



WALLS

THE NEXUS CHRONICLES: BOOK ONE

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The Nexus Chronicles is a book series and is meant to be read in order. Please do not attempt to read this series individually, as it will not make sense. The following is the order of books. They happen chronologically, and they each continue where the last book leaves off until the conclusion in the seventh book.

BOOK 1: WALLS

BOOK 2: PATHS

BOOK 3: ECHO

BOOK 4: STORM

BOOK 5: VERDANT

BOOK 6: DARK

BOOK 7: TOWERS

Preview Note

This is an official sample of the book, Walls. This novel is by Beverly L. Anderson and J. Foster, and will officially be released August 15, 2025. If you are interested in this book, return to Phoenix Voices Publishing to purchase the entire volume. This book will be on preorder through phoenixvoicespublishing.com until release, so you can get the ebook early as well as the physical book. If you purchase through the publisher website, you are cutting out the middleman when it comes to other places. Please leave a review when the book is released or you pick up the full novel. Thank you for checking it out, and we hope you enjoy it.

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Prologue

FINLEY MACMILLAN

Finley MacMillan stood in front of his fellow scientists. His heart beat a steady drumbeat in his ears because his greatest fears were coming true. In his arms, he held a stack of file folders with all the research and proof. Years of study and discovery lay in the paper files. They were also on a drive secreted back at his home in Phoenix. But all the proof, and they believed none of it.

“You cannot be serious, Dr. MacMillan. There is no choice but to bring the QEBS online and you know it. The energy crisis is critical. We need sustainable energy production.” Dr. Farnsworth led the team on the Quantum Energy Bridge Stabilizer project.

Looking around the conference room, Finley found not one ally among them. No one, including his close friend Dr. James Tulle, had supported what he told them. He sighed, shaking his head.

“Scale back the large corporations and artificial intelligence grids. They are the largest consumers of our power worldwide. They are the reason that solar, wind, and water energy cannot keep up. Put renewed effort into nuclear power. It is feasible, it just needs more time to develop.”

The men and women at the table murmured and shook their heads.

“We cannot go backward,” Dr. Anastasia Johnson said, giving him a disgusted look. “Our technology has surpassed all expectations. We simply need to bring the QEBS online to tap into quantum energy. It will be a reliable and continual power source.”

“You’re not seeing the big picture! If you pierce the quantum barrier, you’re going to open this Nexus!”

“Nexus,” Eric Samson snorted. “You and your paranoia. Are you sure you don’t need your mental health checked, Dr. MacMillan? This delusion of yours is bordering on insanity. Those records are mere myth and legend. None of those cultures could have known about quantum space. They did not know about science as we do today. You’re talking about people who still sacrificed animals to invisible deities. How could they have possibly known anything about the advancements we have today?”

“They knew more than we do now!” he exclaimed loudly. “They knew what the Nexus was: an intersection of four different planes or realms of existence with Earth in the middle. There is an artifact to open the Nexus, a key spread over the world in pieces, and without it you’re going to—”

“Enough.” Dr. Farnsworth said, slamming both hands on the table and standing up. “This is enough, Finley! I understand that you are very knowledgeable in archeology and ancient studies. You are a no doubt genius. And yes, you have a double doctorate in ancient civilizations and physics. But this?” He shook his head. “This is ridiculous. You’re off the team. Leave on your own, or you will be escorted out by security.”

Finley blinked in confusion at Farnsworth. “You can’t be serious, Thomas. We’ve known each other since graduate school. You know I wouldn’t suggest this unless I truly believed what I’m saying.”

Farnsworth sighed. "I fully realize that you do believe it, and that's the issue. You feel like this will fail and you will find any excuse to stop bringing it online." He paused, shaking his head. "I hate to say it, Finley, but you're incorrect. And I know that's a first for you. You're not used to being incorrect. We are going to bring the QEBS online tomorrow morning. You will go home to your family, and go on with your life, perhaps finding a job in a museum or some other place. Where? I don't care. You will not be involved. Now, leave peacefully."

Finley could not do that, and less than thirty minutes later, security shoved him out the gate that led into the facility. They locked it back behind him. He turned and scanned his badge that normally opened it, and he found they had already disabled it.

He saw his files had scattered, so he set about picking them up. Luckily, scattering them had not damaged them. The wind was not blowing hard today, and he picked each one up, carefully replacing it in the place it belonged. He slowly walked to his car, thinking of anything he could do to stop the QEBS from coming online. He had no idea what it would do exactly, but he knew it was dangerous. The information he had gathered from several civilizations, which he had pieced together over the last five years, proved that this was dangerous.

He made his way home, sitting in the car for a while. Then he went inside, ignoring his wife, Paisley, and his two children, Alastair and Archie. Alastair followed anyway, as usual. At ten, he wanted to be like his father, and though it was flattering, that was a dangerous thing.

Finley sat down at his desk, putting the files down.

"What did they say?" Alastair asked, his black hair in waves around his face, constantly a mess.

Finley shook his head. "They won't stop."

"What now?" his son asked.

“I do what I have to do tomorrow. Son, I want to tell you a few things, before what I’m going to do may get me killed.”

Deep into the night, Finley talked to his son, explaining everything in more detail than he ever had before. He showed him the research, told him how the pieces connected, everything he’d never said to him before. By the time the sun peeked over the horizon, Alastair lay passed out in the big armchair that sat in front of his desk.

Finley stood up, nodding to himself in an attempt to assure himself of what he would do. He straightened up the files, put away the parchments, and locked everything away. Grabbing the key, an extremely old-fashioned thing since most locks were electronic now, he put it on a wax cord. He went over to Alastair and carefully wrapped the cord around his neck, tucking the key under his shirt. He knew that Alastair wouldn’t understand what the key was for yet, but he could only hope that one day he would find out. Leaning over, he kissed the boy on the forehead.

“I love you and your brother more than the whole world,” he whispered, knowing no one would hear him.

His wife still slept, and so did Archie. He would not bother them, mostly because both of them considered his plight to be a fool’s errand based on nonsense. Archie, at fifteen, already showed an incredible aptitude for physics and studied on his own when he had a chance. Finley swallowed a lump in his throat as he went out into the garage. Here, another cabinet sat. This one, with an electronic lock.

He pressed his thumb to the reader, and it beeped and turned green, the heavy-duty lock clicking as it pulled back. He opened it and began taking out things he had hoped never to use. Finley had prepared for this day for a long time. All the items in the cabinet were things to help him get into the QEBS facility. He would get in and deactivate the thing for himself if no one would listen.

Finley knew the place extremely well, and he knew when the cameras swept and in what direction they faced. He made his way to the back entrance and used the jack box he'd gained to get the lock to think allowed personnel were entering. A jackbox was a hacker invention, one most people only knew about when they had been in the hacker world. He hadn't been a hacker, but his childhood best friend had, and before he died, he'd sent Finley a box of his things. The jackbox was one thing in there.

A jackbox didn't look like much at first. A square of five inches on each side with a cable attached to one corner. It had two methods of connection: direct with the cable or through wireless technology that drilled a hole through the network's protections to connect. The device did everything automatically, and Finley's friend Jason had sent him the instructions along with the item.

After the gate opened, he tucked the jackbox in his pocket. Carrying one was dangerous, since getting caught with one came with a stiff prison sentence. However, Finley didn't think he'd get out of the situation without going to jail. What he was about to do would put him there easily because the QEBS was a government-funded project.

Using the jackbox, he quickly and easily made his way through multiple back entrances. Not everyone knew they had fired him, so he just wore his usual attire and walked as if he were supposed to be there. Thus far, no one had said anything to him; they had just waved and smiled at him with the occasional hi.

The last step was the hardest. He had to get into the lab. Not only was it locked, but two AI-powered guardians sat beside the entrance.

They were small, barely two feet tall, and looked like old-style traffic cones in a nostalgic way. However, they had three-sixty vision and could detect something as small as a flea. They were the problem he had to deal with now.

With great care, he reached into the bag and pulled out something very special. He unfolded it and placed it over his head, allowing it to drape over him onto the floor. Completely covered, the passing blanket would make him invisible to AI detection. Another gift from his friend, Jason. Of course, none of this would matter if he touched either robot in any way. Then, the alarms would sound, and everything would be over.

The human guard wouldn't come by for four more minutes, and it was six thirty, so none of the scientists were there yet. Just as he took a step forward, someone yanked the passing blanket off from behind. He spun around, staring at Farnsworth, who stood there looking smug with two security officers behind him.

"I knew you'd try it," Farnsworth said.

"You have to stop this," Finley said. "You don't understand the forces you're dealing with!"

"You are a scientist. You should already know that the only forces we are dealing with are the ones proven to exist."

Finley growled under his breath. "It wasn't that long ago that quantum physics was thought to be laughable," he said, narrowing his eyes at Farnsworth. "Until something is understood, it appears false or magical. When examined, the truth is revealed."

Farnsworth waved his hand in dismissal. He turned to the security men. "Bring him."

Moments later, Finley sat handcuffed in a chair near where Farnsworth would activate the QEBS.

“You will watch my success,” Farnsworth said as he began warming up the QEBS before activation.

Finley knew he would not convince this man of the truth. He knew the truth, and no one listened to him. The research existed. He had gathered it all, working tirelessly to find all the threads that wove the intricate tapestry of the Nexus. He’d found clues in five different cultures, five peoples who knew more than Farnsworth did.

“You need to listen to me.” Finley didn’t beg. He didn’t ask. It was a simple statement.

The clock turned over to eight. The other scientists had filtered in and taken positions around the room at their stations.

“Coming online!”

“Quantum states initialized.”

“Energy buffers activated.”

“Safeguards one through six in place.”

“We are go!”

“Wait, something’s wrong...”

“Dr. Farnsworth, it’s destabilizing!”

“Shut it down!”

“We can’t! We’ve tried! The safeguards are malfunctioning!”

“All of them? There are six layers!”

“All of them.”

Finley closed his eyes, exhaling all his breath as the frantic scientists worked to shut it down. He knew they couldn’t do it. This was it. He opened his eyes. He knew everything about why this shouldn’t be done. What he didn’t know was what would happen after the QEBS came online. He had no idea what malfunctioning would look like. It could be all for nothing, and it would simply not work. Or it could be catastrophic and bring about the end of the world. There was no

proof about what this would do, as no one had ever speculated that someone would try something like this.

All around the room, the scientists tried everything. Nothing worked. The machine emitted a high-pitched hum that grew louder and louder. Finley watched intently as above the QEBS, it looked like the very air had solidified and a rip formed in it. Through it, Finley saw unbelievable things. He saw lightning, living shadows, misty dream-like figures, walking flowers, and more. The hum grew to the point everyone crouched and put their hands over their ears. Finley, handcuffed, could not, and he could feel what he assumed was blood beginning to drip from his ears. The images he saw, as they rapidly intensified and replayed, fixated him.

