

It was a normal day at McCleskey Middle School, Rod Trujillo and Ashley Kenyon sat in class. Though they were surrounded by other students, Rod was talking to her about something to do with how William Shakespear's last name sounded like, "Shake a spear." He was so easily entertained.

"So... Rod, why is it that this is so funny to you?" asked Ashley, though she herself could not keep a grin off her face. She wasn't entertained by the joke itself, but to Rod's response to it. Rod looked at her from something as if he'd been distracted. Though he sat across from her at the table, he had to lean down to be at equal height with her.

"Hehehehehe... You know why! It sounds like Shake a Spear! How can't you think thats funny?" as Rod said this, his blue-ish greenish eyes widened considerably. He wasn't especially tall, but he was considered very broad by anyone in his grade, and though he was only 5'6" he weighed 190 lbs. He wasn't ripped by anyones standards, though he'd disagree, saying, "Of course I'm ripped. I'm so ripped its not even funny!" And though he wasn't ripped, he was heavily built. He looked down at Ashley, who was only 5'1" with great respect, for he knew what she and any other girl could do to a guy.

"Its not even that funny.." she said, but while saying, she began to laugh, because he looked at her as though she were crazy, and he was the normal one. Rod looked into Ashley's eyes, they seemed all brown, but he knew they had some green them.

"Haha! Your just mad because you think its stupid, but you still think its funny.. See, I'm crazy, but I'm smart!" Rod's hair, a year ago would have bounced up and down because it was over an inch tall but stood straight up, now was just sitting there, a flat top(thought to be stupid by many of his friends, but he liked it because it made him look more like Wolverine, his idol hero). He looked around, a bit spazzy-ish. Everyone else in the room, though loud and obnoxious, they were all keyed in on their own conversations.

"I don't think its funny! I just think *you* are funny!" said Ashley, she got louder when she said, "You." As she said this, their teacher Mrs. Robertson walked in.

"Hey... Rod and Ashley, come here," said Mrs. Robertson. Both Ashley and Rod got up and walked over to her, got in front of her, "Hey, I need someone to lift something, Mr. Trujillo, I think that'd be you, and someone to hold the door for him while he lifts the stuff, I think Ms. Kenyon is well equipped for that job." She motioned to a large box full of text books.

"Got it ma'am, I'll have this done faster then something that is fast," Rod said, he grinned broadly as he said this, thinking himself slightly funny at least. He also loved to lift stuff. At morning workouts for football, he lifted the most of the people there. He was considered a very good football player, the MVP two years in a row, and the starting middle linebacker and the starting fullback, who also went to the all stars. He didn't like to brag, but lifting was something he was very good at.

"Yes ma'am," was all Ashley said, more shy then Rod by far. Rod leaned over, and picked up the box with a low grunt. He always grunted though, whether heavy or not. And Ashley opened the door behind Mrs. Robertson. They both walked out, Ashley in front, and took a left. The walked the ten feet that was between them and the door to get out to the trailer's in the back of the school. Ashley opened the door and Rod walked through it. Rod walked the hundred and forty feet, Ashley close behind him, and asked Ashley open the door. Ashley did.

They walked into the trailer, and Rod dropped off the books on a desk. The room was sparsely lit. He looked around, then turned around, then walked out, Ashley right next to him. He looked across the parking lot, to the door that was now locked.

"Hmmm.. I think you were supposed to hold that open for me.." Rod said, he looked at Ashley and winked. "Here, lets go on an adventure." He began to walk around to the front doors of the school, a fairly long rock. More then four hundred meters. Ashley jogged up to his side then walked next ot him. "So Ash, how is Spanish class treating you?" Rod asked. He knew she was probably acing that class, while he was barely keeping a B in it. When Ashley didn't respond, he looked back. She stood completely still, then he looked to where she was looking. A meteor was flying across the sky. It was

small but it seemed to change directions. It started to fly right at them.

“Ashley!” Was all Rod said before he scooped her up on his shoulder and began to run at a full sprint, faster, he hoped, than Ashley would have run, seemingly stunned by the meteor flying at them. He heard as it burned through some trees that were behind him, and he heard her gasp as it flew into his back. Both Ashley and Rod felt pain, but then they were in a deep, deep sleep.

Both Rod and Ashley lay on the ground, completely unselfconscious, even when the first teacher stumbled upon them, both laying in the parking lot, seemingly unharmed. Rod and Ashley were right next to each other. She screamed, and then called the police. An ambulance appeared quickly, and took each to the hospital.

Ashley was the first to wake from their two month coma. She awoke with a start, her mom right next to her, asleep. Ashley looked around, scared at first. Her eyes were already adjusted to the dark of the room. She heard a small voice, barely noticeable. She looked down at the ground, the place where it seemed to come from, and then saw a small mouse.

“You woke up!” was all she heard before she nearly screamed. “No! Don't scream! I'm a mouse!” said the mouse, it climbed up onto the side of her bed. Ashley stared at it, dumbfounded.

“You've been in a coma for nearly two months!” said the mouse.

“You can talk?” was all Ashley said, and her mother awoke with a start, then looked at her. Tears rolled down her face, she hugged Ashley, then started to say things to comfort her now awake daughter.

Later that day, Ashley was informed that Rod had awoken, that he was also fine, but that he wasn't as awake as she was, that he was still in a haze. She was allowed to go home that night, and when she returned home, she was very happy to be at home that night.

Chapter 1

Rod awoke from his sleep, his mom was right next to him, she looked at him, grief shown clearly on her face. Lex, his little brother was there too. His dad was at work, though he too would have been there if he could have, and Ana, his big sister was also working. His mom jumped up, as Rod's eyes slowly opened, and Lex ran to go get his nurse.

“Ma,” he said, opening his mouth, which was dry and crisp. She hugged him, and kissed his cheek when Lex ran back in, and looked. Tears of happiness rolled down his “ma's” face while Lex smiled, happy to see his brother not on his back. His “ma” showered him with words of love.

The nurse rushed in, then said, “Ma'am, he needs to be left alone, so we can see what happened.” Rod frowned, and his mom fixed her with a grim look.

“He's fine, and awake now. Give me five more minutes,” said Mrs. Trujillo. Rod grinned.

That night he was allowed to go home. He was so glad to be home. He walked into his living room, where his dad, Marty Trujillo, and his sister, Ana Trujillo, looked at him, grinned, and ran up to hug him. Rod accepted the hugs with happiness, and hugged them both back. His “ma” looked at the two, and more tears of happiness rolled down her face. Lex was playing Black Ops on the T.V., but paused it to observe the transpiring events.

“So am I going to school tomorrow? I need to see Ashley, I have to ask her something,” said Rod that night, while he devoured a delicious, one of many, dinner made by his mom. Mashed potatoes and gravy with chicken. He stopped eating to say this and get a drink of orange cool aid, his favorite.

His mom and dad looked at each other, while Ana and Lex both looked at Rod, nearly laughing.

“What is she your girlfriend?” asked Ana, hoping to make a playful argument.

“Do you want to go to school?” asked his dad, he was happy to see his son back, but he wasn't sure if he thought he was ready for school yet.

“Yeah! I gotta see my friends.. plus I might as well have a beard right now, so you know I gotta brag dad! And I want to make sure I'm not too far behind on Spanish!” Said Rod, he was happy to be back, and though he seemed enthusiastic about school, he dreaded it. He just needed to talk to Ashley about the meteor he'd seen..

“Well.. if you want to.” Said his mom.

“Well, all your friends have been lost without their fearless leader, Rod, or Kujo!” said Lex, though he knew that wasn't the case at all. In Rod's absence, the second strongest guy on the football team had taken over custody of the team, Bailey Vance, who was also Rod's best friend.

“Sweet! So I can go?” asked and said Rod. He grinned broadly on the outside, but on the inside, his heart felt like it was going to burst and burn at the same time. He was terrified that he'd caused them to go into that coma, by picking her up and running with her, then maybe tripping. That night Rod went to bed with nightmares.

The next morning Rod woke up at 7:30, he looked at his phone, which was a few feet away from his bed. 219 new text messages, it said. It'd been charging for the last two months, and apparently he'd become popular that whole time. He looked through them. Most of them were from his best friends, Keely, Amber and Fiona. He knew Keely over facebook, they'd been a great match of friends with similar beliefs. He knew Amber from track and field, running at The Heat, and he knew Fiona because she had run at The Heat also, but now moved to Tennessee. He had great friends. He read through them, smiling at his friends worry.

His favorite was from Keely, saying, “Heyyyyyy dudeee. Aree you okayy? I heardd you were ina comaa! I hope you get betterr!”

He got up, then looked at his door. It wasn't as wide as before. He looked down. His gut was still hanging a little, to his ultimate dissatisfaction, but his chest and biceps were huge. He looked down, and lifted his pajama's up, to see larger calves and thighs. *Huh... I knew I was built..* he thought, grinning to himself. He opened his door, and took a right, then knocked on his parents door. His mom told him he could enter.

“Hey ma.. can I take my shower?” he asked. His mom said yes, then he walked forward into their bathroom, then closed the door after opening it and walking in. He got into the shower.

Half an hour later, after putting gel into his hair, cut into a flat top again, and his contacts in, shaving his beard down a little bit, so that all he had was long, thin side burns. He walked into his room, and put on some matching clothes, red shorts and a red T-shirt. This was going to be the weirdest Tuesday ever, and it was May.. weird. His birthday was in 21 days.. On May 31st he'd be fifteen. He chuckled at the fact that he could grow a beard. He left his room, after listening to his TDG CD for a little, and made his lunch.

He and his brother got in the car, and his mom got in too, she was a little slow today, having been up all night last night. His dad was at work, so she was driving them. She drove them to school in ten minutes, and when he walked up to the front of the school, flash backs assaulted his mind. He felt the searing pain of the meteor flying into their backs. But he walked it off, only grimacing slightly at the burning pain in his back. He walked into the front office, then past it. The women in the front were busy. He walked the good fifty meters and was in the sky light, the middle of the whole school. He looked at the seventh grade hall, which was filled with all kinds of kids, they were walking around, doing their own business, if thats what you'd call it. *Hmmm.. no welcoming part, I guess..* thought Rod.

He began to walk down the eighth grade hall when he was stopped by a girl.

“Rod! Your back! I heard you were in a coma! Someone said you were dead!” Said his friend, a great friend, named Echo. She hadn't texted him because she didn't have her phone, but she'd stolen it a

few times and tried to call him. Echo was only a little shorter than him. She was his best friend at the school, aside from Ashley. As he walked to his Home room, Mrs Robertson's room, he was recognized by a lot of people, but he cared very little. He walked right passed Bailey and a group of his friends and stood right outside of home room. There sat Ashley. He froze.

Chapter Two

The whole car ride home from the hospital was silent, and Ashley stared bluntly out the window of the passenger seat of her mom's blue Honda CRV. The air was frozen, and she felt so awkward knowing she'd been so vulnerable the past two months in her coma. Ashley blinked slowly, shaking her head a bit at the head.

*A...a coma. *She thought, impressed. It was still shocking to her, but was disappointed that her streak of never visiting the hospital for broken bones or sprains or anything had been broken just in March. By a stupid...meteor? Memories suddenly scalded Ashley's mind, and she had to grip her temples to stifle the sharpness of what had happened.

Somehow...somehow, I meteor had shot deliberately at Rod and her outside of school. In broad daylight. Coincidence? Ashley wasn't sure what to believe anymore as her eyebrows crinkled in thought.

"How are you feeling, Honey?" Anita, Ashley's mom, glanced at her from the driver's seat, worry widening her stressed, dark brown eyes.

"I'm fine, Mom," Ashley reassured her, looking away immediately and trying to act like the past two months never happened. Which, technically, they didn't really happen for her. At least, she didn't *feel* like they happened.

"I'm sure Dad will be happy to see you," Anita started casually, making Ashley groan on the inside. She didn't want to hear all this small talk.

"Yeah. I'm sure my friends will be too. Actually, I'll just be happy to get home," Ashley grumbled. "The sooner the better."

"Yes," Anita agreed, and they fell silent again.

The moment the car eased to a stop in our garage, Ashley shot out from the car and dashed inside. She was greeted by a stunned father, who promptly outstretched his arms for an embrace. She graciously ran into them and felt tears form behind her eyes for some reason...but managed to conceal them expertly. Ashley definitely wasn't the mushy type, and hated to betray her emotions to others.

The night passed quickly after they exchanged talk of how things changed while Ashley was practically dead, and dinner had never tasted better. Anita had cooked up her favorite meal of all time just for her -- butter pasta with just a dash of garlic and a sprinkle of grated cheese on top. After the plate was served to her, she added just about a mountain more of cheese.

"There." Ashley announced, pride flashing in her eyes in admiration for her masterpiece. "Perfect."

Grabbing a fork, Ashley dug into her pasta and scarfed in down her throat, not realizing how hungry she'd been until the tantalizing aromas of her meal had met her nose. Within moments, her plate was scraped clean, which was something very unusual for picky little Ashley.

"Want seconds?" Charles, her father, offered.

"Yes, please!" She exclaimed, jumping up as though a caveman might jump over and steal it all before she had a chance to get over to the stove.

Before she knew it, she was passed out in bed, her eyes slits as she stared at her familiar ceiling, glad to be in her old bed once again. The comforting sheets hugged her body and warmed her to the bone as her cool fan swept across the room in oscillating circles. Only one thought crossed her mind as she began to drift off to a world of the unknown, where anything was possible: *Hey, Ashley. Long time no see. How are you feeling?*

As soon as she tried to contemplate the thought, she was out, and sleeping like a baby.

The sun slanted through her peach curtains, and penetrated her eyelids. Ashley unwillingly shoved the covers off and rubbed her eyes with her fists, glancing at her clock. 7:13. She flopped back down on her pillows with a groan. She'd woken an hour early, and even after nine hours of sleep, she felt as though she just ran a marathon.

That's when everything came flashing back into Ashley's mind, making her jolt. A purr from her doorway distracted her, and her eyes flickered over to the sound to see a small, dainty siamese cat. She was light gray with dark and black stripes running down her back. Crystal blue eyes gazed up at Ashley's half-asleep figure, questioning and curious.

Are you awake yet?

"What?" She murmured aloud, looking around. No one was her my room. "Mom?"

Snores echoing from her parent's room down the hall told her both her parents were still asleep, and a cruel shiver ran down Ashley's spine. Was she having post-effects from her coma? Or was she just experiencing traumatized visions brought on by her mind's unwillingness to accept the discomfoting fact she'd been to the hospital for the first time ever for being hit by a *meteor?*

Deciding against Ashleying asleep, she hopped out of bed and rummaged through her dresser for something to wear. A simple brown shirt would do nicely with some skinny jeans. And hey, make-up wouldn't do too badly. She had time to spare.

By the time she was completely ready for school, the clock ticked away to 7:56, and the first signs of life from her parent's room started to reach her ears. The slight creak of the floorboards and the small click of a lamp told her that her mom was up. Several moments later, she heard the toilet flush, and recognized her dad was awake and around.

All that was left was breakfast. Ashley swept down the hall, not daring to look at her cat, Sheba, who was still sitting by her door, and skipped into the kitchen. Surprisingly, her refrigerator looked way different from when she'd last seen it...two months ago. Right. Slowly pulling open a drawer, she noticed a fresh stock of strawberries, and found

a grin dancing across her face.

Ten minutes later, she was sitting at the kitchen table alone, staring blankly at the flashing TV and gobbling up a cinnamon toaster strudel with sliced strawberries on the side. She absolutely loved breakfast, which was definitely the most important meal of the day to her, no doubt about it.

As soon as she got to school, she was already greeted by Tara, who happened to be getting out of her car the same time as Ashley was. Rarely, Tara ever said hi to Ashley unless it was necessary, but I guess being out for two months straight made you sort of famous.

Ashley pressed on, passing by the office in a rush, and hoping her two best friends Nina and Dijah wouldn't notice her pass by. She would absolute loathe the looks of concern, the forced sympathy their eyes would show her. Ashley didn't have time for sympathy, and would never accept it from anyone. She simply hated being worried about in any way, shape, or form.

Luckily, she escaped view of the front office without being seen, and she scampered through the halls delicately. She was stopped several times, some by people she knew well and others she barely had talked to throughout the year. Either way, concern all clouded their eyes as they asked if she was okay and what the coma was like, etc. *Word got around*, she guessed, sighing, readjusting her pack's strap, then bravely walking into Ms. Robertson's homeroom and bracing herself as she sat down.

Chapter Three

Rod decided to walk into the room after about two minutes of staring at the back of Ashley's head. He was nervous and felt guilty. He walked towards her, hurriedly, but was intercepted by a small boy with blond hair and a loud voice.

“Rod!” Said Ryan Norton, “Your back! What happened?”

“Hey dude, uh, I was.. I don't know what happened, I just fell on the ground, I guess... Me and Ashley were.. here, dude, I'll talk to you later,” said Rod, a jumble of thoughts rushing into his head at once, he felt overwhelmed. He walked up to Ashley, who'd turned around at the loud voice. Everyone else in the room had noticed him and watched the encounter with slight interest. Rod started to say something, then stopped and looked around.

“Guys, you know staring is kinda mean...” said Rod, but he knew they didn't really care about what was and wasn't mean. They did look away though, because they recognized the half pained look on his face to mean he was quite nervous and very on edge about what was about to happen, and they'd learned long ago that if Rod was on edge, they'd better leave the situation, or it quickly escalated.

“Hey Rod,” said Ashley. She looked up at him, thinking to see what he was so pained or upset about.

“Hey Ash... I uh... Ashley, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?” Rod started, his voice hurried and shaky. “I was so worried, I don't know what happened, I mean, I saw a meteor, and I saw you staring at it so I got you on my shoulder and I ran away, but I must have tripped.. God, I must sound crazy to you!” he was starting to break down, guilt flowing through out his brain.

“Okay, first of all. I saw the meteor too, and I'm glad you grabbed me, because if you hadn't, well... I don't know, it'd not be very convenient.” said Ashley, “Second of all! Don't worry about me, I know you know I don't like that. Third of all, your not crazy.. or at least not much crazier then you were before..” She said. Rod looked down at her, and began to say something when he was cut off by an even more loud voice. He turned around to see a tall black girl. Kayla.

“Rod! Thank God!” Rod flinched as she said that, “Where have you been?” She ran up, arms wide, and gave him a hug. Rod stood there, kind of stunned. “I've been so worried!” She said. Ashley looked up, giggled at Rod's obvious discomfort.

“I've been.. In a coma, I guess..” said Rod, he was having a hard time not just breaking down and sitting down. He felt her squeeze him, and he appreciated that she cared, but he couldn't handle it. *What do I do?* He thought, for the first time unnerved by the care of a girl. He backed up, and said, “Look, I'll talk to you later. I have to talk to Ashley, okay?” He said.

Kayla looked at him, slightly offended, obviously. Then she giggled, winked, and said, “Alright, good luck buddy.” Rod blushed. Ashley looked up, then laughed openly.

Ryan walked over, put his hand on Rod's shoulder, then said, “Haha, dude, its been... slightly different without you here.”

“I'll take that as a complement,” said Rod, gaining back some of his lost whit. He looked at Ryan, then grinned, “Tell me... are there any new girls around?”

“Aside from Chaselyn, who you already know.. and seemed to know before she came here, no,” said Ryan, then he sighed, “Its been dull... Oh, Mrs. Winter's is back.” Rod looked over at Chaselyn, then felt a slight tug in his chest. Then he felt a literal tug as Ashley pulled his hand.

“You can stop slobbering,” she said, with a wink. Rod looked at her, and all the guilt returned.

“Look, I'm sorry, I just.. I don't know, I'm just... I got scared-” he was cut off.

“Like I said, you don't need to be sorry, I saw it too.. wait, what is It?” said and asked Ashley. She looked over to the back of the room, where Ethan, Dustin, Jake and Chaselyn were playing cards. BS probably.

“I don't know.. it looked like a meteor to me.. I feel sick,” said Rod, and he started to walk out the room, but then someone said something to him.

Rod turned to see Heather Lane looking at him. She was a red headed girl, though she might have passed for a brunette, who was just a few inches shorter then Rod. She looked at him, and he looked at her.

“Hi Heather,” said Rod, a weird mixture of dislike, loathing and some other emotion that Ashley nor Heather nor Ryan could tell.

“I heard you were in the hospital, in a coma..” said Heather. She looked friendly enough, but Rod seemed to be pained by the attention.

“Yeah, I was.” Was all he said before he turned around and walked out the room. He made his way to the bathroom, where he stood for a few minutes, clearing out his feelings to himself. When a few of his friends walked in. He felt relieved to see Alex Llerandi among them, one of his best friends. They talked for a bit.

Ashley stood there, shocked at Rod's reaction to Heather. Heather looked impassively at Rod's back as he walked out.

“What was that?” asked Ashley, she too looked where Rod's back had just been. She'd never seen him react to anyone like that. He was always friendly..

“We were friends.. and now we're not.” Was all Heather said before walking away. She left Ashley alone with Ryan, someone she rarely talked to.

“I hear that he and she had a bad night one time, and then that was the end,” said Ryan, but then he too walked off, distracted by another group of people entering. Ashley sat back in her seat, then looked at some Spanish notes.

Rod made it through first period, LA, second period, Math, third period, Spanish, and fourth period, P.E. without feeling weird. He did feel weird, but he felt something else also. He walked into fifth period, Health, and sat down in his seat. Today they were allowed to go into the weight room, he planned on getting out some stress and anger and guilt on the bench press and squat machine. The teacher, Mrs. Wilkes, said he could go early, since she knew she could trust him, but made no effort to pry Rod of details. *She understands..* Thought Rod as he walked to the weight room. Halfway there, he was intercepted by one of his friends.

“Hey Vance,” said Rod as his friend Bailey Vance walked towards him. “You know, I’m gone for two months and you still waddle.. whats up with that?” Rod said and asked, then he took Vance’s outstretched hand and embraced him with a hug.

“You never change,” Vance said, “heading to the weight room?” he asked. Rod nodded, and Vance said, “I’ll spot you, we gotta see if you still got it.” Rod nodded again. They entered the weight room and both instinctively went to the bench press. Rod decided to start easy, and put forty five lbs on each side of the bar. “How much you lifting?” asked Vance.

“This is about one hundred five pounds, a warm up, if I remember correctly,” said Rod, as he got under the bar. He lifted to weight off the rack without a problem. He let it down til it hit his chest then pushed it up, grunting, “one.” He did this eight times, then put the weight back on the rack.

“Put another fifteen pounds on each side,” he said, then after he and Vance had put thirty pounds more on the bar, he got underneath it, then did his reps. A weird feeling coursed throughout his body as he thought *Too easy...* He did ten reps this time, then, “Put another fifteen on,” he said. Vance looked at him suspiciously, then complied. They added another thirty pounds, then Rod pumped the weight out.

“Put on two more forty fives,” said Rod. He was confident he could do this.

“How much is that?” asked Vance, sounding slightly worried.

“Two hundred and five pounds,” said Rod, then he put the weight on, as Vance did also. Vance looked at Rod as though he were crazy. Rod got underneath the weight, the weird feeling returning again, then pumped out ten reps. He was barely breathing hard. Vance looked at him in shock.

“Put on another forty five on each side,” said Rod. They did, and Rod lifted it with ease. Rod said his command again, and soon they were at five hundred and fifty pounds. Rod benched pressed this with some difficulty. Vance looked at his friend, very impressed but worried, he couldn’t do that to save his life. But Rod was in some distress, for his body, and though this was considered a good thing, bulged out with new muscle that hadn’t been there. He wasn’t any taller, but he was bigger and stronger.

“Dang du-” Vance started to say, completely oblivious to the obvious changes in his friend, but was interrupted by the bar snapping in half. A loud crash erupted on the ground as the weight flew into the ground, and Mrs. Wilkes rushed in.

“How much weight is that?” she asked, obviously flustered at the two boys.

“Five hundred and fifty pounds,” Said Rod, sweat starting to roll down his face. Mrs. Wilkes stared at him. She then grinned, and walked in, thinking he was joking, but then looked down at the weight. It added up to five hundred and fifty pounds.

“Who did that?” asked Mrs. Wilkes.

“I did... ten times.” Said Rod.

“Rod?” asked Mrs. Wilkes shock and slight terror on her face.

Chapter four

Stepping into band class, fifth period, I immediately felt out of place, and knew I’d have to face Nina. When she sat right beside me

in the French horn section, it sort of *was* hard to avoid her. I scampered past the two band instructors and slipped into the brass room, which was, thankfully, empty. I grabbed my horn off the shelf and slid to the ground. Of course, my soothing silence didn't last long as the door swung open. Gendi Nyaga, Kyle Guerra, Johnny Allen, and David Frew all barreled into the small room. I intentionally avoided David's gaze – long story.

“Hey, what happened to you?” Johnny asked in that obnoxious way of his, but underneath the annoying layer, I could find a touch of worry coloring his voice.

“You haven't been here for, like, four months or something!” Gendi, who was about two inches shorter than me, threw his hands up in the air with exaggeration.

“Two months,” I corrected faintly, unlatching my case casually.

“Same difference,” David sighed, ruffling his mouse brown hair with one hand. “What happened, Ashley?”

“Nothing much,” I shrugged passively, yanking my horn out of its case and wishing Nina would magically appear. Then again, she could just add fuel to this little fire.

“Ashley?” Ms. Stoney, the assistant band director, stuck her head through the door, not bothering to ask for my story like the others. “Come by my office for music.” And like that, she was gone again.

I sighed, standing up with the French horn propped under one arm, and nodded to the group of boys before darting out the back door. Of course, the moment I stepped into the main band room, I was flocked with a new group of students including Lexie Hough, Armani Morton, Caroline Hale, and KhaDeem Coumarbatch.

I shrugged them off and quickly scooted to my seat. As soon as I sat down, I felt a sharp jab between my shoulder blades, and craned my neck to see Dijah sitting behind me, innocently holding her trombone.

“Cut it out,” I rolled my eyes, about to snap under pressure with all the unwanted attention. I had to admit, though, I was doing pretty good. About fifty people asked what'd happened, and I never even hinted at the reason. If I told them what I thought I remembered about the meteor, they'd think I belonged back in the hospital a little longer. That sort of thing just didn't happen.

“Where were you?” Dijah pleaded. “I tried calling you, like, a million times!”

My eyes widened slightly at the mention of my phone, and I immediately unzipped my purse and lightly pressed a button on the slide.

199 New Messages. My phone always displayed the name of the most recent text, and Rod's name was lighting up the screen.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I tried to process what everything so far meant. Okay, maybe it was a random meteor from the sky, and Rod and I had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But, then the voices? Eh, I was probably just hallucinating from stress.

The rest of the day passed by, and I still hadn't given up her secret to anyone. By the time I was standing up at the office at 4 o'clock in front of the microphone for announcements, Dijah was pounding me for information.

Eventually, around 4:06, I turned on her.

"Just lay off, alright?" I snapped, my hands balling up into fists. "I don't even know what happened myself! So, let's just forget about it, okay?"

Dijah's expression fell flat, and her hazel eyes were cold. "You expect your *sister* to just move on and forget you weren't here the past two freaking months? That's, like, a fifth of the school year! Do you know how much Spanish you missed?"

I gave her a "duh" expression, and before she could continue, pressed the button and recited my usual: "Teachers, please prepare for the afternoon announcements."

After I finished reading my stack of announcements, I passed the mic off to Dijah, who was glaring at me. Before she even finished ending the announcements, I grabbed my backpack, swung it over my shoulder, and stormed out of the office.

Being surrounded by fresh air was surprisingly calming, and I sat on the empty bench with a grunt. Shielding my eyes from the sun, I glanced back over my shoulder at the front door, but yet no students flooded out yet. Dijah must not have finished her last line.

For once, I was glad I was the first one outside, completely alone with my thoughts and no distractions.

That's funny, considering I'm hearing everything you're thinking.

I whirled around, expecting my neighborhood friend Luis Novaes to be standing there with a smirk on his face, but instead found

dried up leaves being tugged at by the wind on the ground. I looked up at the Sakura tree standing tall before me to see a small winter wren perched up in its branches. Hm.

It cocked its head, stared at me for a moment, then bellowed out its song to the world. At the same time, though, I heard another voice in my head.

What are you staring at?

I gripped my hair with my hands, shaking my head with disbelief. I'm going crazy.

You're not crazy. Why is it so weird if a normal bird just tries to make friends?

My gaze picked its way back up the tree, and I found myself in the middle of a staring contest with this light brown and cream wren.

"W-who are you?" I tried, feeling stupid. I was talking to a *bird*. "Are you some sort of...robot thing?"

Oh, yeah, that seems practical, the voice snorted in my head. I wasn't sure, but it sounded female to me. *A robot bird out of nowhere who can get in your head. Idiot.*

My eyebrows pulled together and my eyes widened with bewilderment. No way...

You don't believe me? The bird ruffled its wings, and its eyes blazed with a challenge. *Fine. Hold out your hand.*

Shakily, for some reason, I obeyed the winter wren and raised my hand into the air. I flinched when the bird jumped from its branch, unfurled its dappled wings abruptly, and soared down to my finger. Gingerly, it flapped in place for a moment, then landed itself on my forefinger. Its claws dug their way into my skin, but I really didn't notice. I was too busy gaping.

Okay, tell me to do something, this strange little bird ordered me.

Alright. Er... I thought hard, focusing on the creature. This was just too freaky. *Outstretch your left wing while tucking your right wing in and balancing on my finger with one talon.*

You are a tricky little one, aren't you? the bird seemed to let out a sigh, then, amazingly, copied my requests to the tiniest detail. Just as I was about to object to who exactly was the little one, the

doors flew open and kids swarmed across the sidewalk and made their way towards the bench my pack sat on.

The bird shrugged to me, then quickly dive bombed out of my hand and zoomed into the air. My eyes were fixed on the small creature, dumbfounded, as it swept over the river of students gracefully, arcing, then taking off into the forest behind McCleskey.

"I really should get more sleep..." I murmured to myself just as Mari eagerly joined me. "You'd think after two months I'd had enough, though, right?"

"What?" Mari looked up at me, her hazel eyes sparkly with relief at seeing me alive again.

"Nothing..." I muttered, my eyes still desperately searching the horizon for the winter wren I just finished my *conversation* with.

Chapter Five

I was walking out of school, so relieved at the fact that today was the end of the day. I was near the front doors of the school when I saw Ashley standing alone... she held her hand out, which shook. My initial reaction was to go out and see what was wrong, but then I saw what was on her finger. A *bird*, how weird, I thought. But I wanted to see what was happening.

The bird did some weird pose thing, then Ashley stuttered or something, then the bell rung. I was engulfed by a wave of kids before I knew it, all wanting to get out of school. I wanted to talk to Ashley alone, but before I could get to her, I saw Mari, her friend, talking to her. Anger began to build up in my chest. *Why am I so mad right now?* I thought, wondering at my own over reaction to a minor... hopefully... situation.

I started to walk towards my ma's car when something weird happened. I felt that weird feeling in my thighs again. The anger returned, and it began to build up even more. All the kids around me on the sidewalk took little notice of my stopping in the middle of the sidewalk. Then I felt it. A searing pain ripped across the back of my neck, then rippled throughout the rest of my body, overwhelming me with such pain and anger and agony.

I swooned as it intensified with thoughts of what had happened today. Then the guilt struck in, and I felt my arms and legs begin to build up on themselves. The other kids walking down the sidewalk stopped and looked at me as I grunted in pain. I felt it start to move throughout all of my body then, the agony indescribable. I was about to Ashley over when my brother, Lex, caught me. He asked me if I was okay, and when I tried to respond, all that came out was a groan.

I felt energy start to build up after the pain receded, we were still standing there. The kids surrounded me and Lex as he lowered me to the ground. Then Lex gasped.

"Your eyes..." he said, his eyes wide behind his glasses and long hair. As I opened my eyes again, everything took on a red haze. Then I felt the guilt again. I jumped up, and slammed back onto the ground, rage welling up inside of me. Looked down, barely in control of my own actions, and saw that I was gigantic, ripped and huge. *That's more like it..* I thought, in a moment of clarity. I felt something begin to raise up in my chest. It wasn't pain or guilt or rage. It was dread.

A scream sounded out, and I looked up to the sky. A weird thing was floating in the air, then a

beam of some sort shot out from it. It hit the school, exploding some parts of it, sending chunks of rock into the air. *Ashley!* I thought, panic now coursing throughout my body. Then I heard a scream.

My muscles tensed. I felt such... rage... anger... and guilt. *That was Ashley! Or Heather! Or...* I thought of a list of names of people that I'd feel guilt of their deaths. I felt something change. Several beams shot throughout the area, sending more chunks of rock into the air. Then I felt a pain in my body that I'd never experienced before. The redish haze turned blood red, and I jumped up at the ship. The ground cracked beneath my feet as I lifted off. I flew at the ship, and slammed straight into it.

I blacked out for a few seconds, then I regained my composure, and saw two alien things looking at me. Their heads, insect like, turned sideways as they observed me. I felt such... anger at them. They'd killed Ashley, or Heather, or Echo... Then it happened.

I rushed in at the alien things, each grabbing what I assumed to be guns, and they hit me with something, but it didn't matter. I hit one with my fist, rock hard, smashed his face in. I felt something gushing down my side, and then I turned on the other alien. It hit me with something, and I flew away from it. We were on the ground, surrounded by fire, I'd just noticed. I felt something gushing down my side.

The creature hit me with its weapon again, and I flew several dozen meters, and smashed into the P.E. room, and some kids cried out, for they'd been hiding in there. I took no notice of them as my foe walked in. Rage welled up in my chest again, and I jumped to one side. The beam flew right past my face, narrowly missing, and I jumped to the opposite direction. I was only a few feet from it, when it hit me with another blast. The gushing was even more intense.

Barely conscience, I laid on the ground. Blood was over my eyes, making the red haze even more red. It stood over me, triumphant, and pulled out a knife like thing. It put the knife right over my chest, whens something slammed into its side. I looked over, weariness overwhelming me slowly. I turned to look at my savior and it was...

Chapter Six

Panic was all I felt at first as a saucer-shaped aircraft flew through the sky and paused over our school. The glint of something shiny inside had my alarms going off inside me. I looked over to see a second ship, but it turned around, as though something else had gotten its attention.

This was our first and only concern right.

“Mari, duck!” I yelled, shoving her under the bench. Just in time, I rolled under behind her, when a large beam struck the side of the school. Oh, God...this was **not** good. Was Dijah alright? Had Nina already left with her mom? What about her younger brother, Khalil? Then Rod crossed my mind, and I quickly glanced at Mari.

She was gripping her head, frozen with fright, and tears running down her chin. “What’s going on?” she asked in a small voice.

How should I know? Dread welled up inside me as I grabbed Mari’s wrist and tugged her along behind me.

“Just follow me, Mari, and don’t look back!” I commanded, sounding surprisingly steady despite my terror. Between the two of us, I was always more leaderly, even though Mari was half a year older. Then again, she was an inch shorter.

“Okay!” she whimpered, struggling to keep up with my pace.

I took off towards the P.E. hall, and ducked behind some bushes when another round of lasers shot at the terrain around us. I shielded my eyes and glared up at the saucer-thing, to see... *Rod?*

“Rod, what are you doing?!” I shouted up at the sky, but my voice was lost with all the screaming of the surrounding students. Poor kids without any wits.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Luis standing with his group of friends, staring up the machine with an idiotic look on his face.

“Luis!” I growled, diving over to him. Before he could respond, I yanked him down to the cement, and pulled him over to where Mari and I’s hiding spot behind the bushes was.

“What’s going on?” His blue-green eyes flashed, and a mixture of emotions crossed his face.

“Just follow me and make sure Mari doesn’t get herself hurt,” I hissed, glancing back up in the direction of the flying thing. Rod had leaped off of it, and judging by his irregular steps and actions, he was being pursued.

“Come on,” I motioned to them, and scurried across the open land into the school, hoping the lasers wouldn’t choose right then to shoot at the building again. If so, we were toast.

Upon entering the gym, I noticed Rod struggling to keep up the fight with an alien-looking creature. *This is just freaky,* I bit my lip and narrowed my eyes. Anger flooded me when Rod was slammed to the ground, and the alien pulled out a knife.

“Stay here,” I ordered Luis and Mari. Luis gave me a thumbs up, his eyes hard with determination, while Mari offered a faint nod. She’d obviously never been in a situation like this, and had no clue what to do or how to react. Then again...neither had I.

Dropping everything I had, including my sanity, I pelted towards the creature at full speed, and it took everything to knock it away from a nearly-unconscious Rod.

“Let’s do this,” I breathed, looking strong in my fighting pose, but inside realizing I had no chance against this equipped extraterrestrial.

It shrugged, then came at me with the knife. I barely ducked away, then my eyes found a bow attached to its back. A grin flitted across my face as I stayed just out of reach. Practically dancing, I stealthily evaded this creature’s fighting techniques. Only once it managed to skim my cheek, leaving a thin little cut in its place.

