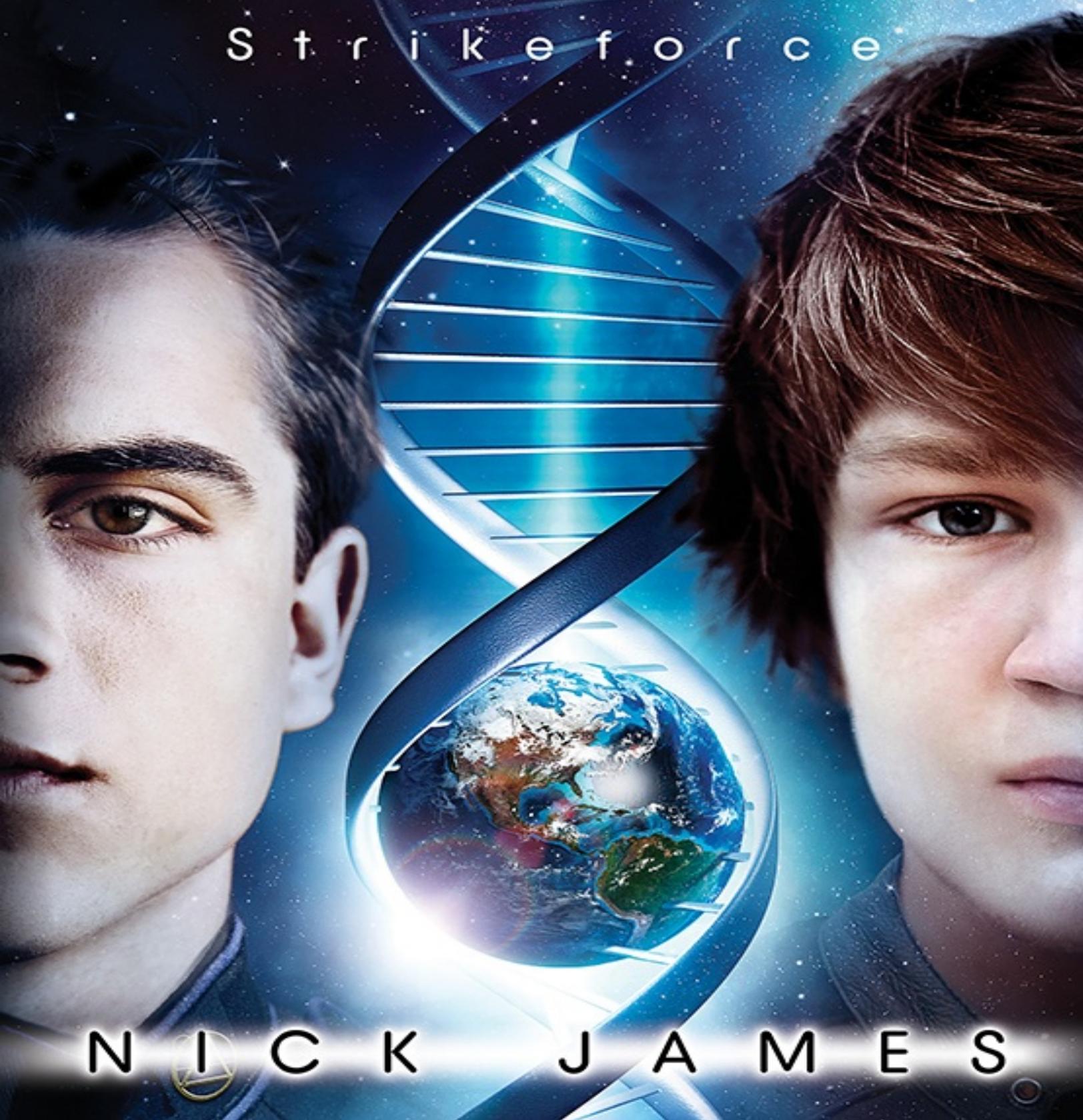


S K Y S H I P

A C A D E M Y

S t r i k e f o r c e



N I C K J A M E S

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1

My fingers burn. The bricks are hotter than I remembered— some supernatural heat that seems to seep out from deep inside. You could fry up dinner on these things. In fact, I bet if you were to crack an egg and watch the insides spill down the side of this building, the yolk would cook before it hit the ground.

But I am not an egg. Right now, I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing.

Cassius glowers down at me, the tips of his boots pressed into my knuckles. My fingers tense on the ledge, gripping onto that impossibly scalding brick with every last drop of energy I've got. I already know it won't be enough. I've been here before, time and time again. Only one time was real, and it hadn't ended well.

Syracuse, New York.

Fringe Town.

I know this is a dream. I know if I concentrate hard enough I can control it. I could rip away the scenery and replace it with whatever I want. It doesn't make it feel any less dangerous.

I take a cautious glance below me. I see my feet first, dangling into thin air. I let them hang loose. Beyond that, twelve stories down, is the cracked pavement of the Fringe roadway. Utterly still. Hotter than a griddle.

"Please!" I hear my voice choke on the word, but I don't feel my mouth open or close. I'm going through the motions. It's like I'm part of a movie. It's playing out all around me.

Cassius smiles. His dark bangs are perfectly combed, unnaturally tidy for the wasteland below us. I notice his navy Unified Party sport coat, the silver badge against his chest. He looks more adult than me, somehow, even though we're both fifteen.

