

What Power Chooses



Ian Columbe



Green Seed Books
Phoenix

What Power Chooses
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= Son =

The Poets Are Liars

Benevolence, 2026

*The poets are liars.
They want to sell you on love,
To sell you on petty desires.
The poets are our sons.*

*They want to feed you
Vile beliefs of who you should hurt.
And they'll convince you it's truth
With the most beautiful words.*

= 11 =

April 2048

Jacob Eres parked underneath the streetlight outside the Behaven residence and used its dim yellow light to find the Behavens' house key on his keyring. He slipped his shoes off upon entry and passed through the hallway from the dark doorway into the warm couch side lamplight.

"You're already packed?" Jacob asked, watching his best friend roll the sleeves on his blue button-up.

"I'm almost an adult," Ian laughed, though his brow was furrowed. "Didn't expect me to be responsible like one?"

"Sixteen is not almost an adult," Jacob said dryly. "Well, I guess we have a couple of hours before our flight, but we can sit in the airport if you want." Jacob didn't seem nearly as excited as Ian was.

"Man, I look pretty eager, huh?"

"I'm glad you are," Jacob said. "Makes me feel good about myself, since I got you this opportunity." Ian tightened the double knot on his shoe so hard he burned his skin. Would Ian be packing if Jacob hadn't arranged for Ian to be invited? No, but that was no reason for Jacob to remind him continually. It's not as if Ian's merits didn't help get him in either. Jacob acted like he was some ever-gracious benefactor to Ian, especially in the last few weeks, though it'd always been a bad habit. Ian reckoned it was because of a fight they'd had recently, and Jacob was trying to put him in his place,

establish his right to authority. All he'd succeeded in doing was irritating Ian.

Ian grabbed the suitcase to carry it out front. As both boys crossed the threshold of the property, the lights clicked off and the curtains slid into place. Ian listened for the whir of the automatic locks and continued to the car parked on the curb once he'd heard them. Ian tossed his suitcase into the back seat of Jacob's convertible.

"You want to drive?" Jacob asked, offering Ian the driver's seat. "Wait, do you have your license yet?"

"No." Ian sank into the passenger's seat. He had been asked this question countless times and was tired of answering it. Jacob knew he didn't have a license. Ian wanted to assume the best, but Jacob had been passive-aggressive all week, especially about his age and maturity.

It had just hit the time of morning when the roads were still dark, but the horizon started to glow. Once they were on the main roads, Jacob merged into the left lane to avoid the road work. Ian looked past the cones at the enormous pothole that he had made, and then at the building across from it, mournfully. It was a little mom-and-pop shop he'd always meant to visit but never did. Ian was disappointed it had gone to waste.

"That was a crazy fight," Ian muttered. During the fight, a missile had been fired at him, and Jacob got him out of the way. It had soared past them and hit that building. Not that it was much of a fight. They were being hunted by assassins.

"It was a scary fight," Jacob responded. "I was really worried about you guys."

"They didn't kill us, maybe they'll leave us alone."

Ian wasn't sure why they didn't. It's not like they couldn't have. Ian froze up at a crucial moment, too unfamiliar with the equipment Jacob had given him and too frightened seeing it fail to help as Jacob struggled, pinned by the neck. Their only saving grace was that one of the assassins inexplicably decided to stop the attack.

He understood why Jacob was mad at him for freezing like that, but he thought his reaction was reasonable; it was basic self-preservation. The humiliation from Jacob was somehow worse than the fear of the assassins.

"What the hell was that!?" Jacob had roared at Ian after the dust had settled.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't just run into—" Ian muttered.

"No! When it's your life on the line, fine, whatever, you can do what you want. But when you're working on a team, you don't get the luxury of freezing. Actually, I take that back. It is never just your life on the line. So, I don't ever want to see you choke up like that again. Come on, Ian, you're better than this."

Jacob hounded him, knocking on Ian's skull like he was expecting a hollow noise. Jacob looked up and turned around before deciding to snap back around to face Ian because he wasn't done yet. "You've been in much worse than that. What happened?"

"It is my life on the line! I can't just throw my own life away." Ian rambled, pleading with him.

"It's not just—" Jacob looked around at the crowd and sighed. "You know what? I need to cool off. We're lucky to be alive right now." He walked away, leaving Ian standing there in the dust.

"What about breakfast?"

“Go to school, Ian,” Jacob called. “You have security guards there.”

What about breakfast!?! What a stupid, childish question. Why would that have been important for anyone but himself? Why couldn’t he have shown Jacob that he did care and that he wanted to be better? Instead, he asked about breakfast like an idiot, implying his morning meal was more important than his friend’s life. That’s not true at all; Jacob just didn’t understand.

Breakfast had always been a tradition for them since they started going to school. Now that Ian had finally gotten a chance to get out of his public school and go to Kingdom Academy, this would be the last time they ever did it. He wanted one last chance to say goodbye to the past. In some ironic sense, asking about breakfast trapped Ian in the past. Asking a stupid, childish question like “What about breakfast?” would never allow him into the adult world. Of course it wouldn’t.

“I hope they leave us alone anyway. I’m ready to be done with the mess.” Ian continued, forcing his mind to return from wandering. “I’m going to a new school. I’m gonna make new friends. I just want to have fun, you know?”

Jacob responded from the driver’s seat to Ian’s hope about the assassins leaving them alone. “No. We got lucky and that’s going to piss them off more. I don’t want to think about what we’re going to have to deal with when we get back.”

“Okay, you’re killing the mood. I’m trying to hype myself up to go get into this great school, and you’re kind of ruining it.” Ian looked at Jacob out of the side of his eye and

then looked back out at the road. “So can we just enjoy the drive?”

“You brought it up. Are you still irritated with me? Is that what this is?” Jacob asked in a defeated tone.

“Are you?”

“I never was. I was just looking out for you.”

“Why? You’re not my dad.” Ian argued. “Let me handle my own business.”

“Ok, well, maybe I’m not, but I’m the only positive masculine figure in your life.”

“You’re sixteen, dude, chill out.” Ian rolled his eyes. There was no real age difference between the boys. Jacob’s birthday was a month before his, but for some reason, Ian always felt decades younger than Jacob. Jacob had all these honors and responsibilities and was inarguably wise for his age. The only problem was that he’d never shared any of his wisdom with Ian. He just wanted Ian to trust that he was always right, because for whatever reason, like a lot of adults, he deemed Ian unworthy of being part of the conversation. It made sense for adults; they just thought kids were dumb and immature, but Jacob was Ian’s age. Jacob should know better.