Enraged, I slipped between its leg-looking things, and swiped the bow right off its back. Grabbing an arrow from the basket hooked around its shoulders, I quickly fixed the bow.

It whirled around, flinging me across the ground. I slid on my side, desperately trying to place the arrow in its socket, and figure out the string. It’d been a year since I shot one of these, and even then it was just a Styrofoam arrow. This was the real deal, and had the capability to kill in my very hands.

I’d never killed before!

“Just do it!” I heard Luis shout from the opposite side of the gym, jumping up and pumping his fist encouragingly. Mari lay on the ground at his feet, looking as though she was about to throw up. Completely useless, she slumped back against the door and covered her eyes. Thanks for the support, Mari.

Okay. I can do it. Lives were resting on my shoulders, and if I didn’t do anything, I might wind up dead, also.

Once I stopped sliding, I quickly turned over so that one knee was on the ground and the other was propped up by my foot. I rested my right elbow on my leg, and closed the left eye, taking a deep breath and centering my shot.

In the matter of a moment, I stretched the string back and released the arrow, sending it right into where I figured the heart was on this creature. It staggered back, gripping the arrow with its three-fingered hands, and pulled it out. Along with the arrow came purple-colored liquid, which I assumed was its blood, and winced as it fell back and knocked its head on the ground. It was dead before it hit the floor.

Sweeping my gaze across the eerily silent gym, I noticed Luis and Mari still in their stances by the door, Rod covered in blood in the center of the gym, and a group of cowering students in the far corner. First thing was first.
Rod.

Chapter Seven

Rod slipped in and out of conciseness. He could feel the blood pumping in his head, what was left of it, and figured that wasn't a good thing. Looking up awkwardly, he saw three faces: Echo's face, Ashley's face, and some other person he didn't recognize at the time. He slipped out of conciseness. A loud siren went off in the distance, and time seemed to stop.

Energy flew throughout his body, and Rod moved his arm. He reached around, and felt the open wound in his side. *Woah... that feels bad..* Thought Rod. He opened his eyes again, and saw that face again, one he didn't recognize, and thought hard on it, ignoring the grinding pain in his side. He knew a puddle was around him, probably of blood, because he could feel it on his legs.

He closed his eyes for a second, then the sound came back, as his numbing feeling began to wear off. He felt feeling coming back into his fingers. Ashley loomed over him at this point, then looked up. An ambulance was nearby, and she thought this would be a good time to get an ambulance.

“Echo! Go get an ambulance! Or some people who can help!” said Ashley, then Echo ran off, tears streaking down her face.

“Hi... Hi Ash..” mumbled Rod, he looked up. Blood was clearly in his throat, she could tell, because of the gurgling sound that he produced with each word. Rod felt feeling flow into his legs. He moved his arms again.

“Hey Rod... your gonna be okay, okay? Don't worry, we're just gonna go and fix up that... big bloody wound!” said Ashley, again on the edge of panic. Rod looked up at her, and smiled, then nodded off.

Rod woke up in a small room in the hospital. *This is the second time I've awakened in a hospital in the last month!* Though Rod. He grunted as he reached over and felt where his wound had been. It was patched up neatly. The door opened, and light flooded in, overwhelming Rod's senses, and he flinched as the light hit his eyes.

"Who are you?" croaked Rod. He couldn't see any features, but he knew it was a girl, because of the long brown hair. She wasn't very tall at all, and Rod wanted to figure out who it was. He thought back to when he'd been lifting weights.. then felt the energy flowing again.

"Its me!" said a familiar voice, and he felt a certain longing to be near it. It was musical in nature. Rod then got up, wincing at the pain in his side. He looked down at her, and she up at him.

"Well.. I can't see right now, so who is it?" asked Rod. He was uncertain what to think, for suspicion rose in his chest.

"Its me, silly!" said the girl. Rod then got a good look at her, since he eyes had finally gotten used to the new light, and it was Ashley. But then... it wasn't her. Her eyes were cold... evil looking. Her smile was cold and uninviting. "I'm back!" she said.

Rod backed up in a corner, and panic overwhelmed him, and he felt a feeling rising within him, ready to burst out, and he felt it expanding in his chest.

"I've come back, silly goose, to help you!" said the voice, but at the end of its words, it began to change. Her shape changed and she was suddenly towering over him. "I've come to get your power out!" said the creature. Rod's eyes widened, and he felt the power growing with the creature. "ITS TIME TO BECOME WHAT YOU MUST!" Screamed the voice.

Rod yelled out something indistinguishable as he jumped out of his bed, sweat dripping. Right next to him sat his friends, Echo, Alex Llerandi, and Ashley, each with a worried and shocked look at their friend. Rod looked at the three, then he relaxed. Their eyes were normal.

Rod looked at Ashley for a second, then smiled a big, shining smile with the recognition of his friend, "Shake a spear," he said. And Ashley and he laughed, as did Alex, for he'd been in on the joke.

"How'd you sleep?" asked Alex, his voice mocking. As he said this, he brought his hand up to his head, covered in black hair, and moved it around in a circular motion, indicating his friend was crazy.

"How long have I been out?" asked Rod, his breath now slowing down, and he thought, *This is the second time... third I guess... that I've woken up in a hospital bed this month...* Then he thought of something else, *I hope its only been a month...*

"You've been asleep and out for... about seven hours since we've gotten you here, and it took us about three to get you here. Before Rod could ask why it took so long, Ashley continued, "You kept changing sizes in the ambulance, and they had to re-strap you."

"Changing sizes?" Rod asked.

"Yeah, they said you were swelling up... but I think that it was the meteor." said Ashley.

"Ashley!" said Rod, trying to hush her.

"No, I've told them, I figured I could trust them," said Ashley, "and they kinda guessed that it had something to do with the coma or something... Alex talks a lot." Then she winked a bit, and giggled, a little embarrassed.

"Oh... what do they think?"

"I think that after what I saw, and what you did, and what she did, and what I didn't do," started Alex, his eyes widening with each word, "I would believe Just About Anything."

"And plus, you kicked the crap out of that alien thing," said Echo, "I doubt you could have jumped that high, or that far, before."

After Echo and Alex left, Rod and Ashley had small talk, then Rod was allowed to go home. His mother was there to pick him up, and she'd just figured out that Rod had been... mortally wounded, but

survived. When he got home, he ate then went straight to bed, completely stunned by the information given to him by Ashley. *I have powers* thought Rod as he faded into sleep, easily four in the morning. He heard his dad getting up for work when he finally nodded off.

The next morning, at school, he could see all the destruction. The P.E. room was completely destroyed, but aside from the sky light, the rest was in tact, enough so for them to go into and out of school. Rumors spread fast, and Rod and Ashley were the stars of the school.

“So, Rod and I have been friends since the beginning,” said Ryan, “and now that he's cool and all that stuff, all you guys want to be his friend.” He squeaked a little with each word, and Rod could tell he was aggravated.

“Rod! Your back!” said a few girls, most of which hadn't said a word to Rod unless they were forced to, which was rarely. Rod walked right past them. He walked into their homeroom, and saw Ashley was reading something, obviously uninterested in whatever it was. He walked right in, skipping the guilt part.

“Hey Ashley, thanks for saving me... I kinda remember now.” Rod said this, but looked away, distracted by a loud voice.

“Hello Rod,” said the voice. Rod turned around, and right behind him was Tara Spire. Once again, a mixture of feelings flooded throughout his body, and felt all anger, sadness, loathing and happiness at once.

“Hi Tara,” said Rod, gruffly, then he turned around again. “So Ashley, are you okay?”

“Yes Rod, I'm fine, now... they want to talk to you, because they Think,” she winked as she said this, “That you jumped into the craft.” Rod wondered at this, then heard a voice in his head.

Rod turned around again, “Hi Tara, what do you want?” he said, aggravated. He liked the attention, but didn't want to be a freak. He just wanted to be the guy who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

After a few hours of explaining to his peers that he'd not done anything at all heroic, but had been sucked up by some weird thing, and that Ashley hadn't even done anything, that she'd been sucked up too, but the monster's, or the weird things as most kids like to call them, machines had broken and it shattered everywhere, killing both of the aliens. Most of the kids hadn't been able to get a good look, so none could disclaim the more likely and less appealing story.

“So... what about those that saw us?” asked Rod. And Ashley explained everything.

Chapter Eight

Frustrated, I frowned to my desk. A piece of blank paper was staring back up at me, mocking me with its sharpness and ordinary reputation. No matter how much popularity yesterday's stunt of Rod's was bringing me, I almost wished my life could be back to normal. That I could be left alone to my own thoughts and judge people silently, behind the mask of a quiet voice.

So, as Rod approached me from behind during homeroom, I almost whirled around and slapped him across the face, until he actual recognized it was him.

My eyebrows lifted when Tara approached us, and started conversation with Rod. Luckily, with most of the kids I've spoken to today, none seemed to understand what happened the day before. I myself didn't, but I wasn't going to act like it. Part of me wished they'd seen my epic act caused by my

adrenaline rush with the bow and arrow, and how I'd defeated the alien creature. Then again, I was fine, also, being known as the girl who just sat in the back of the room silently.

My mind wandered back to the hospital, where Rod had woken for the second time in a month. I'd spent seven hours alone with Alex...well, with Echo there also. Echo and I had spoken a few times at the beginning of the year in chorus, but after our play, we began to realize conversation wasn't difficult, and became easy friends. We weren't extremely close or anything, but we always thought of each other if we were in need of a companion in boring classes.

Then there was Alex, who was of course, very talkative. With his chocolatey brown eyes and semi-long, raven black hair, his tan skin, most of the girls, especially in math, found themselves tripping over him. I could practically see the tiny hearts in their eyes when they looked at him, especially in Sydney everyday at lunch. But what worried me most here, was that Sydney already had a boyfriend of her own. I wouldn't really trust her with any other guys if I were her boyfriend, especially Alex, and in my opinion, she wasn't that great of a girlfriend. She was always gossiping about Harris (her boyfriend), to her friends, and dwelling on all his negatives. Of course, when Mari was around, she would brag about how she and Logan (Mari's boyfriend), and her and Harris should all carpool to the eighth grade dance together.

Anyways...while we were at the hospital waiting for Rod to wake for , I had plenty of spare time in the waiting room with Alex. Echo had been picked up part way, then came back just in time to see him come to. Alex and I had at least five hours to ourselves, and I'd come to know him pretty well in that amount of time. He was actually pretty funny.

Shaking my head, my wandering mind returned to reality, and I realized Rod had been repeating my name over and over, snapping his fingers in front of my face.

"Wh...what?" I mumbled, only bits and pieces of our one-way conversation returning to my brain.

"I have to tell you something kind of important," he whispered so only I could hear.

I nodded in understanding. Boy, there was a lot I had to tell him also. And if I had a tiny hint...it had something to do with our little meteor problem.

I readjusted the collar of my pink sweatshirt, which was covering a forest green tank top before standing up and moving to an empty desk, away from any people. "What is it?" I prompted him as soon as we were out of earshot of anyone.

“Well...I had this...weird dream,” he began awkwardly.

“Alright?” I pressed.

“Okay. So there was this girl. She, uh...nevermind. Well, she transformed into this new creature thing, and told me my power needed to be released or something.”

“Maybe she meant your mad muscles,” I teased, poking one of his arms tentatively. On the outside, I was all smiles with my bright, cheerful eyes, but inside, I was wondering what was *really* going on with him. He couldn’t have become so strong in one night that he could jump fifty feet in the air and grab on to that mysterious, lethal aircraft.

“No, Ashley,” his eyes were hard, and his expression told me he was serious. “It’s something more than...what we’ve known before.”

“Well, no duh,” I gritted my teeth with exasperation. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I know whatever it is has no problem with killing off all of us. I don’t trust the school anymore. I feel it isn’t safe, nor do I feel anywhere in the open is safe anymore. Rod...” I trailed off, trying to figure out in my mind how to put my next few words.

His blue-green eyes watched mine carefully, and I could tell he was listening patiently.

“I think I can communicate with animals,” I winced, looking away quickly. Yeah, it sounded insane. This was my chance to ask Ms. Robertson if I could use the bathroom, then escape to the forest out back of our school. I could find the bow and arrow I stashed in the large, gnarled roots of one tree back there and wish my family luck on their own. I could escape this sudden threat, use the animals around me as resources to find out what was going, and make a living on my own. If no one believed me, that was okay. I could manage.

Of course, I was surprised when he said, “That makes sense.”

My eyes widened as I quickly switched my gaze back to his face. He looked thoughtful, gazing at something behind my shoulder. “I think I have super-strength or something.”

Okay, now I felt like we were back in elementary school, imagining we were living in a world invaded by aliens, and that we were caught in a battle to save humanity. But with the recent events, this crazy fantasy of Rod and I’s might not be so far-fetched after all.

“I don’t know if I’ll make it through the day,” I admitted, my paranoia from yesterday catching up with me. The walls of the small classroom were

beginning to close in on my, and I felt defenseless without the bow I'd snagged from that alien yesterday.

"You'll be fine," Rod promised, and I shrugged. "Regroup outside this afternoon."

"Okay," I agreed lightly, then sat down when the first period bell rang and Ms. Robertson began to narrate class in her monotone voice.

I was curious about my new ability to talk to animals, but also worried, and slightly terrified of this new impending threat on society as we know it. Besides that, life was pretty good.

Chapter Nine

I walked down the hall, looking around, thinking about what was going on in school. I'd done some research, and figured out what happened to all the remains of the "ship" or whatever that thing was. And it was 3:30, so I figured I'd tell Ashley once we got out of school, at 4:15. *Only fifty five minutes..* I thought, then I corrected myself (one of my many *only forty five minutes...* I thought.

The time went so slow. Mrs. Winter's class was always one of my favorite, but I could tell she too was bored by the video on the screen. Sherman's March to the Sea could only entertain you so many times... It was the same video every time. We were looking at the video when I saw a girl who looked to be around Ashley's name, and she looked a Lot like her. *How unusual..* I thought. I felt some weird feeling move through my stomach.

Gas... I thought, then chuckled out loud. Echo turned around and looked at me, a questioning look in her face. Then I realized what had just happened. The girl who looked like Ashley had been killed in the crossfire of some large battle that I didn't know. *Oh crap...* I thought, *I can't believe I HAD to laugh just then..*

"I didn't laugh at the video, that's horri-" and I was cut off by the feeling returning, but ten fold this time. I could feel it expanding, leaping out throughout my body, making me feel as though I were being filled with energy. *Ah crap..* I thought. I stood up and went to talk to Mrs. Winters.

"May I use the restroom?" I asked, "Please?" I looked at her, and she looked tired. She was obviously thinking about her baby, which she'd given birth to sometime before, and she'd spent a sleepless night, last night, or so I guessed.

"Yes, honey, go to the bathroom," was all I needed to hear from her before I whipped around, thanking her, then paced out of the room. I got out into the hallway, the feeling expanding. Pictures flashed through my head, overwhelming my senses with horrific images of Ashley being hurt or abused.

I was about to lose it when Ashley walked out of her classroom, I had no clue which one, nor did I care at the time.

"Oh hey Rod," she said, and she rushed over. Her expression changed from one of slight cheer to one of worry. "Rod, what's wrong?" She asked. I tried to say something, but all that came out was a croak. Then I looked down at my arms, and motioned like I was flexing. They were getting bigger AS she looked.

Worry quickly increased on her face, and some guilt flooded into my system. I felt something building up in my chest, and felt the need to run. Things went blank for a second.

I was halfway to the door, leading to the woods, when I heard Ashley yell something, but I ignored her. I could feel it rising. Images flew into and out of my head. I could feel it expanding,

growing, intensifying. Then it happened. I roared, screamed in anguish, trying to get all my pain out, trying to release all the rage held within. Birds flew from tree's and some car alarms went off. I fell to the ground, feeling the cement fly up and slam into my face. I could feel the gravel begin to crack as I slammed my fist's into the ground.

A yell from Ashley helped me ease back from my sudden anger and rage flash. Tears streaking down my face, I looked to Ashley. I wanted to run to her, to break down crying, to just roll into a ball and cry right next to her. I wanted to just lay there, but I knew I couldn't. My legs felt power in them, and I had to get it out, or I'd explode... and hurt people. And Hurt Ashley! I couldn't let that happen. I ran. I ran fast and far.

Two miles later, a bird was following me, I could tell. It angered me. I looked at it, and wanted nothing more then to squeeze it, to hurt it, to do it harm. *No!* My mind screamed, fighting the rage within, *You can't do this! Get control you sissy!* Then another voice screamed back, **No! You must not fight this. Let it expand, and then let it out. Let it destroy everything! We gave you this for a reason! Now use it!** Thought the second voice. *No! You can't do it! It could hurt your family! Your friends! It could hurt Ashley! The only one who understands!*

While I battled within myself, I continued to run. Quickly though, I ran out of breath, and laid over, pain overwhelming even my anger and rage. Then I stopped, and slept.

The next morning, I woke up to a deer standing over me, its eyes staring into me. I looked over, and Ashley sat there, dirty and tired looking, but strong and beautiful as ever. She sat there, nearly asleep in the dim light, still and watchful. I tried to stand, but I found something was on me. I looked down at my chest, and vines had grown over, as had wood and things of that sort.

"Ashley!" I whispered, "Ashley!" She woke, jumping up, her bow ready, and a few animals jumped also. I just then noticed everything around me. Two badgers, or something, and a few racoons that marched around like soldiers. Three deer sat looking around, idle. And a Bear! She was sitting around a Bear!

"Rod! Your awake, are you... you?" She asked, and the bear rumbled over. I looked at it, it snorted at me. It lifted its paw, and WHACK!

Blackness.

Chapter Ten

"No, no!" I cried, calming the large black bear down. "It's fine. He's a friend. Just when he's normal. So, most of the time he's a friend."

The bear grumbled, without giving an understandable response.

"Okay, everyone," I stood up, announcing. "You all can go now. I can handle things from here."

The bear trudged away and the two badgers slinked off into the darkness. The graceful doe glanced back at me doubtfully for a moment, then scurried off into the woods.

I wasn't sure how long we'd traveled, or how far we made it. All I knew was that Rod had temporarily (hopefully) lost it, and he ran like a maniac miles

away from school. After awhile, I had to circle back to grab my bow before continuing to pursue him. And the best part of all this was that I had no idea how to get back to school.

A sharp whistling through the air jerked my head up and I scanned the branches to find...a brown and cream winter wren. The same one from yesterday.

Listen to me, it urged me, and I frowned.

“What?” I decided to speak freely, since Rod was out of it and no one was around to listen. “Why are you following me?” Though I didn’t admit it, I still thought it was pretty cool.

It seemed to smirk at me. *There’s something I’ve been trying to tell you.* It’s amused eyes quickly morphed to urgent glances as it continued.

They’re here. They’re after us. And they’re planning on taking over this planet, and to destroy everything we have.

Are ... are you talking about the aliens? I dare ask, but even so, I figured we must know. Just to be safe, I asked this one in my head, afraid to speak the words aloud as if they’d come true once they left my lips.

The bird nodded. *We have to take cover. We need to warn everyone. Do you really want mankind to be wiped out? These things are lethal. They have weapons we never imagined, or even thought of creating.*

Um, I thought, raising an eyebrow. *Okay...you’re just a bird, right? How do you know all of this?*

The bird’s expression grew grim with cold determination. *They took my little sister.*

After a short conversation with this mysterious winter wren, I sat down on a nearby log, trying to sort my priorities.

- 1) Find my way back home.
- 2) Warn everyone of this impending disaster.
- 3) Try not to sound like a lunatic.
- 4) Stay alive.

That sounded pretty good for now. I nodded my approval at my list, before finding two dry sticks. Rubbing them together quickly, I eventually created

a small spark using friction, and lighting the pines I'd gathered, created a small fire to warm myself.

I looked beside me on the log to see the bird perched there, shaking out its wings and soaking up the warmth itself.

*Who are you? * I queried, my eyes narrowed. *I mean, what are you called?*

I'm Sierra the winter wren, she introduced herself formally. *And you?*

*Ashley... * I replied, still finding it odd to be telling a tiny bird what my name was. After it asked.

I like it, Sierra approved, and I rolled my eyes. Like I needed a winter wren's approval over my name.

So, what do you plan to do? I asked. *I mean, about this whole alien infestation. *

Well, I obviously plan to fight to the death for my sister, Sierra's dark brown eyes sparkled with strength. I was already beginning to admire the will of this bird.

Hesitating, my gaze picked its way over to Rod's unconscious body. I began to say something, but paused, letting out a breath. "Would...would you like to come with us?" I offered, instantly regretting it.

Sierra stared me down for a good three minutes before responding. *Sure.*

I gave a tiny grin, and Sierra leaped into the air, unfolding her wings, and soared up to my shoulder. Tucking in her small brown-and-white-dappled wings again, she settled in on my left shoulder, slipping her head into the dip of my neck. My eyes were glued to our surrounding forest as the moon began to show off its beams through the night sky, and darkness settled in around us. I was actually comforted by Sierra's company, and her calm, even breathing warmed my confidence.

Chapter Eleven

Rod woke up, slowly, to sound of birds chirping. Also to the feeling of his phone vibrating. He woke up and found the vines still over him, and felt comfort at the sight of a weird little brown bird staring at him. It seemed to be saying something, hopping up and down, and then Ashley came out of the brush around us.

"Oh hi Rod," she said casually, acting like nothing too weird was happening, "I'm sorry about the bear," she said, then smiled a little.

"Hey Ash... where are we?" Asked Rod, hoping to find that she wasn't as crazy as he was feeling, "And how long have we been... here?" He was having flashbacks of all his thoughts and

feelings the day before, and felt a sudden tug in his chest. But this one was different. It was controlled.

"I don't quite know..." she said, frowning, "But I'm finding out!" she said, hoping to cheer up the frown on Rod's face. It was obvious that Rod was reliving some unhappy moments, and she wanted to make him feel less... unhappy.

"Well... I'm getting up," Rod said as he tore the wood and vines from around him, which had wrapped him more tightly and securely than any rope would have. Ashley openly blanched at the show of strength. "What?" Rod asked, feeling confidence in his newfound control of his newfound strength.

"Well... that was pretty.. impressive," said Ashley, clearly she was shook up. From what she knew, the only time Rod had that kind of strength was when he was about to go berserk, or was in the middle. She looked down at his palms and knuckles, which were still red and bloodied from his encounter with the concrete road, which he'd completely destroyed.

"Why thank you," Rod said, trying to sound like it hadn't also shocked him, his confidence dulled by the fact that he Didn't know how it happened. The bird hopped up and down, aggravated by something, then Ashley looked at it, nodded and mumbled something.

"Oh yeah, Rod, this is Sierra, the Winter Wren, and our newest ally," she said, and winced at the look on Rod's face. Still taking in that he'd run away from school, destroyed part of a road, and lead Ashley out here, he was especially shocked that one, Ashley was talking to a small bird, named Sierra, two that she found out its name was Sierra, and three that it was their newest ally. Rod remained quiet as Ashley told him what she'd found out from the bird, most of it seeming to be about how a nest would be built or how to catch the worms just right, but when she explained that she'd heard from the bird that the world was going to be taken over by alien things, he couldn't do it anymore.

"Okay, I can understand... that a bird can talk to you, and I can understand that I owe you A LOT," he exaggerated the words, "A lot," then continued, "but I can't wrap my head around this... how does the bird know?" He regretted saying it soon after, for the bird flew right at him, and pecked him on the forehead, "Sorry... fisty lil thing, ain't she?" he said, slight guilt obvious in his face.

"Actually... I don't know how she knows, but she does. And it has her little sister," Ashley said, thinking it'd help her case. But she didn't need to convince him or do anything to make him quiet and patient, seeming abnormal to all who didn't know him well, again. She explained how she'd chased after him, then gotten the bear to hold him down while still trying to resist the growing vines, and the badgers had gotten water to splash on his head, after some bird relieved itself on him.

"Okay... I'm real sorry, but you lost when me when you said a Bird took a Crap on my Head!" Rod said, trying to lighten the mood, but honestly offended by this. "I mean, who can ruin this... magnificent specimen of a beautiful face?" he said, winking at Ashley. She giggled a little.

"Oh, right, I'm sorry," she said, then winked back. Rod sighed, then began to look down at his phone. 38 missed calls, 109 texts. After looking through them, and finding they were mostly from his ma and friend named Keely, and a few from Echo, Rod suddenly jumped up from his spot on the ground where they were resting.

"What about Alex and Echo?" he asked, alarmed.

"What about them?" asked Ashley.

"They know about what we can do, and all that stuff... part of it at least, and Echo knows that I freaked out right before we disappeared!" Rod said, he began to climb up a tree.

"Don't worry, they aren't stupid... what are you doing?" Asked and said Ashley. She worried he might crack again, for every time he'd gotten excited, something bad had happened.

"I'm trying to get higher to see if I can see the school or some buildings," he grunted, *Ya know... you'd think with all this strength and what not, I'd be able to pull my own butt up a tree without too much tiring...* He thought as he was halfway up.

"Well..." started Ashley, but an excited yelp from her friend, and his form flying down and slamming into the ground right in front of her shocked her.

"Spider! Spider!" Rod yelled, as a large, brown spider was attached to his face. "Get it off! Get

it off of me!” he yelped, and suddenly it jumped off. He looked at Ashley, who was smiling, and saw the spider looking at her.

“It doesn't even eat meat... or insects or anything,” she said, “I told it you were terrified by it, and it got off,” she looked at it again, and it moved around a little, “It thought you were laughing...” she said, then bust out laughing at Rod.

“Its not... that funny,” he said, trying to keep what was left of his dignity. “I knew what it was, I just wanted to... test you!” He said, then walked up to the same tree.

“What are you doing?” Ashley said, “again?” taking a moment to stop laughing and breath. She knew his pride would survive, and that within a few hours he'd do something that was brave to make up for it. Such was his nature.

“Yes,” he said, then bounded up the tree, something seemingly impossible. “Ah, see, a school.. or something, not too far away!” Rod jumped down, checked his face for spiders, then he and Ashley sprinted as fast as they could, running towards the buildings. *It'll be nice getting some nice... fried... unhealthy food..* Rod thought. He grinned, but as soon as he saw what was happening, it quickly disappeared.

A large saucer was hovering over the buildings, a beam shooting straight for the building. It destroyed the roof, sending chunks of rock high into the air. Rod stepped forward, rage burning in his eyes, after a loud scream, that of a girls, no older then them, that rung over the loud crashing of the building, and the sound of a beam.

He began to run forward, but then a large ball flew towards the building, and erupted in a flaming fury. Rod was hit by a wave of destruction, and was knocked back. Even with all his strength, the power of the blast over came him. He flew back next to Ashley, who was starting to aim with her bow, trying to find an open spot. But soon enough, she found there was no winning. And everyone in the building was gone.

Rod got up again, but he was wounded. Ashley put her hand on his shoulder, “No... they're gone,” she said, “And we won last time by luck... Please don't do this, you'll die... or be captured.” As she said this, the saucer flew into the sky, and disappeared behind the blue of the sky. Tears streaked down Ashley's eyes, and Rod just sat down, his shoulder's slumped. They went to sleep, Rod and Ashley ten feet away from each other, both needing to think alone.

Rod was strapped down in a small room, white and metallic looking. He was in a bed, or something similar, and found straps all across his body. He looked at the two creature's sitting in front of him, speaking their language of clicks. Then it sounded more and more like English, slowly melding into English.

“See, my lord, with animals like this.. you can't just apply pain... or it will gain numbness, and with numbness... freedom of pain, and that we cannot allow,” said one creature, its bug like face moving with each word. It looked up at what Rod presumed to be it's master, which was much taller then it.

“Masterfully done, my servant... but it is awake right now,” the taller creature said, it was looking at Rod as it said this. Rod began to struggle, his arms' and legs' veins shown through.

“Yes, it is awake... we shall have to fix that, shalln't we?” said the smaller creature, the servant. It struck Rod in the face with some cord like weapon, and Rod slumped unconscious. The smaller creature leaned towards Rod, who was hearing everything in the room still, though he was unconscious, and feeling the pain of spikes slowly closing in on his body.

“Hahaha!” laughed the larger creature as it pressed a button that pRoduced spikes all around him, and slowly closed in.

“See... his friend, girlfriend or whatever they call them, will soon have dreams that will taint her... turning her into one of us,” said the smaller creature, and the taller one laughed again. The smaller

one winked, or seemed to wink, at the larger creature, their plan now fully in action. Rod truly fell asleep.

He woke up, looking at Ashley, she turned in her sleep, and mumbled something. He looked at her thinking about his dream. *Maybe I should wake her...* He thought, but then he saw her roll over, and saw how at peace she looked. He sighed, and thought about what was going to happen, what they'd seen today, and rolled back over, hoping to Ashley asleep again.

Chapter Twelve

Sierra took in steady, deep breaths. Her sister stood beside her, looking wobbly but able to manage. Sierra leaned forward, parting her beak and taking in a sharp gasp of stinging cold air.

“Sierra?” her little sister asked wearily. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure, Senna,” Sierra shook her head, ruffling some of the dark brown feathers lined up on her back. “Just keep your eyes open and your senses alert. Let nothing drop in on you from any angle.”

“Okay,” she replied shakily, but when Sierra glanced at her out of the corner of her eye, she saw Senna pull her head up bravely and spread her wings.

Pride flooded Sierra, and she knew they’d be fine as long as they stuck together and kept their spirits high. “Follow me,” she ordered, leaping off the branch, and diving into the open air. For a split second, the air blasted her face and sent her heart fluttering like usual, and she felt like she was back home where everything was alright. Opening her brown eyes, though, Sierra quickly remembered the actual situation, and the realization was as strong as the thick smoke from the bombed forest stinging her throat.

“Where are we going?” Senna shouted from behind her, struggling to keep up with her older sister’s quick maneuvering and strong, wider wings.

“Somewhere,” was Sierra’s response, and she could almost feel the disappointment radiating from the small bird behind her. She wanted to tell Senna where she was headed, but knew that she couldn’t, since it would just crush Senna’s heart. Then again, once they arrived, Sierra would have to face the inevitable soul-crushing of Senna’s.

After awhile of dodging tall pines and dive-bombing to the ground, then pulling up abruptly before coming to a mind-blowing death, they began to slow their pace. Sierra came to sudden halt, and once she was about half a

foot above the ground, folded in her wings and dropped to the forest floor.

A soft thump behind her told Sierra that Senna had landed also. “Okay, now, stay close to me, Senna.” Sierra glanced over her shoulder at her, and Senna gave her a small nod of understanding.

They hopped across the landscape, edging closer to a huge dip in the earth. A large aircraft was hovering a mid-air, about the half of the altitude that Sierra could reach when climbing steadily upwards. She crouched behind the thick trunk of a nearby tree, and watched the aliens destruct the land with slitted eyes.

“Sierra?” Senna whispered in a tiny voice, and Sierra just brushed her feathers lightly with her thin tail reassuringly.

Sierra’s eyes widened when she suddenly realized what they were doing. They weren’t sending bombs down to the earth just to blow up trees, but to open up all the animals’ hiding areas. Chipmunks, squirrels, rabbits, hares, birds of all kind...they were scattering everywhere, desperately trying to escape the clutches of these invaders.

Images flashed through Sierra’s mind, and especially the slaughter of their mother a year ago by a fox in the wood next to this particular forest.

Watching these animals scurry to new hiding places, the panic disrupting their calm features, the fire burning in their eyes...it was overwhelming.

A tall alien creature with a net leaped over a defenseless rabbit with a sprained leg or something, and scooped it up. It was squeaking pitifully, calling for any help from the neighboring animals. They all just merely gave glances of pity to the rabbit, and seemed way more concerned about their own safety. A quick glance back at her sister showed Sierra an innocent Senna who looked as though she was going through the pain of finding her mother’s carcass on the forest floor again.

Sierra gritted her teeth as she watched the alien carry the rabbit back to a large side compartment of the aircraft. It shoved it into a small cage beside countless different breeds of captured birds and squirrels, and other wildlife inhabiting this forest.

“Not good...” Sierra grunted when she even spotted a small deer on the farthest cage over. Its small blue eyes were dull and hopeless, and a pang of guilt tore at Sierra’s stomach. These things were pretty strong.

“We have to do something,” Senna spoke up, and when Sierra glanced at her, she could see her own determination reflected in her younger sister’s light brown eyes.

“It just doesn’t seem right to watch them suffer,” Sierra agreed hesitantly,

but she wasn't sure if the price of putting her sister's life in danger was worth it. Besides, what could two miniscule winter wrens do to free animals from alien *cages*?

"Why do you think they're taking them?" Senna whispered, glancing around quickly as though one would jump out of the bushes at any moment.

At a loss of an answer, Sierra just squinted harder at the aliens and the cages, trying to put the facts together. They were blowing up the forest, taking one of each breed of animal, and totally destroying everything else. That's when it arrived to her brain. "Oh!" Sierra exclaimed, maybe a bit too loudly. "For some reason, they're abducting one of each breed to...analyze them?" she guessed, a frown crossing her beak.

"That would make sense...except it makes no sense," Senna huffed.

"That didn't make sense," Sierra pointed out, and practically jumped five feet in the air when a deep rumble sounded, alerting every animal in the forest of the danger. Somehow, the machinery they were using was echoing this deep thunder, and she froze when her gaze picked its way back to the large alien thing armed with an unfamiliar weapon.

Its beady, emotionless eyes were trained on Sierra and Senna. And just then, it pulled the trigger.

"Duck!" Sierra chirped at Senna, who dove behind the trunk. The explosion blasted a nearby tree completely off the face of the world, and Sierra's stomach dropped. As soon as Senna was out of sight of the alien, Sierra took a huge leap into the air, and barely caught wind under her wings to carry her up farther into the sky.

"No!" A hoot from somewhere above her sounded, and Sierra looked up to see a dark brown owl perched on a thick branch, shaking its head urgently. "The aircraft up there will suck you up! It happened to my friend! If you go any higher than the trees, you may never breathe fresh air again!"

Startled, Sierra momentarily forgot to flap, and began to drop rapidly. Luckily, she remembered to keep flying just before she hit the ground, and immediately swerved around. She shot back to the tree where her sister was taking refuge and narrowly avoided a random laser beam shot.

"Senna!" Sierra called desperately as soon as she skirted the trunk of the tree. Senna was gone.

Looking around quickly, Sierra finally spotted the alien grabbing hold of a branch ten feet above her. To her horror, poor, defenseless Senna was hanging upside down from its three-pronged hand by her leg.

Rage flooded Sierra and she suddenly launched into the air towards the

alien. It pulled out some sort of device, pressed a button, and the last thing Sierra was conscious of before she blacked out was a huge flash of light, and Senna's torn up face and strangled cry.

And Sierra's eyes burst open, coming awake from the dream that had haunted her for the last few days.

Chapter Thirteen

Rod stumbled out of the forest onto a road that was, hopefully, near McCleskey. His facial hair was really growing out after three weeks of wandering. After a few days, Sierra had pieced together that they'd move much further than was humanly possible, and that something must have happened to move them further.

"Look, a group of people," said Ashley, who was walking out of the forest behind him. She was looking down the long road, in between the forest, which seemed to go on forever. Rod couldn't see down the road, for his vision was always red and slightly blurry for the last few days, but he didn't make a scene of it. But Rod knew there was movement.

"Oh... good," Rod mumbled, trying to hide the slight jealousy floating around in his voice. Over the last few weeks he'd come to enjoy just being with Ashley and, strangely, Sierra. He'd also come to depend on them to calm him sometimes. Sierra had pecked him in the face a few times when he was starting to lose control, and that'd canceled out the building up anger.

Ashley and Rod walked up to the group when one of them yelled out, "Ashley!" and ran up to hug Ashley. Ashley, of course, responded immediately to her friend, but Rod didn't recognize Ladija, who obviously didn't recognize Rod. She looked at him questioning, then whispered something about his eyes being red and his beard. Rod looked down, blushed a little when he saw his shirt was torn. He also saw that it was no longer covering up a belly of jelly, and it now had some ab marks, noticeably skinnier, but not scrawny.

He looked up, "Hey Ladija," he said, and her eyes burst open.

"Rod?" She asked, she obviously recognized him now. But her look was one of slight fear. As the others approached, Rod recognized two of his friends, Alex Llerandi and Ethan Thompson. Ethan was a taller boy, easily three inches taller than Rod, and was in no way broad. He had brown hair and it was growing also, but not nearly as much as Rod's hair. He and Alex looked at Rod, and both seemed to shrink back at the changes in their friend.

"Hey guys," Rod said, slightly embarrassed by the attention. Ashley and Ladijah watched silently as Chaselyn Baca walked up. She was a shorter girl, black hair that was darker than her skin, but not by much. Rod looked at her, and as she gasped, openly blanched and grimaced.

"Hey Chaselyn..." he said, hoping she wouldn't be scared of him.

"Hi Rod," she said, and then Ashley walked over.

"How did you get out?" she asked, but Rod didn't stop looking at Chaselyn. She shrunk back.