This is the old Cassius. Perfectly confident. Dutiful to a fault. A real killing machine. I don't see any of myself in him. It's impossible to dig past the façade

and uncover the truth. He's my brother. My brother who's trying to kill me.

He sneers. "Where is the Pearl?"

I open my mouth to speak, but end up with silence. It doesn't matter anymore. The Pearl Wars are over. The old rivalries between the Unified Party and Skyship Community seem like child's play. We have new problems. Red Pearls. Invasion. A looming extermination at the hands of an otherworldly power.

I'm done with this. I'm *past* it. But my brain keeps wanting me to revisit this moment. Night after night I'm brought back to our first meeting, forced to endure Cassius's cocky smile until I release my hold on the brick ledge and let myself fall. It's exhausting, but I've learned not to fear it.

I don't have the patience for this.

I begin to wriggle free from his heel. He barely tries to fight back.

The world lights up around us.

This is different.

At first, it's like a sunset. The sky goes dark, then red like someone's poked a vein and let loose torrents of blood. The air grows thicker until it pushes up on me, like my feet are supported by invisible hands. I'm reminded of the Scarlet Bombings, all those years ago when the Authority first attacked us. Clouds of crimson. Death, all around, and a dismantling of the country's biggest metropolitan centers. We'd been naïve, thinking that the bombings were of human origin.

The syrupy atmosphere heats up. The frying pan bricks are nothing compared to this. I must be on fire.

I look up at Cassius. Flames dance around him. They engulf his legs and crawl up his body, eating away at his flesh until all I can see is his silhouette through the smoke. Before I can do anything, the fire streams down at me. I hardly feel it course its way into my body. I'm completely numb.

The sky drips red. The building begins to crumble under my fingers and I know this isn't like the other times. It used to be, I'd wake with a start right about now and the nightmare would be over. Easy escape from my raging subconscious. Now, I'm not sure there'd be any street to hit if I let go.

A laugh pierces the atmosphere. It comes from a distance, off in the sky somewhere, but feels so close that it could have started right inside my ears.

Cassius is nothing but a charred corpse on the roof. Bones break and blow away as dark ashes, sucked up by the red cloud of energy circulating around us. Without his boot, there's nothing keeping me upright. The bricks pulverize in violent explosions around me. I fall, engulfed in flames.

The laughter follows me down. It's not human.

I wonder: If I keep on falling without an end, will I ever wake up?

And then comes the real question. It's not one I want to consider, but it's there just the same, nagging at me:

Do I even want to?

2

“This is not acceptable.”

Madame reclines at the foot of the gleaming metal table. It’s unnecessarily long, just as the room around us is unnecessarily big. This is a place made for armies. We’re twenty-seven strong on our best days—a tight collection of my closest friends and a handful of alien Drifters from the Resistance. Only Madame, Cassius, and I are in the war room now.

This bunker is our temporary home, and has been for just over a week. Northeast Nevada—a secret Unified Party stronghold a quarter of a mile below the ground.

I glance across the table at Cassius, who chews on the remaining end of a stale nutria-bar. Madame’s gaze remains fixed on us. She’s intense. Hiding underground without the luxuries of the Surface hasn’t stopped her from dressing well, or keeping her dark hair expertly pinned at all moments. But it’s all a façade, and it’s crumbling day by day.

I find it difficult to meet her eyes, even for a second. Could be because she’s tried to kidnap me on more than one occasion. But even now that she’s pledged to fight on our side, she’s still mass intimidating. It’s like Captain Alkine times a hundred.

It’s the next morning, after my dream. Turns out I did wake from it, albeit in a pool of sweat. That was three A.M. I haven’t slept since. It’s with the continued threat of yawns that I listen to Madame rattle on.

“Communication is down all throughout the country.” She glares at Cassius like it’s his fault that the Unified Party is crumbling. “Even lines that should be secure are fractured and crisscrossed. I make an attempt to contact the office of the President and end up at the Department of Agriculture. And even then there’s nobody present to take my call. It’s maddening.”

Cassius takes the last bite of his bar. “We don’t know exactly what’s happened on the Surface. Everything’s screwed up. Even if Pearl Power’s still functioning, the infrastructure is bound to be damaged.”

I bite my lip. I don’t have much to add. Watching the two of them talk, I can imagine the conversations they used to have, back when I considered Cassius my enemy. From what he’s told me, he’s always been a gold-star student, capable of discussing military strategy and politics the same way most of us discuss our favorite program on TV. That’s not me. I act on instinct, or to be even more accurate, I *react*. I’m getting better, but none of this war-planning stuff is my element.

Madame rubs her eyes. She looks more human now, under these subterranean lights without all the makeup she used to wear. I can see wrinkles. But beyond that, I see fear. A lack of control. I don’t even know her that well, but I can tell that being down here is killing her. She’s not the only one. The longer we stay, the more distant the Surface seems. A person could lose touch with reality down here. Physically, we may be safe. Mentally? The jury’s out.

“I’ve been up all hours,” Madame continues. “Haven’t gotten more than a few bursts of sleep here and there. I fear that they’ve dismantled communications. I’m sure the President is hiding underground like we are, but that doesn’t do us any good if we can’t reach him.”

Cassius stretches. “Does it even matter? What good will the President do anyway?”

“We’re not doing this alone, Cassius. Regardless of how far you and Jesse have come, you’re in no position to topple an army. We need allies. We need the power of the Unified Party.”

