

“This generation a Shifter will arise,  
Hidden amongst the lost and lies.  
    A great many will see  
    The life that could be.  
    The universe will shake;  
The greatest among us will quake.  
    The towers will fall.  
    The ruled will rule all.”

Prologue

Rian growled when a small group of Shifters entered The Council chamber following Navin and Lena.

Lena sauntered in, her hips swaying dangerously from side to side. Other than Rian, all eyes in the room were on her. Her long auburn hair was undulating behind her in a tight ponytail. Her green eyes were bright and cold. Her smirk revealed straight white teeth, poised and ready for the kill.

“My Lord,” Lena said in her throaty alto. She bowed then, carefully positioning her body in the most flattering way.

The new Seer on The Council, a small mousy man with flat brown eyes and little ability to see anything, gulped audibly as he watched Lena.

“I am not a feudal lord,” Rian snapped at Lena.

“Of course not,” Lena said, rising slowly, allowing the eyes in the room to linger on her lithe body. “You are my god.”

Rian’s eyes flicked to her, somehow his copper eyes were both irritated and pleased. He then returned them to the piece of Shifter trash that had entered the room with her. His copper eyes flashed red for a brief moment, appearing more vibrant and cruel than any eyes before.

“Navin,” he growled. It was almost as though when Rian ordered the deaths of the Shifter Young nearly

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thirteen years ago, he had become less than human. He had become a beast, a monster.

Rian had always been ambitious, willing to do anything to rise to the top. He had always been willing to kill, to destroy. Everything had changed, however, when he had commanded the slaughtering of the Young, of his own child.

Navin held his head high, raising his chin and allowing his colorless eyes to meet Rian's without fear. "Rian," he said tightly, unafraid.

"How is it that you managed to allow the traitorous children their freedom, to announce our presence to the Ordinaries, and to flee from the weaklings all in one day? You have raised the level of failure; I didn't realize just how inept you truly are," Rian sneered.

"Why, brother, I didn't realize that anyone could fail as badly as you, allowing the very same children to flee to a planet that you weren't even aware existed. Had I known that I might match my twin brother, I might have tried harder. Could I have failed bigger?" Navin mused, eyeing the silver in his brother's golden hair.

"I should kill you for your insolence!" Rian shouted.

The Council quivered in meek silence. All eyes were cast to the flat brown table, unable to look at either of the brothers. Finally, one spoke up. She had a tech-based power; specifically what her specialty was, Rian could never remember.

"Sir, if I may interject," she said with a quiet voice. She pleaded with soft blue eyes. Her long brown hair cascaded in heavy waves down her back. She would have been beautiful, her pleas irresistible, if she were not so tired, so sad.

"No!" both brothers spat, and she returned her eyes to the table.

“Kill me if you must,” Navin said flatly, shrugging his shoulders. “It will not bring your son back to you. It will not change what you have done. It will not ensure your victory.”

“My Lord,” Lena spoke again, her yellow-green eyes full of cunning. She had always reminded Rian of a fox; intelligent, ruthless, a survivor. “Navin is no longer fit to command. Whether you deem death an appropriate punishment for his failure . . .” she shrugged as she trailed off, giving Navin an icy, hate-filled glare.

“And who,” Rian asked impatiently, “is fit to command?”

“I have seen these *children*,” she spat the last word as though it had a harsh, bitter taste. “I have fought them. You need a leader who is more cunning, more cruel, less prone to subtleties and symbolism. Navin is too theatrical to simply execute them.” She batted her eyelashes mockingly at Navin before continuing. “You need someone less inclined to the dramatic.”

Rian was growing impatient with Lena, even with her full lips and curves. “Who might that be?” he snapped, ready for this day to be over.

“Me,” Lena answered with a smirk.

Navin threw his head back in a full-bodied, deep throated laugh. When he finally controlled himself and wiped the tears from his eyes, he saw that his brother was glaring at him.

Rian could not force himself to care one way or another. He simply wanted his brother to shut up. “Done,” he answered curtly.

“What?” Navin shouted. “How dare you? Earth is mine!”

Rian, who had just stood up and turned to leave the room, whipped back to glare at Navin, copper eyes flashing a deep crimson. “Kill him!” Rian ordered, and the guards closed in.