Soon, the world went entirely quiet. For a second, Finley thought his eardrums must have ruptured, but he saw the scientists standing slowly, staring at the tear in the area above the machine. It writhed and moved, never stopping. As if it were alive, Finley thought.

“Is it over?” Farnsworth’s shaky voice asked.

Finley shook his head. “No, it’s just beginning.”

In his head, he heard something, and he thought it had to be his overactive imagination about the situation.

You will help fix this, Finley.

Then, everything blew out from the QEBS and the rift over it. For just a moment, Finley saw his son’s face, but older. He wore a wide-brimmed brown hat, and his eyes shone with something akin to purpose. Beside him stood an unbelievable creature, their hands entwined and looking toward five massive towers.

And Finley knew, somehow, it was Alastair who would save the world.

Then it went black.

Chapter One

ALASTAIR'S MISSION

Crystal Kae Truman thought she would never raise a child. Yet, as she stood outside the small house, her heart beat a quick rhythm in her chest, and she knew she could not stop herself from what she was about to do.

The day had been incredible, and their lives had changed with some sort of explosion outside Phoenix. People whispered about it, calling it the Incident. Rumors of strange creatures roaming the land had come their way. Still though they'd commanded all people to stay inside, she heard this noise and could not.

Stepping from the walkway, she made her way through ankle-deep grass that had yet to be cut since the last few days had been rainy. The sound she followed reverberated around her, and thunder boomed, eclipsing the sound for a moment. She continued, even as drops of rain pelted her, and the wind told the story of a storm moving in on them tonight.

She reached her destination and kneeled in the damp grass. Lying there, covered in pieces of grass and dirt, was an infant. It made desperate cries as its little fists pulled against its chest. Crystal gasped, her heart clenching. Two months before, she had lost her baby just three months into a very much wanted pregnancy. The news that she

would never bear a child had sent her into a tailspin, and she nearly succumbed to despondency. However, she felt she had a purpose and stopped the knife before it cut into her flesh.

Now, as she lifted the baby with all the care of a new mother, a chill ran down her spine, and her heart beat even faster in her chest. She stood up straight, cradling the child as the rain and thunder continued, but to her, it didn't matter at all. Walking with care, she came to the door, where her ever-present husband, Fred, stood waiting for her to come back.

"What is that?" he asked over the howl of the wind.

"A baby," she whispered, barely heard over the same wind.

She followed Fred back through the door and into the temporary house they were living in since they had come to the small town outside Phoenix.

"But look at it!" he said.

"It's a baby, Fred, what do you mean?" she asked.

"The eyes, Crystal! What is it?"

She looked down at the baby's face and saw that the eyes were pure black with violet irises. The crying had stopped, and it sucked at its fingers, looking up at her. What little hair the baby had was pure, shining silver. Though she was safe, her heart continued to pound. The child's veins were visible, and they almost glowed gold.

She shook her head. "It must be one of those creatures that people have been talking about, but I can't abandon it. Him," she amended as she looked him over.

"Crystal, you can't let anyone see that," Fred said, looking at her. "They'll never let you keep it, and I can already tell that's what you want to do."

"I'll take care of him."

And that was all there was to the matter for Crystal Truman.

Within two years, the suburbs around Phoenix came together to form new cities around which they built massive walls to protect them from the creatures that came from the other places. She knew little about what exactly happened in the wider world. She focused all her attention and care on the baby.

Crystal and Fred moved to their wall apartment under the cover of night, keeping the child, now two, hidden as they moved. Luckily, Wicker (the name they gave him) was an eerily quiet child. He rarely made a noise and just stared with those unearthly eyes.

Fred worked for the World Builder's Association and helped build the city walls and apartments. As they came close to completion, though, there was an accident, and Fred was involved. He died that day, leaving Crystal a widow and now alone with Wicker.

The community came together to support her, though unaware of the child she had secreted in her home. She explained that she felt uncomfortable with people in her house, and she just preferred to be alone. The excuse that she needed time to herself raised no suspicion, and no one questioned her; they respected her wishes. They brought her groceries each week, and when she needed something, they provided it without question. Crystal was a part of the community, and one thing they had done was support each other no matter what.

Crystal, though she had wanted to be an actress, had been attending school to be an elementary teacher, and she had many books about teaching. She taught Wicker as well as she could, and the only thing she ever told him about his origin was that she had found pure love in him. He asked a few times why he looked different, and Crystal would say it was just the way he was. Though she did tell him one important thing.

Never be seen.

Inside the office, Alastair MacMillian stood staring at his fellow Earth Defense Shield agent, Harley Miller. The two tall men had squared off in the common room where the EDS agents gathered between missions to talk to each other and socialize. Alastair stood a couple of inches taller than Harley, though Harley had more muscle and bulk than Alastair. Harley and Alastair did not get along with each other. They had long forgotten the reason, and it really didn't matter much anymore.

"You don't know shit," Harley said with a derisive snort.

"You have no idea what I know, Harley," Alastair growled out, growing annoyed by just looking at the other man.

Harley, with his green eyes and obnoxiously red hair in a buzz cut, had both hands on his hips and a smirk on his lips. Alastair wanted to slap that smile right off his face. In fact, he was considering it strongly at the moment.

"You can't possibly know anything about the Incident." The haughty tone in Harley's voice grated on Alastair's one remaining nerve.

"My brother is working on rebuilding the machine that caused it, so yes, I know something about the Incident."

Alastair hated talking to the other EDS agents on a good day, but this was going to lead to violence. This all started because Harley was going on and on about how no one knew anything about the rifts or anything else. Alastair didn't reveal his entire knowledge; instead, he stuck to his brother's position. He could verify that.

Harley snorted. "Oh, and what's that machine called, if you know so much?"

“Quantum Energy Bridge Stabilizer, you fuck knuckle. The QEBS.”

Archie, Alastair’s older brother, was indeed working to rebuild the stupid thing. No matter how much Alastair told him not to do it, because it was only going to make the situation worse.

Harley looked shocked. “Well, I’ll be damned, you do know something worthwhile. Something I never thought from a pathetic sharp-shooter.”

Alastair narrowed his eyes at Harley. Now, he was treading on dangerous ground. If there was one thing he prided himself on, it was his shooting ability. “At least I can use a long-range weapon. You’re only good close up. What the fuck you gonna do when you are being sniped from a distance, jack ass?”

Harley snorted and rolled his eyes. “I’ll walk over and punch them in the face before they can kill me, duh.”

“Yeah, sure, you do that, big boy,” Alastair said. “I’m done talking to ignorant idiots.”

He turned around to go back to the front so he could get some air, but Harley could never let someone have the last word in an argument, especially one with Alastair.

“Walk away, Al.”

“That’s it!” Alastair snapped and turned around, landing a left hook right in Harley’s smirking face, knocking him flat. Alastair packed a lot more power into his punches than most people thought, especially more than people like Harley actually expected. He grinned. It felt so good, he prepared to do it again once Harley stood up.

“Enough!”

Before Harley got back up, their superior came in to find out what the squabbling was all about. He reached down and helped Harley to stand up. The captain’s face was an inscrutable mask.

“He punched me!” Harley said, holding his jaw, which was bruising.

“Well, you antagonized me, asshole,” Alastair said, shaking his hand out after the impact of the punch. “I told you before, don’t call me Al.”

Their captain, Captain Tubman, shook his head and sighed. “Alright, it’s done now, I don’t care what the cause was. Harley, go get your partner, and escort the scholars where they need to go.”

“What? I get a fucking milk run?” Harley glared at Alistair.

“You get the assignment I give you, Harley. Get going before I reprimand you for real and report this nonsense to Control,” Tubman said, glaring back at Harley. “And you,” he said, turning to Alastair. “Go to Benu. Report of a Realmer. Unidentified. If it’s dangerous, do what you need to. If it’s not, bring it back to Phoenix. I don’t like unidentified creatures.”

Alastair nodded and turned on his heel to go to the coatroom. Behind him, he heard Harley complaining about getting an easy and boring assignment while Alastair got something good. Alastair couldn’t help but smirk as he pulled his brown trench coat out of the coat closet and slipped it on over his clothing, and the climisuit underneath.

“Got a mission?” he heard, and turned to see another agent, one he actually kind of liked. Cindy Veale.

“Yeah, you got anything, Cindy?” he said, adjusting the wide-brimmed hat on his head.

“Not yet. Hey, I wanted to ask you something. You, like, know about the stuff that caused the Incident, right?” she asked. “I heard what you said to Harley before—well, before you slugged him.”

Blinking rapidly, Alastair didn’t know how to respond to that. He didn’t talk about the stuff his genius of a father had told him and his

brother. Not knowing what she meant, he didn't want to speak up about something he shouldn't talk about.

"Well, I know some things, what exactly are you meaning?" he asked.

She looked around as if checking to see if someone stood near them. "Tell me, where do the rifts go? Rifts, portals, whatever you want to call them."

She looked serious. Her deep brown eyes were honest in appearance, and her face open with curiosity. She was a pretty woman, Alastair thought, though he really wasn't into women like that. Though unlike his brother, who had no interest in anyone at all, he found his interest in men. Though there really was no one who knew about that. Not even his brother.

"Uh, well, you know, we don't really know exactly where they go, and—"

"No, you know. I know you do. I want to know the truth." She glanced around again and brushed her hand through her sandy blonde hair, which she kept short around her face. "I need to know it. Just, I can't tell you why, but I need to confirm something."

Alastair licked his lips and glanced around as well. The area near the cloakroom was bare of anything. It was more of a hall with a closet than anything else. At the end of the hall, it went into the main room where everyone gathered and talked. They heard the quiet sounds of conversation filtering down to them, but nothing clear enough to understand. That meant they weren't very near to the hall.

"Okay, well, they lead to four different Realms. They are places where the creatures come from, but it's a one-way trip for them. They come through, but they can't go back. The four Realms have different types of creatures. That's why there's so many different things you encounter out there, and why learning about one doesn't help with

another.” Alastair hoped she didn’t ask how he knew that. It was all in his father’s research, and if he brought him up, it would come up that he’d been practically laughed out of the science community.

Cindy nodded, obviously taking what he said to heart. “Okay, that’s good. Thanks, Alastair.”

She turned and left, leaving Alastair quite confused by the whole interaction. He shook his head and took a deep breath. Whatever, he thought as he headed to the weapon check by the door.

“Going out on a mission, Alastair?” the man at the desk said.