I glance at the ceiling. It’s pristine, just like the rest of the bunker. I’m not sure this place has ever been touched. If there are explosions going off on the Surface—if cities are falling—we’d never know it. We’re cut off completely. Sound, vision, smell. It’s all a mystery to us.

“We don’t know how many of them there are.” My voice catches in my throat. I shouldn’t be nervous, not after all we’ve been through already. “In the Authority, I mean.”

Cassius meets my eyes. “We all saw the red Pearls falling from the sky like a meteor shower. There were hundreds. Thousands, maybe. And that was just the beginning. Before Skyship Altair sank, when Theo held me prisoner, he made it sound like once the Authority started coming, they’d never stop.”

I pull my bare wrist toward my waist. There used to be a bracelet fused to my skin. I still haven’t gotten used to the way my arm feels without it. Turns out that the bracelet, along with Cassius’s, was the only thing keeping our enemies at bay. Theo Rayne—the psychotic young prince in the Authority’s crazed dynasty—had removed them, thus breaking the barrier that had previously kept red Pearls from falling to Earth. These crimson Pearls don’t need my power to break them. They hit the ground, burst open, and attack.

“Theo was always one for dramatics,” Madame says. “I wouldn’t necessarily take him at his word.”

Cassius grits his teeth. “But we know the Surface is under attack. We need a plan.”

I nod. Last night, our Drifter scouts—Talan and Sem—returned from their latest venture to the Surface. Our bunker is too far from a Chosen City to see much, but with the benefit of a good pair of specs, they witnessed enough.

Billows of smoke in the distance. An explosion, rumbling through the Nevada Desert from god knows where. A fleet of Unified Party Cruisers flying low, with speed reserved only for battle. Glimpses. That’s all, but they paint a pretty lousy picture.

And the longer we stay down here in hiding, the worse it’ll be when we go back up.

Madame slams her fist on the table. “I don’t know what to do. I simply don’t.”

Cassius’s eyes slit. “Feels terrible, doesn’t it?”

“You’re relishing this,” she replies. “Do you consider this my punishment, for all I’ve done to you?”

“I think it’s punishment for all of us,” he mutters. “No need to be selfish. Oh wait.” He smiles. “Selfish is all you know how—”

“You should let me go.” I grip the edge of the table and lean my chair back. “I’m the Pearlbearer. I should be *doing* something.”

“No.” Madame frowns. “You don’t sacrifice your queen to attack an army of pawns.”

My brows furrow. “Wait, did you just call me a—”

“Chess, Fisher,” Cassius interrupts. “She’s talking about *chess*. Calm down.”

“Look,” I say, “after what happened back at the Academy ... being stuck in there like a prisoner ... I’m not listening to any adults anymore, no matter who they are.” The words escape my lips before I realize who I’m talking to. Madame’s shoulders tense. I don’t think she expected something like that from me. I’m not sure if anybody, kid or adult, has challenged her and gotten away with it.

I swallow. I could say more if I wanted, but that was ballsy enough. We may be safe from the Drifters in this bunker, but I’m certainly not safe from her. Only a few days ago, she’d been hunting me down. Even if we’re allies, it doesn’t mean I trust her.

“The Drifters are getting restless,” Cassius says. “And remember what Theo told us. Matigo is already here. He’s gearing up.”

A shiver runs down my spine. Matigo’s the Authority’s king, as well as Theo’s father. I haven’t had the misfortune of meeting him yet, but I know it’s inevitable. And given that his own son died bringing red Pearls to Earth, I can’t imagine the guy’s too pleased with us.

Only a short while ago, Cassius and I had been given a glimpse of Matigo’s throne room on our home world of Haven—a peek at his plans via catalogued memories from the Resistance. He’d sent Theo as a herald, but he’d long since arrived on Earth himself. He’s hiding. He could be anywhere.

Madame rubs her temple. “Perhaps this will all be taken care of before you have to.”

“Don’t bet on it.” Cassius pushes back his chair and stands. “If there’s nothing else—”

“There’s nothing.” Madame closes her eyes as if she’s trying to fend off a headache. “Absolutely nothing at all.”

“Forty-eight hours,” he continues. “That’s how much longer I can stay down here. We’re going to have to fight eventually. Stalling just drains our spirits.”

I glance up at him. “Where are you going?”

“Around,” he answers, and it’s enough. I’ve learned not to follow him unless he asks. It doesn’t usually end up well.

Of course, that doesn’t mean that I wanna be stuck here with Madame either. I stand.

She chuckles. “You both can’t wait to get away from me. I suppose it’s natural, after the game we’ve played.”

Cassius freezes. I can see him working it out in his head—to engage in verbal sparring with her or not. In the end, he can’t help it.

“*Game*,” he repeats. “You’ve got a pretty screwed up vision of the world, don’t you?”

“The world is obviously more screwed up than either you or I could have guessed, Cassius. I’m trying to help you. A little respect would—”

“I’m done.” He turns and leaves.

Madame’s lips purse. “Hotheaded,” she says to herself. “Always has been.”

I stare at her, wondering if she’s making a joke or she’s seriously upset. There’s no way she can expect us to be all friendly after everything she’s done. If it weren’t for her connections with the Unified Party, we wouldn’t even be listening to her.

She meets my eyes. “Talk some sense into him, please. I’m tired. This is emotionally draining.”

I shake my head and move from my seat. “Nobody believes a word you say. You know that, right?”

