

Chapter 1—Evan, Present Day

Ugly. That was the first word that came to mind. Deadly was next.

The twisted creation was courtesy of a new client, a scientist. The nightmare had been tormenting him for the past couple of weeks.

The monster stood roughly fifteen feet tall, walked on two legs, and stretched two muscled arms in front of it, but its elongated head was a grotesque combination of goat and demon. Treacherous horns protruded from either side of its skull, torso, and upper thighs, making it difficult for anyone to get close to the beast. Not that we especially wanted to, but it was part of a Bender's job requirement to eradicate nightmares. So, we took up battle positions—Syd to its right, me to its left—crouched in anticipation of this formidable creature's attack.

"I'll go high, you go low," I called to Syd. Besides a hideous appearance, the goat thing screeched like a deranged bird, and we strained to hear each other, even with the com units.

"Got it, Evan." She unsheathed a ten-inch dagger from her utility belt, the silver blade glinting in the eerie cast of yellow-green light in this nightmare-scape. Being somewhat vertically-challenged (she hated it when I said short), Syd might not look intimidating, but give the girl a knife and she was absolutely lethal. The creature's leg tendons would be sliced to ribbons in seconds.

Syd dived to the creature's right, spinning and coming up behind it, as she avoided an angry kick to her head. She carved into its left limb, and it let out an ear-piercing shriek.

I withdrew an iron mallet from my own belt and catapulted myself off the wall, soaring over the goat-demon and landing a blow to the left side of its skull. Its head jerked in my direction when I came down on its other side. The sharpened tip of the horn caught the left side of my rib cage, and a warm flow of blood seeped through my shirt. Wouldn't be the first time I'd walked away from a nightmare with a permanent scar.

Syd scrambled around its legs, careful not to be trampled. Her dagger was a silver blur as she slashed the gray-haired appendages, the goat-demon staggering in its efforts to avoid her blade.

The ground was wet—possibly blood. But with dream or nightmare creations, you couldn't be sure. Because this thing's creator was a scientist, they tended to more detail-oriented. Odds leaned in the blood direction.

The light around us took on a red hue. Did the ambient illumination correlate to the creature's anger level? If yellow-green meant annoyed, did red mean take no prisoners?

I sailed through the air again, keeping my distance from the sharp tips of the two horns, and managed a solid strike to the top of its head between them.

It floundered, the screeches growing weaker, and movements sluggish as liquid spilled down the beast's face. As the creature slowed, the surrounding light faded to more of a blush color.

Standing to the side, I kept the mallet raised in case Syd needed help. She'd sliced and diced so much that skin, muscles, and tendons hung in shreds around the creature's legs. It wouldn't last much longer. "Pull back!"

She nodded that she'd heard me, then somersaulted behind the goat-demon to get out of its path. At the same time, it lurched forward and slipped in the liquid gushing from its wounds, tilting precariously backwards. Toward Syd. Its razor-sharp horns on a direct collision course with her body.

There was no way the goat-demon would miss her.

“Eject, Syd! Now, now, now!”

Without question or hesitation, her hand immediately shot to the cuff strapped around her left wrist and pushed a red button, expelling her from the nightmare. The creature landed hard where Syd had been only seconds earlier. I exhaled in relief, but it was short-lived. I still had to deal with one seriously perturbed goat-demon. On my own, with no backup.

The beast struggled to rise, unsteady on what was left of its legs, determined not to be banished so quickly. It seemed to have gained a second wind, and now there was only one target.

I needed to move fast. My hand reached for the dagger strapped to my belt, and I groaned in annoyance at the empty sheath. It must have fallen out when I'd landed.

I'd stressed to trainees that a backup plan may save their life, and they should always keep other options in mind. Especially when finding themselves in situations such as this. Tightening my hand around the iron mallet, I propelled myself into the air once again. The beast had managed to stand, but instead of flying over him, this time I hovered just above his head.

His arms sliced through the air trying to reach me, but I was pretty agile when it came to the flying thing, and managed to roll and twist around his blows. I drew back the mallet and

swung with everything I had, connecting with the goat-demon's right horn. It shrieked, but the impact with my mallet had nearly ripped the horn from its head, and I readied myself for another strike. I pummeled it once more, wrenched it off the creature's head, and maneuvered around to the other horn when the goat-demon tried to shish-kabob me.

I increased my speed, flying faster around its head in a random pattern, keeping my movements unpredictable. The com unit crackled in my ear as Charlie, who was still in the lab, checked my status.

“Evan, are you all right? You're bleeding from your upper torso.”

“Affirmative.”

No time to talk, if my plan was going to work. An attack wasn't as difficult now, as the monster only had a nonthreatening stump protruding from its head. With the detached horn still clutched in my hand, I faked a turn to the left, rolled to the creature's right side, and stabbed its eye with the finely-honed appendage, shoving it in until it would go no further. Then I dropped to the ground behind it.

Its wails pierced my ears and echoed off the walls, but I never let my guard down. Sometimes nightmares were surprisingly resilient and recovered quickly.

That didn't seem to be the case with goat-demon, as its gray, hairy body crumpled and folded in on itself, becoming smaller and smaller until it gradually disintegrated, extinguished with a final whimper.

Shoving the iron mallet back into my belt, I bent over and rested my hands on my knees, gulping in deep breaths. I felt like collapsing myself, but needed to begin my exit sequence.

God, I loved my job.

#

When I came back to my body, a medbot was tending to the wound on my torso. It was a minor injury compared to others I'd received. Some of the more memorable ones were the talon marks on my back from some sort of gargoyle/human blend, a dislocated shoulder after being slammed into a wall by a hulking blob-type of thing, and broken ankle from being stepped on by a giant, one-eyed teddy bear. A couple of stitches on the torso hardly rated a second look.

I tried shoving the persistent medbot away, then ripped the vital sign lead wires off my body. "Where's Syd?" I was relatively sure she'd ejected before the goat-demon touched her, but that didn't stop me from swallowing anxiously. I needed confirmation.

"She's fine," Charlie confirmed, gently pushing my shoulder so I'd lie back in the Bender chair. "No injuries. She's in the download room right now. That must have been a pretty good one."

Giving in and resting my head against the chair, I closed my eyes and let the medbot do its job. "You have no idea."

Syd and I were Mindbenders at Scientific Innovations. With permission from our clients, we entered their minds for various reasons. Sometimes our mission was to locate important memories buried deeply in their subconscious, other times to assist in pulling their swirling thoughts or ideas into a cohesive concept that could help Tage, our dying planet. Occasionally, as was the case with this latest mission, it was to obstruct recurring nightmares that interfered with a client's health or well-being. Continuously disrupted sleep caused increased stress,

irritability, lack of focus, and, depending on the client's job, could potentially affect millions of lives.

I rubbed the bandage covering the stitches, annoyed that it caught on the fabric of my shirt. Crossing the stark white hall, I entered the lab where Syd was downloading any residual fear, hers or the client's, left over from this nightmare or any other recent cases. We didn't need to download after every nightmare case, but were strongly encouraged to when the anxiety reached a certain level. Absorbing a client's fear and trauma came with our job, but carrying it around wasn't healthy, and Benders could potentially project that fear onto the client while in his mind. Not a good thing.

Syd had just finished, and the tech was removing the leads from her head. She smiled at me. "Well, that was something I haven't seen before, but what an adrenaline rush, right? Are you hurt?"

"Just a few stitches, nothing major. Ready for debriefing?"

"Sure." She followed me out the door and down the hallway to my office, where the rest of my team, Isaac, Zia, and Amelia, were already gathered around the conference table. As team leader, I doled out assignments at the beginning of every shift, then we debriefed at the end. Sharing data about how we handled situations, techniques we used, and unusual things we encountered, whether about simple cases or level five nightmares, could prevent injuries or save lives later on.

"Evan, do we have anyone lined up to replace Maya?" Zia asked. "That guy filling in from beta team is totally subpar and needs remedial training."

"I'm working on it. Gabriel has a line on a new grad from the Academy."

