

A full-page book cover featuring a woman with long, wavy blonde hair and dark eye makeup, wearing a black sleeveless dress and large, ornate earrings. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a dramatic, ethereal scene with swirling green and blue light patterns, resembling a magical or celestial environment. The overall tone is mystical and high-fantasy.

HARLEY AUSTIN

BOOK EIGHT

VALOR

A WAKENED SERIES

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AWAKENED SERIES

BOOK EIGHT

VALOR

HARLEY AUSTIN

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

*And for Chris;
the best brother anyone could ever hope to have
and my number one fan.*

VALOR

PROLOGUE

B RIGHT LIGHTS! From around the corner! NO!
Oh God! NOOO! The sound of shattering glass;
rending metal. PAIN! Spinning; tumbling;
pummeling pain!
Cool snow. Cold. Blessed sleep.

Lights again—three bright ones right overhead. Voices.

“She’s coming out, Doctor.”

“Increase Propofol—”

Pain. Digging into me. God the pain! More voices.
Darkness.

Huh? Where—where am I? I think as the fog clears. There are sounds all around me. Odd sounds. Like people talking, moving, outside some window. I can see light, and feel its warmth, but—my eyes. They won’t open! Oh my God. I—I can’t move! I’m breathing; but my arms and legs, they won’t

move! Nothing moves! Not even my fingers or a toe. I can feel—thank God I can feel. But I'm, immobile. Completely. There's a slight pain in my head and in my arm. I have a slight headache, but it's not bad.

The door opens. I hear it, plain as day. And then it closes. Someone is humming a soft tune. It's beautiful. Her voice; it's in perfect pitch. A popular song from an album that's a few years old.

"Hey Jane," she says doing something in the room I can't see. "How are you doing today?"

I want to answer. But I can't. My name isn't Jane. It's Alexis. Why would she call me—? Don't these people even know who I am? Apparently not. I must be a 'Jane Doe' to them. Wow.

I feel the warm sheet being pulled away. She's humming softly; changing my clothes and bedding.

"Doctor says you're getting better," she talks to me. I still can't respond. "He said the latest MRI showed the swelling has gone way down." She pulls the sheet out from under me like I'm the centerpiece on a table where the magician pulls away the table cloth without anything falling. Hey! Warn me next time! I'm not hurt, just startled. It kind of tickles, actually. I'm laughing on the inside, but nothing outside even moves. She then rolls me to my side, arranging my limbs just so to keep me from rolling back and continues putting on a fresh-smelling new sheet. The sunshine is right in my face, it's bright, but it feels nice. After the new bedding she gives me a sponge bath, wiping me down all over. The warm water feels nice and the gentle soap has a clean hospital kind of scent to it.

She finishes her work and then sits down next to me, taking my hand in hers.

"I know I've said this over and over. But, I want you to be strong. I know you can hear me. Well, at least I think you can. The other nurses think I'm wasting my time talking to you."

She picks up a book and I hear pages turning. "I only have about fifteen minutes today for my break, so let's see, where were we; oh, here it is, page seventy-one. Our Navy Seal, Derek, and his friends at his security firm, are about to rescue Collette."

And she begins reading. Her voice is music to my ears and she reads well, pretending the voices of the characters in the story like she's on Broadway. I cannot help but smile inside as I immerse myself into the story she's reading, trying to forget what's actually happened to me in the here and now.

* * * * *

Rion entered the door-less security chamber. Scores of Kir sentries in glass-steel armor stood by outside all around the cell that had been placed neatly into yet another of Tian Shan's deeper holds. The larger-than-normal chamber held but one prisoner—a young Titan.

The Kir chains holding the Yang grew mystically longer when no one was in his cell. Now that Rion had entered, the chains had once again grown short, bringing the eighteen-foot colossus nearly immobile to his knees.

Rion's empathy was all around the prisoner as he walked the outer circumference of the cell. On the Titan's back, a deep-blue tattoo-like image of a powerful striped beast resembling a tiger; it's forepaws wrapping his broad shoulders and thick upper arms ending in claws just above his wrists, while the rest of magnificent cat-like beast descended down his back, disappearing into his beige prison briefs and then wrapping his muscularly folded legs.

Rion came full circle and now stood in front of the huge, younger-looking man for long moments, each eyeing the other, neither saying a word. Then Rion touched him with his feelings.

The young man was suddenly startled and tried to pull away from Rion's empathic touch. The Yang obviously had empathic ability. He fought Rion's empathy heavily, resisting him with everything that he had, but the colossus was no match for the will of the sun god.

Rion now sensed his fear. His despair. His loathing of the tiny being that had just invaded his mind. He was young. Really young.

"What are you doing here?" Rion finally asked in the most cultured accent of the Ra tongue that he knew.

"I wish I knew." The twenty-something colossus retorted. His voice had a tone of what Rion felt within his feelings. Nearly a year had passed since Nereus had revealed the huge Titan. But now Rion needed answers.

"Don't lie." Rion approached him. "It's not polite."

The young Titan raised his hands only to his waist, pulling the chains taut. "Neither is this."

"Where are the rest of your people?" Rion didn't answer his retort.

"Scattered. Like the Yin you destroyed."

"I'm not responsible for the actions of others—?" Rion's movements queued the prisoner for his name.

"Ares."

"Ares?" Rion mused. "That's a Terran name."

"Of course it is. I was born here. What did you expect?"

"There's a family of Yang? Here on Aden?!"

"For a Ra you don't seem to know very much."

Rion ignored the quip. The Titan had a firm grasp of current youth culture, and all of the attitude. "How many of you are there?"

"I don't really know. A few at least; we don't really talk to each other all that much. Not any more." He frowned.

Rion could feel his despair and sadness. "I'm sorry."

The young colossus met his gaze. "For what?"

"What happened to your people. Your race."

Ares sighed. "It's like you said. You didn't do it."

"We need to find the rest of your people, Ares."

"Why? So you can throw them into a dungeon as well?"

"We don't know enough about your people at this point.

Whether they're a threat or not."

Ares seemed to chuckle.

"What's so funny?"

"You. The *only* threat on this world right now, is you."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Meridian."