“I just want what’s best for you. And I’ve proven I know what that is. We’re on the way to go test for Kingdom Academy right now,” Jacob argued.

“Ok, but I had the information about the school, and I chose to go. You just supported me. You don’t have to support me on the serum. But tell me what’s wrong with it, and let me make my own decision.”

Ian had torn the argument right back open by mentioning the serum aloud. Ian had begged for equipment

in case of an attack and Jacob had belittled him immediately upon his first use.

Between then and now, Ian had been granted a serum from a Visitor who told him it was his birthright to use. It wasn't fallible like Jacob's equipment; Ian would be effectively immortal whenever he used the serum. He could technically be killed, but it would take more than a nuclear bomb. Jacob was convinced of the opposite. Jacob had it in his head that if Ian used the serum, he would ensure his own premature death. Death wasn't a side-effect of the serum. Something else would kill him; but obviously, Jacob wouldn't explain what that was.

"So, you didn't get rid of it?"

"Of course I did," Ian lied. "I mean, I stored it away, but I'm not using it."

Arriving at the airport ended the conversation. They spoke little on the plane to New York. Once they landed, the first thing Ian did was to check that he still had the serum. The woman who had given it to him promised it would make it through security, mentioning a spell. It seemed she was right.

He began to wonder if magic was real. The woman had called it a potion, but the planet from which she came was hundreds of years behind human science. Ian assumed they just didn't know what else to call it. Visitors couldn't investigate or use the sciences like humans could, so most planets were stuck in the era of the last humans who visited them.

Jacob called them a ride and, once they got on the road, Ian looked in amazement from the backseat as they approached their destination: Nale Tower Hotel.

The tower was the tallest building in America, with two sections twisting around each other for a hundred seventy-two floors. Each section was tapered to a point, creating space between them at the top. A glass sphere seemed to float in that space. Something held it there, but Ian couldn't see what.

The self-driving car pulled over to let them out at the tower's front doors and then sped away. Other students were waiting in the lobby with little cards in their hands. Ian was handed a similar card once he settled in, but his eyes had to adjust before he could read it. The front wall was made of glass, and light followed them into the building, landing on the golden handrails of the staircase opposite. Ian sat beside a stranger while waiting for Jacob to return from the vending machine. "What floor are you on?" Ian asked, finally able to see his card. It was the room numbers.

The guy next to him mumbled. "Seven"

Ian looked at his card. "Same."

"Yeah, I thought so." The kid looked off in the distance. "They assign floors based on which campus you're going to. Arrival times, too."

"Oh, right..."

"Everyone in this lobby right now is from Arizona. We're all going to seven."

Jacob crossed in front of Ian. "Dude, I'm gonna go check out our room."

The kid shook his head. "We don't have our keys yet. Ms. Lizila said we have to wait here until everyone has arrived." The kid didn't look at either of them. His eyes were on a young frog-like Visitor who was in the doorway, searching around the room for something.

The Visitor found what he was looking for. He ran over to the guy Ian was talking to and squeezed the life out of him, as the human tried to push him off. “Hi, Kaden! It’s great to see you! How was your summer?”

Kaden pushed the Visitor away. “Get off me.”

The Visitor beamed. “You know you missed me!” He sang. “And it looks like you’ve already made a friend. I’m Marsh, by the way,” He offered Ian a handshake.

“Ian,”

The woman handed Marsh his card. Marsh looked at his card, then over at Ian’s card.

“Look, we’re neighbors!” He laughed and looked at Kaden’s card. “And we’re roommates!” he said, poking Kaden in the arm.

“Did you seriously book us in the same room!?”

“Just to annoy you,” joked a blue-haired girl sitting by herself across from them.

“Hey!” Marsh greeted her.

“Hey, Marsh. It’s been forever, where have you been?” She answered.

“Around. You know me, always doing something. Is that Jacob-freaking-Eres? Talk about someone who hasn’t been around.” Marsh beamed at Ian’s friend.

“Marsh! Been busy too. You know the drill.” Jacob embraced the Visitor and greeted the other two humans.

Ian zoned out, waiting for the formalities to be over, but was interrupted by his new neighbor.

“Stand up.”

“What?”

“Stand up to greet Ms. Lizila,” Kaden whispered. Ian stood without thinking and the woman handed both of them keys.

“No one else is standing.” Ian was still confused.

“Yeah, but you want to stand out to these people.”

“Alright, hurry up! I’ve never seen the seventh floor.” Marsh said, running off toward the elevator.

“Arizona went to floor five last time,” Kaden explained as they followed Marsh to the elevators. They got in, and the blue-haired girl stepped in with them.

The elevator was spacious and pristine. The back mirror sparkled as though it had been polished seconds before they’d stepped in. Ian stood awkwardly listening to the others catch up as the floor numbers chimed. The doors opened. The blue-haired girl stepped out first, said her goodbyes, and hurried off to her room.

As Ian stepped out, mists hit his skin with a distinct rainforest humidity that lingered as he walked. The sounds of tropical birds singing, monkeys chirping, and a waterfall off somewhere rustled through the leaves. It smelled fresh here. It was completely overgrown and the plants were enormous. The ceiling felt like it was 200 feet in the air. Even the floor was just dirt, rocks, and the path they stood on.

With all the talk of magic recently, he thought a portal had opened up and sucked him into an actual rainforest. Magic seemed to make way more sense than placing a rainforest in a hotel instead of regular hallways.

“Is this supposed to be happening?” Ian asked Jacob. Jacob looked puzzled and then laughed.

“Yeah, you’ve never been here, huh?” Jacob said. He called to his friends who were slightly ahead, “Isn’t this fun?”

We get to see him react to all of this live.” Ian’s question was reasonable. This wasn’t normal. “It’s a long story. I’ll explain it later. But yes, this is supposed to be happening.”

They walked along the gravel path between two metal fences until they came to a brick wall in the back. It was overgrown with vines and lined with doors. Each door was made of birch wood and looked concerningly like they were about to fall apart. This was fortunately just a facade, a well-made façade, at that. Every door was completely structurally sound.

“Hey, you, could I steal you for a sec?” Kaden stopped Ian.

“Uh—” Ian hesitated.

“Don’t worry. He doesn’t bite.” Jacob tapped him on the shoulder and went into their room.

“I didn’t make a bad first impression, did I?” Kaden asked in a hushed tone.