She grimaced. “Seriously? A new grad will probably be just as useless. Can’t we get someone more experienced from another team?”

“Maya was experienced, but that didn’t prevent her from being eviscerated,” Isaac said.

“That wasn’t her fault, and you shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.” Amelia stared him down. “It could have happened to any of us.”

The biggest job hazard of a Bender? If we were killed while in a client’s dream or nightmare, our physical body lying in the lab also expired. We’d all had close calls, but last month, our team had suffered the loss of Zia’s work partner, Maya. Since we normally worked in pairs, unless the assignment was more complicated and required additional Benders, our group had been off balance and out of sorts while we each grieved in our own ways. Even though Maya wasn’t my partner, as team leader, I still blamed myself and took responsibility for her death.

“Not another word, Isaac,” I said. “Amelia’s right. It could have been any of us in that situation. Zia, Gabriel’s chosen all of us individually, and if he sees potential in this new grad, we’d be fortunate to have him or her join our team. Let’s get started.”

After the meeting came to an end, Isaac, Zia, and Amelia huddled together at the end of the long table, whispering and casting glances in my direction. Zia gave Amelia a light shove toward me, and she approached slowly.

“Evan? Um...we’re all going out for breakfast and wondered if...um, you’d like to come? Maybe?”

I stared at her silently.

“So...that’s a no?”

“I’m busy.” My gaze flicked to Isaac and Zia, who looked relieved at my answer.

Amelia returned to her chair, and the three of them gathered their things, chatting and laughing with each other as they left.

Syd had hung back and waited, leaning against the table with her arms folded over her chest. “She was trying to be nice, you know. And politeness never killed anyone. You forget—I know you actually have a soft gooey center. Too bad it’s buried deep down inside all that festering darkness.”

“You’re going with them?”

“Unless you have a better offer.” She raised one eyebrow.

“I don’t.” Syd was the perfect team partner for me. She didn’t take my crap, stood up to me, shot down my ego when it grew too big, was dependable and fierce in battles—and she’d been my best friend for the past ten years, since primary school. We’d met when Max Delacort tried to take her water ration card and I’d stood up for her. Turned out she didn’t need my help. She shoved him against a wall, dared him to do it again, then invited me to sit with her at lunch.

She threw up her hands. “Fine. Go home and sit by yourself in that big empty house. I’m going out to socialize, you know, with friends. Which you don’t have.”

“Except you.”

Her lips twitched in a smile. “For now, anyway. See you later.”

I watched her walk out the door to meet the rest of the team. Once upon a time I would have joined them, but not anymore. Zia and Isaac would never have invited me if the choice was

left to them, and that was fine, because I preferred they keep their distance, but in Amelia's world, everyone should want to be friends, and life was easy and fair.

But I knew better than anyone that life wasn't fair. It was cruel, heartless, and ripped away the things you loved most.

Then it left you alone to deal with it.

Chapter 2—Evan, Present Day

I hadn't been lying to Amelia about being busy, but it wasn't anything I'd discuss with her. It wasn't her business, and was something deeply personal to me.

Chase's tattoo shop had a peculiar smell. Not bad, just a strange type of incense with a spicy/musky sort of blend. The familiar hum of the tattoo needle comforted me, and I rested my head back against the chair, my mind drifting as I began to doze. Because Benders worked primarily at night when people slept, I was tired after coming off a shift, and questioned scheduling this appointment so early in the morning. Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing since, other than the two of us, the shop was empty, and I was able to get some rest while Chase worked on my shoulder.

With so much dark ink on this new design, the pain level would be more intense, but I welcomed it with open arms. Today marked one year that my identical twin brother, Simon, had disappeared, and any discomfort I experienced was minor in comparison to what had happened to him. I deserved to suffer. After all—it was my fault he was gone.

Shuffling steps and the sound of someone dropping heavily onto the nearby chair let me know I had a visitor. "I don't know how you can sleep with a needle continuously stabbing you."

Sydney's comment shattered the tranquility of the moment. Opening my eyes, I rolled my head in her direction. "Breakfast over already?"

She shrugged. "The three of them together just aren't as compelling as a day in the life of Evan Resnik."

I smirked, but didn't believe her explanation for a second.

Her hazel eyes locked with mine. "I know what day it is, and knew you'd be here." I'd been in this same chair six months ago on my and Simon's seventeenth birthday when I'd gotten the first tattoo. Syd had also been here on that day.

I glanced to my left at Chase, who was intently focused on my left upper arm as he worked. Despite my limited ability to explain the kind of design I wanted, he seemed to instinctively understand exactly what I meant. Words and ideas had always come more easily to Simon. He'd disappeared from a locked room, and there had been no requests for ransom, no clues, and no leads...nothing. The lack of evidence was maddening. The investigators, our parents, and just about everyone assumed he was dead. But no matter what anyone said, I knew with certainty he was still alive, because if my twin brother had died, I would have felt his death as viscerally as if it were my own.

"What's that symbol? It kind of looks like the Roman numeral for two." Syd's curiosity had drawn her from the chair to get a closer look at Chase's work. As she leaned over his back, her long strands of sandy hair spilled over his shoulder, blending with his own shoulder-length dark brown.

"It's the universal symbol for twins," Chase replied, scrutinizing his design on my arm as he retracted the tattoo needle. "The dual vertical lines represent twins, the horizontal lines on the top and bottom indicate balance, and the rectangle formed in the middle signifies a strong foundation."

Syd tilted her head to the side. "Pretty impressive. Isn't that twin thing also your astrological sign? Some coincidence, huh?"

“Syd, can you move back a little?” Chase asked. “You’re blocking my light.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.” She stepped back and returned to her chair.

“You good, Evan?” He was still fixated on the design as his gloved hand swiped away dots of blood from my arm.

“Perfect.”

“Then we’re finished.”

I rose, approached the mirror hanging over Syd’s head, and examined the new tattoo. “Excellent as always. Nothing personal, but I hope this is our last visit.” Because if I saw Chase for another tattoo, that meant my brother hadn’t returned yet. This new twin design joined the white and black yin and yang symbol on my right upper arm. Simon and I were opposites in every way, but always a part of each other.

“Nah, I get it, man.” He waved me off before applying a healing ointment and waterproof bandage, then went over the aftercare instructions. “Hope your brother turns up soon, Evan.”

So did I. Now I was headed for my weekly appointment to see when that would be.

#

“A year ago today my brother disappeared, and you’re still no closer to finding him? Your primary job is to find people, Deckard, so maybe you should rethink your career choice.”

Agent Ryan Deckard was the lead hunter on Simon’s case. I’d gone straight to his office from the tattoo parlor. Syd had volunteered to come with me, probably to prevent me from creating too big of a scene, but it was a little late for that. For the past ten minutes, I’d badgered,

accused, and belittled Deckard, and from his outward appearance, he remained calm in the face of my attack, but fury danced in his eyes.

“Look, Resnik, I understand your frustration. I’m frustrated myself over the lack of evidence in this case, but we’re doing everything we can.” His professionalism was actually kind of admirable. I would have thrown myself out of here long ago.

“Everything you can?” I paced in front of the agent’s desk. “What does that include, exactly? Show me some shred of progress you’ve made over the past month. Six months, even. Any progress at all. I’ll wait.”

His jaw was locked so tightly, the tendons in his neck bulged. I bet his blood pressure was through the roof right now. “I’ve reviewed everything we…”

“You’ve reviewed, meaning you’ve sat in this chair and read files on your data pad.” I buried my hands in my hair and pulled on the ends in annoyance. One year, and nothing. No sign of Simon. I stopped pacing, braced my hands on his desk, and loomed over him. “You’re incompetent, Deckard! Get someone on this case who knows what they’re doing, someone who cares about finding my brother.”

He leaped from his chair, planting his hands on the desk and meeting my stance. We were nearly nose to nose. “Enough, Resnik! Every week you come in here and harass me because I haven’t found Simon. Do you honestly think your tactics increase the chances of locating him? I’m in here all hours of the night and day.” He pounded a fist on the wooden surface. “I’ve located every person I’ve ever been assigned. Every. One. I don’t give up. So just lay off and let me do what I do best.”

