several more techs gathered around his screen. *"No, we are behind the moon. They started moving a half hour ago,"* the voice on the other end confirmed.

Nick came racing into the room, followed by Anthony, the council and the rest of the guys. He noticed everyone gathered around Brian. "What is it?" he asked. Brian turned to face him, "They're moving." Nick's heart dropped to the pit of his stomach, "Pull it up." Brian hit a few buttons transferring the image from his display to the hologram in the middle of the room. Nick's mouth dropped open in shock. At least fifty X class size warships were making their way away from the Jeptimian system. Each of those ships could house hundreds of fighters and even more men. "Where is this image coming from?" Nick asked. "Greenshire III," Brian answered, "They're behind the moon." "Tell them to stay hidden until they've passed, then find an alternate route back here. Call the fleet in and assemble the army," Nick instructed. Brian nodded and started distributing Nick's orders.

Nick glanced back at Mason, *"This is it."* The older man nodded. "Nick, the general wants to know where you want the army assembled," Brian asked. "The prairies outside of Havendale, it's the only place big enough," he answered, *"Determine where they'll exit their jump and have the fleet waiting on them,"* he ordered another tech. "Brian, how long before they get here?" Nick asked. "Two days," he replied. Nick bit his lip, "Shit, this is gonna be close," he muttered. He felt someone take his hand and looked over to see his mother standing next to him. "Brian, find someone to replace you and come with us," Nick ordered, turning and walking out of the room with his mom.

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Nick stared down at his food, not really wanting to eat any of it. It seemed the rest in the room felt the same way, because no one was eating. They were all just staring at him. Nick raised his head, "OK, the

brown stuff has officially hit the rotation device." The guys chuckled despite themselves. "They've got us outnumbered in men and in ships. The only thing we can do is out think them," he went on. *"I want half the fleet hidden just out of range when they come in. Then when the battle starts, we can flank them. Maybe we can gain some ground by surprising them,"* he said, looking at the council, *"I also want the unicorns taken to the battle field. I want them ready when they start landing."* "Yes my king," Joseph replied. *"I will be accompanying the army, but I won't arrive until that morning. I want everything ready when I get there,"* Nick went on.

"Whoa hold on a sec," Kevin said, "You're going to fight?" Nick nodded his head. The council and his mother exchanged glances. *"Nickolas, the king doesn't fight with the army,"* Mason said. Nick sighed, *"This one does."* "But...." Nathaniel began. *"I will not ask my people to do something that I won't do myself,"* Nick interrupted, *"I am going to fight with them, end of discussion."* "Then I'm going with you," Kevin said. "Yeah me too," A.J. agreed. "Guys, no. This is not your fight," Nick said. "It is our fight," Brian said, "And you can't stop us from going if we want." "I'm responsible for you Nick, and I won't let you go out there alone," Kevin said. Nick locked eyes with each of the guys, seeing the determination in their faces.

After a long moment, he sighed and ran his hand through his hair, "Alright, but you will go where I tell you, understood?" All four nodded. "Brian, I want you up with the fleet. We can use all the pilots we can get," he said. Brian smiled as all the color drained from Marie's face. "Kevin, you'll be with me, but I'm putting you under Rowland's guard. You'll do as he says, when he says it, got it?" Nick went on. "Got it," Kevin agreed. "J, I want you in medical with Marie. Help out with whatever you can... and D...." he paused, "You are to stay with the queen and Ana." "No, I'm going with you," Ana said, "I can fight just as well as you can." Nick shook his head, "No, I want you here." "Nick....." "No, Ana, now do as I say!" Nick said, sternly. Ana jumped in her seat, then looked down at the table, slightly nodding. Glances were exchanged between the council, several eyebrows raised.

*"What about me Nick? I can fight,"* Anthony asked. Nick looked at his mother for a moment, then back to his 'cousin'. *"I need you here, to protect the queen and the council,"* he said. Anthony looked disappointed, but nodded anyway. Nick stood to his feet, "Alright, I'm not really hungry, so everyone eat and then we'll get back to work." As he rounded the table he bent down and whispered, "Don't worry, he'll come back. I've seen it." Marie nodded, some of the fear she'd been feeling leaving her. Nick gave her a reassuring smile, then left the room.

## Chapter 85

Nick sat alone in his room going over the upcoming battles in his head. He wasn't sure how they were gonna make it. Outnumbered both in men and ships, the odds were against him. He was scared of what was to come. Never in his dreams did he see an end to the fighting, always waking up before he could get that far. He knew what he was facing, he wasn't so sure about his people.

He leaned back in his chair and sighed, his eyes falling upon the forgotten Book of Kings lying on his night stand. He walked over and picked it up, plopping down on the bed. He opened it to where he had stashed the letters he'd written, thumbing through them, making sure he hadn't missed anyone. He stopped at the envelope with Ana's name written on it. That had to be the hardest letter he'd written. How do you say goodbye to someone that you love so much? It just wasn't fair. First they're forced to hide their feelings, and now ..... now they might not get a chance to see where those feelings took them. It was then and there that Nick decided it didn't matter what planet he was on .. his life sucked!

He started to put the letters back, when something caught his eye. The book was open to the place he'd shoved the letters into. The one thing he'd been looking for the entire time, staring back at him. "The prophecy," he muttered, pulling the book closer so he could read. As he read, chills ran down his spine, and his heart pounded in his ears. Tears ran down his cheeks as he finished and lay the book aside.

It took him a long time to gather himself. Everything hit him at once, reading those words. He realized everything that had happened had done so for a reason ...to prepare him for what was happening. The dreams were no longer dreams, but the truth. And oddly enough, he wasn't scared now. He knew what was expected of him, and what he had to do to achieve it. He grabbed the letters, staring at them. Part of what he had to do, already done. Now he needed to prepare for the rest. Taking a deep breath he placed the letters back in the book and set it on his desk, walking to his door. He opened it and stuck his head out, "*Have Rowland come up. I need him to accompany me somewhere,*" he told the guards outside. They both nodded, as Nick stepped back inside his room to wait.

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Marie sat on the end of the bed, watching as Brian packed a bag. A transport was set to pick him up first thing the next morning and shuttle him to the awaiting fleet. Several of the ships were still coming in,

and would be up until the last second. Things had been quiet between them since lunch. Neither knew what to say, so they didn't say anything. Brian knew how frightened Marie was, not wanting him to leave her again. And he had promised not to, but he had to help. He couldn't just sit by and not do anything, when he could fight, and maybe make a difference.

He shoved the last thing into the bag, "Well I think I got everything." She nodded, looking down at the floor. He came over to sit next to her, "I know that I promised not to leave, but....." Marie shook her head, "I understand. I'm just worried." He took her hand and smiled as she looked up, "Don't be. I'm a good pilot. I won't get hurt." "You can't promise that Brian," she said, "You don't know." "But I know what Nick told you, bout me coming back," he said, grinning, "He doesn't whisper that soft. If Nick sees me coming back, then I'm coming back." Marie smiled at his confidence. Brian nudged her, "Everything will be fine, trust me." She nodded, "OK, I trust you. Don't make me regret it." "I won't baby," he said, leaning in to give her a gentle kiss, "I won't."

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Mason walked out onto the balcony and sat down. Reaching out he took LaDonna's hand in his. She looked over and gave him a weak smile. *"I'm worried too,"* he said, *"But there's nothing we can do now."* She nodded, *"That's the part I hate. I know he's grown, but I just want to make him stay here, not fight with them."* He squeezed her hand, *"So do I, but Nickolas is his own person. He has to do what he thinks is right."* LaDonna shook her head, a tear trailing down her cheek, *"I just got him back, I don't want to lose him."* Mason pulled her into his arms, running his hand up and down her back to sooth her, *"Neither do I Donna."*

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Ana opened her door, surprised to see A.J., Howie and Kevin on the other side. She stepped back to let them in, "What are you guys doing here?" "We wanted to make sure you were alright," Kevin replied. She shrugged her shoulders, "I don't know if I can answer that." "Yeah, just what we thought," A.J. said. "And, just what we feel too," Howie added. "I don't like this guys. Nick being on the front line is just asking for it," she said, "It's not like he can blend in with the rest, ya know. They're gonna see him, and know it's him. He'll be their first target. Take out the king and the rest will crumble, ya know?"

The guys nodded. "I'm gonna do my best to take care of him," Kevin said. "I know, but you need to

think about yourself too. How many battles have you fought in?" Ana asked. "Well, none," he replied. Ana sat down on her bed and sighed, "Most of the men you'll be facing are seasoned vets Kevin. They've been trained for years, and know when they're facing a newbie. You'll be lucky to make it through the first onslaught." Kevin leaned against the wall, "Gee thanks for the confidence." "I'm just telling it how it is Kevin," she said, "I wouldn't be doing you any favors telling you otherwise." He nodded, "Yeah, I guess not."

"So what are we gonna do?" Howie asked, "We can't just let Nick get killed." "Or Kevin," A.J. said, flashing his older brother a grin. "What can we do? Nick told us where to be, we agreed," Kevin said. "You agreed, I never did," Ana said. The guys glanced at one another. "Ana, Nick made it real clear he didn't want you out there," Kevin said. She nodded, "Yeah, but since when do I ever do what he tells me?"

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Rowland walked beside Nick through the garden. "It's this way," Nick said, leaving the path and leading him through the trees. "Where are we going?" Rowland asked, as they cleared the trees and he faced a towering rock wall. "I need to get some things," Nick said, walking to the entrance of the cave and ducking in. He waited on the other side until Rowland had crawled through. The look on the older man's face told Nick he'd never seen this place before, and was shocked it was there. "There's something you need to see," Nick said, leading him to the painting. Rowland's mouth gaped open, staring at Nick's image on the wall. "T-that's you," he said astounded. Nick nodded. "But how did it... when was this ....?" the older man stammered.

Nick couldn't help but laugh. "From what I've gathered, it's been here for centuries. It's part of the prophecy," he said. Rowland stared at Nick, "You fighting is part of the prophecy?" "Yes," he replied, "Now come help me," he said, walking across the cave to a door and going through. Rowland followed him, again gasping as he entered the room. "I've never seen this many swords in my life," he commented. "Yeah, um, after we leave here, have some of the men come in and move these to the fields. I've got a feeling we may need them," Nick said, moving through the room until he was standing in front of the golden armor. Rowland came up behind him, "This is the armor from the painting." "Yeah, might as well bring the thing to life huh?" Nick said, laughing nervously, as he picked up part of the armor. Rowland grabbed the rest and the two headed out of the room. "I gotta get one more thing," Nick said, going to the back of the cave.

Rowland watched as Nick opened the massive doors and went into the king's chambers, coming out a second later with an elaborate sword in his hands. "What's that writing on there?" he asked. "It's Aklazhian," Nick replied. "How did it get here?" the older man asked. Nick shrugged, "I'm not sure, but I know the prophecy came from them." "It did?! You're kidding!" Rowland said, surprised. Nick smiled, "No I'm not." "Then you know what it says, the prophecy," he asked. Solomly Nick nodded, picking up his load and heading to the cave exit. "It's not good is it?" his friend asked. Nick sighed, "For Celeste, yes it is." "But it's not for you is it?" Rowland asked, concern in his face. Nick bent down and shoved his part of the armor and the sword through the opening, "Come on, it'll be dark soon," and with that he left Rowland standing in the cave, concerned for his king.

## Chapter 86

Morning came way to soon. Everyone had agreed to have an early breakfast, so they could all see Brian off. Brian scooped the last of his breakfast onto his fork and downed it. He had to admit he was excited to go, but at the same time, he was worried. Worried for the guys, Marie, and Nick. He could tell Nick was hiding something from him, and as much as he had asked him in the last few days, Nick had never admitted it. Now, as Brian looked to Nick, he could see it again in his face. There was just something there, a knowledge of some sort, that no one else had. It sent chills down his spine.

Nick had changed so much since he'd been here. He'd gone from a quirky, fun loving goof, to a responsible, serious man. Some of the changes were good, but it was this tired, burdened Nick that Brian didn't like. Nick looked up and caught Brian staring at him. He half smiled, and Brian returned it. Just as Brian was about to say something, a servant came in. "*Lord Littrell, the transport is here,*" the man said before leaving the room.

Brian took a deep breath, and stood up slowly, "Well, I guess this is it." Everyone stood to walk him up to the landing pad. Marie took his hand as they walked, holding it tight. Brian squeezed it, smiling at her when she looked over. As they stepped outside into the crisp morning air, Brian turned to face his 'family.' Ana stepped up and hugged him, "Be careful out there." "I will," he said as she stepped back. LaDonna took her place, hugging him, "*Thank you for helping us.*" Brian smiled at her and nodded. Anthony shook his hand, wishing him well. "*Good luck Brian,*" Mason said, as he passed him. Brian glanced back, only nodding an acknowledgment. Mason didn't expect anything else.

A.J. stepped up and pulled him into a huge hug, "Kick some ass out there Rok, and don't worry, I'll take care of Marie for you." Brian laughed, "I will, and thanks man." Howie came over and hugged him as well, "Please be careful. Don't take any chances out there." Brian stepped back and batted his eyelashes dramatically, "Who me?" "I'm serious," Howie said. "I know man, I'll do my best," he replied. Howie stepped back and Brian watched his cousin slowly take the few steps to meet him. Kevin bit his lip, his eyes misting over. Brian smiled at him, "Come on, don't get soft on me now, cuz." This brought a smile to the older man's face. Kevin rested his hands on Brian's shoulders, staring into his eyes, "I don't know what's gonna happen, but be careful, alright?" "You too man," Brian said, pulling him into a hug, "Don't get killed out there, K? I don't wanna have to explain that to Aunt Ann." Kevin squeezed him harder, "You either, cuz. Aunt Jackie would have my ass." They both laughed as they parted ways. "Love you Bri," Kevin said. He nodded, "Love you too Kev, see ya in a few days." The older man nodded, not sure he would— who knew what the future held?

Brian stepped up to his best friend and looked up. Nick was fighting back tears, as he nervously shifted his weight from side to side. Brian put his hand on his shoulder, "You sure I can't talk you out of fighting?" Nick shook his head, "No, this is something I have to do." "Please be careful, watch your back out there, K?" Brian almost begged. "I will .. um Bri, thanks," Nick said. "For what?" he asked. "For everything. For taking me under your wing when we first met, for being my friend ..helping me all these years ...teaching me .. just everything man, " he stammered. Brian stared at him for a long moment, not sure where all that came from. It scared him, almost like it was .....goodbye. "Nick, is there something you're not telling me?" he asked. Nick glanced at the transport, "Your ride is waiting, you should get going." Brian sighed, seeing Nick wasn't going to tell him. "Alright man," he said, pulling him into a hug, "Be safe, I love you Nicky." Nick held him tight, almost to tight, "You too Bri." Nick reluctantly let him go, the two staring at each other for a moment.