“Uh, no, why?”

“You seem tense.” Kaden insisted. Ian’s face contorted with confusion. Jacob had weird friends.

“Uh- you’re fine. It was just a little embarrassing,” Ian admitted.

“Why?” Kaden pressed further. He was a bit awkward, but Ian assumed the best. He probably just wanted to get along with his friend’s friend, but this was such a weird way to go about it.

“Well, you know...I walked in, started getting ordered around, and I just took it, like... I don’t know.”

Kaden opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it. “You don’t know me. You don’t want advice from me. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“No, I—” Ian blew out a breath before continuing, “Advice is great. I love advice, I just don’t like being told what to do.” Ian was invested in the conversation by now and urged Kaden to continue.

“Well, that’s the advice.”

“What?”

“You’re gonna get bossed around here. I won’t do it if you don’t want me to. But if you learn to take orders well, you’ll make it here.”

“You don’t feel condescended to?” Ian felt a need to understand Kaden now. He was so unusual.

“Why would I?” It seemed Kaden didn’t understand him either.

“Like you can’t figure it out for yourself.”

“Your only job here is to do what you’re told. Everything else is a bonus. It’s a nice bonus if you can figure things out yourself—”

“What about figuring out how to do things a better way?” Ian interrupted him. He didn’t mean to cut him off; he was just so blown away by the completely different worldview. He had plenty of thoughts on the subject.

His best friend was one of the bossiest people he’d ever met, and that bossiness was the only real point of tension between the boys. Kaden was Jacob’s friend and clearly thought the same way, but he was more open than Jacob was. Ian hoped he could learn more about how Jacob thought through him.

“Exactly, but you still have to do what you’re told.” Kaden looked back at the flat, frog-like face, leaning in the doorway behind him. “Ok, well, that’s all I wanted to talk

about. Marsh's been waiting to invite you guys to dinner with us, I think." Kaden headed past the Visitor.

It was clear by Ian's investment in the conversation that he had warmed back up to Kaden. So Kaden had gotten what he wanted out of the conversation and cut it off before Ian even began to understand him.

"If you guys want to join me and Kaden on our little date—" Marsh started.

"WE'RE NOT GOING ON A DATE!" Kaden yelled from inside the room.

"Meet us back out here at five?" Marsh suggested.

"Sure," Ian said and then stepped into his room. It was just a normal hotel room with two beds and a large window. Ian and Jacob started to unpack. Ian pulled out his charging block and plugged in his phone and watch charger. He pulled his clothes out of his suitcase and put them in the drawer.

"Yo! You put your clothes in the hotel drawers? That's so weird!" Jacob said, disgusted, stretching and sprawling across his whole bed.

"Whatever, you get in your bed with shoes on." Ian rolled his eyes. Jacob stood up and wiped the footprints off the end of his blanket. He walked over to help Ian move food from their cold bag into the mini-fridge when there was a knock at the door. It was Marsh.

"Do you guys have any fancy clothes? Because the restaurant we're thinking about going to has a dress code." He asked. Ian and Jacob both looked at each other. Then Ian nodded.

"I only have fancy clothes," Ian answered. "My sister wanted me to make a good impression."

“Do you have anything going on until five?” Marsh asked.

“Uh, not really. Do we, Jacob?” Ian asked.

“Kaden’s getting a table reserved. Then he has some stuff to do, so I have no one to hang out with,” Marsh pleaded his case before Jacob could give him a disappointing answer.

“I’m going to unpack, you two have fun,” Jacob said.

“I don’t know. I think I should help unpack,” Ian said. He didn’t even think of the serum, he just didn’t want Jacob doing his chores for him, especially right now.

“No, no, no. You have fun. I’ll take care of it.” Jacob sent him on his way. He couldn’t come up with a real reason not to go and so conceded to hanging out with Marsh. Ian could use a fresh face anyway.

Ian was thrilled to have so much free time to enjoy the hotel, though he was bummed that they needed to pay extra to get to some floors, and that some were just closed. According to Marsh, those floors were just closed temporarily, but there was always a floor closed, no matter when he came to visit, often multiple. After a while of hanging out, Marsh and Ian had gotten comfortable enough to start bantering back and forth while playing games at the arcade.

“Do you want to move on to a new game?” Marsh asked, winding up a finishing move for the ninth time in a row.

“Once I win,” Ian said passionately.

“Should I ask Kaden to get us breakfast too?” Marsh quipped. Ian’s avatar died again. He stepped away from the controls and put his hands in the air.

“I’m done! I’m done! You’re cheating.” Ian accused him.

“The highest compliment I could be awarded,” Marsh gloated with a mock bow.

“Ian,” Jacob called from down the aisle of flashing lights.

“Uh, what’s up?” Ian turned his back to Marsh.

“You know what,” Jacob challenged. Marsh sensed the tension and stayed at the cabinet where he and Ian had just spent the last two hours. Once Ian got close enough, Jacob pulled the serum out of his pocket and showed it to Ian. Ian snatched it out of his hands. “You’re still lying to me.”

“Because you’re still being a jerk about it,” Ian said.

“What were you doing snooping through my stuff?”

“Unpacking it so you could hang out with *my* friends, dipshit.”

“Language.”

“And why should *your* requests be respected?”

“I’m not using it. There’s a reason I’m still on Earth. You know the woman who gave me this invited me to go to her planet. I didn’t because you didn’t want me using it.”

“Then why do you have it?” Jacob asked.

“Just in case. I don’t know.”

“Then you did plan on using it. There’s some other reason you’re on Earth and not Warland.”

Jacob’s callout was unfortunately true. The serum had come from a planet called Warland. When Ian received the serum, the instructions explained that it changed the way the user’s body reacted to physical impulses, allowing them to store those impulses as charges and release the energy as

electric and kinetic energy. Releasing a surplus of energy put a strain on the muscles. The one who gave it to him had required him to exercise and improve the force load his muscles could endure. It took him a while in the gym before he was ready to uphold his end of the agreement for receiving the serum. That time in the gym had made him start to question seriously what he wanted.

He had been offered a place on the throne of Warland. The serum would enable him to fulfill that role. The offer to rule the planet, however, had come as such: “Our whole world’s watching. They’ve been waiting for you to finally grow up, so you can take the mantle of king.”

He couldn’t even convince Jacob that he was grown up. How would he convince a planet that he was? He knew in his own heart that he was, but he didn’t have power over anyone else’s opinion of him. He wasn’t ready for their opinions. He told the one who gave him the serum that he needed some time to decide. But Jacob was right. It wasn’t a no.

