

# HARLEY AUSTIN

A book cover featuring a muscular man and a woman in a futuristic city setting. The man is shirtless, showing his well-defined muscles, and is wearing dark jeans. He has a beard and is looking directly at the camera. The woman is wearing a black, off-the-shoulder, form-fitting dress and has long, wavy brown hair. She is looking slightly away from the camera. The background is a dark, blue-toned cityscape with glowing lines and structures, suggesting a high-tech or cyberpunk environment. There are small, glowing yellow particles scattered throughout the scene.

BOOK FIVE

# INTERRA

A WAKENED SERIES



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## INTERRA

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# HARLEY AUSTIN'S

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AWAKENED SERIES

BOOK FIVE

# INTERRA

HARLEY AUSTIN

HARLEY AUSTIN PUBLISHING

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*For my beautiful angel;  
the love of my life and the very best friend  
anyone could ever hope to have.*





INTERRA



# PROLOGUE

She tossed and turned beneath the sheets in a kind of uneasy slumber; her long, dark hair spilling over her pillow while deep dreams were filling her mind. It was him. Again. She drifted behind him, as if flying like a ghost above and all around him as sand and dust lifted from the pavement into a long trailing cloud behind the beefy street machine that sped like a bat out of hell over the empty desert highway.

The helmetless rider's features were shielded by a full-face sun-mask; his thick wavy dark hair billowed and whipped in the fast hot wind that blew past him. Wrapped in dark leather, riding gloves, and boots, his thick muscular build all but lay over the top of the heavy bike's saddle; his hands and feet instinctively moving clutch, throttle, and gear levers into an

overdrive, kicking the powerful steel steed to well beyond one-fifty.

Rocketing past a checkpoint, two Lamborghini patrol cars gave chase, their lights and sirens a futile gesture to the rider now already a half-mile ahead of them and entering the glittering desert city.

Barely slowing to weave and lean the big bike in and out of the light freeway traffic, a posse of patrol cars now gave chase in the distance, all of them hopelessly outdistanced by the dark rider and his sleek machine.

Ahead, a barricade of patrol cars snarled traffic to a standstill, blocking every exit. With deft agility, the rider sped the bike even faster toward the stopped traffic. He lifted the front wheel from the pavement and with a kick of his heel on a lever, the big bike blasted from the pavement, jumping the concrete railing of the elevated freeway. Arab officers watched, stunned, as rider and cycle became wholly airborne, as if soaring above them on wings. Veering away from the elevated freeway, their mouths gaped in disbelief as the rider and machine then touched down onto the side road fifty feet below, and powered off into thicker city traffic.

Weaving quickly past cars and people, the rider approached the tallest of the buildings in the city. Dozens of military vehicles surrounded the *Burj Khalifa*, their mere presence an assumed deterrent to anyone who might try to approach the mammoth skyscraper unwelcomed. Thickly swarming the main entrances of the building, the soldiers had left the other sides of the structure all but unguarded. The rider ignored their fortifications and sped the bike to an unprotected side of the building.

Already standing in the saddle, he leapt from the metal machine, launching himself skyward. The heavy bike skidded rider-less by itself to a fine stop, its dual engines still purring. But the eyes of the soldiers were not on the bike, but rather on

the rider now shooting skyward, mere feet from the sunlit glass, as if in flight, like some leather-clad Superman.

Security had barely been warned when the glass wall of the opulent residence suddenly burst into shards. A hot wind now rushed into the fine décor of the home accompanied by a levitating black leather-clad rider who blew quickly into the main living area, two heavy pistols already in his hands. Automatic gunfire from several well-dressed security officers rang out within the shattered residence, the still levitating rider and his leather taking scores of rounds of hot lead. The guards emptied their magazines into the darkly-dressed intruder who now dropped to the floor as he dodged, crouched, and returned fire with his own weapons. The muzzle of the rider's heavy-barreled pistols flashed with an unworldly 'thume', ejecting visible balls of hot plasma that streaked toward their targets with inhuman and deadly accuracy knocking the men off their feet, over furniture and against marbled-tiled walls. The officers' bullet-proof clothing offered no protection against the veritable rain of white-hot plasma rounds filling the air from the rider's dual-fisted pistols.

Within seconds, thirty men lay dead and dying as the rider moved quickly past the carnage and deeper into the lavish residence.

More security appeared from floors both above and below. But they were no longer the typical human guards; and their weapons no longer conventional. Bright ionic plasma blasts erupted from pistols as halfblood security poured into the residence. The rider's guns blazed again as well. But the demigods were only being slowed by the rider's weapons, not killed. With a skilled gentle jerk of his pistols' grips, the weapons seemed to shift and change, as if transforming into new, heavier configurations.

The rider took several of the ionic hits, struck squarely by the blasts of the new weapons wielded by demigods. His leather jacket was now frayed under the onslaught of ionic weaponry, but the black body-hugging armor beneath his pants and jacket all but ignored the hot plasma blasts.

Returning fire, new streaks of amber now shot from his transformed pistols, leaving nothing and no one to argue with. The halfblood targets unlucky enough to feel the heat of the new amber blaze suddenly burst into a brief shower of atomic light, and quickly disintegrated out of existence.

In another few moments, the room was emptied of more than a hundred of its once powerful demigod guards.

Approaching a smooth titanium door, the rider shed what remained of his smoldering leather jacket. His weapons holstered, his eyes suddenly blazed white with fire; his mind focused and taking hold of the massive door. Aided by unseen telekinetic energies, the massive door jolted away from its thick moorings, the titanium metal seals rending and shattering like pottery as the massive door tore away and floated from the opening as if it were a twenty-ton balloon. Suddenly released, the full weight of the vault door crashed through the unreinforced part of the building's ornate floor and continued its calamitous descent down deeper into the building.

The rider stepped into the ultra-secured area of the residence. Its accommodations were just as opulent as the rest of the home. Inside the vault, another twenty demigods dressed in red guarded an older looking man. Their ionic weapons were drawn and readied, but no one fired.

The thickly muscled rider stood ominously just inside the wreckage of the doorway, his weapons now holstered, his arms folded, his gaze fixed on the older man standing just behind the guards. The rider spoke, finally, from behind his face's sun shield.

"Mithras." The rider seemed to glare from behind the mask.

"You're too late, Dark!" the old man announced. "My armies are already on the move."

"Do tell."

"In another few weeks, the gods will be no more. We've *already* won."

"That's supposed to make me happy, how?"

The old man stepped forward, in-front of his elite red guard. "Join us, Dark!" The old god's charisma was convincing. "The Sentinels are weak. With you by my side, leading the Dark Clan, we can crush the prophecies. They are already broken."

"I'm not interested in the prophecies."

"I know you're not. Even more reason to join me."

"I came for the vessel, Mithras. I'm putting an end to your plasma toys. Give me the location of the vessel and I'll let you live." He took a step forward.

The old god held out his hand. "Not so fast. I'm not living out the rest of my days in some Dominion prison cell. Let me go, and I'll give you the location of the vessel."

"No deal. I'll find it myself. You're under arrest."

The guards behind the old god leveled their weapons.

"You're making a huge mistake, Dark! We will crush the Dominion and the Dark Clan. You cannot escape the Wraith!"

"The Wraith? Get serious."

"They are more than you know. You don't know who you're dealing with now!"

"Yea, and neither do you." The rider removed his face shield.

"RION." The old god's eyes drew wide with surprise, but then narrowed. "I should have known. Only you would pull a stunt so brash—and so foolish."

"The game's over, Mithras. Tell me where the vessel is and you can go free."

The old god fumed. There was no way out of this now. "You were right about one thing, Rion. The game *is* over. And you've lost." He stepped forward. Suddenly a plasma blast hit the old god in the back, an then another, and another. It didn't take Rion but a spit second to realize that the red guards were not loyal to Mithras, but to someone else—the Wraith. Rion's mind quickly found the minds of the guards and with a psionic jolt, all of them sank into unconsciousness, their eyes stunned wide open.