Finally Brian turned to face his wife. She was already crying, but had a smile on her face. He grinned, "Baby, don't cry. I'll see you in a few days." "I know, but I already miss you," she said. He pulled her into a tender hug, "Same here. I'll call you tonight, and if I have a chance before things heat up tomorrow, I'll call." She nodded, taking a shaky breath, "I love you. I'm trusting you Bri, you're coming back," she said, pointing at him. He smiled, "I am. Take care of the guys for me til I get back." Marie glanced at the group, then nodded. Brian took her face in his hands and leaned in, capturing her lips with his in a tender kiss. "I love you," he said, pulling away. All Marie could do was nod as he backed away, then turned and walked up the ramp of the transport.

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Brian watched out the window as the transport slowly made its way into the docking bay. He stood up and grabbed his bag as the ship landed with a slight bump. He walked down the ramp as it lowered to the ground. "*Lord Littrell,*" a man called, walking up to him. "*Just call me Brian,*" he said. The man nodded, "*Brian, I'm commander Worsham, welcome to the Havendale IV. If you'll come with me, I'll show you your quarters.*" "*Thanks,*" Brian said, following the man.

Much to Brian's surprise, they put him in the king's quarters. He was impressed to say the least. "*Wow, this is a lot better than the ship I came here on,*" he commented. Commander Worsham laughed, but kept his comments to himself. Brian sat his bag down and looked over, "*Would it be alright if I take a few runs in the simulators? It's been a while since I've flown.*" "*That would be fine. In fact, I believe a few of our rather gifted pilots are anxious to see how good you are,*" he said. Brian chuckled. It was the trip there, all over again. He would have to prove himself to these men, just as he had done to Andrew

and the rest. He headed towards the door with the commander, *"Gifted huh? OK, I'm always up for a challenge."*

~~~~~

Nick took a deep breath as the transport stopped. *"Do you want me to go in with you?"* Mason asked, looking at him with concern. Nick shook his head, *"No thanks, I won't be long,"* he said, jumping down from the open air transport and heading towards the entrance. Mason watched him go, *"He's so burdened. Like he's carrying so much more than he should have to."* Rowland nodded, *"I believe he is."*

Nick looked up at the massive mountain in front of him. The elaborate carvings going as far as the eye could see. Taking a steadying breath, he continued through the entrance to the King's Mountain. He quickly walked through the sanctuary and into the great hall the tombs were in. Each tomb was sealed with a massive stone. Carved into the stone was that king's accomplishments. And standing next to each, a life size hologram. It was eerie walking past them. They looked so real, like they could reach out and touch you.

He stopped at one, recognizing the name. Marques Shotier. The king that had announced the prophecy. Nick stared at his image, remembering the letter he'd translated. A William was telling him not to lose faith, that the prophecy was going to come to pass. He looked down at the date on the stone. This man had lived more than five hundred years earlier. Nick looked up into the hologramed eyes of the man, *"Well you got your wish. Here I am."* With that, he continued on ..searching for the one he came to see.

He saw it up ahead, and slowed down. Almost apprehensive about approaching the image. But soon enough, he was standing in front of his father, Frederick. For a long moment, he just stood there, staring at him. A flash of anger raced through him at the pain this man had caused his mother—and then right after it, came sadness. For he still loved the man, even with his faults. Unwanted tears surfaced. *"I um I had to come see you one last time. See I kinda screwed up, but I guess it's what was suppose to happen. We're facing a war.... they'll um be here tomorrow. I don't want our people to die, but I know some of them will. Apparently I am the fulfillment of that prophecy .... lucky me,"* he said sarcastically.

*"Dad, I don't know how to handle this. I don't know what to think. Mom told me what really happened ... about you and Mason and her. Did you really hate me that much that you had to send me away? I don't think I could take it if you did. Mom said you were just upset and hurt, I understand*

that ...but I guess I just need to know that you did love me. Did you think of me as your own, or did you always have doubts? I know you can't answer me now ... but it's what I'd like to know. I'm going into this with so much pressure, I-I don't know if I can do it. I mean I know what I have to do ..... but ...it's just not fair!" he cried, slipping down to his knees in front of the hologram. There he held his face in his hands and sobbed. "Please help me .....give me the strength I need to do this," he cried, "Please help me to let go and do what's best for Celeste."

As Nick cried, his body shaking with his sobs, he felt something. A cool breeze blowing across his skin. He wiped his eyes and looked up. The hologram eyes of his father looking at him, sending chills where the breeze touched him. Suddenly Nick didn't feel alone, as he had for the past few weeks. He thought he was chosen to carry this burden alone, but now .. it seemed he had help. He wasn't sure how, but he could feel them. The spirits of all the past Kings were there with him, surrounding him, giving him courage and peace. The weight he had been carrying on his shoulders was gone, the pressure disappeared. Slowly, he got to his feet, still looking at those haunting eyes. Nick could feel his fathers spirit there in front of him, comforting him.

The cool breeze swirled around him, whispering to him ... *You are not alone, for we are all with you.* Nick sucked in a breath and looked around, finding no one there. But the words still rang in his ears, and in his heart. He closed his eyes and just listened. Murmurings of voices filled his senses, all encouraging him. For a moment he basked in them ..feeling free, and for the first time in his life ...feeling like he belonged. No longer were the insecurities there, the sense of never having a place of his own. For here, in this moment, he fit. This was what he was destined to do ... and the past kings welcomed him with open arms. He was accepted, loved.

The breeze swirled around him once more, causing him to open his eyes. He looked into the eyes of his father and smiled. "Thank you dad," he said, wiping a tear away. He turned to leave, but he wasn't walking alone. The presence of the many kings followed in his path, and it gave him great comfort. As he passed through the entrance and approached the transport he smiled. Rowland and Mason stared at him. "*Are you alright?*" Mason asked. Nick nodded as he sat down and the transport took off. "*You look .....different,*" Rowland observed. "*What happened in there?*" Mason asked. Nick stared at the two men, a smile on his face, "*I got answers.*"

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"Hi sweetie, how are you?" Brian asked. Marie smiled at his image on the screen, "Fine, how was your

day?" "Long," Brian replied with a laugh, "Just got back from supper. I've been doing simulator runs all day. I ended up running against every pilot on the ship." "Did you win?" his wife asked. Brian beamed with pride, "Of course. No one can touch me." Marie sobered, "I hope so." Brian took on a serious note, "I know so. They put me in command of the fighters. When things start, go down to the control room, you'll be able to hear me, K?" She nodded, "Alright." "Listen baby, I gotta go and get some sleep. I'm not sure if I'll be able to call in the morning," he said. "I understand," Maire replied. Brian bit his lip, "I love you baby. I'll see you soon." She nodded, "See you soon." With that the transmission ended, leaving Marie alone in her room. She closed her eyes and said a quick prayer, praying that she indeed would see her husband soon.

## Chapter 87

Kevin stood still as one of the servants tightened his armor. It was early morning, the suns hadn't even risen yet. But he had been awake for hours already. He was too nervous and worried to sleep. He didn't know what this day would hold, if he would see the end of it. He'd never thought about dying, but in the past two days, that'd been all he could think of. He wasn't ready to die, but then, who was? He finally came to the conclusion, that if it happened, it happened. There was nothing he could do about it. So now, he was determined to fight as well as he could, and watch out for Nick.

He looked up as the door to his room opened, and A.J. and Howie walked in. Immediately A.J. laughed. Kevin looked down at himself, "What?" "Dude you look like some kind of gladiator or something," A.J. chuckled. Howie smiled, "Yeah, you kinda do man." Kevin stepped over to the mirror, inspecting himself. Well damn, he did resemble Russell Crow in that movie The Gladiator. He flexed his arms, making sure he could move with ease. The breastplate was a little bulky, but the arm and leg shields were comfortable. The servant that was dressing him handed him his sword, then bowed and left the room. Kevin took a deep breath and sheathed his sword, "Ok, so I do look like a gladiator, this stuff's gonna protect me ... I hope." The two glanced at each other, "We hope so too man," A.J. said.

"Come on, let's see if Nick's ready," Kevin said, heading to the door. The three walked down the hall to Nick's room. As they got closer they could hear loud music coming from it. They recognized it as one of Nick's favorite CDs. Howie laughed, "Leave it to Nick to alleviate the pressure with loud music." "Isn't that the song he used to always play ...before all this started?" A.J. asked, trying to hear the words through the door. The three stood still, listening. "Yeah it is," Kevin said. He reached out to open the door just as the song ended, then started again. The door swooshed open and they walked in. Nick had his back to them, a couple of servants helping him get into his armor. As the lyrics started, he sang along with the song, bobbing his head to the beat.

When this began

I had nothing to say

And I'd get lost in the nothingness inside of me

I was confused

And I let it all out to find that I'm

Not the only person with these things in mind

Inside of me

But all the vacancy the words revealed

Is the only real thing that I've got left to feel

Nothing to lose

Just stuck, hollow and alone

And the fault is my own

And the fault is my own

Nick held his arms out for the servants so they could place his armor over them.

I want to heal

I want to feel

What I thought was never real

I want to let go of the pain I've held so long

(Erase all the pain til it's gone)

I want to heal

I want to feel

Like I'm close to something real

I want to find something I've wanted all along

Somewhere I belong

Kevin glanced at the other two, they looked back. Now somehow this song made sense. Even before Nick was taken, he was searching for a place of his own.

And I've got nothing to say

I can't believe I didn't fall right down on my face

I was confused

Looking everywhere only to find that it's

Not the way I had imagined it all in my mind

So what am I

What do I have but negativity

'Cause I can't justify the

Way everyone is looking at me

Nothing to lose

Nothing to gain, hollow and alone

And the fault is my own

The fault is my own

As Nick broke into the chorus again, the servants moved to his legs, fitting the armor to his body. The three hung back, not sure what to say. The words of the song seemed to echo Nick's time here. How his time as King had not been what any of them had imagined. His struggles with the council, with their constant ridicule of his way of doing things. And his constant feelings of never fitting in, of being looked at as a spectacle, a freak— even among his own people.

I will never know

Myself until I do this on my own

And I will never feel

Anything else until my wounds are healed

I will never be

Anything til I break away from me

And I will break away

I'll find myself today

As Nick once again belted out the chorus, he flexed his arms and legs, getting a feel for the armor. He stared at himself in the mirror. His white spiked hair a clash against the golden armor. One of the servants handed him his crown, and he placed it on his head, his lavender eyes taking on a new brilliant glow. He smiled as he sang the last few lines of the song.

*I want to heal*

*I want to feel like I'm*

*Somewhere I Belong*

With that he flicked his hand towards the stereo and the music shut off. He turned and looked at his friends. All three were staring at him, awe on their faces. Nick flashed them his famous grin, "What? No jokes about how I look?" The three silently shook their heads. Nick took his sword from the servant that held it out and walked past them, "Come on, we've got a long day ahead," he said as he left the room.

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Brian took a deep breath as he zipped up his flight suit. He was nervous, and excited. It was an odd feeling. Knowing that he would be in charge of the fighters, and that people would die because of his actions that day. Hardly something to be excited about, but he was ...at least that's the only way he knew of to describe the massive flocks of butterflies in his stomach. Today he would have to prove himself like no other. Sure he was great in the simulators, but what was he going to do once he was actually out there, in a real battle?

He laced up his boots, his mind going into over drive. Maybe he wasn't cut out for this after all? Was it still considered murder if it was in a war? He'd never killed anyone in his life, and he sure as hell didn't want to start now. Just as he finished tying his boots a knock came at the door. "*Come in,*" he called, standing up to face his visitor. Commander Worsham walked into the room, "*Good, you're ready. We've got a lot of things to go over with the pilots before this thing starts.*" "*Um, commander? I've been thinking, and I'm not so sure I can do this,*" Brian said. The commander stared at him, "*You aren't backing out on us are you? We need someone with your skill out there, we're facing bad odds as it is.*" "*I know, I just .... I've never done this for real, only in simulators. What if I get out there, and I can't do it?*"

Brian asked, feeling embarrassed. The commander smiled and put his arm around Brian's shoulders, *"You can do it. There's no way that someone with as much talent as you can get out there and not."* Brian nodded slowly, still a little uncertain of himself. *"Listen Brian, when you're out there, you won't have time to think about it. You'll just be relying on instinct to get you through,"* the older man said.

Brian thought about it for a moment. He had to try. He owed that much to Nick. Besides, his friend was counting on him. He could do this. *"Alright, let's go,"* he said, heading to the door.

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Nick stood in the throne room giving the palace guards and servants a few last orders. When he finished he dismissed them, waiting for them to leave the room before looking to those that remained. The council was there, his mother, Anthony, Ana, the guys, and Maire. As soon as the door shut, LaDonna walked forward, her eyes pleading, *"Please don't go. You can command the army from here."* Nick gave her a comforting smile, *"I have to go mom, you know that."* The queen shook her head, a few tears trailing down her cheeks, *"I don't like this Nickolas. Something doesn't feel right."* He placed his hand on her shoulder, staring straight into her eyes, *"Wasn't it you that told me that sometimes we have to do things we don't like? I don't like this either, but it's something I have to do. I know it in my heart."* *"Damn you, using my own words against me,"* LaDonna smiled, through her tears. Nick pulled her into a hug, *"I love you mom."* The queen held him tight, *"I love you too son, come back to me."* Nick stepped back and nodded, giving his mother a tight smile.

He spoke a few words with Joseph and Nathaniel, then made his way to Mason. The two just stared at each other for a moment. *"Looking at you now, all I can see is that painting,"* Mason said. Nick nodded, *"Me too."* *"Are you sure I can't go with you?"* he asked. Nick shook his head, *"No, the council is to remain here. You will have your hands full."* Mason nodded, *"Be careful Nick."* *"I will, you too,"* Nick said as Mason came forward and hugged him. *"I am so proud of you, son,"* Mason whispered. The words were out of his mouth before he even knew it, he just hoped no one else heard him. Nick smiled, holding the man tighter. How lucky was he? Most people only got one father— he had three. *"I'm proud of you too, dad,"* he whispered back as he pulled away. Tears shown in Mason's eyes, but he refused to let them fall.

Nick moved over to A.J. and Howie, pulling them both into a bear hug. *"You guys take care of the girls for me,"* he said. *"We will man, you take care of yourself,"* A.J. said. *"Yeah Nicky, don't try to be a hero or anything out there,"* Howie said. Nick laughed, nodding, *"I'll try my best. I love you guys."* *"We love*

you too man," A.J. said as they hugged again. Nick held them for a bit longer than normal, and when he stepped back, his eyes were glassy. "Take care," he said, moving over to Anthony.

"Hey cuz," he said, smiling at the younger man. Anthony did his best to smile back, but the fear in his face was evident. Nick pulled him over to the side, *"Listen, I have something I need you to do."* Anthony looked surprised, *"Anything."* *"When the battle starts, I need you to go to my room. On my desk is the Book of Kings. Get it and take it to the council. Inside are some letters, and in those letters is the future of Celeste."* Anthony stared at him, not really understanding what he said, but nodding anyway. *"Don't forget, this is important,"* Nick said in a scolding tone, but a smile on his face. Anthony grinned, *"I won't Nick. I just wish I was going with you instead."* Nick shook his head, *"No you don't. Your place is here ... you'll see. Take care Anthony."* *"You too Nick,"* the young man said, pulling the taller Nick down into a hug. After a moment Nick pulled back and gave him one last smile before moving over to Marie.

"Hey," he said, pulling her into a hug. "Nick, please do what the guys ask. Be careful. You know Brian will be mad if he makes it back and you don't," she said, smiling at him. Nick smiled back, "Ohh I don't want that now do I?" She shook her head. "Take care of him for me, if he gets back before I do, K?" Nick asked. "I will," she replied. "You two are perfect together. I'm so glad you guys found each other," he said, giving her one last hug. "Thanks to you," she smiled. He nodded, flashing her a smile.

Ana watched as Nick moved to stand in front of her. "Hi," he said. "Hi," she echoed back. She looked down at her feet. There was so much she wanted to tell him, but with the others there she couldn't. Nick reached down and pulled her chin up, "Take care of mom for me." She shook her head, "Please let me go with you." "I can't Ana, I need you here," he told her. Tears left her eyes, "Please Nick, I want to go with you." His heart broke watching her cry. This was harder than he thought. Tears welled up in his eyes and he shook his head, "No. You will be needed here." Ana opened her mouth to protest, but Nick placed his finger over it, "I have to do this without any help. I wish you could come too, but you can't. Please do this for me, don't argue. It's hard enough as it is." She bit her bottom lip and nodded.

Nick pulled her into a hug, savoring the scent of her hair, the feel of her body in his arms. "I love you Ana," he said. She smiled through her tears, "I love you too Nick." As they parted he bent down and gently kissed her lips. Pulling away he smiled, as a tear slid down his cheek. He turned to see the stunned faces of just about everyone staring back at them. Oops. Well it didn't matter now did it? Ana shifted her weight from one foot to the other, feeling everyone's stares on her. Nick took her hand in his, causing her to look up. He smiled at her, "We always said we'd face this together right?" She nodded as he turned back to the people in the room.

*"Before I go, there's something I need to say. I love Ana. I have for a long time. I don't care that she isn't the right class for a king. Before I got here, I was just a normal guy. I didn't even know I was royalty. What class you are shouldn't matter. It's what you feel. How that person makes you feel. Ana makes me feel normal, and loved. I can't imagine a day without her in it, and when she's happy, so am I. I guess I'm saying that class or not, I love her, and there's nothing you can do about it. You could punish us from now til the end of eternity and it wouldn't change the way I feel. The way we feel about each other,"* he said. Ana looked at him shocked, but relieved too. At least now it was out in the open. They would face whatever they had to, but they were no longer going to hide their love. *"Now,"* Nick said, *"We can deal with this when I get back."*

He gave Ana one last kiss, then motioned for Kevin and Rowland to follow him. As he walked to the door LaDonna gazed over at Mason, urging him with her eyes to do something. Joseph and Nathaniel just stood there, torn between the law and the king they admired so much. *"Nick, wait,"* Mason said. Nick turned to face him. *"You're right. What class you are shouldn't determine who you're allowed to love. We will change the law once you return. You deserve your happiness,"* he said. Nick took a deep breath and glanced at Ana. The happiness in her eyes was unmistakable. This was how he was going to remember her, full of love, happiness and hope. He nodded then turned and left the room, determined not to look back.

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Brian sat in his fighter, waiting for instructions to launch. He nervously adjusted his restraints and gave the control panel a once over to make sure everything was running smoothly. He glanced down at the picture he'd had made of Marie. "I love you baby," he said, sticking it next to him in a small crevice. The voice coming from the inside of his helmet brought him back to reality. *"They are exiting their jump. This is it guys. Prepare to launch, and good luck,"* the voice said. Brian took a deep breath and looked out the docking bay doors to the vast expanse of space outside. Way in the distance he could make out large ships appearing in twos. He flipped the switch that released his ship from the docking locks, *"This is Angel One, follow me out and form up."* With that he pushed the stick forward and left the docking bay behind.