= 2 =

First Contact

As 5:00 PM rolled around, Jacob and Ian trailed behind Marsh as he led them through the hotel hallways (some of the only normal-looking hallways in the building). Every time they passed a mirror or a painting, Ian would lock eyes with it to avoid making eye contact with Jacob. The rest of the time, he stared at the plain white walls, looking for the next piece of decor. The vibrant red carpets drew his eye much better, but Ian would be damned if he would be caught looking down sheepishly when he'd done nothing wrong. Jacob, not seeming to notice or care for Ian's aversion, continued rambling.

"To answer your question from before, Nale built the tower so that he could self-educate. There's all kinds of stuff in here, but most of it is focused on elaborate science experiments. His big experiment, though, that really pushed him to build this place, was illegal. He couldn't keep Visitors in a regular climate-controlled lab like another biosphere, which is what he was planning to do. So that's why the floors with rooms on them are like that. If he made it a 'hotel', he was allowed to. So part of the reason it's a hotel is so that he can exploit Visitors."

"Jacob, are we gonna pretend that didn't just happen? Like, we can't just be back to casual conversation. That was

insane. You came in and you just started attacking me. That's not what friends do."

"Well, I don't know what you want me to do. You disobeyed my direct orders."

"You don't order me." Ian laughed in disbelief. "I order myself, okay?"

"My direct request, then? A friend would respect my request if it were as important to me as this is. Since you won't act like a friend, I can't. But I do want to be your friend, so I'll put on the tough guy act for the big conversation, and then we can be friends again. You seemed like you wanted to know earlier, and now is a good time, since you don't really feel like talking."

"I do want to know." Ian sighed. "Alright, so tell me why they're putting us in climate-controlled rooms."

"They can't test at every location in the country: too expensive. Even though ours is the first and the biggest location, we don't do it here because of some new education laws that say any entry exams have to be free. Their loophole is to charge for the hotel."

"So why not rent a hotel here?"

"Because the profits would just go to the hotel here?" Jacob scoffed like it was a stupid question.

"Okay, man." Ian started looking at the decor again.

"So, even though Nathan Nale isn't involved with the school at all, he lets his dad use the hotel. You should know his dad is the owner of the school and he funnels the money from the student rooms into the tests."

Marsh hit the button for fifty-two as the three piled into the elevator. When the doors opened, they were greeted with a large hallway. The floor was tiled white and black, and

the walls were red upholstery. There were seven doors opening into the hallway. They followed Marsh through one of them and found the host, dressed to the nines in a full suit.

“Welcome in. Take a seat while we get your tables ready for you,” he said, heading into the dining room. Ian sat on the bench next to the chair Kaden had already claimed. Marsh stood joyfully watching the lobster tank.

“I should call you Ariel,” Kaden called to Marsh.

“I don’t know if she’d like this. She’d love to meet the lobsters, but she might feel bad for them.”

“Who’s Ariel?” Ian asked.

“She’s a close friend of ours. She seems like she’s going through some stuff right now, so we haven’t bothered her. We’re supposed to go do something with her later tonight, so hopefully we’ll find out what’s up.” Kaden explained. “Anyway, sorry, Marsh. There’s gonna be a bit of a wait. I know we said 5:00, but Nale and his tower are quite popular.”

“I don’t know why,” Jacob complained.

“Not a fan of Nale?” Kaden laughed.

“I think he’s cool,” Ian said. “You don’t find it inspiring at all? He made this hotel when he was twelve, and I don’t know about you, but this is the coolest hotel I’ve ever been to.”

“Yeah, obviously he makes cool shit, I don’t think that’s why Jacob doesn’t like him,” Kaden argued.

“Language.”

“Sorry?” Kaden asked.

“Don’t worry about him. It’s just an old habit. Say whatever you want.” Jacob said.

“No, it’s fine. I can watch it,” Kaden offered.

“It’s fine. It’s just awkward. It makes me cringe,” Ian said.

“He can live with a little cringe. Don’t let him tell you what to do, Kaden,” Jacob insisted.

“Leave the boy alone, Jacob,” Marsh chimed in. “If he doesn’t like it, he doesn’t like it.”

“No, it’s not about what he makes. Nale’s just a dick.” Jacob returning to his earlier comment.

“Oh my God, Jacob, you are too. Can’t ever just do what someone asks?” Kaden reprimanded Jacob.

“He does make a lot of cool and useful stuff. He donates a lot of his money, which is good. He’s just kinda racist, so he gets a well-earned, bad rep.” Marsh steered the conversation back on track.

“He has some opinions on Visitors,” Kaden said. “And they aren’t hateful. They’re just a little close-minded. Not very good for his PR. Marsh’s right. He’s not all bad.”

“What kind of opinions? I’ve never heard anything about this.”

“He thinks Visitors are naturally docile. A more submissive species. That we’re inept with all sciences and arts,” Marsh explained. “There are grounds for what he’s saying. It might be true. I’ve never picked a fight in my life. And I’ve been playing guitar for years but can’t write a song to save my life. I don’t know of any Visitors who are different, but it might just be a cultural thing.

“There’s so much we don’t know about the difference between humans and Visitors because we’ve only had any crossover for a single generation; it’s a little ignorant to say anything conclusively. That kind of narrow-

mindedness is just not what you'd expect from the man with the most educational resources in the world."

"I'm just saying I don't like him," Jacob concluded the conversation, sitting down on one of the benches.

The conversation died until the host sat them at their table.

"So what do you do for fun, Ian?" Marsh asked.

"I just started working out, actually," Ian said.

"You did?" Jacob asked.

"I mean, I just did."

"Newbie gains are something else. You look pretty good already," Kaden remarked.

"Well, he's on steroids," Jacob said to Kaden.

"I am not on steroids," Ian laughed, not looking at Jacob.

"Well, maybe something worse," Jacob doubled down.

"Jacob's convinced I'm on drugs because I'm acting different," Ian said. "But I'm not. I've been doing well. I've been in a good mood. A normal friend would be happy for me, but you all know Jacob."

"I will be as long as you don't get yourself killed," Jacob said. He finally turned to Ian. "You know, from an overdose or something."

"Hey, if you ever need a gym bro, give me a holler. Marsh won't work out with me." Kaden saved the conversation.

"It's just not for me, I guess," Marsh said.

"Yeah, I'd be down for that. I don't have your phone number or anything, I should probably get that." Ian said.