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Navin's eyes stared up at him from a pool of blood gushing from the gash in his throat. Rian couldn't help but smile down at his big brother, dying on The Council room floor. "Earth, like every other planet in this universe, is mine. My brother, you should have learned that by now."

Rian turned and walked from the room as though it were merely another boring meeting about crops or taxes. His shoes made a slight squeaking sound on the marble floors. "Make sure that doesn't stain!" he shouted without looking back.

The other council members fled from the room, knowing it was only a matter of time before they met a similar fate. Their long robes flew out behind them, catching in the blood, smearing a red trail behind them. The blood seemed to flow from them as though they were the source of all pain and suffering in the world.

Lena was left with only her followers in the great council chamber, grinning, clapping, dancing, and muttering to herself. She loomed over Navin's dead body, staring into his colorless, lifeless eyes. "Haha! Earth is mine now, Navin. You are nothing! Nothing!"

She danced over his body, her auburn hair swaying in the light of the sunset as it flowed across her skin.

Finally she remembered the two Shifters behind her. The man was about her age with copper hair and eyes filled with violence. He stood, waiting for orders.

The girl was a beautiful young specimen with sunset red hair and a perfect body. Lena grinned at her, "Come here, my pet!"

The girl stepped forward, smiling shyly.

Lena pet her long, soft red hair, still muttering. "We will rule Earth, my dear. We will take it from the Ordinaries."

The girl's bright green eyes smiled up at Lena. "We will kill the Young, won't we, Mother? Tanner? Ryland?"

*Douglas and Angelia Pershing*

Lena's grin widened. "Oh, Devon, we will slaughter them all."

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## Chapter 1

### *The Colonial War While I'm in the Bathroom*

—RYLAND—

I scream as the knife penetrates the soft flesh of my stomach, just missing my vital organs. My eyes flash liquid silver as I throw my head back, blond hair arcing behind me. My mouth opens in a silent scream.

I look into his wolf-like golden eyes and see only hatred. He hates me, despises us all. He doesn't know us. If we had grown up on this world, if there were no prophecies or seers, he could have been our teacher, our brother, our friend. Instead, he hates us.

I force my stiff fingers to grip the hilt protruding from me and rip the knife away from my body, thrusting it up into his throat. I hear a sickening crunch as I drive the knife through his trachea, embedding it deep. He falls to the ground, eyes now empty of hatred, empty of life.

I hold my left hand to my stomach to stanch the bleeding, but the thick red syrup flows through relentlessly. My eyes scan the battlefield for Kai, Tanner, or anyone. I spot Corey, and he sees the blood covering my stomach, flowing down my legs.

He runs toward me, and then he is gone. I feel a hand guiding me to the ground; a voice tells me to lie down. Corey is leaning over me, sheltering me from the cacophony and chaos.

“Ryland,” he says calmly. I try to find his lavender eyes, but everything is hazy and unclear. I know if I can only find them everything will be alright. “Ryland, you need to move your hands.”

I can't feel my hands. All I can feel is heat tearing through my body, pain enveloping me. It doesn't feel as though I've been stabbed. I'm on fire. My blood is lava flowing through me, burning from the inside out.

Corey is yanking at something. When he finally pulls it away from me, he mutters profanities. “Okay, Ryland,” he says, regaining his composure. “There's poison in your bloodstream. I'm going to draw it out.”

Through the clouds of billowing dust, I see Corey raising his hands over me. They begin to glow a sickly green. Then, I am gone.

I am sitting in a church that I have never been to before. The stained glass windows don't seem beautiful. They seem ominous and dominating and oppressive.

The black dress I am wearing seems too small to be comfortable, and its rough fabric makes me itch. My mother and father sit next to me, sobbing. Bryce is too, silent tears streaming down his stoic face.

Tanner is there, holding my hand. He doesn't cry. He stares blankly ahead, as though he is not present. I follow his eyes.

In front of me is a coffin. Its pink surface shines even in the dim church light. I notice that it is too small, though.

I stand up and walk toward it. The knots in my stomach tighten, and it's difficult to continue, but I need to know. I need to see.

When I reach the front, my little sister's serene face stares up at me. But this is no longer Peanut. Her face is cloudy and covered with makeup. Her eyes are closed and her hair is neatly brushed perfectly into place.