~~~~~

Nick's transport arrived in the fields outside of Havendale just as the suns were rising over the horizon. He didn't wait for the machine to stop, jumping down as it slowed. He met one of his generals as he

walked towards the front lines. *"My king, they have already landed. Their army is forming just over the hill,"* he said. Nick looked across the field to the hill the general was pointing to. *"Are we set?"* he asked. The general nodded. *"Good, get everyone in position, and wait for my signal,"* Nick said, finding the servant that held Thomas. He jumped into the saddle as Kevin and Rowland caught up with him.

"Rowland, get you and Kevin a mount," he instructed. Rowland headed off to do just that. Nick looked down at Kevin, "You don't have to do this. It's not too late to go back." Kevin smiled, "That's funny, I was just about to say the same thing to you." Nick sighed, "So you aren't going?" "Are you?" Kevin asked. "No," Nick answered. "Then neither am I," he said. Nick wanted to argue with him, but he knew it was no use. Kevin was determined to stay there, and 'protect' him. "Alright, you do as I say then," Nick started, "Stay with Rowland, and stay behind me. Defend yourself, but don't look for a fight. You aren't trained like most of us are, so rely on Rowland to help you. If things get too bad, get the fuck out, understand?" "Nick I won't leave you here," Kevin said. Nick leaned down in the saddle and placed his hand on his friends shoulder, "If things get bad, get the hell out. I can take care of myself, but I'd never forgive myself if you got hurt. Don't argue with me Kevin or I'll have you taken back right now. I'm the king, I can do that ya know." Kevin opened his mouth to protest, but Nick raised his eyebrow at him. The older man sighed in defeat, "Alright, if it gets bad I'll leave." "Good," Nick nodded, giving his shoulder a squeeze before sitting back up in the saddle.

Rowland came over with the white unicorn and a bay. Kevin took the white one, just as Nick had seen in his dream. As they both mounted, Nick closed his eyes, gathering his thoughts. He smiled as a cool breeze swept across his face. They were here with him, he could feel them just as he could Rowland and Kevin. He took a deep breath, letting his soul calm and his mind rest on what he had to do. He felt a nudge and looked over at Rowland. "They're coming," he said.

~~~~~

Brian watched as the massive ships moved closer. He had his squadron a fair distance away from the big ships, not wanting to get caught in the cross fire when the massive vessels started firing at one another. He shifted in his seat as he saw the bay doors opening on the opposing fleet. *"This is it guys. Shields up, weapons armed,"* he said, flipping the switch for his shields and then pressing the buttons to arm his weapons. He glanced down at the picture of Marie once more, then looked back up. Fighters were pouring out of the ships. For a moment Brian was numb. He'd never seen that many fighters in his life. His fleet was grossly outnumbered. He swallowed the lump in his throat, *"This is Angel One. We're going in in a V formation, keep your wingmen with you. Good luck guys, we're gonna need it. Alright, on my count ....three ...two ....one,"* Brian pressed his ship forward to meet his enemy.



## Chapter 88

Tamara paced back and forth in the control room. Tom sat behind the pilots, watching her. She looked over and caught his eye. "You nervous?" he asked, flashing her a smile. She walked over, "Naw, I mean we do this everyday right?" she said sarcastically. He chuckled, "Yeah right." She sat down in the unoccupied chair next to him, "I think when this is over, if I'm still in one piece, I'm taking a long vacation." "That sounds like a good idea," he said.

"Agent Neely, we're getting an update from Celeste," a tech said. The two glanced at each other for a moment. "Bring it up," Tom instructed. A young woman appeared on the screen. Tamara recognized her as one of the women that was with Nick and Brian the last time they were on Celeste. "The battle is starting in the air and on land. Be prepared to come out of your jump in the middle of it," she said. Tom nodded, "Thanks, we'll be ready." The girl nodded, then the transmission ended. "How long until we exit the jump?" Tamara asked. "At the rate the Celestian ships are going, about a half hour," another tech replied. "Damn, I hope we're not too late," she said, biting her lip.

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Ana worked her console with the ease of an expert. She had alerted all the incoming ships, and now she was helping instruct the massive vessels in the fight. Joseph and Nathaniel had taken it upon themselves to coordinate the battle overhead, while Mason and Anthony helped with the land battle. Every screen in the control room had a different view on it, whether it be from a ship up above, or from a flying vid machine hovering over the fields. LaDonna had her hand in helping as well, going from one side of the room to the other, making suggestions and pointing out missed details. While the battle overhead was well underway, the ground battle was just beginning. The two armies lining up to face one another.

A.J. and Howie sat with Marie to the side of the room. All the activity had them a bit dizzy. They would go from listening to the generals of the ships, to the generals shouting commands to the thousands of troops in the fields. Marie listened for one thing, and one thing only.... Brian's voice. Every so often she could make him out amongst the other radio traffic. And once in a while his fighter would shoot across a camera angle, and for a moment she could see him. A.J. reached over and took her hand, just as one of those moments happened. Brian's fighter shot across the screen for a second. Marie bit her bottom lip, almost to the point of bleeding. "He's kicking ass up there," A.J. said, smiling at her. She nodded.

"He'll be alright," he added. She looked at him with worry in her eyes, "I hope so."

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Nick watched as the opposing army marched over the hill and formed up. His army was outnumbered, no doubt about it, at least three to one. Several different races made up the army, some Nick recognized, others he didn't. But one thing was clear, they all wanted blood. Thomas danced around, all the commotion making him antsy. Nick tightened his reins, making him stand still. Deja vu. It was his dream all over again. He looked to his right, Rowland sat next to him, Kevin on the other side of Rowland. He turned in the saddle and glanced back at his soldiers. Thousands of men, ready to fight and die for him. Nick swallowed the lump in his throat, and turned back around. He drew his sword, and as he did, the air was filled with the sound of his entire army drawing theirs. Nick glanced to the sky, seeing the small flickers of light. The battle up above was underway. He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the cool breeze once more on his face. He took comfort in their presence.

Nick opened his eyes and kicked Thomas forward, turning him to face his army. He looked at his men. All of them staring at him, waiting. He glanced at Kevin, seeing him with his sword in one hand, the reins in the other, ready to take off. "*We fight for our home and our families! We cannot let them win, no matter the cost!*" he yelled. The entire army raised their swords in the air, screaming. Nick glanced back at the opposing army, seeing them looking at one another. He raised his sword in the air, the suns gleaming off the engraved metal, "*For Celeste!*" he yelled, turning Thomas and racing towards his enemy, his army on his heels.

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Brian flew through a fire ball. "*Angel Two, keep up, I don't want to lose you,*" he called to his wingman. "*I'm trying, you're hard to keep up with,*" the man called back. Brian smiled, forcing his ship into a downward spiral, chasing after another enemy fighter. "*Angel One, there's one coming up, three o'clock.*" Brian looked over to see another fighter heading straight for him, his lasers firing away. He pulled out of his spin and banked hard left, his wingman going right. The two came around and caught the ship in their cross fire.

"*Good work, Two,*" Brian called, just as his ship was rocked by a hit. Brian quickly looked around, trying to find where it came from. "*Two where is it? I can't see it,*" he called. "*Brian, it's right behind you,*" his

wingman informed him. "Shit!" Brian muttered, hitting the brakes. The ship flew over him, the sudden move catching him off guard. Brian quickly came back to speed, chasing after him. He waited for his ship to get a lock, then fired. The ship exploded in front of him.

Brian squinted against the bright light, banking his ship back around. "*No Brian, you're in the.....!*" his wingman tried to warn. But it was too late. Brian realized his mistake as soon as he banked, now all he could do was hold on. He'd banked his fighter right into the laser beam from one of the big ships. His shields were on full, and he only caught a small portion of the beam, but it was enough. He watched as the lights on the console went black, his engines died, and he was left drifting in space.

"Holy fucking shit!" he yelled, the movement of the ship making him dizzy. He closed his eyes, praying he didn't cross another laser's path. If he did, it would be the end. "*Angel Two, do you read me?*" he called. Nothing. There were no sounds coming from his helmet. Finally his ship stopped spinning and just drifted. Brian looked up, finding he was getting further and further away from the battle. Alright that was a good thing. At least he didn't have to worry about the lasers. The bad thing was, with no signal, who was going to find him? Everything was off, even his life support system. Already it was starting to get cold, and the air felt stuffy. Brian looked at his console and pressed the button to start the engines. Nothing. He closed his eyes, "Please God, make this thing start." Again he pressed the button, and again nothing.

This couldn't happen. He was supposed to go back. Isn't that what Nick said? He promised Marie he'd come back. How could this happen? Anger and frustration filled his soul and he started banging on the console, "Start you fucking piece of junk! Damn it! Start!!" Suddenly his engines came to life and his console lit up. His mouth dropped open in joy and shock. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" he muttered as he waited for his systems to fully come up. "*Angel Two, this is Angel One, do you read?*" he called, "*Angel Two ...*" "*Angel One, this is command, Angel Two is gone,*" a voice came through his helmet, "*Where are you? What happened?*" "*I got caught in the cross fire, everything shut down, but it's coming up now,*" he answered. "*Where are you, we don't read your signal,*" the tech asked. "*I drifted away from the battle. I'm ...wait, it's coming up, um about .87 degrees south of the battle zone,*" he answered. "*Angel One, get out of there! That's the exit for the ships coming from Earth!*" Brian's blood ran cold. "*My system's not up to full yet, how long before they.....?*" he asked. "*You don't have time, they're exiting now,*" the tech said.

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Thomas ran with lightening speed across the field. Nick watched as the mass of bodies ran towards him. As they met, Thomas speared a young man through the chest with his horn, then kicked at the men forming around him. Nick swung his sword as Thomas made his way through the men. He could hear screams all around him, and the air was permeated with the smell of blood and death. He dared not look back, only forward. He just prayed that Kevin had heeded his warning and was alright. He raised his sword and blocked a blow, then kicked the man in the chest, sending him flying backwards, knocking over others behind him.

Nick raised his right hand and in it formed a ball of light. He threw it into the mass of men, turning his head as it exploded. Thomas lowed his head, taking care of a man that was running towards them. Nick patted his neck, then exchanged blows with another assailant.

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Rowland looked back to make sure Kevin was still with him. He had to admit, Kevin was a good fighter. Maybe it was the animal instinct to stay alive, but he was doing much better than Rowland gave him credit for. The battle had been raging for a good half hour already and he was still on his mount and relatively unharmed. Part of that was due to the white unicorn. The animal refused to let anyone near Kevin, kicking and using its horn to keep them at bay. The few that managed to get through, Kevin was able to handle.

Kevin had just taken care of one of the ones that got through, when he looked up. "Where's Nick?" he called. Rowland glanced ahead, catching a glimpse of Nick's armor reflecting the sunlight. He was surrounded by the other army, and fighting like he'd never seen him. Slowly the rest of the army was making their way to him. Kevin nudged the white unicorn up to Rowland, "We gotta help him, he's surrounded!" "We'll get there," the guard assured him, as they both pressed forward.

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Marie was watching the screens, tears in her eyes. A.J. held on to her, his own emotions on overdrive. Nick was surrounded, but was holding his own. Brian on the other hand, couldn't get his ship up, and his time was out. "Please God, let them miss him," he heard himself saying.

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Anthony was watching Nick on the screen, awed at how he fought with such conviction and what looked like ease. He'd been fighting for more than thirty minutes now, and wasn't even winded. Nick was truly a king in every sense of the word. If anyone had ever doubted it, watching him now they would know it was true. Kings. The Book of Kings. Shit! Anthony jumped from his seat, *"I'll be back!"* he yelled, running out of the room to retrieve the book.

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"Come on, come on," Brian muttered, his eyes fixed on the displays on the console. Slowly the levels were rising. Forty-five percent, fifty ..... Brian heard a loud noise, and looked over as his heart jumped into his throat and stopped beating. Three Celestian ships appeared, all three piggybacking the ships from Earth. Through his helmet, Brian could hear the techs telling the large ships to take evasive action, but he knew they couldn't. That'd be like telling a semi to turn on a dime. It just couldn't be done.

He grabbed the stick and forced it down, his ship responding slowly. "Move you bucket of bolts! Move!" he yelled at his ship. He glanced over seeing one of the ships coming straight at him. "Oh God!"