"The school was hit by some sort of blast, and we all ran, somehow stayed together, and we've walked along this road, finding food along the way. There have been broken cars with food inside, but no people." said Alex, and Chaselyn looked at him, and smiled. Jealousy rose up within Rod, and he glared at Alex.

You could smash him, destroy him. He thought, the voice of anger raising up. *No! He's your friend! He stood by you when you were down!* Thought the other voice. *And now look, he's flirty with the girl you've liked since elementary school!* Screamed the other voice, *But he doesn't know that! If he knew he'd back off.*

The battle raged on in his head, and he thought about both points.

“Rod?”

Look at him. The voice ringed in his head, *He could have any girl, but he chooses the one You like.* Rod's brow burrowed at this notion.

“Rod?”

He doesn't know! Tell him and he'll back off! He's been your friend for three years! Rod felt the pressure building in his chest.

“Rod!”

Hurt him. Bring him pain! It will make everything better!

“Rod!”

Don't do it!!! Rang one voice. *Do it!!!* screamed the other.

“Nooooo!” Rod yelled out, and smashed his fists into the ground. The pavement around him rippled with the power of his hit, and he felt the flesh on his hands rip. Rod slammed both his fists into the ground. He calmed after a few seconds of pure destruction, and looked around. His eyes glowing red, and his fist's bleeding profusely, and he found all of his friends had backed up a few yards, in shock.

“Rod?” asked Alex, and Rod looked at him, then got up, and stalked away. Emotions conflicting, he didn't want to handle trying to talk to them.

“Rod!” Yelled Ashley, but Rod didn't turn around.

Chapter fourteen

Well, I certainly had no explanation for that one. I mean, sure, even I was a bit jealous about Chaselyn and Alex, but I thought Rod had let his feelings for Chaselyn slip away long ago.

Turning back to the group, I tilted my head slightly. Rod would return soon.

I'll go round him up and make sure he doesn't destroy half a forest or anything, Sierra rolled her eyes before circling around in the air and soaring after Rod.

“Kay,” I mumbled. After these three weeks, I'd really learned to trust Sierra.

“What?” Dijah looked at me, and I suddenly realized all eyes were on me. Right. They had no idea. Were they all ready to handle it?

“Oh, er...I was just talking to myself,” I laughed dryly.

“Okay,” Chaselyn shrugged, then turned back to Alex and Ethan. The days I was in class before all this happened, I always noticed she would sit at the back table with them, and her and Alex would always be laughing about something.

I furiously looked away and found my gaze scanning the forest around us. Everything was still. Few birds rang out through the air, and I made a

mental note to ask Sierra about it later. Then, suddenly, the ferns swayed by a large oak tree. I concentrated on my mind hard, trying to pick up any thoughts of any animals. Nothing.

This was not an animal. That I was sure of.

A quick glance over my shoulder back at the group told me they were too sucked up in their conversation to notice anything. I took a step away from them, bending down and squinting my eyes at the fern.

Tensing, I saw something dark poke out. I was prepared to leap away, grab the group, and flee.

Of course, my nagging curiosity kept me rooted to my spot, where I just stared untrustingly.

I flinched when the fern rustled quickly, and a...rabbit loped out?

“A *rabbit?*” I almost screamed in frustration, feeling like a little wimp.

I whirled back around and marched back to the group, where Dijah and Chaselyn greeted me.

“What were you looking at?” Dijah asked, and I shrugged.

“Bunny.”

“Aw, I love bunnies,” Chaselyn hugged herself with a grin on her face, and the rest of us laughed. Sadly, that included Alex. Well, not like I cared or anything. Just an observation.

“Are you four the only people who escaped and stuck together? Or were there more in your group?” I interrupted the laughter, skipping to business.

“Um...” Dijah looked thoughtful, but Alex interrupted her.

“Mari was with us, and her friend, uh...what was his name?” Alex stared at the ground for a moment, snapping his fingers.

Hope sparked within me. “Luis?”

“Yeah! That was his name,” Alex looked proud for “remembering”, and Chaselyn patted him on the back. Grr.

Relief flooded me. Everyone I cared about for the most part was here, safe for the meantime. Of course, Nina was still out there somewhere. Hopefully with her family. Icy claws gripped my heart. What about my family? I looked around, and my stomach grew hollow. Where *were* Mari and Luis, then?

“Where are they?” I whispered, my eyes wide. What if something happened to them? What if I never saw them again?

“They went to find some food,” Ethan replied, looking down at me. Gosh, he had to be the tallest kid around. Besides the other Ethan at our school, Ethan Neault, but who knew where he was.

I gaped. “Food? You sent *Mari Heimlich* on food duty? If she were hunting, she’d scare off every little creature of the forest!”

“Maybe you should find them,” Chaselyn looked slightly worried. “They’ve been gone for awhile.”

I gritted my teeth. Why don’t *you* go look for them? Beyond that, though, I really was hoping I’d be the one chosen, because I wanted to know where they were and if they were alright. If anybody remembered Mari’s reaction to our last little encounter with the aliens, then we know she’d be as vulnerable as a tadpole if they struck again.

“I’ll go with you.” My heart skipped a beat as I recognized his voice volunteering to accompany me out in the wilderness. Alex.

“Really?” I turned on him, blinking in surprise. Besides my awkwardness when it came to talking to most guys, I realized I’d changed quite a bit since Rod and I first became lost in the forest. And what a stroke of luck meeting up with this group!

“Yeah,” Alex smiled sincerely. “How could we just let you go out there alone? A wild bear or something could eat you!” The stupidity of that statement made me grin, and it made me realize how much he didn’t know. I could’ve made the bear eat *him* if I wanted, not me. “And these other wimps I know wouldn’t have gone,” He pointedly swept his gaze across the remaining three members of the group. I found Dijah blushing and looking away with embarrassment.

Don’t worry, Dijah, I thought supportively, * I know you’re not really the outdoorsy type.*

“Come on,” I held my arm out, and he linked it with his. Together we skipped off like fools in the direction Chaselyn had pointed out where they left.

Only when we had skipped about three hundred meters had I realized that I couldn’t communicate with that rabbit earlier. And that thought sent a harsh chill down my spine.

Chapter fifteen

Stomping through the forest, I noticed the sound of wings flapping. I figured it was Sierra making sure I don't do something stupid, like run off in anger, but what did I care that she was there? She could watch me destroy anything and not be able to do a thing. The red haze of everything around me darkened as my thoughts drifted back to Alex and Chaselyn.

Whatever happens, I'm not going back.. I thought as I walked. I was too unstable. Too stupid to do anything around them. I didn't know what I could and couldn't do, and I had a weak hold of my emotions lately. Even as much as I'd tried to stay numb, emotionless, I couldn't.

The flapping got closer and a small bird flew out from in front of me, and pecked me in the eye. "Get away, Sierra," I said, covering my eye. The bird just hovered in front of me, then looked to my right. Just then, I noticed a loud sound. Rustling. Like those of people. I wandered over towards it, hoping it was a new group of people I could be around, and perhaps not endanger with my blasphemous emotion. I saw Alex and Ashley stomping through the forest, but knew suddenly it was only Alex making noise.

Ashley carefully picked her foot steps while Alex just crushed the ground beneath him, not caring that Rod and Sierra had heard them hundreds of yards away. *Should I say goodbye?* I thought. I was concentrating on reasons not to when Sierra made some weird squeaking sound, and I looked at her. She was pointing her beak in the general direction of Ashley and Alex, but ahead of them. I looked hard, but saw nothing.

Then I saw it. It was an outline of something. My sight seemed to get better as I looked, and the red haze deepened further as I looked at a wolf that was looking at Ashley and Alex, its teeth laid bare. I could see it moving towards Ashley and I figured Ashley was talking to it. *She has everything under control...* I thought, and I turned around. Then I heard a gasp. *Alex is in for a surprise..* I thought, but then I heard a scream. I turned around, and saw that it was closing in on Ashley, and Alex was... trying to stay between her and it? *The moron...* I thought. Then suddenly emotions flooded into my seemingly emotionless mind set as I saw it leap at Alex.

Sprinting as fast as my body would allow, even faster so that when I hit the wolf we both went down in a heap of teeth and claws. I was on top of it, trying to overpower it with brute strength when another howl went up. The wolf seemed not to notice, and I wrapped my arms around its neck. With a snap, I brought my arms up, killing it. I turned around to see Alex behind Ashley, who held her bow.

How'd she get her bo-- I thought until I saw a wolf jumping at her from behind her. Alex yelled out, and Ashley turned immediately, letting loose an arrow. It hit the wolf in the throat, but the wolf continued to move forward. I was halfway there when the wolf dropped down on the ground, dead.

More howls went up and I heard a scream behind us, towards the road. I jumped up onto the top of a tree, and sprang out towards the road. I felt the emotions building up inside of me when I heard Chaselyn scream something. Then it happened.

A being of rage erupted from within me, and I sprang out. Two wolves circled the kids, and I jumped right at the one between me and them. I slammed into it, and felt pain in my calve. I looked back, and saw that a wolf's teeth had dug in. But I didn't care.

I wrapped my arms around it, and slammed it into its fellow wolf who'd bit me, sending both flying away. I looked at the last wolf, biggest of the group. Instinctively, I got down on all fours, and something happened that I didn't understand. Me and the wolf began to weigh each other up. I'd felt like it'd been hours when it sprung out at me, and I dodged out of the way, something that seemed impossibly nimble. But I did it.

It bit at my left shoulder, and I came across with my right hand, balled up in a fist, and slammed it into the side of the creature's head. I could feel the blood beginning to pour out of my calf, and I felt it going numb. *I have to do this quickly..* I thought as it attacked again, completely recovered from my right cross. I dodged out of the way, again to my right, and it attacked my left shoulder again. But this time I jumped into it. I slammed into its side, driving it into the ground.

I felt something welling up inside me. The wolf struggled and raked at my waist with its ever

sharp claws, digging under skin. The wolf's eyes stared at me. They turned from yellow to purely black, and it overwhelmed me with seemingly impossible strength. I was thrown back, and hit a tree behind me, my back cracking on impact. I heard a whistle and saw an arrow fly into the side of the wolf. It growled and leaped at Ashley, who'd just caught up to me.

I jumped as hard and fast as I could, and intercepted the wolf mid flight. I had the advantage and I attacked at its side with my mouth. I bit into it, and tore into it. It slashed me with its back claws, drawing blood on my thighs, but I tore into it with my fist's, beating its chest to a pulp. The wolf's strength slowly faded, and it lay dead long before I stopped pounding.

I stood up, covered in blood, but I could tell the liquid wasn't all the wolves' blood. The red haze was impossibly thick now. I turned and looked at the rest of my friends. They all looked at me, terror clearly in their eyes, and I tried to smile, but couldn't. I felt numb. Then Ashley gasped, and I looked down at my left side. An arrow shaft protruded from my hip, and I chuckled.

"Nice shot..." I said as I fell to the ground, exhaustion and a lack of blood overwhelming me. People said stuff, but I couldn't tell what it was that they said. I could feel my heart pumping, and I knew that someone was standing over me. I looked into their eyes, and smiled.

"It's okay.. if I die... Because this is a good way to go.." I said, trying to sound comforting. But the pain was too much, and as I looked up, I felt a tear drop Ashley onto my face. I smiled a little... chuckled...

Then Blackness.

Chapter sixteen

I could feel my breath speeding up, and my heart race. I was numb everywhere, and all I could do was watch, grief stricken, as the rest of my friends crowded around Rod.

This couldn't have...it was...all my fault. My eyes were so wide I thought they'd pop out of my head, and I felt so sick I thought I could faint.

"Ashley...don't worry, it wasn't your fault," Alex tried to reassure me, but I just brushed him aside, guilt gnawing my heart.

I had to do something. Anything. Just to make this up to him.

Emotions I couldn't even begin to analyze bubbled up in my chest, and I felt power flood me. *What...?* I thought, staring down at my clenching and unclenching fists.

Dijah just gaped at me, and dizzily fell back a few steps. Ethan had to catch her before she passed out on the ground.

Chaselyn had just turned her gaze away from Rod, tears streaming down her face, to see me, and her clouded eyes began to expand.

"Y-you..." Alex stuttered, looking incredulous. "You have w-wings..."

"Oh, you see it, too?" Ethan asked, looking slightly relieved, but still

concerned.

“Um...” I looked around, not feeling much different besides the new burst of energy.

“What is wrong with you?” Dijah managed, stepping up to me. She examined me before darting back to the others, looking terrified. “The aliens got to Ashley,” she freaked, catching everyone’s attention. “She’s not who she is anymore. Kill her while we can!”

I held my hands up defensively, taking a step back. That’s where I drew the line. “Woah, woah, woah! Who said anything about killing? What makes you think-“ I cut myself off, remembering Alex’s comment. No matter how much he loved to joke around, in this situation, we wouldn’t be making cracks like that just because.

Stretching would be the wing bone, I suddenly realized there was actually something to move. Frightened, I pulled my gaze across my shoulder to see...twelve-foot-spanned wings. They were shades of beautiful browns, and dappled with cream on the ridge.

Okay, this was just *scary* cool. My eyebrows had shot straight up, and I found myself running my fingers across my soft, downy feathers. They were cool to the touch, and made me want to jump up ten feet in the air with glee. That’s when it occurred to me. Maybe I could.

Of course, first thing first was Rod. I knelt beside him, quickly ripping the arrow back out of his side and examining the wound.

“Can you heal him or something?” Chaselyn whimpered.

“Uh...I’m not sure,” I admitted. Hey, I was new to all this too.

“Well, hurry up and do something,” Ladijah demanded, sounding impatient. I mentally noted her as “not such a true friend after all”.

“Shut up, Dijah,” I spat at her suddenly, my eyes narrowing. “I haven’t seen you try to do one thing helpful so far. Please, just...bear with me.” My eyes returned to normal, and they were almost pleading her, matching my voice perfectly. “Please. I’m just as scared as you. Probably more. I mean, look at me! I have freaking wings. I can’t have you yelling at me making it worse...”

I had to stop before any tears could work their way into my dramatic speech. I whirled back around to Rod, lightly touching my fingers to his heart. Somehow, something deep in my mind told me to do this.

You can’t heal him, I almost doubled over with joy as Sierra’s familiar voice filled my mind. Of course, the news she was bringing me made me want

to puke all over again.

Well, then what can I do? I practically shouted at her.

You can give him your strength. It'll cost you, but it'll be up to his will whether or not he makes it. The most you can do is lend him your power.

I looked around to see Sierra land on my shoulder, and reassuringly rub her head against my cheek. With newfound strength, I nodded, and determined, I closed my eyes. My fingers still resting on the place his heart would be, I concentrated on my supposed strength.

Suddenly, I felt weak and hungry. My mouth was dry, and I felt like I didn't even have enough strength to pull my hand up to my scalp and scratch it.

Good job, Sierra looked reluctant, and her brown eyes showed sympathy. That's when I noticed everything fade to black and I fell backwards. The only two things I was aware of was the bow digging into my back and Alex's concerned voice inches away. I knew there were others. He was one of four bent over me, but Alex was the only one I noticed. Of course, it felt like he was miles away. I didn't care. I just wanted to sleep...

Chapter Seventeen

Rod sat in a limbo. His arms and legs healed completely, he felt something flow into him, and he stood up. He suddenly could see. All around him was a white room. No details, just a white room. Anxiety welled up within him, but suddenly it was out weighed by a sudden calmness given off by the room. Rod looked around. There was one door, and a chair, a bed, and a drawer.

He'd just started to think of escaping when the door knob began to wobble. The door opened, and in walked Chaselyn.

"Hello Rod," she said, a wide smile, sincere with emotion. "How are you feeling?" As she asked this, her eyes looked to his body. Just then Rod realized was only wearing white pants.

Blushing, he said, "Oh hi Chaselyn," and tried to cover up his body. While it was no longer covered in a small layer of fat, it still wasn't tight or good looking, in his opinion at least. "I'm... I'm well, thanks for asking," he said, completely relaxed.

"I'm glad, I was so worried about you," she said, and her eyes widened for a second, "You saved me! Oh... how good you look right now," she said, and she leaned forward, and put her hand on his shoulder. "How broad."

"Uh... Chaselyn," Rod said, completely red now. Then he suddenly noticed, *I don't see in red anymore...* He thought, he looked down, and said, "Hold on." He got up, and hit the drawer next to him, it was smashed to dust, beyond any repairing, "Sorry, I just had to try."

"It's okay... everything is okay now," said Chaselyn, and she backed up and opened the door behind her. "Come with me," she said, grabbing his hand in her own and Rod almost followed her right through the door.

Its... its really light in there.. He thought, and suddenly it hit him. *I'm dead.* He backed up,

pulling his hand out of hers and asked, "What is going on? Where am I?"

"Rod, its okay... Its me, Chaselyn, you can relax... you can trust me," she said, "Just follow me into the light."

"Who are you really?" He asked, "There is no way your Chaselyn, she doesn't even like to talk to me, and your... like, grabbing my hand!" As he said this, he remembered everything that had happened. He looked down, and saw bloody wounds all over his body. He could see his exposed ribs, and the bone on his arms were shown clearly. And he felt something over his face. A tear drop fell onto him.

"Rod?" He heard, but he couldn't mark where it came from.

"Come With Me!" Yelled Chaselyn, or the thing that acted like Chaselyn, "You Have TO!" It yelled. "You are DEAD! You are done! You Saved Your Friends! You die now!" It screamed, and Rod shrank back. Lunging at him, the creature showed its true colors, a half woman half skeleton. Death.

Death.. Thought Rod as he came around with his right hook, and led with a left jab. Death was pushed back, obviously taken back by the strength of the punches.

"Bring it," Rod said, confident in his abilities.

"Yes, I shall..." it said, then it slowly melded back into Chaselyn, "Hit me now." And Death came back at him. Rod dodged the first swipe of many, and took the rest of the vicious hits in the chest. Rod ducked underneath a hay maker punch, and lunged out with his right hand. He balled it into a fist, and hit Death in the stomach.

Chaselyn fell to the ground, "Why'd you hit me Rod?" she asked, tears streaming down her face.

"Chaselyn, I'm so sorry," Rod said, leaning over her, worry streaked across his face, "Are you oka-" he said, but then felt clearly as she reached into his chest, and attached herself to his soul. She began to pull it out, and Rod felt sudden depression. He felt her tearing his soul from his body, and felt the pain of every death ever in the world. He felt himself give up. Then something reached into him, not Death.

"Ashley?" he asked, and he felt strength back into him. His skin grew back, and the red haze came back. He looked at Death, and smiled. "I'm not done yet," he said, and she turned back into her normal form. Rod used the added strength to pull his soul back into himself. He stood up.

"I'm not done yet!" he yelled, and smashed a hole into the side of the wall.

Alex and Dijah leaned over Ashley while Ethan and Chaselyn leaned over Rod. Chaselyn stood up, crying, and hugged Alex, who was also shaken, but wasn't crying. Ethan looked over at Dijah, who was still staring at Ashley. Then he saw her facial expression change. He looked down to see Rod's wounds starting to heal.

"What the.." said Ethan. Rod's eyes, though open, still remained empty and emotionless. Dijah walked over and leaned over Rod, and a tear drop fell from her eyes. It landed in one of his eyes. And Rod woke up, gasping, and he could feel breath coming into his lungs again.

"Ow!" he said, his eye burning. He looked up at Dijah, who looked down at him, and he reached up and hugged her. "I'm not dead anymore," he said, and then noticed who he was hugging. "Dijah?" He asked, and she looked down at him.

"Yeah?" She said, then pulled herself away.

"Your not Ashley... or.." he began to say Chaselyn's name, but saw Alex and her hugging. He got up. And looked at Ashly, and all the pain in his expression from seeing Alex and Chaselyn embraced, was nothing to the look as he looked at Ashley. Shock at her wings was quickly overwhelmed by the look of her. All her color was gone, and she seemed to be skinnier then before. He looked at her.

"She needs food." he said, and stalked off. He'd get them dinner.

Three hours he came back, the four of them were all just sitting around the unconscious Ashley. He carried forty pounds of water on his back, and easily a hundred pounds of canned corn, green beans, peas, and a turkey.

“How'd you get all that?” asked Alex.

“Don't ask questions and eat.” Said Rod. He sat down and tore into a can of peas. Ashley mumbled something and they all looked over, for seemingly no reason though. She was still fast asleep. Rod sighed, put his can down, then laid down. Sleep quickly found him though. He dreamed of he and the one being together, though he wasn't sure who the One was. He could feel hands moving around his body, but was still asleep. He could feel something on his still bruised and bloodied body, but knew that it wasn't still as bad.

And then, it all went black as he fell into true sleep.

Chapter Eighteen.

Blinking slowly, I stretched my tired eyes open. Momentarily, I thought I was in bed, late for school. *Where's Mom? *I thought, frowning. My gaze snapped over to where my alarm clock would be...to see Ethan's sleeping face. I almost screamed, but then it all rushed back to me.

It wasn't a dream.

I tried to sit up, but my spine – everything was aching like crazy. The most I could do was glance over my shoulder again and search for the wings I remembered once having. Nothing. Looking around, I realized everyone was asleep. Empty cans of food were tossed around, and I even noticed some bones of something. Hm.

“Ashley?” An exhausted voice caught my attention. Apparently not everyone was asleep.

I glanced over in the direction of the voice to see Alex sitting up, rubbing his tired eyes furiously. I could tell he was just trying to act like he'd been awake the whole time, but I knew my rustling woke him. I mentally stored this information: Alex was the light sleeper of the group.

“Yeah?” I responded wearily, trying not to betray my pain to him.

“You've been out for awhile,” he stretched. “Do you remember what happened?”

“Yes,” I sighed, propping myself up with my elbow, no matter how much pain shot through my sore back.

“Are you okay?” Alex asked the golden question, almost making me wince. I absolutely hated that question. It meant people were worried about me, and I don't know why, but I just hated that feeling.

“Uh, sure,” I mumbled, but then realized my tone wasn’t very convincing. “I mean, yes. Totally fine.” I hung my head as I continued, making things worse.

“Whatever you say,” Alex rolled his eyes, and I almost smiled when he figured out I didn’t like being worried about. Of course, to my dismay, I could find a hint of concern in his dark brown eyes.

“I’m starving!” I commented casually, clapping my hands together. “What’s to eat? Did you all leave anything for me?” *The freak?* I almost added, but kept silent.

“Of course,” he grinned. Leaning forward, he tossed me a can of peas and tore off a leg off the caught turkey for me.

“Okay, *where *did you get that?” I asked incredulously, almost laughing with joy.

“Rod,” Alex shrugged it off as though it wasn’t that great, but jealousy burned in his features. That was weird. I never came to know Alex as the jealous type.

“Ah,” I glanced over to his sleeping figure, then back at the delicious-smelling turkey. “How long do we plan to stay here?” I asked him, knowing it was an unspoken agreement that Rod and I and Alex’s group were going to travel together from this point on.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that,” Alex looked up into the dark night sky, twinkling with bright stars this far away from any civilization. Of course, we could in fact be very close to school, but wouldn’t know because civilization could’ve been completely destroyed by the aliens.

“Let’s leave at sunrise,” Alex decided, glancing at me curiously.

I folded my arms, jolted by me sudden remembrance of Mari and Luis. It was sickening, knowing they haven’t returned yet from mere hunting. I still don’t understand what their group was thinking when they sent them off like that... “We can’t leave until we find Luis and Mari.”

“Oh, yeah,” Alex looked ashamed for forgetting them.

“All we have is each other now,” I frowned, thinking of how this all happened in just a matter of weeks. “I’m not sure who else has survived this. We just need to stick together to survive, and I’m not to abandon them out there.”

“I know what you mean,” Alex agreed. “Should we search for them now? While everyone’s still asleep?”

I hesitated, my mind swiftly searching for an excuse. There was no way I could easily walk, let alone run in my condition. "Someone has to keep guard," I reminded him, relieved by my legit alibi.

"Oh yeah..." Alex grimaced. "I could wake Chaselyn..." His eyes broadened when he leaned back, getting a first good look at my back. He quickly leaped to his feet and knelt down behind me.

I was puzzled, and I didn't dare look over my shoulder to see what he was doing. I gasped with the sudden pain as he budged something back there, and then realized there'd been a dull stinging the whole time, but now it was fierce and spreading, like a hot wildfire.

"Ashley, you should of said something," he whispered shakily, and the pain was more abrupt this time.

"What are talking about?" I asked, biting my lip. That's when I realized he had just jerked something out of my back, and showed me a bloody bow.

"Oh," was all I said when I looked at it, and he raised his eyebrows, his eyes strained.

"Oh?" Alex asked in disbelief. I wasn't sure if he looked more angry right then or upset. Then again, I'd never seen him angry before, so I couldn't tell.

"Uh...thanks," I grabbed the bow and began to wipe it off in the tall grass, thankful that I wasn't like some girls who vomited upon even seeing blood.

Alex closed his eyes and breathed out deeply. "You're bleeding pretty badly, Ashley. We have to do something about that."

"Okay," I tried to move, but he grabbed my shoulders, pushing me back down to the ground gently.

"You'll open the wound more," he informed me, then held up his forefinger. Like that, he disappeared into the woods. I sighed, positioning my elbow on my bent knee and resting my chin on my propped up fist. There was no need to be concerned. It was just a little bit of blood as far as I was concerned. The bow only scraped me. I was sure of it.

Chapter Nineteen

Ashley woke up to find everyone else asleep. She'd doze off. Looking around, she noticed that Alex wasn't back... and that Rod was gone.

Oh no... She thought, as she tried to stand up, but found that she couldn't. She looked down, and saw her legs were completely fine. *I'm too tired.. I couldn't stop him anyways...* She thought, and she

looked over at Chaselyn. She couldn't stop him, but Chaselyn might be able to... if Chaselyn could just find Rod. She looked at Chaselyn, then whispered to Sierra. The little bird flew out of the woods, accompanied by two others.

"Hello Sierra," said Ashley, "Your friends?"

"Why yes, Ashley, these are my friends, this is BrownTail," Sierra motioned to a larger bird, who had a brown tail and white body. He looked at Ashley with a lack of concern, and then Sierra motioned to the other, a jet black bird, "This is Raven, the crow." Sierra said.

"Oh... okay," Ashley said, "well... I need you to find Rod, and lead Chaselyn to him," as she said this, she motioned towards her. Then whispered, "Chaselyn!"

Chaselyn rustled, but stayed asleep.

"Chaselyn!" Chaselyn popped up.

"Alex?" she said, seemingly instinctively. She looked over at Ashley, confused, then glanced at the birds, and said, "Ashley?" Ashley looked at her for a while, then decided on what to say at first, then explained everything. It took her over half an hour to explain everything, and at first Chaselyn took it all skeptically, but when Ashley ordered the birds to do things that Chaselyn asked, she soon believed it.

Chaselyn wandered into the forest, looking around. Sierra stayed near her, while the two birds, Raven and BrownTail, flew off to her sides. After a few hours, Chaselyn saw BrownTail fly over a certain spot, and start to squawk. Then Sierra flew over, Raven close behind. Chaselyn wandered over.

Mari and Luis walked around a small clearing, Mari seeming terrified by the sounds around her, and Luis took it all in passively, but she could see the terror in his eyes.

"Mari!" Chaselyn said, running out into the clearing. Mari looked at her, and seemed to be unaffected at first, but then it sank in. She and Chaselyn hugged, and Luis stayed still. Mari didn't say a word, though, and she motioned over to their left. She looked, and saw bright red eyes staring out at her. She slowly advanced, fear was marked all over her face, but still she approached. As she got closer, she saw the eyes seemed to grow even more red as she got closer. They looked like human eyes, but they couldn't have been, for they were changing in diameter. She got even closer, and she heard breathing.

"Rod?" She asked, and the eyes got higher. She backed up slowly as a towering person came out of the dark woods. They were easily eight feet in the air, and they looked down at her emotionless. She backed up as a large, muscled arm reached at her, and she screamed as the large fingers reached around her waist, easily lifting her in the air. Luis and Mari stood still, stunned.

Rod watched as Alex searched around the forest. He knew that he was searching for Mari, and knew that they were easily a mile away from her and Luis. He didn't even know who Luis was, but had assumed that he was the guy standing next to Mari. Rod heard the screams, and his red eyes flared.

Alex heard too, because he looked up, in the general direction of the scream, and started to run towards it, far too slowly though. Rod dropped down in front of Alex.

"Your too slow," he said, and grabbed Alex. He put Alex over his shoulder before Alex could respond, and jumped in the direction of the screaming. What would have taken Alex nearly six minutes took him sixty five seconds. He was there just in time to see Chaselyn pulled up, and Alex yelled out, noticing the red eyes growing darker, more blood colored.

Rod put him down on the ground, then jumped into a tree, careful not to make any noise. The tall "man" looked up at him. *Ah... this one is better than the rest..* Rod thought, then thought about his own thinking, then he began to think of why he'd thought that... *Whatever..* He thought, then jumped in at the enemy.

While he was slamming into the enemy, Chaselyn screamed as she was dropped to the ground.

“Run!” Yelled Rod, his voice booming throughout the whole forest. “Uh oh,” he said as he felt the giant fingers wrap around his leg. *Dang...* He thought as he flew into a tree. He felt the tree break before his weight, but he also felt the footsteps of the giant man coming at him.

He scrambled away from the running forms of Chaselyn, Alex, Mari and Luis, and then looked back as the man, enraged, followed closely behind. He was sprinting as fast as he could, cutting to the sides and using football training to cut back and spin around the opponent, who constantly gained on him, whenever he got close enough. He was out matched, and he knew it. *Ashley, where are you?* He thought as a fist cut him short of a spin, and flew into a tree. He slammed into it, taking the top down, and an idea sprang into his head.

“Ashley!” he yelled, as loud as he could, “Get Ready!” he yelled, and he began to sprint in the direction of Ashley, and her bow. He wasn't stronger, or faster, than his enemy, but he was surely smarter.

“Ashley!” Ashley jumped awake, as did the rest in the group, “Get Ready!” they heard, and Ashley immediately grabbed her bow.

“Everyone, get behind me,” she said, and they all complied, except for one.

“No! I can't let you put yourself in danger!” Said Ethan, sounding surprisingly strong and powerful.

“I can defend us, you are defenseless,” said Ashley, trying to get the argument over with as soon as possible.

They argue for a few more seconds, then Ethan complied when Ashley took aim at him. They saw Alex, Chaselyn, Mari and Luis burst out of the woods, and startled Ashley, who nearly shot at them. They all looked at her funny, then got behind her. They heard rustling, then heard a loud grunt, and heard Rod's voice.

“Oops,” they heard him say, more relaxed than any had heard him in the last few days. His voiced sounded like it had before, happy and carefree... not so angry or guilty. They heard a loud thump, then him laugh. “Uh oh,” was all they heard until Rod flew out of the bushes, he face red with a bloody nose, his eyes completely red, but he seemed not to care, he jumped off his back, winked at Ashley, smiling broadly.

“Lets do this,” was all he said, and a giant burst out of the brush, and Rod jumped into him. “Its on, fool!” She heard Rod yell, as she took aim, and then heard a loud laughter, seemingly mad, and saw it was coming from Rod.

“Let's do this!” He yelled. He looked at Ashley as he landed, winked again, smiling his smile, and said, “Help me out, lil girl!”

Chapter Twenty

I raised my eyebrows, taking aim again. The pain was still steady in my back, but I completely ignored it. The safety of the group was more important than my drawbacks, and I couldn't be a liability to our force.

Stretching back my bow, I closed one eye and focused in on my target – a large man-thing. Okay. I could deal with this. I let the arrow loose, watching it shoot narrowly past Luis and straight into the heart of the

beast. I waited expectantly, anticipating its quick death, but instead it just turned its piercing red gaze on me.

Swallowing, I took a step back right into Ethan. Clumsily, I reached for another arrow on the ground and armed the bow.

This thing wasn't giving up.

"Scatter!" I called to the cluster, and they instinctively darted to the cover of the forest behind them. Alex, Ethan, and Luis lingered behind for a moment, watching me with reluctant eyes.

"Just go!" I ordered them, giving them a confident nod. I knew what I was doing, and I didn't really care about the consequences.

Ethan and Luis loped off, but Alex just stared at me for several moments. He turned after I deliberately broke our gazes, and he trotted off after them.

Left alone with myself, the beast, and impulsive Rod, I took aim again, slowly backing in the direction of the forest.

"Rod, stop," I commanded in a low voice.

He just kept on slamming into the man over and over, even when it knocked him to the ground.

"Use your head, Rod," I warned, becoming frustrated. "We can't win. We just need to surrender for now. And by that, I mean escape. With this one, there can't be more far behind. Just give up!"

Something seemed to click in Rod's head, and he backed off some, resting on the ground for a moment and wiping some blood from his nose.

I motioned with my arm towards the forest everyone else fled to, and watch as he slowly retreated.

Before I followed him, I swiftly shot one more arrow right into the man's forehead, and it seemed stunned for a moment. Taking my chance, I dashed into the forest behind the rest of the group.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked, breathless. We were all standing around in a circle, hands on our knees and trying to catch our breath. We were so frightened that we'd run for miles, though we have no idea where.

"Yeah," Chaselyn replied weakly.

"I'm cool over here," Dijah replied contently, folding her arm and acting

like nothing ever happened.

“Good,” I almost snorted, but collected myself quickly. “Alex? Rod? Mari? Ethan? Luis? What about you guys?”

“I’m fine,” Ethan straightened, gazing at me evenly.

“Same here,” Alex brushed some loose dirt off his basketball shorts. Black, lined with white stripes, they practically matched the ones I was currently wearing also, except mine was highlighted with a gold flare in the center of the white stripes.

“Fine,” Rod growled, a mixture of emotions flashing across his red-blue, almost purple eyes. The red seemed to fade, but with the mixture of returning blue, they seemed almost violet. It was sort of odd, but interesting at the same time.

“I’m alright,” Mari responded shakily, looking around and hugging herself desperately. I straightened up and went over to stand beside her reassuringly. I’m sure that within the past few weeks, Mari didn’t see me as her BFFFFFL anymore, but a stranger that had taken the body of me. I admit, I had changed dramatically over the course of this new disaster, but when I saw things from her perspective, it occurred to me how hard it must be for her. I should be the one she can trust and talk to about anything, but now I seem unreachable and unfamiliar. *I* didn’t even recognize myself anymore.

Luis just grunted from where he was now sitting in the dirt, lightly dragging a stick across the ground.

“Alright,” I clapped my hands together, trying to lighten the mood. “We narrowly avoided the mercy of that man’s prong-things.”

Dijah shot me an inquisitive look, and I sighed. “Its fingers.”

“Oh,” Dijah blushed for a moment, then regained her composure and removed the emotion from her face.

Lighten up, I thought, momentarily forgetting the situation.

Oh! Right. “Does anyone have any idea where we are? If so, does anyone have any suggestions on where to next?” If nobody else was going to step up, I supposed I’d have to fill this leader position. For now.

Just then, movement from above caught my eye, and my head followed it abruptly. To my relief, I noticed a familiar brown-and-white form soaring through the canopy of trees, and slowly circling down to me.

Looking up, I realized Chaselyn was staring at me. I knew she knew everything about me now, but her gaze was icy cold and calculating. I shrank

back, but when she noticed I was meeting her gaze, she quickly looked away sheepishly, hanging her head in shame. This was hard for her, too, but she needed to understand that these things happened for a reason. Did she think I understood any better?

Sierra landed on my shoulder at of course the *perfect* timing, and I saw Chaselyn fasten her gaze on Dijah's orange jacket zipper.

"Are your friends gone?" I asked her aloud, not afraid of anyone else's opinions anymore.

Yes. They've headed up north to Canada to investigate what's going on up there, if anything. They're checking on their families, also, on the way, who live in Tennessee. Sierra responded, and I nodded to her.

"Who are you talking to?" Alex asked, one eyebrow raised in confusion.

Chaselyn met my gaze, and we both glanced at Rod. He gave a small nod. It was time to come clean with the entire group.

We all sat down in a semi-circle, and I gathered everyone in close. Judging from my tone, the people who knew me better looked worried, but others were just obliviously following my instructions.

It took me approximately forty minutes to recount everything that had happened, starting with the very moment Mrs. Robertson had asked Rod and I to deliver something outside. I explained the meteor, the reason we were in the hospital, the alien attack at school, the forest until we met up with them, who Luis was, how I'd realized I could communicate with animals (that took the longest), and all the way up to when I had to heal Rod in that uber-awesome form of mine, which I still had yet to figure out.

When I was finished with story time, I was met with gaping faces and huge, disbelieving eyes. After all they'd seen, I was wondering how it was so hard to believe this sort of stuff now, but I just went along with it, pretending to be sympathetic and coaxing them through it carefully.

"I-I can't believe it..." Alex mumbled.

"Hey, do you think we'll get cool super powers, too?" Ethan asked suddenly, and received a slap from Alex.

