

Chapter One

"Phoenix, for the last time, seven o'clock! Get up!" Jeremiah's frustrated shout echoed towards the closed door. Irritation propelled him downstairs. Habit drew him to the kitchen mirror. Disappointment flickered across his face, a sad shake of his head. A tight sorrow gripped his chest as he stared at his reflection. When had this happened? How had he not noticed the young man's face vanish? This aged stranger was unfamiliar. He ran a pale hand over the rough grey stubble of his beard, desperately searching for a trace of the ruggedly handsome youth he once knew. Lost in confusion, he pondered how, in so few years, he'd become this unknown face. *Time certainly speeds up here*, he thought with annoyance, turning towards the kitchen.

"Good morning," Jeremiah said cheerfully, smiling as he entered the kitchen. His gaze momentarily lingered on the man in the wheelchair at the table, where two pieces of buttered toast lay untouched beside a tightly gripped glass of orange juice. Turning to the breakfast bar, Jeremiah took two slices of bread as Leon's voice came from behind him.

"Morning?!" Leon retorted, sarcasm dripping in his tone as he swallowed a mouthful of orange juice and placed the glass back down upon the table before swivelling his wheelchair round to face Jeremiah. "How long has it been, Jeremiah, since you forced me into this mechanical contraption, repeating this pathetic, nonsensical ritual since we entered this dimension?" Leon questioned in growing frustration, lifting his hazel eyes to meet Jeremiah's gaze. "No." Leon snorted, raising his hand in emphasis of his point. "No. Do not answer. Let us consider the question for a moment before we attempt to answer it shall we?" Leon mocked. "Seventeen years! It has been seventeen years since you dragged me into this living human hell." Leon voiced in contempt. "We have suffered in their world for six thousand two hundred and five days." Leon retorted. "That is the answer you were looking for?"

"Not this again," Jeremiah muttered with boredom under his breath. Breathing in deeply in sheer annoyance of knowing what was to come next, as he placed the bread he held in his hand into the toaster. "Leon. Please. Why do we have to go through this every morning?" Jeremiah questioned in exasperation, turning around to face Leon staring up at him from behind the breakfast bar that separated them.

"Why must we go through this every morning?" Leon sarcastically repeated back. "I am trapped in this metal thing, forced to deny my true self – our true selves! Because you're too cowardly to tell him the truth!" Leon argued back indignantly. Growing anger forcing him to remove the dark blue blanket from his legs which hid the secretes he was not entirely of human origin and stood up onto his fawn legs.

"Are you crazy? Sit back down before..."

"Before what Jeremiah?" Leon interrupted. "Before he should, see? Is that what you mean? He is seventeen now. He needs to know who he is and who we really are before we die in this realm and there is no one to tell him who he is!" Leon fought back.

"Keep your voice down." Jeremiah panicked. Walking around the breakfast bar. "He cannot find out this way. It is not fair!" Jeremiah desperately tried to reason.

"Fair?!" Leon laughed out in irritation as he ran his dark-skinned hand through his long dreadlocks. "How is this fair to any of us! There is nothing fair about this situation. We are hiding among these humans. Using them to cloak us while pretending to be his uncles! Tell me how that is fair to the boy or to us?" Leon explained, emphasising his point. His tone

becoming animated in response to Jeremiah and what he believed was his downright ignorance to anyone else's feelings other than his own cowardliness to admit a hidden truth.

"He is not ready." Jeremiah explained, his tone blunt and to the point.

"How do you know if he is not ready if you do not even attempt to try and tell him, Jeremiah?" Leon questioned back abruptly. Momentarily forgetting himself and who could possibly overhear, as he gave into his growing irritation. His tone becoming a little louder and angrier than it had been moments ago.

Jeremiah, who was also feeling himself becoming enraged and frustrated by Leon and his idiotic refusal to allow the matter to drop until he, himself saw fit to inform Phoenix of his true origins and birth right. Walked back around the breakfast bar in exasperation and lent his hands on top of the dark oak in vexation. "Leon, I know frustration and resentment simmers within you. Of which you see fit to tell me of every morning. But you must trust me and my judgement and understand as much as you desire to return, as I do too, to our homeland. Once we tell Phoenix who he really is. That will be it. His life His existence. And all he has ever known will be compromised forever. We will be condemning him to a life of hell if we are willing opening the gates into a world were darkness, he has never known lives." Jeremiah tried to reason. "Every vile and dark creature and monster we told him as a young child does not exist. But does. And not only do they exist, but they will all want his blood as soon as he returns. Are you prepared and ready for that after all this time in the human world?" Jeremiah justified. His protectiveness hanging in his tone as he removed his hands from the dark wood and fixed his focus onto the annoyed expression hanging over Leon's face. "Are you really telling me you are ready to sentence him to that? For what will come for him! As I do not know if he is ready for such knowledge and all that will come from knowing."