~~~~~

"OH GOD!" Howie, A.J. and Marie said at once. They watched as Brian's ship slowly moved down and the large ship overtook it. Brian's fighter threaded in between the Celestian ship and the Earth ship it was piggybacking. Even at full power this would be almost impossible to do. Everyone in the control room glanced at each other, shock and awe on their faces.

*"Control, this is Tumacer I, did we hit him?"* came a concerned voice. *"Tumacer I, this is control, we don't think so. Angel One, do you read?"* a tech said, *"Angel One, come in over?"* Brian moved his stick sideways, his ship lagging along. He barely missed one of the locks that held the two ships together, *"I'm a little busy, give me a sec!"*

Marie smiled, as did everyone else. *"Angel One let us know when you are in the clear. The ships will not separate until you are,"* the tech said. *"Copy that,"* Brian said, as he worked his way between the two massive ships. Whose idea was it to make them so long to begin with? The image of the beginning of the movie Spaceballs entered his head. The ship at the beginning taking so long to pass, and at the end was a bumper sticker. What did it say? We brake for no one? Brian smiled as he dodged a communication antenna, if there was a bumper sticker on either one of these ships, he'd laugh his ass off.

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Anthony skidded into Nick's room and ran to his desk, out of breath. He started to just grab the book, but something made him stop. He opened it to where the letters were placed and picked them up, thumbing through them. His heart was in his throat by the time he'd looked at the last envelope. There was a letter for everyone. It was eerie, and gave the young man chills. He started to replace them, looking down at the page the book was open to. His mouth dropped open as he realized he was staring at the prophecy. Not just a part of it, or the paraphrased version everyone learned as a child, but the whole thing, in detail.

Anthony leaned on the desk as he read, his knees feeling as if they would give out at any second. He couldn't believe it, so he read it again. He shook his head, *"No Nick, no,"* he whispered as tears welled up in his eyes. Quickly he placed the letters back in the book, grabbed it and took off towards the control room.

## Chapter 89

By the time Brian got out from between the two massive ships, his fighter was almost up to full power again. He held back as the two ships separated and then flew around them. Both ships were launching their fighters and he joined in the formation, heading back to the battle. He glanced at the fighters pouring out of the earth ships as he passed by them. One of the leaders caught his eye. He slowed his ship down and came up beside it, looking over. Quickly he flipped his radio frequency, "Drew, is that you?" The man in the other ship glanced over and Brian could see a huge smile on his face, "Brian?" "Yeah man, it's me," Brian said. "Brian! Man, I never thought I'd see you again," Andrew said. Brian laughed, "You know you can't get rid of me that easy." "Yeah," he laughed. "Say Drew, do you have a wingman, cause I kinda lost mine," Brian said. "Ya know Bri, that'll get you a bad rep, always losing your wingman," Andrew teased. Brian rolled his eyes, "You wanna or not, we're almost there." "Sure Bri, It'll be just like old times," he said. Brian sighed, "Alright, try and keep up, cause I'm not slowing down for your sorry ass." Andrew chuckled, "Sure dude, whatever you say."

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Anthony ran into the control room, the large book held tightly to his chest. *"We have to stop him!"* he yelled, running over to Mason, tears streaming down his face. Mason turned from the screen he was watching, *"Stop who? What's wrong?"* Anthony shoved the book into the older mans hands, *"Nick. We have to stop him, he left letters and the prophecy says that .... we gotta get him outta there!"* he cried. LaDonna came over and pulled Anthony into a hug, *"What's wrong, did something happen?"* Mason shrugged, setting the book down and opening it up. He gazed at the letters in front of him, chills running down his back. He glanced at LaDonna seeing the same worried expression on her face. He took the letters out of the book, setting them aside. Anthony pointed to the page, *"It's the prophecy."* Mason nodded as he started to read. The more he read, the more numb he became. When he finished he looked up with worry and horror in his face. *"What is it? What does it say?"* she asked, not liking his reaction. Mason cleared his throat, the entire room quieting down to listen, *"It's too long to read it all, but the last lines read ..... His blood shall enter the ground and awaken the rulers of the past. His sacrifice will bring new life to Celeste and all it's people."*

Everyone glanced at one another. "So what does that mean?" A.J. asked. Ana left her console and walked over to a screen that was showing Nick. She reached out and touched the screen as tears left her eyes and traveled down her cheeks, "It means he's going to die."

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"Whhhooooo hoooooo," Brian yelled, soaring through the debris of the ship he just demolished. "I think you're having too much fun," Andrew laughed. "Might as well, it could be the last fun we have," Brian said, banking his fighter and heading toward the big ships. "Bri, where are you going?" Andrew asked, following him. "Hang on a sec, Drew," Brian said, switching his frequency again, *"This is Angel One, all craft form up."* "Hey Drew, call all your fighters in, I've got an idea," Brian said. Andrew raised his eyebrows, "Why am I scared?" "Oh shut up and do it," Brian laughed. "You heard the man boys, form up," Andrew ordered.

Brian watched as both squadrons formed up behind the two. He sighed, it was half the ships he started out with. "Drew, switch to a private channel for a sec," Brian said. "Ok, what's up?" Andrew asked. "We're gonna take the big one right over there," he replied. Andrew looked over seeing one of the X class enemy ships firing everything it had at the Celestian and Earth ships. "Are you nuts?! We can't take that thing," he said. "No I'm not nuts, and yes we can. Look at it, see there close to the back, that big round thing with the gun turrets next to it," Brian said. "Yeah, what about it?" Andrew asked. "That's the shields. Didn't you pay attention when they went over this?" Brian teased. "I kinda missed that day. Ok, so it's the shields, how we gonna get close enough to do anything?" he replied. Brian smiled, "You leave that to us, just take your guys and head straight for it." Andrew bit his lip, "Alright Bri, but if I get killed, I'm coming back to haunt your ass." Brian laughed, "It's a deal. Tell your guys, I'll tell mine. Wait for my signal, then we run." "Got it."

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Nick plunged his sword through the chest of one of his attackers, at the same time he flicked his other hand toward a large group of men that was heading for him. The entire group flew backwards, landing on those behind them. Nick pulled his sword out of the man as Thomas kicked another in the face, sending him to the ground. Nick chanced a look back, seeing Kevin and Rowland trying to make their way to him. Thomas reared up, and brought his attention back to his own fight. He raised his hand again and formed another ball of light. The men in front of him saw it, and turned to run. They didn't get far.

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"What the hell do you mean he's gonna die?!" A.J. yelled, standing up, Howie right next to him. Mason turned to face them, *"For the prophecy to be fulfilled, he will."* "Screw the prophecy, we can't let Nick die!" Howie said. A.J. looked over shocked that that statement came out of his friend, but agreeing wholeheartedly. LaDonna grabbed Mason's wrist, *"You can't let him do this."* Mason looked down into her eyes, seeing her panic. She'd already lost him once, he couldn't let her lose him again.

*"If it's destined to happen, we can not stop it,"* Joseph said. *"We have to try,"* LaDonna begged. *"My queen, Count Dumal is right. We cannot interfere,"* Nathaniel said. "Guys?! This is Nick we're talking about here, your freaking King! You can't tell me you're gonna stand here and debate this! You can't let him die!" A.J. yelled, throwing his hands up in the air. Everyone in the room glanced between the two council members and LaDonna and Mason. Ana brushed her tears from her face and walked between them towards the door, *"You can debate all you want, I'm going to get him."* Nathaniel reached out and caught her arm, stopping her, *"You cannot. We can't interfere with something as important as the prophecy."* Ana tried to pull away, but she couldn't. A.J. glanced at Howie, then nodded toward the two. Howie nodded back. Suddenly both were running towards the Count at full speed. They tackled him, sending them all to the ground. Ana got to her feet, looking back. "Run Ana! Go get Nicky!" Howie screamed, grabbing Joseph as he moved to stop her. Ana turned and ran out the door as fast as she could.

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"Almost got it," Andrew called as his fighters approached the large shield generators. "Hurry up man, we can't take much more of this cat and mouse," Brian called. His fighters were drawing the ship's fire as the others came in low. Andrew's ships flew over the large ball of metal pouring every ounce of firepower they had into it. "Got it Bri, get out of there!" Andrew called. *"Fall back guys, they hit it!"* Brian called to his men. Fighters scattered everywhere as the big ships continued to exchange hits. The large metal ball exploded, and the big ships took advantage of it. Concentrating all their efforts, they fired on the ship. Several explosions rocked the massive ship, then the sky was filled with a massive white light as the entire ship broke apart.

"One down, forty-nine more to go," Brian said, pulling his fighter out of his turn. "Not funny Bri," Andrew said, coming up next to him. "Not meant to be," Brian said, looking for their next target. Suddenly his ship jerked and his console dimmed for a moment. "Oh crap," he said. "Oh crap what?" Andrew asked. Brian looked back towards the Celestian ships. If he tried to make it back and his ship went out again, he'd be right in the middle of the fight. "Dude, something wrong over there?" Andrew asked again. "Um, my fighter is blinking out on me. I'm gonna have to land before it dies again," Brian

answered. "Land where?" Andrew asked. Brian looked down at the large planet beneath him, then looked back at the ships. "Down there," he said, banking his fighter. Andrew followed him, "Are you sure? Can you make it through the atmosphere?" "I can if you can. Listen, Drew you don't have to go with me," Brian said. "I know man, but what are friends for if they can't watch each other's backs?" he replied. Brian laughed, "Yeah, or watch them crash." "Don't say that," Andrew said. "OK, just follow me in and stay back, I don't know wh.....ing is gonna do," Brian said. "Bri, your starting to break up on me," Andrew said as they headed toward the planet. "I know, it's starting to short out," Brian said. "I'm right behind ya buddy, lead the way," Andrew said.

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Ana raced toward the fields. She pushed the open air transport she'd taken for all it was worth, praying she'd make it in time.

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*"Angel One, you'll be coming in over the battle sight. Stay above the vids, if you hit one it could damage your engines,"* a tech said. *"My engines are the last of ..... ries,"* Brian said, as he fought the stick. Not only was his fighter shorting out, the steering was going too. The ground was coming up quick and he leveled out, seeing the battle ahead of him. "My God," he mumbled seeing the carnage. As he flew over, the sight of dead men littering the field burned into his mind. "Drew can you hear me?" he called. "Yeah buddy," he answered. "When we go over, shoot the hell out of them," Brian said. "You got it," he affirmed.

As the two fighters approached the battle, Brian picked out targets. He didn't want to hit any of Nick's men, so he picked the back lines of the opposing army and fired. Andrew followed suit and as they passed the fields it was safe to say that half the opposing army was now toast. Brian's fighter jerked again, and this time it died. "Oh crap, here we go," he said as the ground came at him fast.

Andrew hung back, watching as Brian dropped to the ground. "Bri, you're too fast," he called, "Bri?" All he could do was watch helplessly as Brian's fighter hit the ground hard and skidded to a stop, dirt and debris flying everywhere. He landed as quickly as he could a safe distance away and jumped out, running to the downed fighter. Smoke was rising from somewhere in the engines. Andrew climbed up onto the craft. The cockpit was still sealed. He could see Brian moving around in there, but it was filling

with smoke. He banged on the glass, Brian looking up. "It won't open!" he screamed. "Try your manual release," Andrew yelled. Brian pulled the lever, and nothing happened. He coughed, "Drew get me out!"

Andrew moved around the top of the ship. Somewhere on the outside was a manual release, he just had to find it. He knew where it was on his ship, but Brian's fighter was a newer model, and as luck would have it, the releases were not in the same place. Brian banged on the glass, coughing violently. The smoke was so thick inside the cockpit he couldn't see. "Where the fuck is it!" Andrew screamed, running his hands along the edges. He glanced over, only seeing Brian's hand on the glass. The rest of the cockpit was full of smoke. "Hang on!" he yelled, finally finding the small lever hidden under a shield. He flipped it and was relieved when the glass started to rise. Smoke billowed out as Andrew reached in and grabbed Brian by his flight suit and pulled him out. Brian was coughing and gasping for air as he drug him away from the ship.

"Easy," Andrew said, stopping and lowering Brian to the ground. Brian looked up at him, tears in his eyes from coughing so hard, "Th-thanks ...man." "No problem, now don't talk, just breathe," he said. Brian smiled, taking slow deep breaths. As he did so, Andrew sat down next to him. He couldn't help but stare at Brian's mark. Brian noticed and held his hand out for him to see it better. "God Brian, what did they do to you?" Andrew asked. Brian sat up slowly, "They saved me." Andrew looked at him confused, but then looked over as a noise filled the air. Someone on a transport was coming at them fast. Andrew helped Brian up as the machine slowed down. "Ana? What are you doing here?" Brian asked. "Get on, Nick's in trouble," she said. Both men jumped on and she sped back up. "What do you mean he's in trouble?" Brian asked. "He's gonna die if we don't get to him," she answered, pushing the transport as fast as it could go.

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"*She has picked them up,*" a tech said. "*Is Brian hurt?*" Marie asked. The tech turned to ask, when another spoke up, "*My lords, there are ships exiting .645.*" The council members glanced at one another. "*All our ships are in, who are they?*" Mason asked. The tech smiled, "*They're Kholathian.*" "*What?*" Nathaniel said. A.J. leaned over and nudged Howie, "Is this good or bad?" Howie shrugged, "I'm not sure, Nick was friends with Ambassador James." The guard that was next to them glanced down. A.J. sighed, "What? We're just talking, we aren't gonna jump up and tackle anyone." Marie put her hand on A.J.'s arm and smiled at him, "I don't think he believes you."