"You never know," I shrugged. "If Rod and I got them somehow, I'm sure you could also. You could just go through everything we have in the past four months and I'm sure one of the events will do the trick." I gave him a sarcastic smile, before returning to my usual straight face.

"I have an idea..." Rod spoke up slowly, and all eyes turned on him. He was sitting farthest away, leaning on one leg. "We could all head to my house. I

know a great place to stay concealed.”

Chapter Twenty One

I'd Ashleyen asleep while Ashley was talking, for I was tired. I awoke just in time to see Ethan get slapped on the back of his head, and I chuckled at it.

“You never know,” Ashley shrugged. “If Rod and I got them somehow, I’m sure you could also. You could just go through everything we have in the past four months and I’m sure one of the events will do the trick.” She looked at them with her most... sarcastic looking smile she could pull off, and I chuckled at that again. But then she straightened up, and they all looked at me. I'd chuckled a little too loudly. Then it hit me.

“I have an idea...” I spoke, it was coming to me as I spoke, they all looked at me, and I blushed a little, because Chaselyn looked at me, and we made eye contact. I felt like I'd been ponty pooled... something no one outside of my family would understand, but I'd been separated from the group long enough to be kinda an outcast. I liked it that way. I noticed that I'd paused while thinking all of this, “We could all head to my house.. I know a great place to stay concealed.”

Stay concealed? I thought, *What am I a soldier or something... moron, you sounded stupid in front of Chaselyn..* I noticed that they were all still staring at me, and I looked at Ashley, she smiled a little, but she didn't seem convinced.

I explained that by my house a sewer that we could hide in. I'd never been down in it, but I was sure my family would flee into there. “If they're alive...” I started to say, then the reality of it all hit me. This was how I'd figure out if they'd made it. I fought tears for a second, but when one escaped my eyes, I knew they could all see it. I opened up my eyes, and saw a red bead, shining or glowing, flowing down my face.

I gulped, and then continued, “if they're alive... then they'll be down there... if now, its still'a nice place ta rest... and I know we've gotta lot'a food down there..” I said, grim and a little depressed. Ashley looked at me sympathetically, but I looked at Chaselyn, who was now looking at Alex, who was scowling at me.

“What?” he yelled, “We're supposed to trust You?” he asked. He walked up to me, got up in my face, “After I saw you go Crazy, I don't think we Can trust you!” he yelled, then tried to push me. I didn't budge. Then he reared back, and threw a punch at my face. I heard Ashley and Chaselyn gasp, didn't hear much from Dijah, but felt that she was most definitely watching, and I heard Ethan tell Alex something about being stupid.

I let Alex land the blow. I let him throw two more punches, then reached up and caught his last thrown punch in my hand. He looked shocked that I was still standing and that I'd stopped his punch mid air. He tried to hit me with his other hand, and I caught that one too. I began to squeeze his fists, and pushed him down onto his knees. I heard a slightly crack in his hands.

“I saved your life,” I said, rage burning in my soul, how I wanted to smash him into dust Right there. “I am the Only reason your still alive.” I said, I could tell everyone was stunned, but when I looked away from his eyes, I saw the fear etched on everyone's face, even Dijah's, and I discontinued.

“You can come with me, or go with him,” I said, “I don't care,” I added, “but I promise you, you won't survive if you go wherever he wants to go.” I stalked off.

I was standing several meters away from the rest of the group when I heard footsteps approaching. I looked down at the ground, deep in thought, and when I heard Ashley's voice, I looked up.

“What did you want me to do?” I asked. I looked her in the eyes, and I could see the conflicting

emotions in her eyes, and I could see where she'd been fighting tears, and it burned my heart and soul to see that I caused this... *But I didn't cause this...* I thought, and looked over at Alex, who, with his pride hurt, glared at me.

"I don't know..." she said, "I'm glad you didn't kill him... I know you could have," she added. She looked back at him. "I don't know why he did that, but I know you can't just let him die out there. We will go to your family, just... let me convince him to come."

"Ashley.. I offered up an option, no one else had anything, and he yelled and hit me," I started to talk louder, but caught myself, "If he's going to distrust me so, then I don't think he and I will get along," I thought for a second, chuckled, "I know we're not going to get along. Ashley walked away, and started to talk to Alex. I over heard bits and pieces of their conversation, but couldn't tell who was starting to "win" the argument.

I was nearly asleep when Chaselyn walked over.

"Hello," she said, more than a little uncomfortable, "what are you doing over here?" she asked.

"Sleeping... or trying to," I chuckled again, a grim sound it must have been, because she seemed take n back by it, "But I'm glad you came over... what are you going to do?"

She was silent for a while, I could tell she was contemplating what she was going to say next, "Rod... you are more powerful... and faster and stronger... and hopefully smarter," she said, quiet at first, and a ball rose up in my throat, I couldn't talk, "because I'm going with you." As she said this, I couldn't help but smile. She chose me. I mean... it wasn't the same thing as a date, because it was to save our lives an all, but ya know, it was nice that she chose me.

"Thanks... I'll not let a thing happen to you," I said, leaning forward, no longer laying on my back, "I promise." She looked at me, and somehow I could see her perfectly though it was late and dark. The moon shown very little light. It was a wonder that she made her way over here without wiping out.

That night I slept more soundly then I had in the last month.

The next morning I woke up to poking on my face. I looked up at Sierra, or I think it was her, looking straight at me.

"Morn'in Sierra," I grunted, and surprised myself without being angry at her. I felt better. I got up, and looked at Ashley, who was talking to Alex, and saw Chaselyn was still asleep, though it was later in the morning. Ethan and Dijah were over here also, hopefully showing that they supported me.

Ashley looked over at me, a look of disgust on her face. I nodded supportively, and she smiled a little, then looked back at Alex, and said something. Alex's eyes went wide, and he seemed to need support. I was curious about what she said, but I figured I needed to do something first. I woke up Chaselyn, told her that I was going to go get us a car, and that I'd be back soon if anyone asked.

I wandered towards the road, and looked down it. The first car I saw, on the side of the road, was a brown impala, my favorite car. The only thing that would have been better is if it was orange. I opened the door, which was unlocked, and got underneath the steering wheel. My sister's boyfriend had taught me something about Car Ignition Switches, and I wondered if there was a way to by pass the system.

After half an hour of messing around with it, the car started. It rumbled as I drove it down the road, *Just like my jeep*, I thought, *'cept a little more powerful...* as I drove the car, it was a stick shift also, and I needed just a little practice. I drove up to the place that we'd been hiding a out, part of a small trail that lead deeper into the woods. I got out and walked into, to find them all waiting. Alex looked unhappy, but relieved, when he saw that I was back.

"Hey ya'll, I got us's ride," I said, my pride nearly bursting.

We drove down the road, and I soon figured out just where we were. I figured out we were just a few miles out of Marietta after a long time of driving. I saw that the place was destroyed, no one

living out in the open. I turned on the radio, and a screeching broadcast played.

“We have food, we have water,
we are a haven for those who are still alive,
please, we are well armed, underground,
We are Atlanta, underground, if you merely
go into the city, we'll see you
and escort you into the safe zone”

I chuckled at the broad cast, and everyone looked at me curiously, “You know that in all scary movies those places are first to go... too many people in one place, a broken down government, and an attacking alien force... c'mon ya'll, this is basic movie stuff,” I said, and chuckled again after.

Everyone laughed uncomfortably, and I knew why. They'd never studied it like I have. I knew where was going down before it was going down. I knew that our sewer was safest. I explained why this was.

“Think about it, there will only be a few people there, its hard as Hell to get into,” they all seemed to think this was reasonable, “and it'd take a lot for them to even find us in there.” They all complied, and let the matter of Atlanta go. *We're not heroes, we're just trying to survive..* I thought, and I looked over at Ashley.

She looked doubtfully at me, and I knew she was trying to think the same thing. It was hard to know you have the power to do something, but that you'd just wait for everything to happen, and survive, because that's what you do in these positions. Never be a hero. The heroes always die...

We're not heroes... Right?

Chapter Twenty Two

Rod looked pale as he drove into his neighborhood, and found it was nearly in ruins. The tree's seemed fine, but many houses were obliterated. Fire was still rabid in some of the houses. They drove on a road in the middle of pleasant, once pleasant, houses, which were surrounded by tall trees. He stayed driving straight as the road bent, and soon looked at his own house.

It was still together, didn't seem damaged at all. This came as a relief. None of his friends spoke, for they knew Rod was on the edge of some feeling, though none could tell exactly what it was, they were all worried. They'd seen him unstable before.

He sat in the car for many minutes, when Mari finally decided to speak up.

“Well...” she started, hesitantly, “we won't be able to figure out if they're... still here... “she chose her words carefully, for she could see the desperation in her friends eyes, “so... should we go, do you think?”

Rod thought for a few more minutes, shrugged his shoulder's, breathed deeply, then got out. He slowly walked down the decline that was his drive way, or was at least at one point. He looked to his right, where the garage doors were closed. Not saying a word, with all his friends out behind him, he opened the door on the left, which was unlocked. As he opened it, a few small birds flew out, and both regarded Ashley for just a second, and then flew off, even though she was trying to ask them something.

Rod walked in, his dad's car, a green mustang, still there. This seemed to comfort him, Ashley and Alex both guessed that he was hoping it'd still be there, and as he walked to the wooden door that led into the inside of the house, they all followed, a safe distance behind. He walked a few feet forward, and took a left, up stairs that would lead to the living room.

The others followed, cautiously, and were relieved to find Rod relieved. He took a right once he got all the way up there stairs, which doubled back to the living room, and they followed up. They looked around his living room while he went to his room. Alex had been there before, but they'd gotten new stuff since he was last there.

He walked over to the far side of the room, which had a table with three computers on it, and above it was a T.V., a very large flat screen. He tried to turn on one of the computer's but there was no power. Dijah and Mari looked around the dining room, which connected to the living room, and looked at the small chandelier that was over a table in the middle of the decent sized room. They looked to the far corner, far right, and saw an empty bird cage. They looked over to the barrier between the living and dining room, a love seat with dog kennels behind it, and noted that they'd been washed recently.

Ashley, though, followed Rod down a hallway that was to the right of the top of the stairs. He took the first right, which was the door into his room, and she followed. She walked in, to see him grabbing two bags. He looked at her, and she at him, but neither said a word. She looked at his dirty ground, which surrounded the bed in the room, directly to her right, and grinned a little.

"Tighty whities?" she asked, and he blushed. Chaselyn walked in behind her right then, and saw it too. She giggled, but knew that he was already embarrassed, so she didn't press on the point of his underwear on the ground. In Rod's hand was some clothing, which he had already been putting in his bag. But the clothing in his hand was unusual. It was made of some stretchy material. When Rod noticed Ashley looking at it, he blushed again, and put it in his bag.

"What is that?" she asked, then walked towards him, nearly tripping on a pile of laundry.

"Umm..." he said, then sighed, "Its my speed suit from track. I thought it might be... okay, sense I need something I can wear that won't slow me down.." as he said this, he pulled it out. On the right side of the singlet, it said "The Heat" his track team. He handed it over to her, and she looked at it. The whole thing was red, and black, with bits of yellow. Down the sides was a black line, surrounded by a yellow line. "I figured if we're gonna do this... I might as well look good while doing it.." he said, then shrugged. "Plus, I like it."

He finished putting clothing in, mainly sports shorts, hoodies and one bottle of freshener. He walked out of his room, his two friends following, to see that Alex and Ethan were trying to turn on a computer, and that Mari, Luis, and Dijah were looking in the kitchen, a side room, that was seemingly hidden from the rest of the house. They were impressed with the size of the oven, and when they commented on it, Rod merely said, "We like to eat."

They all chuckled as they went outside, and even Alex was happy to be out of the woods and in a house. They were standing the deck when Rod sighed with relief. They looked at him, and saw that he was staring at his large back yard, and that a sewer pipe had been propped open. They also saw a rather large boy trying to get into it, hurrying to get it done.

"Who is that?" asked everyone but Alex, who smiled too.

"Lex," Rod said, happy. He had them all wait while he went to go shave. Ashley asked him if he wanted help, and he awkwardly replied, "Sure.."

Ashley and Rod were alone in his parents bathroom, part of their room, when she said, "Look, I know your brother is alive, and you want to see them, but... what about our families?" As she said this, Rod scowled a little, because without running water, he'd cut himself a few times while shaving with just shaving cream, his spit, and a rusting razor.

He grunted in reply, hoping she understood that he would reply in a second. "We'll go after you family's too," he said, then starte dto shave again. Ashley looked at him, and saw that he'd shaved most

of it off of his neck, and had made it look at least slightly controlled. "But I knew where my family was..." he grunted again, cutting his face on accident, "and ya'll didnt'... but once we get our base of operations, the sewers, we can go out and find ya'll's families, okay?"

Ashley pondered on this for a second then agreed. She sat on his parents bed, and waited. After another couple of grunts, a few "ouch"es, and three, "Not on purpose's" he walked out, "How do I look?" he asked.

He had a wild beard, but at least it didn't reach down further then his neck. He'd shaved off a lot of it, but a lot still remained, it wasn't very long, but it was thick. He looked at least seventeen.

"I can't believe your only fourteen," she said.

"Almost fifteen, girly, almost fifteen," he said, satisfied, as he walked out of his room.

"Time ta meet my parents," Rod said, and everyone seemed to cheer up a bit. They walked down the steps and slowly made their way to the sewer top. It was torn open, in a hurry obviously. Rod jumped down, and each followed close behind. It was dark, but they saw a light at the end of the hallway, made by two flashlights.

Ah... my dad's birthday present, two hand cranked flashlights.. Rod thought as they approached. Obviously, one of his family member's saw his nearly violet eyes, a mix of his blue and now red eyes, and freaked out a little. Two axes were brought to bear, by Lex and his dad, Marty, and his mother, to Rod's shock, pulled a shot gun out. Rod walked out into the light made by the flash lights, and gasp's filled the air.

"My baby," said his mother, and she, though she was short, ran forward and hugged Rod, squeezing him. His dad stood in shock at his son's changes, and his brother, also stunned, muttered something. His sister was out on food duty, they told him, as he introduced his company.

Chapter Twenty Three

They'd been hiding the sewer for two weeks now. Rod had been more than happy to pick up any slack left by the rest of his family. He'd gone hunting a few more times, and tried to describe what he could do to his family, and they all took it in skeptically at first, but when he proved it by doing things that only he could do, they all came to believe him.

But Ashley and the rest had seemed less eager to adapt. Alex had gone hunting a few times, but he never could catch what Rod or Lex could. Ethan went out once, but he was so tall and clumsy he'd scared off all of the animals before anyone could get in close. Dijah, Mari and Luis had stayed at the sewer, which was a wide open room, with a small passage for water between two ledges, and helped Rod's mother to get electricity down into the place. They listened to the radio everyday, and still the broadcasts for the ATL hide out played.

One night, as Rod came home, his arms around two dead pigs that had migrated north due to the heat of Southern Ga, he met Ashley sitting outside of the sewer, he bow ready. Over the last few weeks, they'd both created "costumes" that they could use. Rod went with his The Heat Speed Suit, which he added some armor(spare pieces of metal that could surround his shoulders). Ashley'd slowly acquired pieces of clothing which Rod's mom had patched into a scout-looking outfit. It was green and grey and brown, no color's overwhelming each other, and they'd made it very hard for even Rod, who's vision could now switch between heat seeking infrared and the normal spectrum, to find her when she didn't wish to be found. She'd also seemed to be able to light fires without much trouble and could turn off switches that were several yards from her.

Rod had observed this, but left it unannounced. As Rod approached the sewer grate, he saw that

Ashley was waiting outside, for him, maybe. He wasn't sure. He was nearly four feet behind her before she noticed him, with a start, and nearly shot at him. He chuckled a little, but from the look on her face, his mirth was short lived. He waited patiently as she thought about what to say.

She looked at the ground, sighed, then said, "Rod.. I think we have to leave," as she said this, he figured out what happened.

"You want to find your parents," he stated, full aware of what was about to transpire. She looked at him, slightly guilty, and he stated, "I would too, if I were you."

"But... you wouldn't tear me from my family, would you?" She asked. He chuckled a little, the red in his eye replacing the blue green that had come back into dominance. She flinched a little, thinking he might be about to blow.

She stopped worrying nearly as much when he said, "You'll need some help, and I doubt Alex can do half of what I can do." He winked at her as he said this.

"You'll come?" she said, and he shrugged. He thought for a second.

"Do I have a choice?" he asked her, then cut her off before she could say that he did, "No, I don't. I'm bound, by friendship and companionship. You've done more for me than I could ever repay with. I'd never have found my family if you hadn't been there. I'd be dead." At the last words, Ashley seemed a little unnerved by her friend's numbness to emotion lately. He had been less than emotional for the last few days. But his eyes had gone back to normal, mostly, unless Chaselyn and Alex did anything that could mean anything more than friendship.

"So... you are coming," she said, relieved. As powerful as she'd become, with new found power, she still felt he was better at fighting than she was. He was the power, she was the brains. Or at least she liked to think she wasn't as changed as he was, power wise. But she'd noticed she could do things that scared her.

"Yes, I am coming." As Rod said this, he climbed down the latter that led into the sewer that they'd stayed in. He walked in, and he was greeted with warm smiles from his family, a shrug from Alex, Ethan and Dijah both looked up and nodded their heads, Mari and Luis seemed indifferent, as if they hadn't noticed his enter. His sister winked when Ashley walked down right behind him.

"Hey ma... dad, Lex and Ana," he said this, and they could tell by his tone he had something serious to talk about. Over the last few weeks he'd become a type of leader, his strength and speed unrivaled, and he'd always been good at strategizing, so they'd all listened to him lately whenever he had this tone of voice.

"We must talk," he said. He explained that he was leaving to help Ashley find her parents, that he'd come back with news of them being okay, and then that he'd lead one of the other's out with him to find their parents. He told them he hoped they could come back here, where it is safe, or if the others were in a safer place, he'd bring his own family there. They all agreed, but that night, they all went to sleep, aside from Rod, who was on watch, with an uncomfortable air around them.

Throughout the night, Rod sat still, watching the stars. He had a pack next to him, with a change of clothes, food for a week, and water for two weeks. He could carry all the weight, his only problem was that he couldn't fit more into the pack. A second pack had Ashley's clothes, and what she felt she needed. He thought of everything about to happen. They were going to go back out into a war zone, back to the perils of the world again, and he was doing it for her.

Maybe this is all I can do.. He thought. He'd been dissatisfied with how life had been. He felt that once he got back, it would have been all good, with no problems. But Alex and Ashley seemed to have grown closer, and Chaselyn had grown further away from him. *Ah well. Life isn't my thing to control.*

His watch was over when the moon had floated from one horizon nearly to the other, but Alex wasn't awake, and he still needed to think. He merely sat there, watching. He was sitting there when he heard a rustle. He slowly got up, knowing that the noise came barely ten feet away from him, behind

him. He made sure it seemed he was unaware of the presence. He stretched his back.

Turning, he jumped straight into the noise, and heard a large growl. He was happy his suit had metal on it when he heard the bang of claws slamming into metal. He noticed brown fur, and saw that it was the bear that had hit him. *Hmmm...* He thought, as he heard Ashley climbing up the grate. *Great...*

Chapter Twenty Four

That night both Ashley and I went to sleep. She was looking at me, seeming very comfortable as I looked back, equally unnerved by the sudden change of environment. It'd been a month and more since we'd been alone together.. and I'd forgotten what it felt like. We sat, several meters away from each other, staring at each other, until I rolled over. I heard her yawn, and waited several minutes.

After around half an hour, I looked over to find her asleep. *Good..* I thought. I turned over afterwards, and felt dreary. My eyes slowly closed over time, and eventually, sweet, innocent sleep overtook me.

I sat in Mrs. Robertson's class. First period. I looked around, and all my friends seemed bored. The room was dark, and the overhead was turned on, presenting some new part of speech. I turned behind me, Ashley sat, intently staring at something she was drawing. Next to her sat Ethan Nault, another tall boy. He had some facial hair.

I reached up, and felt my smooth skin. *No hair?* I wondered at this when Mrs. Robertson said my name. I looked at her, "Yes?"

"What is the definition of Death?" she asked, her eyes turn slightly red as she said this. But they faded back immediately.

"Umm... the loss of life," I answered. I studied her eyes for a second. *What the heck?*

She looked at me, smiled, and said, "Yes.. very good Mr. Trujillo."

The scene around me changed. I was standing in the middle of the commons, the meeting place in between classes, where all the lockers were. The normal lunch tables were missing, but all the kids were there. They all surrounded me.

Shrieks of, "Freak!" and, "Monster!" Were shouted out. I looked around, suddenly alarmed. Everyone around me stared at me with a bitter hatred towards me. I found Ashley in the crowd, noted that she wasn't yelling... but had a sad expression on her face. I pleaded as I looked her in the eyes, wishing she'd come out and support me. A tear dropped down her face, and she moved her head side to side, indicating that she'd not be coming out to help me.

I could feel something building in my chest. I reached up to my face, felt some wetness on the fur that was all over my face. I hadn't been shaved. I looked around, and suddenly saw a girl who seemed not to hate me. She approached slowly, in the middle of everyone, and said, "I'm coming."

"Who are you?" I asked, and she merely smiled. Her glasses were black, and she wasn't very tall, but she had a powerful aura around her. She slowly faded. And I was alone again. Then my existence's bane, my most hated enemy, the one guy who I hate most walked forward.

"What are you going to do now, Kujo?" he asked. I looked at him. He had no features, for I refuse to let him invade my conciseness. But then the girl appeared again. She looked at me, then snapped her fingers. And he disappeared.

"Your not alone," she said, "Merely you've lost your way," she smiled, and said, "I'm ready to lead you back to the path." She smiled again, then she disappeared again. The people surrounded me.

Confused, I began to run away. The red haze appeared. I ran fast. The hallways got longer. They

were impossibly long. I began to tire, and slowed down. Suddenly, everyone was around me.

I looked around, and one person caught my eye. A girl named Annie walked forward. She was a blond girl, who was just my height. We'd been... slightly involved with each other before. She walked forward, and grabbed my hand.

"Roddy..." she said, smiling, "you need to just relax," she said. She looked into my eyes. AS much as I knew she was trouble.. I couldn't bare to hurt her. Then Ashley walked forward.

"Rod!" she yelled, "No!" I looked back at Annie, who said, "Its okay."

Torn, I couldn't pick either. Annie was... like my sister. We'd been close, more then close, before... and Ashley and I had been friends, almost the whole time, since first grade.

"Roddy... you can come with me," said Annie, I looked at her, and I felt my soul aching. "You can escape it all." Her offer was so tempting.

"Don't do it Rod!" said Ashley, I looked at her. The look in her eyes was... real. It wasn't what I'd always felt around Annie... and the guilt returned. I looked back at Annie, and remembered what an emotional wreck she made me. I was weak. I was emotional, and I was vulnerable. And I hated myself for it.

"I'm coming Ashley." I said, more growled then anything, and got up. I grabbed Ashley's hand, and heard Annie begin to cry behind me. I paused. My heart weeped. My soul burned. My guilt was on a new scale. No girl had ever cried for me. I turned around for half a second, and saw that her eyes were dark red. The light that my eyes became when I was under the influence of rage, passion, and guilt.

"Let's go," Ashley said, and I followed her. Everything was going to be okay. I began to walk with her out of a door, some random door, and as soon as we go out, it happened again. I was alone, with everyone around me. Ashley was being held back by the crowd now, desperately trying to get in to me.

"Monster!" the crowd yelled.

"No! I'm not!" I said, and I saw that now it wasn't just the kids now, but teachers, close relatives and my own family.

"Rod! You're a disgrace!" yelled my ma, and I looked at her. She had red eyes. But that didn't matter. The words coming from my ma destroyed me.

"No..." I tried to say, and I could feel my world crashing in on me. The crowd continued as I collapsed, onto the ground, and I wrapped myself in my own arms. Pathetic. A voice ringed in my head. I looked over, and saw Sierra staring at me with cold, emotionless eyes. I slowly got up. My eyes were stinging. Slowly, I began to rise. And I felt the pressure in my chest more then ever before. I began to run towards the crowd, they all began to run at me. I jumped, using all my strength to smash into the ranks of the enemies.

I burst awake, sweating. Ashley stood over me, concern in her eyes, and I grabbed her, hugging her. She was shocked by this, but allowed me to calm before asking me to let her go.

"Sorry." I said, then noticed another girl with us. I recognized her from my dream, and only knew her as Sam.

Chapter Twenty Five

I couldn't believe I was back here again. Though things had changed, obviously, this was still my home. Sam's home. I had convinced my parents that I needed a break after my little "incident" that sent me to the hospital. Where did I choose for my break? Atlanta, well, just a bit beyond Atlanta, but

that was all detail. The point was that I was lucky to be here. If all of this panic about aliens had occurred before we got here, my parents would never have agreed. I had to beg to even have them let me out of their sights these days.

All thanks to the “incident”. It was like being on lock down. Not the best. Anyway, it had surprised me to see my town like it was. Terrifying was the only word I could describe it as. Even the landmarks that I had memorized as a little kid seemed haunted now. The wind blew my long, dark brown hair into my face, and I had to move it out of my way so I could see. For once, I was wishing I had a hair tie.

My brown eyes scoped out where I was, trying to decide which direction to go next. It was warm, and I was getting some funny looks from some people for wearing long jeans and sneakers. But that was normal for me. At least I was wearing a short sleeved shirt. It would’ve been worse if it was long sleeved. I really couldn’t be concerned with what others thought anyway.

I was starting to feel guilty. Somehow, I had lost my family in a panicked crowd. I would have gone to find them, but another strange thing had happened to me. Ever since my little “incident” weird things have happened to me. And I don’t mean guys asking me about their own nails kind of weird, I mean really weird. Random thoughts have suddenly popped into my head, but they’re not my own.

So, I had gone through town, using these landmarks to try to find my way around, while thinking it’s my parent’s fault they can’t get in contact with me since I don’t have cell phone they can call. My vision suddenly turned green and I realized that it was a forest. I had no control over what I was seeing –hah, like I ever did- and I watched as it turned. I noticed the orange car and this guy with violet eyes. Then I realized I was actually looking through someone else’s eyes. How or why, I didn’t know.

As I started to grow accustomed to this view, a hit from the physical world brought me back to reality. Someone had bumped into me, and then kept walking past. I couldn’t help thinking how rude they were when his thoughts came into my head. I’ll just say they weren’t the nicest and consisted of insults, probably geared toward me.

I remember that I continued on, with no real clue where I was headed. My feet were tired, but I knew I couldn’t stop for whatever reason that was holding me back from stopping. The only thing I knew was that there was someone who needed me. They seemed to be in distress, confused and fighting. How I knew that, I had no idea. But these days, I really didn’t feel like I had much of a clue about anything.

My thoughts and other’s thoughts kept me preoccupied. Each of everyone else’s thoughts was random and would pop in without in invitation. This made me feel like I was snooping, even though I didn’t mean to. Though every once in a while, I would feel the person’s distress again, which bothered me as it would cause pain to me as well.

As I had walked on, I felt the distress getting stronger. It either meant I was getting closer or the person was becoming even more agitated than they were before.

My path led me to an old beaten forest road, leading into –you guessed it- a forest. It looked like I was going camping. The invisible string of pain led me through the woods. In some places, the woods were thick, in others not so much. I stumbled upon an orange car, attempted to be hidden with leaves and branches. A few yards away, was Ash.

She seemed to be just waking up, but I couldn’t help being loud when I called out, “Ash!” If she wasn’t awake before, she was now.

Her eyes widened in surprise and her words showed it too. “Sam? What are you doing here?” She got up and I hugged her, so glad to see her. When I let go, I responded to her question.

“I convinced my parents to bring me here on vacation.” I replied. Silently, I noted the wings. It was a new look for her. She was about to reply when I noticed the guy beside her. “Who’s that?” I knew that was the person in trouble. It was kind of obvious, tossing and turning in his sleep. I don’t know how I hadn’t noticed before.

“Rod.” Ashley replied.

I looked at her, confused. “The one from first grade?”

“The one and only.”

“Geez,” I had a lot of catching up to do. I just shook my head in disbelief. Sure wasn’t the kid I remembered from first grade. Ash just grinned.

“What are you guys doing here?”

“More like, how did you find us?” Ash countered.

Rod let out a moan in his sleep and Ash looked back. It was getting worse. Then, it was like I was there, inside his nightmare. I could see it, the crowd yelling “Freak!” and “Monster!” and Ash looking away. I reached out, coming toward him slowly. “I’m coming.” I told him, as he was panicking. It was my attempt to calm him down. Whether he remembered me or even knew who I was, I had no clue. But my question was answered in his choice of words.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Who am I? There it was. He had no idea who I was. I smiled sadly. Then I felt my hold on the dream slip, and the scene vanished.

I was back in the sewer. Ash was beside Rod, looking up at me. “What happened?”

“I-I think I was just inside his nightmare...” I said in amazement. He let out another moan and I saw my vision change again.

This time I stood in front of him. There was someone else here this time. Their features were blocked, but whoever it was, Rod certainly didn’t like. He’d taken a lot of precautions to make sure he didn’t see the person. A thought came to me. One of my own this time. Could I maybe make this person vanish? Manipulate the nightmare?

It worked in the movies with people who were psychic. Yes, I considered myself psychic now. On a whim, I snapped my fingers and the person who causing Rod such pain was gone. I was feeling pretty good then. “You’re not alone. Merely you’ve just lost your way.” I smiled at his expression. “I’m ready to lead you back to the path.” I could feel the effort it took to manipulate the dream again. I made a mental note that reading thoughts was effortless, but manipulating something was hard. The nightmare slipped away again and I was back in the forest.

“I’ve got a lot of explaining to do, don’t I?” I sighed. Ash nodded.

“Definitely.” Her attention turned back to Rod as he moaned again. He started tossing more fitfully this time. Then he burst awake, sweat running down his forehead and his breath coming in gasps. As soon as he laid eyes on Ash, he hugged her, clearly relieved to be out of his nightmare. I would be too if I were him. I was almost afraid he’d choke her. A few more seconds and I was starting to feel like I didn’t belong here. Which I didn’t; I was intruding.

“Rod... you can let go now.” Ash said after a little while. I watched him let of her and noticed he was calmer now.

“Sorry.” Rod muttered. Then he noticed me just standing there. Recognition passed through his face. I supposed he remembered me from his dream.

“Hi, you probably don’t remember me. I’m Sam.” I smiled at Rod, realizing that this was like meeting him for the first time again.

Chapter Twenty Six

Rod looked at Sam, confused slightly.

“You were in my dream?” he asked, still confused. She smiled slightly, put her hand up, pulled the hair outside of her face. Then she looked at Ashley. Ashley shrugged. Rod started to say something when a loud crack went off.

“Dang it...” he said, then got up, distracted. He walked over to the Impala, which was hidden, horribly, by some trees and branches. He lifted the hood, and shewed off a rat, and replaced some pipe on it, and closed the hood again. He shrugged, still looking at it, sighed, then walked back.

“Now... how were you in my dream?” he asked. He suddenly heard a voice in his head, *I wish I could tell you, but I just heard, or felt, your mental pain and it invaded MY head.* Rod, shaken, looked at her. His eyes lit up a little, but then he stemmed the rage slowly building until it dissipated into a small frown.

“How'd you do that?” He asked.

“Wish I knew,” she said, “but I did somehow, and I guess it worked.” She shrugged. Rod looked at Ashley, who also shrugged. “Bet you don't remember me, do you?” Asked Sam.

“I know you were the one in my dream, if that's what you mean,” Rod said, hoping he didn't sound stupid. He was truly disturbed by the fact that she was in his head, and that she seemed so confident while in it.

“We were in the first grade together, then second, and third,” Sam said, seemingly unhappy to have to say the words, “Then I moved.” Her voice was sad at the end of her explanation. She looked at Rod, who blushed a little when he looked down. He was wearing his speed suit, with metal attachments, and his body might as well have been naked, because the thing was so tight. But when he looked down, he didn't find any jelly at all, but tight abs. This caught him off guard.

“Ah... yes,” he said, a little stiffly, “Wait.. your Sam HawkTail or something?” He asked. She nodded, then corrected him.

“Sparrowtail.” Rod thought about it, then said muttered something to himself that was indistinguishable.

Sam moved her glasses around on her face, and just before she decided to say something, Rod grunted, and began to talk, “So.. you have powers too... that explains that the other guy with the red eyes attacked us... But wait, that wouldn't work, because me an' Ash were together, Sparrowtail and that dude weren't together.. at least I don't think they were. But what about how tall he was? How'd he get that?

“He was so much stronger and faster than me too.. but his brains might as well have been mush.. then again, he was in a battle rage.. like I get sometimes..” while he rambled on, trying to think of what was going on with his life currently, Sam and Ash looked at each other. They caught up with each other, acting like they were paying attention to their friend's ranting.

“That explains it!” He said, then jumped up. Without warning, he dashed over to the car, got in, and turned it on. “Get in!” he said. The two girls got in, Sam in the back seat, the middle seat, and Ash in the passenger seat.

Rod grinned a little as the engine turned over, then rumbled as it stayed on. He put the gas down, slowly bringing the car into fourth gear. He honked the horn, then said, “Alright, girls, we're about to bring a ship down,” as he said this, he honked the horn a few times.

Both Sam and Ashley looked at their friend, their eyes wide and seemed a little fearful of his high speed driving.

“What do you mean?” asked Ashley, but Sam dug into his head, using her newfound powers.

“Oh no,” she said.

“Oh no?” Asked Ashley, who looked at Sam. Sam looked out the window.

“Wait... he might be right!”

“Right about what?” A green light glowed outside the window, Ashley looked nervously.

“Ash, get your bow ready, and be ready to charge it with more than just arrows,” she looked at him confusingly, he looked at her, then said, “Look, I know you have more powers than to just talk to animals, grow wings, and somehow heal me sometimes,” he paused, slammed down on the breaks, switched gears, and turned the car around, drifting slightly, then put the gas down, shifted into fourth gear again, and put the pedal to the metal.

"I saw you move things without touching them and light a fire. Well, I was thinking," he paused and swerved the car, Sam reached into his mind, then gasped as his whole plan was revealed to her head, "Sam, stop that, it makes it hard to explain this," he stopped talking again, and repeated his maneuver again, just as a loud smash happened in front of his car, obliterating the road in front of them, behind them now, and put the pedal to the metal again. Ashley screamed, and Sam smiled slightly.

"Keep this car moving, I'm going to get on top, and jump at it, I'll break it, and you better get out and help me. We're gonna capture us an alien!" Rod said, and he climbed out of the window, after Ashley put her foot on the pedal, and then grabbed the steering wheel, she had no clue how to shift the gear or anything, so she just put the gas all the way down, like he'd been doing, and didn't change direction unless it was vital that she did so.

Rod balanced on the top of the car, his eyes glowing violet. He saw the space ship over head, and noted that it looked like the movies always did, big plate like things. He crouched, ready to jump, when another blast left the ship, and exploded on the ground next to him, the car swerved. He began to load again, and jumped into the air.

He slammed into the ship, smashing a hole in the side. It moved off to the side.

"Ashley, slow the car down," Sam said, she could see what Rod could see. Ashley put the break down, and the breaks screamed and shrieked in protest. From one hundred and twenty miles an hour to zero in six seconds, they barely didn't crushed by another shot fired by the ship, as it floated around.

Rod ducked under a sword like weapon wielded by one of the aliens. Its arms were long and slender, and its four arms were all armed. Rod was happy that he'd added metal to his suit when one of the swords smashed down on his shoulder, but bounced off harmlessly to the side of the slick metal.

Rod winced at the sudden heat in his shoulder, the metal burning him, and he jumped into the creature. It tried to get its swords in his way, but was too slow. He slammed it into the wall, its bulgy head slamming into the wall. It slumped, unconscious.

Rod turned threw it out of the ship. He heard Ashley yell something, and felt the ship vibrate. A bright flash and the ship shuttered. *That's a girl Ash..* He thought as he knew the arrows were pumped with fire. And suddenly, his confidence drained away, he faced a new opponent. The man towered over Rod still.

Rod ducked under the large man's arms as he tried to catch him, the man's eyes were still red. Rod jumped from the ship, and immediately regretted. He was flying towards the ground, hundreds of feet, when he suddenly stopped. *Am I dead?* He slowly opened his eyes. Suspended in the air, ten feet above the ground, he saw Ashley holding her hand out, blood coming down her nose, and her eyes were squinting with concentration. She let her grip go though, Ashleying down on the ground, limp. Rod slammed into the ground, but didn't slow down one bit. He picked Ashley up, put her in the back seat of the Impala. He told Sam to get in the car.

She complied as he ran over to get the unconscious alien. It was light. Suprisingly light. He wrapped some metal around it, and he quickly put it in the back seat of the car. He heard a roar.

"Sam?" he asked. He stood up. He looked down the road. There stood the large man with red eyes.

"Yes?"