"What about it?"

"It's almost here. The Tomb is about to open—"

"It is—" Rion agreed. "That seems to may you happy.

Why?"

"Because it means your extinction, finally."

Rion's brow lifted. "How?"

"I guess it doesn't really matter if you know or not. There is a bright spot in the Universe, Ra. And this little world is *it*."

"I know about the tomb. The ancients—"

"Ancients?" Ares scoffed. "You don't know what *ancient* even means, Ra. *We* made you. It was our mistake." He looked down at the floor now. "Now we have a chance to correct it. Finally."

"Correct it how?"

"Your race is a cancer, Ra. A blight on the Universe. The Tomb, once it opens, will be your cure."

"Is that why no one will be left on Aden?"

The Titan nodded. "Yin and Yang will coalesce to wipe your scourge from existence. And then there will be peace and balance in the Universe once again."

"How? How do we fix it?" Rion asked.

"You're not even capable." Ares continued to gaze at the floor.

Rion approached him, moving into his personal space between his massive wide-spread knees. Rion's tall six-foot-four height placing him at eye level with the Titan's abs as he looked up. "I want to fix it. There has to be a way."

"There is no way, Ra. From across the Universe, from galaxies bordering the edge of existence the Tomb will call them. Like moths to a flame. Some, like me, are already here."

"The Promethean?"

Ares nodded. "We are the signs of the Ancients."

Rion reached out, his hand touching the skin of the young Titan's leg. Both instantly felt each other's feelings.

"Look at me," Rion began. "We're not evil, Ares. Not all of us."

"Yes you are. You're just like your parents. You're just like us. We know what we made."

"Maybe we can stop this—stop the tomb from opening. Keep people like you away from Aden."

Ares chuckled. "It's going to open, Ra. Like it has many times before. There's no way to stop it."

"The Masters would have seen this. They would have devised a way to keep it from happening."

"You're wrong, Ra. About your Masters. They didn't want to keep it from opening, they *wanted* it opening."

"I don't understand—you're saying the Masters wanted us dead?"

"That's what they wrote. I'm sorry, Ra. But that is what the prophecies say, isn't it. *Kn-chu Ra*."

"The end of the gods," Rion repeated.

THE EYE IS THE LAMP OF THE BODY.
EYES THAT ARE GOOD FILL THE BODY WITH LIGHT. BUT EYES
THAT ARE EVIL FILL THE BODY WITH DARKNESS. IF THE
LIGHT WITHIN YOU IS DARKNESS, HOW WILL YOU KNOW
GOOD FROM EVIL?

— THE BOOKS OF RA

1

The cute-sounding nurse who reads to me is named Zoey. Her accent isn't Texan. It sounds more Alabaman. Don't ask me how I know the difference between Southern dialects. I guess being raised in the South leaves you with a sense where people are from.

Zoey is kind. She's always considerate when she's attending me, changes my bedding, she even fixes what I can feel is my very short hair.

I can feel that there's a tube sticking out of my head, a constant IV in my arm and a thin tube from my nose that they feed me through. I'm kind of an all-the-way mess at the moment, but the bubbly nurse talks to me like we're having a conversation, even though I never move a muscle. She even answers questions for me, like I'm talking back to her. She shows me her new costume jewelry. Even though my eyelids are closed, she's a master at describing things to the point

where I can really see the things she talks about in my mind. She gives me little massages on my hands, my feet, she rubs my legs. She tells me how beautiful I am and that being stuck in a hospital is no place for a beautiful girl like me. I know better. I've heard other nurses talking. My upper body was badly injured in the accident, to the point where others now refer to me as 'the bride of Frankenstein'. This isn't Houston or Dallas. The doctors here aren't exactly skilled or even interested in preserving facial features. They just sewed me back up—badly apparently. I hear people cracking jokes in the hallway. It doesn't make me feel any better about my situation. But Zoey does. She tells me about her friend who was in a really bad accident, but they were able to sand away the scars and fix her lips and nose to the point where you can't even tell she was in an accident. That gives me at least some hope.

* * * * *

Christian looked out of the half-mile high windows offering a beautiful panorama of Earth moving slowly beneath them. The massive icecap of Antarctica covered the top of the globe, at least that's how it looked from his perspective as the Tiburion moved slowly, invisibly, around the beautiful blue world not all that far below them.

Still unclothed and not quite awake, a tall slender mug of his favorite *Victrola* coffee shimmered into existence, hovering and steaming its breve mocha aroma as it floated next to him. He lifted the mug to his lips and then placed it back onto nothing, looking over the globe and a quickly passing DDF security vessel on it's way to God only knew where.

He felt strong muscular arms reaching around him from behind, lighting up his tattoo and giving him warm ecstatic tingles all the way down to his ankles. Justin kissed the back of his shoulder lightly. But Justin didn't let him go.

Christian flashed an annoyed smile. "Would you stop! You know what that does to me."

Justin let him go and then reached out to his mug and drew a long wonderful sip from the cup. He handed the mug to Christian who took another sip, still looking out the windows.

"You still feel him?" Justin asked.

Christian nodded. "It's not fair. Nereus is just keeping the guy locked up. He hasn't done anything."

"He's afraid of what he *might* do."

"You can't arrest people and keep them in prison indefinitely just because you think they might do something you don't like. He's not locking up the Kir. They do stuff I don't like all the time."

"I agree." The unclothed Justin leaned into Christian's thick arm. After their awakening, the guy had gotten a little bigger and even more attractive. The two of them were all but inseparable now. "But you know Nereus, he's like Mr. Cautious."

"We have rights, Justin."

"Ah—no we don't." he corrected. "You're not American anymore, remember?"

"I mean Human Ri—" Christian stopped mid-sentence. "Ra Rights."

"There are no Ra Rights, Christian. Interra is a Benevolent Anarchy."

"I don't think Rion or Serena actually *knows* or even cares what Interra is. They may as well rename the city Ki with as many Kir that live there now."

Justin agreed. "I kind of like the Anarchy there, actually."

"Only because you're Invicti. People respect you—us," he corrected.