Flecks of spittle hit my face, but his anger only fueled my own. I wouldn’t back down.

“If this is what you do best, then maybe...”

“Enough, guys. This isn’t helping anyone. How about everyone step back and take a breath.” Syd stood, one hand pulling my upper arm, and the other pushing lightly on my chest to put some distance between Deckard and me. He shoved off the desk and slumped to his chair, and I fell back into mine, dropping my head forward and resting my elbows on my knees. The two of us took a moment to settle, each of us breathing deeply.

“I get it, all right, Evan? People don’t disappear from a locked room. It just doesn’t happen, and I’ve slammed my head repeatedly against the walls of this office at the lack of evidence. In my twenty-year career, I’ve never come across a case like this, and I’d sell my soul for a break.”

My hair curtained most of my face, and I nodded at his statement. I knew he hadn’t given up on Simon, but I liked to think my weekly rants in his office prevented anyone from forgetting about him. They needed to remember Simon was out there. Somewhere.

“I’ve twisted my mind sideways trying to come up with a theory, but so far, nothing holds water.” He massaged his temples, then cracked his neck. “You work with all those geniuses at Scientific Innovations. Why don’t you ask them if there’s some magical way a person could break through four walls without detection? I’ve talked to a few people there, but you have the inside track. Maybe they’ll be more candid with you than with me. Or maybe someone’s come up with new technology or theories over the past year.”

I rubbed my face and stood. “Yeah. Okay. Let’s go, Syd.” I threw open the door and strode into the hall.

She thanked Agent Deckard for his time, then followed me out.

Talk to the geniuses at SI, he'd said. Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. And I knew exactly who to ask.

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We took a ten-minute tram ride from the city to my house in the suburbs. While Syd sat, reading something on her data pad, I preferred to stand and look out the window, holding onto an overhead strap. Strips of blurred landscape whizzed by—varying shades of brown land on the bottom and blue sky overhead. Nothing ever changed. No vibrant seasonal flowers blooming, no explosion of colors in the fall. Without rain, everything just shriveled up and died. I expected to see tumbleweed ambling through my yard any day now.

When Simon and I were much smaller, before Tage's condition had reached the critical stage, our mother had enjoyed keeping a small garden of vegetables, flowers, and herbs. Most of what she grew was related to her work, breeding new strains of food and edible flowers. At the time, I didn't understand the significance of her work. I wanted to please my mother and thought presenting her with a bouquet of flowers from her garden would put a smile on her face. Her shock and subsequent scolding ensured I never made that mistake again.

I sighed heavily. Nearly all the items she'd grown were now extinct. Not much grew in our water-starved landscape anymore.

Syd had to nudge me at our stop, and we exited the tram station to walk the couple of blocks to my house. Many of the houses we passed were empty now—several families had relocated in the hopes of more resources, others had decided to try their own luck at living off the land in more remote locations, and some of the occupants had simply died.

Dry leaves skittered across the sidewalk leading up to the front door. Other than the occasional chirping of birds and laughter of kids a few doors down, the usual neighborhood sounds were absent. The hum of lawnmowers had been nonexistent for years now.

The scanner placed at the side of the door approved my handprint, and the lock clicked open. I entered and tossed my jacket over to the chair in the corner. It fell short and slid to the floor, resting atop shoes and another heavier jacket.

Syd stepped around me and headed to the kitchen. I trudged in the opposite direction toward the couch and slumped down heavily, tilting my head back and raking my hands through my hair.

“Don’t you have any food in the house, Evan?” she called from the kitchen. “Of course you don’t. You didn’t have anything to eat when I was here four days ago.”

“I forgot to send in the order again last week.”

“What have you been doing for meals?” She poked her head around the corner.

“Mostly eating at work,” I shrugged. “I live there more than here, anyway.”

She disappeared again, and I heard her rummaging around in the kitchen, probably still looking for food or cleaning up the few dishes left over on the rare occasions I’d eaten at home. After several minutes, she strode into the room carrying a plate. She kicked my legs to the floor, placed the food on the table in front of me, then sat next to me, one leg tucked underneath her.

“It takes pure talent to make a meal out of what you had in that kitchen. Now, give me your data pad.” She snatched it from the space beside me. While holding it with one hand, the

fingers of her other hand flew across the screen. “There. Next week’s meal order is done and it only took, what, a minute? Hardly an inconvenience.”

“Thanks, Syd.” I sighed and reached for the snack she’d made. When I shoved a hummus-coated cracker into my mouth, I winced. My upper arm was still tender from the new tattoo.

“You know, opening a window wouldn’t hurt. The place could use a good airing out. And you should drop off some clothes at the laundry center tonight on the way to work.” She wrinkled her nose as she swept the room, taking in the discarded clothing that lay wherever I’d shed them.

My hands curled into fists as my nostrils flared. “If you don’t like it, you’re free to leave. I haven’t needed a mother since mine walked out on me four years ago, and I don’t need one now.”

Her eyes narrowed as she turned her gaze on me. “I’m not trying to be your mother, and I’m certainly not your housekeeper. But it’s time you took some responsibility around here.”

“Household chores aren’t exactly high on my list of priorities. More important things come first.”

Syd inhaled deeply, held the breath, then exhaled slowly. She leaned toward me, rested one arm on the couch behind me, and placed her other hand on my thigh. “Yes, Simon is your priority, but you can’t stop taking care of yourself, and your weekly tirades at Agent Deckard’s office aren’t helping anyone.”

“Don’t tell me what I need to do.” I shoved her hand away, and she jerked it back as if it had been burned. My words had cut her, but I selfishly wanted her to hurt as much as I did.

She drew her leg out from under her to sit cross-legged. “I don’t need your attitude, so quit taking your frustration out on me. I’m the friend who stayed around to help you, remember? So just suck it up, act like an adult, and quit blaming yourself for something you had no control over.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and stared straight ahead, refusing to meet her gaze. “You weren’t there. You have no idea what happened.”

“You’re right, I don’t. But neither do you.”

I turned and glared at her, my guilt threatening to overwhelm me again, but she never broke eye contact. It wasn’t fair to Syd, dumping my anger on her. But she was here, convenient, and could handle it. How would long it be before she’d give up on me and leave, like all my other friends?

Like my parents.

Syd uncrossed her legs, twisted around, and slouched back against the couch, taking a deep breath and rubbing her hands over her face before looking over at me again. “I reserve the right to be straight with you, because that’s the kind of person I am, and you wouldn’t expect anything less. I know you’d do the same for me, so listen. You need to realize we may never know what happened to Simon.

“It’s been a year, and I know your bond was incredibly strong, even more so because of that weird twin-thing. But you bark and snarl at people, you’re always in a bad mood—you’re

like a drifting thunderstorm searching for a victim to strike with lightning. You've driven everyone away."

"Except you."

The corner of her mouth turned up, giving me a half smile. "Yeah. Except me. I know how much you miss him, how deep the pain is, and that it hasn't lessened. But it's time to start living again. Maybe we'll find him. But maybe we won't, and you need to accept that."

Syd might have been right, but that didn't make it any easier. Simon was my missing half, and since he'd been gone, it felt like I'd lost a limb. He'd been everything I'd never be. No matter what I told her, getting over his loss would never happen. But I'd tell her what she needed to hear. Reaching over, I took her hand and squeezed it lightly. "I'll try. I promise."

"That's all I can ask. You know that no matter what, I'm always here for you, right?"

I snorted. "It's a good thing, 'cause no one else wants the job."

She gripped my hand tighter. "You're tired. Why don't you get some rest? I'll see you at work later tonight."

As we stood and walked to the front door, I took note that she still hadn't let go of my hand. When I opened the door, she turned and slid her arms up around my neck and hugged me, her fingers tangling in my hair. Which was odd. Syd and I had hugged a thousand times over the years—when we'd been accepted into the Bender program, after Simon disappeared, or for no reason at all. She wasn't the type to hold back her emotions.