“Yup, Dave,” he said, nodding to the very large and very imposing man who handled the weapons, Dave Fellows.

Dave stood at least six feet seven inches tall and had thick muscles. He worked out and trained the agents in hand-to-hand combat. Alastair distinctly remembered being on the mat more than standing when he went through that training. He had to admit; he knew how to brawl much better after working with Dave.

“Here you are,” Dave said, handing over the two pistols that Alastair wielded. “Have a good mission.”

“Thanks, Dave, catch you when I get back.” Alastair holstered the pistols and headed out the door.

The EDS headquarters sat next to the gate out of Phoenix. Alastair headed down the path to the main road and made his way to the massive gate.

When they built the walls around Phoenix, they had made them incredibly strong. The walls were seventy feet high and twenty feet thick. At the entrance, two sloping spires reached up another hundred feet into the sky, bracketing the massive gate that rested between them. It had no real purpose other than to look impressive. And he had to admit that it was impressive.

He waved at the guard as the walkway door opened—much smaller than the larger gate—and he headed down the road as the sun rose to its height for the day. He tapped the control on the climisuit and felt the cooling turn on as the sun beat down on him. It would be a long walk, but he had a pack with enough to make it there and back easily enough. And who knew? He might return with a Realmer in tow. Or, he might just as easily have to terminate one.

The sun had almost set when he neared Bennu. He was thoughtful as he walked down the lit path. It was one of the merged walled cities that had come up after the Incident. The posts shone special lights on the path that repelled the creatures that infested the world these days. Tanner lights, as they were called, helped people like Alastair travel between the walled cities of the world.

Stopping, Alastair looked up at the Tanner light above him. He pondered the strangely purplish colored things, a great invention by Dr. Mara Tanner in New York City. They functioned as both a light source and a field that repelled anything not from Earth. He took a breath and continued on his way. Passing a comfort hut, he got closer to the small city. Comfort huts were one of the many EDS waypoints on the roads between cities. He didn't need to stop, so he continued on.

Up ahead, he saw his destination.

He approached the walled city. Being a smaller place, the walls stood twenty feet high instead of fifty like Phoenix's. They were still five feet thick and would withstand an attack from just about anything. Of course, sometimes "just about" mattered more than people thought.

As he approached, the regular lights around the city came on by motion sensors. The Tanner lights, of course, were never off. Well, almost never. He came up to the gate and walked up to the interface.

“I request entry.”

“It’s too late to open the gate,” came the expected response in a snide voice. These smaller cities ran on superiority complexes and reveled in their power, he found.

“Not to let me in.” He held his badge up to the camera.

“Oh, of course, sir, just a moment sir!” the gate guard said, obviously scrambling to do just that.

The heavy gate opened outward, and Alastair walked into the city. A gate guard stood next to the small gatehouse and bowed to him as he walked by. The sign of respect was certainly nice to see, but he imagined if he didn’t have the badge of an EDS agent, the reception would be far different.

“Welcome to Bennu, sir! Happy to have you here!” he said.

He was a portly fellow, with pink cheeks and a double chin. His black hair, thin and stringy, barely covered the bald spot on his head. He had dark, beady eyes, and Alastair felt he was a slimy bastard. The façade he wore was fake. Of course, that was the first impression. He knew better than to go by that, because he often thought the worst of people before they showed themselves differently. He protected himself that way.

“Yeah, glad to be here. I hear there’s been word of a Realmer of unknown type here,” he said, not wasting time with pleasantries.

The beady-eyed guard blinked, then grinned. His crooked teeth told Alastair that dental care wasn’t his priority. “Oh, that’s not an issue anymore.”

Alastair reached up, removed his wide-brimmed hat, and scratched his dark head. He didn’t like the implications of that statement. Cities

were not supposed to handle Realmers alone. That's what people like Alastair were for.

"Are you telling me you did something with the Realmer without our permission?"

The guard's small eyes became comically wide, and his smile faded. "Um, no, sir, not—well we had—there was a demand for something to be done! From the people, you know, not the mayor or anything—"

Alastair glared at him. "You know the consequences of defying the EDS. What have you done?"

"Um, there's to be an execution if it already hasn't happened—" the guard managed to get out.

"Idiots!" Alastair exclaimed. "You always fuck up my job! You'll be hearing from us."

With that, Alastair turned on his heel and walked down the path toward the center of the city. If they were executing the Realmer, that's where they would do it. It was always a public spectacle when something like this came up. He wished he could say that this was the first-time he'd encountered this type of thing. The truth was, he'd seen this before, and in that case, he hadn't been in time to save the Realmer. This time, though, he wasn't going to let it happen.

He came down the path past the side of the row of apartment buildings that lined the inside of the walls and saw a crowd in the city square. The people yelled and made whooping sounds as they watched a man in a dark robe march a figure with a hood over their head onto the gallows. They looked to have hastily constructed it, though, because it wobbled a bit as they stepped up onto the landing.

The robed man grabbed the noose and put it around the figure's neck, and then he pulled off the hood.

"Tonight, we rid ourselves of danger!" he yelled.

This man, while not as portly as the first, was not thin. He looked to have a small potbelly, and a full head of blond hair kept neat. The robe looked like an old-style judge's robe from the twentieth century.

Alastair blinked, using his ocular implants to zoom in on the figure. He frowned because at first glance, he'd never seen a Realmer like this. The eyes were like a dark-clad, one of the more intelligent and human-like creatures from the dark realm, but he had stark silver hair, which didn't match the eyes. Dark-clad had eyes that were pure black with an iris of another color; in this case, it was vivid purple. But their hair always matched the color of the eyes.

He wore a sleeveless shirt, obviously homemade, and a pair of loose pants. He had no shoes, and as Alastair looked him over, he had veins that glowed stark gold against his pale skin.

Suddenly, Alastair's heart began beating fast as though under terrible fear. He had no idea where it came from, but it was sudden. Then he realized, maybe it came from the Realmer? Those from the echo realm could project their emotions and thoughts sometimes. Ah, well, he said to himself; it didn't matter where he came from. He was a living being, and in a world like theirs, life was not to be wasted unless absolutely necessary.

They had gagged him and had his hands tied in front of him. He looked around, fright clear on his face. Alastair didn't blame him for being scared. These idiots were going to kill him for being a Realmer. Well, not on Alastair's watch, that was for sure. Not this time, and never again.

He pushed back the trench coat he wore and pulled the pistol from the holster at his hip. Well behind the crowd, and slightly above them, he had a clear shot from where he stood. On the gallows, the man made the Realmer stand on a stool and tightened the rope on the side of the frame.

“Now, we show them what invading our town gets them!” the pot-bellied man crowed.

Then, he kicked the stool out from under the Realmer.

At the same moment, Alastair lined up his shot. He didn't really need the ocular implant for it, but he used it anyway just to be sure. He was a natural at sharpshooting, and the implant made him even more exact when he shot. Before the rope pulled taut on the Realmer, he shot. The sonic burst cleanly severed the rope, dropping the Realmer onto the platform.

Silence covered the entire area as Alastair holstered the pistol and slowly walked down the path to the gallows. At first, there were looks all around, then they saw him. All eyes were on him.

As he made his way down the sloping path, he didn't acknowledge anyone, eyes only on the Realmer who lay where he fell, his breath fast in his chest. A strange feeling overcame him, and he became even more sure that the Realmer was the origin of the feeling. The pot-bellied man had a mortified look on his face, as well he should. What he was about to do violated several laws and a treaty or two. Alastair stopped just before he got to the base of the gallows. He took off his hat and brushed his hand over the brown, stiff material. Then, he met the almost executioner's eyes and replaced it.

“Bring him down here.”

No one spoke, and barely anyone made a noise as the pot-bellied man got the Realmer to his feet and walked him back down the stairs to Alastair.

“Uh, sir, I can explain—” he started.

“Shut the fuck up.”

Alastair wanted none of their explanations. There was no good explanation for killing anyone, Realmer or not. They didn't even execute criminals anymore. In fact, EDS was the only people allowed to act

to terminate a Realmer thought to be too dangerous to be kept alive. And that was something that Alastair had never had to do and hoped he never would have to do.

The man nodded, saying nothing else. He at least knew his place.

Alastair moved closer and reached out to remove the gag from the Realmer. Now that he was looking at him with his natural eyes only, he saw he was indeed male by appearance and had a delicate-looking face with large eyes and pouty lips; in fact, if he hadn't known better, by the face, he would have guessed a female Realmer. His skin had an unnatural pallor to it, as though he hadn't seen the sun in a while. He wasn't very old, but he wasn't a teen. He stared up at the taller Alastair with those large eyes damp with tears.

Alastair grumbled under his breath as he pulled a knife from his belt and cut the ropes on his wrists. For a second, the Realmer didn't move, just stood there, still and staring at Alastair.

"What's your name?" Alastair said.

The Realmer hesitated and looked around him at the potbellied man beside him and back to Alastair. He swallowed and whispered, "Wicker."

"Okay, Wicker, we're going to find a room for tonight, then in the morning we'll take you to Phoenix, where we'll get you settled into a nice, warm home. These fucking idiots won't touch you again or I'll put a hole between their eyes."

Wicker nodded slowly, still looking absolutely terrified, and Alastair couldn't blame him. If Alastair had been five minutes later, the young Realmer would have died.

"Where's the motel?" Alastair demanded.

"Uh, at the base of apartment complex six. In the middle of the east wall," Mr. Pot-belly said. "I'm sure they'll accommodate—" he started.

“They’ll accommodate whatever the fuck I say to accommodate, or I’ll be back with a full team to clear code the city.”

No one wanted an EDS officer team to clear code a city. Clear coding was their way of marking a city as dangerous and under scrutiny for breaking the code of conduct. Nothing they did in the city would go without oversight from the EDS officers.

“Please, sir, I know this looks bad, but you have to understand our situation! We found out that an older woman had this...thing in her apartment where she had apparently been taking care of him for some time! We had to do something!”

Despite not wanting to converse with Mr. Potbelly, Alastair was curious now. “How did you find out about him?”

“Ms. Truman passed away, and as she had no kin, we had to clear out her apartment. She never let anyone enter her home, and now I suppose we know why.” Mr. Potbelly stopped and looked unsure. “Uh, and well, we had to clear the house, and we found it there with her body. We assume it must have killed her.”

Alastair snorted. “I seriously doubt *he* killed anyone or anything. He’s obviously been kept sequestered in her home for a long time, you dumb ass. Why would he kill the person taking care of him?”

“We don’t know, sir, but it—”

Again, Alastair repeated himself. “Shut the fuck up. I’m talking.” Alastair hated repeating himself. “Now, unless you have something more than ‘we guess he killed her,’ I’m taking charge of him.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, I better not hear word one from anyone.”