Before she can respond, I head for the door, keeping my face forward.

If this is the help we have, how are we supposed to fight an entire war? We’re screwed.

3

Cassius keyed in the six-digit code and stepped back to allow the door to slide open before him. His hand trembled at his side. He made sure to steady it before moving into the room.

It was one of the bunker's larger living areas, outfitted with two dozen beds positioned up and down each side like an army barrack. A long gray rug ran down the middle, the only attempt to make the place look inviting.

It was also the home of their Drifter allies, at least the few that they'd managed to find before heading underground. The Drifters preferred to be housed together like this, separate from the humans. Cassius supposed that if he was on an unfamiliar planet in the midst of a war, he'd want to be amongst similar types as well. And although he still didn't feel it, stepping inside this room was doing exactly that.

He tried to force Madame's words from his head. Even looking at her infuriated him. There was a time, years ago, where her face had been the one he'd longed for most. He'd called her "Mother," even if she hadn't one hundred percent acknowledged it herself. But ever since she'd started lying to him, then *hunting* him, he couldn't use the word anymore.

He scanned the room. Some of the Drifters crouched on the beds. Others stood in groups, whispering in a language he didn't have any hope of understanding. They all looked human enough, of varying ages and heights, but even if he couldn't easily say why, there was something off about them. The residual glow from the Pearl energy had long since faded from their bodies. Instead, regardless of age, their skin was a pale, babylike complexion. Any wrinkles that were present were surface deep at best. No pockmarks or pimples. The sight of it reminded Cassius of the first time he'd burst into flames. It was as if the voyage from Haven to Earth had seared their bodies of any imperfections.

Angels.

The thought had occurred to him more than once before. In a strange way, they almost looked heaven sent.

Every last one of them turned to stare the moment he stepped through the door.

They were sensitive like that. Good hearing. It made sneaking up on them difficult, not that he'd ever want to try something like that.

He raised a hand. "Hello."

They stared at him in silence for a moment. Then Talan—one of the more advanced English speakers they'd freed from a Pearl more than a week ago—moved forward to meet him.

"Cassius." The Drifter said his name in a way that made Cassius feel like he'd snuck up on something illicit, that these aliens were planning something he shouldn't be privy to. "Greetings, my friend."

He glanced up at the Drifter's eyes. Talan's pupils were a dull green. He still held the faintest amount of Pearl energy he'd come to Earth with, though it was buried deep inside.

"We're flatlining," Cassius said. "It's always the same when too many people talk at once. Nothing gets done."

Talan nodded. "Have you come to discuss Haven?"

"No," Cassius responded. This wasn't the first time he or Fisher had been in to see the Drifters. After all, their information was invaluable. Though they hadn't been able to reveal anything new regarding the Authority's plans for conquering Earth, just hearing about his home planet was like a drug to Cassius. The more he knew, the more real it felt. Simple things like the planet's geography and seasons made the abstract seem so much more real in his mind. "I just ... I needed to get away for a moment." He bit his lip. "She'd look for me in my room. She doesn't like coming here."

Talan nodded. "Your Earth mother."

"She's not—" He stopped himself. "She doesn't have anything to do with me. Not anymore."

"I see." Talan stepped back to take a seat at the edge of a cot. "Well, you're very welcome in our chamber, though you'll notice there are not many distractions. We've been discussing the war at hand, as I'm sure you'd expect.

As you say, the longer we're hidden down here, the greater chance Matigo has of taking over without our resistance."

Cassius leaned against the wall. "Where do you think he is?"

"Anywhere," Talan responded. The other Drifters looked on in reverent silence. "He arrived before any of us, just as the war on Haven was beginning to disintegrate. He's been on Earth for more than a year now ... that much is sure. Beyond that, he could be hiding anywhere. Close. Far. It's inconsequential, really. If the rumors are true, he's powerful enough to be anywhere he wants to be in no time at all."

"Meaning he could attack us down here? I mean, if he really wanted to?"

"I suppose," Talan said. "But it seems to me that Matigo ... that the Authority as a whole is waiting for something. There is nothing rash about his plan. He's hidden this long. It doesn't appear that he's opposed to waiting longer."

"For me," Cassius replied. "And Fisher. Right? He's waiting for us."

"You are the key to our Resistance. That's all we know. I wish there was more. Your parents would know."

Cassius ground his fist against the wall. "Well, my parents aren't here right now." He paused. "Besides, you're wrong."

"About what?"

"I'm not the Key," he muttered. "I'm the Catalyst, remember? The reaction. The excess to Fisher's power."

Talan stood, shaking his head. "You're mistaken, Cassius. You're every bit as important as your brother, if not more so."

"And how do you know that?"

"The Key cannot exist without the Catalyst," Talan continued. "Together, the two of you are stronger than anything Matigo could imagine."

Cassius tried hard not to chuckle at the words. He pictured the times he and Fisher had fought together, the mistakes and messes they'd made.

"We're lucky to be alive," he said. "Let alone *strong*. The best thing we've done is bring down an entire Skyship ... brought in the whole of the Authority to conquer the planet. You know what ... maybe we just need to stay out of the entire thing. Let the Chosens and the Skyships fight it out. I mean, what have we done so far that's worth celebrating?"

Talan frowned, then moved forward to grip Cassius's shoulder. "Wait and see, my friend. Wait and see. You may think you're a small part in the grand scheme of things, but my companions here ... we've bet our entire existence on you and your brother. Wait. Your hour will come, and you will not disappoint."