But this felt...different. Not bad, but like it meant something else. What had changed?

I wrapped my arms around her waist and returned the embrace.

She held on a few moments longer, then pulled back slightly and looked up at me, holding my gaze. I caught a flash of something in her eyes before she released me. Something like disappointment. In me?

“You’ll be okay, Evan. Never exactly the same, but you’ll find a new normal.”

“Yeah. Maybe. Thanks, Syd. I mean it.”

“I know you do.” She slipped out the door.

I closed it behind her, then leaned my forehead against its cool, firm surface. Syd was right. With Simon gone, I’d pushed everyone away, built a wall around myself, and smothered nearly every emotion. Except anger. After a year, I should be coping better with my loss. That sounded good in theory, but the guilt still ate me alive, gnawing away a piece of me every day since the night Simon disappeared.

What Syd didn’t know—what no one knew—was that I’d heard Simon calling for help that night and ignored him. When he’d called my name, instead of charging into his bedroom, I’d stayed in my own room beside his, and slung the pillow over my head to muffle the sounds of his screams. If I’d only done the right thing, been smarter and less insecure, he’d still be here with us, my parents wouldn’t have left me, and remorse and misery wouldn’t be my constant companions.

Chapter 3—Simon, Two and One-Half Years Ago

Keeping this information inside me was more difficult than splitting an atom. I'd won the opportunity to intern for the person I most admired in the science world—Dr. Lucas Sebastian, the founder and chief scientist of the research company, Scientific Innovations. SI was responsible for nearly every technological advance made in the past twenty years toward sustaining Tage.

The chances of winning the competition had been slim. More than one hundred people had applied. But I'd worked diligently on my project, going without sleep and food numerous times until my brother had brought me meals, forcing me to eat or threatening to carry me to bed if I didn't rest. Evan was the first person I most wanted to share this with.

Although anxious to tell him the news, my soul cried out for the welcome isolation of my lab in the basement of our home. This was valuable time that could be spent on my project, and I didn't care to be around all these people. But Evan came first, because he'd been just as invested and excited as I was.

I took a short cut through Central Square Park, and stopped beside a park bench. Various groups congregated around some kind of sport ball, an activity for which I had no time or interest. But if I wanted to locate Evan, my best bet was outside somewhere—anyplace without four walls to constrain him. When I didn't see him in the clearing, I expanded my search to the rock-climbing section. I found several of his friends scaling the face of a twenty-foot rock or belaying at the bottom, but my twin wasn't among them. A couple of them called out to me, thinking I was Evan. No point in correcting them. I waved and kept walking.

He was close. I felt the familiar swirling vortex of his emotions—dark and light, high and low—that was all Evan. Whatever he was feeling always rose easily to the surface. There were no hidden agendas with him. He'd laughed when I described the sensation, stating I was exactly the opposite— a river of calm, never slowing or speeding up. A constant he could always depend on. The ability to sense each other's presence had always been with us. We called it a twin connection, and had assumed it was common to all twins. But in speaking with others, we discovered that wasn't the case.

I turned in the other direction and spotted a familiar petite sandy blond sitting on a bench, her head lowered as she read something on her data pad. If I wanted to find Evan, she was my best shot. I headed over to her and blocked the late afternoon sun so I could see her face.

“Sydney, where is he?”

“I'm not your brother's keeper, Simon. Use your Wonder Twin powers and find him yourself.” She didn't even look up to acknowledge me.

“Syd, please. It's really important.”

She sighed heavily, and reluctantly lifted her eyes from the data pad, glancing to my right. Spinning in that direction, I observed a group of guys playing football on an adjacent field. Evan carried the ball and sprinted for the end zone, the closest person trailing at least ten feet behind him. He crossed the goal line, and was soon surrounded by his teammates, laughing and high-fiving each other. Even though I found sports to be a waste of my time, I made an attempt to keep up with football because Evan was on the team. I hadn't missed a game.

The grin slipped from his face and he looked over the heads of the other guys, searching, probably for me. When his eyes locked on mine, he immediately left the field, despite the loud protests of his teammates as he ran in my direction.

“Hey,” he said, not even breathing hard.

A run like that would have left me gasping for oxygen.

“What’s got you so excited? It feels like you’re about to burst into song or something.”

I couldn’t hold it in any longer. “I won. They awarded me the internship.”

His smile could have lit up the center of a black hole. “You won? I knew it! I told you not to worry!” He gripped my shoulders and pulled me into a hug.

It was hard to squeeze out any words with his arms wrapped tightly around me, but I managed a few. “While I appreciate your excitement, I’d really rather not have your sweat seeping into my clothing.”

“What? Oh, sorry.” He released me.

I wiped the side of my neck, damp from his perspiration.

“Congrats, Simon. Pretty awesome news,” Syd said, closing her data pad and smirking at my reaction over Evan’s sweat.

“Simon, this is seriously amazing. At fifteen, you’ll be the youngest research assistant at Scientific Innovations.”

I smiled, savoring that information and letting it seep in before commenting. Evan was sincerely happy for me, but having no interest in science, he truly had no grasp of what an honor

this was. “Working with Dr. Sebastian will be a privilege, something I never thought possible. At least, not before completing school. But he was very interested in my research on developing nutritional alternatives.”

“I’m sure it’s fascinating stuff. No time to discuss it right now, though.” Syd fluttered her hand in the air. “You’ll finish your schooling with tutors at SI, then?”

I chuckled. Any attempt to explain the details of my research would cause their eyes to glaze over due to their lack of interest and comprehension. “Yes. Six hours per day in the lab, two hours on school working at an accelerated rate.”

“You mean more like twelve hours in the lab,” Evan corrected.

I sighed happily. “One can only hope.”

With Tage facing the crisis of an unidentified disease killing the animal population, daily activities had undergone dramatic changes—traditional schooling being one of them. SI had opened several of its programs to gifted students, especially in the area of science. Anyone able to contribute to the planet’s survival was fast-tracked, allowing them to continue their education with private studies and finish much earlier than normal.

Evan snorted. “Simon, you and I have vastly different definitions of fun. I wouldn’t mind leaving school, but not to work in some lab like Mom and Dad. Wait...we still have parents, right?”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t be so snide. Their project is one of the highest priorities at SI, and they can’t be home every night.”

“Once a week is more like it,” Evan muttered, throwing his leg across the back of the bench and stretching. “Guess you know where we rank in the scheme of things.”

“Eww, Evan! Pull your shorts down and quit flashing people.” Syd turned sideways to avoid the view.

His response was to shrug and continue stretching.

“Dr. Sebastian just informed me today that our shortages aren’t the only dire ones. Earth’s situation is more extreme than we’d thought. Their fresh water supply is nearly depleted, the population in some areas has been cut by more than half, and we’re in no position to help them. You should be proud of Mom and Dad. They’ve made great strides in their fields. The needs of the many need to come before the two of us. Besides, we’re capable of taking care of ourselves.”

Evan lowered his leg and dropped onto the bench, stretching out and laying his sweaty head in Syd’s lap. She didn’t seem to mind. “I get it, Simon, but you’d think they’d check in every now and then to see if we’re still alive.”

“Mom messaged me this morning, wished me luck with the internship results, and said they’d be looking forward to good news when they arrived home this evening. They’ll be here working at the local offices of Scientific Innovations for a couple of days.”

“Guess that tells you who the favored child is.” Syd flicked Evan’s head with her fingers.

“That can’t be a surprise to you. We’re the spawn of two gifted scientists—one of us born with the heightened intelligence and abilities of our parents, and the other good at...well, we’re still waiting for confirmation on that.”

“Your talents are in other areas, Evan.” I was troubled by the way he always compared himself to me. “I could never deal with people the way you do. You’re a keen judge of character and have dozens of friends. I prefer the solitude of my lab. Whether you realize it or not, you’re a natural born leader, and have the ability to sort out the root of a problem and develop solutions faster than most people I’ve met.”

