

Chapter One

Joseph Walker stared into the small bin he'd opened. A lump formed in his throat at the sight of the contents, proof that someone cared a great deal about him. He swallowed past the abrupt rise of sentiment with difficulty. Another, equally powerful emotion, made it doubly hard to breathe.

The second reaction was far too familiar and not unexpected. It was terror.

Counseling himself not to be a fool, Joseph allowed his fingertips to drift over the soft fabric of a sapphire blue shirt, the topmost item in the bin. He lifted it out and laid it on the sleeping mat he'd occupied for the last two years. Next came pairs of black trousers, socks and shoes. Even a new pair of underpants. Almon had thought of everything. But then, the Nobek's generosity and attention during Joseph's incarceration had been nothing short of saintly.

Then why was Joseph so scared?

"Because I don't know exactly what comes next." Just enough to make him wish he could put off release for another week. Or two.

Joseph forced himself to breathe deeply, attempting to calm his pounding heart. He fought the urge to find somewhere to hide so no one could find him. He'd never noted any such place in the psychiatric facility, but he knew there was one. Nesof had mentioned he had a hideaway on site, where he could catch his breath when the job got too heavy.

Almost immediately, Joseph felt ashamed. He'd worked hard to overcome his inclination to avoid conflict at any cost. He'd worked just as diligently to learn to stand up for himself. To stand up *to* himself and his less-than-favorable personality quirks. This was his graduation day, so to speak.

His hands shook violently as he tried to reach for the shirt again. Nausea swirled his guts and began to climb up his throat. He should go to Dr. Adna and discuss this abrupt descent into panic. Surely this amount of anxiety was a clear indicator that he wasn't ready for freedom?

He went back to deep breathing. Closed his eyes and forced himself to settle. Opened them again. He raked his fingers through the curls that had grown from the short military cut he'd once sported.

Almon was waiting. His sponsor. His patient, caring friend who might become more. Almon had given a lot of himself to help make this day happen. Joseph had to do this. Yet he couldn't force himself to move.

The buzz of the door announce offered a momentary reprieve. Or maybe it wasn't. Almon could have grown tired of lingering in the release area. Would they let him in the patient wards now that Joseph had officially served his sentence?

"Door, open."

It wasn't Almon after all. Nobek Nesof, the orderly, stepped in. He cradled folded garments in his scarred, beefy arms. The small dimensions of the space made him look bigger than his height of well over six-and-a-half feet. His shoulder-length black hair was tucked behind his ears, the better to show off his handsome, smiling face.

"I brought your outfit for beyond these infernal walls. Oh." He stopped short as he noted the clothes laid out on the mat. Nesof blinked hard and fast. Because Joseph was an Earther, his room tended to be lit brighter than most. Nesof often said it took a few seconds for his more sensitive eyesight to adjust.

"Almon said I'd appreciate stepping out in an outfit besides facility-issue." Looking at the drab gray fabrics Nesof carried, Joseph was glad his sponsor had been so considerate. His

other choice would have been his old Earth Space Fleet uniform—definitely not clothing to be sporting on Kalquor.

Nesof's smile had disappeared in favor of a darker expression that was gone almost as soon as it showed up. He gave the stack of clothes he'd brought a look of consternation. "I'm sorry, Joseph."

"Sorry for what?"

"I didn't think—well, as your only friend in this place, I should have thought to bring you garments beyond what the center provided."

Joseph's heart warmed with appreciation. "My clothes aren't your problem. As of fifteen minutes ago, *I'm* no longer your problem."

"You never were a problem, Joseph. That ensemble though—Almon should have bought from Beauchamp's Earther Apparel, if he'd wanted you to have the best. They have the nicest clothes in the district."

"These will do just fine. I like the color of the shirt."

"Almon's got okay taste, I suppose. And I'm sure he did as well as he could afford." Nesof set the center-issued clothing on a shelf and eyed the outfit on the mat critically.

Joseph bit his tongue, though he wanted to speak in Almon's defense. Nesof's little digs against the other Nobek showed his naturally suspicious demeanor, nothing more. It had become a knee-jerk response since he'd become Joseph's primary caregiver.

Joseph owed Nesof almost as much as he did Almon. The orderly had shielded him with single-minded protectiveness from others who disliked him. Joseph had ruined a lot of lives and made a lot of enemies. He'd needed someone within the center to keep him safe, and Nesof had attacked the issue with zeal.

Nesof would not be outside to help him, however. Joseph's anxiety kicked in once more as he acknowledged he'd be exposed to those who wanted an eye for an eye. Even under Almon's roof, there would be hours when his sponsor would be at work, hours that would leave Joseph on his own.

"Are you okay?" Nesof's deep voice woke Joseph from his ruminations.

"Yeah. Just—just trying not to be overwhelmed. You don't realize what a big step release is, until it's time to take it."

"You have your transition plan. Dr. Adna is a com away. And so am I." Nesof expertly rubbed the back of Joseph's neck to relax him. The touch was heavy and warm. The Earther wished he could blanket himself in it.