Rion sank quickly to his knees where the old god had fallen, lifting his shoulders into his lap. "Mithras!"

The once royal god had never felt such pain before in his life. He was glad to know it would not last long. He coughed, blood spattering Rion's armor.

"I can get you to—"

"Too—late. For me, Rion." The god weakly gripped his arm. "Run! My boy—"

"Run? From who?"

"He's mad. His armies—vast." The old god sputtered from his wounds. "RUN! Hide. Before—"

"MITHRAS! The vessel, where is it?"

But the old god just stared blankly into Rion's eyes, unmoving.

Rion grimaced, turning his head to look away. He had always heard so many things about the ancient warrior god. And now Mithras was gone. Although they were bitter enemies, right now, Rion felt sorry for the Seven and for the old god; a deep sadness.

She somehow felt the rider's pain and grief for the old man as she hovered like a spirit over them. She watched him carefully lay the old man gently onto the polished stone floor,



then watched him stand and look directly at her. His face was saddened but yet, filled with resolve. He walked up to her and then past her as if not seeing her at all.

Her eyes suddenly opened as she jerked wide awake within the darkened dorm room. She lifted her arm to her head in a deep sigh. She could feel her heart beating rapidly in her chest, too rapidly for sleep. She looked at the clock. Only 3:39 AM. At least she didn't have school tomorrow. How many of these dreams was she going to have? And who was the guy in black? *Rion*. She had seen him, over and over in these vivid dreams, but this was the first time she had heard his name; at least that she could remember. She wondered now who he was. The dreams felt so real. Could he be real? Or was he just a figment of her overly creative imagination?

Pressing her thighs together while rocking her hips under the sheets she didn't have to wonder about the effect these dreams of him were having on her. The dreams always ended this way. She smoothed her hand over the top of her soft panties. The last dream, only a couple of days ago had left her panties not just damp, but wet with desire. Somehow, this figment of her imagination drew up real feelings within her.

She stretched under the covers, flattened her fingers over her panties to soothe her aroused feelings, and then dozed restlessly back to sleep.

# 1

**S**ea World. Alone or with friends, it was one of Serena's favorite places to get away, get some exercise, gaze into the aquariums, and take in a few fast rides. For the past couple of years she had taken advantage of the student passes the university offered. Winter was also the perfect time of year; still very warm but not too hot, and the crowds were less than half of what they would be in the summer. Serena liked watching the people stroll through the park's tree-covered paths on their way to wherever the next attraction would lead them.

Several friends were taking in a show Serena had seen so often she had grown bored of it. It was a perfect day to just sit on a shaded bench and watch the people as they passed by; and it was much more entertaining than watching animals jump through hoops in a darkened theater.

Serena wasn't the only one in the park watching the people. While she scanned the other benches across the courtyard she could see others, young people and older couples, and singles like herself, doing the same. It was just as interesting watching the watchers.

She kept her gaze moving, here and there, but for the third time in a minute her eyes returned to a guy standing on the opposite side of the courtyard. Leaning against a shade tree he was obviously one of the many other people watchers.

*Wow.* She couldn't help being a little captivated, at least with how he looked. He was taller than most, with a fit muscular build, dark hair in a nice cut, and dressed in a snug, almost black workout shirt that hugged every huge muscle he had. She usually didn't go for the gym-rats; all of those she had dated in the past were only interested in one thing besides barbells. None of them had lasted beyond the first date.

Few guys actually appreciated Serena for her mind and her talents. She loved music. Since the age of five she had been a natural at playing the piano and a few other instruments as well. Now a semi-accomplished composer, her commercial jingles were running on radio and television. People really seemed to like her music, even other musicians appreciated her talents. But other musicians also generally turned out to be artsy narcissistic disasters when it came to relationships. She avoided dating other musicians like the plague.

She found herself gazing at the tall built guy again. This time her eyes moved along his legs. He had nicely defined, powerful-looking thighs, but not totally out of proportion like the oversized body builders she had seen on the cover of magazines. He wore the same color of dark loose running shorts that showed off his body and did a not so good job of immodestly hiding his indecently sized packaging beneath them.

*Jeeze, Serena, take a picture*, she mocked herself. But, it wasn't a bad idea. The camera on her phone would work, she just needed to be casual about it. But just as she was lifting her phone into position, several Asian teens flocked around the object of her fascination and began offering to have him take *their* pictures.

Serena sighed, rolled her eyes, and left the bench in search of other interesting people to watch.

*"What's she doing now?"* the balding overweight man dressed in shorts and a loud tourist button down listened over the tiny earpiece that no one noticed he was wearing. The tall and very shapely brunette walked right past him, close enough for him to smell her perfume, his eyes fixed on her well-curved ass filling out her pink khaki-looking short-shorts. He frowned, almost biting his lip.

*"She's heading toward the front of the park."* He appeared to say to himself in a normal voice.

*"Is she leaving?"*

*"How the hell should I know? She looks bored."*

*"Keep following her. We don't want to lose her."*

*"Yea, like that's gonna happen."* He grumbled, stuffing a magazine under his arm while professionally keeping his distance and a close eye on the ass of the well-curved co-ed.

\* \* \* \* \*

This was now the third show Serena had passed on watching with her friends. Was she just not into the park today? It was such a beautiful day. Why sit under an awning on a hard bleacher when one could be taking in the sun and warm outdoor air?

Lunch with her friends felt typical and uninteresting. Clearly, Serena was distracted today. The image of that guy

leaning against the tree earlier in the day returned to her thoughts, again. *Wow, who looks like that?*

"Earth to Serena ..."

"Huh?" Hearing her name popped her mind out of the daydream she had been immersed in.

"Girl, what is up with you today?" Marci prodded.

"I know exactly what's up," Celeste quipped in her full 'New Yorican' accent and giving Serena 'the look'. "It's written all over your face."

The rest of the girls at the table turned their attention to Celeste, including Serena. It would be nice if *someone* knew why she was being so absent minded today.

"You're scoping out some guy. I've seen *that* look before."

"Really?" Marci chimed in, now looking at Serena, "What's he look like?"

"What?" Serena defended. "I'm not—"

"Are." Celeste countered.

"Please, I'm just ..." Serena, paused.

"Just what?" now even the usually quiet Jasmine got into the conversation.

Did Celeste have a point? Serena's thoughts had been wandering all over the memory of that guy standing by the tree. There was something familiar about him. She couldn't quite put her finger on it. Then she smiled. "Alright. Maybe I am. I did see a guy earlier this morning. But ..." she shook her head.

"Uh-huh," Celeste continued to prod with her typical hint of sarcasm.

"But what—?" Marci's curiosity shifted into overdrive. "C'mon, Serena, we see guys all the time. But this one's put you into la-la land. Was he cute?"

Serena nodded. "And built."

"Gym rat." Kelly thumped her opinion into the conversation like she was the be-all-end-all authority on men.

The truth was Kelly seldom even dated. "We've all been there, done that," she finished.

Serena managed an agreeable smile.

"So where did you see him? What was he doing?" Celeste ignored Kelly's non-contribution to the conversation. Men were *always* of interest to Celeste.

"Oh, same as me; just watching people."

"Did he see *you*?" Marci asked.

"I don't think so. He got mobbed by a tourist group wanting a photo op."

"Mobbed, huh? Must have been *really* nice looking for that to happen." Celeste munched a French fry.

"Okay, let's talk scales here, Serena," Jasmine said. "One to ten ..."

"Oh, I don't know." Serena protested, "I just saw him briefly from across the courtyard."

Jasmine broadcast a perturbed look. "Serena, one to ten," she repeated.

Serena thought for a moment reviewing the memory of the mystery guy. She wanted to just say ten, but that might make her look immature and just over the-top. Celeste gave tens all the time and it really diluted the whole man-scale thing. Still, she couldn't get the guy out of her mind.

"Probably a nine."

Jasmine's eyebrow lifted. Marci's mouth fell open. Celeste choked on her straw while Kelly guffawed. Serena stared at the surprise of everyone at the table.

"What?"