All eyes were on the screens as the ships exited and launched their fighters. If they came to fight with the opposing ships, Celeste was done. The fighters circled around what was left of the Earth and Celestian squadrons and the big ships came up behind Celeste's fleet. LaDonna glanced at Mason, tension on her face. *"My lord, we have a message coming in,"* a tech said. *"Bring it up,"* Mason instructed. A hologram of Tunk appeared in the middle of the room. He nodded, *"My lords I'm sorry we're late, it took some convincing that this was the right side to be on."* Mason smiled, *"Welcome aboard Ambassador, feel free to blow up any ship you like."* Tunk laughed, *"Thank you, we shall do that."* And with that the transmission ended. Everyone watched as the Kholathian ships opened fire, and their fighters joined with Celeste's and Earth's. Joseph looked over to Nathaniel, *"We may have a chance after all."*

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Nick swung his sword with all he had. The man in front of him fell to the ground. Then, just as in the dream, the large warrior appeared in front of him. Nick jerked back for a moment, the sight startling him. But he was determined, he knew what he had to do. He swung at him, and missed. The man stepped forward and grabbed him by his armor and pulled him off Thomas. Nick hit the ground hard, but sprang back up to his feet, his sword at the ready. The two circled for a moment, then both lunged forward, exchanging blows. The sound of clanking metal could be heard all around as the two fought viciously.

Nick moved to block the oncoming sword and the man flipped his at just the right second, sending Nick's sword out of his hand and to the ground below. Before Nick could react, the man was standing in front of him, a menacing grin on his face. Nick blinked a moment, then looked down, seeing the man's sword in his chest. It happened so fast he didn't even feel it. But now as he realized what had happened, the pain hit. He winced and staggered back a few steps. He was determined to stay on his feet, and not show any weakness. The man stepped forward and put his hand on Nick's shoulder, grabbing his sword and twisting it. Nick clenched his jaw and stared at the man. His attacker seemed to enjoy Nick's reaction, and moved to pull his sword from Nick's flesh. Nick grabbed him, *"You have just sealed your fate."* The man laughed, yanking his sword free of Nick's body.

Nick cried out in pain and dropped to his knees, holding his chest with both hands. Blood covered them in an instant. He fought to breathe. He placed one of his hands on the ground beside him, trying not to fall over. The blood on his hand seeped into the ground. Nick lifted his head and closed his eyes. A cool breeze swirled around him. He heard a huge gasp, and looked up. All the fighting around him had stopped, and everyone.... his soldiers and the enemy.... were staring at him. The man that attacked Nick

was slowly backing away, fear in his eyes. Nick felt someone touch his shoulder and looked up into a pair of familiar eyes.

For a moment the two stared at each other, then Frederick looked back. Nick followed his gaze and saw the past kings standing behind him. They were as real as anything, but all had an eerie glow about them. Nick coughed, his injury momentarily forgotten, but now back in full force. Frederick squeezed his shoulder, then walked past him. As each king passed Nick, they touched him. And with each touch, Nick could feel himself dying. It seemed as if they were taking his energy, his strength. The opposing army started to run, but they had nowhere to go. Every direction they went, the kings appeared in front of them. Then the kings moved into the sea of men. Nick had to turn his head. He couldn't watch what was happening, for each man the kings touched burst into flames. Nick's army stood back, afraid to move, save two.

Rowland and Kevin ran to Nick. "Nick, oh God," Kevin said, kneeling beside him. Nick coughed, sinking to the ground. His strength was gone. "*Medic!*" Rowland yelled. Nick shook his head, "No, I .....have to fin.....finish this." "No Nick, you're hurt, we gotta get you to a hospital," Kevin argued. Nick shook his head as a transport sped up to them and stopped. "Nick!" "Nicky!" Ana and Brian yelled as they jumped off the machine and went to Nick's side. "Ana?" Nick asked. She took his hand, tears streaming down her face, "I'm right here." "Take me to ..... the throne room," he said. "No we gotta get you to a doctor," Brian said. Nick closed his eyes and mustered what little strength he had left, "I am still king, do as I say!" The group glanced at each other. "Alright Nick, we're going," Brian said, helping the others get him into the transport. Ana stayed by his side on the floor as the others sat down and Brian took the controls. "Hold on to him," he said, hitting the accelerator. The transport looped around and headed in the direction of the palace.

## Chapter 90

The control room was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Everyone was staring at the screens wide eyed and in shock. The past Kings moved through the opposing army until there was no one left, then they disappeared. All that was left was burning fields and a shocked Celestian army that still hadn't moved. Mason moved to wrap an arm around LaDonna and pull her into a hug. Her tears seeped through his shirt and wet his skin.

*"My lords, something's happening,"* one of the techs announced. All eyes went to the man. *"What is it?"* Joseph asked. *"The enemy ships have stopped firing on us. They're just sitting there,"* he said. Nathaniel glanced at Joseph raising an eyebrow. Everyone watched the screens, seeing the enemy fighters going back to their ships. *"What's going on?"* Howie asked. A.J. shook his head, *"I have no fucking idea."* *"They're leaving!"* Anthony said. Sure enough the massive ships were turning and heading out of the system as fast as they could. *"Tell the commanders to call in their fighters and form up. They might come back,"* Joseph said. *"Something tells me they won't. Not if anything like what just happened down here happened up there,"* Mason said.

*"My lords, lord Littrell is calling in,"* a tech said. *"Let us all hear,"* Mason commanded. *"Go ahead,"* the tech said. *"We're coming in fast. Nick is hurt, have a medical team in the throne room and open all the doors, I'm not stopping this thing till we're in there,"* Brian said. *"Brian, how bad is he hurt?"* A.J. asked. *"It's bad J,"* he replied.

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"Nick, don't close your eyes," Ana begged. Nick blinked a few times and opened them, staring at her. He was fighting for each breath, and blood was pooling around him. Ana looked at Kevin, "He's losing too much blood." "Maybe if we took his armor off we could stop it," Andrew suggested. "Good idea," Rowland said as he Kevin and Andrew moved to help Ana. They pulled the arm and leg armor off first, dropping it over the side of the transport. "How are we gonna get his breastplate off without hurting him?" Kevin asked. Ana bit her lip and looked down at Nick, "Hey, we're gonna take this off. It's probably gonna hurt." Nick nodded, trying to sit up for them. "No Nick, let us do it," Rowland said, as he and Kevin pulled Nick up to a sitting position. Nick winced, but didn't utter a sound.

Andrew and Ana unhooked the breastplate and pulled it over Nick's head. "Sweet Jesus," Andrew muttered, looking at the group in horror, "It went all the way through." Kevin leaned back to see the blood spilling out of the wound in Nick's back, "Oh God." "Guys, we gotta stop the bleeding," Ana said, looking for something to use. "Here," Andrew said unzipping his flight suit and pulling his t-shirt off, handing it to her. Kevin and Rowland followed suit, peeling their armor off and giving her their shirts. Ana ripped them into bandages and handed some to Andrew. Together they applied them to Nick's back and chest and wrapped them tightly with some supplies from the first aid kit.

Gently they lay Nick back down. Brian glanced back at them, "Hang on to him, we're almost there and I'm taking this thing all the way into the palace." Everyone looked at him like he was nuts. "Bri, are you nuts?! This thing won't fit!" Kevin said. "Yes it will," Brian argued, seeing the palace up ahead. Andrew stood up and moved to Brian's side, "It's gonna be tight Bri." Brian nodded, "You might wanna sit down and hang onto something." The group glanced at each other nervously as the palace drew closer. Brian turned and headed through the gates, "Get down and hang on!" he yelled as the main doors to the palace loomed in front of him. Everyone moved to the floor and held onto the transport with one hand, and Nick with the other.

Brian took a deep breath, "God, please let this work," he muttered as he flew into the palace. He zoomed down the main hall heading for the throne room. "Move!" he yelled as a couple of servants came around a corner right into his path. They jumped out of the way just in time. Brian slowed a bit to make the turn into the throne room. He still bumped the door with the back of the transport, jarring everyone. "Sorry!" he yelled as he sat the transport down right next to the diases the thrones sat on. Everyone crowded around Nick. "We're here," Ana said. "Get me up ..... to the ..... throne," Nick said. "Nick, there's a doc here, you gotta ...." Brian started. Nick shook his head, "Not now .....I need to do this." Ana saw the determination in his eyes and looked at the others, "Do as he says."

Kevin and Rowland helped him up and walked him to the throne, sitting him down. Nick leaned heavily on the arm of the throne and looked up. The council, his mother, Anthony, the guys and Maire were there. So was a medical team, and several guards and servants. He noticed a couple vid cameras floating above them all, catching everything. Nick looked over to a servant who was standing close to the throne holding his robe. He motioned him over and let him place his robe around him. Sitting there in only his pants and boots, he was cold.

LaDonna moved towards him, tears in her eyes, "*Nickolas, please let the doctor look at you.*" Nick shook his head, motioning the council to come forward. He had to do this quick, he didn't know how long he could stay conscious. He pointed to the book that Mason held in his hands, "*Open it ..... there's a*

*letter to .....to the council. Read it.*" Mason nodded opening the book and thumbing through the letters until he found the right one. Nick's seal was on it, making it an official declaration. The three council members glanced at one another as Mason broke the seal and opened the letter. He cleared his throat,

*To the honorable council and the people of Celeste,*

*Being that I, Nickolas Carter, your king, have not chosen a queen, nor have an heir to take my place on the throne, I am appointing such a person. I declare that this day, Anthony DeGrafe shall no longer be known as my cousin. From this point on, he shall be known as my brother, with all the rights and privileges that title bestows. I ask that the council approve this declaration and bestow this title upon one who deserves it more than I ever have.*

Anthony looked at Nick with shock on his face. Nick did his best to smile at the young man, then he looked to the council, *"What say you?"* The three men exchanged glances, all truly shocked. Mason stepped forward, *"I vote yea."* Nick looked to the two remaining members. Nathaniel nodded, *"Yea."* *"I also vote yea,"* Joseph said. Nick grabbed the chair and winced as a sharp pain ran through his chest. He struggled to get enough air to speak. Finally he looked up, *"Anthony come."* Anthony moved to stand in front of the throne, tears already in his eyes. He'd never seen Nick this way, and just looking at him scared him. Nick struggled to stay in a seated position, with each breath came an awful gurgling sound. The bandages around his chest were soaked with blood, and it was dripping to the floor beneath the throne.

*"Kneel,"* Nick instructed. Anthony got to his knees, looking back up. The lavender eyes that stared back at him were full of determination and purpose. *"I am resigning ...as king. I have done wh.....what I was sent here .....to do. Now it is .....time for a new king. Anthony DeGrafe .....do you promise .....to rule for the good of Celeste .....and not for .....for your own personal gain?"* Nick struggled. Anthony's mouth dropped open, along with everyone else's in the room. *"Nick, I can't ....."* he started to protest. Nick leaned forward and placed his hand on the young man's shoulder, *"You can. You were .....born for this. Follow your.....heart Anthony .....you will be a great king. Now ....answer the question,"* Nick smiled. Anthony took a deep breath and looked over to LaDonna and Mason. Both had tears in their eyes, and smiles on their faces. LaDonna nodded at him. Anthony looked back to Nick, *"I promise I will do everything in my power for the good of Celeste, and never for my own personal gain."* Nick smiled, pulling the crown from his head. With trembling hands he reached out and placed it on Anthony's head. He had to smile, it was a little big for the young man. Nick pushed it back a little, getting it off the boy's forehead, *"Then rise .....Anthony, King of..... Celeste, and greet your ..... subjects."*

As Anthony stood to his feet, everyone in the room knelt. Nick pushed himself to his feet, letting the robe fall off his shoulders. Anthony grabbed him by the arms as he swayed. *"Remember what .... Frederick taught you. Follow ... your heart ..... and you will do well,"* Nick said. Anthony nodded. Nick gave him a small smile, then his knees went out from under him. Mason ran forward and caught him, easing him down to the ground in front of the throne. Nick fought for every breath, and struggled to stay awake. Marie and Cameron ran forward to help. Ana quickly moved to his side, gently touching his face, "Hang on Nick," she begged. Nick looked around, seeing his family and friends around him. LaDonna was kneeling next to Mason. She was holding one of his hands, but he couldn't feel it. His eyes traveled to his 'brothers'. They were all huddled together, looking at him with tears streaming down their faces. Lastly he looked at Ana. She managed a smile, "It's going to be OK. You're gonna be alright, just hang on." Nick started to try and say something, when he stopped. A cool breeze caressed him. He heard a collective gasp, and everyone but Mason and Ana left him, backing up, fear on their faces.

Nick watched as Frederick walked around and knelt next to Mason. The other kings gathered around him, all had smiles on their faces. Ana broke down in sobs, but still refused to leave Nick's side. Mason stared at his brother, the two seemed to be talking without words. After a few moments Frederick nodded, then looked at Nick, *"It is time."* Nick nodded as the kings moved closer, each laying a hand on him. He looked to Ana, catching her eye. *I love you,* he thought, just as King Marques Shotier looked at the others, *"It is complete."* Each king nodded, as they looked at Nick. Suddenly Nick felt a surge of power run through him. His body tensed for a moment and he cried out. Then just as soon as it was there, it was gone, and so were the kings. Nick looked at Mason, fighting to breathe, his vision blurring. He felt the man pull him into his arms and hold him. Nick turned his head, as Ana took his hand. He squeezed it, then closed his eyes. "No Nick, don't close your eyes," Ana begged through her tears. Mason felt Nick's body go limp in his arms, and pulled him closer, rocking him back and forth, and humming the lullaby he'd sing to him when he was a baby. Ana looked down, a cold chill running down her spine as Nick's mark dimmed before her eyes. She broke down, holding his hand to her chest, "Please Nick don't leave me .....I love you!"

# Chapter 91

*Two weeks later .....*

LaDonna walked slowly into the sanctuary, the group she'd come to know as family walking behind her. Everyone was oddly quiet. Their footsteps rang through the massive hall as they moved from the sanctuary to the tombs. The boys glanced at one another, never having seen the inside before. The holograms of the kings gave them chills. They each slowed, taking time to look and pay their respects. They owed these men a lot. If it hadn't been for them, they might not have won the battle.

LaDonna stopped at her destination and looked back. A smile crossed her face as she saw the guys milling around, taking everything in. Mason moved to stand next to her, taking her hand in his. *"They are good kids. I must say I'm going to miss them,"* he said. She nodded, *"So will I. They're all like my own to me now."* Mason gave her hand another reassuring squeeze, and smiled at her when she looked at him. The queen gave the boys another minute before she cleared her throat, *"Guys, over here."* Slowly the guys made their way to her, forming a semi circle around her and Mason. LaDonna stepped to the side, revealing what they had come to see.

Next to Fredericks tomb, was a new stone. It was marked in two languages, Celestian and English. On it read the prophecy and at the bottom it simply said, *It Is Complete.* Brian marveled at Nick's hologram. Depending on which side you were standing on, you got a different view. On one side was Nick, dressed as King. His lavender eyes and white hair accentuated by his crown. On the other side was Nick as he appeared on Earth. Blue jeans and a t-shirt, blonde hair and those seas of blue that seemed to stare right through you. He smiled at LaDonna, *"This is wonderful."* The queen nodded. "How did they do that?" Kevin asked, stepping from one side to the other. Mason laughed, *"We have our ways. This one is special though, just for Nick."* "The kid would love this," Howie said quietly. A.J. nodded, "Yeah he would."

Marie made her way over to Brian's side, taking his hand. *"When will they finish it?"* she asked. The guys looked at her. "What's not finished?" Brian asked. Kevin looked from Frederick's stone to Nick's, "The dates. Nick's dates aren't on it yet." LaDonna nodded, *"Those will not be added for a long time, hopefully."* Everyone smiled. "We hope so too," Howie said.