"Start the car, get it ready, I'mma fight with this fool for a little, then jump in the car. Make sure its in fourth gear and turned on," he said as the monster-man started to run at him. He began to run back, and when they hit, was surprised when he wasn't completely overpowered.

He was beat though. He slammed into the ground, which cracked around him. *Time to go...* He thought, and began to run at the car. Sam had done what he asked. He jumped into the driver's seat, and he put the pedal to the metal. The tired screamed as they burned on the ground. The car went from zero to ninety in a matter of seconds.

They left the roaring man behind.

"So Sam," he said, gasping for breath, tired and soar, "How was your first day back?" He asked,

with a wink.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Slowly Rod let the car slow down. They'd need gas soon, he knew, and he didn't want to burn all their fuel unless he had to. He looked over at Ashley, and immediately slammed the breaks. Sam squeaked a little, looked at him questioningly, then looked where he was looking.

Ashley's eyes were completely white, her pupils in the back of her head. She was writhing in pain. Rod put the car in park, then got out, ran around the outside of the car, and opened her door. He caught her before she fell to the ground, limply, and he gently laid her on the ground.

Sam got out quickly, her black hair bounced as she knelt next to her.

"Can you help her?" Rod asked, he was worried. He'd never had to care for someone like this... usually he was fighting something, something he could hit, something he could do something against. This was different. His friend, his best friend, his companion for the last few months was in trouble, and all he could do was watch.

"I can try," Sam said. She put her hand on Ashley's forehead, and found it was moist. Whatever Ashley was going through, it wasn't fun. She swooned, and fell into Ashley's dream state.

Unusual creature's ran throughout the place. Sam could see Ashley running away from something. It looked akin to one of the alien creatures, but she couldn't tell. She focused on the creature, trying to do what she'd done in Rod's dream, but when she attacked it, she found it was more powerful than the enemy Rod had fought.

The creature looked at Ashley, who'd tripped, seemingly helpless in her own mind, with all her doubts laid clear, and ignored her, a new enemy shown to it.

Rod examined Ashley and Sam as they were connected. Unsure of what to do, he looked around, trying to think of anything he could do. He saw something on Ashley's neck. He poked it, and received a slight shock.

Great. He thought, positive that this was the Alien's doing.

Sam shrunk back as the creature began to stalk towards her. Its approach was fast, and she panicked. Her lack of experience in this field, being in others' minds, rang out obvious at her, and she began to retract from her friend's mind. She heard Ashley scream, or yell, she couldn't tell, and her determination returned.

She eyed the creature, and began to concentrate on it. She felt power within her as she attacked it, trying to repeat what she'd done in Rod's dream. The creature wavered a little, and she gained more hope that she could defeat this foe.

Rod poked at the thing again, for the slight glow around it, which he'd just noticed as it flickered, had gone out for a second, as though it had given way. He poked it again.

Sam saw something slam into the creature, and saw it recoil slightly, then it growled. It began to stalk towards her quicker now. She stood her ground, and put her hand up. She dug into her essence, and felt power there. She felt it building up in her. The creature was barely ten yards away when she felt it build up in her hand, flowing into the flesh. She felt it building. Building. Expanding inside her.

The pain became unbearable, and she had to release it. She pointed her hand at it, and, to her relief, had little trouble releasing the energy. But when the energy was let out, she was rocked back. Her

body became tired and her vision blurred. She fell to her back as the energy streaked out of her hand, white-clear energy flowing freely from her.

The air around her rippled as the power was let go. She watched as it collided with the creature, which was barely two yards away, its approach had quickened when it saw her weakness. But it'd made a mistake. The pulses of energy slammed into its chest, and what could only be considered screams of pain escaped its "mouth."

Rod watched the light go out again, for more than a mere second, and then touched the thing. No shock. He then began to wiggle it a little, seeing if it was attached to flesh. His sense of touch was acute, so being gentle was no problem for him. He knew it was hardly attached to Ashley's neck, and he guessed it was her problem at this time.

Sam felt fear as she looked at the creature. It was stunned. She looked around, suddenly aware that she was in Ashley's consciousness. Ashley was on the ground. The surroundings changed. It went from a dark world to a seemingly careless place. She looked back at the creature, and noticed it fading.

Confused and curious, she began to approach it, and when it suddenly disappeared, she jumped back. Suddenly, she was hit with Ashley's thoughts. Before she could absorb much of it, she ejected from Ashley's mind, thinking her job was done, hoping to learn nothing she wasn't supposed to learn. Before she could get out though, she saw a great fear for a small bird. Confused she lingered for half a second, and soon, with Ashley's memories, knew it as Sierra.

She'd try to help them to find Sierra.

Rod pulled the small metal thing out of Ashley's neck. He looked at it, confused by its purpose, but jumped when Sam began to stir again. He was startled. He pocketed the metal tube-thing and helped Sam up.

"Did you help her?" He asked, worried. His fear of losing Ashley returned, and it ate at his heart. Emotion welled up, and he lost control of the wall he'd been using to block all emotional feelings. Suddenly, with Sam awake again and no obvious results, he felt dread.

"Yes, I helped her," said Sam, her voice was soft. She could see her new, or old, friend was distressed. "But I don't know when she'll wake."

"Okay," was all he could say. He let it all out, right there. Tears streaked down his face. *This is what I am now.* he thought, looking at his unconscious friend, *This is what I do...*

He looked around, then aware that they were on the middle of the freeway. He refused to sob, though he felt it would come naturally if he stopped fighting it. Worried, he told Sam that he was going to hide the car. He walked over, lifted it, grunting and straining at the weight.

Sam was sure that he was in pain or that something had just been revealed in his mind, and she felt she could help. She reached out with her mind, and met his. The sudden emotional intake was stunning. She was taken back at all the mixed feelings. Chaselyn ringed in her head. Ma and Dad and Lex and Ana ringed in her head. Guilt was surrounding all of the rest of the feelings.

Rod continued to walk without taking notice to the new sympathetic mind that was connected to his. Sam had to get in, had to figure out where it was all coming from though. She delved deeper, sure that the reasons couldn't be too deep within his mind. Doubts and fears were made clear to her, and she knew why he was so driven to protect his friend.

Insecurity, his own insecurity, flooded into her, and she felt suddenly that she couldn't do anything, that she was now locked into place, that she could never get out. The emotions overwhelmed her. She'd never thought he could feel, anyone could feel, anything that was this agonizing. She dug deeper though, seeing no escape.

She was deep within his mind, his thoughts were hers. *I shouldn't have done that..* She heard,

her own thoughts weren't being relayed also, just his. She tried to retract as the regret, his regret, seeped into her. Suddenly, she regretted this. Suddenly, her own doubts seemed to form in her head, out of their buried graves.

She could see his memories now. Good and bad. She saw him running away from a man in a scary mask, his dad. He was but a young child. She saw him sitting in his room, holding his phone in his sweaty hands. He was wearing a T – shirt and shorts. Tears were flowing down his cheek. He'd just broken up with his girlfriend. She could feel the regret in his mind.

He hadn't wished to, but he'd seen her, basically, cheating on him with his friend. And he'd ended it. She could see, feel, the power dedication to his family and close friends. And suddenly, she knew what it was to be Rod. She remembered what He remembered. And then suddenly, his memories retracted. She had what she had wanted and needed to get out now.

She felt herself become herself again, and couldn't remember the feeling of being Rod anymore, but she knew things she hadn't before. She looked to wear Rod had been, and saw that he was on the ground, sound asleep. She hadn't meant to dig in so deep, but now she knew why he guarded the two of them so deeply.

Why he felt such regret and rage. But when she tried to describe it to herself, she couldn't. She just knew why, though she knew no words that could say it. She just knew that if she ever needed someone to fight to the death, someone to depend on, her or Ashley, that all they'd need to do was to hint at it to Rod, and he'd be their man til he couldn't any longer.

Suddenly, Ashley slammed awake, gasping. She looked at Sam, and Sam looked at her. Sam couldn't help it, but her mind leaked out. Everything she'd learned leaked into Ashley too. Sam swooned, and fell to the ground.

She and Ashley sat there for a while, thinking about the information they'd just gained from their male companion, and decided, though without any verbal confirmation, that neither would talk for a long, long time.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Close to an hour had passed since Ashley had regained consciousness. Sam still sat with her, and together they sat in silence. Rod was still asleep; they had silently decided to leave him be for the moment. It was probably better that way.

Meanwhile, guilt consumed Sam, eating her on the inside like most things did. She knew things she probably shouldn't about Rod. She'd know how much it would bother her if something like this happened to her. Memories were precious to her... emotions meant to be concealed.... Just taking all of it seemed wrong. It was effortless. Things like these should be earned, and she knew that. So why was she tempted to take another look? Sam knew she'd never forgive herself if she did read his mind again.

But it was so hard to resist... She was convinced of it now. Her skills were a blessing and a curse. But more importantly... did Rod know she'd been his head? The moment of truth approached as Rod started to wake. Both girls turned to watch, and the silence dragged on, even as Rod stood up.

Aware that all eyes were on him, Rod let out a self-conscious, "What?" Absolute silence. This irritated him incredibly. Usually when things like this happened, it was because people didn't want you to hear something. But what was there that they couldn't tell him? When no one spoke up, he repeated himself a bit more forcefully, "What?"

Ashley shrugged and stood up. "Nothing."

Rod sighed, releasing his irritation. Or at least trying to. If there was ever a time he wished he could read minds, it was now. He looked at Sam, hoping she would give him an answer. Sam just shook her head, as if to say it wasn't worth it. She then put on a forced smile and decided to

change the subject, "Have a nice nap?"

Rod refused to be shaken so easily. "C'mon, we're all we've got left. We can't keep secrets from each other, not now."

Ash let out a sigh, caught between two people she cared about. She noticed the inkling of a smile on Sam's face, but it was gone in a split second, leaving her to wonder if it had ever been there. Did she let Rod know that Sam had rummaged through his mind or did she stick to her silence? Lucky for her, she didn't have to make that choice.

Sam shut her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. When she opened them, she stood and looked at Rod. "I'm sorry." Then she added, "For everything." She headed toward the car before Rod had the chance to ask what she meant.

As much as Rod tried to hide the car, the Copper Impala was easy to spot. Orange, even a duller orange like copper, was quite possibly the worst color for camouflage. Sam turned, only to see that the two hadn't moved. "Well, are we going to find Sierra or not?"

The mention of Sierra got them moving. "How'd you know about Sierra?" Ashley asked.

"I saw her in your mind when I was there." She replied, a tad guilty she'd lingered in her friend's mind.

"Well do you know where to find her?" Rod asked, cutting into the conversation.

"Uh, no, but how hard could it be to find a bird?"

Sierra glided through the sky, relying on the low drafts to keep her airborne. Her eyes scanned the earth below. She'd lost the humans who were helping her find her sister. It's hard to keep up with a car, no matter what kind of bird you were. They didn't seem to realize that. Humans were so oblivious and self-absorbed sometimes.

Sierra let out a surprised chirp as two swallows darted past her, messing up her gliding. She flapped her wings a couple of times to balance herself out in the wind. She was about to yell at them until she realized they were flying away from something. When she looked back, she saw a small aircraft in the distance. It wasn't a plane; it didn't have those so-called "wings". It wasn't one of the large wingless rockets people shot up sometimes either. Those only flew vertical.

That meant that it must be the aliens. Perhaps the very ones that had taken her sister. Sierra knew she wouldn't be able to free her sister herself if she was aboard. For the sake of Senna, she'd have to keep flying. She rose into the sky, catching a faster moving draft. Finding Ashley and Rod was her first priority.

She only hoped she could find them in time.

They were driving for about ten minutes when Ashley spotted something in the sky. "Hey... what's that?" She looked up, squinting to see if she could make out what it was.

Sam was jolted out of her thoughts at Ashley's words and looked up. Rod slowed the car to a halt, watching the dot in the sky. "What is it?" he asked aloud.

Sam shrugged. "It doesn't look like any plane I know."

"Well then let's follow it and see what it is and where it's going." Ashley spoke like the answer was obvious.

"Looks like Sierra will just have to wait." Rod said as he turned the car to follow the unknown aircraft.

The craft got lower and lower to the ground, until it disappeared completely behind a line of trees.

When the trio arrived, there was nothing but an empty field. Nothing seemed out of place. It was a pretty nice field too. There was a small forest surrounding it. The grass was tall and had a few wildflowers growing in it.

"Where'd it go?" Ash asked, suddenly doubting they'd seen anything at all.

Rod turned the car's engine off and got out. "We'll just have to see, won't we?" Ash and Sam followed him out. They all weren't quite sure what they were looking for. It looked just like any other field you could drive by or walk by. There was nothing unnatural about it at all. Sam looked around, scoping out the field, trying to find something out of place. The other two were checking the edge of the forest, thinking that something may be hidden there. Thoughts, her own of course, flew around in Sam's head. But one thought really stuck out. If there was something here, could she be able to sense it? It was worth a try, right?

Sam closed her eyes and reached out with her mind, ignoring Ashley and Rod's thoughts and minds completely. There were two other presences here, unknown to her and very strange creatures. They were here in the field, right in front of her. Their minds were swarming with thoughts too complex and fast moving for Sam to comprehend. Not to mention that they were in a different language. And it sure wasn't Spanish. She supposed it was their native language.

Then, one of the alien's thoughts turned English. And its thoughts were directed at her. "So you think you're so smart, don't you?" the alien voice snapped, now in her head. It had a strange, metallic edge to it.

Sam didn't reply. She was too stunned that the alien had recognized her presence in its head. Then came the pain. The alien mind was brutal and cold, pushing its way into her head. It didn't care that it was causing her pain with its searching, the way it forced its way in. No, Sam sensed it wanted to hurt her. To hurt all of them.

The voice let out a sound that could be considered as laughter. "Perhaps this will teach you not to pry..."

Quickly Sam tried to pull back, but the alien mind held her fast. She tried to resist, but the alien was stronger. She gasped aloud as a memory forced its way into her head.

The lights shone brightly, burning themselves into Sam's vision. She closed her eyes, and then reopened them when a shadow blocked the lights. Two human figures now stood beside the cold metal table where she was held. They wore doctors' clothes. More specifically, it looked as though they were dressed to perform a surgery. Terror rose within Sam as she realized what was going on. The alien who she had contacted had been involved with a government dissection. And she was going to experience it herself. Her eyes spotted the glint of a needle and the small pain as they injected whatever was inside into her. It was a sedative. It was easily recognizable by the blurry vision, drowsiness, and the slowing of the heart and mind that followed. But it did nothing to ease the pain. She could feel everything. The slicing of her skin... the blood rolling down her arms... It was too much. She would've cried out, but the sedative was strong enough to render her speechless. Pain coursed through her and she shut her eyes tightly as if that would block it out. Mercifully, the memory receded, as if the alien had decided she'd had enough.

"Sam! Sam!" Someone was shaking her. She recognized the voice instantly. Rod. Sam's eyes flew open. Her breath was ragged and she was deathly pale. She felt sick and somehow she'd ended up on her knees in the grass. She looked at both arms. No scar, no cut marks. It had all been in her head. But then why was she in so much pain?

Ash knelt beside her, worry written all over her face. "Are you okay?" she asked almost immediately.

Sam would've thought it was obvious that she was not okay, but she let it slide. Instead, she ignored the question. There were more important matters at hand. She looked beyond her two friends, at the empty field. But she knew better. "They're... here." She struggled to get the words out. The alien's mind and memory had left her breathless. The pain was still fresh in her mind, but her regular skin color was beginning to return. "Two of them."

They looked in that direction. Rod turned back to her. "Are you sure?"

If Sam had the energy to glare, she would've, but she just nodded. Ash pulled out her bow and a regular arrow. She notched the arrow and shot at the empty space. There was a sharp clink as the arrow hit something metallic and then just seemingly floated there, stuck to something invisible. Rod started toward where the arrow 'floated' with one hand out in front.

"Let me help you up." Ash held out her hand for Sam to grab. Sam grabbed the hand gratefully and Ash helped her friend up. They stood at a distance, watching their brave friend approach the invisible unknown.

Rod stopped as his hand touched something cold and metallic. He flashed a triumphant grin over his shoulder. With both hands, he searched for something he could grip. When he found the chink in the metal, he took both hands and tore open a hole in the ship.

Sparks flew where the metal had been disconnected. It looked as if someone had ripped a hole in the fabric of space for now you could see the inside of the craft, even though the outside continued to remain invisible.

"Ladies first." Rod grinned.

Ash rolled her eyes, walking over and grabbing her arrow. She then stepped onto the craft, Sam followed closely behind. Rod was the last to go in and he didn't look back. Perhaps if he did, he would've seen the winter wren that flew in behind them.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Rod walked in behind Sam and Ashley. Ashley's bow was ready, and armed, when a creature flashed by, lightning fast. It distracted Rod from hearing the sound of wing flaps.

An arrow slammed into the wall, dinting it hardly, as Ashley reloaded her bow, notching yet another arrow in.

"I'll take the lead, ladies," Rod said, confidence welling up inside of him. Sam shrugged at Ashley, both taken back by their friends sudden change of heart. He'd been surprisingly optimistic lately. *He must really love that car...* Sam thought, chuckling at her own thought for a second.

Rod stalked forward, muscles tensed. He glanced around the dark room, unsure of what he'd find. He was in the middle of the small hall way, not too wide, but with shelves every couple of feet. He watched each shelf as they came close, Ashley's bow aimed with each shot.

Sam, weary this time, reached forward a little, hoping to get a little bit of a clue as to where the aliens had gone off to. She soon found an answer, one alien was moving around above Rod, and she withdrew her mental link immediately.

Before she could warn Rod, he found out for himself. The hard way. Ashley shot, wounding the alien, which cried out in pain as the arrow stuck into its skin. Rod, suddenly pressed by tentacles on the creature's hand attacking him, walked back a few steps, the alien between Ashley and Sam and him. He blocked several hits from the creature, which was facing him alone, though the several arrows in its back got on its nerves.

"Ashley, why don't you hit it with those... fire arrows?" he growled, barely holding his own against the six tentacle attacks that pressured him.

"I don't want to hit you!" Ashley yelled, frustrated. Sam decided to take things into her hands. She mentally leaped at the alien, which was too engaged in its fighting with Rod to fend off Sam's mental attacks.

Rod was pleasantly surprised by the lessen of the intensity of the battle. He decided to take the aggressive, hoping, and thinking, to overwhelm the alien while it was distracted, with whatever it was that was messing with it. He growled, causing Rod to hesitate. A giant mistake.

Sam's battle with the alien, mentally straining, was vicious. It attacked at her with mental tendrils, while Sam could only create one large weapon, of pure mental power. She felt overwhelmed but she refused to give in. She didn't want to kill it, like the one that had died in their car while driving, but wanted to incapacitate it.

Rod swung at the creature, furiously, slamming it straight into the ground, but his victory was short lived. The second alien, taking its time, held a weapon level with Rod, from behind him. He turned around, ripping one of the shelves up. The bolt of power, drawn from the weapon that it held in its hand, and slammed into the metal that Rod held.

He flew back, thinking and growling many curse words, though he often tried not to curse. Sam and Ashley barely dodged out of the way of their friends flying. He flew into the field, outside of the ship, and slammed into the ground. A loud crash created.

Sierra barely ducked under a weird bird that was flying as fast as it could. She looked ahead, to find another large craft. She decided to go lower, hoping to hide in the forest. For her sister, she had to survive. A loud crash, reminding her of Rod with the weird and primal growling and grunting.. and cursing.

Slightly encouraged, she flew at the sound, as fast as she could, and found that it was Rod. He held a piece of metal, or what used to be a piece of metal, that was charred and breaking. It was burnt black.

Sam and Ashley looked at the new alien, over the one that was laying on the ground, unconscious. Sam could feel it trying to get into her head, toying with her, until Ashley muttered something and took aim at the alien.

It barely dodged the arrow, charged with energy Ashley had somehow produced. What it didn't expect was the fire to come at it from behind. It screamed a little as it flew forward, onto the ground.

"Sierra?" Rod mumbled, though he was pleasantly surprised to see his bird friend, as he got up. He chuckled as Sierra flew around his head, chirping happily. He was taken from his moment of reprieve, reminded of the ensuing battle by a loud explosion.

"That's my cue..." he grunted as he began to run into the ship again. It was now visible, with the internal damage. He barely got in to see the creature slam into the ground, face first. He chuckled a little, then ran forward, past Ashley and Sam, who both still took cover behind the shelf, having just been hiding from the explosion.

"You put a lot into that one," Sam remarked.

"Yeah..." Ashley said, giggling a little. *I wonder how it is that I can giggle at a time like this...* She thought, but then thought of how much more sane she was than her friend who was laughing madly as he grappled with the alien.

She looked over, and was shocked to see that he had a decent reason to laugh. The creature, fighting with two tentacles, was tickling him with the other four!

"Stop... hehehehe... tickling... hahahahaha!... me!" Rod yelled and laughed as he fought with the thing. It knew it was working, so it intensified the unusual attack. Rod growled a little, and grabbed one of the tentacles that he was fighting with. He swung the creature, slamming it into the wall, then held it there.

Ashley and Sam both flinched as Rod slammed his head into the creature's head. They both "Ewed" as a little of its blood, green and blue-ish color, flowed down his forehead.

"I got a little carried away," he said... actually very sorry. He hadn't meant to kill it.

Suddenly, with the adrenaline gone, Sam could feel their thoughts again. She could feel Rod's slight guilt seeping into her thoughts, and she could feel Ashley's disappointment in Rod's actions.

"You okay?" Rod asked, he noticed Sam's face crinkled up and her eyes look distant.

“Yeah..” Sam said, “I’m fine...”

“You sure?” He asked. Ashley put her bow on her back, and put her arrow back into the quiver. She dug the arrows out of the back of the unconscious alien, and cleaned them, as Rod made sure Sam was fine. He worried about her, he didn't know why, but he felt an unusual connection to him.

Sam sighed, then said, “I’m sorry Rod,” and though he didn't understand, he accepted the apology, knowing that if its Sam saying it, then it will make sense, or it had good meaning. He turned, abruptly, and picked the alien up off the ground, then said something that made them all light up.

“I found Sierra... or, well, she found me,” he said, with a chuckle. The shine in his eye returned... “Shake a spear,” he mumbled, then laughed deeply.

Both Sam and Ashley laughed, to which Rod gave a weird glance at Sam, though he didn't follow through with his question.

“You did?” Ashley said, happy to find her bird friend back.

“Yeah... well, she did, all I did was make a loud noise and talk a lot while I tried to get back up,” Rod said, grinning broadly, “but you know.. if it weren't for my skillful getting blasted away... we'd not have our little bird friend back.” He puffed his chest out as he said this, tight muscles on his chest, big too, moved up and down as he moved them. Amused, he sat down contently.

“Whatever...” Ashley said as she put her finger out. Sierra sat down on her finger, and eyed Sam for a second.

I like her. Sierra said to Ashley, who relayed the message.

“I’m glad...” Sam said, truly happy to be accepted by yet another member of her unusual group of friends.

“Ya know...” Rod said, his slight accent coming back, “I’m too surrounded by ya'll girls...” as he said this, he thought over his statement, “Never mind, I like this set up.” He grinned and winked with the last statement.

Both Ashley and Sam, and Sierra strangely, though it escaped them all as to how she did it, shrugged and sighed. Then they all bust out laughing.

“Yea, Rod, I’m sure you really happy,” Ashley said, and Sam nodded, grinning.

“Yes, I’m sure you are, just thrilled actually,” Sam said. Rod grinned and nodded stupidly. He'd lay the alien next to him, and slowly tied it with the vines that always seemed to grow when they needed to tie something. He looked up, to see Ashley concentrating on it.

“Thas cool,” he said.

“Yea...” Ashley said.

Sam, though their sights still rang loud to her, found peace with her friends. She was happy, content, and she knew that Ashley and Rod were too. She truly did know, too, because she could tell what they were thinking, to her guilty dismay, though she was happy that she knew that her friends were happy. Until she heard of one regret in one of their heads. And with this one, she truly felt sorry, and knew she could not help, unless she were to go in and actually change something.

Chapter Thirty

Regret. It’s one of the most haunting of emotions known to humankind. It taints even the happiest of memories, and can be crippling if you let it. Sometimes it even kills you on the inside. Not that I would know, of course.

The instant I read the regret, I knew there was really nothing I could do. Actually, I almost missed it. It seemed to drown in the other emotions circling around Ash and Rod’s heads. Since I didn’t understand winter wren, I couldn’t tell what was going on in Sierra’s head. The regret was just below the surface,

but it was still there. I could sense it.

Just to be sure, I double checked by briefly going through both of their heads, not too deeply of course. First Ash, then Rod. It was Rod. Why was I not surprised? Even though I promised myself would not pry into a friend's mind ever again, I did a little digging. Guilty as charged. If I kept this up, I'd need a search warrant or something.

I'll be honest now. I was slightly offended at Rod's regret. Slightly. Okay, maybe a lot. But the important thing is that I understood where he was coming from.

You see, he regretted this ever happening. Before you say "That's terrible!" or anything of the sort, let me explain something to you. It had absolutely nothing to do with me, Sierra, or even killing that alien. Absolutely nothing. It was about what happened previously. Before I ever appeared. If I were to pinpoint the main reason it would be he regretted getting his strength from that comet. While, yes, it had been quite useful, to him it seemed like the cause of many of his problems at the moment.

Memories were attached to that regret, as always. There was that girl, Chaselyn, wasn't it? Anyway, she was in one of the memories, looking almost... terrified... of Rod. The time he and this other guy basically got into a fist fight. Then there was the nightmare that I had first appeared to him in. I saw myself through Rod's eyes, which I must point out I thought that was pretty wild since it's not every day you see yourself through another's eyes. Anyway, the cries from the hostile crowd rang in my ears for the second time, which I guarantee is no better than the first time. The waves of hate rolled of the crowd and the disapproval of, at least what I assumed to be, his mother flashed through Rod's mind.

In short, he thought everyone else thought he was a monster.

Which considering some reactions of people in his memories, they probably did. Except for Ash, -as far as I could tell- Sierra, and I. I was bothered by the fact that he put us in the "everyone else" category, though I was probably the only one who truly belonged in that category- even if I didn't believe Rod's imaginary public opinion of himself.

Alright, he got a little aggressive at times, got carried away in the moment a lot, and he seemed pretty sure of himself just about all of the time. But a monster? Never. The only crime he ever committed was being human.

I withdrew from his head, not willing to change what little I could. I couldn't turn back the clock, but I could make it so he didn't have this regret. Believe me, I wanted to help. But my morals and ethics didn't allow it. Plus I didn't think Rod would appreciate me messing with his head. I couldn't just let him go around thinking that everyone thought he was this destructive being, that'd be cruel, but I really didn't want him to know I was snooping.

I decided Rod's mental well-being was much more important than whatever opinion he had of me.

Rod was in a whole other world when he noticed Sam staring at him.

"What?" he asked, bringing his hand up to face checking to see if he had something on his face. She seemed dazed. He noticed that her eyes were a little glazed over.

"Sam?" he asked, and Ashley burst awake. She had her bow in hand before any of the others could respond. She looked at the two, now staring at her.

"What was that about?" Sam asked, and Rod chuckled a little, thinking to himself about how paranoid they were becoming in their sleep.

"I don't know..." Ashley said, then laughed a little. But the laugh was short lived. Sierra squeaked at her, alarming her of something flying at them. Rod and Sam both looked at the weird light, and both of their eyes widened. Flashbacks of the first day when Rod and Ashley had been hit by the

meteor flew through Ashley's mind.

“Ah shi-” Rod began to say as the meteor flew into them.

Sam was first to wake up. She looked over, to see that both Rod and Ashley looked.. well, normal. Rod's beard, as big as it was, didn't hide violet eyes anymore, he was still lean and thin(more thin than he was, but he was still heavysset), and Ashley wasn't hiding wings that she could retract at any time.

Rod awoke with a start. His muscles bulged, and his eyes went violet right away. He relaxed a little, seeing Sam was awake and alive. His eyes, glowing, went from violet to blue-green. His muscles slowly receded back into normal proportions. Ashley woke up to, suddenly, and she found the same results. Sierra still made sense, but she had a hard time talking back. Sierra was a little bigger than she had been. Her eyes glowed, and she seemed to be more powerful.

“What the kell” Rod asked, replacing the curse word with his high school, “Just happened?”

“We got hit by a meteor... it would seem so, at least,” Sam said. She shrugged. His intensity raising, he noticed he was getting bigger suddenly. Muscles bulging, eyes glowing violet suddenly, he took note of the fact that every time he worried about anything, he began to change back into his more... powerful form.'

Sam and Ashley noticed also, but didn't put it together as quickly as he did.

“We can control it.. to a degree... Sam, what am I thinking?” Sam checked, trying to get into his mind, but found she couldn't. Alarmed, she felt something well up in her chest. She accessed it, and found she could suddenly get into his head again. She found images of mashed potatoes and two racks of ribs.

“Thats a great thing to think about...” she remarked, sarcastically. Rod chuckled, then turned to Ashley.

“Your right, I couldn't talk to Sierra for a second.” They all took a second to look at the bird, he puffed her chest out.

“I can speak English...” Sierra said. All of them, alarmed, looked at her. “I can do this too,” she said, and stared at a tree that surrounded their field. A laser like beam flew from her eyes and slammed into the tree, slowly destroying the bark, burning it.

“Dang...” Rod said. He was suddenly distracted by yet another thing flying at them.

“Get ready..” he said, and nodded in the direction of the now approaching space craft. They all stood up, Ashley getting her bow ready, restringing it, Rod grabbed the piece of metal he'd used to protect himself from the blast, and Sam began to reach out with her mind.

All of them tense, ran to hide in some woods to their right. They were all surprised to see the ship close behind a Hummer with a large gun on top. A man, one who was in the back, climbed up and got on the seat behind it. The gun vibrated violently as its bullets smashed into the craft, but to no avail.

The car swerved as a beam exploded out of the ship, slamming into the ground right next to where the car had been, destroying the concrete. They saw a woman in the passenger seat, holding a suit case or something, and the man driving it was a nerdy looking scientist type.

“We have to help them,” Ashley said, and Sam nodded. Both looked to Rod, to find that he was already moving. He began to climb up a tree that was tall enough to let him get level with the ship. Ashley notched an arrow on her bow, and loaded it with energy.

Sam reached out with her mind. Six forms were within it. She thought about the alien that they still had tied up, which was still unconscious, and alarmed, looked back. She reached out, and found it was still asleep.

The ship got within jumping range for Rod, and he roared as he jumped out onto the craft. It shuttered as it took the combined blow of Rod slamming into it and Ashley's arrow exploding on its side. The driver within found himself distracted by an unusual probe in its brain. It began to fight back, but found the Sam's mental tendrils were more than effective against it.

Sierra let loose her optic blasts, and the ship rocked a little.

Rod found himself in a precarious situation. He'd slammed straight through the wall of the craft, but found himself confronted with two of the aliens, both armed with those blasty weapons.

"Dang it.." he muttered as one shot off, but its shot rocked off to the side, for the ship was slamming into the ground. Rod, taking this opportunity as one to advance on the creature, jumped forward, and slammed into one of the aliens. He slammed two fists into its face, and the creature died, its blood squirting out all over Rod.

He turned to find that the other alien was unnerved by two things. The blood on Rod and the look in his eyes, and the second was the arrow that protruded from its stomach, the second close behind it.

"You ever gonna run outta Arrows?" Asked Rod, looking at Ashley and Sam. Sam was mentally grappling with the alien in the pilots seat, desperately trying to keep it distracted. Her body followed Ashley like a zombie.

The Hummer stopped driving, the man with the gun yelling at them as the craft slammed into the ground.

"What the?" Asked the man using the gun.

"Something slammed into it, it would seem," the driver said, shifting his large round glasses around on his face. "And then something exploded on it." The four people in the car, two girls and two guys, one guy heavy set and military looking, another, the driver, skinny and tall with blond hair that made him look like the loser of almost all books, though his intelligence made the others look like first graders.

One girl with brown hair and skinny body was barely older then Rod and Ashley and Sam, though she radiated intelligence and control. The fourth, a girl also, was a blond girl who looked like a male version of the nerdy looking man. They all observed the ship as they heard an explosion within and saw one alien fly out of the ship, its face completely destroyed.

Rod ducked under a sword looking laser thing, as he would have called it, and smashed his fist into its face. Bones cracked under his knuckles, and the creature flew from the ship. He turned around, and thought himself dead, except that the alien, who's sword was raised up to strike, was struck with two arrows, their shafts vibrating. He grabbed it, and slung it from the ship. He turned to see two more aliens. But one was different.

It was larger then any of the other ones, and its body wasn't the skinny lean that Rod was accustomed to seeing. This one was giant, at least ten feet tall, with bulging muscles, and red eyes. His eyes flared, bright violet, and he looked into a mirror.

A second of distraction over came him as he remembered that his book hero also had violet eyes.. *How cool is that?* He thought, thinking of the Drow Elf Drizzt Do Urden, a renegade warrior. But he came right back to reality immediately, as the smaller alien jolted with a fiery arrow slamming into its chest, exploding on it. Another slammed into the big one, though it shrugged it off as though it were nothing.

"Uh girls... Get back!" Rod yelled as he crouched down, getting ready. He glanced around for a second, and found that there was a sword like thing laying several feet away. The creature stalked up to him, and he slowly made his way to the sword. He barely got the sword as he dodged back, barely escaping certain death.

He jumped back, and turn around and sprinted as fast as he can. He barely got out of the ship before the creature destroyed the wall, and walked out of the burning ship. Rod turned around, and brought the sword up to bare. He barely ducked underneath a wide swipe of the creature, only to get hit by another fist flying the other way.

"Rod!" Sam screamed, and she tried to get into its head, but found she couldn't. Ashley pelted it

with fiery arrows, which exploded on it, but the creature didn't even glance their way. The four observers all yelled out, the girls screamed, as Rod got up.

His nose, bleeding, was seemingly broken. He could barely see because his eye lids were so swollen. He brought the sword up with his right arm, his left arm broken from impact, and he swooned at the pain. He'd heard the screams though, and refused to go down. He rushed the creature, barely dodging one punch by the giant, and being clipped by the other arm. Arms.

"It has four arms..." he groaned as he noticed two smaller but no less muscular arms under neath the larger arms. He heard more arrows slamming into its back, but was disheartened to see it didn't even flinch. He took a new approach this time, his left arm hanging numbly the whole time. He ran off to the side, and cut back, narrowly dodging a wide sweep by the creature's right arm. He cut back, using the sword to hack into the creature's arm, which howled in pain.

Its wrist, bleeding profusely, hung limp for a second, then it snapped back to movement. Rod ducked under one wide swing, and found that the smaller arms were expecting his dodge. He saw stars as he flew back, his face burning after taking a fist in the face. He slammed into a tree, and heard a crack, and barely got out of the way of the Ashleying tree trunk.

His left shoulder popped out of the place suddenly, as he jerked, barely dodging a giant piece of something that the creature had thrown at him. He slipped, and fell to his knees. Knowing his doom, he put his head down, and sprinted forward.

If I'mma die.. I'mma die a man... He thought as he slammed into the creature's stomach. He felt it grab him, and felt himself being ground into the ground. He felt it as his shoulder's cracked, and groaned as he saw the horrified look on Ashley and Sam's face through the creature's face. He saw a tear drop Ashley down Ashley's face.

Finding his last ounce of strength, he threw both arms up in an uppercut. The creature howled as Rod's fists, both of them balled up, his middle knuckles leading the way, slammed into its organs. He grinned grimly as the creature fell to the ground, and saw that he'd slammed his fist's through its body, and gotten to where its heart had been, for he felt it pumping, slowly slowing down, against his hands.

"Its... its okay ya'll," he said as loudly as he could as he fell back, unconscious. And then it came. Blackness.

Ashley and Sam rushed up, and both dropped to their knees in front of Rod. His breath came in gasps of pain. Tears streaked down both of their faces. Ashley tried to reach within herself, to get to that power, to help Rod again, but found that she couldn't. Sierra landed on top of Rod's forehead, and looked into his blank eyes.

Sam reached into his mind, and tried as hard as she could to keep his mind sharp, to keep his feelings from being relinquished to death.

The four people rushed up. The larger man, the military guy, grabbed Rod's shoulders, and the slimmer guy grabbed his feet. They picked him up, and brought his to the truck.

"Who are you?" Asked the brunette girl.

"He's Rod... I'm Sam.. this is Ashley," Sam answered, she'd checked her mind, and found them to be trustworthy, at this point at least.

"He's gonna live... maybe." the larger man huffed. He was a very gruff man.

"Well... I'm Linzy, this is Sheron, this," the brunette girl motioned towards the slimmer man, "Is Trevor, and this," she pointed to the larger man, "Is Gavin." She tried to smile as nicely as she could, but found no relief could help these poor girls. She looked at Ashley's bow questioningly, but found that Ashley's glare unnerved her. Sam mind checked each other them, learning that they were part of some government agency.