"We should lightshower. There's a ten 'o'clock with Admiral Dark."

"I know." Christian sighed, still feeling the colossus guy buried deeply within Tian Shan. He frowned and followed Justin into the shower, the still half-full floating mug of latte fading out of existence.

2

Sleep comes and goes for me. Mostly I've been bored all day. It's night now. A little cooler in the room. Things are quiet with only an occasional sound somewhere beyond the door of my room. A couple of hours go by, I guess. I just pass the time thinking. Mostly about memories of people and places. Right now, I'm thinking about Serena. She keeps popping in and out of my thoughts. I wonder where she is now? I'd heard through friends that she'd gotten married to some guy that was loaded. I never hear from her anymore. But wow, she was beautiful. We'd become best friends—better than best friends.

We'd met at a friend's slumber party out in the country. With our friend's parents away for the weekend, the crowd got a little rowdy in the pool and by the end of the evening none of the girls were wearing our bikinis, most of us were totally buzzed and half of us were kissing each other playing 'truth or dare'.

That was the first time Serena and I kissed. It had been a magical kiss. One that lasted for minutes on end as the girls standing around us went from curious to envious as the two of us embraced, our lips and bare breasts making love in front of all of them. We'd both still be kissing if someone hadn't interrupted, *'Y'all need a room?!'*

Yea. We needed a room. Most of us went to bed in sleeping bags in the great room of the house that night, but Serena and I—we stole ourselves to an upstairs bedroom where we spent the night; just the two of us. Serena's body was all over mine and I was all over hers. I needed Serena, wanted her; badly. And she seemed to need me.

I think she was mostly infatuated with my breasts. Even after the pool party, whenever things got going between the two of us; she'd always go in for the kill with her hands and her lips all over my chest. I guess it's a really nice chest; she thought so.

We were both built like a brick house, so they say; Serena's curves were killer, I guess mine were as well; we were really drawn to each other. If the two of us were together, I was usually the one who wanted to jump between the sheets first. The woman was dire 'do-me' material. She attracted guys like it was nobody's business. And that ass. Oh my God. I mentally bite my lip as a twinge of desire lifts warmly from between my legs. Odd. I may not be able to move, but the feelings and desires of my body are still very much there.

Speaking of attracting guys, the darkest time in our relationship was when she met Jake. He was from Israel. The guy was hot; not exactly smokin', but definitely decent. Maybe I was a little biased about how good looking he was. I honestly don't know why she even began dating the guy; but, like me, he couldn't keep his hands off of her. I don't know what she saw in him; I guess he was able to fuck her senseless. It was the only time I wished I had a male appendage so I could compete

with whatever Jake was giving her. But who am I kidding here? He was more than just a 'typical' guy. Jacob Gold's family had more money than God; and mine didn't. Hell, I barely even had a family. He was a military officer, a combat instructor, and a fighter pilot. God. Overachieve much? And he was charming. A confident bad ass who, by the age of twenty when he and Serena met at school, had probably killed more people than I had kissed. But the guy had one Achilles' heal—me.

Jake demanded I stop seeing her. I told him what he could do with that. We had a really heated argument over Serena. I don't think either of us ever told her about it. Besides, it wasn't her fight. I don't think Jake particularly liked the idea of his lava-hot girlfriend swinging both ways. If the guy had any insecurity, that was it. Not only do you have to keep an eye on the other men, but the other women as well.

It all came to a head when Jake asked Serena to follow him back to Tel Aviv. He demanded it actually. You'd think after dating someone for two years you'd know that making that kind of demand isn't going to work. I knew what his endgame was. Get Serena out of the county, so I could never see her again. I didn't have any money to be jetting off to another country. It would have totally destroyed Serena's and my relationship.

Honestly? I was shocked when Serena told him no. She knew the score. What he was up to. Serena's smart. Crazy smart. She would have been happy seeing both of us. But Jake didn't want to share. He packed up his toys, so to speak, and went home. He just broke-up and left her. I guess she broke his heart or he broke hers. Anyway, Serena swore off men at that point. She stopped dating guys altogether after that. For me it was a year of total and complete bliss. She'd come to Austin nearly every weekend or I'd come to visit her in her dorm room in San Antonio. I'd stay in her room. It was the girl's dorm,

c'mon. We fucked like bunnies half the night in that dorm room. Everyone knew what we were up to. The way Serena would scissor me and kiss with her hands all over my chest until I was coming hard—

Alright, now I'm really hard between my thighs. And I can't move to do anything about it. I try to simmer my emotions; it's not difficult as my mind moves into thinking about what happened next.

She calls and tells me that she met this *guy* at Sea World and that he'd already asked her to dinner. I—don't know why, but I was filled with real trepidation after that call. I told her to be careful. Call it intuition, but the guy just felt, well, dangerous to me. Not dangerous like he was evil, I mean dangerous to me personally, like Serena and I were now suddenly over.

Turns out that intuition was right. That was the last call Serena and I ever had. Sure, I talked with a few of our friends, Celeste mostly. She said Rion was really wealthy; he had a downtown apartment, a custom sports car. The guy even gave her some really expensive jewelry. I can't compete with that. All I have is me.

A new sadness grips me. I start to cry inside. All I have is me; and right now, *me* isn't worth a whole helluva lot. I'm broken; and I don't know if I can even ever be fixed.

God. Please. A lump grows in my throat as my emotion wells. Just—rescue me or kill me. But don't let me just lay here like this—forever.

3

Nereus, I just want to talk to him.” Christian stood in his San Francisco office overlooking the bay with the city’s iconic bridge in the distance.

“Any particular reason why?”

“Because he’s like me. I can sense him.”

“He’s nothing like you, Christian. His race is evil. We thought we’d destroyed them eons ago and now they’re back.”

“You’re not exactly a Saint yourself, General.”

“Touché. But I’m at least trying to save a world these creatures are bent on discovering and destroying. The Ra and Titans are at war, Christian. We always have been. Since the day their race birthed us—we have been their bastard, their mistake, their Frankenstein. They tried to destroy us. We scraped and clawed like hell, fighting for our survival. I know that doesn’t mean much to you. You haven’t seen war like I have.”