"Nine!?" Celeste was the first to actually get words out. "Girl, you barely ever get above six! *Nine!*?"

Serena nodded, "Yea. Nine." She repeated.

"Man, I have got to see *this* guy." Marci's drink straw was still in her mouth.

"Get over it, he's probably already gone. You'll never find him in these crowds," Kelly dulled.

"Miss Killjoy strikes again," Celeste frowned at her friend.

"No, Kelly's probably right," Serena sighed out loud. "This park is huge. I probably won't see him again."

There was a lot of truth to what Serena and Kelly had said. They had played this game before. Outside of literally stalking someone, the chances of finding the same cute guy again after losing him in the park were slim to none.

Still, Serena's "nine" guy completely energized their lunch conversation with new intrigue.

"Did you lose her?" Rion heard in his mind over the continuum.

"Sev, really? Do you know who you're talking to?" he thought back to Sevrin. Sevrin felt his annoyance.

"Yes. I do know who I'm talking to. I just wanted to make sure."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Rion frowned. "I can feel her, easily. She's having lunch with her friends in the next building."

"What does she feel like?"

"She's—bright. Like the others."

"Like the others? You hesitated for a moment."

"So?"

"Why did you hesitate?"

"Why does this feel like an interrogation?"

"Is she cute?"

"I can't *feel* cute."

"That's not what Elle says."

Rion rolled his eyes. Sevrin was way too intrigued by the whole empathy thing of the newbloods.

"Kind of."

"Kind of what?"

"Okay. Yes. She's cute." Rion huffed. Although he couldn't physically see her where she was with her friends in the restaurant they'd ended up within, his feelings were all over within her. The fact was, the woman wasn't just cute, she was beautiful; like no one Rion had ever seen or felt before in his life. Francesca was beautiful, but she felt nothing like this to him.

*"Holy shit!"* the overweight agent dressed in loud colors heard in his headset, sitting by himself, five tables away from the girls.

"We're not supposed to be using that kind of language over the wireless," he droned quietly, as if speaking into nothing, while surfing his phone.

*"Oh, yea? Well, facial recognition just told us you're not alone, hot shot."*

"Let me guess—you spotted Seven agents. How'd they get here so fast?"

*"Worse."*

"What could be worse than those U.N. bozos? Wait—don't tell me you picked up some Dominion goons?"

*"Guess again—"*

*"Oh shit. Not one of the gods—"*

*"Oh, you're quick, Socrates. Not one of the gods, the god. Rion Steele, nimrod."*

"Oh, fuck. Seriously?" the tourist-looking agent got up from his table, his meal only half finished.

*"Looks like he's tailing her too."*

"We won't be able to pick her up then. Dammit." The agent fumed to himself, leaving the restaurant.

*"What's the matter, Twinkle Toes, don't want to go head to head with Zeus?"*

*"Yea. Right. What's Frank want us to do then?"*



*"Lay low. Just keep tailing her. We don't want to set off their danger senses."*

"Got it. I'll be keeping my distance. Trust me."

\* \* \* \* \*

The afternoon was growing late. As expected, neither Serena nor her friends ever saw her mystery guy the rest of the day. Feeling disappointed, Serena ducked into a small shop to pick up a couple of little souvenirs for her younger brother and sister. With the holidays just weeks away, perhaps they would enjoy something a bit different.

Serena found some inexpensive trinkets, some small stuffed toys, and a couple of t-shirts. She looked around the small shop for the checkout counter when she had a sudden rush of feeling, like the air had just begun to feel different; more charged somehow. Glancing discretely behind her, she suddenly saw her mystery guy again! Serena did a double-take just to be sure. It was him! He was walking on the path just outside one of the exits of the store.

Indecision tore at her. Something inside her really wanted to strike up a conversation with him, somehow, but what would she say? As a Southern girl, she wasn't the type to just approach random strangers.

Still deep in indecision, Serena set down the souvenirs and walked out the other side of the shop, her thoughts swirling like a nervous tempest for some kind of introduction. What would she say? Turning the corner she literally ran right into him.

"Oh! Oh—I'm so—sorry," she apologized, nearly tripping while backing away, but his hands were already gently on her arms, steadying her. She hadn't planned this, but—

"No, no, my fault. I'm sorry," he offered taking a step back himself, and then he paused. "You ah—" Rion suddenly

fumbled what he was about to say as he now stood face to face with her. *Gods she was beautiful!* He had been following her at a distance all day, but being this close to her, the soft angles of her face, how she made him suddenly feel when they touched. Her attraction was suddenly overwhelming. He tried to recover quickly. “—you. Ah, wow. Are you okay?”

Serena nodded. “Sure. Yea. Thanks.” She smiled, oddly disappointed about his hands leaving the sides of her arms.

Both seemed to just look at each other for several moments, the odd feeling of intense attraction palpable within each of them. Rion had intended to just follow her at a closer distance; agents were lurking all over inside the park now. But now that they’d seen each other, felt each other, he instinctively decided to take a very different tack than just passive observation.

“You’re that girl—the one I saw sitting on the bench this morning. What a surprise.”

Serena’s mystery guy had the strangest accent, cultured, well spoken, she had never heard it before.

“You noticed me?” Serena’s heart skipped a beat, excitement sweeping through her.

“You’re kidding, right? Who wouldn’t notice you?” He offered her a beautiful pearly-white handsome smile with amazing dimples.

Serena was smitten by the simple compliment. The fact was, she was smitten by everything about the super-fit guy. Everything about him just seemed so—exceptional.

“You’re, ah, not exactly unnoticeable either,” she quickly returned, her eyes unable to keep from doing a quick dance up and down his sculpted body.

He smiled and she blushed slightly. *I did not just say that!* she mentally kicked herself.

“I think I took a dozen photos of those tourist girls and when I was done you’d already left. Very disappointing.” His dimples flashed. “My name is Rion, by the way.”

"Rion—" she repeated. And then blinked. A wave of déjà vu numbed her mind for a moment. She stumbled in her thoughts as the memory of the vivid dreams bolted through her. "Rion." She repeated again more softly. "Oh. Ah—I'm—Serena."

Rion could feel her sudden odd sense of emotion.

"Are you okay?"

"Ah, yea. Fine. Just—I can't believe—" She paused looking at him in his fine Ray Bans. It *was* him. The same guy from her dreams. "You, have a nice name, Rion." Her thoughts continued to race. *What is up with this? He's real?! I am not psychic!* She continued to stumble in her thoughts while looking at him.

"You have a beautiful name as well, Serena." There wasn't anything that *wasn't* beautiful about this girl. *Dammit, these Invicti were killer!* Rion suddenly knew exactly what Elle had been talking about now. He also realized he was still standing in her way. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be keeping you from anything." He stepped to one side.

"Hmm, no, no, not at all. In fact, I was hoping I'd run into you again, just, not literally." The honesty mixed with some of her mirth felt good. Why not tell him she had been hoping to run into him? Besides, she had gotten got him to smile those dimples at her again.

Although Rion had been following her, he hadn't actually planned on meeting her. She felt like Invicti. Because of that, he had been deliberately trying to keep his distance. Distracted in his thoughts over the continuum with Sevrin, the unexpected had now happened. Rion found himself face-to-face with the blossoming newblood.

Not only was she beautiful, she was also witty. Still, Invicti or not, Rion had his rules about meeting and getting to know people, especially women. But everything about Serena had

really caught his attention. Maybe it was fate, maybe it was just dumb luck that he had run into her like he had.

Rion shattered a cardinal rule.

"I don't suppose you would you be interested in a walk around the lake?" he invited.

Serena's heart fluttered from the unexpected invitation. "Ah, sure, why not?" Serena's voice was warm, a slight Texan accent charming its way into Rion's ears.

The tall Rion seemed only a touch shorter than her six-foot-four brother. Rion looked even more incredible up close where she could see every muscled curve and ripple of him. *Well, almost every curve ...* she entertained the saucy thought briefly looking over his well-filled-out running shorts again.