Someone who didn’t know Evan as well as I did might have missed the way the corner of his mouth turned up slightly, and mistaken the light crimson color that splashed across his face to be caused by his physical exertion. But I knew better.

Syd shoved Evan’s shoulder. “See? I’ve been telling you almost the same thing. Even though you’re identical twins, comparing you and Simon, other than looks, is like comparing river rocks to diamonds. And I’ll give you a hint which one of you is the rock.”

“Whatever.” Evan rolled his eyes.

But I could sense his pride as if it were my own. In a way, it was, since we felt each other’s emotions. At almost any given time, we knew what the other was experiencing. Distance hindered it somewhat, but when we were at home or school, it could be disconcerting, especially if one of us felt an especially strong emotion. Evan’s temper had threatened to derail me numerous times.

“Mom and Dad should be home soon. Are you ready to leave?” I asked.

Evan tilted his head back and raked his hands through his hair. “I guess. But we both know it’s not me they’re anxious to see.”

#

We would have beaten our parents if a group of admiring girls hadn't distracted Evan for nearly a half hour. By the time we got home, I didn't have the opportunity to give Mom and Dad the news of the internship, because word had spread rapidly through the company. They grabbed me the second I walked through the door.

Mom drew me into a hug. "Simon, we couldn't be prouder! What an honor for someone your age to be working with Dr. Sebastian."

Dad pulled me away from her for a hug of his own.

"You can learn a lot from him, Simon. Having Sebastian as a mentor can mean great things for your career at SI. Your project on nutritional alternatives must have really impressed him. Excellent job, son." And he slapped me on the back.

"Evan scored two touchdowns in the game last night." I untangled myself from Dad's arms. Although my brother and I had walked in together, our parents had yet to acknowledge his presence, and he now reclined on the couch, arms stretched across the back, mere feet away from where they stood.

Mom's focus had been on Dad and me, her eyes shining with pride, and at the mention of Evan's name, a look of confusion clouded her face, almost as if having another son had slipped her mind. "What?"

Evan held up a hand and waggled his fingers in our direction. "Hi, Mom, Dad."

"Evan, that's... good news." Mom moved in his direction.

Evan narrowed his eyes as if gauging her reaction. Lowering herself beside him on the sofa, she placed a hand on his shoulder, but Evan hesitated before allowing himself to be hugged. From where I stood, it looked excruciatingly awkward.

“Well, yes, Evan.” Dad cleared his throat, “That’s good news. Physical activity is important, of course. But how are your classes going?” He advanced to the chair adjacent to the couch, while I took the opportunity to go in the kitchen and give them a moment alone.

Our parents had always given more attention to my classes and grades than Evan’s. I’d explained to him it was because they and I spoke the same ‘language’—science. They’d both received recognition in their fields, were highly driven, and were committed to developing ways to aid our planet until more long-term solutions could be found. When opportunities to advance their projects arose at a remote branch of SI, neither hesitated at accepting those assignments, believing it to be their ultimate responsibility to our people and planet. Keeping our family one cohesive unit was a distant second in their list of priorities.

I didn’t doubt they loved each of us in their own way, but Evan had always struggled with their choice to leave, and there remained a rift between them. Especially since his grades were nowhere near my own, and his interests were so diverse from our parents’ expectations. There had never been any doubt in my mind Evan was intelligent and gifted, but his talents were in areas that didn’t parallel our parents’ goals for us.

My thoughts were interrupted by rising, tension-filled voices coming from the living room, and I felt Evan’s emotions churning between anger, sadness, and disappointment, anger rapidly gaining a lead. That hadn’t taken long at all. I dropped what I was doing to back him up. Not that he really needed it. But I’d always supported him, nonetheless.

I rounded the corner to see that battle lines had been drawn, with Evan standing behind the couch, and my parents on the opposite side. I took my place beside my brother.

“Not everyone is born to be a scientist! There are other ways to help, you know. If you’re both as intelligent as people say, why can’t you expand your minds and see that?” Evan ranted, holding his arms out wide.

Mom stood beside Dad, her arms crossed as she spoke. “Evan, we certainly don’t expect you to reach Simon’s level, but if you’d only apply yourself, perhaps you could obtain some sort of support position at SI and contribute in that way.”

He dropped his arms and leaned over, bracing his hands on the back of the sofa. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe I’m just not smart enough? That maybe Simon got all the brains and this is the best I’ll ever be? Or is that too horrible a concept to imagine? A Resnik with only average intelligence—the shame would be too much to bear.”

“Just stop. Your father and I know you’ve never given academics your best effort. Simon has spent hours upon hours studying and working in the lab, while you’ve played sports and traipsed around with your friends wasting your time. Maybe it’s not too late to get on the right track and make something of yourself.”

“Mom, Dad, you both need to quit.” Between Evan’s anger and my outrage at his treatment from our parents, I strained to maintain a civil tone. “How can you speak to Evan this way? It’s as if you don’t even know your own son. You’ve been so wrapped up in your own projects and my academics that you’ve never taken the time to learn about his interests.”

Our parents stood motionless at my outburst, their eyes wide in shock, and Mom's mouth hung open. Evan's emotional surges were a fairly common occurrence, but any outpouring from me was unusual.

Evan huffed. "Maybe if you hadn't abandoned your children and had stayed around to raise us, you'd have figured out Simon and I are different people. We'll never be the same, and I'll never be like the two of you." He spun to leave the room, but stopped and looked over his shoulder. "But it was nice of the two of you to drop by." He escaped through the front door, probably going for a run.

I turned back to see Mom's eyes narrowed, and Dad's head shaking slowly, his lips pressed tightly together.

"You've almost lost him," I said, my voice low. "Is it really worth berating your own son and making him feel less just because he doesn't choose the same path as you?"

"Simon," Mom called.

But I ignored her as I went out into the night in search of Evan.

Chapter 4—Evan, Present Day

The alarm on my data pad woke me. I squinted at the dim early evening light streaming in from the windows. Lifting my arms above my head, I stretched and remembered the dream I'd been having. Simon and I were about six years old when we figured out I could 'play' in his head. A smile slid across my face as I relived the memory.

Simon whispered from my bedroom door. "Evy, are you awake?"

I didn't answer, because he already knew I was.

He tiptoed over to my bed so he wouldn't disturb our parents down the hall. The bed jostled as he pulled back the covers and slipped in beside me.

I rolled toward him, my face only inches from his. The close proximity enabled us to keep our voices low. "Is it the stuff in your head again? Is that why you can't sleep?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Lots of ideas spinning around and my brain can't rest. I'm so tired." He yawned.

I rubbed my burning eyes. "It's hard for me to sleep when you can't sleep, so I'm tired, too."

"Is it like this in your head? Really busy?"

"Not when I want to sleep. When I'm awake, I think about fun things, like playing ball outside or swimming at the beach, but your brain is full of school stuff all the time. And none of that's fun. You were remembering that story we had to read yesterday about not having enough water."

Simon's brows drew together. "How do you know what I was thinking?"

I shrugged. "Guess it's that thing we do, when we know how the other one feels."

"But that's not the same as knowing what I think." His eyes widened. "Do you know what I'm thinking now?"

"No."

"Try, Evy. Like you did before."

I wasn't really sure how I'd done it, but I squeezed my eyes shut and thought about Simon and what was inside his head. For a minute, it felt like I floated, but then I was standing in the middle of a whirling cloud surrounded by Simon's voice. It sounded like he was talking to himself about stuff we'd learned at school, and numbers I didn't understand. But then I heard him say very clearly, 'Evy snores.'

I giggled. "No, I don't. You snore."

Simon gasped. "I didn't say that out loud. How did you do that?"

"I just thought about being in your head and I was there. Why do you like to talk about numbers so much?" I wrinkled my nose.

This time Simon shrugged. "I just like numbers and science stuff. Numbers make sense to me. My turn to try and get into your head." His face scrunched up like he was concentrating really hard, and he held his breath.