Kaden scribbled it down on a napkin. "Where do you work out?"

"I've got a home gym," Kaden said. "I don't have time for a commute. That's the real reason Marsh doesn't work out with me. He has a hard time putting up with my dad."

"Why? What's up with your dad?" Ian asked.

"Listen, he loves me. That's all anyone can ask for," Kaden answered.

"Right, yeah." Ian agreed.

"And hey, between you and me, hook me up with whatever you've got."

"I have to know. What inspired you to start going to the gym, Ian?" Marsh asked.

"Perhaps not for the right reasons," Jacob interjected, of course alluding to the fact that he was following the instructions about the serum.

"Jacob." Ian turned red. He wasn't going to be embarrassed in front of his new friends.

"Ahh, for a woman?" Marsh asked.

Ian laughed. "No, it's mostly to punch harder and be able to carry heavy stuff."

"You seem like the sort of guy who ought to have a partner. You're good-looking enough. Quite a charmer with a quick wit. You're friends with Jacob, so you must have picked up a tip or two."

"Oh, you flatter me, good sir," Jacob interjected.

"Is it flattery, though?" Kaden asked.

"You can shut it." Jacob fussed at him.

“No, there’s no girlfriend,” Ian said. Marsh made a limp wrist gesture. Ian scoffed, “There’s no boyfriend either, geez. Do you have a boyfriend?”

“My love story is of the unrequited variety,” Marsh responded.

“Ah! that’s alright. My love story was written by a guy who hates romance. Is your love interest even aware of your ‘love story?’” Ian asked.

“I’ve done everything I can to make them aware.”

“Except for actually telling them,” Jacob interjected.

“I shouldn’t need to.” Marsh looked over at Kaden. Kaden was staring off into space, but noticed the silence.

“Anyway,” Kaden said.

“What do you do for fun, Marsh?” Ian saved the situation.

“I play piano. Oh, and I love to read; my room looks more like a library than a bedroom.”

“Oh, that’s cool; my sister loves to read.”

“I’d love to spend my days just hanging out on a porch swing, having pleasant conversation, though. I’d do that for fun if I had the time.” Marsh daydreamed.

“Oh, the things I’d do if I had the time.” Ian leaned back into the booth.

“Get good at fighting games? Maybe?”

“Oh, trust me; I put in plenty of time for that.”

It was a good time on all the roads of conversation they went down, and the food was divine. Jacob didn’t have to understand why Nale’s tower was so popular; Ian did. The lamb chops had Ian wishing Nale would build a tower right in the middle of his hometown, Phoenix.

Once they had finished eating, the boys took Ian to the usual hang-out spots where they had spent their visits in previous years. Ian waited behind to grab a drink from the vending machine while they went up to one of the balconies. The blue-haired girl he'd met briefly earlier was in line in front of him, buying water.

"Excuse me," She stepped out of the way and began to leave. She turned around suddenly and asked him a question. "You're Ian, aren't you?"

"Yeah. You're one of Jacob's friends, right?"

"Ariel Sage."

"Oh, yeah. They were talking about you at dinner. You're the animal girl, right?" Ian reached down and grabbed his can of root beer from the vending machine.

"That's me."

"Has Jacob talked about me?"

"A couple of times. Jacob doesn't talk about his life that much, but I remember you because every time he'd mention you or post a picture of you, he'd call you his little brother."

"Of course he does." Ian shook his head.

"And we thought that was weird since we knew he didn't have a little brother, but he would go, 'Nah, he's basically my brother,' you know?" Ian listened as she followed him to the elevators. "Which floor?"

"Uh, s—" Ian began.

"Seven, duh, obviously. My mind is somewhere else today," Ariel laughed. Ian was not going to floor seven, but he wanted to stay and talk to this girl a little longer. It was a fair assumption that he'd be going to his room, so he played along.

“So I’ve always wanted to meet you, and I saw you with Jacob when you came in. But you look older than I expected since I’ve only seen old pictures, so I wasn’t sure if it was you.”

The doors opened, and they began to walk along the path. The fireflies flew out of their way as they walked past.

“That’s cause we’re the same age. He’s just weird about me. I couldn’t tell you why he acts like he’s my older brother. Not even that, I swear he acts like he’s my dad.” Ian caught himself carelessly complaining to this total stranger, “Anyway, you’re a friend of Jacob’s, I’m guessing you’re here for the tests too. Oh, and you’re on floor seven. My head’s somewhere else today too.”

“It’s the stress from the exams,” She giggled.

“You’re nervous too?” Ian asked.

“I wouldn’t say nervous is the right word,” Ariel said. “There’s nothing we can do except be prepared, but I don’t really know how to prepare. I mean... They’re fun-ish.”

“You don’t study for these?” Ian asked.

“They don’t tell you what to study for,” Ariel said.

“Yeah, that might be why no one would give me a straight answer. That’s what’s been making me nervous.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be if I were you. My only advice is: pay attention. Every detail matters. That’s all these tests are about—attention to detail.”

“I’ll try not to be. I’ve got to get into this school. It’s a lot of pressure.”

“Like I said, they’re fun... kinda. As long as you pass. You will, especially if you need to get in. You’ll apply yourself and do great.”

“Thank you.” Ian smiled warmly.

“Do you mind me asking why?”

“Oh, I just need the time and freedom. I go to school for three hours a day and it’s such a good education, I can just skip college. I’m a busy man, so I need those hours and those years.”

“I was just asking because I need to as well, but no one else really gets it. I mean, I knew you didn’t have the same reason as me, but I was still curious.” Ariel said.

“Oh yeah? Do you mind me asking?”

“This school’s all I got.” She shrugged. “This is my room, so...we can talk about it later. It was nice meeting you!”

“Yeah, of course, you too. I’ll see you around.” He started down the dirt path to his room and checked over his shoulder to see if she had closed the door.

Just before she closed the door, she peeked back out and called after him. “Have faith in yourself.”

“I will, I’m excited,” Ian called. “Good night, Ariel,”

“Good night, Ian,” She laughed. Once the door had closed, Ian hurried back to the elevator to catch up with his friends.

They had found a pool table on the balcony stories above the tallest rooftops around them. Ian joined in playing as the sun went down on the unsleeping city. Marsh and Ian teamed up against Kaden and Jacob. Once the sun sank beneath the concrete, Marsh decided to call it a night.

“You know, it’s nice getting to know you, Ian,” Marsh said.