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Ana walked out onto the balcony and looked out. The unicorns were grazing in the fields, the suns were shining and a gentle breeze touched her long hair. She smiled, walking over to the railing and looking down at the figure sitting in the chair. "You alright?" she asked. He nodded, giving her a smile. "Did they leave already?" he asked. "Yeah, a little while ago. You can still go if you want," she replied. He shook his head, "No, I saw the vid of it. It's nice." "Yeah it is," she said, moving to sit in the chair next to him.

He had a distant look on his face. One he'd carried since the day of the battle. He caught her staring and she looked away for a moment. "You want to talk about it?" she asked for what seemed like the millionth time. And for the millionth time he shook his head no. Ana sighed, "You have to sometime. You can't keep all this bottled inside you know." "Sometime," he said quietly, "Just not now, K?" "Alright," she agreed. At least that was a start. The high pitched whinny of a unicorn caught their attention. Thomas was standing by the fence looking up at them, bobbing his head and pawing the ground.

Ana watched as a smile formed on his face. "You want to go down and see him?" she asked. He stared at the unicorn for a moment, then turned to her, "Yeah." "Ok, stay here and I'll get the hover chair," she said, going back into the palace. He sighed, hating how weak he still was. It'd been two weeks since that eventful day ..... the day he was suppose to die. Nick looked at himself, his left arm held to his chest, immobilized. The days after the battle were a blur to him. He didn't remember having surgery, or the countless blood transfusions. The last thing he remembered was the kings around him, then he woke up in medical attached to every monitor known to man and a ventilator. That was four days ago.

Ana returned with the chair and helped him over into it. She guided it back into the palace, the little motors humming quietly. Nick enjoyed the ride from his room to the fields outside. Not counting the balcony, this was the first time he'd ventured out since he'd woken up. The suns shining on his face warmed him, and he smiled. "I'm gonna miss this," he said. Ana nodded, "I know, so will I." He looked back up at her and grinned, "So you're coming?" "Yes, what makes you think I wouldn't?" she laughed. "I dunno. I mean my other mom is kinda ..difficult, and it is Earth. You'd have to get used to the dim light and then there's that little allergy we have to the air and all," he rambled. "Don't you know by now that I'd follow you anywhere? Even to Earth. I love you Nick, and where you are, that's where I want to be too," she said. He reached up with his free hand and she took it, "Love you Ana." "Love you too," she said, leaning down and kissing the top of his head.

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Anthony sat on the throne looking at the council members. *"So it's agreed?"* he asked. All three nodded, smiling. *"Yes my king, we are agreed,"* Joseph said. Anthony looked to Tunk who was seated across from him, then to Tamara and Tom. *"I believe our alliance will benefit all of us. We have already received formal apologies from those that attacked us, now we just have to formally accept them,"* he said. Tunk nodded, *"Then I believe we have finished."* Anthony held his hand up, *"There's one more thing. We are having a going away celebration tonight. Nick is feeling better and we thought tonight would be good, since you guys ( he nodded to Tamara and Tom) are leaving for Earth in the morning."*

*"That sounds great,"* Tunk said. Tom nodded, *"I agree. We could use a little celebration around here after the past couple of weeks."* *"Good, then I expect you all there,"* Anthony said, getting up, *"Oh and don't tell Nick. It's kinda a surprise."* The group laughed, wondering if Nick would ever again be surprised, with the abilities he had. *"Ok, but don't blame us if he already knows,"* Tamara said. Anthony rolled his eyes, *"I know. He does have a knack for knowing things before they're gonna happen and all, but lets hope for the best here people. If there's nothing else, I'll see you tonight."*

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Nick sat next to the fence, petting Thomas. The unicorn purred loudly, letting Nick know he was worried about him after the battle. Nick smiled, "I know, I'm sorry I didn't come out sooner to see you." The unicorn bobbed his head, a look in it's eyes that plainly said 'you better be'. Nick laughed, then held his chest, "Oh don't make me laugh, that hurts." Thomas nudged him with his soft nose. "Listen boy, I gotta tell you something. I'm leaving in a few days ...going back to Earth," he said, his voice smaller than he thought it should've been. Thomas shook his head. Nick smiled, "I know you don't want me to go, and I'm gonna miss you so much. But I gotta. It's my home, and well, I think I need to go so Anthony can get the ball rolling here. I know it's hard having a former king around ....thinking you might not be doing something just he way he did it and all that."

The unicorn seemed to ponder that for a moment. Then it just looked at Nick with it's huge brown eyes. They seemed to be tearing. Nick touched the side of his face, "Don't do that, please. It's not like I'm leaving forever. I'll come back to visit. This place is a part of me now, I can't just leave it behind forever. I just need to go back and get things sorted out there ... then when the time is right, I'll be back." Thomas neighed, flicking his tail. "I'm sure. Do you think that mom is gonna let me leave if she thought I wasn't coming back?" Nick grinned. This time the unicorn seemed to laugh, and nodded its head.

"See .... we'll be together again. And in the meantime, I want you to take good care of Anthony for me," he said. Thomas bobbed his head, making the promise. "Thank you my friend," Nick said, hugging the unicorn's neck the best he could with one hand.

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A.J. lay on the bed looking at the ceiling, "Man, I can't believe we're leaving in a couple of days." "I know," Howie said from the chair across the room, "I've gotten used to being here. I like it." "So do I," Kevin said, coming in from the balcony, "But we've got lives back on Earth. Hell, our families are probably freaked, it's been months." "I know," A.J. said, sitting up, "That's why I'm not begging to stay a little while longer. I miss my mom." "Aww," Howie said. A.J. glanced at him, "Oh shut up D, like you don't miss your family too." "I didn't say that. I just think it's nice to hear you say you miss your mom," Howie smiled.

Kevin chuckled as Brian and Marie came into the room. "Hey guys, what's so funny?" Brian asked. "Nothing," A.J. said. Kevin smiled at his cousin, "He misses his mommy." A.J. threw one of the pillows at Kevin, hitting him square in the face, "Will you shut up?!" Marie laughed, "I think its nice Alex. Shows the feelings we all knew you had somewhere in there." Everyone laughed. "She's got you pegged bro, better watch out," Brian teasingly warned. "Yeah yeah," A.J. said.

"So, we ready for the party?" Brian asked. "Always ready for a good party," Howie replied. "Well, this one is special," Marie said, "All for Nick." "He'll love that," Kevin said, standing up, "Has anyone talked to him today?" "I talked with Ana a little while ago," Marie answered. "He still being quiet?" the older man asked. Marie nodded, "Yeah, but I'm sure it's just going to take time. I mean to go through everything he went through ... that's a lot to deal with." "Damn straight," A.J. said. "I couldn't do it," Brian replied. "Bri, you had your own shit to go through," A.J. said. "We all did, but to know the whole reason you lived was to die for your people. That had to be tough," Howie said. "And now that you've lived ... what then? I'm sure Nick's been thinking about that since he woke up," Kevin said.

"Thinking bout what?" Nick asked as Ana guided his chair into the room. Everyone glanced at one another for a second. "Oh nothing," Kevin said, "How you doing?" Nick smiled, "I'm good Kev. The same as the last hundred times you asked me." Kevin felt his cheeks flush. He couldn't help worrying over the kid, that was his job, wasn't it? "It's cool man, I know ya care," Nick said, giving him his famous grin. "We all care, Nicky," Brian said. "Yeah dude, we love ya," A.J. grinned. "More than we can ever say," Howie added. Nick looked down at his lap, "Aw guys, stop it. I'm gonna be all embarrassed for the

party." Everyone's eyes shot around the room, seeking out the person that told. Nick smiled, "What? You don't think I knew? I'm telling ya, it's gonna be impossible to surprise me ever again," he laughed, holding his side. "Well, mister know it all, we better go then. Wouldn't want the guest of honor to be late now would we?" Ana asked.

## Chapter 92

Nick listened to the guys as they all made their way down to the ball room. Everyone was dressed informally. All the guys including Nick in jeans and t-shirts. Ana and Marie were wearing the traditional jump suits. He looked down at his hand resting in his lap and started picking the tail of his shirt. Ana touched his shoulder and he looked up at her. "Something wrong?" she asked. He shook his head, "Naw, I'm just nervous for some reason." She smiled, "There's nothing to be nervous about. This is just a quiet little thing, just for us." He nodded, as they rounded the corner and she guided his chair into the ball room.

Everyone's jaws dropped open. The place was packed. Anthony and LaDonna were already there, and they both stood up smiling at the group. "Small huh?" Nick said, looking around. "Um ...well," Ana started, but was interrupted by the queen. "*Come in, take your seats,*" she said. Everyone moved into the room, taking their seats at the head table. Anthony and the queen were in the middle, the guys on either side of them. Nick sat next to his mom, Ana on the other side, then Brian and Marie. Kevin, Howie and A.J. were next to Anthony. "Well ain't this fancy," A.J. said, sitting down. "Yeah, no one said anything bout inviting the entire planet," Kevin chuckled. "*Well, we wanted to surprise you guys too,*" Anthony said, a huge grin on his face. "I think you succeeded," Howie smiled.

Anthony waited a moment to let the crowd settle down, then he cleared his throat, "*Thank you all for coming. This celebration is for these men sitting with me tonight. Celeste owes each and every one a great debt.*" The crowd applauded, and Anthony waited until they had quieted. "*So before we have our meal, I have something I want to give them,*" he continued. All the guys glanced at each other, wondering what this was all about. Several servants came in carrying different boxes. Anthony moved out to the front of the table. "*A.J., Howie, will you come down here?*" he asked. The two got up and made their way to stand next to him. Two of the servants came forward, holding out their boxes. Anthony opened one and took out a silver medallion. It was on a golden ribbon, and embossed on it was an image of Celeste with two hands grasping each other in a hand shake. "*For offering your services to Celeste, and risking your lives, I bestow upon you both the medallion of Friendship,*" he said, placing the medallion over A.J.'s head, then reaching into the other box and doing the same for Howie. Both the guys had huge smiles on their faces. The crowd erupted in applause as the two sat back down.

Two more servants stepped forward. "*Brian and Kevin, come please,*" Anthony instructed. The cousins stepped down, giving each other a smile. Anthony opened the first box pulling out a unique silver metal. On one side was a unicorn with two swords crossed behind it. On the other was a replica of Celeste as

seen from space. *"Kevin, for bravery on the battle field and service to Celeste, I honor you,"* Anthony said, nodding. Kevin bent down so the young man could place the metal on his chest. When he finished, Anthony smiled at him, before moving to the other box. He pulled out another metal. This one had a fighter against the background of an X class ship on one side and the other side once again had an image of Celeste from space. *"Brian, for leadership and bravery in battle, I honor you,"* Anthony said, placing the metal on his chest. Brian looked down at it, then back up, a grin so wide it almost reached his ears. Once again the crowd erupted in cheers and applause.

The two made their way back to their seats as Anthony turned to face the table. *"Nick,"* he said. LaDonna stood up and guided Nick's chair around the table. A servant stood next to Anthony with another box. Nick looked up at the young man and managed an embarrassed half smile. Anthony grinned at him. *"Nick, I don't have the words for how much you have done for us. We took you from all you ever knew and brought you here. You didn't have to stay, but you did. We made you king. Again, you didn't have to accept, but you did. You taught us all what it means to sacrifice everything you have ... you taught me how to lead. You came and showed us that it was OK to be different..... to do things differently. You've changed Celeste forever, and we can never repay you for that. So, I am bestowing upon you the highest honor we have,"* Anthony said, turning to accept the golden metal. Nick blinked a few times, the brilliance of the metal, glaring in his face. On it was the royal family's crest and on the other side Celeste. Anthony carefully placed it over Nick's head, making sure the metal didn't bang against his chest. *"For everything you have done, and all that you mean to us. I honor you,"* Anthony said, kneeling in front of him. The sound of chairs moving filled the room, and as Nick looked out his heart swelled. Every person was on their knees. He looked back up at the table, seeing the guys had also knelt. Nick felt the hot tears slide down his cheeks as he reached out and took Anthony's hand. *"Thank you, my king,"* he said, pulling the young man to his feet. Anthony shook his head as the room got to its feet, *"No, thank you .... my brother."*

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Nick leaned on the arm of his hover chair, watching the party. The meal had been served and then the tables cleared. Now the entire palace was filled with the joyful music the band was playing. Most everyone was on the dance floor, laughing and having fun. He smiled as Mason and LaDonna danced by. The love they felt for one another clearly evident on their faces. Kevin and Howie came by next, each with a young lady from the upper class on their arm. They seemed to be having fun. Next came Brian and Marie. They shared the same looks as his mother and Mason did. So in love, and not a care who saw. Nick laughed, holding his chest as A.J. danced by with two beautiful young women.

He felt a nudge and looked over. Ana raised her eyebrow, "That how he is on Earth?" Nick nodded, "Yeah, J's always gotta have two of everything." Ana laughed. Nick watched her, loving the gleam in her eyes when she was happy. It'd been there since he woke up, never leaving. She caught him looking and glanced at herself, "What? I got something on me or something?" "Naw," he said, "I just love to watch you. You're so beautiful and you don't even know it." She blushed, looking quite embarrassed. The music moved into a slow song and Nick held out his free hand, "Wanna dance?" "Honey, you can't dance right now," she said. "Yeah I can, come on," he urged, "I know you wanna." She laughed, taking his hand, "Alright, but just for a minute."

Nick maneuvered his chair to the edge of the dance floor then slowly stood up. Ana held his arm, helping to steady him. After a moment he looked at her and smiled, "See, piece of cake," he said, pulling her close. She rested her head lightly on his shoulder as they moved back and forth to the music. Their feet never left the same spot, the two just swaying along with the melody. Nick leaned his face against the side of her head and closed his eyes. This was heaven. It had to be. After all the hell he'd been through, this very moment was the peace he was looking for. No longer did they have to hide their feelings. They were free to love each other, no matter who saw. As weak as Nick was, he felt like he was soaring above the clouds. The music stopped and they both looked into each others eyes for a moment. Then it hit them that it was strangely quiet. Slowly they turned their heads to see the entire room watching them. It wasn't an accusing look, but each face had a smile. Nick glanced at A.J. and he gave him a the thumbs up. He tried to keep from laughing at him, as Ana looked back to him, complete embarrassment on her face. "They like us," Nick said, giving her a cheesy grin and then quickly kissing her before falling back down into his chair. "Way to go Nicky!" A.J. yelled, clapping his hands. The whole crowd laughed, then joined in the applause. Nick shook his head as Ana guided his chair back around the table, "I'm so gonna get you for that J," he muttered.