"Did it work?" I asked.

"No." He released the air from his lungs with a huff.

“Maybe you just have to practice.” We lay quietly, staring at each other, and all I could hear was the sound of our breathing.

“Evy, I just had another idea.”

“Maybe if you stopped thinking up so many ideas, we could both sleep,” I mumbled.

“But this might help both of us sleep, I promise.”

I sighed. “Okay, tell me your big idea.”

“You said you can make it quiet in your head when it’s time to sleep. Do you think you could go in my head again and make it quiet?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Guess I could try. Close your eyes.”

Simon obeyed, and once again, I floated into his swirling thoughts, wondering how someone could have this many things going on inside his head at once. No wonder we couldn’t sleep.

No more than a minute had passed when he opened his eyes. “How did you do that? It’s not loud anymore.”

“I just thought about having a big box, like where we put our toys, and I put all your ideas inside, then closed the lid.”

His eyes widened. “Did you lose my ideas? What if I need them again?”

“When you want to think about them, just open the lid and take them out,” I replied, like it was the simplest thing in the world.

Simon exhaled in relief, and then we both fell into a deep sleep, still facing each other, never moving until Mom woke us for school the next morning.

I hadn't thought about that memory in years, and it left a warm feeling inside me, almost like Simon was here. It had been a while since I'd last attempted to sense him. Maybe it was time to try again. I closed my eyes tightly and reached out, searching for a sign, some inkling that my twin was near.

Nothing.

The hole in my chest left by his disappearance ripped open a little wider, filling me with a deep, bone-chilling cold. Exactly as I'd expected.

Putting that thought out of my mind, I shoved off the covers, swung my legs over the side of the bed, and stood. It was time to go to work.

#

After entering Scientific Innovations, I had to pass through the lofty, two story common area before reaching my office. Conversation and laughter echoed down the hallway as I approached, but when I entered the room, the laughter came to an abrupt halt, and people detached themselves from groups, either scurrying in the opposite direction, or trying to look busy as I strode past them.

Overhead were large monitors displaying the current and scheduled cases in each lab. Directly in front of me on the second story level was a long expanse of glass which made up one wall of our director's office. Through one of those windows, I saw Gabriel Minnick standing with his hands clasped behind his back. He looked down, nodding imperceptibly in greeting

when our eyes met. When I'd been going through the assessment program to determine my suitability for the Mindbender Academy, Gabriel had all but singled me out and mentored me, saying he'd spotted my strengths immediately.

Stopping at my office first, I checked a few things, then headed to Gabriel's office for our daily briefing.

"Come in." The door muffled his reply.

I stepped inside and was thrust into the serenity and calm of his domain. Nearly everything was beige or white, and nothing was ever out of place. No leftover food containers or trash, just clean lines and sharp corners. His desk held only his data pad, a separate computer, and a picture of his wife. She was a beautiful woman, but something had happened and she wasn't in his life anymore; I wasn't sure why, and had never asked him about it. It was an unspoken rule that any information regarding her was off limits, never to be a topic of discussion.

Like his office, Gabriel's appearance was crisp and clean, his hair pulled back with a leather tie at the base of his neck. No strands escaped—ever. His clothes were always pressed and spotless, with no stray crumbs or stains. Syd had suggested I could learn a thing or two from Gabriel about laundry, but sometimes I wondered if he was really human. Seemed like someone that perfect would have to be a cyborg.

"Come in, Evan. Have a seat."

I approached the chair facing his desk and pulled out my data pad to receive this evening's list of cases.

“What’s on the agenda tonight?”

“Nothing too heavy. A pretty textbook night for your team.” He touched the screen of his data pad, then pointed to mine. Immediately, a list of the evening’s scheduled clients and their information appeared on my own data pad. Scanning the cases, I noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Gabriel was right. Just some basic cases of misplaced items, and a couple of recurring level one nightmares.

“So, Doc is back again.”

“Yes, he is,” Gabriel chuckled. “Such a brilliant, accomplished scientist, but sometimes I have to wonder how he even remembers the location of his lab.”

I smirked at his comment, because he was right. Dr. Paul Quill had made significant strides in Tage’s food situation and water conservation. He’d created underwater biospheres anchored to the sea floor that grew produce. The sea water evaporated from the heat of the sun and condensed on the roof of the biospheres, then dripped back down as fresh water to feed the plants.

The problem was, if Doc didn’t immediately enter his ideas into his data pad when epiphanies struck, they were lost in his subconscious. My team and I had helped him relocate those ideas numerous times. His mind was a fascinating place to be, constantly active with theories and concepts swirling around. It was very similar to Simon’s, and while in Dr. Quill’s mind, I’d thought about how much Simon would have loved to be with me and gain an insider’s view of Doc’s inner sanctum.

But even if Simon were here, that wouldn’t be a possibility. Bender cases were classified, and we were required to sign rigid confidentiality agreements. We discussed nothing

of what we saw or learned. Ever. Allowing someone to access your innermost thoughts and granting them permission to enter your mind was an act of the utmost trust. Betraying that trust was grounds for immediate dismissal and, depending on the severity of the breach, could potentially involve banishment to the Criminal Realm.

The Realm was a parallel world made up of citizens who broke the laws of Tage in the most atrocious ways. For minor offenses, a facility existed to house them for certain time periods, but those who committed the worst crimes were sent to a place from which they could never return. The Realm was made up entirely of criminals. Receiving no supplies or assistance from Tage, its inhabitants built their own society, and survived any way they could. Stories about life there could provide a lifetime supply of nightmares, and therefore job security for a Bender.

“I’ll leave it up to you to distribute the caseload to the team.” Gabriel slid his data pad to the side and leaned toward me, clasping his hands together on top of his desk. “I know yesterday marked a year since your brother disappeared. How are you doing?”

So, work talk was turning to a more personal agenda. “Fine.” I looked down at the white rug while twisting the silver earring in my left ear. My eyes flicked upward and took in Gabriel’s concerned face.

“Did you talk to your parents?”

Leaning back in the chair, I crossed my arms over my chest, and diverted my gaze to the wall of glass behind Gabriel. “It’s been a few months. I knew I wouldn’t hear from them on the anniversary, because they don’t want a painful reminder that I’m the one who’s left. They might as well have lost us both, because they act like I don’t exist—not that they paid much attention to

me before he was gone. I thought family were supposed to be supportive when things went off the rails, but I was stupid to think anything would change.”

It didn't used to be that way. When Simon and I were younger, before our parents had left us, our home had life and laughter—the way a family should be. Things I'd taken for granted at the time. It had never occurred to me our parents wouldn't be there one day, but they'd chosen to leave us when we were barely teenagers. They'd said we were mature and responsible—they probably meant Simon—and were sure we'd understand the importance of their work and their decision. Promises were made about everyday communications over the data pad. It would be almost like they were here.

And then promises were broken. They'd skipped a day here or there or were too busy to talk when we'd contacted them. Soon enough, communication had all but stopped between us. Until Simon had gone missing and they'd blamed me for not taking care of him. After efforts to locate Simon had failed, they'd returned to their work and all but forgotten me.

Like both of us had disappeared.

Syd had stayed with me the following three nights, never leaving my side, as I'd alternated among sobbing over my brother's absence, raging about my parents' abandonment yet again, and withdrawing into myself from grief and blame. On the fourth day, Gabriel came, and the two of them cleaned me up, forced me to eat, and then got me to SI to start bending, all against my will. But it had been the best thing for me, exactly what I'd needed. My job offered the stability I'd lacked at home, purpose, and a reason to get out of bed. It also gave me a physical outlet for my emotions. I threw myself into it, and my hard work paid off when I became the youngest team leader at SI.

The sympathetic expression on his face never wavered. “You’re right to be angry. Your parents have failed you. Anything you need—someone to talk to, a place to get away, whatever—I’m here for you. Remember that.”

The burden of guilt and pain I’d carried for the past year was exhausting. I’d blamed myself for so long, and I’d allowed my parents to do the same. But not anymore. I was going to bring Simon home. Me. Not my parents. Not Agent Deckard. Me.

