

zephyr unfolding

NICOLE GIVENS KURTZ

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for Christopher

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“Ren, are you awake?” inquired a rather lean and tanned Bain. “Come on, it is nearly noon.”

Ren experienced a sense of vertigo as he rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself back onto his heels. His hammock lay undisturbed. The bright rays of the sun filtered down to the earth’s surface, warming the coastline and spreading light to the darkened sky. The morning had heated up to a sweltering roast even before noon. He stretched and inhaled a strong whiff of the ocean’s saltiness.

He gazed up as Bain climbed the narrow, bamboo ladder into his hut. Bain’s wet dark hair had grown and it reached the small of his back. The smell of the ocean clung to him, no doubt from his daily swim.

“That water can kill you,” Ren said grumpily as he stood up. There was a hammock, a few tin plates and cups, and a gun inside the hut. “How is everything this morning?”

Bain smiled, showing even teeth that seemed brighter against his tanned body. Naturally dark, his skin shimmered like burnt sand despite the drying heat of the sun.

“Fine. The ship hasn’t arrived, so no messages. And you can use the exercise of a little swim.”

The peacefulness of the morning loomed out from his grass house. The entrance to his home lacked a door, but gave an excellent view of the blue rolling waves of the Pacific Ocean. From this height, he could see clear out across the water, where it seemed to go on forever. In the far away distance, he could make out the grayish smog of a floating city, where the wealthy and the poor lived in unsettled routines and perpetuated the cycle of daily life.

This quietness would be the only peace he would receive for the rest of the day. He knew he would be inundated with soldiers who would flock to him with the latest updates, strategic plans, and correspondence from the Resistance’s leader. As the Resistance Army’s second-in-command, his duties increased the more battles they won.

chapter 01

As a youth, he had sought the responsibilities he now held. He fought for the rank and won it. Now, only twenty-eight, he felt spurned on by the chaotic nature of war. Ren closed his eyes and released a long, slow breath.

"Then why did you wake me if everything is *fine*?" Ren barked, still nursing his irritation at being disturbed. The mornings were his to enjoy and everyone on the island knew it.

Bain's smile broadened at his brother's irritation as it always had since they were children. Ren looked absolutely funny, at least to Bain, when he was angry. The way Ren's face became red and sweaty reminded Bain of a wet balloon on the verge of bursting. It puzzled him that some men feared Ren with a fright usually reserved for gods.

"Because today is a special day," Bain said slowly. "Do you know what it is?"

"No!" barked Ren, as he ran a thick hand through his limp, reddish-brown hair. Taller than Bain and heavier, Ren towered above most of the soldiers. His teeth were not as straight, nor did his hair cascade down his back, like Bain's. Ren's hair stopped just short of his shoulders and lacked curls. When wet, his hair became stringy and tangled. Although he didn't have Bain's handsome features, he more than made up for his lack of good looks with his courageous and unflinching demeanor.

Bain laughed. "It is obvious from your tone that you do, old man. Happy Birthday, brother!" With a swift scoop, Bain engulfed his brother in a huge bear hug, pulling Ren to him and squeezing tight.

At an utter lost for words, Ren allowed Bain to hug him. *Yes, today is my birthday.* A brief smile appeared on his face, and then it vanished like the smoke of an extinguished fire.

He extracted himself from Bain's embrace and said grudgingly, "Thanks." With his eyes diverted to the floor, he spoke softly, the grumpiness forgotten. "It means much to me that you remembered."

Bain playfully punched Ren in the arm. "What are little brothers for?"

"I have no idea. Maybe to torment their older brothers?" Ren shot back playfully.

Bain roared with laughter. "Come, breakfast awaits."

Sighing once more, he nodded to Bain and they left the hut, each climbing down the narrow ladder one at a time. He was drained...perhaps not drained so much as emptied out, like a hollow piece of pipe.

Off in the distance, Ren heard the faint singing of birds. He knew that few remained after the UWC's mass contamination, but where there was destruction, there was also hope. As he and Bain approached the beach, he noticed the crowd of people. The population had grown in recent years. The beach buzzed with activity. Several Resistance soldiers, out of uniform, carried fruit and vegetables in from the gardens. Others, mostly women and

some of the older children, baked bread in the earth ovens. A smooth, soft breeze blew in from the ocean, bringing with it some relief from the hot day.