His skin was slightly tanned, and his limbs were hair-free. He moved effortlessly with an odd poise that was smooth; it was like he knew how to move, not just walk.

"So what brings Rion to Sea World?" she asked him brightly as they began walking toward the lake boardwalk.

"Call it an 'imposed' vacation. My family tells me I work too much, so they make me take a few days off now and then. What about you?"

"I come here a lot with my friends, or sometimes just by myself to watch people and get away from classes."

"So you're in college. Very cool. What are you taking, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Music, architecture, and geology. I graduate in May."

"A musical architect?" he mused.

"I know, right? Actually, I love stone; the solidity, the gorgeous colors and natural patterns. I want to build things with it so people can appreciate how beautiful it is. Music is more like icing on the cake."

"Nice. So, what do you play?"

"Piano, keyboards, the horn," she offered. "What about you; what do you do, besides lift weights?" She teasingly took

hold of his thick bicep with both hands as they walked along, lifting one eyebrow and grinning.

Rion smirked, as susceptible as the next guy to the compliments of a pretty girl. "I don't lift that much anymore. I work in IT, security mostly, basically helping companies keep bad people out of their networks."

"You're a geek?" she smiled. None of the geeks she knew came as well packaged as Rion.

"Yes, Serena, I'm a geek," he admitted. Rion chuckled at the thought; he wasn't sure if anyone had ever actually called him that before.

"Don't tell me you play video games, please."

"No, I don't play video games," he assured. "I also don't watch TV, I usually don't watch sports, I pay my bills, I don't drink or do drugs, I'm vegan, and single. Any other questions?" His dimples were incredibly disarming.

"Yes," Serena began with a wry smile, not skipping a beat within the conversation, "how do you stay single?"

He grinned. "I was about to ask you the same question."

Even though Serena had caught Rion's gifted attention with her aura, Rion was pretty sure that even without his empathic senses, she had have easily grabbed his attention. The length of her thick dark brown hair flowed beautifully around her shoulders and down her back. Serena's long legs and perfect curves were accentuated by snug pink khaki shorts and a fitted polo top. The girl knew how to tastefully dress her amazing curves.

"What makes you think I'm single?" Serena flirted, still smiling.

"Well, I'm just guessing," Rion admitted, "but you're not wearing a ring."

"No, I'm not," she offered in her finest Texas charm. Serena noticed the wide gold inlaid band around his finger. "Your ring looks nice though."

Rion lifted his right hand, "Thanks. It's kind of an old family heirloom."

"So do you have family here in San Antonio?" Serena probed, wanting to keep the conversation going as she walked beside him, a little too closely, making sure she touched him as they walked. Rion picked up on the affection. He returned her play, brushing his arm against hers now and then as they walked.

"No, the company just keeps an apartment here that I work from off and on. My family is sort of spread out all over these days."

"I know *that* feeling."

"We've ID'ed the girl."

"And?" the portly agent in tourist disguise said to no one obvious as he got a dirty look from a middle-aged woman passing by with several lively kids in tow.

"Serena Erickson. She's a student at Trinity."

"Beautiful." He watched the two of them walking from across the lake, adjusting a small set of binoculars as he zoomed in on Serena's shapely ass. "How come we didn't have women like this at Baylor?"

"We did. But they only came out at night when the moon was full. What are they doing?"

"Talking. His back is to me, I can't see his lips, but she's telling him about her classes, music classes. It's nothing. Chit-chat."

"Frank wants us to pull back now. We know who she is. Get out of there. We'll have to bag her later."

"I thought you wanted me to bring her in?"

"Too risky with Steele hanging around, dip-weed. Besides, we're pretty sure we're not the only one's watching her. Get the hell out of there if you know what's good for you."

"Yea, yea. I'm leaving."

Their walk around the lake was over far too soon. They arrived back at the little souvenir shop as Serena's friends were just coming out of the theater the shop was attached to. Serena introduced Rion to Kelly, Jasmine, Marci and Celeste.

Serena's awestruck quartette of friends were having difficulty simply introducing themselves. *Was this guy for real?!*

Rion's *modus operandi* should have been to just wave goodbye to all of them, but, he couldn't just leave a newblood Invicti alone—the girl was really bright to his senses. The look on Serena's face and her own feelings told him she wasn't exactly wanting him to leave either—ever. He needed a way to get her alone again, somehow. She needed to know who she was.

Rion turned to Serena. "Tell me you're not leaving so soon?"

"We have classes tomorrow," Marci frowned.

"All of us came with Serena," Kelly offered. "We have to leave with her."

"I understand." Rion didn't hide his disappointment. Still, he wasn't about to just let her leave alone with the possibility of someone else discovering her.

Serena seemed to sense Rion's disappointment and even reticence. She had barely spent half an hour with Rion and now Kelly evidently had it in her mind to ruin any time she might have left with him. "Give us a minute, guys. We'll meet you by the entrance."

Rion and Serena watched the girls walk off toward the front of the park. "I'm sorry, Rion. Kelly can be a bit abrasive. She means well."

"It's okay," he smiled, knowing he had have at least a few more minutes alone with Serena. They walked slowly toward the entrance, much more closely together than when they had walked around the lake. Rion's hand found Serena's and they

locked fingers as they walked. The feeling she gave him as they held hands moved Heaven and Earth within him.

"I don't suppose you'll be coming back here any time soon?" Rion asked, a hopeful tone in his voice.

"I can," Serena offered. "Are you asking me out?" she smiled, hopeful that that was what he had in mind.

"Ah, well, I guess I am. Although, maybe a theme park you visit often isn't the best for a first date."

"I can be flexible," she assured.

"How about dinner tomorrow night?"

"*Tomorrow* night?" Serena smiled. "You don't let any grass grow under your feet, do you?"

"Not with someone as beautiful as you."

Serena blushed a smile.

"I know a great restaurant downtown, right on the River Walk. *La Paris*." Rion spoke the name of the restaurant with a perfect French accent. "My apartment is in the same building, actually."

"*La Paris*?" Serena had only been there once. The fashionable five-star was expensive and high-class. The all-vegan menu drew crowds from as far away as Houston and Austin. "You live downtown?"

Rion nodded.

Serena was totally intrigued now. The Pierson Tower was new and not a cheap place to live. Serena was quickly realizing that Rion wasn't exactly a poor college student.

"Alright, Superman, you've got yourself a date."

"Superman?" Rion smirked at the nickname.

Serena smiled wryly as the two exchanged phone numbers.

"Serena—" he began, his eyes meeting hers. "I don't suppose you could do me a favor—make me a promise, actually?" There was a deep sincerity in his tone and a feeling that moved through her that she couldn't explain. Like this was really important to him somehow.



"What is it?"

She watched him remove his ring, then place it into her hand and close her fingers around it.

"What are you doing?" she asked, giving him a curious look.

"I want you to keep this with you."

"Your family ring?"

"I know, it sounds a little strange, but—it's kind of an odd custom my family has had for a long time, when we meet someone new."

Serena opened her hand and slipped the way to large band over her finger. Both chuckled.

"I know it's not your size, but, maybe you could put it on a chain; wear it around your neck. For me. Please?"

His piercing blues met her eyes. Serena completely melted like a puddle with his hands holding hers. She was intrigued by the touching gesture. The gold band was heavy and felt really valuable. "Rion, I—I just met you, I can't take gifts like this."

"Then it's not a gift. Just think of it as something to keep me in your thoughts and feelings." He smiled. "You can give it back later."

She nodded.

"It's really valuable. Try not to wear it out in the open where others can see it. Keep it against your skin."

"Okay." She smiled at the odd romantic gesture. "Anything else I need to remember?" They began walking now toward her friends who'd gathered at the front entrance, Rion's fingers once again locked in hers.

"Yea. Just one. Whatever you do. Serena, please—don't take it off. Ever."

"Ever?" She smiled.

He stopped walking, his eyes meeting hers again. It was as if she could somehow feel the seriousness of his feelings deep

within herself for a brief moment as his hand briefly touched the side of her face.

“Ever.”