Alastair knew they were chafing at this. The cities hated the fact that EDS held authority in the world beyond their city governments. Countries vanished, their purpose gone. There were only massive walled cities that took care of those inside the walls. The United Na-

tions became the World Hope Alliance and took ultimate authority over all cities. The EDS helped with the Realmers and the threat from the other creatures. To do this, they had to have authority in all areas. Still, he was about to walk away when he saw a man walking briskly toward them. He smirked. The mayor, no doubt.

Alastair reached over and took the Realmer's hand, and he felt the tremble in it. He squeezed it, hoping to assure him that nothing would happen to him now.

"What is this?" squawked the man as he huffed his way up the incline toward Alastair and the Realmer. "Why are you here interfering in my city?" he demanded, coming to a stop incredibly close to Alastair.

Alastair narrowed his eyes at the man, not backing away an inch. He wore a suit, black with pinstripes, and had a tie on, no doubt as a show of power. The tie looked hastily tied, as it lay crooked. His face looked red from the strain of quickly walking up the slight incline. Like the others, he was rotund. Alastair noted that most of the population was thin—some emaciated-looking. It was obvious where most of the food went in this city. That didn't make Alastair want to work with this man at all.

"Your city?" Alastair said, acting dumb.

"My city!" he nearly shouted. "I'm the mayor! Reginald Forsyth. I demand to know why you've interfered in a sanctioned execution. The people demand justice! This creature murdered Ms. Tubman!"

From the corner of his eye, he saw Mr. Potbelly waving at the mayor desperately to get him to stop talking. The mayor ignored him.

Alastair stared for a moment, wondering how long this idiot would let the silence hang. Not long, it seemed.

"You need to—"

“I *need to* what?” Alastair snarled at him. “I need to listen to you? You’re nothing but a little man on a power trip here. I am the one in this situation with the power. I’m EDS, and I was sent here on suspicion of you having encountered an unknown Realmer. You know as well as I do, each situation is treated differently based on the individual Realmer involved. Malevolent Realmers are judged, and we do what is necessary. Benevolent Realmers are judged as well and taken to be resettled elsewhere than your close-minded wannabe kingdom.”

Mayor Reginald stared at him in obvious disbelief that he was talking to him in this manner.

“Furthermore, you have no right to execute *anyone* without EDS approval. You should know that loss of life in this time is to be avoided at all costs, even among those with criminal activity. They can be taken to secure work facilities to do tasks that are within their capabilities. We have lost too many people to let life simply be wasted. And that includes peaceful Realmers.”

“You can’t just come into my city and—” he stammered.

“Actually, yes, I can. And if you had any fucking brains, you’d know that. You know, I’m leaving tonight. I refuse to spend any time in this kingdom of yours. I’m declaring Bennu under a clear code. You’ll be receiving a team of EDS agents within the week.”

Alastair turned to Wicker, ignoring the sputtering mayor. “Do you want to leave?”

The Realmer stared at him, and Alastair felt a wave of confusion. “I have never left here.”

“Well, first time for everything,” he said. “Let’s get you out of this fucking shithole.”

Chapter Two

RECEPTION IN PHOENIX

Alastair felt unbridled fury at the events that had just transpired in Benu. He didn't waste any time; instead, he headed out immediately with his new charge. It wasn't until Benu had nearly disappeared from view that he halted. Wicker ran into his back, obviously not expecting him to stop like that.

He turned and narrowed his eyes at the Realmer. Then he looked up at the Tanner light as it cast a familiar purplish glow on the area. They didn't bother Wicker. Tanner lights repelled anything not from Earth. Usually, it was a visceral reaction. A Realmer would just avoid them unconsciously and would avoid any area the light shed on. Why wouldn't they repel a Realmer like Wicker? He looked like a Realmer. If he wasn't a Realmer, what the hell was he?

Wicker stood and stared at him, looking confused. Alastair didn't blame him; he imagined the young Realmer was very confused by things at the moment. As much as this situation confused Alastair. A Realmer that looked like nothing he'd ever seen—which didn't happen often—and Tanner lights didn't affect him.

"I'm sorry," Wicker said, eyes welling up with tears.

Alastair blinked. What the hell? "What are you sorry for, Wicker?" he asked.

“For being here.”

“What do you mean?” Alastair tilted his head and looked over him, realizing that he was shivering.

He closed his eyes, chastising himself. Of course, he was shivering. He didn’t have a climisuit. It was the desert at night. The temperature was dropping, and the weather was incredibly unpredictable. He pulled off his trench coat and stepped closer to him. The specialized trench coat would keep him warm until they got to a place to rest.

“Here,” he said, voice dropping a little in volume. “You’re not wearing much to be out here at night. You don’t need to be sorry; I do. I didn’t think about that because I was so angry.”

Wicker looked up at him, eyes still full of tears. “I’m sorry you’re angry.”

Before he snapped that he wasn’t angry at him—he was angry at the fucking idiots in Bennu—he stopped himself. Wicker wouldn’t understand where his anger was from. If he understood the situation well enough, the old woman had raised him isolated from everyone and everything. So, he took a deep breath.

“Listen, Wicker, you’ve done nothing wrong.”

“They thought I did,” he said, grabbing onto the trench coat and pulling it tight across his chest. It fell almost to his ankles, which was in a way comical, but Alastair stifled the chuckle at it.

Alastair put his hands on Wicker’s shoulders and looked at him squarely. “They were wrong. You have done nothing at all. They were dumb asses who were on a power trip and afraid of their shadows. They wouldn’t know how to do anything of merit, let alone appreciate someone like you.”

Wicker stood silent for a few moments. “But Mama said never to be seen no matter what. I tried!” he looked up suddenly, tears streaming down his pale face. “But she fell down, and she didn’t get back up! I

don't know what I did, but they said I did something to make her die! And I couldn't wake her up! I don't know what happened, but I swear I didn't do anything!"

"Wicker, you didn't do anything. She died, that's all. There was nothing you could have done. Sometimes, people die, especially older ones. She was older, wasn't she?" he asked.

He wiped a hand across his eyes and nodded. "Sh-she was seventy. We just had her birthday a couple weeks ago. And she was fine. W-why would she—" He took a deep, shaky breath as if holding back a sob.

Sighing, Alastair reached out and pulled him into an embrace. Immediately, Wicker wrapped his arms around Alastair and let out a sob. Alastair could only imagine how hard this had to be for the young Realmer. Being raised alone would be hard for anyone. So, she had raised him by herself. He'd never interacted with anyone, and he wouldn't really know much about the world except for the things she taught him.

They stood there, about a mile from Bennu, in the illumination of the Tanner lights, and Alastair let him cry out his grief. It was sad that he wouldn't have any real time to get through the loss of the only person he'd ever had, but the way the world was, it wouldn't give him the time. However, Alastair would give him whatever time and comfort he could. Dealing with pain was something he was intimately familiar with.

After a few minutes, the sobs abated, and Wicker stood holding Alastair, his breathing deep and heavy.

"You okay, Wicker?" Alastair asked after a couple of moments passed.

"I think so," he mumbled against Alastair's chest. "I'm sorry," he added.

First, Alastair felt frustration at the necessity to apologize for everything, but he dampened down that reaction. It wasn't his fault. He was navigating a whole new world with no experience. He didn't know what else to do.

Gently, Alastair pushed him back so he could look into his face. "Look, you don't have to apologize about things like this. You don't have to apologize for existing. I know those people in Bennu probably said a lot of really nasty things. But it comes from fear, not from anything you did."

Wicker looked up, his eyes still damp and infinitely sad. "Why would they be afraid of me? I didn't do anything—"

He didn't finish that because the Tanner light above them flickered. It was off for about three seconds. Each light covered about six feet, and they were right in the middle of its range. A three-second blink meant that if something was stalking them in the dark, it could attack if it was quick enough. Very rarely did things get close to the area of Tanner lights, but sometimes, a creature saw something that tempted it too much for it to wait and watch, attacking when the moment came.

And it did.

Something thick and green grabbed Wicker's waist and jerked him into the darkness. By the time the light flickered back on, Alastair stood there blinking at a space where he had been a second before.

"Wicker!" he shouted, trying to see past the lights.

One of the annoying traits of the Tanner lights was that while they illuminated the area, it was impossible to see beyond their light. It made the areas outside them incredibly dark. Alastair hated to do it, but he was going to have to deactivate the one over him to see what was going on and deal with whatever Realm creature was out there. Probably a verdant, he imagined. There were some nasty desert ones.

He pulled out the deactivator and pointed it above him. One click, and the light was off. Then he heard Wicker, and when he looked, there was a burst of electricity. He could see in the dim light now, and he saw the massive plant creature. It was a verdant all right. He'd seen this type before. It appeared as a massive mushroom that had millions of tiny appendages under it that allowed it to move. During the day, when they were dormant, it just appeared as a gray mushroom with green vines wrapped around the stalk. However, at night, those vines became tentacles it used to feed the gaping maw hidden beneath them.

Wicker scrambled to get up from the ground as the creature collapsed in front of him. Sparks of electricity sizzled along the body, and Alastair didn't know what had just happened. Had Wicker done that? Was he the source of the electricity?

Wicker came stumbling back, and Alastair clicked the deactivator again, turning the Tanner light back on. He stepped forward and pulled him back into the light to look him over. Green goo covered Wicker's face and the trench coat alike. Wicker looked scared out of his mind, as would be expected. He'd almost become something's dinner.

"What—what—what was that—" he gasped out.

"Hey, it's okay, you're okay and safe now, alright?" Alastair assured him.

"It had a huge mouth!" he exclaimed. "So many teeth! I don't know, I was so scared, and it was going to eat me!"

"I know, there are bad things from the realms, too, and that's why those people were afraid of you. They can't tell the difference between things that are bad and things that are not." Alastair hated that he had to tell him all these things right there and then. He wasn't an educator; it seemed fate had other ideas, though.

"I'm not like that thing!"

“Of course, you’re not!” he responded. “But people like that are ignorant, and they don’t distinguish between people like you and creatures like that.”

Wicker wiped his face, flicking green goo onto the path at his feet. He suddenly started crying again.

“What’s wrong now?” Alastair asked, worried that the creature had hurt him somehow.

“I got your coat dirty.”

Alastair stared at him for a moment. After almost being eaten by a desert creature, he was worried about getting Alastair’s coat dirty. Alastair couldn’t help it; he smiled and reached out. He pulled him into another embrace and rubbed his back, goo and all.