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I feel the knots in my stomach rip away, sucked into the black hole that resides where my heart once lived. I feel myself tremble, and I am falling. When my knees hit the cold stone floor, I'm jarred awake.

My eyes snap open, and I find myself in a med tent. There are people all around me, some are screaming, crying, bleeding, dying. I bolt upright, and the pain in my stomach makes me retch.

I grab my gut, and my memories come flooding back. We were fighting the Shifters. I was stabbed.

Where are Tanner and Kai?

Corey sees me awake and sprints over. "Oh, thank God," he breathes. "I wasn't sure if you'd wake up."

"What happened?" I demand, my voice containing the newfound authority that I have claimed as one of the resistance's top commanding officers. "Where is my brother? Kai? The battle—"

"The battle is over," Corey soothes. "Kai and Tanner are okay."

For the first time, I note that he is clean. He is not in fatigues. He isn't covered in dirt or ash or blood. His tousled blond hair is carefully arranged. Kai and Tanner may be okay, but I can tell he's hiding something. He's not that good of a liar.

"How long have I been unconscious?"

Corey shifts uncomfortably. "About three days."

"Three days? We were supposed to leave for Colony—"

Corey raises a hand to silence me. Despite his age, twelve years, he has a commanding presence. His abilities to heal the sick and injured are valued beyond all others in the new resistance. His voice carries weight.

"The battle was won, but casualties were high. The mission has been postponed. They're meeting to discuss new tactics," he says, as though I'm a petulant, impatient child.

“I need to attend these meetings,” I snap, trying to rise from the tangle of sheets.

“Ryland, the poison in your system was new, genetically engineered to harm Shifters. You need time to rest. We need time to study its effects, learn whether you have been compromised.”

Rising to my feet, I shove him out of my way. “I trust that your skills have spared me from any lasting effects. I need to get back to my job.”

“Ryland, stop!” he shouts, and the whole room goes quiet.

I turn back to him, eyes flashing. “We’re at war, Corey. I don’t have time to rest or heal.”

“Then you are going to get yourself killed,” he says matter-of-factly.

“I wouldn’t be the first casualty,” I say, pushing out of the tent.

The camp is in chaos. Shifters and Keepers are running through the red dirt, creating plumes of dust that billow through the air, coating everything in a red haze. People are running, packing, arguing, laughing.

I head toward the center of the camp, toward the largest tent. When the two sentries outside see me coming, they straighten up. “Ryland, I’m glad to see that you’re okay,” the younger says.

His name is Greg, I remember. He is young, only eleven or twelve years old. I will never forget his face. He is Kensi’s twin, the Keeper girl whose death started our first battle on Earth.

“Thank you, Greg,” I say, as he opens the door for me.

I enter the tent to hear the shouting. Alice is screaming that we need more weapons. Kai is telling Kyle that he needs to get his Keepers in line. Solé is crying about some poor baby. Tanner is trying to get everyone to focus their attention on the crude map on the table below them.

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“God, you can’t get anything done without me,” I say as I force a grin.

The noise stops as everyone realizes that I have returned from my coma or whatever it was. Marcus smiles broadly. “Ryland, skipping these meetings is not the wisest choice at this point in our war.”

“Maybe if they weren’t so boring . . .” I trail off and shrug. “So, why exactly are we still here?”

–TANNER–

Wait! Hold on! What is going on here? I just went to the bathroom, and Ryland starts without me? My sister seriously does *not* know how to tell a story. Geez, Ryland. You can’t just start with us on another planet without explaining how we got here. We *are* on Colony Six, but some crazy stuff happened between the attack on DC and our battle on Six.

First off, you would think that we would be treated like heroes or something, seeing that the United States Capital was not totally destroyed. Instead, they blamed us for everything.

So not fair!

After the fight we are standing in the center of the battlefield with the Washington Monument completely destroyed and the Lincoln Memorial covered in debris, looking more like an ancient ruin than the symbol of hope it was a few hours earlier.

An enormous ship from Gaia, sent to destroy all of the Shifter Young before we had a chance to fulfill a prophecy that would bring down the Shifter overlords, now lies as wreckage. When we hear a thunderous sound and the wind begins to kick up dust, we all duck for cover.