Linzy got in the car, and Gavin strapped Rod down as Trevor and Sheron got in.

"Where are you taking him?" Ashley asked, though Sam already knew.

“We can't help him out here, we're bringing him back to camp,” Trevor said. He seemed like a nice guy, but that wasn't enough for either girl.

“Well... what are you guys?” Ashley asked.

“Human,” Sheron said, chuckling, but stopped immediately as the death glare fell upon her. “We're part of an agency that is trying to save us, we got caught out in the middle of the road when a craft came on us, and we'd been running for less then an hour when you found us... and saved us.”

They were at the camp when Trevor explained everything. They'd put Rod in a machine so that it could slowly repair his bones.

“We've known about “superhumans” for the last hundred years. Meteors had been Ashleying since the beginning of time, and they always carried an unusual element in them. It often granted humans power, but sometimes would kill them,” Trevor said, “But it turns out, the alien's have tracked the element, element A, to here because we are good at absorbing the substance,” as he explained this, he told them about past people who'd been gifted this way. “President Roosevelt, the one who had polio, didn't actually have polio, he'd given his legs up to increase his own ability to think.”

Ashley and Sam took it all in, absorbing the information. They were suspicious of the all gray room, which didn't seem like a government facility. It was underground, but it made up for the old fashion looks with hundred of monitors and screens and computers.

Rod lay in the white room again. The damage he'd done before was gone, and he found himself wearing everything white, but had no shirt. *This again?* He asked himself, then got up. Pain overwhelmed him, and he sat down. Waves of agony flew over his body, and terror filled him as the door opened. And Chaselyn walked in.

“Do we really gotta do this again?” Rod asked, confidence loud in his voice, though he had nothing to back it with, “I'mma get out, don't you worry about that,” and Chaselyn smiled.

“You're not getting out,” she said, “You're actually dead this time, its impossible for you to get out.” She grinned evilly as she said this.

“Yeah... whatever,” he felt his shoulders crack back into place, grunted in pain and grimaced a little. She smiled.

“Your dead,” she started to walk out of the door, “The sooner you accept it, the sooner you can move on.” He heard her say those words, and dread filled his body.

“If your gonna save me... please do it quickly,” he said, hoping Sam and Ashley would somehow hear it. Then he laid his head down, grimacing in pain, and weeped a little as he slowly faded into an unsatisfying sleep. *Please...* He thought as he slowly fell into slumber. *Please...*

Chapter Thirty One

There was something wrong. There was something very wrong. Sam knew it. The rush of doctors only confirmed her suspicions. She already didn't like this place. It was stuffy and uniform. Her eyes followed the doctors.

Ash was too busy to notice since she was talking to the government officials.

Apparently they needed to be debriefed. It was “necessary if the two groups are to work together.” She tried hard not to point out that they hadn't made any deal to

work together. Ashley was answering all of these questions for them, at least trying to. There were questions like “How long has your group been together?” and “What have you experienced in your time after the comet hit?” Questions like those. She was doing her best to answer them, but the time questions were hard to answer. For the most part, they’d completely lost track of it.

Sam watched the doctors rush into a room. The label on the door read: Doctors Only. She narrowed her eyes and read one of the doctor’s minds.

‘Gotta save the gorilla boy, gotta save the gorilla boy.’ The thought rang through the doctor’s head as he rushed through the door.

Sam started to move toward the door. No one gave much thought to her, as usual. She did her best to stay out of everyone’s way as passed through the halls. She was nearing the door, and was able to hear the panicked voices of the doctors.

“Excuse me, miss, but this room is restricted. I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to move away.” Sam turned to see a tall blond woman behind her. Her tone was friendly, but everything else about her just screamed strict. She wore a gray office clothes and black high heels. Her hair was pinned up in a bun. The woman’s green eyes looked at her accusingly.

A noise distracted Sam for a moment. It came from the restricted room. The sound filled her with terror. She was flashed back to the hospital, when her dad had been there. She remembered watching a machine that had the exact same sound. Oh no... she thought to herself. A heart monitor. The sound was a heart monitor. Its loud, monotone sound rang in her ears. The machine had flat lined.

She didn’t have to look to know whose monitor that was. She didn’t have to hear the doctor’s shouts to know what had just occurred. She knew who ‘gorilla boy’ was. She knew ‘gorilla boy’. “Ash...” she said hoarsely. Her eyes started to tear up, but she refused to let all of these people see her cry. “Ash!”

She got a response as Ash turned around. Her friend looked at her questioningly, and then started toward her realizing something was wrong as she saw a teardrop roll down Sam’s cheek. “What is it?” Ash asked. The woman was still there, obviously unhappy with both of them, but either could care less.

Sam couldn’t bring herself to say the words that came next. But she didn’t need to. Someone came out to do it for her.

A tall male doctor came out of the room, his face grim. At the sight of Sam, he knew she knew. There was no point in trying to hide it or soften the blow. “I’m sorry to inform you of your loss.”

Ash broke down. Tears welled up in her eyes. “You mean-?”

Sadly, he nodded. “The damage was too great. I’m so sorry.”

Rod was dead. Rod was dead. Rod was dead. Rod was dead. Rod was dead. Rod was dead. It was unreal. Death... death came to those who were ready. Rod wasn’t ready... was he? Well, it didn’t matter. Rod was dead.

The girls had been left alone in a room. It was a gray room with a bed on each side. They’d even made a small bird nest for Sierra. There was a nightstand next to each bed and a dresser in the room. Ash lied down, staring at the ceiling. Her eyes were red from crying. Sam had let herself cry and was sobbing quietly into a pillow. Sierra was too upset to even eat the birdseed the government had so graciously supplied for her. The room was in a stunned silence. It was haunting and the silence was deafening. There was nothing solemn about it. It was a shocked silence. There was little grieving going on, just shock and disbelief. But that would go away. As

soon as they had accepted Rod's death.

Ash felt responsible. She tried to occupy herself by finding pictures in the ceiling, but that didn't work. Nothing could distract her from her guilt. She'd saved Rod's life when he was on the brink before. She blamed herself for this. She hadn't helped him though she could've. The first try, she hadn't succeeded, but why didn't she try again? She knew she should've tried to access that power again. Ash closed her eyes, trying to calm herself down. In doing so, she drifted off into a dark and restless sleep.

Sam awoke to a dark room. She was still in the gray room the government had given them. Somehow she'd Ashleyen asleep along with her friends. By her nightstand, there was food. Ugh, government rations. Ash had some too. Hers remained untouched. She supposed they'd brought them food and found them asleep so they left it here and turned off the lights.

A noise brought Sam's mind out of her daze. It was her stomach. She was hungry, but she didn't feel like eating. So she left it alone. Perhaps she'd go back to it later.

Sam had no idea what time it was. They hadn't left a clock or anything. Silently, she got out of bed and opened the door a bit. The hallway lights were bright, so she had to quickly slip through the opening. The hall was empty, for this hallway was lined with quarters for the officers, not offices. Sam vaguely remembered how she got here. She had been upset at the moment, but why? Then it came back to her. Rod was dead.

She fought to keep herself under control. Sam started walking, like she usually did with her friends before this ever happened. It was calming to her. Gave her room to think. She could care less where she was headed or if she got lost at the moment. Somehow she got back to the main offices and where they'd debriefed Ash, Sam, and Sierra. Sam looked around. There weren't many people here. She stole a glance at a clock. It was about two in the morning. Behind her, she heard a snatch of conversation. Normally, she wouldn't think twice about it; conversations were heard by her all the time. But perhaps it was because she needed something else to focus on that she tuned in on it.

"... you see that's just the problem." A woman's voice. "You can't be entirely sure."

A man spoke next, his voice serious. "We have to be. This thing threatens us. Our entire existence."

The woman sounded offended. "And you think I don't know that?"

"I think you're letting other things get in the way."

"You know as well as I do that there are more important things, and you'll realize that one day. I hope you just realize it before it's too late."

The man paused. "I know that you know I'm doing the right thing. I know you're frustrated. I know you think I'm a heartless, militarized..." Sam lost the conversation for a split second. "...but this is for the good of the world. We've got to believe that."

"They're just kids." Sam froze. They were talking about them.

The man spoke again. "They're not kids. They're superhumans. They've held up well so far and with help, they can defeat the menace."

"But they've already lost so much." The woman countered. "What makes you think they

can handle more?"

"Because the human spirit cannot be put down. There were many places where they could've quit and surrendered. But they didn't, did they? No, they continued. That's why they're here today."

Sam refused to hear more of the conversation. She didn't like where it was going. Quickly she ducked into a room and quietly shut the door behind her. When she turned to see where she was, she instantly wanted out. Death watched over this place. A silver tarp covered the body on the hospital bed. The machines by it were silent and off. Her heart beat wildly. Death with its cold tendril fingers seemed to reach out to her here. People had died here, not just Rod. Because of that, death seemed to be stronger here.

She had to force herself to stay. Not just because she was in a restricted area and leaving at the moment would be a bad idea, but out of respect for her deceased friend. She took a seat on one of the armchairs set aside for visitors.

And she just sat there and let her mind wander.

At least, she would've if there hadn't been another mind in the room. She could've sworn it was empty. Her eyes looked around the room. There was no one there. But who was it, then? She reached out with her mind, curious to know more. The mind was faint, weak, and barely hanging on. It was ready to give up and truly die and never be recovered.

And it was coming from under the tarp.

If she knew her science correctly, she'd say that the machine that checked for brainwaves wasn't as precise as a psychic was and had missed the weak brainwaves left. So they had left Rod for dead. Not their fault, but Sam blamed them anyway. Sam was hesitant to leave, she wanted to share the news that Rod wasn't as dead as they thought he was, but if she did leave, would he still be here when she came back? Or would he have lost all hope by then?

She went in.

Chapter Thirty Two

Rod sat confidently, looking at Chaselyn, or what he thought was Chaselyn... or what he didn't think was Chaselyn. He didn't know. But he sat staring. He could kind of hear everything that was happening about him. He was a little offended to be called monkey boy or something, but he was glad that someone was trying to help.

"Your still going to die," Chaselyn growled. Rod flinched a little as he saw the pointed teeth in her mouth.

"People are trying to save me," he said. He flinched as he felt something streaming down his stomach. He looked down, to see a line of blood appearing.

"They're going to do an autopsy, fool," she said. Worry was all over her face, though Rod couldn't figure out why.

"Why would you care?" he asked, truly perplexed. But all Chaselyn did was get up and walk out of the door, nodding her head the whole time. Rod could hear yelling, and a loud beeping. It sped up. His heart raced. And he slowly felt it slow down... then it stopped. Or seemed to.

He was still alive, but he heard someone curse themselves for not saving him. Worry streaked his mind. But he wouldn't give in. *He died... saving us...* He heard a girl saying. *He deserves a noble*

burial... He could hear her saying.

You know there is another way, another voice said, *We could... well, we could do what we've tried in the past.*

No, its too risky! The first girl said, *His friends would kill us.*

Not if he killed them first. Or if we did it to the- The second voice was cut off.

We will not kill those kids... but we will keep them ignorant of this.. A third voice said. Then it all went quiet. Fear filled his insides, and he felt sudden cold. The world around him was collapsing.

“Ah crap,” he thought as the doors were torn away. Unusual demonic creatures with multiple arms and pincers on the ends were reaching at him. He crouched and jumped away, but fell straight to the ground. He looked down to find his foot tied with a rope. He saw Chaselyn holding the end of it, yelling something.

“You'll be lost in a... limbo for all of eternity... if they kill you!” She screamed, worry etched on her face. “These are the demons of your world!” she screamed.

But he had to stay alive. Sam and Ashley would need him. And if he had to, he'd bring her with him. He got up and began to run, wincing with every step. He could feel his ribs moving around with each bound, and every time he had to change direction he could tell that he was closer to collapsing within himself.

He was tripped by a long slithering creature, and barely scrambled away before a large fist came down where he'd just been. The chase was on, and he meant to survive as long as any being could. And he would.

He ran faster then then ever before, and the creature's were left behind. But when he left those behind, he was only confronted by even more monsters. He ducked under a wide swing by a particularly large beast, with eight arms.

He ran in, putting his head down and shoulder forward, and slammed into the beast. He heard a loud crack, and knew that it wasn't just the monster that was injured by the attack. He barely got away from the beast, as it fell, before he himself collapsed a little. He looked up to see Chaselyn staring at him, her look relaying the sorrow that she was feeling.

Then he saw Sam. Sam? How was Sam here? The look on her face, as she saw him on the ground, broken, inspired him... kinda. He barely rolled out of the way of a large smashing pincer slamming into the ground where he was. He jumped up, and sprinted towards Sam. But he couldn't go very fast anymore. He bones were weak and his muscles were tired. He saw Sam concentrate on something, and saw a beast that was moving to intercept him just Ashley low, a blast into its chest destroying its exoskeleton.

He saw Chaselyn move her hands, and a creature that was close behind him crumbled down.

“Go back to life!” Chaselyn screamed, “And I'm not Chaselyn! I'm just... I'm your weakness!” A tear drop fell down her face as Rod neared. She moved her hands around in a circle, and a black hole appeared there.

“Who are you then?” Rod asked, Sam was holding the beast's off with a field of mental energy. She knew he, by reading his mind, that he needed to ask.

“I'm... I don't know, but you need to leave! I'm death for you, now leave!” Death screamed, but she wasn't evil anymore. She was just... just like them.

“But-” Rod was cut off by Sam pushing him through the hole.

Rod awoke gasping, his body burning with each breath, for the first time coming into his body after several hours. He could feel his body start to work again, and as good as that felt, he could also feel all the broken parts.

He looked over at Sam who just smiled a little and shrugged.

"Thanks." he said, and closed his eyes.

"Your not dying now!" She said, and she put her hand on his shoulder, which she felt give way a little.

"Gah... I'm not dying... just sleeping!" Rod grunted, in agony of the applied pressure.

"Oh... sorry," she said. "I'll... I'll come back in the morning, I'll tell someone your alive, and I'll tell Ashley and Sierra that you are alive."

Rod nodded, then slowly fell into slumber. He could feel his body healing, and was glad to feel hands moving him, in his sleep, to a machine that would speed up his healing.

Sam walked into the room, exhausted, and slumped against the wall. She closed her eyes, but heard shuffling. The light turned on. She opened her eyes when she got poked on the forehead.

"What happened?" Ashley asked, her eyes seeming to peer into Sam's soul, with a glare of fire. Sierra looked over also.

"I saved Rod." Sam said, then she fell into sleep. She was greeted by happy dreams. A good change.

Rod awoke the next morning, and saw a face he didn't expect. Linzy, the brunette girl, was waiting for him to awake.

"Hi... I'm Linzy," she said, smiling. "I, uh, just kinda... wanted to make sure you were okay," she said, looking at his body, tightly wrapped in white bandages, "and well.. your not, are you?"

"Oh no, I'm just peachy," he replied, sarcastically, and chuckled a little, "You see a girl with glasses, black hair... as tall as me..."

"Oh Sam is asleep, as is Ashley and... the bird," she seemed to be weirded out a little by the bird part, but Rod didn't notice.

"So... your Linzy... then, I guess I should introduce myself," Rod said, he grunted as he got up into a sitting position, "My name, as you probably haven't heard, is Rod." His eyes shined as he came to realize how pretty the girl was that he was talking to.

Her eyes, brown, shine brightly, and her face was narrow but defined. She was nothing short of beautiful, and had an effect on him. His stomach bubbled, and his voice cracked as he finished his sentence.

"Oh, I know your name, Ashley and Sam told me, and I know that you saved me and my friends... so I just wanted to thank you," as she said this, Rod blushed a little, and she giggled as he gulped a little.

"Oh it was nothing.." he said, "really.." he said.

She looked down at his body, and said, "Oh yes, I can see that it was nothing..." she said, and she got up as she said it, "but it was very brave of you," she got up and kissed him on the forehead as she said this.

His eyes went a little violet, and she seemed unnerved by it, but then she noticed that it was also that the rest of his face was red as a cherry, and figured he wasn't mad. He'd probably just never been kissed.

"Oh uh, thanks," he said, "Ummm.." he started to say as she walked out of the room, and looked back, and smiled a little, then left.

Sam and Ashley walked into the room, followed by a flying Sierra, and saw that he was red and his eyes were violet.

"What happened?" Sam asked. Ashley looked around, and put her hand to her bow, getting ready to fight away anything that threatened her friend. Sierra landed next to Rod, then seemed to laugh.

"*He's been toyed with..*" Sierra said, and Ashley relayed the message, relaxing.

"Uhh... did you meet Linzy?" Rod asked, Sam and Ashley both just put their hands on their hips and fixed Rod with a look of disappointment.

"What?"

"You know what," they both said, then looked at each other.

"She's pretty, I'm sorry!" he said. Both girls, and Sierra, laughed at him.

Chapter Thirty Three

I woke to find myself sitting in a small chair beside Rod's bed. It'd been a week now, and he was practically fully recovered. Sam and I had been exploring the government building throughout the week, but I was starting to become unsure of these four new characters. Sam had told her they were trustworthy, but every time they were around, I seemed to receive a shiver down my spine.

My eyes opened to see Linzy glance at me, then flip her hair and stride out of the room. I lifted my eyebrows and pulled my gaze to Rod, who just blushed slightly and looked away. This was becoming a regular routine.

Every morning, afternoon, or evening, I'd find Linzy sitting beside his bed and talking to him, sometimes for an hour or so at a time. It was odd, but I had to give Rod a little slack too. After all, he just died and a pretty girl was spending time with him. This must be paradise for him.

Rod glanced at me, and smirked. "You look jealous."

"You wish," I rolled my eyes and then sighed. "You hungry?"

"Starving," he shot me one of his hunger-filled glances, his blue-green gaze pleading with my hard brown one.

"Alright," I trotted towards the door and pulled it open, stepping into the hall and glancing around each side of me. Furrowing my eyebrows, I realized that Linzy girl was standing in the halls...just standing there. I side-stepped behind a pole and watched her carefully. She seemed to pull something out of her pocket, gaze at it, and then darted down the hall.

With narrowed eyes, I followed her at a distance down the hall, making sure to stay out of sight. Occasionally, I had to pause and act like I was reading a bulletin board as a doctor passed. They looked oddly stiff, and wore tight smiles across their lips. Suspiciously, I locked my gaze onto Linzy's back as I crept down the halls. What was she doing? And why'd she look so shady all of a sudden? Gritting my teeth, I noticed as her gaze quickly darted around her, then she slipped into a door marked

"Management Only. Do NOT Enter." I crept up to the knob and tried twisting it slowly, only to find it locked. Realizing this chase was over, I let out a large breath and propped my elbow onto the wall, leaning my head against it.

I couldn't tell Rod about this. He would just think I was lying. He knew I never trusted these newcomers from the start, and would just think I was making these things up to gain attention or something. The only person I could trust at the moment was Sam. She would say Sierra also, but...she wasn't exactly a person. Besides, Rod liked this girl. I couldn't go and ruin it for him based off a shred of evidence.

I dashed down the hall, dodging nurses who were scurrying the opposite direction, and received various glares and mutters as they passed. My legs carrying me before my mind could think, I entered the room Sam and I had been staying in the past week.

"Hey, Ash!" Sam greeted cheerfully, but when she noticed my grim expression, her face fell immediately. "What happened?" she prompted, looking serious.

"Linzy happened," I sighed, knowing I sounded like a jerk who was pointing fingers. But of course, once I explained to Sam, I knew deep in my mind she'd understand. Then again, I could just let her explore my mind for herself and relive my last five minutes.

"Go ahead," I sighed, "take a look."

Sam held my gaze wistfully for a moment, and I just gave her a confident nod.

Taking a breath, her eyes glazed over and my breath caught in my throat as I could feel her mentally probe my mind, and then I knew she was experience what I'd experienced, and was hearing my thoughts. I kept my mind blank and closed my eyes as she completed it, and then smiled at her.

"Done?"

"Yep," Sam blinked, and her dark chocolate eyes returned to their sparkly selves. "And I agree with you. I don't trust Linzy; she seems like she'd hiding something."

"But what could she be hiding?" I contemplated any answers, but came up with nothing. WE were the freaks, the ones with the extraordinary abilities and hyped out senses. They were just bystanders, people who were sucked into this battle but could step out at any moment. They weren't entitled to help fight the threat, and just looking at themselves in the mirror didn't remind them they were forever woven into the battle between the worlds. So, what could Linzy have that was so important, that we didn't?

"Let's keep an eye on her," I declared, setting my jaw.

Sam nodded, "But we can't tell Rod. You know how he feels."

"I'm sure you do," I pointed out with a small chuckle. "Tonight...I'm going to follow her. And this time I won't lose her trail. I'll need you to cover me...you know, with the nurses and all."

"Alright," Sam shrugged, and her eyes flitted around me to the door behind me. I spun around to see it open a half second later, and a tall doctor stepped in, holding a clipboard.

"Um...Ashley? Can we ask you a few more questions?"

I groaned audibly, annoyed with all the appointments they were making with me. After all I'd been through, I'd found myself growing stronger inside, and found it was more possible to say "no" to people and to just let out her inner feelings. Mostly of all, she'd grown more sarcastic and detached as time stretched on. Every few days, a doctor or nurse would step into the room, asking either Sam or I to step out and answer their questions. If I didn't know better, I'd think they were paparazzi. Seriously, they ate us up.

"Sure," I responded absently, shooting Sam a look only she could comprehend.

I followed the doctor out into the hall as he led me down several turns and into a new corridor. My eyebrows pulled together in confusion as we kept trekking further, but finally, we stopped in front of a door presenting a sign that read: 'Don't Enter, Testing.'

My eyes slits, I stepped over the threshold as he held the heavy door open for me. We sat down in small plastic chairs that faced each other, and he popped the pen against his knee, sliding the ink tip out.

As he opened his mouth to probably introduce himself or something, I cut him off. "What does the sign out there mean by testing? I thought you were questioning me?"

He looked her over before answering, "Yes, it's a form of testing." He chuckled, "You know what I mean?"

I kept a straight face, and shook my head, "No." His face fell and his eyes flitted back down to his clipboard. I leaned back in my luxurious plastic chair and crossed my arms, raising my eyebrows at him.

"Alright. So...how do you fly?" He immediately leaned down and stared at me intently, prepared to scribble down notes.

"Okay," I said in a low voice, leaning forward, and motioning with my forefinger for him to lean in close.

"Oh, oh, alright!" He whispered, eargerly, scooting closer.

"Alright," I murmured, staring into his eyes with wide ones. "I whistle, and then my magical pegasus soars up to me and we fight off the rainbow monsters together." He began to write quickly, scribbling down the info until he reached the word "pegasus", and sighed, looking up at me.

"Let's move on," He muttered, looking irritated.

"Fine by me," I shrugged, leaning back again and folding my legs. "What else you wanna know?"

"Well, I know you have a connection with that bird of yours...Sierra, is it?" He asked, looking down at me.

"Maybe," I blinked slowly.

"Alright, how do you communicate with her?"

"Easy. She'll peck me in the head a few times, and - oh, get this, we have this braille language all figured out so we can just slap each other in the face a few times, and voila! We know exactly what we're trying to say."

He hissed out a breath at my skeptical tone. Geez, this was getting amusing. It was so easy to toy with this man.

"Listen, Ashley, I know *you're* the brains of your group, so listen closely. We're trying to help you defeat these aliens, and we just want to know how your powers work so maybe we can even duplicate them. We would love to help save our planet, even at the cost of-"

"Of what?" I snapped, placing my feet flat on the ground. "Of our lives? Let me guess, as soon as you have the chance, you're going to start experimenting on Rod again? You people can't do *anything* against these aliens, only we can. You naive doctors need to understand this before *you* are the ones getting killed. Just back off and let us do what we unfortunately, do best. And by the way," I added as I stood up, my hand on the door. "I'm *not* the brains of my group. We all are." I snorted with the thought that we could all also be very well as stupid-as-a-stone sometimes as I slammed the door behind me, then slumped down some. That felt good. For once I'd been able to speak my mind, and let out what I'd been holding in since the day I'd been hit by the meteor.

Quickly maneuvering my way down the hall, I slipped back into our room quietly and sight down on my bed, heaving a sigh.

"How was it?" Sam asked quietly, noting I looked quite different this time.

"Oh, just peachy," I tried Rod's phrase, finding myself giggling slightly.

Later that evening, Sam and I put our plan into action. I silently paced down the halls, claiming I was hungry if anyone asked. My eyes were narrowed with concentration as I tried to locate the room Linzy was staying in. I should've already known this...it had been a week, but I hadn't cared enough to actually visit Linzy before. My breath caught in my throat when someone stepped out right in front of me...Linzy!

"Why are you staring at me?" She asked, glancing me over.

"Oh...I..." I stuttered, biting my lip. What was my excuse?

"I'm hungry," I muttered, looking away with embarrassment.

"Alright..." Various emotions passed through Linzy's brown eyes for a moment, then she sighed. "Do you know where the mess hall is?"

"No," I admitted. "The doctors had always brought us food themselves."

"Come on," she flashed me a smile and then led me down the hall. Finally, we walked through double doors and stopped in a big-lobby looking place. I took a few steps forward, and noticed not many people were in here.

"Oh!" Linzy called suddenly, and she turned back around to face me. "Hey, can you hand me my sweatshirt, please?"

"Sure," I walked over a few paces to see a few hooks that jackets would hang on. Sure enough, a blue sweatshirt was on the first hook, and I grabbed it. Something small and metal fell out of the pocket in my hand, and I stared at it, dumbfounded. It was unrecognizable. I pocketed the small wonder and quickly handed her the jacket, then headed straight towards Rod's room. "Hey," I greeted as I entered, and he waved to me.

"Do you know what this is?" I cut straight to the chase.

"Er..." He stared at it, then his eyes widened as he patted his body. "How did they get that?" He whispered, and I frowned at him, raising one eyebrow in question. He had some explaining to do.

Chapter Thirty Four

"Well, what is it?" Ashley asked, impatiently, for she and Rod had had a stare off for the last few seconds.

"Well... its that thingy that was on your neck... when you like... spaced out," Rod said, trying to pick his words carefully. "I put it in my pocket.. and forgot about it, I guess."

"Oh... Sam, check him, I don't believe him!" Ashley, and Sam looked meanly at Rod, who shrank back.

"C'mon girls... don't do this," he said, and he felt Sam's brain reaching out to him, he started to yell out when suddenly Sam and Ashley bust out laughing. "What?"

"We so got you..." Sam said, laughing, and Ashley agreed.

"Alright, well, let us be serious now," Rod said, frowning at his friends unusual behavior.

"She got that somehow, and apparently grabbed it on purpose," Ashley said, "and apparently that has something to do with mind control or something.."

"Well, if thats true, and they're trying to stop the aliens, perhaps they want to build bullets that would like... tell the aliens to pass out..." Rod said, "I dont' know.. thats not the best idea ever thought of, when has a government run society ever done things for the greater go--"

He was cut off by a nurse coming in, and starring at the three. "You all are expected at the testing sight." She said, then she curtly smiled and walked of the door.

Rod god up, "huh... wonder what they want..."

"Probably to ask you how you lift things..." Ashley said, then laughed at her own joke. Only Sam got it also, who laughed, and Rod stared at the two.

"Girls..." he mumbled as he got fully dressed, putting a tight shirt on, and some shoes, supplied by their hosts, that wouldn't break as easily as his old ones had. They walked out, and into a dark hall way.

Ashley asked where the testing sight was, and Sam cut her off, just invading a random guy's mind, who was in a white coat who and was asleep, and got the answer. Sam smiled a little, and Ashley muttered, "Show off..."

She was sarcastic, but she trusted and loved no one more then Sam, Sierra and Rod. Sierra flew over to them, saying, "I found out why Linzy's been so secretive."

"Why?" All three asked, and the bird replied.

"They've taken DNA from Rod to create controllable super humans, but have been unsuccessful at this point," her eyes relayed worry.

"We'll ask them about this when we get to them." Rod said as they walked down the hallway. They approached a door that said, "Testing," not the one Ashley had been at, and opened the door. Ashley tried at first, but found it was locked. Rod, grinning, merely broke the lock by spinning the handle so hard that the lock bent and broke.

He seemed to puff out his chest a little after the action. He smirked a little, then walked in, to find an ultimate shock.

Three robotic creations that looked slightly like Rod, Sam and Ashley. He noticed a smaller robot that reminded him of Sierra. Each robot looked at the four.

"What the-" he started to say, when the one that looked like him activated, and began to walk

towards him. It was shaky and obviously mechanical, though it looked remarkably like Rod.

He back his three friends out before he slammed the door shut. The robot pounded its fist into the door, knocking Rod back. The door flew off its hinge. He got up on his feet, then crouched, ready to fight the replica. He began to run at it when a girl screamed.

“No!” Linzy screamed, and she pressed a button, and the robot, sprinting at Rod, fell limp and slammed into the ground mid stride. Rod also tried to stop, though he couldn't as easily. He ended up slamming into the ground also, though to was far from limp.

“What the heck is that?” Ashley asked, and pulled her bow out from her back. She'd had a few arrows left before their meeting, and the government facility happily gave her many many arrows, all perfectly made.

Sam had begun to pull out two sharp metal Rods that the government had given her, and they glowed to life, releasing electrical energy. She held the weapons by a handle that protected her from the shocking power of the weapons.

“Those are... our failed attempts to create soldiers,” she said, and then ran away, crying.

“What do we do?” Rod asked, getting up. They were all stunned, completely caught off guard, especially Rod, who thought Linzy an innocent girl.

They entered the testing room they were supposed to go to, and found a large table with six men behind it.

“Hello, please sit,” one man said, his voice kind, but strict easily. The four complied, Sierra just landing on the table next to Ashley, eying the men suspiciously. Rod sat in the middle, Sam to his left and Ashley to his right. The man noted this.

“So you are the leader?” he asked.

Rod was unaware that the question had been directed at him and looked around, waiting to be “Tested.” The man cleared his throat, then motioned at Rod, who just smiled dumbly at him.

“Oh? Am I the leader?” Rod asked. “Oh hail no, I'm not the leader, I'm just the one with the hard head.” He said then smiled.

“What is up with those soldiers your making?” Ashley said before the man, who was dumbfounded, could reply.

“They are our attempts to save the world... though it is told to us that you believe only You can do it,” the man said, snottily. Another man spoke up.

“But we do believe that we can help you as our savior,” he said, nervously. He was a small man, though his nature seemed to be a nice one.

Rod noticed Trevor was one of the men who was sitting up there. He smiled at Rod and waved. Rod waved back.

Sam looked at Rod, suspicious of his sudden... stupidity. Rod looked at her, and smiled and nodded. She decided to look in his mind, promising herself she wouldn't look too deep. When she did, she found that there was a haze everywhere around it. He was... being mentally messed with, it seemed. She looked around, and found what it was that was causing it.

“Linzy?” she said out loud, and everyone looked at her. Rod's eyes narrowed slightly. He seemed to be coming out of a haze.

“How do you think you can help us?” he snapped, looking at the men. He was suddenly intense. Sam and Ashley both looked at him, confused by the sudden change in mood.

“We can tell you where the most ships are and we can supply you, feed you... house you,” the small man continued.

“And we can rescue you if you get into too much trouble,” Trevor said, smiling. Light flashed across his eyes and he said, “You got hit by a second meteor, do you know how rare that is?”

“Enlighten me.” Rod ordered, his eyes burned violet, both Ashley and Sam got worried.

“It means your powers have intensified, and it also means that you all, you in particular, Rod,

are more... likely to unleash a large barrage of energy at once,” Trevor said, getting worried by the look on Rod's face. He looked enraged. “Because your powers are emotion-derived even the slightest emotion can change the way your powers work. You, when angry, are strong, powerful and fast, but when your intense and cautious, your sense of smell and sight and hearing is beyond that of any animal, earth animal at least.”

Rod stood up, “and how do you know that?” Ashley stood up too.

“You've done tests, right?” Ashley said.

“We can't tell where your powers are originated from, Ms. Kenyon, nor yours, Ms. Sparrowtail, or as your friend calls you when he is... delirious.” The first man said.

Trevor looked at the man, worried eyes.

“Retrain the big one,” the man said. Rod looked to his sides, and two robotic versions of himself started to walk towards him.

“Dang it... I just got healed up!” Rod said, then he jumped back, and rushed one robot. It swung at him, a strike he easily ducked, and flew back as Rod slammed both his fists into it. Its body, broken, went limp.

The other robot, adapting to his fighting style, pulled out a metal Rod, similar to Sams, and waved it menacingly. Its focus on Rod was the reason Ashley's arrow was so effective. Completely caught off guard, the robot crumbled under the force of the fiery arrow.

Sam knocked each of the men out who were now standing, looking at the escaping kids, but not before more guards were called. The door behind Rod opened, and two Rod-Bot's came out. He met one with a roar, slamming it into its fellow bot, and found himself facing a robot that looked a lot like Ashley. He flinched when it razed its right hand, and a bolt flew from it. Rod barely dodged the shaft which slammed into the wall behind him, vibrating.

Rod ran out of the stair case he'd slammed in to, and closed the door behind him. The bent the metal so it'd break before it bent. He turned to see Sam and Linzy in what seemed like a mental battle.

I'm not your enemy! Linzy said, screaming into Sam's mind.

You haven't been our friend! Sam yelled back, mentally. Linzy winced.

*I had that metal thing so that *they couldn't get it!* Linzy mentally replied. Rod watched as both girls relaxed. Ashley was watching too, and she seemed to understand what had happened, though it was completely beyond Rod.

“Come with me,” Linzy said.

“We can trust her,” Sam said. Rod shrugged and Ashley sighed.

They busted out of the underground structure, in a vehicle that was solar powered and quiet. Rod was in the passenger seat, next to Linzy. Ashley sat on top of the vehicle, her bow bent ready, and Sam was behind Rod and Linzy, reaching around in case any minds were searching for them.

“We have to wait for Trevor,” she said. And Rod looked at her wildly.

“Why would we do that?” he asked.

“Because we'll never get away without him, and he's my brother,” Linzy said. Rod groaned, but didn't say no.

“So are you the leader?” She asked Rod, and Rod shrugged.

“There is no leader,” he said, “but I think that if I had to pick a leader... it'd be... Dang, I can't pick a leader!”

“So your a telepathic person also?” Sam said.

“No, just an illusionist, and to be one, I have to know how to use mental warfare,” Linzy said, “Oh, there he is!” Trevor came running out of the building, and then disappeared.

Rod tensed up as Trevor reappeared next to him.

“Hiya,” Trevor smiled.

He disappeared again, then appeared with another vehicle. "They're tracking us for now, if we split up, they'll never catch us... Rod, can you take your two friends, and I'll take care of my sister?"

Rod nodded, but then thought, *Yeah.. I'll be taking care of them? Right, no, they'll be keeping me sane...*

Rod got in the passenger seat. Ashley got in the back and Sam in the passenger seat. Suddenly two more vehicles appeared, both in illusion, not real. Rod winced as Trevor drove right through one apparition, he'd gotten in the driver's seat, and then put the pedal to the metal.

They were two miles outside of Marietta when they stopped.

"Whats to eat?" Rod smiled, and Ashley opened two of the suit cases. Filled with food that seemed more like poisons than anything, and Rod tore into a package labeled, "Steak," and Ashley and Sam looked at him in disgust.

"Anything you won't eat?" Ashley said.

"Plastic," Rod replied in between bites, then winked. He ate quickly, while the girls slowly picked at their food.

"Ya know Rod," Sam said, right before they fell asleep, "Why do you always start the fight?"

"Hey... they approached me... I just... just didn'... didn' let 'em get me..." he said, as he passed out.

They all slept that night, and found that they were happy that they were under tree cover, for helicopter's flew around.

Chapter Thirty Five

So, we were on the run again. I mean, technically, I wasn't sure if we were trying to run from the government agents, or if we were chasing the aliens. Either way, though, for now, it was just Sam, Rod, and I living life as fugitives. Who wouldn't prefer that lifestyle? We'd managed to smuggle some food from the facility, but Rod practically drained us of our supply already. I swear, traveling with a very hungry boy like him doesn't exactly give us an advantage, but I had to appreciate him anyways.

Suddenly, my thoughts were interrupted by an argument that erupted to my right. Sighing, I crawled over to Sam and Rod, who were desperately holding each side of a bag labeled: Green Beans, acting as though it was a rope in a game of tug of war. Sometimes, I honestly feel like the only mature one around here, and often wondered how I was the youngest one out of us three.

"Ha!" I heard Rod exclaim, and glanced at him just in time to see him

give a final tug, and to watch the bag rip open. Green beans exploded and they began showering down on us. Both Sam and Rod sheepishly glanced at me to see me giving them an expressionless scowl.

"He cheated," Sam pointed a finger at Rod, her voice quiet. "It's not my fault. He used his strength ability."

"Guys," I stood up, brushing off the little green bean guts. "You're acting like little kids. Let's just breathe and -" I paused and looked up, my eyes squinting.

"What?" Rod asked, peering closer at me.