Wicker walked slightly behind the man who had rescued him. His mind was a mess, though, and as they walked, he pulled the man’s trench coat tighter around him. It felt incredibly warm under the material. The goo from the creature that tried to eat him had dried, and his face and hands were itchy. His exhaustion pulled at his eyelids the further they walked, and his feet dragged along the concrete path. He actually hadn’t heard the man’s name.

“Uh, you never told me your name,” he said, looking over at him.

The man stopped, looking back at him. “Oh, I guess I didn’t. Alastair MacMillan. I was real distracted by the mess back there. Didn’t dawn on me to mention my name.”

Wicker nodded. “Um, thank you, Mr. MacMillan, for saving me. I’ll never repay you.”

“What’s this ‘mister’ crap?”

Unsure what he meant, Wicker froze in place. He didn't know what to say to that question. Mama always said to be polite if he ever met someone else, and that meant calling them mister or miss. "Uh, I mean, what should I call you?"

The man sighed. "Just call me Alastair; there's no need for calling me 'mister' at all. In case you didn't notice, I don't stand on formality."

Wicker tilted his head to the side and really looked him over. With everything that had happened, he hadn't taken the time to observe his savior.

Alastair was tall, and without his trench coat, he looked strong. He had on a tight-fitting shirt that looked like it had circuitry woven into the dark blue fabric. It showed decent-sized muscles and a fit body. He wasn't overly muscular but had defined ones. He wore a pair of pants that looked to be made of a tough material in black. On his feet, he wore a pair of heavy boots. But that wasn't what struck Wicker the most.

His face was striking. Wicker, of course, had only seen pictures of other people, and then the crowd that tried to hang him. He knew little about people at all, but Alastair had the darkest blue eyes he'd ever seen. From under the wide-brimmed brown hat, he had long, curling black hair that fell to his shoulders. It looked long enough to be pulled back if he had wanted to. His lips were wide and thick, and his nose was prominent and proud. In his left ear, he wore a silver ring that had a symbol dangling from it that looked like a triangle with a point at the top. Wicker didn't know if it meant something special or not. All that combined with a dusky complexion made him a handsome figure.

Wicker felt the heat rise to his cheeks, and he gasped a little, looking away. Why was he staring? And why did he feel like he knew him somehow? He cleared his throat. "I see. Alastair, then."

“Just don’t call me Al,” he muttered, turned forward, and started walking again.

Wicker paused for a second, then jogged to catch up with him. He almost said something and called him ‘sir,’ but he had a feeling Alastair wouldn’t like that either if he didn’t like being called ‘mister.’

“Alastair?” he asked, still slightly behind him.

“Yeah?” he said, glancing back at him for a second.

“How long do we have to go?”

“Another few hours,” Alastair answered, not pausing in the trek.

Wicker stopped. “A few hours.”

Alastair turned back, then came back to where Wicker had stopped. “Yeah, what’s wrong?”

“Um, it’s just I’ve been up since yesterday. They didn’t let me sleep at all. And I don’t know that I can stand another few hours without sleep.” He swallowed hard.

Alastair sighed deeply, and Wicker felt a pang in his heart. He’d upset him. Or disappointed him. He didn’t know which, but he felt terrible about that.

“Wicker, why didn’t you say something before?”

Blinking rapidly, he looked up. “I thought you would not like it. And there really isn’t anything to be done about it.”

Again, Alastair sighed. Wicker felt like he had made him even more upset. “Come here a little further,” he said, gesturing to him.

Wicker frowned but followed him. He had noticed rounded areas off the path with some kind of small structure. Actually, he had thought they were guard posts or something. Alastair walked up to one and pressed his palm to the panel in the middle of the door. The seal on the door glowed red for a second, then turned green. The door opened from the center, both sides going inward.

“There we go, we’ll stay here for the rest of the night.”

Wicker followed him into what he found was a small cottage containing a bed and some supplies, with a kitchen area and a door toward the back. "What is this place?" he asked, looking around.

"They're comfort huts for us. We travel a lot, and they're placed along the road in case an agent needs to rest. I'm afraid there's only one bed, so we'll have to share. We generally travel alone."

Wicker moved over to the moderately sized bed and sat down on it, still looking around. "Who do you mean? You said, 'we travel a lot' and you came into Bennu and told them what to do and they couldn't stop you."

Alastair nodded. "I suppose that would be a question, right? I mean, I don't pull position much; in fact, I rarely assert my authority in cities. But I'm with the Earth Defense Shield."

"What's that?" Wicker asked, frowning.

Alastair looked shocked. "You don't know what the EDS is?"

"Mama never told me about that. It wasn't in the books she had, either. I mean, a lot of the stuff she taught me wasn't all the way caught up. She'd gathered it when she was younger, so the last fifty or so years weren't in there. She tried to help where she could, but it wasn't a lot that she knew about more than just in Bennu." Wicker stopped. "I don't know a lot, I guess."

It hit him like a punch. He wasn't ready to be out in the real world, not really. He wasn't prepared. How could he survive in the bigger world without Mama? She had been everything to him, and now she was gone. Without realizing it, tears had started to fall from his eyes again.

"Hey, now what's wrong?" Alastair said, coming over and putting his hand against Wicker's face.

As Wicker tilted his head up, his heart beat hard in his chest. He felt his face heat up and felt as if cold water fell over him at the same time.

As stared up into Alastair's blue eyes, he wanted to get lost in them forever. He didn't know what to think about what was coming over him, but he knew it meant something. His mouth had gone dry, and his stomach was aflutter with something.

"Uh, just thoughts about Mama." He hid the fact that something else was stirring within him just from Alastair's presence.

Alastair's face softened a little, and he smiled. "It's tough to lose someone for anyone, and I can only imagine how hard it was for you to lose the only person you'd ever known. It's okay to be sad, and it's okay to cry. Crying is not a weakness, no matter what others might say. It shows great strength to show how you feel to the world."

Wicker gulped, unable to articulate an answer to that comment for a moment. He was so very kind and so very wonderful. Was this the same man who had just berated an entire town without blinking?

"Now, come, let's sleep the rest of the night," Alastair said. "I'll take that trench coat and put it through the laundry box."

Arching his eyebrow, Wicker stood and removed the coat, feeling a chill once he did, even though the room had temperature control. Alastair took it and placed it in a box attached to the wall.

"I don't think it's ever been that dirty," he said, turning and smirking at Wicker. "I want to talk more about what happened with that creature, but it's late, and you need rest."

Alastair took his hat off and placed it on the small table at the edge of the room. He ran his hands through his curls, and Wicker thought it was so pretty. He came over and crawled into the bed nearer to the wall. When Wicker didn't move, Alastair looked at him.

"Come on, you need some sleep."

Wicker nodded and got into the bed. Alastair pulled the covers over them both and turned onto his side, facing the wall.

"Sleep well, Wicker."

He stayed still, trembling under the warm cover. He didn't want to move because he feared he would disturb Alastair. Eventually, though, his exhaustion won, and his eyes slipped closed.

Archie MacMillian shrugged into the white lab coat as he got ready in his plain bedroom. He glanced around, eye falling on the white dresser and the white standing closet. The closet contained more lab coats and plain-colored clothes, mostly in grays and black. He sighed and turned back to the bed—small and plain like everything else—and picked up his pocket tablet. He turned it on and checked the data for the day. They predicted the weather to be warm, so he did not need a climisuit. He really hated them, and unless the weather turned cold, he avoided them.

Slipping the tablet into the chest pocket of the lab coat, he turned and set out for the day. He walked down the short hall past his mother's bedroom. He paused, not opening the door, and called out. "I'm headed to the lab, Mother." No answer came, but then he didn't expect one.

He exited the apartment and entered the lift to take him to the ground floor. Each apartment opened to the side, so the occupants entered the lift that would take them down, or up for that matter. This time of day, the lift wasn't busy, so it came immediately to take him down. The apartments sat against the seventy feet high wall surrounding the city, leaving room for eight floors with apartments on each level. The wall went all the way around the perimeter of Phoenix, and apartments lined it. Except for the grand entrance gate, of course.

Archie walked down the path as above him hover cars made their way back and forth. He supposed he could have taken the car, but it was a nice day, and he wanted to walk a bit. As he walked, several people acknowledged him and said hello. He knew most of the occupants around his home, which he shared with his mother, and around the lab.

“Archie!” he heard behind him. It was shrill, a near scream, revealing her identity.

“Shelly,” he said aloud, turning toward the woman who ran toward him.

The young woman followed Archie whenever she could. She stood barely five feet tall and had a thin figure, with the exception of her breasts, which were large compared to her frame. Honestly, Archie found her aesthetically pleasing to look at, but he didn’t care for the way she continued trying to garner his affections. She didn’t seem to understand that he was not interested in her, and never would be. Science was his mistress, and no one could replace that in his life.

“Whatcha doin,’ Archie?” she said, smiling a toothy grin.

Today, she wore a long yellow skirt and a thin, almost sheer pink top. She had some kind of tank top under it, which probably was a good thing. She wore a pair of sandals and her ever-present bright pink pack around her waist. He didn’t think he’d ever seen her without that pack on.

“Heading to the lab,” he said. “If you’ll excuse me—” he started.

“Oh, I’ll walk with you!” she exclaimed.

Archie sighed. “Very well,” he muttered and turned back to the path, trying to ignore her presence.

Over the next fifteen minutes, she talked continuously. It was useless prattle, and Archie didn’t listen to most of it. Until she said something that caught his attention.

“...and Alastair left for Benu. I can’t wait to see how they’re doing! Did you ever hear—”

“What? Alastair’s gone?” Archie stopped and turned toward her.

“Yeah, that’s what I said, silly. You don’t ever listen. He went to Benu.” She smiled cooly as if she knew she had his attention. She did, but not for the reasons she thought.

Archie narrowed his eyes. “No doubt as an EDS agent,” he muttered.

“Yeah, I guess there was a report of some kind of Realmer in Benu, so he left yesterday morning,” she said, still grinning like a fool.

“Indeed,” Archie said. “So, not an escort.” That put him at a higher degree of risk.

“Nah, this sounded interesting, if you ask me,” she answered.

“Why is that?”

“Well, the report said it was a cool new Realmer. So, they didn’t know what kind it was, but it was on two legs like a human.” She looked extremely proud of her ability to give Archie information.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “And how did you find this out?”

“Oh, one of the gate guards. It’s so funny, you know. Some of these guys just talk a lot around me. I don’t know why, but they say all kinds of funny things, and most of them will answer whatever I ask them,” she smiled and shrugged at him.

Archie shook his head. “I bet they do.”

He turned and headed down the last part before the path turned to go into the building that housed his lab.

“Can I come watch you work?” she asked, running to catch up with him again.

“Yeah, whatever,” he grumbled as they came to the door.