“You’re a cool guy,” Kaden added, holding the cue in his right hand and shaking Ian’s with his left. “I’m hoping you make it in. I think we could be friends.”

“I do too. I’ll see you around, guys. This was fun.”

“Bye, Kaden. Marsh, you too,” Jacob said, as they headed through the glass doors back inside. Ian went to rack his cue and the triangle. He turned to see Jacob looking through the glass doors, not moving a muscle. The only hint he wasn’t a statue was his tie blowing in the howling wind.

“So, you want to punch harder,” Jacob called over the wind, “huh?”

“Yeah, why?”

“‘Why’ is the question.”

“I just think I’d feel safer.”

“You don’t want to punch harder because Certina told you that you should?” Jacob asked.

“You know her! You know her name!” Ian accused. Certina was the woman who gave Ian the serum. “You’re not gonna tell me how, are you?”

“That’s none of your business,” Jacob said.

“And what I do with the serum is none of yours.” Ian stormed back into the building, but didn’t go to bed; he didn’t want Jacob to find him in the room. He decided to bide his time in the Nale Hotel library until he was sure Jacob was asleep.

The library doubled as an art museum. He ignored the books and admired the paintings instead. The current style was still performance pieces, but Nale had different tastes. He’d built the world’s largest collection of surrealist paintings and put them here. The melted clocks of *Persistence of Memory* could be viewed on their original canvas alongside the famous apple in *Son of Man*.

Most of those were pretty well known, but the one that caught Ian’s eye was by an artist named Benevolence. It

was a painting of hundreds of men with the same face repeating forever in a winding line across the surface of a calm ocean, each sticking a knife in the back of the man in front of him.

The painting itself was mesmerizing, but its little info plaque was odd. Most of the plaques pretended to know what the painting was about, but this one admitted no one knew. Instead, it speculated about the artist since the piece's meaning remained mysterious. Some scholars believed she wasn't even human, which would be huge because no other known work of art was created by a Visitor.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" A man in a full white suit had snuck up beside him.

"I thought Visitors couldn't make art."

"You want to know my theory?" the man asked. "It's a descendant of a human, so distant, she's forgotten where she came from."

"It's an interesting theory." Ian nodded, looking at the artwork.

"Hard to believe, if you don't have full context. This isn't the only work that's come from Benevolence, though. She's more a poet than a painter, originating from the planet of Warland." Ian was shocked to hear that name come out of anyone's mouth other than Jacob's or Certina's.

He looked up to see who the mystery man was and recognized the face much faster than he recognized the voice. He accidentally let a gasp escape his lungs as he took a step back.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." It was none other than Nathan Nale. Ian knew Nale's father worked at the school, but Nale didn't. He should be too busy with any

of his countless business enterprises. Clearly, he was here for something special. Ian made sure to straighten his back and smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Ian Behaven. I look forward to grading your exam. I’m sure I’ll be impressed.”

“I didn’t realize you worked at the school, or that you knew me.”

“I have a personal project. I got permission from my father, the owner of the Kingdom Academy school system. I’m Nathan Nale, by the way.”

“I know.” Ian laughed in disbelief at his situation.

“I got permission to oversee your exam, as well as a couple of classmates, and to hire the ones that do well for a project. You inspired that project, you know.”

Ian was too stunned to speak. How did Nathan Nale even find him? Did he know about the serum? He knew about Warland.

At Ian’s blank stare, Nale explained, “I’ve been watching the Auctrid Case.”

A couple of years earlier, the Phoenix police had commissioned Jacob to build a suit of armor called the Goliath. He had also worked with them as an investigator on cases like the Auctrid epidemic. Jacob had stolen some samples from the illegal organization that produced it, which is why he and Ian were being hunted by the Visitor assassins in the first place.

Somehow, information had leaked that Ian Behaven had a connection to the man in the Goliath armor, and so assassins made Ian their target to draw that man out. Jacob had promised never to let anything happen to Ian, but Ian wanted to take care of himself. Ian had begged Jacob to make him a suit under this premise. Of course, Ian couldn’t even

recall this much without becoming hot with embarrassment, remembering also that when given a chance to use it, to ‘take care of himself’, he had frozen. If the assassins had gone through with it, Ian’s hesitation would have killed Jacob. Ian wasn’t exactly a core team member.

“I’m not that involved. I’m really just included for my own personal safety. How did I inspire it?”

“Well, you and your crew, especially that Goliath...the attempt they’re making is inspiring. They just aren’t efficient enough at shutting down Auctrid or the man behind it. They don’t have the resources, and I’m anxious about another war spawning from it if we’re not quick.”

“The Auctrid stuff is a small operation. It’s a local problem. I don’t think you have to worry.”

“It’s historical! It’s the first weapon used by Visitors that wasn’t designed to be used by humans first. The man at the center of the epidemic is dead set on making sure that the damage done by this weapon is taken to the fullest extent of what its nature necessitates.”

“What’s the project?”

“Let’s see how you do on your exams. Try your best. The project pays well.” Nale tapped him on the shoulder and departed.

= 3 =

Ariel Sage

Ariel sat near the edge of a lake. The deep purples and blues of the sky reflected off the water and touched every leaf and blade of grass around it. The light of the waning crescent moon danced on the water, though it barely reflected in the girl's eyes. The light flickered out, covered by the shade of her brow as it furrowed.

“What’s taking them so long?!” Ariel asked herself. Her spirits lifted as she heard footsteps behind her, but when she turned, it wasn’t Kaden or Marsh. It was Ian.

“Hey, Ariel.” He moved to her side to watch the water.

“Hey! What are you doing here?” Ariel asked.

“Couldn’t sleep. I have a lot on my mind,” Ian explained.

He paused for a moment to listen to the faint call of the crickets and the quiet hooting of the owls with her. The sound of the frog croaking on the lily pad in front of them nearly overpowered all other sounds of the night. He broke the silence quickly, though, to give her the exciting news. “I just met Nathan Nale.”

“What? No way.”

“He just gave me a lecture on a painting and left.” Ian sat down next to her.

“You’re lying.” She laughed.

"I'm so serious. He said he's here to grade my exam. I inspired him to start some project." Ian insisted.

"He's not even here. He was broadcasting live from Arizona this morning."

"Okay, you don't believe me, but you'll see. So, what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for Kaden and Marsh," Ariel said. She looked at her watch. Marsh gave it to her when she was little. He made her jealous by giving Kaden a nicer one, but she had grown to love the watch.