"I hear something..." I murmured, extending my wings and leaping up into the air. I hovered about two feet off the ground, steadily stroking my wings up and down, then curved upwards. After about ten seconds of flying, I was a mile above the ground and was glaring into the direction of the horizon, which of course was the direction the setting sun was in, also. Not having the best eyesight, I squinted more until I could finally see a small speck probably fifty miles off. Luckily, we were in a relatively flatland area, so I could see for miles around here, even with my horrible vision compared to the others. Okay, technically, it's not so lucky. Sure, I might be able to see a small chopper fifty miles away before it gets here, but after it gets here, then what? Right. No where to hide. That's why I had to be the distraction. I **was** the one with wings, right?

I quickly soared down to Sam and Rod, who'd shielded their eyes to try and watch me. I gathered them and Sierra closer to the trunk of the tree without explaining, and just shook my head when Sam asked, "What'd you see?"

Without looking back, I dashed away from the single oak tree across the hard, cracked ground, heading away from the horizon. That's when I remembered Sam could read my thoughts, and tried to think of everything except the chopper and being a distraction. After two minutes, I began to feel an invader in my mind, starting to probe at the surface of my thoughts. Concentrating on the one thought, I angrily thought to her, **You exploded the green beans.** That shocked her and she recoiled just enough to be popped back into her own mind and out of mine. About thirty seconds later I was out of range and realized I'd run about ten miles already. **Ten miles? Are you serious?** Just as I began to ponder if I also had the ability of super speed, I felt a large pulse to my left and glanced in the direction to see a large pothole in the ground. That was **not *there a second ago.*

They're shooting at me! I quickly realized, and decided it was time to unfurl the wings again. I leaped up into the air and snapped open my silky, pale brown wings. Just before I smacked into the ground, my wings carried me higher into the air, gliding across the wind currents. I heard the pang before it struck, and quickly swerved to the right. The air I'd been in just a moment before was now being disrupted by a red blast, probably coming from one of the alien's guns. I rose higher in the sky, and swerved around just before my body connected with the spacecraft shooting past. It came to an abrupt stop and slowly turned so the front was facing towards me.

We both hovered there in mid-air for a moment, just glaring at each other. Well, that is, if this space-thingy had eyes. Suddenly, I raised an eyebrow and crossed my arm, which made the alien in the windshield hesitate in shock. It was obvious I was at a disadvantage here...or at least, it **appeared** I was at a disadvantage.

"Don't. Mess." As I said each word separately and in a low warning voice, some part of the ship exploded. "With." There goes the right engine. "Me." Ooh, the cockpit just exploded. That's gotta hurt. I watched, satisfied, as the whole spaceship was sent crashing to the ground, and then punched the air, laughing. "I had no idea I could do that!" I cried to the wind with glee, and performed a few loop-dee-loops before speeding back in

the direction I'd come. After ten minutes, I'd traveled seventy miles and recognized the lonely oak tree in the middle of the open land. Folding my wings about ten feet off the ground, I let myself drop and landed in a crouch, then slowly stood back up. Rod crossed his arms and stood up, Sam scowled, and Sierra soared over to me, landing on my shoulder.

"What happened?" Rod asked, looking mildly impressed, but otherwise trying to keep a straight face.

I grinned, aware they hadn't seen what had happened, but this time, I wasn't going to try and stop Sam from probing my mind.

I can't believe you did that, Sierra looked at me with her small, deep blue eyes. *That was risky. You didn't even bring your bow and arrow.*

*So? *I smirked, returning her gaze evenly. *I found a new power. It's...pretty awesome...and I don't feel so useless anymore if I don't have that bow with me.*

Sierra snorted - the best bird snort I've ever heard - and rolled her eyes, *Exploding things. Very professional. You're starting to sound like Rod.*

My mouth dropped open, *How could you even compare?*

See, I would've missed this if something happened to you.

Whatever, I looked away, and noticed Sierra and I's conversation had given Sam enough time to relive the whole scene.

"Woah," Sam breathed, but quickly blinked as if she just realized what she was saying. "Ash, that was way too risky." She practically was echoing Sierra's words. "What if that power had backfired on you? What if that power hadn't come and it was just your wings versus the spaceship?"

"Hey, you should be happy I did something helpful for the group," I frowned, folding my arms.

"What power did she get? What power did she get?" Rod asked eagerly, his blue gaze flickering from me to Sam.

"One moment, Rod!" Sam scolded. "I'm chiding Ash here."

I rolled my eyes, knowing Rod wouldn't drop it that easily. Their bickering flared into an argument, and I tuned out. Suddenly, a thought popped into my mind. *Hey, Sierra? *I concentrated my brown gaze on her, and she instinctively turned her head in my direction.

*Why aren't you speaking where we can all understand you? *I asked, the question bugging me. The past day she'd only been speaking to us through me, and I hadn't even noticed it. *The meteor hit you, too...you can speak to all of us now.*

Sierra sighed and gazed at me. *You really want to know? Well, it's true that meteor hit me also and I can speak to all of you. But...it has such a huge strain on my small body to use any of my powers. Birds aren't meant to have such capability...it's just not how we were created. But *your* mind is accustomed to *me*, instead of how I have to work hard to speak to all of you. It's so much easier just to speak to you through your thoughts rather than everyone. I'm afraid if I use my abilities too much, it...well, it'll be a grim ending for me.*

Well, *now* I understand. *That makes so much sense,* I thought back, turning my gaze to my feet. *I'll tell the others so they

won't be offended.* I chuckled to myself and opened my mouth to announce the new update to my friends only to find them chasing each other around in a new, completely irrelevant argument.

"I give up," I hung my head, and it was Sierra's turn to chuckle.

Chapter Thirty Six

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Sam asked, annoyance creeping into her voice. She wasn't sure how many times they'd been over this. "White chocolate is just as good as any other chocolate!"

"It is not! Everyone knows white chocolate isn't even chocolate." Rod argued.

"Rod, it has the word chocolate in the name- it's chocolate!" Sam pointed out, exasperated. This reminded her of the time they argued about Twinkies way back in first grade, though she wasn't sure if he remembered that, considering he didn't even remember her. First Twinkies, then green beans, and now white chocolate. Were they always arguing about food?

"That doesn't mean it's actually chocolate!" Rod shot back. "People lie. They're lying. It's not really chocolate."

"Oh, like how you lied about using your strength on the green beans bag?"

Rod looked at her quizzically. "Green beans?" His blue eyes lit up as he realized what she was referring to. "I never lied about that. I never said anything about that."

"But you were thinking it." Sam crossed her arms.

She got him there. He had been thinking about how he used his strength to get those green beans. "I hate it when you do that." He grumbled.

'They're acting like preschoolers.' Ash complained to Sierra. 'They're supposed to be the mature ones here, not me. I'm younger than them.'

Sierra let out an amused chirp. 'You don't see it?'

'See what?' Ash asked, curious now.

Sierra didn't get to answer her question. There was a huge explosion in the distance, shaking the earth. Black, billowy smoke climbed into the sky and the group decided that they absolutely had to check it out.

Trevor drove the solar powered government vehicle through a back road. Linzy had done her best to hide them from the government, but somehow they'd seen right through her illusions. They were following them by land, and despite Trevor's attempts to shake them, they were right on their trail. Trevor swerved into the woods, hoping the dense undergrowth would help them disappear. But it only proved to be worse. There was no road here, so the vehicle bounced as they went over tree roots. Looking into his mirrors, he frowned as he saw the government was still following, their own vehicles having hardly any problems.

"They're gaining!" Linzy bit her lip. She created the illusion of a tree Ashleying, blocking the path behind them. They weren't fooled and drove right through the illusion. Panicked, Linzy turned to look forward again.

Trevor gritted his teeth in frustration. "Hold on." He took a sharp turn, back onto the road. At least

there they stood a chance.

Linzy looked back again, the two government cars were still hot on their trail. They hadn't made any move to be aggressive... yet. There was still time for them to take the offensive. Neither Trevor nor Linzy would put it below the government to start shooting at them.

Trevor let out an amazed gasp. "You've outdone yourself this time, little sis!"

"Huh?" Linzy asked, turning around. She looked out the window. There was a huge ship looming ahead of them. It was massive, and sleek. The main part of the ship was football shaped, with huge fanlike wings spreading out on its sides. The metallic multicolor of the ship shone brightly in the spectators' eyes.

"That's incredible. Look at the detail! Something like that couldn't actually fly, but the government doesn't know that." Trevor had a grin on his face. "Way to go, Linz, that'll definitely get them off our backs!"

"Uhh... Trevor... That's not me." Linzy replied her eyes wide and worried.

Trevor's grin instantly faded. "If that's not you..." He abruptly broke; the vehicle skidded to a stop. The sudden stop caused the government vehicles to have to brake as well and had to swerve to avoid a crash.

Cautiously, Trevor got out of the vehicle. "Trevor, what are you doing?" She didn't get an answer. Then she too climbed out.

Seeing this, the government agents came out of their cars, dressed in their suits and sunglasses with their wires in their ears. One of them started rapidly talking into their microphone, catching up headquarters on the current situation.

Inside the ship, targeting detected two life forms, both with faint traces of radiation from Element A. It was dark aboard the ship; the ship controls glowed with a strange green color. In the cockpit there were several aliens, though it was too dark to see what they looked like. One was obviously the commander, in the center of all the action. One of the aliens in the front turned to look at the center alien. There were a series of sounds that followed afterward, and if properly translated, would've sounded something like this:

"My liege, targeting sensors have detected faint traces of Element A on two of the life forms down below."

"Zoom in on them." The screen zoomed in on two young beings, a brunette girl and a blond man.

"Those... those are two of the ones who destroyed my scouting ship."

"Yes, my liege."

"They do not carry Element A. They are also a threat to our mission."

"That is true, my liege."

"They are a threat and of no use. Destroy them."

"Right away, my liege, your wish will be granted."

The government agents pulled guns out on Linzy and Trevor. "Stand down and come with us peacefully."

"C'mon, guys." Trevor let out a nervous laugh. "We're all on the same side."

"You have stolen government property, helped superhumans escape, and have defied capture." One of the agents spoke up, eyeing the two. "I don't call that as being on the same side. Now hands up."

Linzy looked at Trevor. Her big brother nodded. Dejectedly, they put their hands up in surrender.

"Alpha team to HQ, come in HQ." One of the agents spoke into their microphone.

"HQ here."

"We've captured two of the rogues. The superhumans do not seem to be around and are still on the run." They replied.

"Bring both to your contact, then head out after the superhumans."

“Roger that. Over and out.”

Linzy and Trevor exchanged a glance. There was no way they could allow them to go after Ashley, Rod, Sierra and Sam. They knew they needed a plan, but there was no way at the moment to make such a plan. But they had to come up with something before they were handed over to that contact. The shot from the ship was almost silent, but as it neared it was noticed. Linzy and Trevor knew what they had to do. They had to stop the government from getting the only hope this world had left. So when the government agents ran, Linzy and Trevor held onto them, stopping them and themselves from escaping the blast.

Rod stopped the government vehicle as soon as the grass started to become charred. They were near the site of the explosion they had seen earlier. Sam hopped out, and Ashley followed. Rod was the last to get out.

“Wonder what happened here...” Ash thought out loud.

“Nothing good.” Rod replied grimly.

Sam nodded in agreement, her hand instinctively reaching for her electric Rods. She looked at the blackened grass, then up ahead. Scraps of metal were scattered all over the place. As they traveled by foot toward the source of the explosion, they started to realize something was very suspicious about this. The scraps of metal looked oddly like the metal from their own vehicle. There was a large, black crater up ahead, surrounded by more of the same metal scraps.

Ash went over to inspect the metal. “Isn’t this the same metal from the car we stole from the government?”

Rod walked over to take a look for himself. “Yeah... yeah, it is.”

Sam wandered over to another part of the area, then stopped dead in her tracks. “I think I know why...” her voice was unsteady and had a nervous edge to it. Her chocolate eyes stared down at something by her feet, but it was unseen to Rod and Ash. The color had left her face, and she looked at her friends, her gaze tearing away from the object at her feet.

Curious, the two moved to where Sam was. At Sam’s feet was a slightly charred body due to fact that it was on the edge of where the blast had taken place. It was unmistakably Trevor.

“Is... is he...?” Ash asked, looking down at him.

As if in reply, Trevor took a shallow breath, coughing. “Ash...?” His eyes were closed, so he must’ve heard her voice.

“Trevor, what happened?” Rod asked.

“On the run, government,” –he coughed- “aliens, then... this.”

Sam reached into his mind, reliving the whole thing. The alien ship, the chase, the government agents, and Trevor and Linzy sacrificing themselves to protect them flashed through her head.

“You... you see it Sam?” Trevor asked hoarsely.

“Yes, I see it Trevor.” Sam responded quietly.

“Good...” Trevor breathed, his voice fading.

“He’s gone.” Sam said as she felt his mind give way to death.

There was a moment of silence for their passed comrade.

Then Rod broke the silence. “Where’s Linzy? What about Linzy?”

Ash scoped out the wasteland. “I don’t know, Rod. I simply don’t know. If Trevor barely made it...” she trailed off.

“Sam?” Rod asked, his blue eyes hopeful.

Sam sighed and reached out with her mind, searching for signs of life. Nothing. Nothing survived. She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Rod. Linzy’s gone.” He looked defeated for once. “They did what they thought was right.” She tried to comfort him, but it seemed as though he wasn’t listening.

His hands formed a fist at his side, his eyes focusing now on a body that was definitely Linzy’s.

“They’ll pay.” The look on his face now was almost scary. “It’s time to end this.”

Chapter Thirty Seven

I walked along the sodden path, covering my shoes with a thick mud. Thoughts clogged my mind, but I couldn't seem to think straight as I trekked along the abandoned road, as though a fog was smoldering my brain like a blanket. No matter how hard I struggled, or how much I writhed around, I couldn't escape the blank air filling my heart, my mind, like emptiness sucking my soul away. When I reflect back on the sensation, I decided it was quite odd, especially since I had no idea how I got here or what I was doing. Then it all rushed back to me...everything I'd lived for in the past three days. The hollowness was gone, just like that, and memories overwhelmed me, making me drop to my knees. I was completely alone. Nobody was here with me, not Sam nor Rod, or even Sierra. It was just me. Alone. *Truly* alone for the first time in a long while. It all seemed to begin, or rather, continue back when we stared at Linzy and Trevor's lifeless bodies in the crater.

Rod seemed to be going insane, but we weren't able to pinpoint how to calm him. He was obviously upset over Linzy's - and Trevor's - death, and was plotting severe revenge for the aliens. Technically, we all were pretty torn up about the tragedy that struck here, but Rod seemed to be taking it the hardest. I stepped forward to lay a comforting hand on his shoulder, but he just twisted away and took a few steps forward, leaving me to stand alone. I glanced over my shoulder at Sam, who was staring at me with a questioning gaze.

No good, my gaze seemed to tell her as I barely shook my head, grimacing.

Hey, Ashley, Sierra called to me, and I looked up, watching the small brown bird soar across the burnt up landscape. *Look at this.*

I nodded and scurried across the dead land until I reached the winter wren, and looked down at what she was pecking with her beak. *Look familiar?*

At first, I was completely perplexed about what the shiny metal object, charred with small black markings, was, but when I peered closer, a small gasp escaped me. It was the same exact device as what Rod had found in my neck awhile back. The same one Linzy had before I took it out of her jacket pocket. But...we still had it! How could it have ended up here? Unless... it dawned on me then. They had a duplicate! But was it the aliens, or the government agents who dropped it?

"What'd you find?" Sam asked, coming up behind me. Her own eyes seemed to widen when they landed on it, and she murmured to me, "Let's show Rod."

I picked up the metal object and dusted off the ashes with my fingers before dashing with Sam over to Rod, who was leaning against a tree in distress. “Do you recognize this?” I whispered to him, feeling as though this moment was a tender moment, and everything had to be quiet.

Rod didn’t answer for a moment, as his gaze was fixed on slowly passing, fluffy clouds in the bright blue sky. Seemingly as though he was drowsy, he dragged his gaze down with some effort to what I was holding, and his expression seemed to change only a little. “Yeah. That’s the thing I found in your neck.” He then cocked his head a little, but otherwise didn’t show much more interest, which was strange for him. “How did you get that?” He patted his jean pocket, and pulled out his own, holding it up beside mine.

Swallowing, I muttered, “They’re exactly the same.”

“Yeah,” Rod breathed, staring at them. “Do you think it’s from the aliens? Maybe we can get a lead on them this way!”

“How?” I looked at him, eyes narrowed. “By doing a DNA test on it? Sorry, Rod, but we don’t have that sort of technology with us right now!”

He grunted and just looked away again, training his gaze on a flickering leaf.

Giving up, I turned around and headed back towards Sam and Sierra, shrugging. “It’s time to go. This place is giving me the creeps.”

For awhile, the four of us traveled in the government car, the wind whipping through our hair and slapping our faces. I groaned when my hair kept twisting in my face and latching itself around my nose and lips, and brought my fingers up to knock it back again. I’d decided to sit in the back seat with Sam rather than shotgun beside the driving Rod, just to give him a little space.

“Rod...” I warned, my eyes flickering up to the sky. “Slow down. I hear something.”

Obediently, Rod’s foot lightly pressed down on the brake pedal, and the car instantly began to lose speed. I grabbed a bar running across the top of the car and stood up, nodding to Sam before leaping into the air and watching as the car passed by underneath me. Unfurling my wings just in time, I soared up, catching some strong air currents to help pull my wings up and down.

I was about level with the altitude planes would fly at before I saw the UFO in the distance, shooting straight at me. Slowly, I

closed my light brown eyes and concentrated all my energy onto the swiftly approaching dot, ready to explode it. My eyes flashed open, prepared to see flames and shattered bits of aircraft exploding on the horizon like a horribly designed firework, but nothing happened. The small dash just kept approaching me at full speed.

“What happened?” I yelled to the wind, frustration coating my voice. “Why didn’t it explode?!”

Suddenly, Sierra’s voice filled my mind, making me want to think: “Not now, Sierra!”

I told you that you shouldn’t just carelessly throw yourself out there like that... Sierra scolded me, sounded as flustered as I felt. *Your power is still new and faulty! You don’t know what conditions need to be met for it to work yet, Ashley!*

I silently mocked her but didn’t respond, desperately wishing I had my bow and arrow with me. Maybe I could gain a new power...if I focus really hard on something...maybe it’ll appear! I squeezed my eyes shut and repeated in my head over and over, *Bow and arrow! Bow and arrow!*

My eyelids fluttered open again, my eyes sparkling with hope, but nothing happened.

Keep dreaming, Sierra snorted in my mind, and I stuck out my tongue, though she was still on the ground with Rod and Sam. *Oh, and you might want to look out.*

Abruptly, my gaze looked up again to see the spacecraft practically on top of me, and I folded my wing-tips in so I lost ten feet in the air just before the ship rammed into me. Gasping for air, I whirled around in time to see it hover over me. The last thing my vision registered was a large alien, which was too blurry to make out the details of, cackling in the cockpit of the ship. Then everything went black.

Darkness flooded me, but I knew I was awake. Murmurs could be heard from a distance, but when I sat and tried to make them out, I realized it just sounded like a bunch of gibberish. *It must be alien-speak, * I thought vaguely, trying to stand up. My limbs were soar and I was still aware that I couldn’t see a dang thing. *Am I blind?* I thought, my heartbeat pumping.

I jumped to my feet, and blindly stepped forward, my arms flailing in front of me and trying to feel my way for me. My feet crashed into a pile of clutter, sending my body down to my hands and knees. Unfortunately, my hands landed on something rough, and I sighed, realizing I had a new set of cuts to add to my collection. My hands fumbled along the wall, struggling to find something I could grasp to help support my body, but to my dismay, the wall was as smooth as a pebble in a stream.

“They caught you too, huh?” A deep voice carried through the darkness, making me jump in shock.

“W-Who are you?” I asked like an idiot, still attempting to slow the sudden upbeat of my heart.

“I’m Jake. Yes, it’s nothing special, but it’s my name,” he sounded like he was in the opposite corner of...wherever we were.

I tried to act like I knew what I was doing, though I wasn’t sure if he could see me. “Well, thanks for practically giving me a heart attack, *Jake*,” I snapped, irritation flooding my veins.

“Hey,” his tone seemed to offer that he was holding up his hands innocently, “we’re both on the same side here. Us against the aliens, right?”

“Yeah...sure,” I muttered, but finally asked the question that was nagging me. “Can you see in here?”

“Not a thing,” Jake sighed, sounding as though he was standing. I froze as silence settled over us. Was he moving? Was he just standing there? Who *was* this kid, anyways?

“I can help you, if you want,” Jake suddenly said, making me narrow my eyes in the blackness.

“Help me do what?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Escape,” he simply replied.

“Oh, and I see that’s been working out well for you so far,” I retorted, looking around.

“In return, though, I ask a simple favor,” he continued, ignoring my comment.

“And what would that be?” I plopped down on the ground, soon realizing that walking around in this lighting wasn’t going to work.

“You help me find my sister,” Jake proposed.

“We’ll see,” was all I said, but somewhere in my heart, I could feel a twinge of sympathy for him, even though I hadn’t even heard his story. “So...why are we here?”

“The aliens want a sample of every living creature on Earth...before they destroy it,” Jake informed me gravely, making my eyes widened.

“Destroy?” I echoed.

“Well, technically not the ‘destroy’ we’d think of, but more in the way they’d wipe out anything the human race is used to. They’re going to totally clear out all the forest and kill the wildlife they haven’t captured – including humans. At least, this is what I’ve gathered from them while I’ve been here.”

“So, why’d they take us?” I asked, perplexed.

“I’m guessing you’re special...are you not?”

I thought for a brief moment. Could I trust him? “Well...as a kid my parents always told me I was a special little girl...and my friends told me I was special, also.” I gave a wide grin to the darkness.

“Ha-ha, very funny,” he laughed humorlessly, making me bite my lip. “Come on. You know what I mean.”

“Alright...” I sighed, looking down at what I supposed was the ground. “I’m special. I was hit by a meteor a few months ago outside my school, and now I have wings, can communicate with animals, and can apparently explode things with my mind. But of course, it has to be the right condition and such, and it doesn’t seem to work when I just want it to work. Which is why I’m here, by the way.”

Jake’s voice sounded excited, surprising me, “I was hit by a meteor also!” *Wow, this meteor’s gotten around,* I couldn’t help thinking as he went on, “Afterwards, some strange things started happening. I realized that I could just turn invisible whenever I wanted. Just like that. Apparently, I have the mental ability to shift the speed of my atoms, also, so I can pass right through a solid, or I could become hard enough to withstand the hardest of impacts. This last one takes a lot of control, energy, and focus, but it sure does come in handy sometimes,” he spoke quickly, making me lean forward in anticipation. “I recently found out I have the ability to just conjure up something I focus really hard on. Isn’t that strange?”

My jaw dropped. Seriously? Why did *he* get that ability? I could’ve used

that an hour ago! Or, at least, I think it was an hour ago... “That is pretty awesome,” I commented, a small smile playing at my lips. “So, wait, are we on their ship right now?”

“You bet,” Jake responded, sounding farther away now.

“Hey, where are you going?” I frowned, trying to make out his form, but of course, I couldn’t.

“Don’t worry,” he chuckled. “I’m still here.” Suddenly, I heard a small pop and he gasped, slamming back into the other wall.

“Hey...are you okay?” I asked hesitantly, taking a small step forward in fear I would trip over something.

“Fine...” his voice sounded tense, and suddenly a small beam of light shined through the darkness, making my eyes squeeze close with the sudden brightness. Slowly, I opened them back open again and allowed them to adjust. He turned the beam onto my face, and I ran my fingers through my hair timidly, looking away. “Oh, wow. You’re only about fourteen, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I gritted my teeth. “How old are you?” I turned my gaze onto him, but of course couldn’t see his face since he was still selfishly shining the flashlight on me. Wait...where did he even get that? “Did you just make that thing appear?”

“Yup!” He announced proudly, twirling it in his hand. Of course, his suave act lasted only about five seconds until he dropped the flashlight and it fell it to the ground.

I rolled my eyes, “Smooth.”

“Oh, and I’m about fifteen and a half,” Jake quickly said, “to answer your question.”

I nodded, then pointed towards a shiny glass thing sealing us off from the rest of the ship, “Hey, shine your flashlight there.”

He did as I said and we saw that the aliens who’d been there earlier were now gone, leaving us alone in this entire wing of the ship. Of course, as Jake flashed his light around, we soon realized they only allowed us a corner of the whole wing. “Oh, how very generous of them,” I muttered.

“Hey, I never caught your name,” Jake looked over at me, and with the light reflecting off the walls, I detected a small smile.

“Ashley,” I mumbled, and then tried kicking at the plastic sealing us off from the rest of the world. No good.

“Here...let me try,” Jake offered, handing me the flashlight. I shrugged and shined it on him, raising my eyebrows when I studied his features for the first time.

He had tanned skin stretching across his tall, muscular body, and atop his head, he had the typical ragged “guy” hair, that was combed to the side with long bangs reaching his eyebrows. His hair was a shade darker than mine, maybe a chestnut brown, and was for the most part straight until it reached his ears, where it flipped out abruptly and ended. His eyes shined a bright green, hinting flecks of gold within, and he had high cheekbones that framed his natural smile perfectly. His skin was completely smooth, and only a few freckles dotted his sturdy arms, that were only a few shades darker than his olive skin. Looking him over, I’d say he was about three to four inches taller than me, and maybe about half-an-inch taller than Rod and Sam, since I was pretty sure those two were about the same height. Overall, I thought vaguely in the back of my mind that he may be a bit attractive, but I didn’t really care at the moment. All I wanted was to get off this freaky ship and inform my friends of what the aliens were planning, and that’s all I could think about.

Grinning at me, he suddenly charged for the wall, and to my surprise, completely passed through it, turning invisible for a moment. Looking back at me from the other side, his eyes sparkled in the dim rays of the flashlight. “They wanted to capture to super humans like us, but they must have forgotten we actually have *powers* that make us super humans.”

I sighed, rolling my eyes at him, “Yeah, yeah. So are you going to get me out or what?”

“Right,” Jake waved his hand in the air, as though he’d forgotten. Pacing over to a small button on the wall, he pressed it and the door to the prison slid open. I stepped out and brushed off my shirt, joining him on the other side.

“Let’s do this,” I grinned, ready to show the world what I had in me.

Chapter Thirty Eight

Rod and Sam looked up at the ship in shock, when it hit her with some sort of weird beam, and she disappeared. Sierra flew down towards them, she looked freaked out, nearly as much as Rod and Sam were.

“What just happened?” Rod asked.

“She’s gone...” Sam said, but as soon as she said that, the car, with Sierra in it, was roaring

down the road that they were on. The ship was going fast, and they couldn't keep pace. Rod looked down, at the road, and found that it was ending soon.

No matter. He thought, and as soon as the car was at the end of the road, he put the break down hard. They screeched to a stop, and Sam asked what he was doing.

“Stay here, or don't go too far, I'll get Ashley,” he said, “Or if you can keep up, come along, I care not!” he said. His eyes burned with determination again.

He was out of the car and sprinting faster than the car as soon as he could. He jumped around trees and was soon caught up with the ship. He stared at it as he accelerated. *Dang it...* He thought, then picked up the pace.

He was nearly level with it when he saw some sort of guy appear outside of it. *Human?* He continued to sprint, but knew he was Ashleying behind. *Dang it!* He thought, his mind yelling out, trying to keep up with it was tough, and it was harder because he couldn't go in a straight line, he had to dodge around trees.

He heard some sort of *plop* sound and Sam was right next to him. Before he could question it, she disappeared again, and *plop*, she appeared a hundred meters a head of him. He caught up again before she could concentrate and disappear again.

They had gone several miles when Rod noticed Sierra was holding onto Sam's shoulder. They were nearly caught up with the ship when the man appeared again, this time with Ashley. Soon, giant wings were let out, and they were flying. The ship stopped and soon Rod and Sam were caught up with the ship.

It turned around and shot the beam at Ashley and the man, whom she was holding. The beam passed right through the two, and Rod and Sam gasped. Enraged, Rod jumped as high as he possibly could, hoping to make the jump. He was about halfway to as high as the pair were, when Sam appeared next to him. She wrapped her arms around him, then *plop* he was inside of some dark room.

Your best inside of the.. ship, so I'll let you stay in there, and go ask what is up with Ashley and... that guy.. Sam told Rod in his head. He nodded, then slammed into one wall. The ship lurched.

Ashley and Jake watched as the ship lurched around, a lot of loud banging sounds were emanating from within. Sam appeared next to them, and Ashley grabbed hold of her. Her wings beat furiously to hold up the three of them, but soon she found she was more than strong enough to hold the three of them.

“Hiya,” Jake said, looking over at Sam.

“Hello...” Sam said, “Ashley, what is up with the ship and... him?”

“My names Jake,” Jake said, smiling.

“His names Jake...” Ashley said, “We got captured and stuff... and now we've just escaped... is that Rod?”

“Yep...” Sam said, she heard a loud yell, and heard an unusual squishy sound.

Rod just smashed an aliens head into a wall, and soon he felt the blood slipping around the small room he was in. He could feel himself almost slip in it.

He couldn't see anything though. He slammed into the side of the ship again, and slammed through it.

The aliens stared at him, unsure of what to do with this new human, that they hadn't captured. Rod stared back, for less then half a second, then he went into action. He hit one with his right fist, its head whiplashing back, and he brought his left fist around to hit another. The third pulled out a small gun.

Rod hadn't the room to maneuver around the shot, so when he felt it, he grimly smiled. It didn't hurt that bad.

The ship continued to get knocked back and forth from within.

“Who is that?” Jake asked, he felt a little fear of whatever it was that was causing that much damage.

“That is good ol' Rod,” Ashley said, smiling at her friends berserker anger and... goofiness, most of the time.

“He tends to be... less than gentle...” Sam said, smiling also.

Rod slammed his head into the aliens head, hearing its face crack. The aliens hand slammed into a small lever, and the ship began to fly out of control.

“Uh oh...” he said, and he pulled the lever back, but it wouldn't budge. He pressed a little button, and the ship began to fly straight at the ground.

“That is not good...” he said, and then he jumped up, and he slowly broke the roof. He jumped out of the ship, which was just a few seconds from slamming into the ground. He jumped straight up, and slowly his momentum was broken and he fell into freeAshley.

The ship slammed into the ground, and it blew up, sending flames straight up into the air. The air around him was heated, and he could feel his skin begin to burn a little. Soon, he was fly straight down at the explosion, which was receding. It was soon naught but a small pile of miniature flames, and Rod was flying straight at it.

Dang... He thought.

Sam yelled out, then disappeared. She reappeared half the distance between Rod and where she was. Ashley then flew straight towards her Ashleying friend, dragging Jake along with her. He screamed a little, then blushed after he regained control, to find Ashley staring at him, smiling a little. Then she looked back at Rod, and she went all the faster.

Rod slammed into the ground, in a roll, and didn't feel the majority of the blow, for it was absorbed by the roll. He was sure that he'd broken something, but he didn't care. He'd destroyed the ship.

He rolled into a stop, and sat down, feeling his shoulder. It wasn't broken, but it had popped out of place, then back in. He chuckled grimly. He looked around the destroyed ship, and found something to munch on.

Sam appeared next to him, and Ashley and Jake landed near to him soon after.

“You survived,” Sam said, “I'm glad you're okay.” She smiled.

“Yep... who's the tall boy?” Rod said, nodding at Jake.

“My name is Jake-”

“Ah, thats the name, how'd you do that thing?” He said.

“I can speed up the particles in my body, which allows me to pass through solid ground,” he said.

“Ah, great, a science lesson,” he said, looking at him. He was right next to Ashley, and she looked at him with a sort of... he didn't know what it was, but he didn't like it.

“So... what'cha eating?” Sam asked.

“Not sure...” he said, then laughed a little. He passed it to Sam, who took a small bite, who passed it to Ashley, who took a small bite, then she passed it to Jake, who finished it. Rod glared at him, then decided it wasn't worth worrying. He found another bar, and ate it. He passed some to the rest, and they sat in silence.

“So that was you who made all those... loud sounds?” Jake said. He didn't expect such a short guy to have done all that. He didn't look like much, despite his muscled body.

“Yeah yeah, though I'd be bigger...” he said, he was used to receiving that from football, because everyone expected Kujo to be taller and bigger. He was always the shortest athlete in his competitions in Shot put and Discus.

“No, not that...” Jake said. Rod glared at him, “Fine, I thought you'd be bigger, based on that sounds that came from in the ship.”

“Eh, I don't care.”

They all fell asleep that night, and Ashley and Sam found it hard to sleep with Jake and Rod glaring at each other. They seemed to be fighting for dominance. Sierra laughed at the whole affair, having seen it so many times out in the natural world. Rod and Jake just stared at each other, Jake would flinch every once in a while, but he didn't seem to back down... until Rod's violet eyes flared up.

Jake flinched and Rod chuckled. He growled then, and turned over, and fell asleep. Jake did likewise.

Chapter Thirty Nine

Sam sat up, gasping for breath. It was still dark. She shut her eyes, her nightmare flashing before her eyes. Trevor's last moments. He knew what he was doing. He knew he wasn't going to make it. The blast from the alien ship was all consuming. He had shoved many of the government agents behind him, putting himself ahead of them and toward the edge of the blast. The last thing Trevor remembered before the darkness, before waking up at the crater, was the pain. Trevor's last moments were now Sam's to keep.

Her eyes opened and she looked around. The others were still asleep. Rod was muttering something in his sleep, but she couldn't make out what he was saying. Ash and Jake were both sleeping peacefully. Sighing heavily, Sam laid back down. She had to make sure Trevor and Linzy didn't die for nothing. Closing her eyes, she conjured up the image of the ship that Trevor saw. The same one that fired the shot that killed him. That was their target. Her eyes slid closed, and she drifted off again.

A few hours later, Sam woke up. The sun was rising in the sky. Her stomach growled so she stood up and went to dig through the car's food compartment. “Rod!” she muttered under her breath, irritated. He'd stuffed the food bars he'd salvaged from the alien ship wreckage into the compartment. It was jumbled in there with absolutely no organization. They weren't even put in nicely; they were put in sloppily, covering up whatever other food they might've had left. Sam didn't feel like digging for her breakfast either, so she pulled out one of the bars.

“I get one of those too, right?” a voice asked from behind her.

Sam jumped, her heart beating a mile a minute. “Don't do that!” she hissed, turning around to look at Jake.

“Sorry.” He sounded sincerely hurt.

Sighing, Sam handed him the alien food bar. “Here.”

“Awesome.” Eagerly he grabbed the bar. “Thanks.” Then Jake walked off.

Her appetite had vanished. Thanks a lot, Jake. She thought to herself.

Jake sat down by the sleeping Ashley. She stirred a bit, then blinked open her eyes. Jake was about to take a bite of his food bar, when he caught Ash staring at the bar. He lowered the bar and snapped it in

half, giving a piece to Ashley.

“Thanks.” She said, taking the food from his hand. He just sighed and took a bite of his own bar. “Good morning to you too.” Ash muttered.

“It’s not a good morning when someone steals your food.” Jake replied pointedly.

“Hey, you gave it to me. That’s not stealing.” Ash defended herself.

He grinned. “It is if the thief used puppy dog eyes. The ultimate guilt trip.”

“I did not use puppy dog eyes!”

“Right, that just might be your natural look.” Jake laughed.

Sam pulled out two of the bars anyway. She’d better eat even if she wanted to or not. She took a reluctant bite. How were they going to find the ship? She could see the metallic colors in her head, the huge sweeping wings of the ship... It was obviously all for show. That was the lead ship. It just had to be. Who makes a ship like that if it isn’t for someone or something important?

“Sam?”

Her head turned to look at Rod, who was now standing beside her, obviously still half asleep. She’d been jolted out of her thoughts for the second time this morning and to be honest, it was getting on her nerves. “What?”

“You okay?” he asked.

“I’m just fine.” She replied.

“If you say so...” His eyes looked at the barely eaten bar in one of Sam’s hands to the untouched bar in the other. “Are you gonna eat that?”

Sam gave him a disbelieving look. Then she just shook her head and sighed. “No.” She handed the uneaten one to Rod. She laughed softly as she watched him devour the bar in a matter of seconds.

“What? I’m hungry.” Rod defended himself, and then reached for another bar.

Sam shrugged and took another bite of her own bar.

“So what does your little group do anyway?” Jake asked Ash.

Ashley thought for a moment. “We’re a band. See, I have lead vocals, Sam plays the electric guitar, Rod plays the drums, and Sierra’s our manager.” She couldn’t keep a straight face and a smile spread across it. The idea of them being a band was too absurd.

“No, what do you guys really do?” Jake asked, grinning.

“We’re fighting the aliens.” Ash replied. “Trying to get back all of the animals and you know, save the world. Nothing big.”

Jake looked at her for a moment, thoughtfully. “You’re going to help me get my sister back, right?”