Cassius brushed free from the Drifter's grip, meeting his eyes for a moment more before turning and heading for the door, his heart heavy with a looming sense of dread.

"I can't be here," he muttered. "I can't be in any room down here." He craned his neck, closing his eyes. "It used to be so simple, you know? Before all of this. When I knew who I could trust and what ... what I'm supposed to do."

Talan's voice came from behind him, but the Drifter made no attempt to approach. "There are no easy answers, I'm afraid. Trust in yourself. You'll do what's right. You'll know it when the time comes. It's like a second skin, the destiny you wear. You're not used to it. It's new. But it fits you completely—inside and out. You are a champion, Cassius Stevenson. Never forget that."

4

That first night in the bunker, sleep had come so easy. It helped that I'd been running around from city to city without any shut-eye. Right now, I wouldn't mind a bit of exhaustion. Insomnia is ten times worse.

It's not so different from back at the Academy, except down here the corridors are impossibly dark, lit only by tiny circle-shaped nightlights every few yards. No moonlight streaming in to give a sense of perspective. Together, the hallways form a large rectangle, branching off here and there but offering little in the way of escape. Basically, there's nowhere to go but your room if you want to be alone.

Avery Wicksen sits across from me on the opposite side of the corridor, back against the wall, knees up. I'm against the other, slumped into a shape that can't be good for my posture. My chin's pressed into my chest, knees just far enough apart to frame her face. We bounce a rubber ball back and forth—an oddly lo-fi relic Skandar found in the bunker's pitiful rec room. Disregarding everything that's happening above us, it's just like old times. We're out of our rooms, sneaking around when we should be sleeping. Except neither one of us really has the energy to do much sneaking. It's mostly sitting.

"I had that dream again last night." My voice rebounds against the silent walls, though I try to keep it at a whisper.

Avery bounces the ball once more before cupping it in her hand. She brushes her straw-colored hair over her ear, eyes narrowing. "Falling off the building?"

"It gets worse the longer we're down here." I yawn. My body wants to conk out. It's my mind that won't let me.

"Do you think it means something?"

"I don't know." The truth is, I've learned never to discount my dreams, especially if they repeat over and over. "The fire was stronger this time. It came down at me, got inside me."

“Cassius’s fire?”

“I think so.” I catch the ball. “He’s getting antsy.”

“We all are.”

“Yeah, but I think it’s worse for him. He’s not a sitter, or a waiter. And I think I’m starting to feel the same. I mean, I know we’re safe down here, but it doesn’t feel right.”

She yawns. “Do you ever wonder what Captain Alkine’s up to?”

“I’m sure Skyship’s still hunkered down in Siberia. They’d have seen the red Pearls by now.” I pause. “Hopefully they’re safe.”

Avery sighs. “It’s the not knowing, isn’t it? That’s the worst.”

“I think I liked it better when we were running around on the Surface.”

“I had the same feeling when Madame brought me back to the Lodge,” she says. “Hooked up to her devices, not knowing whether you were in danger or not. It’s killer.” She meets my eyes, biting her lip. “But you know, maybe the darkness isn’t all bad. We could make the most of it.”

My brows rise. There was a time, not too long ago, where the mere idea of Avery coming on to me would have sent my head reeling. In my mind, it would have been impossible, something I could only dream about.

Now, down here in the darkness, she’s what I could safely—maybe—call my girlfriend. And with everything that’s going on, I can’t even enjoy it.

“I don’t—”

Something in the distance stops me. I tilt my head to make sure that I’m not imagining it. If I hadn’t walked down these corridors countless times in the past few days, it would be impossible to tell how long they stretched. Dark is dark, no matter how far it reaches. Pools of black surround us on either side.

Except for the tiny red light.

It hangs some distance to my right before disappearing around the corner. It’s too small to be a Pearl. More like the blinker on a com-pad.

I turn back to Avery, whispering, “Did you see that?”

She shakes her head.

On instinct alone, I pull myself from the ground and ball my fists.

“Whoa.” Avery stands. “Calm down. What did you see?”

I stare into the darkness. “You know of anything down here that would make a red light? Communicators? Weapons?”

“It’s late,” she says. “I wouldn’t trust my own eyes. Maybe you should—”

“Do you still have that flashlight?” I hold out a hand.

She hesitates before reaching into her pocket and placing a palm-sized light in my hand.

I flip it on. Full power, by mistake. It casts the hallway in a glaring blanket of white light. I dial it down before stepping forward. “Just give me a second. It’s probably nothing.”

Avery glances behind her. “I used to be the one getting *you* in trouble.”

We tiptoe all the way to the corner. I freeze. Avery bumps into me, then grabs my shoulder to steady herself.

“Footsteps,” she whispers. We both hear them. Light, but not far away. “I guess we’re not the only insomniacs around here.”

I block the flashlight’s beam before shutting it off. Taking a deep breath, I peer around the corner.

I see it immediately.

One red light bobs ever so slightly several yards away. Try as I might, I can’t make out any other details. The footsteps have disappeared. The red doesn’t seem to reflect on any of the walls. It’s not strong enough.

“Skandar?” I keep my voice at a whisper. “Eva?”

The tiny light freezes before shifting to the right. I watch as a second light parts from the first, moving slowly apart. I step back in horror as I realize that what I’m looking at is looking back at me as well.

These aren’t lights at all. They’re a pair of eyes.