He shifted in his chair. “That being said, I hope you’ll listen to what I’m about to say. This anger you’ve been harboring has resulted in you alienating most of your friends and sequestering yourself in your office or at home. I’ve also checked the logs. It’s been quite some time since you’ve downloaded any residual fear, and combined with your anger and grief, it makes for an unstable mixture.

“I’m concerned about you, Evan. Our relationship has always been more than just supervisor and employee. But I’m telling you as your supervisor,” he leveled his gaze at me, “get yourself to a lab and download.” Gabriel’s stern tone left no room for argument.

I slunk down, exhaling and rubbing my hands over my face. “I’ll try to make time. I didn’t mean to take it out on you. You’re the last person I should be dumping on.”

His lips curved into a smile. “I didn’t take it personally, Evan. You’re not the first person to sit in that chair and take out some misplaced aggression on me. It’s part of being a boss. And a friend.”

#

Prior to Dr. Quill being escorted to the lab and prepped for his case that evening, I was able to catch a few moments with him in the client lounge. When Deckard had mentioned geniuses at SI, Doc was the first person who came to mind. I'd worked with him for several months, and felt I could speak freely with him.

The lounge was decorated in muted, calming colors with reclining seats and plush pillows designed to provide a relaxing atmosphere for clients before they were prepped. Upon entering, I inhaled the pleasant smell of eucalyptus and heard the soft sounds of ocean waves from speakers hidden within the walls. Doc was lying in a recliner staring at the ceiling.

“Doc?”

At the sound of my voice, he brought the seat back to its original position. “I know I'm supposed to be meditating or letting my mind wander, but I can't sit here and do nothing, Evan. It's unnatural. Without anything to record my ideas, I'm probably creating concepts you'll have to locate in future cases.”

I grinned and lowered myself to the seat opposite him. “Don't worry, I'm not here about that. I have a question. Can you think of any way a person could disappear from a room, with a locked door and windows, and leave no trace of how he got out or where he was taken?”

“Is this a riddle?”

I tilted my head. “No, it's a serious question, I promise.”

He stroked his chin and stared at the wall behind me, his eyes somewhat unfocused. “Well, I wish I had a solution to offer, but the technology hasn't been discovered yet.”

Air whooshed from my lungs in disappointment. I'd allowed myself a sliver of hope, only to see it crushed. "I didn't think so, but thanks anyway."

"That's not to say it won't be, Evan."

I stood and clapped him on the shoulder.

"See you in the lab, Doc."

Chapter 5—Simon, Two Years Ago

Evan wouldn't take no for an answer when I'd said I didn't have time to take off work for dinner.

“If you don't meet me, I'll drag you forcibly from your lab on the grounds that you deserve a break. Just because our parents deserted us doesn't mean we can't have a meal together like a normal family.”

So, as dinnertime neared, I left the lab. Glancing at the time on my data pad, I noted I was ahead of schedule, and decided to take advantage of the extra time. Evan was somewhere in the park and said he'd meet me by the rock climbing section. A weathered park bench ahead of me on the left was empty, so I ambled in that direction and took a seat, enjoying just being still. Closing my eyes, I tilted my head back, basking in the warmth of late afternoon sunshine on my face and inhaling the musky smell of wet leaves from a recent rain shower.

My work day at Scientific Innovations began in the early morning, and I often never left until nine at night, sometimes later. Balancing on-site tutoring with my project work was challenging—not that I was complaining, because I truly believed this was my life's calling. Working at SI had exceeded my expectations, but I couldn't say when I'd last seen the sun or taken a few moments to myself to just...be still. To sit there and do nothing felt wrong somehow, against my genetic makeup—an act of selfishness when Tage's situation was so precarious.

But Evan always stressed the importance of downtime and rest, saying I wouldn't be of use to anyone if I was exhausted. In theory, he was correct, but slowing down my mind was the equivalent of preventing ocean waves from crashing ashore.

The brisk chill in the air reminded me winter was right around the corner, and I was glad I'd grabbed a jacket on my way out the door this morning. Only after putting my hands in the pockets and finding Evan's football gloves did I discover I'd taken his by mistake. He'd probably never miss it anyway.

It was time to get moving, and after inhaling deeply once more, I pulled the collar of Evan's jacket up around my neck and rose from the park bench. I'd only gone a few feet when I heard running footsteps behind me, and assumed it was someone jogging or kids playing around—until I was grabbed by the back of my jacket and spun in the opposite direction. Before I could catch a glimpse of the person responsible, his fist connected with my face. I staggered backwards. A warm gush of blood spurted from my nose and flowed over my mouth.

Another blow glanced off my cheek bone and struck my ear, but the next one caught me squarely under the chin, gnashing my teeth together. I dropped to the ground, curling into a fetal position and covering my face. When my attacker paused, I hoped he'd finished, but it was only to roll me to my back and sit astride my chest. Through my fingers, I saw Max Delacort, who had clearly mistaken me for Evan. "Resnik, I told you what would happen the next time I saw you!"

"Delacort! What the hell are you doing?" Evan. He must have witnessed the attack. Not a good thing.

Max's head spun toward Evan's voice, then whipped back to me, his forehead creased. "Simon?" he asked in a coarse whisper. I nodded, holding my hand over my nose in an attempt to stop the flow of blood. "I should have known when you didn't fight back."

To the right of Max's shoulder, I saw Evan sprinting toward us. I didn't need to see his face to know he was furious. I felt the rage surging through every vein in his body.

Max's eyes were wide in apology. "Simon, I'm so sorry, I would never intentionally hurt..." He touched my face softly and shook his head. "Evan's going to kill me."

"A definite possibility," I said in a distinct nasal tone.

Before Max could climb off me, Evan leaped over the park bench, grabbed him by the back of his collar, yanked him up, and spun him around.

If I didn't intervene, Evan might actually kill him. I wiped my nose with the sleeve of Evan's jacket, pushed myself from the ground, and staggered between the two of them, facing Evan. His breathing was heavy, eyes bulging, and nostrils flared. If he wasn't my brother, I'd have turned and run in the opposite direction, but instead, I brought my hands up and pushed lightly against him.

"Move, Simon!" Evan tried to dodge past me and get his hands on Max, but I moved with him. He looked over my shoulder and yelled, "Do you have a death wish, Delacort? You don't ever touch my brother!"

I shoved harder, but me trying to hold Evan back when he was this worked up was about as effective as butterfly wings keeping a storm at bay. "Stop it, Evan! It was an honest mistake. I'm wearing your jacket and Max thought I was you."

"He's right, Resnik. I swear I thought Simon was you. I only saw him from the back, and it's getting darker outside. You know I'd never go after him." Max's voice was pitched higher than normal, and his hands were up in a defensive stance.

“Look at his face! He’s bleeding and you’re hiding behind him like a coward.”

“Just hit me if it makes you feel better. I deserve it.” Max dropped his hands to his side and closed his eyes, as if resigned to accepting his punishment.

“Hitting you is a good place to start.” Evan lunged again.

“No one else is getting hit, so both of you just calm down!” I never raised my voice, and it caught them both by surprise. Max’s eyes popped open, and Evan backed away in shock. But he didn’t drop his steely gaze from Max’s face. I breathed in through my mouth and exhaled. My nose was throbbing and filled with coagulating blood. “He already apologized, Evan. It was just a misunderstanding.”

“It might have been a mistake thinking Simon was me, but assuming it had been me, what was your problem, Delacort? What’s got your panties in a wad this time?”

Max squared his jaw and narrowed his eyes. “That crap you pulled on the field yesterday. You knew I wouldn’t let that slide.”

Evan’s mouth twisted into a smirk. “Seriously?”

The two of them hurled insults back and forth, and no doubt fists would fly again without my intervention. I sighed heavily. The clash-of-the-alpha-males drama had been playing out since Evan and Max met in primary school, and had grown very tiresome for me. What had started this enmity was a mystery. It seemed to be hatred at first sight. “Can we call a time out?” I stepped between them once more, my hands gently pushing against their shoulders to separate them. This wasn’t the first time I’d acted as mediator during one of their confrontations. “Let’s go to dinner, Evan. I need to get cleaned up anyway.”