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Tamara and Tom made their way up to the head table. "Hey Nick, we just wanted to say goodbye," Tamara said. "You're leaving?" Nick asked, "The party's just getting going." Both agents laughed. "Well, we're taking off early in the morning. Your ships are piggybacking us again," Tom said. "Oh, well, then I guess we'll see you back on Earth then," Nick said. Tamara nodded, "Yeah, we should arrive a couple days before you guys do. That'll give us enough time to put the plan into motion." "OK, sounds great," Nick said, offering them both his hand, "Thanks guys for all your help." "No problem," Tom said, smiling, "Not only did you change things here, you did a number back home too." "Yeah?" Nick said, "So are they ready to hear we're out here?" Tamara held up her hands, "Ohhh no! Not yet, but I think we're getting closer. Thanks to you." "Cool," Nick said, "I always wanted to change the world," he laughed. Tom playfully slapped his shoulder, "Bet you never thought you'd change two, huh?" Nick shook his head. "Ok, we'll see you in a couple weeks then," Tamara said. "K, be careful, have a safe trip," Nick

said. "You too," Tom said, as they left the room.

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Ana glanced over, seeing Nick talking to the agents from Earth. *"Would you like to dance?"* a voice came from behind her. She turned around, *"Lord DeGrafe ...um, sure."* Mason smiled, taking her hand and leading her to the dance floor. Ana noticed he looked like he wanted to say something. He'd open his mouth and take a breath, only to close it again. *"I'm happy for you two,"* he finally said, *"You are good for him. I'm glad you don't have to hide what you feel anymore."* *"Thank you,"* Ana said, *"I love him so much."* *"I can see it. I don't know why I didn't pick up on it before the day of the battle, but now that I look back, I see it. You loved him before you even got here, didn't you?"* he asked with a smile. Ana nodded, *"I did. I didn't want to admit it, but yeah."* Mason nodded, *"Take care of him for us."* She smiled, *"I will my lord."*

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*"Well my friend, this has been some celebration,"* Tunk said. Nick nodded, *"Yeah it has. I wasn't expecting the ceremony."* Tunk gave him a huge smile, *"So, you can still be surprised?"* he laughed. Nick chuckled, holding his chest. *"You alright?"* Tunk asked, his smile turning to concern. *"Yeah, just can't laugh very well yet,"* he replied. Tunk put his hand on Nick's shoulder, *"If you ever need anything from me or my people, all you have to do is call."* *"Thank you Tunk. You are a good friend,"* Nick said.

*"Excuse me Ambassador,"* LaDonna said, moving around Tunk to stand next to Nick's chair, *"May I steal my son away?"* Tunk bowed, *"Of course your highness,"* he looked back up at Nick, *"Have a safe journey home. I will miss you."* Nick reached out and hugged him, *"I'll miss you too. We'll get together the next time I'm here, K?"* Tunk smiled, *"I look forward to it. Goodnight,"* he said, turning and walking back into the crowd.

LaDonna looked down at her son, *"You look tired, can I take you up?"* Nick looked out at the dance floor, seeing Mason and Ana still dancing. He wanted to stay until the end of the party, but he knew it would last all night, and he was exhausted. *"Yeah, but have someone tell Ana I'm leaving,"* he said. LaDonna motioned a servant over and told the man to deliver the message. The man walked out onto the dance floor. Mason and Ana stopped dancing as the man talked to them, then both looked up. Nick waved and Ana blew him a kiss. Mason nodded and LaDonna smiled as she guided Nick's chair out of the room.

The hallway was so quiet compared to the ball room. LaDonna sighed as she walked, *"I can't believe you're leaving me in a couple days."* Nick looked down at his lap, feeling the same way. He didn't know how he was going to say goodbye to her, even if it wasn't forever and he knew he was coming back someday. *"I don't wanna leave, but I have a whole other family and friends ....."* he started. She put her hand on his shoulder, *"I understand Nickolas. I can't even imagine what they've been through these past few months. To think you were kidnapped and no where to be found ....., you need to go back to them."* Nick reached up and held her hand that rested on his shoulder, *"I know, but I'll be back, when everything settles down again."*

LaDonna laughed, *"And when will that be? In a year or two?"* Nick bit his lip, he honestly didn't know. *"Nick, I'm just kidding. I don't expect you to come back in a few months. I know you have to recover, then your management will want to reschedule the tour dates you missed. Then another cd, and promotion,"* she said. Nick laughed and turned in his chair to look at her, *"You sound like Kevin."* She nodded, *"He and I had a long talk. He let me in on some things, explained a little about how your business worked."* *"Yeah good ole Kev,"* Nick muttered as they reached his room. LaDonna guided his chair over to the bed and helped Nick move from it to the bed. She then retrieved his pajamas and helped him take off the sling that kept his left arm tight against his chest. Nick winced as she pulled the shirt over his head and replaced it with his pajama shirt. Then she pulled back the covers and helped ease him down into the bed, placing pillows on his left side to support his arm.

*"That comfortable?"* she asked. He nodded, *"Thanks."* The queen sat down next to him and brushed his bangs off his forehead, *"When you go back, we will set you up with some transmitters. Anytime you want, you can call and talk."* *"Thanks mom,"* Nick said, his eyes shining. His mother laughed, *"Don't make me call you first and ask why you never call your mother."* Nick giggled, *"Don't worry. That wont happen."* *"Good,"* she said, staring at him intently, *"Honey, I've noticed that you've been sort of quiet since you woke up. Is there something I can help with?"* Nick bit the inside of his jaw. He wasn't sure how to explain how he felt. He didn't know if he ever could.

*"I can't explain it. I just have this feeling,"* he said quietly. *"Tell me,"* she urged. He sighed, *"I don't know how. Um ... I'm not supposed to be here now. I was supposed to die, and I ....., um ...."* *"Baby, are you feeling guilty for living?"* she asked. Nick shrugged, then regretted it as a pain shot through his chest, *"Uh, I'm not sure ....., maybe. I just know that when the kings came back to the throne room, they came to take me with them. Something changed, and they didn't. Did I not do what I was supposed to? I mean, I'm not complaining, but I just wanna know. Did I screw up so bad they didn't want me anymore?"* LaDonna's mouth dropped open in shock and she leaned down and hugged Nick close to her, *"No sweetie, you didn't screw up. You did everything right."* *"Then why?"* he asked, feeling tears in his

eyes and not sure why they were there. His mother pulled back and looked at him, tears in her own eyes. *"Honey, Mason asked for you to be spared. He begged Frederick not to take you. You had already completed the prophecy, there was no reason for you to die. Mason asked him to give you the chance he never gave us, to let you love and live,"* she explained.

The tears spilled over Nick's cheeks as he stared at his mother, *"He did?"* She nodded, *"Yes he did. That's why you are still with us."* Nick took a moment to let that sink in. *"So, Frederick and Mason, did they make up?"* he asked. She smiled, *"Yes. They forgave each other, because of you."* *"Me?"* Nick asked, wiping his face with the back of his hand. *"They both love you and want what's best for you. Frederick saw Mason change because of his love for you and me. Mason said he told him he was proud of him and asked him to forgive him. You, my son, have done more than the prophecy ever spoke of. You brought two men together that I thought would never see eye to eye. Now things are settled between them,"* she said. Nick smiled through a yawn, *"I'm glad you're happy now."* She smiled, *"So am I. Thank you."*

Nick gave her a smile as his eyes drifted closed. He opened them again. *"Go to sleep, you've had a long day,"* she soothed. He nodded, letting himself drift to sleep. LaDonna stayed with him for a long time, just watching him. She gently touched his face, *"You have both your fathers in you,"* she whispered, seeing so much of Mason and Frederick in Nick. Carefully she leaned down and kissed his forehead, *"I love you,"* she murmured, as she got up to leave. As she reached the door, she looked back at his sleeping form. Damn she was going to miss him.

## Chapter 93

Brian shoved the last of his shirts into his duffle bag. "Honey, do you need any help?" he asked, looking over at Marie. She was sitting on the floor trying to force the last of her belongings into a bag that was obviously not going to hold one more thing. She looked up and blew a stray hair out of her face, "That would be nice. This won't fit." Brian laughed at her as he walked over and assessed the situation. He knelt down and pulled the bag over, dumping everything onto the floor. "What'd you do that for?" Marie asked, seeing her morning of packing go down the tubes. "If you fold them different, they'll fit," he replied, sitting down cross legged and grabbing a pile of clothes to fold.

Marie cocked her head to the side, "And how do you know that?" He grinned at her, "Years of living out of a suitcase. You learn how to pack to fit everything you need." "I see," she said as he packed her bag for her. Now everything fit with room to spare. They both got up and looked around their room. "Is that everything we're taking?" he asked. "Yeah," she said, "My parents are taking my apartment for dad to use when he's here on business, so this is it." Brian smiled at his wife, "Are you ready? We can still not go if you don't want ....." Marie held her hand up, "Bri, we've been over this. You're life is on Earth, and my life is with you." He sighed, "I know, I just hate that you'll be away from your family for so long." "I'm a big girl baby, it's fine. Besides, we'll have transmitters and I can call home anytime I want. And we're only a couple weeks away if I want to come visit," she said. Brian pulled her into a hug and kissed her, "Love you." "Love you more," she giggled as he let her go and grabbed both their bags. "Well, let's take these up and see if everyone else is ready."

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Kevin looked out over the grounds, letting the morning sunlight warm him. It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. A gentle breeze whipped through his now long hair. It'd been months since he'd had it cut. Howie and A.J. were talking quietly behind him. Both were excited to be going home, but also expressing wishes not to leave this pristine world. Kevin had to agree. He'd grown to love Celeste and its people. He was definitely going to miss them. He turned to see Ana walk out, carrying her bag, a servant carrying Nick's. "Morning," he called. "Morning," she replied, handing her bag over to the servant so he could put it in the transport.

"So, where's Nicky?" A.J. asked. "He wanted some time....to say goodbye," she said, looking over the grounds and nodding. The guys looked over and saw Anthony and Nick heading toward the fields. Nick

seemed to be talking a mile a minute and Anthony was nodding as he pushed Nick's chair. The guys laughed at the sight. "Probably giving him some last minute advice on ruling a planet," Kevin mused. "Naw," A.J. said, "He's probably giving him advice on girls." Ana glanced at Kevin with her eyebrow raised, while Howie snickered. "J, why does it always have to be girls?" Kevin asked. A.J. smiled broadly, "What else is there?"

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*"..... and during council, don't let Joseph get off on his tangents about the underwater mining. You'll be there forever," Nick said. Anthony laughed and put his hand on Nick's shoulder, "I've got it. Don't worry, I've had the best teachers." Nick bit his lip, "I'm sorry, I just didn't want anything to surprise you." "Everything is fine, thanks to you. The shipments are still coming in, and by the last estimates Celeste will be rid of it's need for Krystal in about a month. Already the crime rate is down, and employment is up. You saved us Nick. Not only from those that fought against us, but from ourselves as well," the young king said. Nick blushed from embarrassment, then looked at his younger brother, "You are a good king. Don't lose sight of it, K?" Anthony shook his head, "I never will. I have to much to live up to." "Live up to?" Nick asked, as they came to the fence and stopped. "Yeah, you and Frederick are some pretty hard shoes to fill ya know," he said. Nick shook his head, "Don't be like us man. Be yourself, even if it is a little different from the norm." Anthony smiled, "Of all the things I've learned from you, that is the most important one." Nick laughed, "You learned from me? Wow, never thought I'd ever hear anyone say that." Anthony chuckled as the unicorns approached the fence, "Well get used to it bro, you taught a lot of people in your short time here. The entire planet's attitude about certain things has changed, because of you. Now, I'll leave you alone for a bit," he said, stepping back so Nick could talk to the unicorns in private.*

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LaDonna moved from one to another, saying her goodbyes. She had grown to love each of the boys as she did Nick, and it was hard to let them all go. Marie's parents were there to see her off. Both were so sad to see her go, but knew it wasn't going to be forever. They spent a lot of time with Ana as well, since she had no family to see her go. Mason made his way around as well. Like the queen, he had found a place in his heart for each of the guys. It was harder than he thought to tell them goodbye.

He turned to see Brian and Marie in front of him. "My lord, may we speak with you?" Marie asked. Mason nodded and followed the two over to a quiet corner of the building. Brian licked his lips and

cleared his throat, *"We uh, we wanted to let you know that since we're leaving, there's really no need to continue your daily visits to the nursery."* Mason stared at him for a moment, not sure if he heard right or not. *"Brian, Marie ..... you gave me that punishment for a year, and I intend to honor it. Besides, I sort of look forward to it now,"* he said. *"You do?"* Marie asked. The older man nodded, *"I do. It puts things in perspective. Nothing is as important as life, love and family. For a while I forgot that. You two have helped remind me."* Brian glanced at Marie. It was getting harder not to like this guy. Especially after what Nick had told him about Mason asking Frederick to spare him. Brian looked back at Mason and extended his hand, *"Let's put all this behind us then."* Mason bit his lip to keep his chin from trembling as he shook Brian's hand, *"Thank you."* Brian nodded, then took Marie's hand and headed back to the group.

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"Goodbye my friend," Nick whispered into Thomas's fur. The unicorn purred loudly and nuzzled Nick's neck. After a moment, Nick let go and guided his chair away from the fence. He wiped his face with the back of his hand as Anthony approached him. *"Man I'm gonna miss him,"* Nick said. Anthony nodded, *"I'll take good care of him for you."* Nick laughed, *"That's funny, I asked him to take care of you."* The young man smiled and looked up, seeing the group waiting on them. *"I believe you are ready to go,"* he said. Nick looked up and sighed, *"Yeah I guess so. You know if you need anything, all you gotta do is call. Those transmitters work both ways ya know?"* Anthony smiled, *"I know Nick, and I will call, you can count on it."*

The rest of the trip through the palace and up to the landing pad was silent. This was it. Nick was leaving the planet he had come to love so much, and going ..... home. As they moved out onto the pad, Mason and LaDonna came to meet him. For a moment, nothing was said. They just looked at each other ... tears in their eyes .... no words to describe how much they were going to miss each other. LaDonna knelt down and held Nick's free hand, *"I will miss you, my son. Be careful, and if you need anything, I'm here."* Nick smiled, reaching out and pulling her into a hug, *"I love you mom. I'll miss you so much."* LaDonna squeezed him as tight as she dared, then pulled back and kissed his cheek. Nick sniffed, reaching up and wiping the tears from his mother's face before kissing her cheek.

LaDonna stepped back, letting Mason take her place. *"Thank you for ....."* Nick started. Mason held his hand up, *"Let's not do this OK? I owe you so much, there's no place to start, so lets not,"* he said, pulling Nick into a hug, *"I love you Nickolas. I will miss you so much."* *"I'll miss you too ..... dad,"* Nick said. Mason grinned, feeling the most immense pride a man could feel. He had to have the best son in the entire galaxy. At least that's how he felt, and nothing would ever change that feeling. Mason stepped

back and tousled Nick's hair, *"Take care."* *"I will,"* Nick said.