He placed his palm in the center, and the seal showed red for a second before turning green. Reaching down, he pressed the button in the center, and the door slid open into the wall beside it.

Shelly still talked, this time about the lab. “It’s so cool, you know, Archie! Why doesn’t Alastair ever come here? Didn’t you say he liked science stuff, too?”

Archie sighed as he walked into the open room where his project sat, half-assembled. Wires flowed out of the panels like waterfalls of circuitry, and he knew that she would ask him about things again. He’d answered her questions many times, but she always asked the same ones.

“What was this thing called again, Archie? Keebs?”

Shaking his head, Archie glanced at her. “QEBS. Quantum Energy Bridge Stabilizer.” He wanted to add that he’d told her that probably ten times.

“Oh, that’s right, you told me that, I just didn’t remember.” Of course, she didn’t, Archie thought.

She walked across the clean, white-tiled floor to the spot where the QEBS sat. Reaching out, she ran her hand under some wires. “Will this really do what you said it would do?”

“I hope so,” he answered, walking over to the main panel at the edge of the room. “Do be careful not to pull on any of those.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, turned and came over where Archie stood. “Now whatcha doing?”

Archie glanced at her. “I’m checking the calibrations of the fields surrounding the QEBS.”

Shelly stood silent for a few moments, watching as his fingers flew across the board, each tap lighting up the button before it faded a second later.

“What’s that do?” she asked, unable to resist asking another question, he supposed.

He turned to her and sighed again. That was getting to be a habit. “It will tell me if I’ve set things up correctly. If we’re going to activate this, things have to be in perfect alignment. I want to save the world, not break it further.”

She nodded as if she knew what he was talking about. “So, when this thing turns on, it’s gonna fix the holes in the sky where the creatures fall through?”

“That’s the idea,” he said.

“Didn’t you say this kinda thing put the holes in the sky?”

Archie closed his eyes, annoyance creeping into his voice as he spoke. “The first QEBS they activated was obviously mis-calibrated somehow. If I fix it and calibrate it right with the quantum frequencies necessary, I should be able to fix the error and realign the planes like they should be, thus sealing the breaches.” He paused. “I wish Alastair was here to look this over.”

“Alastair’s smart, too, huh?” Shelly said, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet with her hands tucked at the base of her spine.

“Might be smarter than I am,” he said, sighing. “He wastes that intellect on EDS. He should be here, helping make this a reality.”

Shelly didn’t speak for a bit, then looked at him. “Did you ask him?”

Archie paused in his data entry and looked at her for a moment. “Of course. He refuses to come here.”

She frowned and looked thoughtful for a moment. “Why?”

The question caught Archie off guard. “He does not believe I should do this.”

“Why not?” she continued to probe.

Archie exhaled and looked at her. “He has this idea that if we do this it will worsen the situation. He thinks that there is an answer, but it has to do with this ridiculous hypothesis that ancient civilizations knew about this before it happened. I don’t believe it for a moment, but I cannot dissuade him from his ideas. Just like he will not listen to me about working such a dangerous job.”

“Okay,” she said, looking around. “I’m gonna go talk to the guards again, see if they know anything good. Bye!”

She turned and waved at him as she headed out the door. Archie breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe he could get some work done after all.

Chapter Three

A NEW CITY

Alastair woke up in the way that one wakes after a good dream. He felt nice and warm, and something lay heavy on his arm. He blinked a few times as the day lighting started coming on to match the dawn outside. His brow scrunched, and he remembered he had shared the comfort hut's bed with Wicker. Turning his head, he realized Wicker had turned during the night, as had he. He now faced Wicker, and Wicker had turned toward him. Wicker lay on his arm and had one of his arms thrown over Alastair's chest. He'd snuggled into Alastair's neck.

"Oh, fuck," Alastair whispered as his throat turned dry.

Alastair had his share of hookups over the years, but he'd never stayed overnight with anyone. It was usually a night of good fun, and then he got dressed and never saw them again. This was a first. And he didn't know what to do. He couldn't get up without waking Wicker, and he also didn't know how Wicker would react to such a position. Of course, Alastair hadn't a clue if the move had been purposeful

on Wicker's part. He shook the thought away. Why would he do something like that?

"Hmm, why's it bright?" Wicker murmured in a sleepy voice.

Still half-asleep, he sat up and looked around, apparently not noticing that he'd curled up against Alastair. He glanced at Alastair, and he seemed to wake up a bit.

"Oh, yeah, we're at the hut thing," he said. "I was so comfortable and slept so well."

Alastair's heart raced in his chest, causing the blood to rush in his ears. He swallowed and wanted to tell him why he had slept well, but he hesitated. Wicker didn't even know it had happened, so why change that?

Wicker got off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom. Alastair heard the click of the shower button and the sound of the sonic shower coming on. He rolled his eyes and stayed where he was. Thoughts were running through his mind that he knew were inappropriate for the situation. Wicker knew nothing of social situations, and he definitely didn't know anything about relationships with others, let alone another male.

After a few minutes, Wicker came out and smiled. "That feels so much better!"

"I bet. You were a mess after that creature tried to eat you."

Wicker shivered. "That was so scary."

"Speaking of that, what happened out there? I couldn't see well because of the Tanner lights, but I swear you somehow made lighting appear and killed that thing." Alastair sat up for himself, tapping the chest of the climisuit to reactivate it in automatic mode.

Wicker's eyes widened, and he shook his head. "I—I don't know how it happened. It had me and it was squeezing me really tight. I

knew I had to do something, or it was going to pull me into that big mouth of teeth. It was taller than I am!”

Wicker stopped, getting his breath under control once more. Then he started to breathe faster as he talked. “But I just held up my hands, and I felt a strange sensation starting at my head, and it traveled down my arms, and the lighting was just there. It looked like a ball at first and then it shot forward and went into that thing’s mouth. That’s when it kind of exploded and dropped me.”

Alastair stared for a moment. He had lightning powers; that was definitely not something a creature from the dark realm could do. They had powers, but not over lightning. That would be like a creature from the Storm Realm. Out of nowhere, a sensation of his stomach filling with butterflies hit him.

He looked up at Wicker and saw his cheeks had colored pink and he’d looked away. His gaze was on the small kitchen area.

“Uh, do they have food here?” he asked, turning back, face still rosy.

“They have nutritional pills.”

Alastair’s least favorite thing in the world had to be those dumb pills. Well, that or sonic showers. He understood why they put them out in these huts, but he didn’t have to like them.

“Nutritional pills?” Wicker tilted his head to the side and frowned. “I’ve never heard of that before.”

Alastair smiled a little. “Yeah, you take two of them with water and they expand in your stomach making you feel full. Go try a couple,” he said, sliding over and out of the bed.

Wicker went over to the cabinet and pulled out the bottle. Alastair went over to the laundry and got his coat out. He shrugged into it, smiling at the sensation of feeling it against him again. The coat made him feel just like the hero in his favorite book. Then again, that’s where he got the idea to be a dual-wielding fighter with ancient-style

guns. They were more than projectile shots. Of course, he had had them made with modern technology. They were very special. And they made him feel like a real gunslinger.

Turning, he saw Wicker filling a cup with water at the dispenser. At least he wouldn't be hungry the rest of the way to Phoenix. He went and picked up a water concentrator, just in case they needed water before they got to Phoenix.

A few minutes later, they exited the hut and headed back down the road to Phoenix.

Wicker stopped and stared at the massive gate. He'd never seen anything like that. The walls were immense, so much higher than Bennu's. The gate had two sloping tower-like things on either side of it, with the gate itself reaching the same height as the walls beside it.

"It's seventy feet tall, the walls that is."

Wicker turned, eyes wide. "That's so amazing!"

"The two sides of the gate are completely unnecessary, but the mayor wanted the entrance to be unforgettable. Come on, let's go up to the walking entrance," Alastair said, leading the way through a milling crowd in the area outside the gates.

As Wicker looked around, he saw some kind of market set up out there. Stalls and people trading for items lined both sides of the path. "What's all this?" he asked as they walked by the people.

Alastair stopped and looked around. "Oh, the day market. There's no room for people to set up like this inside the city, so they put a market out here. It's a trader market, so they don't take any money or credits. They just trade unique items."

“Oh, that’s interesting.”

An intense feeling washed over him. The walls were too close, and people crowded near him. People came walking past, almost brushing into them many times. He glanced around quickly to each side and to the back now and then. Telling himself to keep it together, he knew that Alastair would not want him to panic. It wouldn’t be good if he did, so he tried his best not to let the feelings get to him. He glanced around, eyes spotting small areas where he could conceal himself, but he didn’t. He wanted to be braver for Alastair. If he did well, maybe Alastair would praise him. He smiled to himself, realizing how much he would like that. His breath hitched in his chest at the thought, then he took a shaky breath. There it was again; that was such a distinct feeling in his chest.

They walked up to the massive gate. Towering over them, the gate looked like it had different-sized openings in it, growing bigger and bigger as they expanded. In the very center, a single door sat open, with a man dressed in some kind of padded outfit standing with a strange weapon on his hip.

“Alastair, you’re back,” the man said, then his eyes landed on Wicker. They widened, and he frowned, looking at Alastair. “Uh, who’s this?”

Alastair shrugged. “Wicker. Taking him to HQ.”

The man didn’t say anything for a moment. “I take it you’re vouching for him?”

Without even looking at the man, he started walking through the door. “What the fuck do you think, Ed?”

Wicker stepped quickly after him, leaving the man named Ed behind. Glancing back, he saw Ed watching them walk down the path.

A sudden noise surprised Wicker into jumping and grabbing Alastair. Alastair grunted at the extra weight pulling on him. "The hell, Wicker?"

"What's that?" he said, gasping as a giant thing that looked like a huge beetle began rising from the ground beside them.

It took a moment, but Alastair finally seemed to understand what he was talking about. "Oh, it's a hover car."

"A hover car?" Wicker said, still clinging to Alastair. "You mean, there's people in there?"

Alastair patted Wicker's hand where it gripped him on the arm. "It's fine, Wicker. They're transportation. They have hover paths above us, see?" He pointed upward.

Wicker looked to the skies and realized there were many of these hover cars buzzing through the sky. Hover cars moved in perfectly equidistant lines around each other. It almost looked like a choreographed dance. They were all different colors, and some were bigger than others.

"Wow," he muttered.

"Come on, let's get to the HQ." Alastair didn't seem in a hurry, though.

Wicker swallowed and nodded, letting go of Alastair's arm and taking a steadying breath. "Okay, we can go."