Through the thick air we see several choppers that hover and then land on the ground in front of us. Several men in suits rush toward us. Perfect! We were able to fight

off the Shifter invasion, and now we have to deal with the Keepers?

I stare at my sister, who looks like she doesn't know if we should run or welcome them. She nods to me, and we silently agree to stand our ground. Together we wait to see what they will do.

The Suit Guys walk right up to me and my sister, and one of them asks, "Ryland Ascunse, Tanner Ascunse, will you come with us?"

Ryland looks them fiercely in the eye and spits, "Is that a question, or an order?"

The Suit Guy takes his dark glasses off and surveys the scene. Let's see, there are like sixty Shifter Young who look like they are just waiting for the word to pounce on these guys. Not to mention the strangely uniformed Tyros (young Keepers in training) who just helped us defend the planet.

A girl steps out from the group and says, "Dad, you can't just take them." She is beautiful, about fifteen years old with long dark hair and fair skin. Like all of the other Tyros, she is wearing a dark suit with a white shirt, a black tie and regulation Converse tennis shoes.

"They were right. They aren't the enemy. They saved us," she pleads.

The man stands stoically, although I do notice a twitch on his face and an almost imperceptible gulp. The man looks back to us and says, "Please, would you and . . . your friends come with us?"

Ryland looks at me and then to Kai, who shakes his head and mouths, "No."

She looks the guy in the eye and says, "We'll go with you. If you'll guarantee their safety." She looks back to the group of Shifter Young.

The guy looks to one of the other Suit Guys who slightly shakes his head. Ignoring his companion, he looks

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back to Ryland—who he clearly sees as our leader—and says, “We have a deal then. Come this way.”

Kai looks like he could kill her, but he follows anyway. One of the Suit Guys offers to take Peanut from Mom, but she holds her grip. That is definitely not going to happen. Not yet anyway.

Ryland looks back to the Tyro girl and says, “Thank you.”

The girl smiles and says, “Sisters?” referring to Ryland’s family speech a few moments ago.

“Always,” Ryland tells her.

I always wanted to ride in a helicopter, but this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind. They take Kai, Chucky, Melinda, Frederick, Solé, and Kyle (Solé won’t let go of him) to a different one. My family and I are the only ones on this one, well, except for the dozen or so—clearly armed—Suit Guys. It isn’t until we are above everything that I can take in all that had gone on today.

There are maybe a few square miles of damage with a huge ship forced awkwardly into the earth. When we rise a little higher, I poke Ryland with my elbow and say, “Look at that.”

She looks like she’s lost in thought and could care less about what’s going on outside. She gives me a dirty look and reluctantly glances out the window. “Wow,” she quietly whispers.

“I know, right?” I say while I stare out.

There are like a million people—maybe not a million, but there are a lot—gathered in all of the areas surrounding the battlefield. There are military trucks and troops—probably reserves that hoped they would never see an actual war—everywhere.

Ryland shakes her head and says, “This is nothing compared to what’s coming,” not taking her eyes from the window. “We have to warn them.”

She looks at Mom and Dad. They both have tears in their eyes. Mom is stroking little Peanut's hair. Dad looks like he's trying to be strong, but he's broken, too.

I sit back and think about everything. The sound of the fleet of choppers pounds in my head. How had we gotten here? In the span of a few short weeks we had changed from a couple of teenagers living in a small town outside of Wethersfield, Connecticut, to being America's most wanted while running from the FBI and real live aliens.

It's strange the way everything worked out. I mean, Kai found us just before the Keepers did. We found Kyle, who happens to be a genius and famous among the Tyros, and we wound up at Solé's parents' house where we found out about the prophecy—and it happens to be talking about either Kai, my sister, or me! Most likely it's about Kai, but it has run across my mind that it could be Ryland. I mean, she *is* like a superhero or something. How many people do you run across that can actually fly?

Then there's Devon. Her parents make me so angry that I could—I'm not sure what I could do—but it's bad. She is the most amazing person ever. There is no woman more beautiful, and I can't believe how smart she is.