"Oh, what for? I think they're asleep."

Ariel glared at the pond, accidentally splashing the frog when she kicked her foot through the water. The frog croaked louder in agitation. She sighed and buried her face in her knees until she regained her composure.

She looked at the shadowy trees across the lake and the artificial stars above them. Floor seven was beautiful at night, but she wanted to see real stars. She was going to see the Crystal Observatory with or without the boys.

"You know what, since you're here..." Ariel jumped up and grabbed his arms. She dragged him toward the elevator. "I got these tickets, as a pass to every floor of the hotel at any time. Kaden, Marsh, and I were going to go check out all the floors we couldn't go to before. But no, they fell asleep."

"I'm sorry," Ian said.

"You don't have to come. Only if you want to." She paused right outside the elevator.

"Yeah, of course I do. This is gonna be fun!"

"You pick where to start. As a courtesy for joining me," Ariel said, as Ian stepped into the elevator.

“No, it's your thing. You paid for the tickets.”

“I was supposed to pay and the boys were supposed to plan. I don't even know what any of these floors are.”

"Here," he said, randomly hitting buttons on the panel. "The elevator will choose."

“What the hell? What if people are waiting on the elevator? They're going to have to wait forever.”

“It's fiiinnne.”

Stepping out on the first floor the elevator stopped on, the pair was greeted by a huge gymnasium with a life size chess set and full-size basketball court.

"How often you wanna bet that chess game gets ruined by a stray basketball?" Ariel poked fun at the room design as Ian followed her out of the elevator.

"There's a net around the court," Ian responded, picking up a ball.

They each took a few shots back and forth. Ariel quickly got into a rhythm and made a couple of points. Ian figured it out, too. He got more in total, but fewer in a row. Ian's final shot was so bad that it went over the court net and knocked over the giant chess set.

“Ha! Told you so.” Ariel gloated.

“I suppose I ought to go pick that up.” Ian sighed.

“You ought to, huh? Here I'll help”

“You want to play a round?” Ian asked, setting the king back in place.

“I guess we can play one round. I'm warning you, though, I'm good.”

“Yeah? We'll see,”

Ian chose black, a “rookie mistake.” Ariel shook her head, disappointed with him.

“You should always want to move first. It's a huge strategic advantage.”

She lost in seven moves.

“That's checkmate.”

“That doesn't count! That was like five moves.” Ariel complained.

“Why'd you take the pawn then? Obviously that was dumb,” Ian laughed.

“Oh, you're calling me dumb?” She crossed her arms and tried not to smile.

“You handed me that win.”

“If I had taken your horse, you would have taken mine.”

“What's putting you in checkmate right now?”

Ariel looked at the knight she had neglected to take. “Shut up,” she said quietly, playing with her bottom lip as she thought. “You cheated.”

Ian shook his head and laughed. He reset the board, and they started a new round. Ariel quickly realized she wouldn't be able to win after she lost her queen to a bishop that she just “didn't see,” so she tried to trap him into a stalemate. He caught on and kept his pieces away from her king so that he didn't accidentally put himself in stalemate. So, Ariel's king hopped from white square to black square hoping Ian would slip up. He was too cocky not to.

“Wait...no,” Ian sighed realizing he moved his rook one space too far. “Take backsies?”

“No, you lost!” Ariel cried out proudly. “I'm just the better chess player.”

“You realize it's a stalemate, right? That's a tie, and you still lost the first game.” Ian checked.

“That one didn’t count, and this one, you didn’t win, so I did,” Ariel explained.

“Oh, ok. I see.” Ian said sarcastically. “One more. A tiebreaker.”

“No, I think I’ll leave while I’m up.” Ariel decided.

“You aren’t up, you lost a game and tied another,” Ian said.

“No, you’re wrong,” Ariel informed him. Ian rolled his eyes, went over to the ping pong table, and started paddling a ball into the air.

She watched from a distance as she reset the giant pieces, Ian’s eyes locked on the ball, narrowed in.

“Come on, we’ll do a quick round,” he said without breaking concentration.

Ariel was much better at ping pong than Ian, but she refused to play with him again after he won his first game in twelve and debated whether he should ‘quit while he was up’ and told her she was wrong when she tried to say he was losing.

They didn’t visit too many floors, since Ariel wanted to be able to spend a good amount of time on each floor. After about three or four more floors, they ended up at the aquarium. They found themselves in the company of a handful of people there, most of whom were dealing with jet lag. The two of them sat down together and watched the animals. The conversation drifted from the stingrays and turtles to the pets they had back home. Ariel told him about her parrot, Yellow Feather, and her cat. Ian told her about his dog, Sparky. She said she wanted to meet Sparky when they got back to Arizona, but when Ian suggested he meet her pets, she changed the subject. Even though she was sure he

wouldn't do anything to Yellow Feather, she had made a promise.

Ian was distracted easily enough, as a shimmering wave of glowliao passed over their heads. This was the first Visitor creature they'd seen in the aquarium. They couldn't wait around for much longer to see more, though. It was well past midnight, and she still had one last thing she wanted to show Ian.

Once they were back in the elevator, she punched in the numbers: 1-7-3.

"Uh, you hit three buttons."

"I know. It's the glass ball at the top of the building. The Crystal Observatory." She explained. "Rumor has it, this was the reason the hotel was built in the first place. Because Nale wanted to map out new star charts for his dream space-flight company. So he built a hotel around it to pay off the cost of building the tower."

"Maybe there is something to that story. I didn't know they counted that as a floor. I thought it was just a weird design choice." Ariel swiped her card in the slot beside the elevator buttons, and the elevator began to move.

"Nope, you can go inside. It's supposed to be this life-changing experience, so... let's find out." She grinned. After a minute, the walls around them seemed to dissolve.

The elevator doors opened and they were standing there with no floor in front of them, just the endless void of night sky. Ian looked up and saw the city lay miles above them. The buildings were dwarfed by the gargantuan sky which surrounded them. Ariel stepped out and Ian gasped fearfully. Her foot landed firmly on the glass.

“Calm down, there’s glass and a lot of technology at work to keep us from falling.” Ian stepped out lightly. Ariel started to walk forward. Ian just looked at her. She realized that to him, it must have looked like she was walking up an invisible wall.

“You try,” Ariel said. He did. But even walking across the starry sky, he looked like he still couldn’t trust it. She helped him along the glass sphere for a while. They eventually stopped and sat down to admire the city.

“City’s beautiful,” Ian said, “different from Arizona.”