Momentarily stunned by the sudden rush of feeling and emotion, all Serena could do was nod.

Rion said good-bye to all of them and then watched them disappear into the parking lot with Serena grabbing more than a few backward glances. Soon they were out of sight.

*Wow.* He sighed heavily to himself disappearing back into the park. The day had been a whirlwind of surprise. He had stumbled upon a nascent newblood—someone he was all but sure could be Invicti. Beyond that, the woman was seriously hot. But there was something more about her, something he just couldn’t put his finger on. It was like she already knew him, knew his name somehow. He needed to see her again. He shook his head. *Rion, I so hope you are not going to regret this.*

## 2

**Y**ou're late, Harlan." Frank glared.  
"Yea, well, this time I have a good reason."  
"I don't want to hear it," the DHS Secretary  
grated.  
"I do," Diane quipped. "Where did you  
end up?"

The president looked with a raised eyebrow at the two of his inner circle as Harlan sat down next to Diane and across from Frank. "What are you two up to?"

"A Masonic Temple, of all places," Harlan answered Diane's original question.

"A what?" Frank raised an eyebrow. That would be the last place he'd expect someone with Harlan's inspiring intellect to be.

"The Scottish Rite Masonic Temple, down on 16th."

"I know where it is. What were you doing down there."

"Snooping," Diane chimed in.

Harlan nodded.

"Don't tell me you're still on this *Books of God* kick?"

"*Books of the Gods*, Frank," Diane corrected—again. She looked at Harlan. "Did you find the pages?"

"Yea, but their librarian wouldn't let me 'check them out', so to speak. And they won't allow photocopies. I did grab a few pictures with my phone, though."

"What are you two after?" the president asked.

"We're on a treasure hunt, Brett, to find as many extant pages as possible of the Books of the Gods."

"And?"

"So I found something in one of the older fragments we dug up in Belize."

"Belize?" Frank re-entered the conversation. "You're talking about the Mayans then?"

The President's interest was suddenly taking root in the conversation as he listened to his team banter back and forth.

"We are," Harlan nodded.

"So what was so interesting about the Belize fragments?" Frank was still half scoffing and also interested at the same time.

"Not much, other than the fact that it mentions the *cities* of the gods."

"Cities?" Frank's gaze shot between all of them.

"So these gods, the Ra," Harlan continued, "at one time there were like millions and millions of them, all over the world. We really thought they were just in one place, in and around the Middle East."

"Right," Frank nodded, "the cradle of civilization. That area, it's called the Levant."

"You're only getting part of the story, Frank," Diane corrected. "There isn't just *one* cradle of civilization, there's like four or five, or six or seven of them, depending on who you talk to."

Frank nodded. He was familiar with the debate.

The president, however, was not. "Really—?" he leaned forward to hear more.

"One of these cities of the gods was evidently located in or around the Nile River delta. Another was somewhere along the Yellow River in China. And another, was somewhere around Mesoamerica, in what is now modern Belize."

"Wait a minute," Frank was connecting the dots. "All of the areas you're talking about were sites of some of the more advanced civilizations, more than two thousand or three thousand years ago."

"Or older, much older," Diane offered.

"Everywhere there's a Ra city talked about with the Belize book fragment, we find what we've been calling an advanced human civilization. They have advanced agriculture and farms, advanced construction, deep knowledge of math, science and astronomy—and massive temples dedicated to the gods."

"So, Diane," the president began, popping a few Nicorette. Normally he would have lit up by now, but Diane had read him the riot act about that months ago. "All of these ancient civilizations, it's like they all died out. Why?"

"They didn't all die out, Brett; only some of them did."

"Still. Why? If you have advanced knowledge like this—"

"We think they were destroyed," Harlan added.

"By who?"

"We're not sure. The fragments don't say. What is clear is that the gods were at war with each other."

"I've heard that," the president nodded. He was pretty sure the Seven were part of these 'gods' in some way and they sure as hell didn't like someone called the Sentinels. "So, what happened to *their* cities? The gods' I mean," the president asked.

"Destroyed, in their war. All of them—" Diane frowned.

"That's too bad," the president grimaced.

"—all but one. Their capital." Her gaze leveled with the others in the room.

"Huh? Are you telling me that there's an entire city of these gods that survived their war?"

"That is what the Belize fragment alludes to. Yes."

"How do you hide an entire city in this day and age?" Frank asked rhetorically.

"Well, if Leavenworth is any indication, you bury it." Diane offered.

"That's not a city, Diane," Frank countered, "it's just an installation. A base of some kind."

"You don't know that," she argued. "We don't know how far that place extends or even what it's connected to."

The president raised his eyebrow at Frank, who was saying nothing. "Harlan, what did you find in the library at the Masonic Temple?"

"Yea, so it was kinda weird. I met with a thirty-third degree Mason by the name of Fergusson Kentigern."

"Because that sounds American, not." The president chuckled at his own joke.

"No, he's not, I could barely understand his English. I flew him in from Scotland, a place called Orkney, in the northern Scottish Isles. He's the foremost authority on the Kirkwall Scroll."

"And that is?"

Frank took over. "We studied the Kirkwall in one of my Hebrew classes. It's basically a floor cloth about twenty feet long and six feet wide. It's a kind of rambling pictorial mish-mash of the history of the Israelites as they entered Egypt and then left to form their own civilization. It has pictures of the Ark of the Covenant, badly written Hebrew along with a bunch of Masonic symbols."

"Israelites? What the hell do the Israelites have to do with Scotland? Or the Masons for that matter?" the president asked.

Frank shrugged. "It's like anything else we've uncovered from the late Middle Ages, seventeen or eighteenth centuries—people creating artifacts and using them in an attempt to add legitimacy to their religious and political causes. The Catholic Church has been doing it for centuries. The Freemasons claim they have history going all the way back to Shem and Noah."

"That's all true, Frank," Diane offered. "There is just one problem with your history here; the Belize book fragment predates the Kirkwall Scroll by nearly two millennia."

"So?"

"So—the paleo-Hebrew inscribed on the Kirkwall matches the same phrases found in the Belize MSS."

"Bullshit." Frank scoffed. "We just discovered that fragment."

"Not bullshit," Harlan defended Diane. "Here, have a look at the pictures I took of the Kirkwall copies they had downtown, and compare them to our page three of the Belize fragment."

Frank took Harlan's phone and swiped through the images. Diane and Harlan along with the president watched him study the images; observing with interest as his eyes drew wider. He pursed his lips, now shaking his head. He handed the phone back to the Chief of Staff.

"Well?" the president asked.

"It's the same writing, Mr. President. But that's not Hebrew. Or even paleo-Hebrew. It's something, but—"

"I'll tell you *exactly* what it is," Diane interrupted. "It's the writing of the Ra. The original language of the gods."

"Diane, do you realize what the hell you're saying here—that the Freemasons built the pyramids. That they learned the language and math and geometry of the gods?"

"I know exactly what I'm saying, Frank. And I'm pretty damn sure at this point that they did."

Frank leaned back in his chair with an exasperated sigh, "Ahh, God. We can't make these kinds of jumps to conclusions, people. I'm a well-studied archeologist with a minor in paleography. We *don't* have enough data."

"Screw the archeology," the president leveled. "We don't have decades to chase this stuff down with scientific methods, Frank. I need answers and I need them yesterday, not tomorrow."

Frank nodded, his lips pursed, frowning.

"So these Masons," the president continued, "They knew the language of the gods?"

"Apparently some of them did. How else would you learn their knowledge?"

The president agreed, nodding. "So this city, the capital of the gods, where was it? Atlantis?"

Frank groaned, rolling his eyes.

Diane ignored him. "The fragment doesn't say. It could be anywhere, but most likely, it was originally in one of the seven cradles of civilization."

"Originally? What does that mean? I thought you said it was still around somewhere?"

"It was moved, apparently. Hidden from humanity and the gods who were attacking them."

"To where?" the president asked rhetorically, his finger thumping his upper lip in thought.

"Mount Olympus, maybe?" Harlan posited.