“Of course I will. We’ll do it together.” Ash responded. She paused for a split second before asking, “What happened to your sister?”

Jake shook his head. “I-I don’t want to talk about it.”

Ashley tried to not let her disappointment show. She supposed that if he didn’t want to talk about it, it must be pretty awful. She felt bad for him and pressing for answers would probably only make her feel guilty. “Alright.”

But it seemed as if her unwillingness to ask for more details had the opposite effect. “I suppose you have a right to know...”

Ashley wanted to voice her agreement, but decided it was best to stay silent.

His eyes scoped the little clearing they were in, making sure the others weren’t listening in. They weren’t. They were too busy having a conversation by the car. “My little sister and I got separated when the aliens attacked our hometown.” Jake looked up at the sky and leaned against the tree behind them. “It’s all my fault. I should’ve paid closer attention to her, I should’ve told her to leave while she still could!” Jake ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Ashley, she’s only ten.” His voice was quivering a bit now. “Ten! She’s too young to be involved in something like this.” He let out a long

sigh and closed his eyes. "She was kidnapped by them, those monsters." He lifted his eyes and looked at Ashley. "I haven't seen her since. I don't know if she's alive or-" He cut himself off.

"I'm sorry." Ash comforted him. "I promise you that we'll find your sister. You did help me escape after all and if you remember, one of your conditions was helping you find your sister. I won't go back on my word."

"Thanks. Just... don't tell them,"-he glanced at Rod and Sam-"please." His eyes were almost pleading. Ash bit her lip, but then nodded. "I won't."

"Thanks." Jake said again. The two looked up as Sam and Rod started to come over.

"What's up?" Jake asked as Sam sat down with them.

"We need a plan, that's what." Rod growled.

Jake frowned at the open hostility. Ash and Sam exchanged a meaningful glance.

"Are you going to sit or what?" Ash questioned. Rod let out a grumble, but sat down. He obviously wasn't fond of the new arrival to the group.

Sierra hopped over as well, eager to finally come up with a plan. In her own opinion, they'd been going through this whole encounter far too long without a plan.

"We have to find the ship that killed Trevor and Linzy." Sam started off. She described the ship to them. "It has to be the one we're looking for. It might have all the animals on board, and if not, it will certainly know where to find them."

Jake nodded in agreement. "It sounds like the one we're looking for..."

"You would know." Rod spoke up, giving Jake a hard look.

Jake narrowed his eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Here we go again." Ash sighed, knowing her comment was going to be ignored.

Sam nodded in agreement. At least I'm not the one going to be doing the arguing for once... she thought.

And sure enough, her comment was ignored. "Well it seems like you spent a long enough time on one of their ships."

"Your point?" Jake was trying not to sound hostile, but there was an edge to his voice.

"My point-"

"Stop!" Ash broke in, "Would you both cut it out? We're getting nowhere."

They stopped their bickering but continued to glare at one another.

"Ideas anyone?" Sam encouraged. "Anyone at all?"

After a moment, Jake said, "Well we first need to find the ship, don't we?"

"I meant after we find the ship." Sam replied, her own voice containing a bit of an edge.

"We find the ship, get inside, split up, and take the ship down from the inside. Simple as that." Rod grumbled.

"Well, it's not exactly a plan, but it's a start." Ash sighed.

It was almost dark when they had all agreed on a plan that was mostly agreeable with them all. It had been a long and hard process. Jake and Rod had clashed more than once and gotten into disagreements with just about everything. Neither Ash nor Sam was quite sure why they were atppshley laughed out loud, she c

such odds with each other. Sierra had contributed at various points, offering things they themselves probably wouldn't have.

So that's why there was an air of tension about the group as they fell asleep that night. Not just because of the friction between Jake and Rod, but also because of what lay ahead in the morning.

Chapter Forty

It was hard to sleep, for Rod at least. He was more than a little jealous. Or envious. Or whichever it was. He got very little sleep, and the little that he did get were dreams of Linzy. *God... I miss her...* He thought, then it occurred him that he never really got to know her. He just... kinda liked her. *Whatever...* He thought after debating with himself on exactly why and to what point he liked Linzy to.

He began to think about what they could have done, but suddenly it hit him. She was gone. He had no chance. He could feel tears filling his eyes. He just shrugged it off though, and decided that he was going to sleep, no matter what he had to do.

He ended up just getting up and pacing around. He circled around the camp, watching for things in the dark. It wasn't hard for him to see, for his red haze vision allowed him infrared vision. He chuckled as animals scurried through their life, as they went along with their lives, though he couldn't tell whether or not they were unhappy or happy... or with any emotion at all.

It didn't matter to him. He circled the camp, deep in thought. *Huh... wonder what those bats are doing...* He thought. Suddenly, a small sound alerted him. Ducking into a crouch, he watched as Jake woke up. He looked around, muttered something to himself, and Rod's eyes lit up, deep violet.

Wonder what he's do'in... Rod thought. He wasn't accustomed to watching people in the morning, *A lot like that creepy vampire dude...* He thought, then chuckled to himself.

Jake perked up at the sound, and looked around.

"Where's the mean guy..." Jake said, and Rod growled a little.

"Depends on what your doing," Rod growled, barely loud enough for Jake to hear.

"Where are you?" Jake asked, looking around. Suddenly, a flare gun appeared in his hand.

Huh? Rod thought as a flare shot at him. He jumped up, unsure of whether it was a weapon or not. It lit up the area. He landed on several yards closer to Jake. Jake growled, and Rod returned the favor.

Rod grunted as Jake and he slammed into each other. Rod was taken back by the weight of the opponent, but Jake was taken back by the strength of Rod's blow. Both yelled out a little as a ball of fire flew at them.

Rod jumped away, then looked at Ashley, looking at both with a condescending look. But Rod was at the point of no return. He looked back at Jake, who looked back at him. Hatred was visible in both of their eyes. Rod jumped up, and Jake jumped too, but couldn't get nearly as high.

Rod's eyes went wide when he passed straight through Jake. *Dang it...* He thought, then he rolled, and ended facing the grinning Jake. Both stared at each other, and ran at each other. Rod jumped up, and slammed his fists straight into Jake's chest. Jake wasn't expecting the sudden explosive movement, it was inhuman move to pull off, and when it slammed into his chest, he found himself dug into the ground.

Rod was lifted straight into the air by a rock flying at him. He was unsure of what exactly hit him, and that made it even more surprising when he fell into a cage of iron. It suddenly burned him, hanging over an open flame.

He growled and grunted, and could hear Ashley and Sam yelling something. The flame and the cage disappeared, and Jake looked at Rod, triumphant. He looked at Ashley, and suddenly his look turned to one of guilt.

Rod glared at the two, and knew that Ashley wouldn't be mad at him for long. And knew that Jake had just bested him. He growled and stalked away. Sam hurried after him, Sierra close behind. Both were sure that he was about to explode. About to destroy something and, perhaps, everything.

Rod just sat down in the woods, and he just sat down, crouched. He didn't know why he was just sitting there, deep deep in thought. Sam and Sierra caught up to him, and watched him. Sam didn't

bother looking into his mind, she knew he was in control.

Rod turned around, and looked into Sam's eyes. In his eyes she saw deep deep emotion, so deep... so primal that it scared her a little.

"Who is he to think he can come in here," Rod started... but then he just stopped. He stared at Sam, then shook his head. He looked up, seeing the sun was far over the horizon. He stood up, and looked around. He stared at it, then he walked back to the camp, Sam and Sierra following closely.

"There is something coming," he said, looking at Jake and Ashley, who were talking. Ashley seemed unhappy, but the look on Jake's face shown pure hatred. Rod returned the look, but decided that the petty hatred was useless. The air currents were different, the pressure in the air was higher than usual. Something big was coming.

Rod and Sam looked at the fluttering form of Sierra, both sure that she was flying in fear. Sierra barely dodged a large blast of energy. Both tensed up. Suddenly, though, Sierra disappeared. Then Rod looked over to see Sam slowly Ashleying into nothingness. She screamed a little, then she was not there. He jumped up.

"No!" He roared, and jumped up to the top of a tree. He landed on a branch, cracking it, and jumped up again. He flew up higher than most birds dared to fly. He found that the giant ship that Sam had described was floating up there. He heard Ashley cry out, and Jake also cry out. Suddenly, he felt his own form becoming less substantial. He looked down, and slowly he felt lighter.

He could feel his body fade into nothingness. He reappeared next to Sam, Ashley, Jake and Sierra. They were all sitting in a large cell. Rod looked around and he noticed that their clothes had all been replaced with tight spandex suits. He blushed when he noted that he could see all their bodies with acute detail. He blushed even more when he noted Sam and Ashley examining him. He looked over to see Jake reacting similarly.

Both just shrugged. This was perhaps the friendliest thing that they had done towards each other.

An alien voice clicked on, and it spoke what seemed gibberish to all five of them.

"What the Kell is that?" Rod asked. He heard the voice slowly changing into English.

"You have been chosen to represent the human race," the voice said, "You are the mightiest humans upon the planet. You have been chosen to represent the human race in a combat test."

"What the heck?" Jake asked.

"If you wish for more knowledge, merely ask, and we shall tell you."

"Why were we chosen, what are we going to do, and why are we doing this?" Ashley asked.

"You have been chosen because you are mighty super humans, the best of the best. You are going to be tested in ways of combat, so that we can decide whether or not to take over your planet, if you win, we shall not destroy you. You are doing this because in our society, there is a group of soldiers... soldiers you call them?... go out and ravage a planet, taking its natural resources.

"We picked your planet guessing that your race is one of the most defenseless races in the universe. You lack the strength, intelligence and the durability to survive the harsh climates of most planets. But your planet fought back, admirably, and we were less than prepared for the fight, and our government has been enraged.

"We did not want a war, but to merely raid your planet, steal its resources, and take animals to recreate at our own disposal. If you fail to defeat our more powerful warriors, then you and your planet shall be destroyed. If not, then we shall leave you in peace... for now."

The voice stopped, its metallic ringing discontinued abruptly.

"Huh... I guess... we're awesome..." Rod said, grinning.

"This is bad..." Sam said.

"I don't see why. We've lived the last few months in constant battle, and I like to think we've

gotten pretty good at it. Why not be given the opportunity to finish this in a way that we excel on?" Rod said and asked. He felt confidence in their ability, for he'd yet to find an enemy that he hadn't been able to destroy alone, though it nearly killed him several times.

He also had pent up rage at the fact that the new boy had beat him. They all waited, and hours passed. They waited, and suddenly a door opened. A score of aliens waited outside, with weapons that Rod recognized as halberds. They pRodded out the five, including the bird, and they followed a long dark hallway. It was silver.

They all looked around suspicious, unsure of what to do, and they were led into an arena. The arena was large, and thousands of aliens were staring at them. They were all cheering, or what seemed like cheering, for them as they walked in. They seemed to be happy about everything.

Rod and Sam backed up, and they were comforted by each others presence. Ashley and Jake did likewise, and Sierra was near the two.

A loud voice rang out, in the aliens language, and another voice rang out, in English, "These... inbred creatures are to fight our own super Trielinia warriors, we have decided that the best way to entertain the crowds, and to fix our problem, is to have a skirmish between our best and the humans best!" The crowd cheered and they all made similar sounds to, "Whoop!"

Unsure of what to do, Rod waved. The crowd made a squawking sound, what Rod assumed was, "Booing."

"What are you doing?" Sam asked.

"Not sure..." Rod replied, and he grinned. They all relaxed, a little, and watched a two giant doors opened on the side of the arena.

"And now our own warriors... and an extra edition to our elite warriors!" The voice yelled out.

Four large aliens walked out, wielding large weapons that resembled axes. Rod realized these were the type of aliens that he'd almost died against, and he knew their hearts were where his man hood was. He grinned grimly at the memory.

"Oh great..." Jake mumbled, and Rod growled at him, but decided that he wasn't going to let that emotion get in the way of their upcoming battle. All four of them, except for Jake, gasped at the next person to walk out.

Rod audibly groaned, and nearly fell to the ground as Linzy walked out. She held in her hand a large two handed swords. She spun the sword around in her hands, and the way her body moved was more than a little machine orientated.

The bolts and pieces of metal that were attached to her body. Her eyes were lit up with a green fiery color. They were cold and evil. A shudder flew up all five of their spines. Rod swooned, and nearly fell to the ground.

"Whats his deal?"

"They kinda liked each other," Ashley said. But she was too distracted to answer correctly.

Soon, a giant table arose, with weapons on it. Rod chose a giant hammer, Sam two small daggers, Jake picked an unusual spear like weapon, Ashley picked a large bow with a new quiver, for she lost her usual one back with the car. Sierra just fluttered around, hoping to guess which way they could get out.

But there was no way for them to get out, and Sierra knew it. They were in for the fight of their life. Soon, a trumpet-like sound filled the air. Soon, they found themselves pitted against enemies that were more than four times their size, aside from Linzy, and Rod felt his eyes water.

Emotions burned at their stomachs, and they planned to fight for the planet. They had to win. Or they, and all that they cared about, would die. This was it. Nerve racking and mind numbing, but no one said being heroes was easy. This was it.

Chapter Forty One

Jake,” I whispered, noticing his determined, hard look.

“Not now,” he muttered, focusing on the lethal aliens.

“Jake!” I hissed, a bit louder this time. He was concentrating on the aliens, and over the last two days, it was easy to recognize the shine in his dedicated green eyes. He wanted to fight these things, and escape, but I knew it was all because of his sister. If it weren’t for her, he’d probably have given up by now. It was no matter, though. If we continued at this pace, we’d be killed in five minutes, and there’d be no one left to save Earth. We just had to set aside our personal emotions blinding us and think with our heads, not our hearts.

“Jake, these things will flatten us. Have you ever battled one of these before? The only way we’re going to survive and find your sister is to find a way out of this place. I could get Rod to slam into the roof after carrying him up and maybe create an opening, or I could try and focus and maybe explode a hole in the wall-“

“Ash, stop,” Jake looked at me, his eyes almost pleading. I stared at him for a moment as he continued, meeting his soft gaze. “I’m fighting for my sister. I will win. There’s no other way out than to win. What if my sister’s on *this *ship? Dear God, she’s only ten. If we ditch this ship and blow it up or something, it could be the final time I ever see my sister’s face. She means the world to me, especially after the aliens blew up our parents. We’re way outnumbered at this point,” he swept his arm across the whole alien audience watching, and I briefly wondered how it was even possible to fit so much onto one ship. “We need to fight. Fight for our freedom, rights, and our own freaking happiness.”

I blinked, his words stopping me. Everything started to move in slow motion as I doubted my own strength. I watched as Rod barreled towards the aliens, a battle scream leaving his lips, and Sam right behind him, focusing her gaze on the smallest alien.

Linzy, twirling her machetes in her hands, let her greenish gaze Ashley onto Jake and I, and threw her head back, letting out a cackling laughter. My gaze grew wistful when Jake yelled out, charging forward also. I was the only one just standing there, looking like a selfish idiot who didn’t want to get hurt.

But I knew I had to fight. For Rod, Sam, Sierra...and Jake. I had to fight for everything I believed in, even if I killed myself. I could last long enough to get the others out of here, and they could save the world without me. Besides, I wasn’t that much of an asset besides being able to shoot foes at long distances, right?

Letting out a loud scream, I raced forward with my bow knocked, aiming for the smallest alien. I didn’t actually release my grip on the draw though until I hopped onto a large rock to better my shot. As soon as I launched

myself into the air, I let the arrow fly and watched as it spun through the air, launching towards the beast's heart.

It doubled over in pain when the arrow pierced its skin, and I landed on its back. It began to straighten up again as I quickly ran down its long spine...or where the spine *should* be, and landed on the ground kneeling, my back to the large blue alien. I slowly stiffened when a large shadow crossed my head and stretched in front of me, and winced when something slimy hit my cheek and dribbled down to the chin bone. Grimacing, I slowly looked up to see the alien towering over me, moss green blood dripping from where the arrow was poking out of its body. I drew my hand up to my face and wiped the gunk off my cheek, taking a swift step back.

It roared gibberish and swung at me multiple times, each I barely dodged. The alien had finally backed me up to a wall of the area, and I choked on the scent it was reeking. "You...are disgusting," I managed, rolling my eyes when it drew its gun. **Not good.** My mind began to race, trying to think of ways to escape this pickle, when all the sudden an all-too-familiar voice rang out in the air.

"Ashley!" Jake cried, sending himself to the back of the alien with his spear. Just before the alien could turn around and knock him back a few yards, Jake managed to lodge the spear into its neck, cutting the head clean off. It fell to the ground after a large crack erupted from the creature, and it fell forward. I jumped out of the way before it landed right where I was just standing.

I backed up until I was beside Jake. We both just stared at it for a moment, totally oblivious to the rest of the battle going on around us. I shook my head, frowning at the blood covering the ground.

"You okay?" Jake breathed, then stepped forward and yanked his spear out of the dead alien body.

"Fine," I replied, nudging one of its arms back with my bow to search for the arrow I'd shot. When I finally reached it, I realized it was covered in a thick film of slimy blood, and quickly decided I had ten perfectly good arrows left in my quiver. Whirling around, Jake and I faced the rest of the battle scene unfolding before our eyes.

Rod was slamming the largest aliens with his fists, and packed enough power to punch a hole through a brick wall, but this alien barely showed any pain. When I pulled my gaze to the other side of the ring, I noticed Sam and an alien facing each other, but neither made a move. The expressions on their faces told me all I needed to know. They were having their own war inside their minds, but I couldn't tell who was prevailing.

"One down, three to go," I muttered, looking for the smallest of the remaining three. And of course, my gaze landed on Linzy, who was streaking right towards Jake and I. "Nevermind...make that four." Jake and I exchanged a quick glance, and he barely showed any fear in his leaf green eyes – just determination.

"Ash, you go that way," he gestured to the right of us. "Follow the wall and get out of this girl's way. Apparently you all have some sort of history with her, so I'll have to take her." He told me, his expression hard.

I nodded, breathing out, and he patted my shoulder. His eyes seemed to soften for a moment, telling me everything would be alright, but in an

instant it was replaced by the cold, furious gleam. In an instant, I was sprinting along the tall red wall, my arms pumping by my sides as I raced far away from that section of this gigantic ring. Once I was sure I'd almost run a mile, I slowed and bent down with my hands on my knees, working hard to catch my breath. Jake and Linzy were just dots on the horizon, but I was much closer to Rod and his alien now.

The alien turned when he caught sight of me, but I was ready this time, and was already aiming for his neck with my bow. "Rod!" I called, and he glanced at me out of the corner of his deep violet eyes.

"When I shoot this, I need you to twist and turn and, then yank it straight out!" I yelled through gritted teeth, for what I was saying was pretty gruesome, even for me.

"Gotcha!" Rod called, his hands curling back into fists. I let the arrow fly as the alien began to stomp towards me, and it caught it off guard. It was sent to the ground on its back, its four eyes glazing over and going blank. Rod quickly jumped on it and grabbed the end of the arrow protruding from its neck with both his hands. Yanking it hard, he made sure it dug out a digger hole than when it was shot before Ashleying back on his butt. "Got the arrow!" Rod shouted to me, smiling.

That was good. The largest alien was taken down. Now... my light brown gaze raked the rest of the arena. Now we help Sam and find the last alien. As Rod and I neared Sam and the alien she was battling with, we found them frozen with shock.

"What's going on in there?" I shouted over the roar of the crowd. Apparently, Jake and Linzy's battle was getting heated, wherever it was.

"I don't know!" Rod swallowed, his lips contorting. "We have to do something!"

"No duh!" I shot back, my hands clenching and unclenching in fists. How exactly could we influence a mental battle. Right, like this. I pelted towards the alien who was frozen with surprise, and landed a kick square on its chest, blowing it back to the ground. Glancing over my shoulder at Sam, I noticed her blink and shake her head, finally coming out of her trance.

"It's pretty weak!" Sam called to us. "Rod, you can finish it off now."

Rod grinned, barreling towards the alien and slamming his fist straight through its heart. The alien laid there, dead, slimy blood draining onto the ground. "Is it just me, or is this getting more disgusting as we go on?" I muttered, hooking my bow over my back again. "C'mon," I announced more loudly, looking the two over. "Let's go help Jake and find that last alien."

They both nodded. "Right." I jogged along the side of the arena, and slowly

stopped, looking back over my shoulder. Sam and Rod were talking about something, but I wasn't close enough to hear them. Rod nodded and sprinted directly across the ring, and quickly out of sight over a small hill. Hills. Seriously. On a *space ship.*

Ashley? Sam's voice rang through my head, and I squinted at her. She couldn't communicate via telepathy, could she? When she continued, I suddenly realized what she was doing. She was able to open up her own mind's thoughts so I could hear them, and when I thought a response, she'd already be reading it. Clever.

What? I thought, tapping my foot impatiently. Jake's life could be on the line here!

*We're splitting up. Rod wants to go help Jake fight Linzy... *I heard her sigh, and felt myself echoing her. *I'm going to follow him, since I know he'll do something rash. You take down that last alien, okay?*

Well, I'm glad I always have the support of both you, I thought back, annoyed, and sprinted forward at full speed, gripping my bow in my left hand. My arms pumped at my sides as I conquered the ground and had traveled at least a half-mile. The crowd's roars sprang up again and I hissed out a groan, realizing something must have happened on the other side of the arena with the rest of my group.

"Hey! Fish face!" I yelled hopelessly, wishing the alien would just pop out of nowhere. My luck, the ground quivered beneath me, and something popped it, sending me flying. I crashed into the ground a few feet away, grunting, and immediately pulled myself up to a kneeling position, my bow ready.

The last alien had drilled its way through the ground somehow and had come out right under my feet, and was now crawling out onto the solid, hard-packed dirt. I grimaced and drew back the bowstring, ready to let my flaming arrow fly, but hesitated when it held its hands up. At first, I thought it was surrendering, but suddenly, a small white ball was flung towards me, and I narrowly dodged it.

Breathing heavily, I regrouped myself and glanced over my shoulder. The alien was coming at me, holding a large machete. My eyes narrowed as they calculated the distance between me and the quick alien, and I realized it was no use. Squeezing my eyes shut, I turned away and tucked my head under my arms as to protect my neck. Suddenly, there was a loud pop and some fizzling, and my eyes fluttered open. I was casting a long shadow in front of me, and no pain arrived. I stood up slowly and turned around, only to gasp in shock. All that was left of the alien was its creepy, scaly feet. Apparently, the body had been blown off. I looked around for who was responsible, but everyone was on the other side of the ring with Linzy. Crinkling my eyebrows, I realized *I* was the one who exploded the alien, and tapped

my foot with folded arms. “Sure. *Now* I can blow things up.”

I let out a sigh and grabbed my bow again, stepping towards the rest of the battle. Five minutes later, I crested a soft hill and swiftly registered what was happening. Sam was on the ground, bleeding from a head wound, and Rod was standing between her and Linzy. He looked unsure, and quite torn, as to what he should do. Jake was standing on Linzy’s other side, and it looked like he was sneaking up on her. Rod’s arm was bleeding from a deep wound and Jake seemed to have a slight limp. Not making one more move towards them, I drew my bow and nocked an arrow, using my mind to set it aflame. Squeezing my left eye shut, I focused in with my right eye, and swayed the bow until it was in perfect position. If I let the drawstring go, the arrow would pierce Linzy’s heart.

My own heart was racing two-thousand miles per second, and I was hyperventilating. What if I missed? What if I accidentally shot Rod or Jake and missed Linzy? What if Linzy was, like...immortal now and couldn’t die? I shook my head to rid myself of that last thought and hissed out a sigh, pushing all doubt away. I *had* to do this.

One moment before I decided to release the bow, Rod caught a glimpse of me out of the corner of his eye and shrieked, “No!”

Linzy’s head snapped in my direction, and her hands clenched into fists. Her eyes seemed to flare with anger and she took a step towards me, raising her sword.

Ugh. Leave it to Rod to mess everything up. I had to recalibrate the distance and aim the bow again as she rapidly approached. “Rod!” I shouted, my eyes clouding. “She’s gone. This isn’t her. This is just some demon soul in *her* body to fool us. Just believe me.” My voice trailed off as I let the arrow fly, just a single tear slipping down my cheek as I did so. Why was there one tear? How should I know? I’m just telling the story!

I watched, my heart skipping a beat in anticipation, as the arrow soared through the air. Everything just seemed to freeze and everyone stopped to watch the arrow directed for Linzy. My eyes widened with anger and frustration as the arrow slipped right over her head, brushing her hair’s frizz.

“Gah!” I stomped, throwing my bow down on the ground. Okay. It was official. I was a failure. She stormed towards me, raising the sword, but I just sighed at the theatrics. Jake quickly rushed up behind her, and she was blinded by anger that she didn’t even notice as he jabbed his knife straight through her chest. She gasped, coming to a halt, and looked down at the tip protruding from her chest.

“Why...?” she sobbed in such an innocent voice, that she almost had me going there for a minute. I just kept a straight face and crossed arms with a

raised eyebrow. The angelic expression on her face immediately flared into a freaky demonic one, and she snarled, “You all will pay for this! Even your precious little *bird!*” She spat the last word before doubling over and sagging to the ground.

I had to look away as Rod rushed up to her, his eyes round and watery. “Linzy!”

“He’ll never understand,” Sam winced, limping over to me.

Jake yanked his dagger out of Linzy and dragged himself away before Rod had the chance to turn on them with sheer anger. The crowd roared, obviously disappointed, and I just threw my hands up in the air, shouting, “Oh, for crying aloud, *deal with it!*”

Aliens began to appear at the closest door on the wall of the arena, and I was instantly on guard. “We have to get out of here,” I muttered to Jake and Sam, who both nodded in unison. My gaze flickered up to the roof, and suddenly Linzy’s last words replayed in my head. *You all will pay for this! Even your precious little bird! * I looked around, concern flooding me. I hadn’t seen Sierra since the beginning of the battle.

As if she had been called to me, I suddenly heard a faint chirping, and glanced up to see the small brown-and-cream bird soaring in circles above us. *Ash! I found where they were keeping the other animals! Come on!*

I nodded and flashed my gaze over to Jake and Sam. They both seemed to understand, and Sam dashed back towards Linzy’s body to collect Rod.

“How do we get up there?” Jake asked in a loud voice over the crowd.

“Uh...” I began, but a grin took over. I dashed away from Jake and the others, and when I had enough space in the large ring, extended my flecked wings. I soon was airborne and was at Sierra’s height. She sang happily and led me over to a large vent. *Through here!* I looked down and watched Jake, Sam, and Rod. Their eyes were glued on the aliens barreling towards them, and I swallowed guiltily. There was no way I could just leave my friends behind. I dove down and tore a piece of metal out of the wall. Though it was long enough to reach down to the ground, it was almost as light as a feather. I bent it down towards my friends and they quickly grabbed on to it. Using all the strength I barely had, I lifted them up to a platform at the level I was hovering at, up above the audience or the other aliens. I landed on the platform myself, tucking in my wings. “Come on, guys.”

Without question, they followed me through the spacious vent and it was silent besides all the shuffling. Sierra was in the lead, soaring forward and waiting for me at the end.

I swung my feet out and dangled there for a moment, examining the room we

were in. It was large and white – white walls, floor, and even cages. Inside the cages were various animals of all sorts. Different bird breeds, tigers, lions, platypuses, horses, otters, wolves, housecats, elephants, giraffes, and many more. Yes, the room was **that** big.

Over all the mixed thoughts I was receiving from the animals, one indefinitely stood out. A small, yet desperate, chirp over all the roars and coos was reaching out.

**Sierra!* It called, sounding small and afraid. My gaze flickered over to Sierra, whose small eyes widened.

She fluttered forward a bit, trying to scan the various cages for one animal she cared for. **S-Senna?**

Sierra, I'm here! Sierra's little sister cried out, and Sierra zoomed forward to one of the cages in the back. I dropped to the ground, Sam behind me, then Jake, and finally, Rod. We all crept forward, a bit wary of the bigger beasts. First we went around and opened all the cages with the housecats and dogs, and we worked through most of the birds. I came around to the winter wren cage, and Senna exploded out to Sierra. They both performed a bird hug, and fluttered to a small perch by the vent and began speaking quickly. I tuned them out of my mind and held my temples, trying to block the millions of animals all speaking to each other, and some trying to speak out to me. Sam was releasing the lions and bears, soothing them with her mind, while Rod worked on the elephants, and Jake was tentatively opening the wolves and foxes' cages. I bent down at the otters' cage and opened it up. The male stopped and showed its teeth menacingly before waddling away towards the other animals. The female otter stopped and looked up at me with large brown eyes, her whiskers twitching.

Thank you for saving us, She flicked her long tail, blinking. **I'm Suki. Who are you?**

I smiled at her, my eyes sparkling. **I'm Ashley. Nice to meet you. Now, can you get a grip on that male before he starts picking fights with the other animals?**

Suki looked up at me, amusement dancing in her eyes. **It's the least I could do after all the trouble you and your friends have gone through for us.**

I nodded my thanks to her as she waddled after the male, and moved on to the turtle cages. Eventually, we had let all the animals out, and it was all of us on one side of the wall staring at the animals gathered on the opposite side of the room. Sam stood closest to the windows, I was beside her, Rod was beside me, and Jake was closest to the vent we'd climbed through.

"Can you tell if they're angry?" Sam whispered, her dark brown eyes flitting around behind her glasses.

“Can’t you?” I asked, tilting my head in confusion. Sam shook her head, looking down at me.

“No, I can’t seem to get into animals’ minds. They speak a completely different language than us.”

“You haven’t figured that out yet?” I giggled, and she just rolled her eyes.

“Guys, focus,” Rod cut into our thoughts, his gaze a glare. Okay, he definitely wasn’t over Linzy... “How are we going to get all these animals past the aliens?”

“Like this,” Jake grinned, and we all turned to look at him. Suddenly, a metal baseball bat appeared in his hands and he rushed over to the window, smashing it open. The glass shattered everywhere but luckily was sucked out of the ship before it could pierce any of us or the animals. Sierra and Senna flew over to us, hovering just above me head.

Ashley, the aliens are coming. The cats can sense their auras, and they sure don’t seem happy, Sierra informed me, gazing at me intently. I nodded.

“Guys, we have to hurry,” I looked around quickly. “The aliens are on their way, and they’re pretty angry.”

“Okay,” Rod straightened and looked around. He yelled in a powerful voice, “Animals! Get out, now!”

Most just looked at him confused. The wolves bared their fangs, hackles raised, and the lions lashed their tails dangerously. I could sense the tension rising, and as my gaze raked them, I picked out Suki’s small, dark brown figure. She gazing at me, concerned.

He needs to stop yelling at them. They’re going to snap any moment, and they’ll rip you four to shreds! Suki warned me, worry coloring her voice.

“Rod!” I shouted over him and quickly calmed him down. “Stop yelling. You’re making them scared, and when some of these animals are scared, they attack.” Shrinking, I tried to reach out to them gently. Eventually I got through to the polar bears and black bears, but the wolves took a little extra work. With Suki and Sierra’s help, I was able to calm the lions and tigers, and soothe the cougars and cheetahs.

*Alright, *I announced to the group as a whole, and all eyes were upon me. *Lions, you take the lead. I want all birds to circle all the animals from above and make sure no one is left behind until we are a safe distance away. Ostriches and chickens, I need you directly behind the lions. Tigers will be behind them. I need the elephants and turtles behind them, and the giraffes beside

them. Dogs and housecats, you stay directly behind the elephants. Bears, you stay behind them. Everyone will file behind them and the wolves will take up the rear just to be sure no animal is lost or captured. Everyone understand?

*

A chorus of yaps, growls, and hoots met my speech, and I proudly glanced back at my friends, who were staring at the animals in shock. Just as the wall burst open with animals, I screamed, "Let's do this!"

The lions barreled out the window and jumped to the ground, the rest of the animals directly behind them. Luckily, the ship wasn't more than ten feet above the ground, so it wasn't hard for us to leap down. Rod, Sam, Jake, and I shuffled in with the bears, Sierra and Senna circling our heads. Suki was struggling to keep up at my feet, and I bent down so she could grab my arm. Eventually, I was carrying her as we dashed along the rugged terrain. Looking at my friends, I noticed sweat beading up on their foreheads as the sun beat down on us. I had to do what I had to do. I parted from the group and unfurled my wings, catching an air current and riding in the opposite direction the herd was headed. The aliens were chasing after the animals with their spaceship, but I concentrated, closing my eyes. A moment later, the spaceship was just a distant memory, and it was just a bright firework exploding before me.

*Wooh! *Suki shouted in my arms, her whiskers twitching joyously. *We've won! Yes!*

I gathered Suki in my left arm and pumped my right arm in the air, yelling with pure joy. After months of a hard, unforgiving, never-ending battle, we'd finally won. Finally. I let Suki down on the ground and she bowed her head to me gratefully.

Thank you, She gazed up at me with her round eyes, and though I'd only known her for twenty minutes, I knew I was going to miss her. *I am truly in debt to you. I can take it from here. My habitat isn't too far away. Goodbye.* She rubbed her head against my leg before turning and waddling away towards the distant forest.

Through the smoke, I could make out a rough figure, and immediately tensed. I was expecting a large alien who'd survived the explosion, but was surprised to see the familiar figure of Jake step out.

"Jake?" I tipped my head to the side, folding in my wings. "How'd you get here?"

He grinned and pointed to the motorcycle he was holding at his side. How had I not noticed it? He must've conjured it up when he'd seen me take flight.

I broke out in a smile and started towards him, but his grin faltered, catching me off guard. "What's wrong?" I asked wearily, and noted he

couldn't meet me gaze directly. We just freaking destroyed the alien threat and saved *the world!*

"I-I..." He sighed, staring at the ground. "I don't know how to say this."

"What?" I cocked my head, blinking. I wanted to step forward and lay a comforting hand on his shoulder, but I just felt like I shouldn't.

"Well, I..." Jake reached up and ruffled his shaggy brown hair, finally deciding to look down into my eyes. "I'm leaving. I decided to go find my sister on my own. She obviously wasn't on that ship, so I was misled... I need to find her, but I don't want to lead you into anymore danger. I couldn't do that to your friends, either."

I stepped forward quickly, my eyes widening. "Jake-" I started, but he shook his head, shushing me.

"No, Ashley," His green eyes grew intense as he gazed into mine. "This is how it has to be. I can't stand seeing you in danger. So, I have to leave." His tone made me snap my jaws shut with nothing to say. I knew in my heart I couldn't argue, no matter how much I wanted to fight and make him stay with us.

Without another word, we embraced each other in a hug, and he rested his chin on my head for a moment. Several moments later, we stepped back, and he blinked slowly, eyes dull.

"Goodbye," he whispered, his gaze lingering on me as he swung his leg over his bike and turned it on. He revved the engine a few times before nodding to me in farewell and speeding off into the horizon.

I stood there, speechless at the sudden goodbye. So, that was it? We were just partners until the aliens were defeated, and then we had to part? I clenched my jaw and stared hard at a blade of grass waving in the breeze. It was so peaceful and calm, despite the smoking piece of machine lying there a few yards away. I sucked in a quivering breath before pacing in the opposite direction the herd had gone.

After awhile of bitter silence, I came across an empty street surrounding by the trees, and walked along it, my shoes sloshing in the muddy ground. Never before had I felt so alone, with Jake gone and Sam and Rod miles away. I sighed, closing my eyes and forcing back the tears. I knew Sam and Rod would easily find me, but I just wanted to be alone for awhile. Yet, not *this *alone.

I swallowed. I had no idea what I wanted anymore.

I think I sang a bit, maybe screamed for awhile, but it all just died down to humming. I wasn't sure of my emotions. I think I may have felt sad, forgotten, abandoned, and a bit hopeless. But I knew somewhere beneath those

other emotions I was happy we'd finally conquered the aliens. Overall, though, I just knew I was numb to the core. In such a short time of knowing Jake, we'd become so close, and now he was gone, like he'd slipped from my fingers. I'd never felt that way before. Focusing my gaze on the single yellow stripe in the middle of the broken up pavement, I eventually stopped and sat down where I was, arms draped across my knees. So, this is the end of our story, where we beat the aliens and we should be celebrating. Yet, I was depressed, and I knew I would be for a long while as I stood back up again.

I walked along the sodden path, covering my shoes with a thick mud. Thoughts clogged my mind, but I couldn't seem to think straight as I trekked along the abandoned road, as though a fog was smoldering my brain like a blanket. No matter how hard I struggled, or how much I writhed around, I couldn't escape the blank air filling my heart, my mind, like emptiness sucking my soul away. I had no idea how I got here or what I was doing. Then it all rushed back to me...everything I'd lived for in the past three days. The hollowness returned, just like that, and memories overwhelmed me, making me drop to my knees. I was completely alone. Nobody was here with me, not Sam nor Rod nor Jake, or even Sierra. It was just me. Alone. *Truly* alone for the first time in a long while. It all seemed to begin six months ago when Rod and I were hit by a meteor in McCleskey's parking lot.