“It is nice from up here,” Ariel remarked. There was silence. Ariel didn’t know what to say to him. She still didn’t know him all that well, and there was nothing here for them to do to distract from that fact. It was just them and the view. Ian broke the silence for her.

“So, what are your grand plans?” Ian asked.

“Sorry?” Ariel asked.

“Your grand plans for your life. Everyone’s got ‘em.” Ian explained.

“Interesting conversation starter, did you look up ‘how to talk to pretty girls?’”

Ian laughed awkwardly. “No, it’s a question I ask everyone when the conversation goes dead. It usually gets them talking for a while, so...”

“Ok...Let’s see, grand plans? I have whatever the opposite of a grand plan is.” Ariel said.

“What does that mean?” Ian asked.

“Win the lottery and never have to work a day in my life. Start a family or something.” Ariel clarified. “I’m probably going to be a veterinarian since the lottery isn’t guaranteed.”

“Veterinarian,” he repeated. “I don’t see why that’s not a grand plan. You like animals, you want to spend your life helping animals. It’s grand in its own way. You don’t have to be president or anything.”

“Grand plan seems like a big picture. I’m only being a vet because people kinda have to work to survive. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t. The grand plan is really just to be happy.”

“Do you find that you aren’t?”

“I’ve had a rough last few years,” Ariel said.

“Rough few years?” Ian asked.

“They’ve just been kinda lonely, I guess,” she explained. “I lost my parents when I was young, and then my grandparents in the years after that. I never had any aunts or uncles, so that means no cousins either. So I have no family. I live by myself. I have to work at a gas station to earn minimum wage because I have to pay the bills, so I don’t have a lot of time to make new friends. And then, since I started high school, almost all of my friends disappeared from my life. Jacob’s always busy with his stupid secret project. Kaden and Marsh were the only people I had left. Now they’re not here, even though I saved up years for this.” Her voice cracked.

Ian didn’t say anything. She saw in his eyes that he empathized, though. He gave her an awkward pat on the shoulder. He started to take his arm back, but she put her head on his shoulder and wiped away a couple of tears. He relaxed his arm and let it stay wrapped around her.

“That stupid grand-plan thing does work.” She laughed pitifully. She sat back up, and Ian took his arm back.

She watched his expression for a little while. He had turned to look pensively up at the city once again. She looked

up, too, and saw the dazzling sparkle of the streets in the sky. Streaks of blue and green light tore across the city. This prompted her to look down at the dark, starry night.

The streaks of light were created by residue from the alternative rocket fuel used in passenger and cargo spaceships. Even in the nation's famous dark sky cities, like Flagstaff, you could hardly see the stars anymore. The light pollution extended into the sky if there were rocket ships nearby. There were always ships nearby.

The NYC SpacePort was only a few miles from the hotel. As a result, the spaceships were all be closer to the ground than the Crystal Observatory. The stars beneath them were as clear as day. This was the first time Ariel had seen most of them.

She looked at Ian again and found that he was looking at her. He quickly looked away, back up at the city. She turned the question back around on him, since the conversation had died.

"What about you? What do you want to be when you graduate?" Ariel asked, trying to sound cheerful and lighten the mood. Ian took a quick breath and broke eye contact with the horizon to look at her.

"I'm not sure," Ian sighed.

"What do you mean you're not sure?" Ariel asked. "You ask this question to every person you meet, and you never thought of an answer for yourself?"

"Well—"

"Nope, I'm calling bullshit. You looked up how to talk to girls." She laughed.

"Listen, I had a plan. I wouldn't be testing at Kingdom Academy if I didn't, but there have just been some

changes lately. I wanted to be a pilot. Kingdom has the best program in the world for it. If I don't get in, I'll have to go apply for college. Anywhere with a good interstellar spaceflight program would want me to prove that I want to be a pilot to change the world and do good, but I don't. Not really. I just want to get off Earth, go see the rest of the universe."

"You can just lie."

"I was genuinely thinking about it, but then some of Jacob's friends offered me a job. Really good pay, multiple times what I'd make as a pilot,"

"Interstellar pilots make a lot," Ariel said.

"It's a serious opportunity. It's high status. On a Visitor planet, so I can travel the galaxy. I want to do it now, but Jacob doesn't really want me to."

"Huh, that is a tough spot to be in. If Jacob asked me not to, I'm not sure I would take it. Then again, it depends on why he was asking. I'm guessing he just wants it too, right?"

"I don't know. He won't tell me. He's keeping his reasons a secret."

"Yeah, go figure."

"He's kept the job itself pretty well from me up until now. I thought I knew everything about him," Ian said. Ariel shook her head and lay her head on Ian's shoulder again.

"Join the club."

They quietly watched the starships come into and leave port until their eyelids got heavy.

Ian walked her to her room. Ian held out his hand to shake. Ariel was expecting to hug him and had to do an

awkward shuffle backward when she realized he was just trying to shake her hand.

“Thanks for hanging out with me tonight,” Ariel said.

“Hey, listen. I’m so sorry about the Kaden and Marsh not showing up. That sucks, but I’m sure they feel terrible and they’re going to make it up to you.” Ian said. “I hope you feel like you made the most of the night anyway.”

“Thanks, Ian. I did.” She held out her arms to hug him. He obliged, expecting it to be a quick goodbye hug, but she lingered there for a second, even beginning to speak to him while her head was still on his shoulder.

She spoke softly, but her gentle voice pierced through the crickets and the running water. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.” She stepped back and let her arms fall to her sides. “Well, I’m going to bed. We have a long day tomorrow. We probably should get some rest.” Ariel said.

“Good night, Ariel,” he said.

“Good night, Ian,” she responded.

She went into her room and closed the door. She kicked off her shoes and hopped into bed. She took a deep breath and buried her face in her pillow to cover up her uncontrollable smile.

Ian closed the door to his room. He didn’t get to take off his shoes. A shadowy figure stood over his bed. Jacob was still asleep. Ian strained to see who the figure was. When she spoke, he recognized the voice of the woman who gave him the serum.



“Have you made your decision?” Certina asked.

"I... I can't right now. Maybe after I'm done with high school. I'll look at it instead of college."

"That's your decision," Certina said. "Call me when you want to come to Warland."

"Wait. Is there a way for me to train without going to your planet? I just don't think I'm ready for that step yet."

"Do you want to get started right now?"

"I don't want to wake Jacob up."

"That's what magic's for."

"Magic?" Ian asked.

"Let's get started."