"Your kindergarten knowledge of Greek mythology is underwhelming, Harlan." Frank shook his head.

"Well, that is where it was, right?"

"Olympus would put the city within close proximity of the Levant, Brett." Diane offered. "Those legends had to come from somewhere."



"I can't believe you people are even seriously talking about this," Frank scoffed, again.

"So where would they move it to, Mr. Harlan?" the president asked.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "I'm just playing our game, you know, tossing out ideas like we always do."

"Olympus was home to the twelve Olympians," Frank began. If they were going to be playing this game again, the group needed a bit more information. "Zeus, Poseidon, Hera, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, and the rest. Each had their own kind of domain on Olympus and they would all meet in a common area to discuss matters."

"Thanks, Frank." The president continued to muse. "So three thousand years ago—or more, the gods uprooted their capital and moved. Where would you go?"

"Someplace quiet. Out of the way, maybe?" Harlan proposed.

"We're at war, remember." Diane chimed in.

"Yea, good point. These gods are pretty tough. I don't see them turning tail and running. That doesn't sound like them to me."

"A fall back plan then?" she offered. "Maybe they were regrouping. Consolidating their forces. They were killing each other off, after all."

"But to where?" Harlan asked.

"These gods, they've always been recluses with us—kind of there but not there, as it were," the president asserted "Three or four thousand years ago, they sort of withdrew from us. Left us alone. Went into hiding. Where would *you* go? Where is as far away from the Levant as you can get?"

"The other side of the world?" Harlan asked. "We weren't really there yet."

"I think that's a good possibility."

"The Americas, probably." Diane agreed. "North. Central. South, maybe?"

"So maybe they came to the Americas?" the president continued.

"Or—" Frank suddenly had an epiphany. "—maybe they were *already* here."

"What?" Diane shot him a glance.

"Don't you get it. They were *fucking* already here!" Frank stood up now, a smile crossing his face. All eyes were now on him. "Oh, Jesus, I don't believe this. All this time it was right in front of our faces."

"What was?" the president asked.

"The home of the gods! It wasn't the Levant at all. It was fucking Mount Olympus."

"You're losing me Frank." The president frowned. "Watch the language."

"Holy shit!" Now Harlan stood up, his eyes focused on the Homeland Security Secretary.

"You're a Northwest boy, Harlan, just like me."

"They're on fucking Mount Olympus," fell out of Harlan's mouth.

"Mount Olympus is in Greece, gentlemen," the president offered.

"No, it's not," Frank corrected. "Mr. President, Diane, where have we been seeing the most activity from the Ra over the past few years, since we've known about them?"

"Seattle." Both said in unison.

"Exactly, the west coast. Some activity in Bethlehem, Michigan, with the Dominion, but for the most part, it's all been centered somewhere in and around the Pacific Northwest.

"First it's that flap with the Levi kid and his wife. Then we have the run-in with the Kir gods."

"So you're saying they were in the Cascades before they moved to the Levant?"

"NO! Dammit, Brett, pull your head out!" Frank was suddenly very animated and a little frustrated at his U-dub college friend. "Right across Puget Sound, are the what mountains—?"

"Oh, God, you're right, the Olympics, the whole *Olympic* peninsula." The president agreed.

"You're not serious—" Diane looked askance at all of them. "There's a Mount Olympus—in the Northwest?"

"Yes!" all three of them said at once. Now the president was on his feet.

"Frank, Harlan, put some resources together and start following up on this. If these Ra do still have a city, I want to know where in the hell they put it."

"Obviously on Mount Olympus," Diane deadpanned. She couldn't believe the guys were even following up on this.

"You don't look convinced, Diane."

"Honestly, Brett. Please. If you're wanting to hide something, the last place you put it is where your enemies will know exactly where to look to find it. It makes no sense."

"Maybe they're not *trying* to hide it?"

"I don't know Washington State geography all that well, but I'm pretty damn sure I'd know if a city of the gods had been parked there. They're hiding."

"Sure, from us. Not from the other gods."

Diane's brow lifted as the rest of the team gathered to leave.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rion stared at the holographic design floating in front of him. He'd been staring at it for hours now. Every time he made a change it wasn't right. He had just reverted for the umpteenth time when Francesca entered the lab, descending

the apparently floating stairs between the six subtly glowing Reflex cores that were deep within the building.

She felt his emotion, then heard him sigh.

"Unfocused. Perhaps you should be reading or taking a break on a beach somewhere."

Rion sighed again. Clearly frustrated. "I took a break all day today, at Sea World. All it did was complicate things even more."

"You are referring to the newblood young woman you met today?"

He frowned at her.

"Interesting." Her feelings were all over his.

"I'm sure you're not talking about my math here."

Francesca looked at the unintelligible grimoire that had been neatly scattered all around the three-dimensional device he was working on.

"You appear to be thinking about her instead of your work?" She broke an imperceptible smile.

Rion sighed. "She's really bright, Francesca."

"You have seen bright newbloods before. This one is different?"

"She's *really* bright."

"An Invicti?" Francesca raised a brow.

Rion nodded, finally taking his attention away from the working model image floating in front of him.

"If that is the case, then you cannot leave her alone. Others are already watching her. As a newblood she's in enough danger—as an Invictus—" She didn't need to finish her thought.

He nodded.

"So why isn't she in Jericho?"

"I can't just kidnap her, Francesca. Jericho's watching her. And I gave her my key."

"I noticed."

"She'll be safe enough."

"But will you be?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"She is quite beautiful." Francesca broke a short smile.

"She's—" Rion stammered.

"Attractive?"

Rion nodded. "A little too—attractive."

"I have not seen these feelings within you before. This is appears to be more than just attraction."

Rion groaned. "I can't be getting involved with someone, Francesca. Not right now. And especially not with a Human."

"Especially? And why is that? Especially?"

"I need to find a Ra. Her culture is completely Human. Those relationships never workout."

"Never?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Mostly never." He corrected himself.

"I believe most of the newbloods have done admirably in acquainting themselves with their Ra heritage."

"I don't have time for a relationship right now." He parried.

"So you are avoiding her?"

"Well, not exactly." He admitted. "I—sort of asked her out. We're meeting for dinner at La Paris tomorrow night."

"And now you are having second thoughts?"

"I guess." Rion looked away from her, pushing the model away from himself.

"Rion, I do not think it is her Human culture that you are most worried about."

"It's just bad timing."

"You seem to be able to make time for whatever it is you want." She folded her arms elegantly, her gaze meeting his.

"She's beautiful, Francesca. I can't stop thinking about her. I can't focus. Our attraction is ridiculous."

"This is what we call a positive problem."

"Everything about her is calling out to be awakened."

"So awaken her."

"It's not that easy. If she really is one of these Invictus, it could be dangerous. You saw what happened with the the last two."

"You are referring to Ian and Beau's awakening."

He nodded.

"I am sure the two of you could find a place to—"

"It's not—just that. It's who I am."

"I see. The last of royal heirs to the legacy of the gods?"

He nodded. "It's my DNA. I can't just give that kind of power to just anyone."

Francesca snickered beautifully.

"What's so funny?"

"Boys."

"I hate it when you call me that. I am over a century you know."

"And you *still* think you have the power to control both Fate and Nature."

"I'm just trying to be careful."

"Such is admirable, Rion."

"But—?" He glowered.

"But what? She is a girl. You are a boy." Francesca smiled wryly, turning away and heading back for the stairs. "Make sure you invite me to the coronation."

Rion groaned. "You are so *not* helping."

"Of course I am."

# 3

**R**ion still hadn't been able to pull himself out of bed even as the clock on his bedside table read 10:08. After working late in the lab, he'd slept in again.

Just like the night before, his thoughts continued to bounce eagerly between the new vessel design enhancements and the new woman who'd suddenly entered his life. Right now, his thoughts were focused on Serena.

He could tell she had kept her promise about keeping his ring with her. Carson's people were keeping an eye on her. It was everything he could do not to just invade her feelings with his own over the continuum. It was enough to just lay within the morning light of his room, feeling her presence, knowing that she was safe.