Alastair nodded and led the way. They soon passed rows of apartments against the wall, just like in Benu. These went up much higher, and some looked twice as big as the ones in Benu. A few feet from the apartments, though, there were buildings in a row. Each one was the exact same as the other ones, and each door had a number on it. They headed toward the one with the number thirteen on it.

"What are all these buildings with numbers?" Wicker asked as they got closer to it.

“Oh these? Headquarters for different things. Twenty-four over here, more in other areas.” He paused, nodding toward the gate. “They put it here because we’re moving around a bunch. We leave a lot.” Alastair put his palm on the door, making the seal turn red, then it clicked to green and slid upward.

“Welcome to the Earth Defense Shield,” he said, smirking at Wicker.

They walked up to a counter where a very large man stood. Wicker stepped back a little when he saw him. Alastair nodded to him and pulled out two pistols, one on either hip. He handed them over to the man.

“Yo, Dave,” Alastair said. “Put them in the lock box for me.”

“Hey, Alastair. What you got there?” Dave nodded toward Wicker as he took the guns.

“Oh, this is Wicker. Last assignment to Bennu. Idiots decided they were going to string him up because he was a Realmer. Like I’d let that happen.” Alastair grumbled the last and shook his head.

Dave chuckled. “You just have to be the hero, don’t you?”

“Pfft, I just do my job.”

“No, I’m serious. Alastair, you’ve rescued more Realmers than anyone here. They just don’t put in the effort like you do.” Dave smiled at Wicker. “And welcome to our headquarters, Wicker. Anyone gives you any trouble, you come find me, and I guarantee you they won’t again.”

Wicker thought he had a pleasant smile, and he nodded at him, unable to talk. He’d never seen a guy who looked so imposing yet talked so gently. He swallowed and saw Alastair smiling at him. Immediately, his face started to heat. Wicker ducked his head and covered his mouth as he looked down at the floor. He didn’t want Alastair to see him blushing.

“Okay, let’s go into the main room to make report.”

“Report?” Wicker asked, frowning.

“Yup, gotta report to the captain,” Alastair said, reaching out and taking his hand. This action caused Wicker to gasp at the touch. It felt so comforting.

Alastair led him through what looked like a broad gathering area. A bar stood to the side with a woman cleaning behind it. In the area in front of it, tables and chairs sat with a variety of people seated in them. No one really paid any attention as they walked through until a red-headed man walked up with a distinct swagger to his walk. He had a smirk on his lips.

“Ho, there, Alastair,” he said.

Alastair stopped, frowned, and rolled his eyes. “What do you want Harley? I’m going to report to the captain.”

This Harley stepped closer to Wicker and looked him over. Then, his hand shot out and grabbed Wicker by the chin. Wicker gasped, and Harley tilted his head upward, almost too far for comfort. Almost as fast, Alastair dropped Wicker’s hand and grasped Harley’s wrist.

“Let. Go.” It wasn’t a statement; it was a command.

Harley let go, and so did Alastair. Harley put his hands up. “Ooh, did I touch a nerve?”

“Leave him alone.” Alastair’s voice sounded tight and almost forced.

Harley arched an eyebrow. “Him? He’s pretty enough to be a girl. I know what it is; you’re protective because you’re fucking him, huh? I heard from a couple trustworthy sources you don’t like women.”

Wicker’s heart pounded in his chest. He lost the argument between the two for a bit. His mind spun in circles because that feeling he got around Alastair...He looked around the room and more people were looking at them as Alastair continued to banter back and forth with

Harley. Swallowing hard, Wicker looked for an escape, but there was nowhere without people. Soon, his breath came in rapid pants, and then he found himself looking up into Alastair's dark blue eyes. He hadn't realized he'd even moved.

"Wicker, I said, are you okay?" he said in a calm yet firm voice.

Alastair had put both hands on his shoulders, and Harley had left the area. Still, eyes were on them, and Wicker could barely put a complete thought together; his mind raced so fast. His heart pounded in his chest as his eyes went wide and he stared at Alastair.

"Come with me," Alastair said, taking his hand again.

He led Wicker to a door on the side of the bar. He opened it, and the lights came on as they entered. Wicker got in, then backed up into the door. He slid down and sat on the floor, pulling his knees up and wrapping his arms around them tightly. His heart was pounding and his head felt really weird and dizzy.

Alastair kneeled in front of him and didn't say anything for a while. "It's okay," he said in a comforting voice.

"I'm sorry," Wicker whispered. "I tried. I really tried. I wanted to show you I was brave and could handle everything, but I don't think I can."

Shifting to sit flat on his hip and pulling his legs up beside him, Alastair put a hand on Wicker's knee.

"You don't have to be brave, Wicker. You've gone through a lot in a few days, and you don't have any experience with this many people. It's no wonder you're overwhelmed."

Wicker swallowed dryly. "It's just, Mama never thought I'd be around people. We just lived our little lives the way we always did, day to day, and she taught me lots of things, but only a little about other dealing with other people. I don't know if she was afraid to or what."

He sighed. "I knew how to be around her; I don't know how to be around other people."

"I know, Wicker, I know. And that's okay. No one expects you to know everything. I'm here to help, okay? I mean, as long as you want me to be." He added the last as an afterthought.

"Of course, I want you!"

Alastair's eyes went wide, and Wicker realized what he'd said. Now that he'd said it, he couldn't really take it back. He didn't know what to do, and an awkward silence ensued for a few minutes.

"Uh, well, that's good," Alastair said, clearing his throat and breaking the silence. "I will help you as long as you want me to."

Help. Wicker felt a pang at that word. Was that his only interest, helping him?

They sat there a little longer, and Wicker got his heart and breath under control after a few minutes that seemed much longer than they were. He swallowed hard and took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. Looking up, he met Alastair's eyes and nodded slowly.

"Are you feeling better?" He put his hand on his shoulder. "We can go talk to Captain Tubman and see what he says."

"I think I'm ready," Wicker said, standing up as Alastair did the same.

Once again, Alastair took his hand, and Wicker swore his chest would burst. It felt right, natural even, for him to take his hand. Even though Harley touching him had triggered a deep, visceral reaction in him, touching Alastair was comforting. It was as if he only wanted Alastair's touch.

They walked out, and Wicker found the room had emptied somewhat, and those still there were in intent conversations over their drinks. No one even looked up as they went past all the tables to a

door on the other side. Alastair waved at the top of the door, and it slid open.

Inside, the room looked like the office Mama had back home. A big desk dominated the room, and a man sat behind it. He had very dark skin, large dark eyes, and a bald head. It looked quite shiny, actually. Wicker had only seen old men who had bald heads in the books, and this man didn't look that old. He would have had to shave his head for that. Either that, or maybe some humans didn't have hair.

"Hey, Cap, obviously, I'm back, and with our mystery Realmer."

The captain nodded. "Strangest dark-clad I've ever seen," he muttered, his voice deep and rich.

"Am I a dark-clad?" Wicker asked, turning to Alastair.

"Definitely not," Alastair muttered. "Uh, sir, he's not dark-clad. Aside from the hair, his veins glow like a verdant Realmer, and he used lightning while we were on the way here, like a storm Realmer."

The captain arched both eyebrows. "How in the world is this a thing? Realmers can't interbreed, or at least I don't really know if they can, and he's young, but not that young."

"I'm twenty!" Wicker said, standing as tall as he could, which at five foot five wasn't very tall.

The captain's lips turned into a slight smile. "Spirited," he said. "So, give me the run down on what happened in Benuu."

Alastair nodded curtly. "I got there about dusk, they gave me a little hassle getting in that late, but they realized who I was. The guard said they'd 'taken care of things' and I knew it was bad. I went to the city square, and they'd made ramshackle gallows, and were about to hang him." Alastair smirked. "So, I showed off a little."

Tubman sighed. "I'm sure you did. They're a little backward in that city."

“I shot the rope, easy enough for me. Gave Wicker a tumble, but he didn’t hang. Then the mayor started arguing me with. I think he genuinely believes the bullshit he says, but I think it’s just fear based, and it’s spread among the other residents.” He paused. “Um, so I called a clear code.”

Tubman arched his brows. “Isn’t that a little extreme?”

“He pissed me off. And the way the entire community was acting, it would probably help straighten things out. Send a three-man team; have them scare them into line or something. I don’t know, but they need a reality check about the power we hold. They need to know Realmers are *our* jurisdiction, and execution is strictly forbidden except in extreme situations.” Alastair shrugged. “I think they just need to know they should be following the very few laws we have worldwide.”

The captain sat quietly for a while, then nodded. “I suppose you’re right. We can’t have a local area randomly executing people with our population the way it is.”

He reached over and touched a button beneath a screen. The screen lit up with a woman’s face. She looked pretty, Wicker thought. He could only see her face and saw that she had blonde hair and brown eyes.

“Yes, Cap?” she said in a rather treble voice.

“Set up a small team for a clear code in Benuu.”

She nodded. “Reason?”

“Attempted execution of a Realmer, defiance of an EDS officer, and violations of world ordinances.”

“Thanks, I’ll put it in right now. Do you have a preference on who goes?” she looked away and back at the screen.

“No, whoever is available, please. Thanks, Cindy.” He tapped the button, and the screen went dark.

“Okay, that leaves one thing.” He turned back to Alastair. “Well, what are we to do about him?”

“I mean, he’s his own person, doesn’t matter where he came from. He’s not dangerous, and he’s been polite. He was raised by an old woman who never let anyone know he existed, so he’s struggling to get used to being around so many people,” Alastair said. “So, I guess it depends on what he wants to do.”

Both men looked at him then, and for a moment Wicker froze. What was he supposed to say? He knew only one thing. He didn’t want to leave Alastair. There was some kind of pull toward him he couldn’t explain, and even though he knew little about relationships except with Mama, he wanted to stay near him.

“I want to stay with Alastair,” he said after a few moments of silence.

“Guess that’s settled,” the captain said. “He’s yours.”

“Wait, what?” Alastair said, looking between Wicker and the captain. “What the hell?”

Wicker’s heart clenched. Maybe he didn’t want him to stay with him after all. He felt the tears prick at his eyes, and he dropped his gaze to the floor.

“I’ll be okay on my own,” he said, not looking up.

“Wait, no!” Alastair said, dropping his hands on Wicker’s shoulders again. “That’s not what I mean. It’s just you’re a mystery, and I expected a fight to take you with me.”

Wicker looked up and met his eyes. Once again, the overwhelming sense of comfort and something he couldn’t name came over him. Despite his attempts not to let it happen, tears leaked.

“You mean that?” he whispered.

Alastair sighed a little. “Of course, I do. We’re in this together, right?”

Wicker smiled and nodded back. "Yeah."