"Yea; and I hope I never have to."

"And I hope you don't have to as well."

"What does it hurt to talk to him?"

"You're both Promethean—you both have the stigmata."

"So? I'm a billboard. 'The end is near.' Big deal."

"It is a big deal."

"How?!" Christian groused.

Nereus sighed patiently. "I don't want the Titan awakened."

"Awakened. I thought—"

Nereus raised his eyebrow, his eyes meeting Christian's.

"You mean they're not? Already?"

"This particular one is like the Kir. He, like us, was born here on Aden; and like us, he has some of the Yin ability. Like us, he's empathic. There's never been an empathic Yang. Until now. And I don't *want* any more."

"I was told that the Yin and Yang were genetically incompatible," Christian mused.

"They are. Yin and Ra are genetically incompatible as well. Yet here we are."

"Wait—" Christian's mind worked quickly. "Then you're saying this Titan has Human blood?"

Nereus nodded. "Our people are still studying it. Humans are a very young race, Christian. They are the 'stem cells', if you will, that have caused the unbelievable to happen."

"I had no idea."

"These beings are powerful, Christian. It's already pushing some of the limits of our knowledge just to keep him contained. You don't know what he's capable of."

"Then he has to have family here, on Aden. Somewhere."

"Somewhere," Nereus agreed. "And when I find out where that somewhere is, I will destroy them. Quickly. And without mercy. Or they will destroy us."

"You couldn't maybe talk to them first?" Christian scowled. "Maybe see what they're like?"

"I already know what they're like."

"Maybe they're diff—"

"Christian, why do you think the Ra build vessels the size that we do?"

"We have a lot of people—" he nodded.

"No. Because *this* is the size of vessel—" a holo image of an epic ship faded into view in the middle of Nereus' office. The ship was near planetary in size, its ominous design struck a foreboding chord within Christian as he looked at the unknown vessel. "—the Yang taught us we needed to defeat them."

"I—I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't. None of you do. Not even Prince Rion knew—until I told him."

"I still don't think you need to kill them. This, other Promethean, he doesn't feel evil to me."

"He may not be; evil, Christian. That's not why he's a captive."

"Testing, right. He's our Guinea Pig."

"He's not just a science experiment. We're going to need defenses against them. We have no idea what their knowledge is like today. The Yang were the reason why we expended so much effort in discovering Reflex in the first place. Some legends say it was the Yang who destroyed the Yin long before we ever show up."

"And now Darius and these ancient Titans—"

"Will be coming here. Somehow, they're here already. As evidenced by our young friend in Tian Shan."

"When can I talk to him?"

"Let me think about it. I'll talk to Vise."

"Great. Admiral 'Shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later'."

VALOR

“Do not dismiss his wisdom, Christian. His family is likely older than our world.”

Christian pursed his lips, nodding.

4

Nights are always the hardest it seems. I'm usually wide awake. Day in and day out. The only interesting thing in this place is who is going to be checking on me after hours. It seems like it's always someone new or different during the night shifts. Well, whoever it is, they're early tonight, at least I think so. I hear the door close and see the light when they click on the switch.

"Oh."

I hear a soft male voice.

"Wow. Jane," he begins. "You. Look at you. You're beautiful."

What? I think to myself. This male nurse with the soft voice is about to totally creep me out now. I haven't had a real shower or a real hairdo or even makeup for God only knows how long. Beyond that I have a pretty good idea of what I look like now. The windshield shattered in my face. I can only

imagine, but I'm sure I look anything *but* beautiful at the moment, especially with a tube sticking out of my nose.

Still, he's like the day nurse who reads to me. Humming softly. His voice is—well, it's nice, actually. He's not exactly carrying a tune, but his tone is smooth. With expert efficiency he cleans and changes me while talking softly.

"You have become quite the celebrity, Jane," he carries on. "No one knows who you are. Your car and ID were burned beyond recognition. You're lucky you were ejected before hitting the bottom of the ravine. Do you have any family?" he asks, obviously rhetorically. "We need to find them, and the sooner the better."

He finishes taking care of me, pulls off his gloves and drops them into the receptacle. Then he tucks me in, and oddly takes hold of my hand, squeezing it gently—

My mind all at once buzzes momentarily. Suddenly, I, I can see him. Standing with me. It's like a flash of memory, only it's not a memory—but, more like a *déjà vu* of some kind. We're standing on the beach, holding hands. He pulls me into his arms and I wrap mine around him. He closes his eyes and says softly, "Oh, Alexis, you're so beautiful." He's about to kiss me. I close my eyes and open my pout to his, feeling his warm lips fold into mine ...

And then—it's gone. The vision is gone; but the memory of it isn't.

"What the hell?" I hear him breath quietly. He lets go of my hand quickly, like he's startled, and then he slowly, cautiously takes hold of it again. Only this time, it's just him holding my hand. I want to squeeze his. But I can't.

"Ah, wow." He breathes. "Alexis?" he whispers. "I have to—go. Alexis. I have other rounds to make." He stammers. I

want to squeeze his hand to keep him next to me, but nothing happens.

He lets go of my hand resting my arm gently under the covers. Then leaves quickly, turning out the light.

There's something new tingling now inside me. It's all over my body, and my emotions. The way he touched me. I want him to come back.

NO! COME BACK! TALK TO ME! PLEASE! But he's already gone. Somehow, whoever this new guy is. He SEES me. Come back. Please?

* * * * *

"You really shouldn't eat the food here, Elliot." Sharma sat down in the hospital's cafeteria with an early morning tray. "It's deadly."

"Thanks for the warning." Elliot sipped his coffee from a small foam cup.

"Why are you still here? Your shift ended an hour ago."

"I know. I'm—torn."

"Oh?" Dr. Sharma began eating watching his fellow resident looking conflicted.

"The Jane Doe in ICU. I dropped in to help out last night. We were short handed again."

"Doctors changing diapers," Sharma shook his head. "Once my residency is up, I am fuckkkking out of here." He tapped his finger on the cheap veneer of the folding table. Sharma's Indian accent was all but gone as a third generation American, but it still came back now and then when he cursed.

