

Chapter One

LUKE

In a hidden alley, somewhere on the island of Zuturo, Luke Weiler was being used as a punching bag. It was his own fault, as it usually was, because he'd been the one who'd pounced like an angry lion and attacked first. It appeared Luke's brain hadn't registered the fact that there were two of them and one of him, or that they were a pair of fourteen-year-olds and he was twelve. It wasn't a fair fight by any means, but he'd brought this upon himself.

"I'm just saying." Kenny rolled up his sleeves, while John held Luke back to prevent his escape. "Your brother and the rest of the Raiders can't protect us from a Mokrullian attack. Their fleet is ten times bigger than ours! The Raiders are useless against them."

Luke didn't necessarily disagree, but his older brother was a Crimson Raider, and he wasn't about to let these two losers insult Finn. "You don't know anything." He did his utmost to ignore the pain from his busted lip. "The Crimson Raiders are the most respected soldiers in Iros! It's thanks to them that Zuturo hasn't been blown to bits.

You wanna talk about useless, Kenny? Your fly is open."

Kenny's eyes immediately flew down to his pants.

"Oops." Luke bit back a laugh. "Made you look."

"Knock him out, Kenny!" John snarled.

"Wait, please!" Luke begged. "Leave my nose out of this, okay? It's my best feature."

"Shut it, Weiler!" Kenny cracked his knuckles.

Luke tried to wriggle free from John's grip, but his attempts were futile.

"Aw, crap." He contemplated shouting for help, but his screams would undoubtedly be drowned out by the festivities taking place in Zuturo.

After all, the Crimson Raiders would set sail that afternoon in hopes of finding what most of the population of Iros was after.

"Sweet dreams," Kenny said maliciously.

Luke closed his eyes, prepared to meet his maker.

But the blow never came.

"Touch him, and I'll break your hand."

Luke's eyes flung open. A blonde boy with intense gray eyes and a

petrifying death stare had hold of Kenny's arm.

He wore brown slacks and a white shirt underneath a pale blue cardigan.

"You!" Kenny spat, but his voice was shaky, and his face had turned pale.

"We were just messing around!"

John let Luke go instantly. "Y-yeah! Please, don't hurt us!"

The blonde boy kicked Kenny's behind. "Get out of here."

Without looking back, Kenny and John bolted out of the alley.

"Phew." Luke dusted off his black trousers and then the dark blue wool jacket he wore over a beige shirt with

string tassels at the collar. "That was a close one."

"One hundred and thirty," the blonde boy said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I've saved your butt from getting kicked one hundred and thirty times."

Luke laughed, hanging an arm over the other boy's shoulder. "I didn't know you could count that high, Damien."

Damien pushed Luke away. "At least I know better than getting into fights I have no chance of winning, you halfwit."

"That's because you always win."

And it was true. Ever since they were little kids, Damien had always been the one who had saved Luke from getting beaten up. Trouble followed Luke wherever he went, like fallen leaves that got stuck in the sole of your shoe, but Damien never failed to scare it away. Luke started fights; Damien ended them. Now that they were both twelve, nothing had really changed. Damien was the responsible one of the duo. In fact, sometimes, Luke thought his parents liked Damien more than they did him, but he couldn't really blame them. The Weilers considered Damien a member of their family, and Luke's parents had gone as far as to claim they had three sons instead of two. Luke didn't mind this at all. He and Damien had been best friends since they were three years old.

"How'd you find me, anyway?" Luke asked.

"Saw them dragging you here." Damien dug his hands in his pockets as they walked out of the alley and onto the busy street. "So I followed, in case you needed a hand."

Half-timbered buildings came into view as soon as the boys set foot in the marketplace. It was incredibly noisy, what with the townsfolk celebrating the upcoming departure of the Crimson Raiders. The place was packed. If one were to be new to Zuturo, it would be easy for them to get lost in the never-ending maze of stalls, but Luke and Damien knew their way around. All kinds of produced goods could be found at Zuturo's marketplace: coal, leather, wine, food, cloth, spices.

"Hot sheep's feet!" announced a tubby, bearded man. "Come get your hot sheep's feet!"

A delicious smell of freshly baked bread engulfed the air around them, but it was quickly overcome by a foul fishy odor as they walked past Mr. Hoover's fish stall.

"Man, it reeks." Luke pinched his nose, casting a glance at Damien. "Did you forget to brush your teeth this morning?"

Damien punched Luke's arm. "I like it better when you don't talk."