Before I can do anything, the creature floats off the ground and careens toward me. The flashlight hits the ground as a cold hand slams against my throat, knocking me off my feet and pushing me back through the air.

“Jesse!” Avery’s voice fades as I’m propelled farther down the hallway.

Fighting for breath, I reach up to my throat and pry at the fingers, not daring to look up at the red pupils that blaze mere feet from my face.

I break the creature’s grip and fall to the ground. The back of my head thuds on the floor, sending a dizzying shockwave through my body. I try to ignore it,

fighting through the pain as I climb to my feet.

I take a shaky step forward as the creature lands behind me and spins around. Avery's flashlight clicks on again in front of us, forcing my eyes shut. I hear a gasp, but can't tell if it's from the creature or her.

I lift my hand to shield my eyes and feel the creature's fingers tighten around the back of my skull. I cry out. The thing doesn't care. It shoves me forward, too fast and forceful for me to react. I can't catch myself. My face plants hard into the ground.

The corridor spins. Avery's voice pops in and out of my consciousness.

"Stop!" she yells. The beam flickers off, then on again.

Something grabs my ankle and yanks upward. My left leg twists unnaturally, like it's about to be pulled from my body. I grit my teeth and claw at the ground. Blood starts to pool under my face.

Avery screams. "Put him down!"

I hear footsteps. My body inches across the floor.

"He's killing him!"

A second voice joins the fray, but everything's spinning and throbbing and blacking out. I can barely focus.

An incredible heat streams over my head, like someone's just brought the full brunt of the Fringes inside the bunker. The corridor lights up. I feel my leg drop to the ground. Something shrieks behind me, otherworldly. Inhuman.

Before I can react, hands reach around my wrists and pull me forward. I flip onto my back to see Cassius and Avery looking down at me.

"Are you alright?" Cassius meets my eyes.

I nod, then glance over at his fist. It's still sparking.

Fire eats away at the corridor. Soon, the crackle of the flames overtakes the screaming. The bunker falls silent. The creature is dead. If not for Cassius, I would have been, too.

5

The charred body of the enemy Drifter lies before us, placed unceremoniously in the middle of the wide circular table like a sick centerpiece. Nine of us stand around the perimeter of the bunker's tiny war room, staring in at the corpse with a mix of revulsion and curiosity.

The creature is human enough, but even past the darkened patches of flesh, it's easy to tell that it's different. It's not the same kind of "different" as our allied Drifters, either. This is something new.

Its arms are bulky like a body builder's, with strange ribbed indentations from the shoulders to the elbows. I can't tell if they're functional or simply decorative. Its mouth, from what I can see, is wider than any human's. Its eyes are pure gray, dulled of their red glow from last night. It wears a dark tunic and trousers covered in colorless body armor, though much of the clothing has been ripped from its burnt flesh.

Sem, one of the friendly Drifters, stands at the head of the table. "This is an Authority foot soldier." His thin eyebrows sink as he glances down. "Not every soldier will draw attention to himself. Some will look no different than you or I. This man has clearly been ... augmented."

Cassius rubs his chin. "How did he get in?"

"It appears this base is not as secure as you thought." Sem frowns.

"It's unheard of." Madame crosses her arms as she flashes the soldier's body a look of disgust. "If nothing else, Unified Party bunkers are secure. I wouldn't have suggested we come here if—"

"Nobody's blaming you," Cassius shoots back.

Avery stands beside me. Her hand moves from my back up to my shoulder. "How are you feeling?" she whispers.

I shrug. Better than I look, probably. A black eye and a thumb-sized scrape across my cheek won't exactly inspire the king of leadership I'm going for. The

truth is, the mental effects are much worse than the physical ones. I keep replaying the confrontation in my head—what I could have done differently, how I could have reacted better. The Drifter had taken me by surprise, and I was careless enough to walk right toward it.

But the real question that's been nagging me doesn't have anything to do with my own reaction. Had the soldier attacked on instinct or had he intentionally targeted me? The way things have been going, I can't be sure of anything anymore.

Eva Rodriguez clears her throat. She stands next to Skandar Harris on the left side of the body. They've both been in this with me since the beginning. Fellow Skyship trainees, and now fellow Resistance fighters. Eva's made for this kind of thing—a soldier through and through, and definitely more physically imposing than I am. I know that Skandar would like to think he's equally up to the task, but he's so impulsive. I'm worried that he'll do something stupid and get himself hurt.

The two of them have been chummier than usual these past few days. I don't know if it's the isolation of the bunker or something else, but I've never seen them cling to each other like this before. Maybe they just don't know what their place is in all of this. Cassius and I are Haven-born. So are the Drifters. Eva, Skandar, Avery, and Madame got pulled into this.

"Bottom line," Eva starts, "is that it isn't safe in here anymore. That's what everybody's thinking, right?"

"Right now I'm thinking about *him*." Skandar rustles his messy brown hair, motioning to the soldier. "*This* is the kind of thing we're up against? We don't stand a chance!"

Sem glances at his fellow Drifters, one on either side of him, before addressing us. "The crimson in their eyes is the giveaway, but we won't always be engaging them in darkness. In the light, especially sunlight, it will be impossible to distinguish the enemy without getting close. Without seeing the reds of their eyes."

Cassius clenches a fist. "He didn't like my fire, that's for sure."

"Odd," Sem responds. "As a former resident of Haven, he should be accustomed to the heat."