"I don't mind doing the work. But, I think—something weird happened last night."

"In ICU? I didn't see any alerts."

"No. No, nothing like that. It's just—you know, I was talking to her, you know, holding her hand. Seeing if the stimulation might generate some kind of response."

Sharma nodded. "Did she move?"

Elliot shook his head. "No, but, I had this vision, like some crazy déjà vu. I can't explain it."

"I can. No more doubling up on *5-Hour Energy*. That shit will kill you."

"It wasn't like that. I mean, it felt *real*, somehow."

"Real?" Sharma chewed. "Define 'real'—?"

"Like a memory, only it wasn't a memory, but it felt like I was standing with her, on the beach, next to my house."

"That's not a déjà vu, we call that a premonition."

"I know what it's called. I'd never had one before, until last night."

"Tell me, Elliot, how tired were you?"

"Not. I'd slept all day."

"Hmm," Sharma continued to dig into the food on his plate. "You know that girl's brain dead. She's never going to pull out of her coma. The brain swelling was way too much. Whatever intellect she had," he shook his head, "is destroyed. No one survives that kind of trauma."

"Her scans are normal, mostly. A few small anomalies."

"There's no one home, Dr. Elliot. She's been in that coma for two years. Admin has been making noises for months now about her. They want her out of the system."

"Oh! And where's she going to go? Hospice?"

"Probably. No insurance."

"That's unethical. We're supposed to be doing no harm, remember?"

"She's terminal, Elliot. Get over it. She's gone."

"I don't think she is."

"Why?"

"I can't explain it."

"Yea, well, the board isn't going to buy 'premonition' as reason for continuing to pay the bill. At some point, Elliot, they are going to have to pull the plug. Actually, I'm surprised they haven't done it already."

"I know." Elliot finished his coffee and got up to leave.

"Stay out of it. Words of wisdom, my friend."

"Sure." He nodded and headed for the exit.

* * * * *

Nereus stepped out of nowhere into Vise's dining room, completely unannounced. The flagship's interior defenses recognized him instantly—and ignored him.

"A bit abrupt, Nereus. Could it not have waited for a conference?" Vise set down the eating utensil.

"I don't have time for your Imperial protocols. The Titan's escaped."

Vise was on his feet at once. "Gods. I thought you said escape from Tian Shan was impossible?"

"It is."

"Obviously—"

"Unless you're being helped from the outside—by another sun god."

"Sun god?" Vise thought quickly. "The Promethean sun god?"

"Christian Jade," Nereus nodded with a scowl. "It's the only explanation."

"Not the only." Vise corrected. "There are others of your evolved fledgling race on Aden, Nereus."

The general nodded again.

"We must alert Interra and find him."

"I've already talked to Rion. Their council is deliberating."

"I don't care what the children of the council are doing, Nereus. The Yang is dangerous. He could alert the others."

“Agreed. It was probably a mistake revealing the Titan to the young Prince in the first place.”

“No. No, they needed to know. They just do not realize it’s danger yet.”

“I’ll find him,” Nereus assured.

“See that you do, Nereus. I do not need to remind you what an awakened Yang might be capable of. Especially, one that could be made—invincible.”

5

I 've, been trying to keep count of the days since I woke up, but they all just kind of blur together. I now know what the date is. Zoey brought in a tabloid to share with me of all of the latest Hollywood gossip. I cannot believe how long I've been here; two years?! I'm mortified. But then Zoey doesn't stop with what's in the magazine. Now she goes off on the latest hospital gossip and even her crushes on several of the cute doctors. She'd sleep with Dr. Elliot, whoever that is, in a heartbeat but he doesn't seem interested in her. Zoey's now convinced the drop-dead gorgeous doctor is gay since he and Dr. Sharma seem to hang out a lot together.

But as my thoughts swirl and the room softly brightens with the morning light, something is odd. Instead of the typical routine, I hear voices outside my door. But no one comes in.

The morning comes and goes as I just lay here in my thoughts. I'm a little hungry now. The brightest part of the day

then comes and goes. Evening is coming. Still, no one comes in. I hear my stomach growl. They could not have forgotten about me! Could they?

Now I start to worry. What if no one comes in? What are these people doing? Am I just supposed to lay here for days—and then it hits me again. The thing I keep trying to push out of my mind. What if no one comes now? What if they've decided that I'm just vegetative—that there's really nobody home in my head?

That ugly evil thought now sets up residence in my mind as I feel myself growing more and more hungry and a little thirsty now.

I'm really worried now as the night falls—and I'm all by myself, alone.

* * * * *

The last thing Jake expected to see were ion blasts going off above him, raining chunks of heavy concrete rubble onto the street in the Muslim quarter of Jerusalem. Their squad partially pinned by the heavy gunfire, Jake returned several hot blasts of his own, dropping another Ra combatant, but not killing him. Jesus these people were tough.

Several DDF fighter planes raced across the skies at low altitude above to intercept enemy incoming. Part of him wished he was up there, but then, he was glad to be on the ground now. Ra pilots were deadly and his own reflexes were still very Human. The only thing giving him any kind of advantage right now was the black bodysuit armor he wore under his IDF combat fatigues while a full-faced helmet shield gave him a perfect artificial reality horizon of everyone and everything moving around him.

But it wasn't perfect. Someone's plasma bolt tagged him in the shoulder, ripping through his black fatigues like butter and

glancing off his Dominion Reflex armor. The heavy blast knocked him back against the concrete wall. He could see where the surgical shot had come from and his next thought was to do something, but his armor's IA was already moving his arms and body, quickly targeting the asshole on the roof. He felt his gun fire without even pulling the trigger, leaving a fine eight-inch wide hole through the chest of the sniper. The combatant stammered for a moment as his body came to grips with his missing heart. Then he fell three stories to the sidewalk, making another mess.

DDF halfbloods were now descending on the streets and alleyways appearing out of nowhere. The crossfire of sun-bright bolts, exploding concrete, and slagging metal grew intense. He was firing, over and over in various directions at the target-rich street battlefield. Two Ra soldiers seemed to drop out of nowhere. Obviously leaping from the rooftops somewhere above him. Both of them punched him, hard and in unison, knocking him back against the concrete of the building. Only mildly stunned he fought back, the superior strength of his armor knocking one of the Ra sailing across the street while he dodged and blocked several of the remaining soldier's punches.