I sit there for several minutes concentrating on her eyes, her face, her hair, the feel of her touch, the taste of her kiss, and I get angry. I look over at Peanut's small and fragile body in my mom's arms, and I get angry. I think about Devon—my love—and how helpless I felt when he took her from me, and I get angry. I remember how helpless I was when Navin killed my little sister. *And yes, I get angry!*

It was him. Navin. The Shifters. They took everything. They started it. Ryland is right. People need to know. They need to know what is coming before it's too late.

Ryland nudges me, and I come back to reality. We are flying over the White House. Not a white house, *the* White House. We land behind it, and they rush us into a back

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entrance. Our whole group is reunited for a short time as the Suit Guys rush us down a long hallway and into an elevator that takes us down. I mean, down. For like, several minutes. Seriously, how far are we going?

It kind of reminds me of falling down the ventilation shaft at Keeper headquarters with nothing between the ground and me but my sister. The elevator stops, and they lead us into a war room or something. We are surrounded by—what looks like—all of the major generals in the United States.

A man walks up to us and reaches his hand out saying, “Thank you for coming, Ryland and Tanner. We have a lot to talk about.”

This is not any man. I recognize him. Ryland has a look of awe on her face as she shakes hands with the President of the United States.

Chapter 2

*An Intergalactic Spaceship Isn't as Cool  
If You Don't Know How to Turn It On*

—RYLAND—

Of course, Tanner would decide that we need to go all the way back to the worst day of my life—so far—and then make me finish telling you what happened. You don't even care, do you? No, why would you? You care about the battle, the war.

So, I'll try to catch you up as quickly and as painlessly as possible. I know, I'm the best, and you love me.

My mouth was not hanging open when we met the president. I was trying not to scream. How dare this man suddenly decide that we're important enough to talk to now? He waits to help us until after Devon is gone, and my sister is—

He shakes my hand and smiles down at me with perfect white teeth. Like a shark. Like a coward, hiding here in this bunker. As though he were the one who was just attacked.

“Sir?” Tanner stammers in awe.

“Oh, now we're worth your time? Before we were America's most wanted fighting this battle alone, now you're here pretending to be important! Get away from us!” I shout. I can't help it. Anger is boiling up inside me like I'm an active volcano or something.

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He has no right to smile at me or welcome me. I'm the one who just fought for our planet. I'm the one who just lost everything. He's just a stiff smile and false promises.

Yes, he is. Like every president. They promise one thing while they're running for office; they get elected; then it's "I-never-promised-anything-of-the-sort." He's no different. He swore up and down to lower taxes. They're higher than ever! And yes, I do keep up with politics.

His smile falters for a second, as he glances around at his various advisers. One of them nods solemnly. "I understand your frustration, but you must understand that we were unaware of these Shifters before now."

"Not all of you were!" I scream, pulling away as he tries to lay a hand comfortingly on my shoulder. "Did you know that under FBI headquarters your own people have been putting the heads of children on spikes, displaying them like trophies? Did you know that they have been slaughtering children to prevent an alien invasion when we are the only ones who can stop it?"

The president blanches, then his face turns a sickly shade of yellowy-red as he pulls his hand away. "Excuse me?" he squeaks.

It is in this moment that I start to laugh. This polished politician paled at the anger of a teenage girl. Granted, that teenage girl did just help save his country from imminent destruction. The president looks uncomfortable, shocked, confused.

You have to understand. I am angry. My baby sister just died. We saved the world. And I've been brought before the president like some sort of terrorist. He has no idea what's really going on.

Tanner stares at me with his jaw on the floor for a second before answering the president. "A human organization that call themselves Keepers has been trying to protect the earth from a perceived threat of alien invasion.

What they've really been doing is slaughtering innocent children, like us, refugees from our home world."

The president composes himself. "I see," he ponders slowly. "And why are you refugees? Why are you here?"

"We're here because on our home world, there are Shifters who are called Seers. These Seers can see the future. A Seer saw that a Shifter child would destroy the Shifter government. The government decided that the best thing to do would be to kill all of the Shifter children." Tanner tells this all slowly, knowing that it sounds unbelievable, impossible.

"They slaughtered children to stop a child from growing up to overthrow the government?" One of the president's advisers looks like he might be sick when he asks this.

"King Herod did the same thing in the New Testament. You're Christian, aren't you, Mr. President?" I snap.

He nods slowly, swallowing hard. "But prophecy? That's ludicrous!"

"Try telling that to Solé," Tanner mumbles.