“I went in full blast. I don’t think anyone’s accustomed to *that* sort of heat.”

Avery nods. “I was lucky enough to jump back in time. Even then, I felt the flames. Jesse was right under them.”

“I’m fine,” I say.

“But you shouldn’t be,” Madame counters. “You should have caught fire. We should be dealing with third-degree burns right now.”

I glare at her. “Gee, thanks.”

“I channeled it well,” Cassius says. “The flames hit what I meant them to hit, and nothing more.”

I glance at him, wondering if he’s telling the truth. He doesn’t look back.

“If they’re gonna start creeping down here,” I start, “I think I’d rather be on the Surface. At least then I’d know to expect danger and be ready for it. They wouldn’t have a chance to corner us. We could find weapons ... allies ... ”

Avery’s hand drops to her side. “Are we ready for that?”

Cassius scoffs. “Will we ever be?”

“You don’t win wars by hiding,” Eva adds. “Fisher’s right. We need to get to the Surface.”

Avery cringes at the word. “But what do we do once we get there? We can’t just abandon shelter without a plan.”

Madame rests her hands on her hips, staring at the floor. “I give up. I can’t seem to contact the President, and without him I have no line to the Unified Party. If we travel to the Surface, the Unified Party needs to know what we know. We have the means to defeat this enemy, but not the leadership to see it through.”

I take a deep breath. “No. The Unified Party’s gotten us into enough trouble already. What we need is the Skyship Community.”

Eva nods. “In an invasion, you attack from higher ground. The Skyships are our biggest weapon. Head up to the Tribunal if you want the government involved. At least we know where they are.”

“I can’t go to the Tribunal,” I mutter.

“Why not?”

“I’m the Pearlbearer. Standing around and talking isn’t my thing, and it isn’t gonna help. I need to get out there and free more Drifters. We’ll have a better

chance that way.”

Sem nods. “Jesse is correct. The more friendly Drifters on the ground, the better. Haven’s natives are the backbone of this war. We don’t need the government to fight. We need the Resistance.”

“There’s a framework,” Madame starts. “There is order to war.”

Cassius leans his hands on the edge of the table. “Why not do both? Split into two groups?”

Madame shakes her head. “I’m not sure it’s wise to separate ourselves.”

“I’m not sure it’s wise to stay *together*,” Cassius counters.

It’s silent for a moment as each of us ponders what tactic is in our best interest.

In the end, it’s decided that there will be a pair of forces: one to head up to Skyship Atlas and speak to the Tribunal, and one to help me break Pearls, releasing as many allies as I can manage in a short timeframe.

It’s decided that my support team will be Avery, Skandar, and a couple of our Drifter friends. A small group, but at least I trust them.

Meanwhile, Cassius and Madame need a loyal Shipper to get them past clearances, so Eva’s heading up to Skyship Atlas with them.

It all gets thrown down in what seems like no time. I think everyone’s just eager to get out of this bunker, especially now that we know it’s not safe. I certainly am, but that doesn’t mean that the idea of traveling back to the Surface doesn’t bring anxiety. Everything bad that’s happened to me has happened up there. I don’t see that changing.

Our mission code name: Strikeforce. Get our respective jobs done and rendezvous as soon as we can.

We have communicators. And Unified Party cruisers. It should be manageable, but the thing is, we’ve got very little idea of what’s going on above us. There are a thousand unseen variables—possibility after possibility for something to go wrong.

Still, it gets us out of the bunker, so I’m not going to argue. For now.

Two groups.

Avery clutches my arm. “We’re sticking together, Fisher.”

I nod. “There’s no way I’m letting Madame close to you, especially when I’m not around.”

She chuckles. “Well, aren’t you just the big hero?”

“We’ll see,” I respond, staring forward at the wall. “We’ll see.”

I head for Cassius as soon as the meeting breaks. He walks through the door into the outside hallway. I follow him.

“What do you want, Fisher?” He marches forward without looking at me.

I match his pace. “You’re sure this is a good idea? I mean, if you hadn’t have been there last night, I would be dead right now.”

“You can take care of yourself,” he replies. “Besides, you’ll have Wicksen and Harris. Plus the Drifters.”

“I just want to make sure ... ”

He stops and turns. “We’re targets. You realize that, don’t you? Matigo’s hunting us. Hell, the entire Authority’s hunting us. If we stay together, we’re a bigger target.” He starts walking again.

“I get it. I get the logic. I guess it’s just ... you guys have a clear plan. A destination. All I do is go up there and break Pearls?”

“Not just Pearls,” he replies. “Find a storage center. Break as many as you can.”

“Where?”

“A Chosen City. Portland, maybe, since you’ve been there before. Trust me, the Unified Party’s got way more Pearls in storage than the Skyshippers, and the west coast hubs are particularly well-stocked.”

I follow him around a corner. “How do you know that the Unified Party is better stocked than the Skyship Community?”

“How do you think?” He shakes his head. “How do I know anything about Skyship?”

I swallow. “Madame.”

“It used to kill me how naïve you guys were,” he says. “Floating up there like we weren’t watching your every little move. I guess we were all naïve, though.” He stops outside his makeshift room. “Suit up, Fisher. We leave in an hour.”

He shuts the door and leaves me standing in the hallway. I close my eyes for a moment and am instantly brought back to my dream two nights ago. I see him

bursting into flames, and not coming back from it. I hear the laugh, echoing in my mind.