The Ra martial combat skills were unreal. Jake had to just let the AI of his armor fight for him. But even it was taking unbelievable hits from his assailant. The only thing that saved him was the appearance of another DDF soldier. Her reflex rifle in one hand pointing at the now advancing Ra from across the street while her boot quickly slipped behind the knee of the one striking Jake. The Ra god momentarily lost his balance as her rifle fired, dropping the one when he was half-way across the street while her fist landed in a graceful uppercut on the unbalanced one who'd been beating the hell out of Jake.

The Ra soldier recognized the new threat and all but ignored Jake now, deciding that it was more necessary to go toe-to-toe with the new IDF woman.

Both sparred in a blur of kicks, strikes and blocks as the woman easily advanced on her opponent, often using the sleek glass-steel rifle itself as a kind of short bo-stick.

Jake could see the weapons fire all around them was ebbing almost as quickly as it had started. Only a few shots here and there rang out now. DDF were everywhere, moving through the streets.

With the speed and elegance of a master, she swept the remaining assailant's feet, knocking him to the ground, landing her knee on his chest and the barrel of her short thick assault weapon resting against his nostrils. He was breathing heavily, outclassed by the woman resting atop him. Several DDF now surrounded them, their guns pointed at the prone Ra soldier.

Francesca removed her face shield, allowing her thick dark hair to unfurl and cascade down her back.

"Succubus bitch!" the soldier fumed speaking Ra, knocking the barrel of her rifle out of his face.

"Likewise." She retorted, lifting her knee off of his chest.

"We'll take it from here, Counselor." One of the DDF assured her over his com-link.

Jake moved beside her as their unit's forces secured and transported the off-worlder away.

"I saw what was happening from the alley," she said as both began walking the middle of the street, explosions still going off around them. Overhead a five-mile long DDF vessel descended, casting its shadow over the holy city, its anti-troop weapons firing at any Ra un-savvy enough to declare personal war on the advanced Reflex-powered cruiser.

"I had the situation under control."

"Of course you did," she smiled, expertly shouldering her weapon.

"I don't think I've ever seen you in combat gear." He dusted some of the rubble off her slender shoulders and back.

"I do keep telling you I am a soldier."

"Carson keeps telling me the same thing. It's just—the four-inch Stilettos and briefcases sort of throw me off." He winced.

"As they are intended to do."

"Nice. I need to get back to my unit."

"The DDF have the thugs on the run, Jake."

"So?"

"I believe I will be relieving you of your duties here for the time being."

"Oh? To do what?"

"It is classified at this point."

"Contessa, you are not pulling me out because of what just happened, I hope?"

"It is not your war, Jake."

Jacob looked around at the wrecked and war-torn collapsed buildings of a street that just yesterday was filled with busy markets and people.

"I've got news for you. After today, we just made it 'our' war."

6

Hey. Alexis." I hear a quiet whisper after the door closes. It's him! The same guy from last night. A new feeling of warmth rises inside me, dispelling my hopeless gloom the minute he enters. But, it's strange. He doesn't turn on the light. With gentle attention to detail, he makes quick work of my needs and even does something with my IV. No one has been in my room all day. Then there's this silence, like he's looking at me. He sighs.

"Who are you, Alexis?" he asks rhetorically.

I hear his gloves come off. Then I feel his warm hand in mine and suddenly it happens, again—

The house is filled with people. His friends mostly. I don't recognize but a couple of them. But we're all laughing and carrying on. We're seated at a table with festive decorations, like it's Christmas or Thanksgiving or something. He's seated

right next to me. And under the table, his hand is moving warmly between my thighs, his fingers touching my panties; sending warm shivers into my body. It's not a problem. My own hand is doing the same thing—to him, touching him—intimately—feeling his hardness beneath his fine slacks.

He turns to me with a great dimpled smile on beautiful sculpted lips. And I see his piercing platinum eyes dance as they look at me with a soft flash of some unworldly glow.

He drops my hand suddenly and I feel my arm land limply onto the blanket covering me. Whatever this vision I just had a second ago was, he obviously felt it; we both did. We were both right there—just a moment ago! I can't see him. But a moment ago I did. *Oh my God.* He's beautiful. Handsome. Like no one I've ever seen before. His face. I've seen his face. His smile. His thick brown hair. Those dimples.

I don't know who he is. But with the feelings of what I just experienced, I *know* him, somehow. I search my memories, but, I know I've never seen him before. Until now.

I hear him leaving.

NO. WAIT. I shout to no one who can hear me.

The door closes quietly.

Please. Come back.

The memory of the two of us still fresh in my mind. A memory that I know is real, but one I've never felt before, until just now.

I love you.

And then I feel it. The tear slips out of the side of my eye and runs down the side of my head.

* * * * *

"You look like hell, River. Welcome to residency." The older doctor laughed seated at the far end of the small tropical bar. The place was quiet this time of day.

"It's not residency, Jerry. I just can't seem to sleep."

"Really? This insomnia have a name—?" he grinned.

He sighed. "She does."

"Did you ask her out?"

"No, but apparently, I'm going to."

"Apparently?"

"It's this 'Jane Doe', Jerry," the young doctor's eyes met his elder's.

"Ohh, don't tell me you're getting personally involved in that mess? Don't do it, River. You have your whole career ahead of you. Don't throw it away on a single patient."

"I can't help it."

"What do you mean you can't help it? That girl's dead. She was dead the day all of you brought her into surgery. As bad as she was? *That* should never have even happened. You should have written her up as DOA, let her expire and been done with it."

"I know. It was my fault. The on-call surgeon wanted to abandon ship. Just like you said. I—sort of convinced him to try to save her. I thought it would be good experience. I never thought she'd survive either."

"And now she's a burden on the State and the hospital system."

"Yea." Elliot took a long draw from his cold clear bottle.