“Fine.” Evan pointed at Max as he backed away. “Don’t think this is over.”

Max eyed Evan, his mouth set in a hard line.

“Excellent, because I’m famished,” I sighed.

Evan turned to walk away, and as I fell in behind him, Max tugged on my sleeve to stop me, speaking too low for Evan to hear. “Simon, again, I’m so sorry. You have to know that I’d never hurt you.” He held out his other hand.

I shook it, noting my hand seemed to be perspiring all of a sudden, and my pulse quickened. “No hard feelings. I know it was an accident and, given your history with my brother, I’m surprised it hasn’t happened before,” I chuckled.

Max smiled, and while I was occupied with the unusual amber color of his eyes, he moved his other hand to my shoulder and gently squeezed it.

“Are we leaving or what? We’re going, we’re staying. I thought you wanted food?”

“I’m coming,” I called over my shoulder. Looking back at Max, I met his eyes and smiled again, ducking my head slightly. “Guess I’d better go.”

“Oh...yeah. Sorry again.” Max dropped my hand, then rubbed the back of his neck. “See you, Simon.”

I nodded in reply and turned to follow Evan, but hoped I’d see Max sooner rather than later.

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I huffed out a breath and shut down my lab equipment for the evening, syncing my data pad with what little I'd accomplished today. Distraction had never been a problem for me, not in school or work. Evan joked that my mind was like a laser—program a goal, activate the invisible blinders, and it became my sole focus in life until completion. He compared it to giving a scent to a hunting dog. Canine attribute or not, it was an ability I prided myself on, considering it one of my greatest strengths.

However, that ability had lain dormant for the past few days. Ever since I'd had my run in with Max, my thoughts had drifted to his strong jawline and the way his tousled, flaxen hair fell over his forehead when he'd apologized for hitting me. Or the stunning amber shade of his anxious eyes when the setting sun filtered through the trees and lit up his face. All very unscientific thoughts, and completely unrelated to my current projects. I found myself in foreign territory.

Evan and I had always confided in each other about things of this nature. Or, more accurately, Evan confided in me, since I had no time for such dalliances. He was rarely without a wide-eyed, adoring girl attached to his arm, but his interest in the opposite sex changed as often as colors in a kaleidoscope, and I'd ceased my attempts to remember their names. Until Abbi.

Abbi was a new transfer to our school, and when Evan saw her the first time she walked into class, I felt something in him change, like the shifting of tectonic plates. Even I could see how attractive she was, something that undoubtedly caught his attention initially, but over time, I came to know her as a friendly and intelligent person who had a keen interest in quantum physics. For Evan, she became his sole purpose for existence. The problem was, Abbi was the first girl he'd met, other than Syd, who wasn't waiting in line to be with him. She never looked in his direction. Only I knew how deeply this affected him, because underneath that undeniable

charisma and self-confident flashing smile, Evan still questioned whether he was enough. It was a deep-seated doubt planted by our parents that had grown and flourished over the years.

Being inexperienced in relationships, I wasn't much help, but encouraged him to take a more subtle approach instead of his current borderline stalking method. And he did. Evan got to know her as a friend, discovering that he genuinely liked her. Confident that the interest was mutual, he planned the perfect first date, Abbi accepted his invitation, and things went as he'd anticipated. He returned home that evening a taut bundle of smiles and excitement, and I felt the stirrings of confidence and hope building inside him.

Those budding euphoric feelings stuttered and came to a grinding halt when Evan learned Abbi also had a first date with Max. And the competition began, each trying to outdo the other, with Abbi completely unaware she was now the prize in a years old rivalry. She had to make a decision, and she did. It was Max.

Maybe he'd genuinely cared for her, or perhaps Abbi was just another challenge to be won over my brother, but I felt Evan's growing self-confidence shatter. In his mind, her choice had confirmed that our parents were right, and he'd never be good enough. It took him weeks to emerge from his blanket of depression, once again slapping on his mask of indifference and attaching a new girl to his arm. But I caught the flash of pain in his eyes every time he saw Max and Abbi together.

All of this drama and suffering reaffirmed my belief that relationships were a waste of time, and would only divert attention from my studies. Besides, no one had ever given me reason to look twice.

Until now. And that could cause problems not only with my work, but also with my twin. Abbi had been one tangle among many others in the adversarial relationship between Evan and Max that apparently was spawned over nothing more than each other's existence. Losing Abbi had left a permanent gouge in Evan's psyche, and another tick was added to the ever growing list of reasons he'd loathed Max. Especially since he'd broken up with Abbi a few weeks after she'd dumped Evan.

Evan had tried to influence my feeling towards Max, but I'd refused to let my brother's views color my perception of him. As a scientist, I preferred to gather facts and form my own opinions. I supported my brother, but he wasn't infallible and sometimes created more conflict than originally existed.

I'd interacted with Max occasionally at school, and since he also played sports, had seen him at Evan's games. The times we'd interacted, I'd found him quite engaging. We'd once had a long, enjoyable conversation regarding string theory. The discussion had gone late into the evening and continued over a quick dinner. With a sudden start, I realized how unusual that was. Max hadn't been in any advanced classes, but he seemed very knowledgeable about the subject, and had even caught up with me a few times after that for further discussions.

Had he spent grueling hours studying string theory purely for the sake of spending time with me? Was that dinner a date? My heart rate quickened at the thought, and my face warmed. With my 'blindness' on, getting to know Max hadn't been a priority, but after he'd nearly knocked me unconscious, the anger and contempt I'd seen in his amber eyes had abruptly transformed to pain and regret upon the realization it was my blood he'd spilled instead of Evan's.

If I mentioned having these sorts of thoughts about Max to my twin, I could confidently predict the outcome of that discussion. When Max was around, Evan's thoughts were dark and temperamental, a vortex of antagonism without a hint of respect or admiration. Not even as a competitor.

No. Best to keep my thoughts to myself on that topic.

I walked through the dimly lit front lobby, and pushed open the towering glass doors at the entrance of Scientific Innovations. The evening air was crisp, with the brightness of the full moon lighting a path along the sidewalk. Movement in my peripheral vision startled me, and I turned to see someone step from the cluster of trees lining the walkway.

“Simon?”

I stopped abruptly, knowing the source of that voice. He'd been the primary reason for my diversion over the past few days.

Max walked hesitantly toward me, as if afraid I might bolt. His shoes crunched the dry leaves littering the ground beneath the trees.

“Max? It's late, what are you doing here?” I seemed to be slightly short of breath. Odd.

His hands were shoved deep in his pockets, and the slight evening breeze ruffled his hair.

“Um, I wanted to apologize again for the other day, I—“

I shook my head, lifting my hand up to interrupt him. “No need. It was a misunderstanding.” Then a thought occurred to me. “You came all the way here just to apologize? How did you know I'd still be here at this hour?”

He dropped his head and looked up sideways at me. “Well, I kind of overheard Evan complaining about your late hours and how you lived here more than you did at home.”

I laughed. “He’s mentioned that a couple of times. Or twenty.” Max smiled, then all was silent except for the sound of dry leaves scraping against the sidewalk. He held my gaze and chewed on his lip. I tried to speak, but my mouth was too dry.

“Do you have to go home right now?” he asked, in a jumbled rush.

Tilting my head to the side, I managed to form words. “Not really.”

“Would you, uh, maybe want to grab some dinner with me?”

And there it was. Evan’s self-proclaimed nemesis, the one person who knew how to push his buttons with just a look, his primary cause of anguish over the past several years, had asked me out. I’d always been loyal to my brother—he was like an extension of myself, and I knew his heart as well as my own. I also understood the conflict and anger my spending time with Max would cause. So it was quite surprising when I heard myself answer, “Yes.”

His radiant smile was brighter than the full moon.