Months had swept by them like the crashing waves of the ocean. Ren found it hard to believe that it had been almost a year since he had rescued Bain and Aurora from a life of servitude on New England Tre.

Their island lay undiscovered by the United World Council, at least for now. Ren felt anxious about the island's secret location becoming public knowledge. The reports over the last few days had grown increasingly urgent. Several key spies had vanished and according to some reports, had been tortured until they confessed all of the Resistance's secrets. Afterwards, they were slaughtered anyway.

Ren was deeply troubled. The island's noise suddenly fell away to silence as Ren recalled his conversation with Bain shortly after their narrow escape from the UWC one year ago.

"Ren, now that we're safely back here, what will the UWC do?" Bain asked with a look of concern, his hair shining in the moonlight.

"I do not know. I must report to General McGoodman in the morning."

"Until McGoodman gets back what's his, I won't sleep easily. The UWC is expecting big things from you and they may strike first..." Bain said with a grim expression clouding his usually smiling face.

"I know that too, Bain," Ren interrupted. "But I doubt the UWC will strike here."

"You never know," Bain said as they started toward the huts.

As if his ears had been uncorked, the sounds of the island came crashing back to Ren, knocking him out of the memory. *Bain had been right to suspect*, Ren thought as he stood in the center of activity. People rushed by him, some collided with him and just as hurriedly tossed a 'sorry' over their shoulders, never breaking their strides. The island hummed with the purpose of living and temporary peace.

Bain shot him a puzzled expression, but said nothing as they began to walk to the area designated as the kitchen. Exposed to the elements, the kitchen was nothing more than a section of the island where the bread ovens rested. It was more like an open-air marketplace, except no one paid. Instead people picked up what they wanted. Amazingly, no one took more than was needed. Gluttony had no place here amongst occasional famine, desperation, and death. A line of hand-made baskets waited to be filled with fruit and vegetables, which the soldiers soon replenished from their sacks.

Aurora and Bain had taught the people to grow more than coconuts and how to utilize the island's natural plants for food. The abundance and variety now available helped many thrive where so many had died of malnutrition several short months before.

Finally, Bain said, "You seem troubled."

Bain kicked small sand dunes as he walked with Ren. His brother was usually an arsenal of orders and commands. This quiet Ren worried him. But Ren never showed defeat or any form of weakness.

To Bain's surprise, Ren said, "I am. The reports should have been here by now."

"Perhaps they are delayed," Bain suggested, hoping to defuse his brother's somber mood.

Ren said coldly, "They are never delayed."

He did not comment. Ren's reputation for quick anger and swift punishment was not lost on him, brother or not.

They reached the earth oven closest to the ocean where a young woman kneaded dough with her hands. Her blond hair hung in a long, solitary braid decorated with pink flowers. As she moved, it thudded around her waist. Her thin, cotton dress contained splashes of water and dirt around its hem. Her back was to them and she seemed absorbed in concentration. With sheer strength, her slender arms worked the thick dough, forcing it to flatten.

"Hello, Angel," Bain said cheerfully. "A beautiful day if ever there was one."

She twisted around to see who it was that called to her. Her face, deeply tanned, broke into a smile at the sight of Bain and Ren. With determination, she flattened out the dough, placed it into the oven, and finally came over to them.

She dusted her hands on her dress. "You are so right. It's shaping up to be a fantastic day." Her eyes remained focused on Bain. They were pale, water blue and bright.

Bain replied, "Indeed. Have you seen Aurora?"

"She's off in the garden, working her hands until they bleed," Angel teased as she pointed in Aurora's direction. "It's cooler back there, but she works too hard."

He nodded in agreement and said with a chuckle, "Well, better go rescue her then."

Ren shot him a scowl, but remained silent. His face was flushed red all the way down to his neck as Angel's gaze moved from Bain's and burrowed into his. It was like the blue ocean had engulfed him. His throat seemed to close and he cleared it several times in an attempt to maintain some dignity.

When Bain disappeared into the brush, Angel said, "So how old are you?"

He cursed Bain under his breath. "None of your business!"

One of her eyebrows rose in question at his short answer. "You're such a brute—a barbarian! It's just a simple question!" Her cheeks grew pink as her anger slowly rose. *Why does he insist on acting like a barbarian? And why do I continue to engage him?*

Ren took an intake of air and barked, "So what? It ain't any business of yours!"