"Solé is a Seer?" the president perks up.

Tanner nods.

"We will need to think on all that you have told us, consider what to do next. In the meantime, you will be our guests," the president says smoothly.

"Prisoners, you mean?" I ask sharply.

We are herded off to what is an admittedly nice room with a huge California King sized bed, a seating area, and two attached bathrooms. I am pleased to see that Kyle, Kai, and Solé are already waiting for us. I run to Kai and throw my arms around him.

He makes an "oomph" sound like I knocked the air out of him, but he wraps his arms around me. "Where were you?" he snaps, as though it's my fault we were delayed. "I thought the Keepers killed you!"

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I laugh as I pull back. “We were meeting with the president. He’s the one keeping us here.”

Kai rolls his eyes. “Of course! We save the world, and now we’re prisoners!”

“It’s all going to be okay,” Solé smiles. “We aren’t going to die here.”

“Awesome,” Tanner grumbles under his breath. “I’ve got the pessimistic twins, and an optimistic Seer. This is going to be great.”

“Maybe I can help?” Kyle suggests uncomfortably.

“Why? Is your psycho dad best friends with the president? Because if he is, we’re already dead!” Kai snaps.

“Well, we’ve got to do something!” Kyle shouts back.

“Kyle is just being nice!” Solé, who I’ve never heard raise her voice before, shrieks at Kai.

Kai eyes Kyle. “I don’t see how! You’re useless, Keeper—”

“Shut up!” I scream, silencing everyone. “We’re all on edge today. We’ve lost friends, family, allies. We’re prisoners here. We need to stay calm and stick together.”

“Really?” Tanner barks at me. “You’re going to tell us to calm down after you just screamed at the president?”

“You did what?” Kyle shouts at me.

“I don’t know if that was wise,” Solé sighs.

“Nice,” Kai grins at me.

We all stop and turn as the door clicks open. My stomach clenches. I’m going to be sick. I am going to vomit.

Into our room walks an extremely familiar FBI agent. An agent who has been chasing us for weeks. An agent whose face has been plastered in the news.

An agent who also happens to be the leader of the Keepers.

We are all going to die.

–TANNER–

I wasn't standing there in awe. I just couldn't believe Ryland went off on the President of the United States like that. I mean, isn't he the leader of the free world, or something like that? I guess I'm not as surprised as I should be. My sister has been moody lately, not that I blame her.

What really shocks me is Solé. I didn't even know she could scream. I guess when it comes to Kyle, she can become a real momma bear. Seriously, don't mess with her cub.

When the door opens, Carl Marques walks into the room. I suck in a sudden breath and look into Kai's eyes. A second before he was smiling proudly at my sister. In an instant I see rage, hate, desperation, loss, and fear. Then nothing.

Solé screams, and I hear a desperate gasp from the entrance.

I scream, "No, Kai! Not here!"

Kai is behind the man with his arm around his throat. Several men raise their weapons and Kai pulls him into the room and whips him around forming a human shield. "Go ahead! Shoot!" Kai spits. "I go down; *he* goes down."

"Let him go, son," one of the agents says while he nervously lowers his weapon.

The agent motions to the others to lower their guns. They do. Kai tilts his head slowly, trying to process what is happening.

He shakes his head and says, "No, you don't. You're not tricking me." I can see that he has tears in his eyes.

"No one wants to hurt you, son," the agent says as he slowly holsters his weapon.

"Kai," I say calmly. I cautiously walk up to him and say, "Nobody else needs to die today."

The Keeper leader was so arrogant when he talked about us on TV a couple of weeks earlier. He seemed

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imposing and frightening. As he struggles for breath, he looks small and weak.

“He does,” Kai says, shaking his head as he pulls him further into the room. “He was there. He killed them.”

Carl Marques desperately chokes out, “We can help you.”

“How can *you* help us?” Kai says to his desperate hostage. Kai sucks in his tears and tightens his grip on the Keeper. The Keeper that we all know killed Kai’s parents is right in front of him now.

He is not going to let him go. This man is about to get what he deserves. He is going to die. He had sealed his fate the day he killed two people in a warehouse less than a year ago. Those two people had escaped a horrible holocaust twelve years ago on Gaia only to be hunted down and slaughtered by the very people with which they sought refuge. Right in front of a young boy. A boy that is about to even the score.