We have to do this. There's no choosing. But that doesn't mean it isn't gonna end badly.

6

The row of Unified Party cruisers sits at the far end of the transport bay, five in total. The one we came down in is parked at an awkward diagonal in the opposite corner. The five unused models gleam and sparkle with the reflection of the overhead lights. The one in the corner is too scratched and dirt-caked to reflect anything. Sort of like us.

Skandar stands to the right of me, Eva to the left. For a moment, it seems like we're back in the docking bay of Skyship Academy.

I tap my foot on the ground, mostly to break the all-encompassing silence of the bay. "It's gonna be weird doing this without you, Eva."

She crosses her arms. "Don't be silly. You've got Harris. Unless you don't want him."

Skandar frowns. "Of course he wants me. I'm every bit as good in battle as you are."

"You keep telling yourself that."

My mind runs through the conversation I had with Cassius. Portland. Last time I was in the city, Cassius had been hunting me down. Avery and I had crash landed, right through the Bio-Net. This time, we'll have to break in from the ground. No small feat.

Footsteps sound behind us. I don't need to turn and look to know who's waiting.

Avery walks up and massages my shoulder. I watch Madame stride in front of us, thrilled to take command even though nobody's officially appointed her. She can do the talking if she wants. I'm not gonna argue.

She stops and pivots, hands on hips. Her mouth's curved in a deep frown. Cassius and the Drifters fill in on either side of us, creating a semicircle. I close my eyes for a moment, hoping to feel any residual Pearl energy from the

Drifters' bodies, but they're drained of it, which means if we get into a scrap on the Surface, they'll be as much help as a human.

Madame takes a deep breath. "You all have your com-pads. They will be our only link until we rendezvous again. If anything goes wrong." She pauses and stares at me. "*Anything*, we all need to know of it as soon as possible. Don't be a maverick. We're here because we want ... *need* ... to help each other. Even if we don't like one another, we're in this together, and all the stronger for it."

She clasps her hands behind her back. "We'll take the pair of cruisers in the center. Avery, I'm confident you remember how to operate Unified Party transportation. I know it's been some time."

Avery's eyes slit. "Don't worry about me."

"I'm not," Madame responds pointedly. Then, her expression softens and for a moment it looks as if she's going to walk over and give us a hug. Lucky for everyone, she stands her ground and releases a sigh instead. "Good luck."

I nod. "You too." And it's not even completely disingenuous.

"Cassius?" She motions him to her side. He glances back at me before joining her. I watch them all disappear into the cruiser. Eva's last. She turns and gives me a slight nod and a worried smile, but says nothing.

There aren't any long-winded goodbyes. Nobody down here is really the type. It's better that way. It keeps our focus. Besides, goodbyes give the sense that we're not going to see each other again for a long time.

"C'mon, Jesse." Avery's voice snaps me out of my thoughts.

I swallow, then turn to take one last look at the bunker before boarding our cruiser.

Once inside, we take our seats. Skandar stays in the back cabin with the two Drifters while Avery and I man the cockpit.

I watch Cassius's ship take off first, hovering up toward the ceiling of the bunker, which peels open with slick silence. Soon we've got a chimney of sorts to guide us up to the Surface.

Avery brings our cruiser safely underneath theirs, providing enough distance to keep any of the residual effects of their thrusters at bay. I watch as the sight of the bunker outside my window is replaced with dark earth. Soon we're pushing up through the narrow, claustrophobic tunnel.

Then, the sky.

As hazy and troubled as it is, it's still a relief to see. I've been living under low ceilings for too long. The vast expanse of the Surface stretches all around us—an unending blanket of barren brown. In a way, it feels liberating.

That liberation is short-lived.

As I watch Cassius's cruiser pull away to the left, I spot a red Pearl in the distance. It hurtles toward us, falling faster than any normal Pearl I've seen. And I know that, despite all of my powers over green ones, I can't stop it. When it comes to red Pearls, the Authority's in charge.

Avery tilts us from the Pearl's path, just as it rockets past our port side. I feel intense warmth in my gut that only begins to fade once the Pearl is far enough away from us.

"They're still coming down," I mutter.

Avery straightens us out, not saying a word. We continue to speed from the bunker door, which has now closed and blended in with the desert surroundings below.

I take a look at the Surface ground. It's quiet and still. That much is unchanged. This far from a Chosen City, there's not much that the Authority could destroy. Of course, that doesn't mean that they won't still be nearby. Waiting.

An explosion sounds in the distance, somewhere off to my right. I glance out the window to see a shuttle—I can't tell if it's Skyship or Unified Party—come bursting through a thin layer of clouds. It's little more than a speck from here, but it hurtles to the ground in a clear diagonal path, too fast for landing.

Seconds later, I watch the shuttle collide with the ground in a second explosion. I don't see a parachute. Worse yet, I've got no idea what brought it down. The skies seem quiet.

The cockpit door slides open, revealing Skandar.

"Whoa!" He runs up to the console. "Did you just see that?"

"The skies aren't safe," I reply. "I didn't think there'd be so many of them, so close."

Avery flips a switch on the ceiling. "I wish this thing had some cloaking."

I grit my teeth. I've crashed before. It can't happen again. "Just get us to Portland. The faster we can be on the ground, the better."

"Roger that," she says. "Out of the frying pan, and into the—"

"Don't." I close my eyes and take a deep breath. "I'd rather not think about fire. I'm sure there'll be enough time for that later."

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