Anthony moved in and hugged Nick again. *"I'm gonna miss you, bro,"* he said. Nick smiled. Anthony had been calling him 'bro' since he'd woken up. *"Gonna miss you too kid,"* Nick smiled, *"Maybe sometime you can make an official visit to Earth. See your older wiser brother."* Anthony laughed, *"We'll see. I have a lot of work to do here ya know."* *"I know,"* Nick said, understanding all too well the work a king had to do. Anthony grinned, glancing over at Ana, *"Have fun,"* he said with a twinkle in his eye. Nick laughed, holding his chest, *"Oh man, I am a bad influence on you!"* Anthony squeezed his shoulder, *"Naw, all's good. Now you better get going before you change your mind."* Nick nodded, looking up at the young king, *"Goodbye."* *"Not goodbye, see you later,"* Anthony corrected.

Ana came over and took Nick's chair, guiding him towards the transport. As they went up the ramp, Nick looked back, and waved. Mason and LaDonna were arm in arm, Anthony in front of them. All were crying with smiles on their faces. Then their image was gone, replaced by the inside of the transport. Kevin and Brian helped Nick out of his chair and over into one of the seats. It was just a minute before the transport was moving. Nick watched out the window as they lifted into the air and headed toward space. He kept his eyes on his family until they could no longer be seen. Then he took in the landscape. The mountains on one side, the fields on the other. The wind swaying the grasses made it seem as if the planet itself was waving goodbye. Who knows? Maybe it was. The blue sky turned into darkness filled with millions of stars. Nick smiled. These were his stars, his peace. He took in all he could before the transport landed in the docking bay and he was moved back into his chair and taken to his quarters.

The group had been quiet. All of them already missing the place they had called home for so many months. But they all knew it was different for Nick. None of them could imagine what it was like for him to leave after all that had happened. It seemed like ages ago they were on the stage, Nick getting in trouble for not listening. Now, he was so different ..... they all were. This experience would be something that held them together for the rest of their lives, and it had changed them all for the better.

Ana stopped in front of Nick's door, looking back at the group. Kevin, Howie and A.J. were in awe of the ship. She smiled at their faces. *"I think I'll take them around and show them the ship,"* Brian said. She nodded, looking down at Nick. He had dozed off in his chair. *"I'll take him in and let him rest for a while. Meet you guys at supper?"* she offered. *"Sounds good,"* Marie smiled. *"Do you need some help?"* Brian asked as Ana passed her mark across the sensor. *"No, I got it. See you later,"* she said, pushing Nick through the door, and letting it close behind her.

She pushed Nick's chair over to the bed and turned down the covers. "Nick? Sweetie, wake up," she said, running her hand through his hair. He looked up, then looked around, "Sorry," he muttered. "No problem, you need your rest," she said, helping him into the bed. She got him settled, "You need anything." He looked over at the large tapestry with the royal crest on it. "Can you open the curtains? I wanna see the stars," he asked. She smiled, getting up and pressing the button to pull back the curtains. Then she ordered the lights dim, and came back over to sit next to him. He took her hand and interlaced their fingers, all the while staring out at the vast expanse of space. "So much has happened since we did this last," he said quietly. Ana nodded, remembering the countless times she would come to Nick's room only to find him sitting in front of the window, staring into space. She would join him for a while before she insisted on them getting to work on his lessons. "It seems like another lifetime ago," she replied. He smiled, "I think it was." A comfortable silence fell between them. Nick settled back into his pillows, content. Soon Ana was laying next to him, his head resting on her arm. He looked up at her, seeing a far away look in her eyes. "What are you thinking?" he asked. She looked down, "What its gonna be like when we get back to Earth. You've never really told me anything about your other family. What's your mom like?" Nick laughed, "Oh baby, are you in for a surprise."

## Chapter 94

The two weeks it took the ship to reach Earth seemed to fly by. How is it that when you are going somewhere time stands still, but when you're going home, it passes in an instant? Everyone was excited as they boarded the transport. Over the past two weeks Nick had improved greatly. He was walking and had his left arm in a regular sling, rather than in the immobilizing one. He would only have to wear the sling for a few more weeks, then he could begin using his arm again. Still he got tired easily, but as time passed he would regain his strength. The ship's doctor had taken a lot of time to explain to Nick just what had happened to him to cause his weakness. Nick just smiled and nodded. The medical terms meant nothing to him. All he knew was that the past Kings had taken his energy, and it would be a long time returning. His scar from his surgery was healing nicely, and much to Nick's delight, it wasn't as big or as noticeable as he thought it would be.

"Man I can't believe we're here," A.J. said, looking out the window of the transport as it made its way down through the atmosphere. "Where are we anyway?" Howie asked, not recognizing the land that came into view beneath them. "I dunno," Brian replied, "Kinda looks like Europe maybe?" Nick looked out the window, not sure where they were either. "I wonder when we'll get to see our families," Kevin said, starting a whole new round of conversation. Ana looked over at Nick and squeezed his knee. He glanced over. "What's that smile for?" she asked, grinning at him. "My family. I didn't realize how much I missed them until now. I can't wait to see my brother," he replied. "I can't wait to meet them," Ana said, feeling the butterflies in her stomach. Kevin looked over and smiled, "Well, don't let mamma Carter get to you." Ana nodded, "I know, Nick's already warned me." The entire group laughed.

The transport landed in a large field, and the group headed down the ramp, bags in tow. "Hey guys, welcome home," Tamara called. "Hey," Nick said, heading towards the vans. "You look better," she commented. Nick smiled, "I had a good nurse," he said, glancing at Ana. "Well, if you'll all get in, we'll head back to the hotel," Tamara said. "Is the news out yet?" Kevin asked. She shook her head, "Not yet. Your families will be here in the morning and the news is breaking tonight." "Oh joy," A.J. grinned. "Oh joy indeed," Nick said, as he stepped into the van. The pandemonium would soon ensue.

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"Now the story the press is getting is that Nick has been here for several months. He escaped from his captors, but in doing so was injured. He's been in the hospital all this time, and Ana was his nurse," Tom

said. Marie glanced at Ana and smiled, "Told you you should have been a nurse." Ana rolled her eyes. "But if Nick's been here for months, then why didn't he contact someone?" Kevin asked. "Amnesia," Tamara said. Nick sighed, "Oh great, like that's gonna be believable. And what? I just suddenly remembered my life again?" "It's better than the alternative," Tamara said. "Which is?" Kevin asked. "The truth," Tom answered. "Ok, even if we go with the amnesia thing, it's not like people don't know who Nick is," Brian said. "Yeah, someone would have had to recognize him before now," A.J. added. "Not where we are," Tom said. "And exactly where is that?" Nick asked. "Southern France," Tamara answered. "We're in France?" Howie asked. "Yes, we thought it best since you all are speaking with a French accent now," Tom said. "We are not," Kevin laughed. "You are too," Tamara said, "Wanna hear?" Kevin waved his hand, and Tamara pulled out her tape recorder. "Ok, someone say something," she said.

"Well I don't know bout anyone else, but I am definitely not speaking with a French accent," A.J. said, crossing his arms over his chest. Tamara stopped the tape then rewound it and pressed play. All the guys mouths dropped open. "Damn, well I take that back," A.J. said. "I think it sounds cool," Howie said. A.J. hit him, "You would." "Guys," Kevin said sternly, cutting off Howie's reply. Nick laughed, "Some things never change." "Ok, so back to the story," Brian said, "If Nick's been here all this time, where have we been?" "Good question," Tom said, "You've been here too. We worked some things out with INTERPOL, they have agreed to collaborate our story. Early leads brought us here, and since you guys are so close, you wanted to be where we were searching." "So, you've been here in an exclusive resort the entire time," Tamara said, "And that's how you met Marie." "I met my wife at a resort?" Brian asked. "Marie has been set up as an agent for Interpol. She was assigned to your case, and you two met that way," Tom said. "Cool, I'm a secret agent," Marie laughed.

"Alright, so what about management?" Kevin asked, "If our families are on their way, then they won't be far behind." "You're right," Tom said, "Actually they're coming with your families. They already set up a press conference for tomorrow night." "But the news just broke two hours ago," A.J. said. Nick sighed, "Do I have to go?" "That's the whole reason for it. They want the world to see that you're alright," Tamara said. "So what am I suppose to say? How long was I with my kidnappers? What'd they do to me? I can't talk about any of that stuff, it never happened!" Nick yelled. Ana placed her hand on his shoulder to calm him. "Don't worry Nick, we have it all covered," Tom said. Nick glanced at the guys, "Oh yeah, who's worried?"

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Nick bit his lip. He was nervous as hell. He glanced around the room, seeing the same looks on

everyone's faces. They sat in a large meeting room inside the hotel, waiting for their families to get there. They were due any minute. He watched as Brian tried to calm Marie down. She was so nervous she was visibly shaking. He didn't envy her at all. Jackie and Harold were the most loving people in all the world, but to find out their son got married to someone they didn't even meet? Well, he just didn't know how that would play out. Ana sat down next to him. "She gonna be OK?" he asked. She smiled, "I think so. Just pre meet the parents nerves." Nick looked into her dark blue eyes. He wasn't sure he was going to get used to seeing them this way. The light on Earth gave her a whole new appearance. One he wasn't used to yet. Her skin was golden, her hair a light brown, and her eyes had darkened to a deep blue.

He reached up and touched her hair. "I'm still not used to this," he said. Ana laughed, "You aren't? Do you know how different you look to me?" She touched his blonde hair then ran her fingers over his face. "I love your eyes, they're so blue," she smiled. Nick grinned, leaning over and kissing her. "Nick?!" Nick looked up to see his mother, coming into the room. He stood up, seeing the rest of his family walk in. Jane stared at him, "You're really here? This isn't a dream?" Nick shook his head, "It's no dream mom." The Carters crossed the room and huddled around Nick, engulfing him in a huge hug. "We thought we'd lost you," Bob said, blinking the tears from his eyes. Ana looked over at the guys. All of them were smiling with tears in their eyes. Aaron moved to stand in front of Nick and wrapped his arms around him. The two brothers said nothing, they just held each other.

Soon the other families made their way in. Ana and Marie stood back, watching. It was truly a sight. All five families were so relieved and happy to have their loved ones back. The two girls seemed to fade into the woodwork as the families talked and cried. Brian cleared his throat, "Mom, Dad, there's someone I want you to meet." He walked over and took Marie by the hand, "This is Marie Lapool Littrell, my wife." The entire room fell silent, all the families eyes going from Marie to Jackie and Harold. "Y-your wife?" Jackie asked. Brian nodded, "I know this is sudden, but we've been together since I've been gone. I'm sorry you didn't get to see me get married, but we ..... I love her so much, and I just couldn't wait to spend the rest of my life with her." Jackie opened her mouth, but closed it as Harold squeezed her shoulder.

Marie glanced at Ana, a 'help me' look on her face. Brian's parents were just staring at her in shock, and she didn't know what to do. "Brian, sont-ils bien ?" *Brian, are they alright?* Marie asked. He smiled at her, "Je pense they're dans le choc. Juste donnez-leur une certaine heure," *I think they're in shock, just give them some time.* Jackie stared at Marie, "I've heard that before." "Heard what?" Harold asked. "That language," she said. "Honey, it's French," her husband said. Jackie shook her head, "It's different." Brian and Marie stared at each other. Harold walked over and pulled Marie into a huge hug, "Welcome to the family." Marie smiled, "Thank you." Brian took his mother's hand, then Marie's, "Mom, there are some things we need to talk about." Jackie looked at her son, then to Marie as he

pulled her out of the room.

"Well, since we're in the surprise mode," Nick said, "Everyone, I want you to meet Ana Copeland." Ana stepped up beside Nick. He took her hand and smiled at her. Jane glared at her for a moment, "You aren't married are you?" They both laughed. "No mom, not yet anyway," he said. Ana stepped forward and extended her hand to Jane, "It's nice to finally meet you Mrs. Carter. Nick has told me so much about you." Jane glanced at Nick, as she took Ana's hand and shook it, "Well, you can't believe everything Nick says." Ana smiled, as the rest of the Carters came to greet her. Aaron nudged Nick, "She got a sister?" Nick laughed and pushed him away, "God you're still annoying!" "Yeah, but you love me," Aaron grinned. Nick nodded, "That I do kiddo."

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To say the press conference and the weeks following were hell, would be putting it mildly. The guys were hounded by reporters wanting to get the inside scoop. Fans were constantly at their houses, and gifts poured in. Management was already talking about rescheduling the missed tour dates, then sending the boys back into the studio for another album. So, life was back to normal.

Jackie was the only one out of all the families to hear the truth. Brian figured if she'd kept her father's secret this long, then she could keep Nick's as well. The rest bought the story the agents and the boys told them. None of them asked to much, not wanting to bring back 'bad' memories for Nick. So it was left at that.

The boys had all gone home to rest, but they called each other everyday. This was something new they had started, and had promised to do when they couldn't all five be together. Ana had made herself at home in Nick's house. He really didn't recognize the place anymore, but he loved what she did to it. Somehow she had decorated the place so it reminded him of Celeste. The furnishings, the colors, everything. She even went so far as to have a mural painted in their bedroom of Celeste's stars. Jane had given him 'the talk' once they were home. She didn't approve of Ana, just like she hadn't approved of any of Nick's girlfriends. So Nick did what he always did .... he ignored her. The rest of the family adored Ana, and that was enough for him. He even thought Aaron had developed a little crush on her. Maybe there was some Angel in that boy after all?

Nick got up from his desk and walked into the living room. Ana was in the kitchen, searching through

the cabinets for something to fix for dinner. "How's the queen?" she asked. Nick smiled, "She's fine. Said to tell you hi and that she misses us." "I miss her too," Ana said, leaning against the counter, "She's the closest thing I have to a mom now." Nick nodded, walking over and taking her in his arms, kissing her neck. He looked outside to see the sun setting. "I'm gonna go out and watch, you coming?" he asked, already heading to the patio doors. "Yeah, let me get us something to drink first," she replied.

Nick left the house and walked down to his private beach. He sat down and buried his toes in the warm sand. He stared off into the distant colors, entranced at how they reflected in the water. He smiled as a gentle breeze touched him. He barely noticed when Ana sat down next to him, absently taking the glass she handed him. "What is it?" she asked, seeing the look on his face. He took a deep breath and shook his head, "All my life I searched for where I fit. Where I thought I belonged. I just realized something." "What's that?" Ana asked. He glanced at her, "Everything I went through, all the searching. It led me here." Ana stared at him for a moment, not sure she understood. Nick sat his drink down and leaned back on his elbows, staring at the sky. The first stars were peeking through the darkness. "I used to stare at these stars every night, wishing for a place that I could call mine. A place where I wouldn't be made fun of for things I did naturally. Then when I thought I found that place, it wasn't what I wished for. There I got made fun of for things that were the norm here," he laughed, "I just figured out that I'm not going to truly belong anywhere. No matter where I go, I will always be different. But now I see it as a good thing. No longer am I searching for something I already have." "So what is it you have?" she asked. He looked at her, "A home. Here I fit, and here I belong .. on Earth, with you."

Ana smiled at him, leaning down and kissing him. Nick gently pulled her down so she was laying next to him. They both stared up at the stars. Watching as each one appeared. Soon the sky was full of them. Ana reached over and took his hand, interlacing their fingers. He squeezed her hand. He let out a sigh of contentment and happiness. He was home .... and he had found where he belonged.

THE END