Angel huffed before shouting, "Fine! I was only making polite conversation!"

"Yeah, right. You wouldn't know polite if it bit you in the arse!" he replied curtly before stalking off into the brush, following the same trail that Bain had disappeared down moments earlier.

Angel swore as she watched Ren's fleeing back. She couldn't help but notice his shrinking frame. Although slightly slimmer, he was still a rather large man. She continued to stare at his muscular back.

"Animal!" she shrieked after him and turned her attention back to the oven.

Ren grumbled to himself as he walked. She had a way of turning him into a beast. Ever since he kidnapped and then rescued her, Angel Alt had been a painful thorn in his side. She plagued his thoughts, ruined his sleep and resurrected cravings and desires long since dormant and undisturbed.

The Resistance commander's life did not warrant having a wife or family. To do so would put her in jeopardy of being kidnapped, tortured or killed. What kind of dowry would that make?

He scoffed at the idea of her as he picked a burnt purplish flower from beside the trail. A brief thought flashed through his mind of giving Angel the flower. He hastily dropped it.

Every time she came around, he felt like he was being smothered. Words clumsily fell from his mouth before he could even think about it. His tongue felt tied and bound. This frustrated him and he despised being frustrated. The lack of control over his emotions only fueled his irritation, turning him into a...*barbarian*. He snorted at the word and at Angel's accusation. Perhaps she wasn't wrong about him after all.

She was the former wife of Todd Alt, the UWC's first in command, and this only complicated the situation. How could he want her when he hated everything that Todd Alt stood for? How could he even *think* that he and Todd admired the same qualities in a woman?

He shivered at the thought despite the muggy day. The square, sectioned-off clearing contained rows upon rows of budding and blooming plants. The brilliant rays beamed down on the outstretched crops with unyielding warmth.

Bent down with a tiny shovel, Aurora wore a wide-brimmed straw hat that shielded her from the blaze of the sun and a long-sleeved cotton dress that had splashes of mud on it. Beside her, Bain patted the upturned earth and they giggled together over a private joke. Several times Bain took the water pail

and splashed her with it, much to her amusement. Unaware of Ren's presence, the two worked beside each other in laborious bliss.

What about breakfast? Ren thought and opened his mouth to ask, but quickly closed it. He felt old despite his still young age. *Best leave them alone.* He made his way back down the path to the beach, staring at the well-worn stones and cursing his luck. No one noticed his solemn mood. His birthday came only once a year. With each passing year, he felt more and more tired.

Suddenly screams ripped through the smoggy heat and tore into his heart. Numbness filtered down from his head to his feet as he increased his pace from a slow stroll to a trot. He heard whistling and then a large explosion. As he came closer to the grass huts, he could make out the funneling black smoke of fire above the treetops.

What the hell is going on? Bewildered by the sudden rush of adrenaline that seeped into his veins, Ren searched around for clues. Tingling sensations spread across his back and dread piled into his stomach. Absorbed in his own thoughts, he hadn't heard anything. But suddenly, the roars of the sirens and the screams of the injured slammed into his consciousness.

Something was very wrong.

"Oh, no!"

He bent down behind a patch of trees and watched as a few feet away from shore, the United World Council's sub-crafts launched blast after blast into the ocean-side Resistance community. Ren's eyes scanned the beach area where several women, children and soldiers lay scattered in a mass of bodies. He heard crying and more screaming as people tried to flee the attack.

Without giving it another thought, he stood up and raced toward the danger as people fled from it. As he ran toward the burning grass huts, he sidestepped collapsing bodies, blasts of sand, and screaming children.

"Get to the safe houses! Now! Leave your belongings! Go! Go!" he ordered above the chaos. He directed them to the rear of the island, shoving them like cattle. "Run! Hurry!"

Morgan, a young girl of six with thick braids and dark skin, stunned and petrified with fright, could neither run nor move from her spot as others raced by her. Seeing she was in danger of being trampled, Ren raced toward her.

But then he saw John, his navigator and friend, lift Morgan to his hip and swiftly run up the beach. Along the way he picked up more children from their dead mothers' arms. John's hulky frame burrowed through the fire and falling trees like a well-trained monster. He moved hastily and gracefully despite his frame.