"Live and learn, my friend." The old doctor tasted the salted edge of his margarita.

"She's not dead, Jerry."

"If she's not, she'd probably be better if she was. Even *if* she ever wakes up; that kind of trauma—she'll just be a child living a woman's body. If that. You need to move on, River. There's no future in getting personally involved here."

Elliot groaned. "You ever have a premonition, Jerry? I mean—like a real one."

"I probably thought I did, doing weed back in college," he grinned.

"No, I'm serious."

"You had a premonition?" There was a tone of sarcasm in the older man's voice.

"A couple now. It only happens when I touch her. My skin on hers. It's like, for a moment, we share a memory, with both of us. Right there. Only it's like the memory hasn't happened yet. It's really vivid."

"You need to get more sleep."

"You think I'm crazy."

"No, River. I think you need to take a weekend off. Find something to take your mind off work. Residency is hell; not as bad as it used to be. But, if I were in your shoes, I would not be bucking hospital administration. You might be a doctor, but they can still mess with your references. Wait until you're out of residency, then piss 'em off."

River chuckled. "Yea. Too late."

7

It's been two days. I'm not feeling well at all. The knot in my stomach hurts more than the sores on my arms and legs. I'm so thirsty. I'm not really scared anymore. Just angry. I know what's happening. So this is how it works—when they want you to die.

It's those kinds of thoughts that now shoot through my mind as my body racks with soreness and pain. Why didn't they just let me die in the accident?! It would have been more humane than just letting me waste into nothing for days on end. At least give me a sedative—put me to sleep! Please! GOD! Let me die in peace instead of in all this pain! Who does this to people?!

It's getting brighter. The morning light is coming again. I don't care now. I don't want it. I just want to die and get this over with. I want the pain to stop. But it doesn't. Hour by hour it just gets worse. I just want all of it to be over. I start to cry

again. Only now there's not much that leaks out of my eyes this time. How can people be so evil?

* * * * *

Serena reclined back into the sofa, closing her eyes. With the subtle sound of rushing air, someone was suddenly in the living room of their mile-high spire home that overlooked the snowy Olympics, Puget Sound and Seattle below in the distance.

"And how is supermom?" Jake asked. A half smirk moved across his face. Even frazzled with three new toddlers she looked just as beautiful as ever.

"Supermom is resting; finally."

"The triplets asleep?" he asked taking a seat on the couch opposite her.

"Yes." She groaned, her eyes still closed. "Finally."

"I can't believe how big they're getting."

"Nea says Ra mature twice as fast as Humans. Fourteen months and they're already reading."

"Wow. Maybe I do have some Ra blood. I was reading at three."

"Bully for you."

He chuckled. "I'm sure it will get better."

She lifted her head from the sofa, grateful for some adult company. "How is Francesca?"

"She's—fine."

"Just fine? I thought you two were dating."

"Francesca's—" Jake paused, fishing for the right words. Serena felt his confusion.

"Complicated?"

"Yes." Jake agreed. "And I wouldn't exactly call it dating. It's like she's avoiding me. I've seen her maybe a dozen times the whole year."

"Are you two just friends or more than friends?"

"Just friends, Serena. Not that I wouldn't want something more, but—I thought I came here to talk about you?" he changed the subject. At least he tried to.

"Francesca's not going to rush into something, Jake. She's older, wiser. She has a lot on her mind."

"Don't we all." He scowled.

"I didn't mean to pry. I'm sorry."

"No. It's alright. It's just—"

"You want to be awakened." She sensed his feelings.

"I do, Serena," he admitted. "I'm attracted to practically every Ra I meet. It's not going to kill me."

"Probably not. But I think Francesca's maybe just being careful. With you, I mean."

"Maybe; but, I don't think you asked me over here to talk about my love life—"

"No. I didn't. The truth is, I asked you here to talk about mine."

Jake snickered. "*Your* love life? You're sleeping with Zeus and Poseidon."

"Mitch isn't Poseidon, Jake," Serena corrected.

"That's not what Sevrin says," he grinned. "He does command the Kraken."

The goddess rolled her eyes with a groan. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that one."

"Is there a problem with your husbands?" he asked half smiling. "Because if there is that's *not* something *I'm* going to be able to solve." He chuckled.

"No, no, it's nothing like that. Both Rion and Mitch are jewels, actually. When they're not working."

"*That* sounds like a problem. The single mom syndrome?"

"It goes with the territory, Jake. That's not actually what I'm concerned about. I can't find Alexis."

Jake's mind was stunned for a moment. He'd not heard that name in close to two years. He'd all but forgotten about her. But now that Serena mentioned her, a wave of old memories came flooding back in an instant, and all of them unwelcomed.

"I'm sorry to bring it up," Serena continued. "I know she wasn't your favorite person."

"No," he admitted. "That's true."

"I tried to call her a few times, to invite her to the Coronation."

Jake nodded. A lot of Serena's friends from school had been there. It was a very public event, broadcast not only over the continuum but the Human networks as well. The gods had their royalty and the human tabloids were eating it up. Everyone wanted to know who the new princess was, even if they'd never even heard of a Ra before. What was even more odd was that most of the Human governments had more or less declared the Ra illegal. Any citizen caught harboring a Ra could be fined and imprisoned. There were still a handful of sanctuary cities where the Ra were welcomed, but even those were dwindling as the U.N. asserted financial pressures on the leadership and people of those cities.

"Celeste hasn't been able to get in-touch with her either."

"Maybe she just tuned out—after she found out about you and Rion?"

"I don't think so. You didn't know her like I did."

"You can say *that* again."

Serena felt the unwelcomed feelings of the memories she was dredging up within him. "I know it's painful, Jake. But I'm really concerned. I wouldn't have even brought it up otherwise. I need you help."

He stood up from the couch. "So it was *you*—not Francesca."

Serena nodded. "I told Francesca to pull you out of Jerusalem. The DDF can handle the situation without you."

"You pulled me out of a hot situation so I could play cop on a missing persons case? Thanks a lot, Serena."

"Jake, don't be like this." She stood now as well.

"Dane secretly deployed God only knows how many of his troops all over Israel, Mexico, China, and other nations, and even after a year, we're *still* rooting them out."