Instead, he squared his shoulders. "Right. And Almon's taking a few days off his work to help me settle in."

"Com me tomorrow. We'll make plans to meet. I'm here for you, Joseph. Always."

Joseph nodded. He could do this. He had the support. He had a place to live. He had Almon—though his sponsor was certainly the basis for some of the nervousness he felt at that instant.

Almon's also the man who made surviving worthwhile. Not just surviving, either. He's why I committed to making my life meaningful.

Almon might be his future. When Joseph allowed himself to dream about the life he had ahead of him, the strong Nobek was the center of those hopes. The time had come to discover if dreams could come true.

Joseph's spine stiffened. "Thanks, Nesof. For all you've done for me."

Instead of replying, the orderly abruptly grabbed him. Nesof pulled him in close for a bear hug, enveloping Joseph in the mixed aroma of musk and antiseptic cleanliness. For a moment, the Earther enjoyed the friendly clasp. As it went on, he grew uncomfortable.

He warned himself not to draw away, not to allow his issues about his sexuality put him back in a defensive mode. This was Kalquor, not Earth. Others wouldn't see a friend's hug in the wrong light, no more than they'd find fault in men being lovers.

He still couldn't look Nesof in the eyes when the orderly released him. Shades of the old Captain Joseph Walker, denying who he was. Though psychologically stable enough to roam around in public, he had issues to overcome yet.

He peeked up through the curls that had fallen over his forehead, letting them offer him a little cover. He gave Nesof a shamefaced smile. "I'd better change into my new duds. Almon must be wondering what's keeping me for so long."

"The least little concerning notion that pops up, com me, Joseph. I mean it."

"I will."

Looking as reluctant as Joseph felt, Nesof backed out. The door shut, cutting off exactly half of the friends the Earther possessed.

Joseph sighed. Turned back to his ex-sleeping mat. Eyed the clothes that were not facility-approved pajamas, the outfit that would mark him as a free man on Kalquor.

It's down to two choices. I can hide in a world of unrealized dreams or dare the world to let me live them for real.

In a rush of determination, Joseph flung off the thin pajama top and reached for the dark blue shirt Almon had brought him.

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Patience was not a Nobek's strong suit. Nobeks were high-energy beings, their bodies filled with exuberance that demanded to be spent in some fashion. It was that often frantic need to act on their environment that caused them to lash out at objects—or others—that happened to be in their vicinity. The vigor and the necessity to express it formed a Nobek's most difficult challenge to overcome. To do so was a matter of pride, a kind of rite of passage for the warrior breed. Conquering the drive to keep moving and avoid lashing out when movement wasn't possible was what forged a truly strong Nobek.

Controlling the impulse to act brought no accolades, though every second of every day, a Nobek had to be prepared to be patient. Most non-warriors believed acknowledgment was due when a member of that breed sprang into motion at the instant it was essential. They didn't understand that Nobeks were always poised to move, to strive, to fight. It was the man who could go still and pause who had truly achieved a noteworthy accomplishment.

There were no awards for reining in those impulses to make things happen, because a Nobek could fail the test of patience at any given instance. He might win the majority of his battles within himself, but the internal war went on until he died. Only at the end could he be judged by his peers and found successful...or not.

Nobek Almon saw himself as forged by the fires of endurance. He'd persisted in the face of tremendous grief, imprisonment, abuse, loss of rank, and loss of career. Some of the obstacles he'd faced had been forced upon him. Others were of his own doing. The last two years were an example of the latter.

It's not enough to be strong against the challenge of fortitude. You have to have a reason to persevere when your will crumbles before every sense screaming at you to act. Who had told him that? Almon couldn't remember, but it must have been an instructor in training camp, so many decades ago.

He waited for his reason, standing motionless as only a determined Nobek could, rebuking his nature's screams to pace or to check the time. Most importantly, he kept from interrogating the guard working at the outtake desk as to how much longer he would have to endure the endless slippage of minutes.

Almon's one outward concession to the anticipation eating at him was that he did not sit in any of the numerous chairs in the waiting area. Energy coursed through his muscled frame and his stomach fluttered, but he displayed none of that outwardly. He was a Nobek. The fact he was among the breathing after all he'd been through was a testament to the strength he displayed.

Not moving. Stoic, with his arms crossed over his chest. Patient.

He regretted signing off on the forms so quickly, making him Joseph's designated guardian and sponsor while the Earther remained on Kalquor. He should have stretched the process out and spent extra seconds on that, rather than the current contest between himself and patience. His quick signing had certainly betrayed his eagerness. But he could not wait for the moment when he'd escort Joseph out of the facility that had kept them separated.

If the swift way he'd committed to Joseph's upkeep hadn't been a reason to judge him, little else would. Except for the matter that he was the sponsor of the very man who'd once been his captor. Not that Almon cared how the doctors, orderlies or security guards regarded him or his relationship—hoped-for relationship—with a man who'd committed crimes against the empire. Anyone who thought less of Almon for that could step outside and register their complaints in the Nobek-preferred method of debate. He could have used a good, old-fashioned fist fight.