"John! I need you! This way!" Ren shouted above the noise and the explosions of cannons. The whistling was nearly deafening, and the ringing in his ears sounded like the bells of the dead.

John nodded and promptly handed the children to a younger girl. He directed her to the rear of the island where safe houses had been erected for such a time as this. The young girl herded the children toward the house with terror etched into her face. The safe houses were John's brainchild. He knew that one day the UWC would find them. Stocked with food, the safe houses had many people to protect. They were built to withstand fire, cannons, flooding and ramming from tanks—but only for a few days.

As John fell in line behind Ren, two other soldiers, Andre and Terry, took notice and soon the four of them raced along together in a tiny, determined pack. Many were wounded with cuts and abrasions. Their clothing was smeared with blood and dirt.

Ren felt the air burn his chest, but he could not stop running until he reached the Resistance's sub-craft. Once there, they had a fighting chance of getting off the island alive. *Someone had betrayed them.* This knowledge smoldered inside Ren, elevating his fury to new levels. Visions of how he would rip the head from the betrayer's body floated in and out of his mind.

The Resistance had only a few sub-crafts since most of their fighting took place on land; however, only one was docked at the island. Palm branches covered the sub-craft and the soldiers rushed to uncover it. Just as Ren climbed the rope ladder to the deck, he looked across the island and saw Bain and Aurora running towards him. Bain, although not officially a soldier, knew about the Resistance's sub-craft. It was no secret to the island's residents.

"Come on!" he shouted with fear in his eyes as a large fireball whirled towards his brother and Aurora. It slammed into the earth, shooting sand high into the air and dousing Aurora and Bain.

"Now!" Ren yelled. "Hurry!"

He turned away and lifted the hatch. He couldn't bear to watch anymore. He had to stop this from getting worse. Bain could take care of himself; he had to take care of the island.

The Resistance's sub-craft came with fully equipped galleys, marine toilets and showers and offered luxurious advantages. Automated life-support and climate-control systems maintained comfortable cabin conditions at all times. Integrated roll stabilization insured a smooth ride while it surfaced. With two vertical and two lateral thrusters, exceptional maneuverability was guaranteed. It was 213 feet long.

Several soldiers, including John, had already made their way onto the sub-craft and were busily climbing down to the Forward Control Room. Bain and Aurora, breathing heavily, also made it onboard before a smaller UWC's sub-craft fired again in their direction.

Ren entered the Forward Control Room through a watertight, pressure-proof door. All control and navigation instruments that operated the sub-craft were housed here. More than a passenger-transport vehicle, the sub-craft came equipped with torpedoes, guns and fire-cannons.

Ren fell into his commander's chair and could feel the anger take over. "Take us down and out!"

To the right of Ren's bucket chair, Bain took a seat at the helm. To Bain's left, John wedged himself into the seat in front of communications and inserted the small metal earpiece into his ear. Andre manned the sub-craft's engines from the engineering workstation and Terry took up his familiar spot at tactical, which was closest to the door and to Bain's right.

Bain immediately pulled up the screen of the ocean. The three UWC sub-crafts illuminated the screen in florescent green. The two larger sub-crafts circled the island slowly, like the hands on the face of a clock.

"Back us away from the island. Let's give them something to shoot at besides our women and children," Ren growled. His eyes squinted to slits of fury. In this mode, Ren was lethal and demanding. "I will find out who betrayed us!"

"You will know them by the blood that stains their hands!" Bain agreed, bitterly.

The idea that a Resistance soldier had leaked their whereabouts angered Ren and forced his mind to focus on thoughts that were both gruesome and cruel. The familiar wooziness came and passed as the sub-craft became fully submerged under the ocean.

"We're under, sir!" Bain announced.

"Fire at will, Terry!" Ren ordered as he sat straight in his chair. His eyes, afire with mounting rage, seemed to leap out from his strained face. So many innocent women and children had been killed by the surprise attack. His lips were peeled back against his clenched teeth. As he scanned the monitor, he noticed that the two enormous UWC sub-crafts fired at them, but missed. "Get those bastards!"

