



221.11.28 | 9:23 A.M.

S*tephen, Stephen, Stephen. My name is Stephen.*

He'd been chanting it over and over to himself for the last two days – since they'd taken him from his mom. He remembered every second of his last moments with her, every tear that ran down her face, every word, her warm touch. He was young, but he understood that it was for the best. He'd seen his dad plummet into complete madness, all anger and stink and danger. He couldn't take seeing it happen to his mom.

Still, the pain of their separation swallowed him. An ocean that had sucked him under, its coldness and depth never-ending. He lay on the bed in his small room, legs tucked up to his chest and eyes squeezed shut, curled into a ball, as if that would bring sleep down on him. But since he'd been taken, slumber had come only in fits, snatches full of dark clouds and screaming beasts. He focused.

Stephen, Stephen, Stephen. My name is Stephen.

He figured he had two things to hold on to: his memories and his name. Surely they couldn't take the first away from

him, but they were trying to steal the second. For two days they'd pressed him to accept his new name: Thomas. He'd refused, clinging desperately to the seven letters his own flesh and blood had chosen for him. When the people in the white coats called him Thomas, he thought they were talking to someone else. It wasn't easy when only two people stood in the room, which was usually the case.

Stephen wasn't even five years old, yet his only glimpse of the world had been full of darkness and pain. And then these people took him. They seemed intent on making sure he realized that things could only get worse, every lesson learned harder than the one before it.

His door buzzed, then immediately popped open. A man strode in, dressed in a green one-piece suit that looked like pyjamas for grown-ups. Stephen wanted to tell him he looked ridiculous, but based on the last few encounters he'd had with these people, he decided to keep his opinion to himself. Their patience was beginning to wear thin.

'Thomas, come with me,' the man said.

Stephen, Stephen, Stephen. My name is Stephen.

He didn't move. He kept his eyes squeezed shut, hoping the stranger hadn't noticed that he'd taken a peek when the man had first entered. A different person had come each time. None of them had been hostile, but then, none had been very nice either. They all seemed distant, their thoughts elsewhere, removed from the boy alone in the bed.

The man spoke again, not even trying to conceal the impatience in his voice. 'Thomas, get up. I don't have time for games, okay? They're running us ragged to get things set up, and I've heard that you're one of the last ones resisting your new name. Give me a break, son. This is seriously something you want to fight about? After we saved you from what's happening out there?'

Stephen willed himself not to move, the result only a stiffness that couldn't possibly look like someone sleeping. He held

his breath until he finally had to suck in a huge gulp of air. Giving up, he rolled onto his back and glared at the stranger dead in the eye.

‘You look stupid,’ he said.

The man tried to hide his surprise but failed; amusement crossed his face. ‘Excuse me?’

Anger flared inside Stephen. ‘I said, you look stupid. That ridiculous green jumpsuit. And give up the act. I’m not going to just do whatever you want me to do. And I’m definitely not putting on anything that looks like those man-jammies you’re wearing. And don’t call me Thomas. My name is Stephen!’

It all came out in one breath, and Stephen had to suck in another huge gulp of air, hoping it didn’t ruin his moment. Make him look weak.

The man laughed, and he sounded more amused than condescending. It still made Stephen want to throw something across the room.

‘They told me you had . . .’ the man paused, looked down at an electronic notepad he carried, ‘. . . “an endearing, child-like quality” about you. Guess I’m not seeing it.’

‘That was before they told me I had to change my name,’ Stephen countered. ‘The name my mom and dad gave me. The one you took from me.’

‘Would that be the dad who went crazy?’ the man asked. ‘The one who just about beat your mom to death he was so sick? And the mom who asked us to take you away? Who’s getting sicker every day? *Those* parents?’

Stephen smouldered in his bed but said nothing.

His green-clothed visitor came closer to the bed, crouched down. ‘Look, you’re just a kid. And you’re obviously bright. Really bright. Also immune to the Flare. You have a lot going for you.’

Stephen heard the warning in the man’s voice. Whatever came next was *not* going to be good.

‘You’re going to have to accept the loss of certain things and think of something bigger than yourself,’ he continued. ‘If we

don't find a cure within a few years, humans are done. So here's what's going to happen, *Thomas*. You're going to get up. You're going to walk with me out that door. And I'm not going to tell you again.'

The man waited for a moment, his gaze unwavering; then he stood and turned to leave.

Stephen got up. He followed the man out of the door.