But even without the key, Serena had managed to insert herself into his thoughts and feelings. She was definitely

goddess material with the way she looked and how she felt to him.

His phone beeped a text. He rolled across the fine sheets and picked it up from the nightstand. Her text read, "Looking forward to dinner.", and was then followed up a smileycon.

Rion grinned as he lay across his bed, tapping out a reply. It was the first time in a long time Rion could remember actually looking forward to something.

Serena finished texting him while Kelly and Celeste looked on in trepidation and fascination, respectively.

"You are so not going through with this date tonight, Serena," Kelly began. "You know absolutely nothing about this guy. He could be an axe murderer for all you know."

Serena frowned. "Please, do you really think I'd have texted Rion if I hadn't checked him out first? I asked Jake to run his number for me last night after we got back from the park. Turns out his phone is registered to an internet security company. He checks out."

"You mean his phone checks out," Kelly corrected.

"I'd like to check *him* out," Celeste chimed in. "Did you see the front of those shorts he was wearing! Oh. My. Gawd."

"I didn't think you and Jake were still talking," Kelly probed, ignoring Celeste.

"We're still friends."

"Just without the benefits," Celeste quipped.

Serena had met Jake while he was in the States on an exchange student program from Tel Aviv. They had dated for almost the entire two years he had been at school; but their relationship had ended abruptly when Serena just couldn't see herself moving to Israel. They stayed in touch on Facebook and she would Skype with him every now and then. They were still good friends; it was great to have someone in her corner as strong and solid as Jake, even though they were no longer



romantically involved. Jake had some family in the IDF and if Serena wanted someone 'checked out', there were few resources on the planet better equipped to do it. She had avoided some real losers recently thanks to Jake and his family's connections.

"Serena, I still can't get over the fact that you're going on a date with such a hottie. It gives me goose bumps just thinking about it. Ask him if he has a twin and I am so in."

"He's a geek," Kelly reminded Celeste. "He's just got good packaging. Take away all the buff and good looks and he's still—a geek. Probably spends hours in front of a computer screen playing War Craft. Boorrring."

"Rion said he doesn't play video games, Kel."

"Sure he doesn't," she snarked. "Hello? He's *in* IT. Geek alert."

"We talked for quite a while at the park. He's got a brain; and a personality. And he can be pretty funny."

"His accent is really strange, Serena," Kelly continued to nag. "That tanned skin of his; he might be Middle-Eastern. A terrorist. You need to be careful."

Celeste ignored her. "You two click, Serena. We all saw you. A walk around the park and already he's holding your hand on the way out? That is so *not* you. And the way you two kept looking at each other. You practically gave yourself whiplash trying to catch glimpses of him walking out of the park. Girl you have got it baaad. Way bad."

Celeste's intuition was turning out to be all too accurate. Serena's thoughts were almost completely preoccupied now with Rion the rest of the day; it was beginning to distract her from her classes. She had never fallen so hard for a guy... and they hadn't even been out on a real date yet!

After classes, and a long run through the trails, Serena relaxed under the hot steamy water in the shower room of her dorm. She thought about removing the heavy ring that she had hung on a fine gold chain around her neck, but then she recalled her promise to Rion. Now the band hung wet and soapy between her very full pert breasts as she considered the odd sensations she seemed to have when it was the closest to her heart. It was as if she could feel Rion; and if she were going to be totally honest with herself, it was the same sensuous sensation she had felt in her dreams.

The truth was, she had taken the ring totally off for a few moments, while changing and dressing. But, it began to feel strange to have it away from her skin, even for the few moments as it lay on the desk in her room. It was like it was calling to her somehow; touching something deep within her. The ring was heavy and there was an inscription on the inside of it; she was pretty sure it was Hebrew. She had tried to Google-translate the inscription but had gotten nowhere with that. Of course, she'd thought about asking Jake ... but she didn't want to find herself subjected to more questions than she could truthfully answer. Jake could be a little jealous sometimes.

# 4

Serena tried to make sure she wasn't late for their dinner date; but traffic downtown was just not cooperating. She was already ten minutes late when she pulled into the building's public parking garage. After only a tiny breakfast, a protein drink for lunch and a long afternoon run, she was famished.

Fortunately, La Paris was on the Walk. She found Rion waiting at an outside table that was right on the water. As their eyes met, he smiled, left his seat, and began walking to her. It was sweet that he didn't just wait for her to get to him.

"Hey!" Serena offered, her sweet Texan accent not at all faint.

"Hello," Rion dimpled, taking in the fetching sight before him. "Serena, you look fantastic." He took a noticeably deep breath.

Surely Rion could not be as nervous as she felt right now. Maybe he was. She was not going to allow him to be nervous

too! Serena took hold of his muscular arm and pulled him close as they started down the Walk back to their table. Her little display of affection melted the ice and she felt Rion relax.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"It was okay. Just classes. How about you?"

"It feels like I'm still on vacation. I got almost nothing done today."

"Really? Why not?"

"Well," he began, helping her with her chair. "I met the most amazing woman at Sea World yesterday. I seemed to be having a really hard time taking my eyes off of her."

Serena smiled at him demurely. "Really."

"Yea," he continued. "She completely preoccupied my thoughts all day. I'm not sure what I'm going to do."

"Well you'll have to tell me about her," Serena insisted, a coy grin curving across her lips. Serena was intrigued. 'Rion really sees me as a *woman*', she thought, 'not just a *girl* in school'. Even as a senior in college none of her other boyfriends had really ever referred to her as a 'woman' before. Serena rather liked being called a woman.

"So, tell me more about this mystery woman of yours," she flirted.

Rion smiled and continued the charade. "I don't know that much about her really, except that she's tall, exceptionally beautiful and she has this really quick wit; very intelligent," he confided.

"Well, she sounds, very ... "

Rion watched her carefully.

"... compelling."

"You are very compelling, Serena," Rion ended the charade with a smile.

"Aw, and I was looking forward to hearing more about your mystery woman."

"I wish I knew more," he smiled. "I guess we're both mysteries to each other at this point."

"Have you really been thinking about me all day?"

"I have. I probably shouldn't admit that. I'm sure on some level that makes me look a bit immature."

"Not really, it's sweet." It would not have been very Southern for Serena to admit to Rion that she had been feeling the same way about him all day as well. She could definitely empathize with his feelings.

A server with a fine French accent introduced himself and then took their drink orders.

"I thought about calling you a few times, just to talk," he admitted.

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't know how busy you'd be today. I didn't want to scare you off thinking I was—you know."

"Stalking me?" she smiled.

"Yea."

"Silly, you should have called me," she chided gently. "Classes were pretty boring today. I would have loved to talk to you."

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind next time," Rion assured her with another of his dimpled smiles. Serena was impressed that Rion was being really careful with her feelings. Most guys wouldn't have even thought twice about ringing her phone off all day.

"So how did music classes go?"

"I'm pretty much finished with those. I'm actually working on a radio jingle for an insurance company at the moment."

"Nice. Have you done many of those?"

"A few. This one makes six."

"Well you must be really talented, then. I'd love to hear some of your work."

"Most guys aren't all that interested in music, unless they're musicians. Do you play?"

"A little now and then," he offered. "I've had lessons and studied some, but it's been a while. I wouldn't exactly say I'm the artistic type when it comes to music though. I'm more the 'geeky' type," he joked.

Serena chuckled. Looking at Rion the way he did, his mannerisms, how he carried himself; he hardly fit the "geek" stereotype. He seemed far too cultured.

She shook her head with a grin.

"What?" he mused.

"You just don't strike me as a 'geek', that's all."

"Don't let this facade fool you," he warned jokingly. "I've been known to be, well, a little 'nerdy' at times. Well, that's what my family tells me, anyway."

"So tell me about your family," she began. "How long have you been in San Antonio?" she asked.

"A few years now. What about you, I'm sure you're not a native here?"

"No, just a student. But I've mostly been raised in the South. I pretty much consider myself a Texas girl, now."