Dave walked up to the door of the captain's office and waited to be let in. The door silently slid open, and he stepped inside. Tubman had dimmed the lights since Alastair and the Realmer left. He usually preferred to sit in the room and think during downtime, and only turned the lights on when he expected visitors. Except for Dave, of course. They'd been friends since before the Incident. He knew Tubman had issued a clear code order for the city Alastair had been in.

"What do you think?" Tubman asked him, staring to the side at the wall.

"I'm not sure. You really think Harley can be trusted to know what's happening?" Dave asked, sitting down in the chair in front of the desk.

Tubman was silent for a bit. "Of course not, Harley's full of shit. But he did bring something to my attention that I needed to notice."

"What's that?" Dave asked.

"Alastair is enamored with that Realmer, for better or worse. And that Realmer is attached to him, as well. I don't know if it's because Alastair saved his life, and he's got no experience with anyone except the woman who raised him, but Alastair was pissed. Called a clear code."

"What are you going to do? It's pretty taboo for one of us to get involved with them," Dave pointed out.

Tubman turned, a wry grin on his face. "Well, I don't know anything about it, do you?"

Dave smirked. "Hah, nah, boss, sure don't."

“But that’s not the reason I didn’t insist the Realmer go to the facility to be tested. Somehow, I think Alastair is going to get more information about that Realmer than an entire team of scientists.” He paused. “Besides, it’s good to see him less grouchy.”

Dave chuckled. “Yeah, you’re right there.”

Alastair left the office without thinking about what he’d just promised, but as soon as they got outside, he realized what he’d done. He’d just promised that Wicker could stay with him. Which, that wouldn’t be a problem—if he didn’t live in a hostel.

“So, Wicker,” he said, turning to him. “Uh, I don’t actually live in an apartment, but we can go where I live.”

Wicker looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“See, I’m not here a lot, and when I left the apartment I shared with my mother and brother, I didn’t get one of my own. Actually, I think that apartment, all my addresses still have it as my home. But everyone knows I stay at Mable’s.” He’d been there about five years now, and he had thought nothing about getting his own place.

“What’s a hostel?”

Alastair closed his eyes and sighed. Wicker would have no idea what that even meant. “So, it’s a communal living area. It’s supposed to be a temporary housing thing, like when someone is between homes or visiting. But you share a living area, bathrooms, and there are several beds in each room.”

Wicker nodded. “But I can stay there, right?”

Blinking, Alastair felt his chest tighten. “Well, yeah, of course, you can. I just thought you’d want to know there’s other people there.”

“As long as you’re there, I’ll be okay.”

Alastair stared for a moment; his chest now tighter than ever as he looked at him. He swallowed, his throat clicking dryly. “Uh, so, I’ll show you there.”

They walked a little while and soon came to the mag-slip line’s station. Wicker looked in awe of the train. It amused Alastair to see someone so innocent about the world. He liked being the one to teach him things, though, and that was strange for him.

“What is that?” Wicker asked as they came up next to the station. One train had pulled in, a smaller one with four train cars.

“That? Oh, it’s a mag-slip train. It’s a frictionless high-speed train,” Alastair explained. “This one is a commuter train. It takes people from one side of the inner city to the other.”

Wicker looked at him, then back at the large, tan train car beside them. “How do you know that?”

“It’s only got four cars. The commuter trains are shorter than the other ones that take people to the far side of the city,” Alastair explained. “Come on, we’re almost there.”

Wicker followed him, looking back as the train took off. They walked a little while longer. Wicker took in everything around them, scanning all areas as if visually recording everything he saw.

“So, there’s the apartments around the wall, just like Benu,” Wicker said as they walked. “But Phoenix has a ring of buildings about a block away from the apartments, sitting in front of them.”

“Right,” Alastair confirmed. “Then inside that ring, sits another ring with other businesses, then you have the old city center that was maintained when the walls were built.”

“How big is Phoenix, anyway?” Wicker asked.

Alastair stopped walking to think. “Uh, twenty-five miles’ radius if I remember right.”

Wicker nodded, and Alastair led him up to one building. A sign of a bed marked this one above the door. In fancy script, it said “Mable’s House.” Wicker thought the sign looked nice, and they headed to the door, which looked like all the others with the circle in the center. Alastair put his hand there, and it lit red, then green, and slid open from the middle.

“Alastair!” came a voice from the desk in the front.

They both approached the desk, and behind it the dark-clad who manned the desk during the day stood. Shimmer was his name, and he had been there ever since Alastair had been.

“Shimmer, hey,” Alastair said, walking up.

The dark-clad stared openly at Wicker, and Alastair knew a question was coming. “Uh, Alastair? He’s not dark-clad, why’s he have eyes like one?”

Alastair shrugged. “No idea where he comes from; he was raised in Bennu by an old lady all by himself. Guess she found him as a baby back around the time of the Incident.”

Shimmer tore his eyes away from Wicker and stared at Alastair. “Uh, that’s weird, isn’t it?”

Nodding with a shrug, Alastair grabbed Wicker’s hand and led him into the room behind the desk. Wicker looked around as they entered the main dayroom. Some of the residents sat around the holovision, and some had holotabs as they sat on the sofas situated around the room. Wicker didn’t ask anything, but Alastair saw him examining everything as they walked through.

“This is the day room. We kind of get together and play games or talk with each other or whatever. Well, the others do. I really don’t.” Alastair never really got involved with other people often.

“Why not?” Wicker asked, looking up at him.

Alastair frowned. “Uh, well, I don’t really know, just never was big on doing stuff like that,” he said. “Anyway, follow me, I’ll show you the bathrooms and my room.”

Wicker nodded as they walked through. Some people looked up, then back to what they were doing, but no one really paid attention to them. They walked toward a hallway. Alastair pointed to a door on either side.

“Bathrooms. They have sonic and water showers, you can choose either on, or anything else you might need.” He paused and watched as Wicker looked at each one. “Now, you can’t keep your stuff in there. There isn’t enough room, so you’ll need a carry tote for your hygiene stuff. Come this way, I’ll show you my room I stay in.”

He led Wicker to the second room on the right, and this time, there was a number lock in the center. He tapped in the code, and the door opened. Inside, the room had six beds, and he knew five were being used, including the one he had claimed. The one next to Alastair’s was empty.

“This is my spot. No one bothers my things, so I leave it here. Granted, I don’t have much.” He patted the plain black cover he used. The only other thing was a white pillow.

He pointed to a shelf behind it and a small closet next to it. Wicker walked over and looked over his shelf and into the small closet. Alastair also had a chest at the foot of the bed with a cushioned top, and on that sat a box with an incredibly complex lock. It was supposed to be un-hackable, but Alastair didn’t know if that was true.

Alastair walked down there and used his fingerprint, then punched in a code, waited a second, and punched in a second code. Then he put a different finger on the scanner. The box made a soft click and opened. Alastair pulled the guns off his hips and laid them carefully

in the box. He glanced over at Wicker as he closed it, then opened the chest and laid it inside.

“We don’t carry weapons inside Phoenix usually. Not unless something bad happens. Which I’ve never seen.”

He sat down on the bed and patted it beside him. Wicker blinked a moment, then walked over and sat down. Alastair noted he got close, but not too close.

“So, what do you think so far?” Alastair asked him.

Wicker looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, it’s a big place, and there are lots of people here. I mean, it’s nothing like Benu. I’ve never been somewhere with so many advancements. I don’t understand how Benu is so...primitive.”

Alastair smiled. “Well, see, we have manufacturing plants and the materials available to do that manufacturing. We also have researchers, scientists, and engineers that can do a lot of things. Smaller cities don’t have those capabilities, and with the lack of trade between cities yet, they have no way to get these things from us. If a city has some good tech, once it breaks, it’s gone since no one can fix it,” he explained.

Wicker nodded, seeming to take in that information. Alastair imagined it was odd to see so much technology that he’d never been around.

“So, what now?” Alastair said.

Wicker turned, looking up at him with wide eyes. For a moment, Alastair found himself lost in their darkness. The purple almost made them glow, he thought. He’d never seen a more beautiful sight. He broke the gaze and looked away, clearing his throat.

“I really don’t know,” Wicker said as he, too, looked to the side.

About Bev

BEVERLY L. ANDERSON



Beverly L. Anderson began writing at eleven; their talent foreshadowed a remarkable future. Their first story, written in spiral notebooks, was about a kidnapping. Even then, countless story ideas featuring fantastic places, monstrous creatures, and forbidden love filled their mind. Unsurprisingly, they now favor the darker recesses of the psyche over its brighter aspects. They immersed themselves in the study of psychology and related fields. They spend most of their days dreaming about stories and deciding how to make the unruly characters do as they tell them. Characters sometimes act independently, defying the author's intent.

Bev's other hobbies include gaming of all types, including a great love of tabletop. They are an advocate of transgender/LGBTQAI+ issues as well as autism/mental health. They still enjoy writing fanfiction when they can. Their interest in the BDSM community began as a simple curiosity but has led her to the road to finding a place for herself there as a Dominant. They have gone on a journey of self-discovery in the last few years, finally pinning down their identity after thirty years of searching. Coming out as non-binary (bigender), asexual (aegosexual), and panromantic was one of the hardest things they've ever done, but it gave them the confidence to become themselves even more. Bev, who is autistic, has ADHD and bipolar disorder, and follows an eclectic pagan path, frequently clashes with what society deems "normal."

Beverly started their writing journey seriously in 2013 when they found their way to fanfiction. They spent several years writing over three million words in various fandoms. For the last few years, they have been pursuing the adaptation of those stories into original works and publishing them for a wider audience. Finding their publishing home in Phoenix Voices Publishing helped make that dream a reality, one that they help others find.

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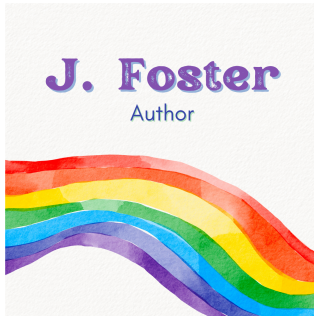
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About J. Foster

J. FOSTER



J. Foster has been making up stories ever since she was a child. She then started writing fanfiction while in high school. She is always coming up with new ideas and has an incredible mind for making characters and placing them in stories. In 2014, she met Beverly through random luck, and they bonded because of their mutual love of fanfiction. Since then, she and Beverly have been working on several original ideas, and their catalog of works in progress is steadily growing. They have become great friends despite living hundreds of miles

apart, and they have nightly sessions where they work on stories, talk about fandoms, and have good conversations.

In her spare time, J. Foster loves role-playing, animals, music, anime/manga, traveling, and reading. She also does her fair share of writing and loves learning new things. She is also on the autism spectrum and a demi-woman.