Thinking of punching another Nobek's face loosened his control a bit, and his hands squeezed instinctively. It was only then that Almon realized he continued to grip his handheld, on which the release and guardianship forms had been recorded after he'd signed. Grateful for the oversight that gave him a task, Almon secured the palm-sized computer device on his belt. He frowned at the slickness on his palm. Checking to make sure the security guard wasn't paying attention to him, Almon surreptitiously wiped his hand dry on his trouser leg.

Never let them see you sweat went the Earther maxim. Almon agreed and was glad no real enemies were present to call him out on the evidence.

A new test would begin any moment now, as long as Joseph's fears didn't get the best of him. Maybe that was what was taking so long. The boy was a mess of hurt and trauma and terror. Two years of psychological care had helped, but he had a long way to go. Maybe in the end, he'd decide Almon was not whom he wished to take that journey with. Maybe he'd refuse to attempt the journey at all. It was possible.

And still Almon waited.

He started when the door to the patient wards clicked and an electronic voice warned it had been unlocked and for all non-employees in the waiting area to stay behind the red line on the floor. It hissed open, and Joseph stood on the other side. His deep brown eyes lit for an instant before he dropped his gaze and shuffled forward. The sounds of distant sobs and shouts followed him, along with the dark, looming shadow of Nobek Nesof. The orderly held the bin Almon had provided for Joseph to haul his belongings from the center. He was noted and

relegated to the background of Almon's awareness, an unimportant smudge behind the ethereal Earther treading slow steps toward Almon.

He's here. He's taking that leap of faith. He's coming home with me.

At thirty-three, Joseph was no child by his own kind's standards. Nevertheless, Almon often found it difficult to not see the Earther as far younger. Much of it was the insecurity he wore like a second skin, the way he jerked to attention or hunched defensively when addressed by someone he perceived to have authority over him. At first glance, Joseph appeared to be a mere boy. Tousled dark blond curls framed a full-cheeked face. He had a dimple in his chin that almost disappeared when he smiled. It took a closer look to note the fine lines at the corners of his eyes, the deeper crease between his brows, and the sadness that swam beneath his pleasant expression.

Joseph avoided looking at Almon, though his feet had brought him over the red line, within several feet of the Nobek. Close enough for his sponsor to catch a whiff of his clean, somehow sweet scent. Anxiety was palpable from the young man in the tenseness of his shoulders, the trembling of his fingers at his sides.

Almon suddenly worried that all the preparation for this had not truly readied Joseph for a life beyond the center. Yet the board of criminal rehabilitation had deemed him restored to adequate mental health to do so, his sentence served in full for crimes committed by an unbalanced emotional state.

The rest would come, given a stable home life and a lack of judgment for issues that were not within Joseph's control. Acceptance alone, on a day-to-day basis, would work wonders on the skewed moralities inflicted on Joseph from when he was born. At least, that was what his therapist Dr. Adna had claimed. Almon had to hope he was right.

Joseph stopped, and Almon closed the gap between them with a single stride. It took effort to not embrace the boy, but the aura of cringing was present, if not the actual act. Instead, Almon held his hand out for the bin.

Nesof's expression was grudging as he passed it over, but the orderly had always acted with suspicion where Almon was concerned. Protective bastard, even against the warrior who'd taken huge pains for the Earther. Almon tried to feel gratitude that Nesof had cared for Joseph in the places beyond the visitor's center and Dr. Adna's consultation office, places Almon was not allowed to go.

The orderly leaned close to whisper in Joseph's ear, though he didn't lower his voice enough to escape Almon's excellent hearing. "Be well, Joseph."

A nod from the curly head. "Thanks again."

With a final glance at Almon, who imagined for an instant he saw loathing in the glare, Nesof turned around and waved his hand over the door's sensor. Joseph turned to watch him go, to witness the barrier close and lock him out of the life he'd lived for two years. As if he were tempted to beat down the barrier and demand to be returned to his ward.

Almon couldn't imagine anyone wanting to be enclosed, especially after his own incarceration in a cramped cell with dozens of other men. Quarters so close, they'd had to take turns lying down to sleep. But Joseph had a need for security, having lived with the threat of losing his for much of his life. For him, there was safety in a cage, security in being bound in by walls.

Patience.

Almon drew a breath and addressed the officer at the desk. "Does he have any documentation to sign?"

“No, the formal stuff he needed to do was resolved earlier this morning. Good luck, Joseph. And congratulations on your release.”

Joseph blinked at the guard, as if surprised by the kind words. He dared a tremulous smile. “Thank you.”

The smile, while not directed at him, gave Almon the opening to obey the urge to touch Joseph. He was careful about it, only brushing his elbow, lightly, quickly. “Are you ready to go?”

“As I’ll ever be.” The Earther squared his shoulders, a familiar gesture when he was facing up to anxiety-provoking circumstances.

It wasn’t the most promising of responses, but Joseph followed it up by marching to the outer door. Almon followed him, reminding himself that with love and patience, Joseph would be all right. Almon had both for the Earther in massive quantities.