"Yes." Leon answered back without hesitation. Defiance a shadow in his tone. "I am ready! I have always been ready to return home. And it does not matter how long you force me to stay in this human world; it will change nothing." Leon declared as opposition hung in his tone. "I will return home and with my last dying breath, it shall be used to fight for the freedom of Utonia." Leon declared defiantly. Conviction arched heavily on his face as he looked at Jeremiah. "Jeremiah please. I beg you. Our planet is dying if Markus is allowed to remain to rule without the threat of our kind." Leon tried to reason. "We do not even know if any of our brethren live or not!" Leon whispered. His voice giving way to his emotions. Turning from Jeremiah and walking towards the window at the back of the kitchen. "I love Phoenix just as much as you. But I cannot understand why you are happy to stay in this world when you know Markus betrays our world. Our home and all we had known. And pretend everything is okay and nothing is happening!" Leon questioned. Irritability taking hold as he shook his head from side to side in indignation. Taking his attention away from the sight of the early morning daylight seeping through the blinds and permitting his sight to meet Jeremiah's. "I cannot do this anymore Jeremiah. Too long we have stood by and done nothing while death takes all we know. I cannot wait in this world being weak. Vulnerable to any attack Markus will send should he discover he is hidden here." Leon reasoned, "I am sorry Jeremiah, you leave me with no choice. Either you tell him who he is and who we are. Or I will." Leon warned just as the sound of Phoenix's footsteps walking across the squeaking floorboards above them forced silence quickly to their lips.

"I will tell him," Jeremiah spoke quickly. Panic arching in his tone, fearing Phoenix would enter the kitchen at any moment and see Leon in his true form and exposing who they are before Jeremiah was ready to tell him of all hidden truths.

“When?” Leon questioned stubbornly, refusing to do as Jeremiah clearly wanted him to do, and sit back down before Phoenix should see him.

“Soon!” Jeremiah answered in trepidation. His tone dripping in the anxiety and frustration he was feeling towards Leon. Erratically moving his attention between the open door of the kitchen and the annoyed expression still holding Leon’s face hostage.

“Give me your word you will tell him and that you will tell him soon?” Leon demanded walking purposely slow towards the breakfast bar.

“I give you, my word!” Jeremiah quickly shot back as the sound of Phoenix walking down the stairs amplified his simmering panic. “Sit down before he sees you!” Jeremiah pleaded, a small sigh of relief escaping him as Leon finally complied. Leon covered his fawn legs with the familiar blue blanket he seemed to loathe since their arrival in this dismal world, turning back to his toast as if nothing had transpired, just as Phoenix entered the small kitchen of their three-bedroom semi-detached house.

“Toast?” Jeremiah questioned in cheerfulness. Smiling in nervous relief as he turned around from the breakfast bar to remove the two slices of cold toast from the toaster; grateful Phoenix was still none the wiser of who they all truly were.

“Yeah,” Phoenix answered, throwing his black school bag down next to the breakfast bar and picking up the bottle of orange juice from the table next to Leon. Pouring himself a glass before he sat himself down on the dark wood of the stool. “You have not forgotten I’m going on an exciting school trip to the museum today?” Phoenix sarcastically reminded his uncles, keeping his attention on Jeremiah as he began to drink his orange juice. “Oh yeah, football practice is going to finish late tonight. Coach wants to go over some more strategies before the game on Saturday.” Phoenix half smiled as he placed his empty glass down onto the breakfast bar.

“No. I have not forgotten.” Jeremiah answered, putting down the two slices of toast he had just smothered in butter on to the plate sitting in front of Phoenix.

“Are you planning on helping your team win this time?” Leon mocked. Turning his wheelchair around and smiling patronisingly up at Phoenix.

“That is funny Uncle Leon, really funny; you should be a comedian.” Phoenix answered in sarcasm back. “Are you planning on running for the bus this time?” Phoenix cheekily smiled as Leon smiled back.

“That’s my boy. Give as good as you can get. Just as I taught you.” Leon winked, “Except when you are on a football pitch.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Phoenix muttered, turning back around on his stool and picking up a slice of toast and taking a bite. “Disgusting, it’s cold,” Phoenix said in revulsion. Placing the toast he held in his hand back down onto the plate in repugnance, as he forced the small amount he held in his mouth down his throat.

“Phoenix, if you do not get going you will be late for school.” Jeremiah reminded Phoenix, his attention flittering to the yellow clock hanging on the wall. “I do not need or want another phone call from Mr Speedwin advising me of your lateness. Again!” Jeremiah warned in irritation. Picking up the plate of wasted toast and emptying it into the bin before placing the plate into the sink amongst the array of dirty dishes, bowls and cups. “Do not look like that Phoenix.” Jeremiah spoke sharply in response to the uninterested and bored expression

hanging over Phoenix's face; as he rolled his eyes in frustration, his obvious dislike for his teacher arched over his face. "One more bad report and you are looking at being expelled from school Phoenix. This is your last day before the weekend, try and keep your nose clean, and we can start next week with a clean slate."

"Jeremiah, give the boy a rest." Leon interrupted, "He is a kid. Let him be a kid before..." Leon suddenly fell silent. Realising he had accidentally said more than he had intended too.

"Before what?" Phoenix jumped with a tone that was both bemused and confused by Leon and his vague remark as he turned around on his stool and fixed his striking green eyes onto Leon and the worried expression covering his face.

"Before you're a man which is what I meant." Leon quickly lied. Feeling the weight of Jeremiah's harsh stare bearing down heavily upon him.

"O-kay," Phoenix replied slowly, his gaze lingering on Leon with a newfound curiosity. "Better head off. Wouldn't want to be late for school, would I, Uncle Jeremiah?" A hint of mockery flickered in his eyes as he rose from the stool and slung his bag over his shoulder. Moving quickly out of the kitchen. Pausing briefly at the mirror. His reflection confirmed the casual disarray he aimed for. Dark curly hair, just so. His olive-skinned face, not dry, looking creamed and hydrated. Tie loose. Top button undone. A stray crumb banished with a swipe, he nodded at his image, a faint unease now mingling with his usual tolerance for his weird uncles; as he turned away from his reflection and opened the door. Closing it behind him as he stepped into the cold of the early morning chill, on what he thought was his oddball uncles.