A skillful and merciless shooter, Terry fired the cannons at the UWC's half-submerged sub-craft. Because of its size, the UWC's sub-craft took longer to submerge than Ren's. With only half of its craft underwater, it was a sitting duck. The blasts ripped through the sub-craft's vulnerable undercarriage, leaving gaping holes that allowed water to flood the bottom. The twisted metal carnage reached out into the ocean like waiting empty arms. Within minutes, floating bodies and body parts drifted out into the water, turning it a reddish-blue hue.

"Defensive maneuvers, Bain!" Ren roared, as he mopped his wet face with his calloused hands, anticipating retaliation shots. He leaned forward in his chair, nearly tilting it over. His fist slammed into the chair's arm. "Fire! Fire!"

Bain artfully avoided serious injury to their sub-craft as he maneuvered through the waters and around the UWC's sub-crafts. His steering maneuvers caused the UWC to fire upon its own sub-crafts at times. The Resistance's sub-craft was smaller than two of the humongous UWC's sub-crafts. The Resistance darted in and around the two sub-crafts like a nimble bunny. The smaller UWC vessel had vanished behind one of the larger ones.

"Where is the smaller one?" Ren bellowed. "Report! Now!"

Terry said, "Sir, the smaller sub-craft has re-emerged. It is no longer under water. I—I can't find—"

"Do not tell me what you can't do! Find it, now!"

Terry gulped back a reply and furiously scanned the water for any signs of the smaller sub-craft. His dreadlocks shielded his fear from Ren's view.

"Find it and destroy it!" Ren ordered, his voice echoing violently throughout the Forward Control Room. Terry winced once more, and frantically continued to search for the sub-craft.

But once one of the larger sub-crafts capsized, the other sub-crafts retreated.

Ren stood up. His murky brown eyes round in disbelief. *Where are they going?*

Bain said in shock, "They're leaving."

Ren's eyes narrowed into thin slits. *What the hell are they doing?* "John, what are they saying?" Ren asked, his bewilderment hidden behind a mask of rage.

"Nothing, sir," John said quietly, listening intently to the UWC's communications. "The comms are silent. Or they are blocking us."

"Terry, find that other sub-craft! Now!" Ren roared with accelerated speech. "Don't wait. Right now! Report!"

Terry chewed his bottom lip to the point where it bled out in small droplets. Spots of sweat covered his forehead as he searched.

"Terry..." Ren snarled.

"Sir, the sub-craft has submerged again. There it is!" Terry pointed to the much smaller green dot on the screen. Only two green dots remained on the monitor. The larger had descended to well below Ren's own craft, but the smaller one submerged to just under the water's surface. Terry smiled and let out a breath of relief.

"Fire! Damn you, fire!" Ren ordered, sending spittle against the back of Terry's chair.

Terry fired several shots into the water. One landed square against the smaller sub-craft's hull but did little damage. Ren swore as he watched the other two shots barely nick the craft's top.

The smaller UWC sub-craft fired a few cannon shots into the water, but missed Ren's sub-craft by several yards. To his surprise, the smaller sub-craft retreated from the island too. It shot like a dart through the water in obvious flight.

Strange, Ren thought, scanning the screen as the dots became smaller and smaller. *It is almost like they didn't really come here to fight.* His eyes remained glued to the screen as the UWC retreated. Within minutes,

the monitor was completely blank. All green dots vanished from the screen as instantly as they had come.

"Should we follow them, sir?" Terry asked carefully, not wanting to suggest a course of action Ren didn't order.

"No, let's get back to the island," Ren said slowly. "John, grab the medicine and bandages. Bain, you, Aurora and John start taking care of the wounded. Terry, you and Andre bury the dead."

Bain steered them back to land and as soon as the sub-craft re-emerged and docked on the island, everyone hurried to carry out their orders. Ren waited until the Forward Control Room emptied before hoisting himself from the commander's chair. Wearily, he walked down the tight hallways, climbed up through the hatch, and passed the engineering workstation to his room. The forward portion of the upper deck was the commander's room. Ren entered the code and the door hissed as it slid open.

Hesat down on his king-size water bed and the tall floor-length velvet curtains remained closed. In his many years of fighting, he'd never seen the UWC turn tail and run from an all-out battle. Clearly his small sub-craft wasn't much for them. Quicker, yes, but the UWC could have defeated them in a very short time. There were no tracking chains to save them from such an onslaught of power this time.

They came here for something, Ren thought, but what? And who betrayed us?