"I know."

"No, I don't think you do," he fumed.

"Jake, Alexis and I were attracted."

"Like that wasn't obvious!?" he folded his arms.

"I think she could be a newblood."

Jake simmered his anger. Newbloods were becoming more and more scarce now. Interra needed newbloods—as many as they could find. He had to admit, tracking down a newblood was something worth being pulled away from a combat zone for.

"Oh. Ah. I'm sorry," he apologized. "Bad memories." He sat back down. "Alexis and I weren't exactly friends."

"I know."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"The weekend before I met Rion."

"Was she still living in Austin?"

Serena nodded. "I called her the same evening after Rion asked me out. I could tell she was upset about the date."

"She wasn't the only one." Jake smiled the snarky remark. "You called me as well—to have him checked out."

"Maybe the IDF should have told me I was about to go out with a god?"

Jake chuckled. "Yea, I guess we kind of dropped the ball on that one."

"That was the last time I talked to her. Her number's been disconnected. The store she worked at said she'd been let go. Her apartment's been rented to someone else. It's like she just—disappeared or something."

"What about her family? What do they know?"

"Alexis was kind of a foster child, Jake. Someone in her family had a child they weren't supposed to have. To cover it up, she lived with other relatives who raised her as their own."

"Did you try calling her folks?"

"Her foster parents were divorced a long time ago. No one in that family had any money. She was living with friends when I met her. No one in her family has seen her for years now."

"Do you think she was upset about you and Rion getting together?"

"No, Jake. That's not the kind of person she was. She didn't mind sharing. Even girlfriends."

"I'll find her, Serena," Jake assured with a nod. "It may take a few days—maybe a week or two; it depends on whatever leads I find."

"Thank you, Jake. If anyone can find out what happened to her, I know you can."

8

On behalf of Jane Doe, we have filed this motion with the court asking for a continuance of her life supporting care." An inelegant overweight spokeswoman for the church spoke in near monotones reading from a prepared statement, her hairdo and light teal polyester Sunday dress had seen better days, four or five decades ago ...

The forty-something well-dressed executive sitting behind his desk dismissed the browser tab playing the video from the local news site as his phone warbled a musical tone from his desk.

"Yea?" he hit the speaker button.

"Myron and Myron on line two."

The executive tapped the button on his phone. "Good news or bad news, Curt?"

"Well, for you, it's bad news, unfortunately."

"Seriously?! Don't even tell me—"

"It was inevitable this time around, Dr. Talon," the seasoned well-spoken voice of the attorney came through his speakerphone loud and clear. "Someone from the Christ Life Center filed the emergency request on behalf of the girl last night. The judge granted an emergency order for the hospital to continue her life support pending an independent medical review."

"Jesus. Seriously? It's not going to find anything different than what my own staff has found—it's a waste of time."

"I wouldn't know. I'm not a doctor. What I do know is that someone with fairly intimate knowledge of this patient's case is funneling information to the court. The judge is requesting full records."

"Fuck."

"You have thirty days to produce the records."

"Another MONTH?!"

"You can get them to the court sooner if—"

"Myron! I am not keeping a brain-dead bitch in ICU for another month! You should see the costs she's generating. Two years I've put up with this bullshit. The Medicaid reimbursements ended last month. I'm done. She's a huge liability now."

"Well, Dr. Talon, costs aside for a moment, all I can tell you is that the court was apparently provided with enough significant evidence that they believe it's worth a look."

"Define significant evidence?"

"Someone or someone's testified privately with the judge, providing some kind of medical evidence or testimony that the girl maybe isn't as vegetative as your staff is reporting. Any idea who that might be?"

"It's got to be someone on the ICU. No one else would be allowed access to her room."

"How many?"

"At least a dozen!"

"I think you need to start restricting access. It might help us find out who's funneling information to the court."

"Yea. Yea, good idea. I can lock the records, restrict them to just her personal care staff."

"Yes, about those records, Talon. I would advise you at this point to keep those as pristine and accurate as possible."

"Our records are *always* pristine and accurate, Myron."

"Of course they are." The attorney scowled. He had at least fifteen malpractice cases moving through his office. He knew exactly the kinds of records the hospital kept.

"What's the end game here, Myron? How do we make this go away?"

"It's not going to go away, not anytime soon, Dr. Talon. The court wants to know what her real condition is. Courts move anything but quickly."

"I've told you what her *real* condition is."

"Of course, but there's also the preponderance of a conflict of interest. The court is aware that she has no insurance and that the hospital is likely going to be picking up a good chunk of the tab now, so to speak. You're in a precarious position, Tom. I know she's expensive."

"You have no idea."

"No, I do, actually. I've seen her financials that were filed with the court."

"THEY HAD HER FINANCIALS!?"

"They were part of the evidence provided and part of the reason for the court's decision here. Your hospital was turning a pretty good profit on the girl as long as the Medicaid payments were coming in. Too bad those have dried up."

"So, someone's working against me, now." His face twisted in anger.

"We're all working on behalf of the young lady, Dr. Talon."

“Yea. Yea. Of course we are.” He played along, but still fuming on the inside.

“As your attorney, Talon, I’m advising you to review your care of this young lady carefully; brain-dead or not, if she expires before the court is through with this—the PR is going to be a nightmare.”

“I’m not worried about the PR, Myron. But thank you for the advice. I’ll get the records to you by this afternoon. The sooner we get this over and done with the better.”

Talon ended the call.

So, someone on his own staff was working against him. Jesus. It might take weeks to find out who had done this. Maybe it was more than one? It wasn’t the first time the staff had become upset about these kinds of cases. They’d had to pull the plug on patients all the time. Sure, it was the family who was usually making those decisions, not the hospital. But this was a Jane Doe. No family. Why couldn’t she have just expired just after they’d brought her in, when her brain had swollen out of her head after the craniectomy? These kinds of procedures were expensive and fraught with all manner of complications. Patients expired all the time after—Talon’s thoughts froze. Then suddenly a smirk began working its way across his face. “Complications, huh?” he mused out loud.

* * * * *

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