"I like Southern women," he assured her. "All y'all's accents are just killer." His mock masculine Southern drawl was just perfect, drawing an impressed grin from her.

"Wow. That was good. But, you have an interesting accent yourself. Is that natural? I don't think I've ever heard it. Where is your family from?"

"No place you would have ever heard of. My family is spread all over the world these days. I'm sure the mash-up of a bunch of different languages makes me sound like I'm confused."

"No, not at all; it's very unique. So your family is all over the world? Where do your folks live now?"

Rion knew at some point that question would come up and he had tried to prepare himself for it; but it didn't help. A grim pain gripped him. His face fell and he tried to recover as best he could.

Serena saw the sudden fall of Rion's expression. *Oh, no!* she thought as a rush of trepidation warned over her. What had she said?

"They're gone, Serena." he offered, fumbling his recovery, badly.

Serena reached out and touched his hand, "Oh, Rion, I'm sorry. I had no idea."

"No, no, it's fine." The pain Rion still felt over the loss of his parents had a way of popping up at the worst possible moments. He fought back his misting eyes. "They passed away not long ago. I guess in a lot of ways I'm still not quite over it." He finally regained some composure and quickly changed subjects, "So what about your family? Where's home?"

Serena was glad that Rion had decided to move on to something else.

"They're in North Carolina now, Ashville. My dad's job keeps them moving around a lot."

"Really? That's a beautiful area. Do they like it where they are?"

"I think so. But who knows. Next year they could be in Alabama or Montana."

"I know the feeling," Rion commiserated. "I've moved around a lot myself over the years."

"Is that because of work?" Serena asked.

"Partially, I can pretty much work from anywhere. But the company has a rather large presence here in Texas. San Antonio is more or less central to Dallas, Houston and Austin, so it was easier for me to move here for a while."

"So what do you do for them?"

"Network security. It's interesting work," he said wryly, rolling his eyes a little. "If you're a geek."

"Security? Like doing what?"

"Let's just I keep the bad guys from breaking into networks they are not supposed to be in. But, I'm under a security contract; they don't let us talk about the details, unfortunately."

Serena was well familiar with that kind of answer. Jake had been mired in Israeli national security and wasn't able to discuss a lot with her at times either.

"So you're a geek who doesn't play video games—"

"No." He took a drink from his glass.

"So what do you do for fun?"

"I—like to, re-build things." Rion chose his words carefully.

"Like cars?"

"Yea. Sometimes." He nodded. "Usually motorcycles, and—small, vessels. Things like that."

"So you have a boat?" she asked.

He nodded and smiled. "You could call it that. I've more or less rebuilt a few of them from the ground up. I'll have to show you my latest one some time."

Serena wasn't expecting Rion to own a boat. Then again, she should have known that he had to have money. He did live in the tallest building in town after all. She did wonder what kind of boat it might be though, but it would be un-lady-like to ask him how big it was.

"I'd love to see it."

Rion smiled and then noticed the chain around her neck. The thick box-link draped to the top of her cleavage and then disappeared into her shirt, ending in a ring-like bump beneath he could easily empathically feel.



"You put your ring on a chain. It looks nice." The larger chain was a bit thicker than most and a good choice for the heavy ring.

"I did. Thank you. I really like wearing it."

"I like you wearing it, Serena. I hope you don't ever take it off."

"Maybe I have once or twice. I usually wear it all the time though. Is that okay?"

"I—feel better knowing that you have it with you. You should leave it on," he smiled. "I know this sounds dumb, but it gives me a warm feeling—I mean, knowing that you're wearing it." Rion smiled at his little foible.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dinner was perfect. Serena didn't want the evening to end. Apparently, neither did Rion. With the theater not far away, it was close to nine when both found a place in line to get tickets for a movie. They were holding hands, their fingers locked together gently as the line began moving slowly through the corral.

"Hi y'all!" Serena heard a familiar voice from behind her. She turned to see Kelly, Celeste, Marci, and several other girls from her dorm suddenly piling into line behind them. Serena quickly dropped Rion's hand and scowled at the smiling faces of her friends.

"And what are y'all doing here?" She was mostly glaring at Kelly.

"Lighten up, Serena," Celeste started in, "we've all been wanting to see this. Hi Rion." She flirted a smile at him.

Rion smiled back. He leaned in and half whispered into Serena's ear so everyone could hear. "Relax. We're surrounded."

"Evidently," Serena glared half smiling herself now at all of them.

The line had grown long but was moving quickly. All of her friends were chatting and carrying on, pulling Rion and Serena into their fun and conversation. They were close to getting their turn to buy tickets when everyone's attention turned to one of the far ticket windows. A small group of obvious roughnecks had simply walked up to the window without bothering to wait in line. They were getting boisterous with the ticket clerk behind the window because he wouldn't sell them tickets.

Serena felt Rion's hands around her waist as he gently pulled her back and stepped in front of her. The clerk evidently won the stand-off as the motley crew huffed away from the window cursing obscenities about having to stand in line. The rest of the ladies had followed behind Serena, leaving Rion first in line. The unruly cadre stomped toward the head of the line right where Rion was standing. As the group approached, Rion could easily smell alcohol. The first of the gang, a burly tattooed thug about Rion's same height, stepped right in front of Rion. Serena took a step back. Rion never took his eyes off the ruffian.

"What are you looking at, butthead?!"

Serena could see that Rion didn't intimidate easily. Rion just stood there, his gaze fixed squarely on the other man's face. Rion himself was quite intimidating. He wasn't burly and overweight like the redneck thug in front of him, but he would certainly give anyone pause before they tangled with him, that is, if they weren't too drunk to notice.

The bear-sized thug took a step into Rion's personal space. Rion never moved but continued to look the thug in the eye. People were backing away from the two of them as the other three roughnecks surrounded Rion.

"Think yer' hot shit, huh, pretty boy?!" he bellowed.

Rion never moved—a muscle.

The guy was right in Rion's face.

The thug's arms flew up to give Rion a shove.

Serena couldn't see everything that was happening because one of the gang had stepped right in front of her. But she saw the thug pull a hunting knife and draw back. That was all Serena needed. She took a couple of quick steps forward, planted her hand in the middle of his shoulder blade for leverage and forcibly lifted his knife hand back as far as she could in a very unnatural backward motion. She had done the move in practice hundreds of times, but this was the first time she had followed all the way through and actually felt flesh tear.

The thick blade fell loudly onto the sidewalk.

Serena quickly pulled him backward over her planted leg and sent the now screaming thug face-first into the concrete. With a smooth pivot she turned to help Rion, but he had already turned and was looking—at *her*, his eyebrow raised in surprise. The big man who had attacked Rion was sitting on his butt, his nose misshapen and badly bleeding just as profusely as his mouth was complaining.

"By dose! Buck man! Do boke by dose! Buck!"

The other two hoodlums helped their bleeding leader to his feet. With one bleeding and another of them wailing with a badly torn and dislocated shoulder, it was evidently enough to take the fight out of the drunken lot of them. They gathered their complaining and howling wounded and left quickly amidst a cheering, clapping and now laughing crowd.

Rion looked approvingly impressed at Serena. "You are just full of surprises," he smiled. "You don't look Israeli."

"I'm not," she admitted; "an old boyfriend was. I trained with him for a couple of years."

Rion nodded his approval, "Good instructor."

Serena knew what he meant. He wasn't disrespecting her or her skills. Complimenting one's instructor was a sign of respect for both student and teacher. Once more, Jake wasn't your average civilian *Krav Maga* instructor. Jake was *Mossad* and full out offense was what he had taught Serena.

Rion purchased the tickets and they picked up some popcorn and sodas from the concession.

Serena found it interesting that Rion had picked-up on her elite martial style so accurately. It only added to the intrigue and mystery of him. She also still couldn't forget that she had somehow already seen him within her dreams. That now, more than anything, told her there was much more under the hood of this suave accented, occasional hobby lifter and boat rebuilder than met the eye—that was for damn sure.