“He doesn’t die,” a calm voice says.

I can’t tell where it is coming from.

“He will help,” the voice says from somewhere else.

I look over at Kai, and Solé is shifting in and out of focus gently touching his arms, and caressing his back and shoulders.

She appears right at his ear and whispers something. She appears on the other side and whispers something else. All the while gently touching him. She slowly calms Kai down until he releases his grip, and he drops, becoming a weeping boy on the immaculately clean floor.

Solé joins him on the floor, and he wraps his arms around her, letting it all out.

The Keeper leader, the enemy, regains his composure and straightens his suit—like we really care what his clothes look like. He tugs at his collar—it probably feels like he is

still being choked—and says, “Like I said: We can help each other.”

“How can you help us?” Ryland asks the man, her eyes full of suspicion.

I ask, “What do you mean each other? What do you want from us?”

“You have to understand,” he says. “The people are going to want to blame someone.”

“By someone, you mean us?” Ryland spits abruptly.

“You *were* the fugitives and terrorists that were running from the FBI.”

“Wasn’t it *you* that claimed we were terrorists in the first place?” I ask.

“Be that as it may, you will need my help,” he tells us, his arrogance returning.

“I could still kill you,” Kai says from the floor.

“That you could young Shifter, but as your pretty little girlfriend pointed out, I don’t die today,” he says with a smile.

I repeat, “What do you want from us?”

“Now that is the right question, my boy,” he says as he looks pleasingly at me. “The truth is we have certain—”

“The artifacts,” Kyle interrupts.

“Yes,” as he looks Kyle up and down. “Mister Cooke knows his history. It seems it has been a while—centuries really—since the original landing day and our successful liberation. While we know where they are, we . . .”

“You don’t know how to use them,” Ryland says with a smirk.

I can’t help it. That makes me laugh. “The Keepers. The Enforcers of Earth. The holders of alien technology, only we don’t know how to turn it on. What? Are you hoping we brought the keys with us?”

“Not you,” Kyle says.

# Ordinaries

Kyle is a genius. Not us. Of course not. We were babies. We didn't drive ourselves to Earth. Somebody brought us here. People that know about alien technology. Pilots. I had never even thought about them. It wasn't that long ago. They must still be here. And the ships. We must still have the ships that we came in. I decide to keep my mouth shut. Maybe he didn't think about *our* ships.

"So what?" Ryland asks. "You want us to lead you to our people so we can work together now? After what you have been doing to them? You think they will just forget about everything and teach you how to use your own tech? Fat chance!"

"All I'm saying is, we have a common enemy," Marques tries to say reasonably.

"Yeah," I tell him. "Us and them. It's you. You're *our* common enemy."

"You refuse to help us?" he asks, looking my sister square in the eye.

Ryland nods resolutely. He looks at Kai and me in turn, and we stand unwavering. If that is Ryland's answer, then we will stand behind her. Carl Marques, the leader of the Keepers turns and walks out the door. Kyle looks like he is about to say something but then thinks better of it.

When the door closes, we all breathe a sigh of relief. Did we just do that? Did we stare down the leader of the Keepers? Did we scoff at the President of the United States? A few weeks earlier we would have cowered to a gym teacher because he didn't like how slow we were running.

"Maybe we should have listened to him," Kyle says, looking slightly concerned.

A screen suddenly clicks on, mounted in the corner of the room. I hadn't even noticed it before. I guess I was preoccupied with being held captive and all. On it we could

see a press conference being held in front of the White House.

Carl Marques steps to the microphone and looks directly into the camera. He knows we are watching.

“Nearly an hour ago the terrorists, Ryland Ascunse, and Tanner Ascunse, were apprehended.”

A cacophony of questions explodes. He calms them by raising his hand and continues, “We have learned that the two young terrorists led the attack on Washington, DC, and our forces were able to capture them before the next part of their plan was carried out.”

The people speak out at once. He again calms them—he is so good at managing a crowd—and goes on, “Rest assured, they will be dealt with swiftly, and justice will prevail. There will be no questions at this time.”

The crowd erupts as he is ushered off the podium and reenters the White House. The screen shuts down immediately.

We all stare, in shock, at each other.