



E.R.E.B.U.S

A Novel By:



Chapter 8- Take My Hand

Curled up with his knees pulled tightly into his chest Hunter sobbed as the throbbing pain in his head intensified. Every morning, cruel guards violently dragged him from his cell like a runt, throwing him into the same laboratory where he endured unspeakable horrors. His body was routinely pumped with a thick black tar-like serum. E.R.E.B.U.S was written onto almost everything; holding chambers, vials, even the machines he was strapped to.

With each session, the pain in his head intensified to the point of becoming unbearable. Every sound was deafening. Even the buzzing of a fly's wings caused his head to pulse violently, a cacophony of noise threatening to break through his skull. "I just want to see my family," Hunter sobbed, holding his hands over his ears trying to block out the crippling noise.

Time had all but stopped for him, he couldn't even remember the last time he saw daylight. The steel grey corridors were all cold and narrow with no windows; trapping Hunter in a lightless world.

"No! Please, I don't want to go!" a girl's shrill voice screamed from outside as heavy steel doors slammed shut. To Hunter it was as if a banshee had screeched directly into his ear, the noise exploding inside his fragile head. Tears fell from his tightly scrunched eyes as the pain became excruciating.

"Can you hear me?" another girl's voice spoke quietly as the wailing screams for help became distant. Hunter heard it clearly and it didn't hurt as much.

"Yes," he replied softly, scared of his own voice.

"Are they testing you too?" she asked quietly. Hunter could barely recognise the voice through the pain but it felt familiar. It sounded like she was in the cell next to him. Hunter only managed a hum for a reply. "What's wrong with you then?" she asked, trying to keep her voice to a quiet whisper.

"I- I can hear everything," he sobbed, his voice bellowing inside his head. "But... I can't see..." he whimpered, the darkness surrounding him from all directions. Opening his eyes, the pupils had completely glazed over to a milky white.

After only a few sessions of the black liquid being forcefully pumped into his veins, Hunter noticed his sight begin to blur and his hearing became incredibly sharp. The more he could hear the less he could see. He begged for them to stop, he begged for them to not take away his sight but they strapped him down, and pumped even more into his frail body until eventually he awoke in the dark.

It wasn't like closing your eyes, where light still manages to penetrate through the lids. No, it was total darkness... complete oblivion. "What about you?" he whimpers.

"Everything I touch gets taken away," she said, her voice quiet and secretive.

"Can you take away the pain? It's too much," Hunter asked, wanting the constant pulsing to stop.

"It doesn't work like that. You'd be taken as well," the girl continued to whisper trying not to make too much noise. "Don't tell anyone though. They can't remember," she whispered.

"I- I won't..." he replied, trying to focus on her voice and drown out the cries surrounding them. "I'm Hunter..." he said, in the hope of making a friend.

"Hunter... It's me, Mallory," she replied sweetly, "I'm so sorry this happened to you,"

"It's not your fault," Hunter said, thankful that he wasn't in this alone. "I thought you got out?"

"They were waiting for us," she said, her voice becoming hollow at the memory.

"Are your family here too? Maybe we could find a way out if we work together," Hunter suggested, but Mallory sighed deeply and shuffled in the cell next to him.

"I haven't seen any of them," she admitted. "I'm scared Hunter; I don't think there is a way out..."

"There has to be, and we'll find it together," he said, a breath of determination filling his lungs.

Suddenly, thundering footsteps marched down the concrete corridor. Each step more deafening than the last, they completely drowned out Mallory's comforting voice. Hunter's head flew back crashing into the steel wall as his cell door slammed open. The noise was so loud it crippled his entire body with seething pain.

"Get up," a man's voice bellowed aggressively. "NOW!" he ordered, the sheer force of his voice paralyzing Hunter.

A gloved hand wrapped around his throat and pulled him up from the floor. His frail young body dangling above the ground and his legs flailing feebly. He couldn't see, but Hunter knew the man's face was inches away from his own because of the stench of stale cigarettes wafting over him. Slamming Hunter's feet down onto the floor so he stood up, the man pushed him as if to say move.

Hunter, however, remained still.

"Please don't make me," he sobbed, knowing that the pain in his head was only going to get worse.

Gripping the back of his neck the man pushed Hunter forward again forcefully into the wall. As his head smashed into the concrete the darkness around him began to vanish and light poured into his eyes. It was almost blinding, each detail magnified. Hunter could see the dead skin cells flaking away from the guard's aggrieved face. He was barking viciously at Hunter but he couldn't hear it.

As sound vanished, sight returned.

"You're one of the lucky ones. You don't want to know what happens to failed experiments," the guard spat, but Hunter couldn't hear. Instead, he looked frantically around for a way to escape.

Droplets of water falling from the pipes above seemed to drip slowly around him as he focused on every detail of the corridor. He noticed the hatch on the cell door next to his was down. Thrusting his bony elbow into the man's gut Hunter pulled away and jumped up to the hatch.

"Mallory please, take my hand!" he screamed, as the man ran over and pulled on his legs. "Touch me, please! I don't want to be like this!" he pleaded, struggling to hold on.

Desperately looking inside for help, he saw a faint shadow of a girl. Mallory's dark hair was draped over her face as she slowly walked silently towards the door. Jumping up she held onto the hatch and reached out. The last thing Hunter saw was her pale hand touching the man's cheek softly, before a thick black smoke surrounded them both, pulling Hunter away violently.

"NO!" Hunter yelled, his body lunging forward in bed. His breath was heavy and his body dripped in warm sweat. Frantically looking around with startled eyes he sighed when he realised he was just in his room. The window had steamed over and his bed sheets were damp. "Not again," he groaned, tired of the constant nightmares.

Swinging himself out of bed he stretched out with a loud sigh. Licking his lips, his mouth was dry and clammy, probably from all the sweat. He pulled on a pair of grey joggers and walked out into the corridor where he could hear a twinkling scratching sound coming from the lounge area.

He opened the door to see Jaida sitting at the breakfast bar with her back to him. Walking closer he noticed that she was twirling what appeared to be a spinning top made entirely of translucent amethyst crystal. "Can't sleep?" he asked, startling the blonde girl who nearly fell backwards from the shock.

"Don't do that! Are you trying to kill me?" she scowled, noticing Hunter chuckling to himself. She pulled herself closer to the bar for safety and shifted on the stool to get comfortable.

"Maybe," he grinned, hunching over the bar from the other side. The spinning top had shattered over the marble surface, with smaller pieces littering the floor. Jaida collected the shards carefully in her hand by scraping them to the edge of the bar. "What are you doing?" Hunter asked, nodding his head towards her hand full of crystal.

"I can't sleep so I thought some practice would tire me out," she hummed with her face turned away, still annoyed at Hunter.

"By playing with a spinning top?" he asked with a raised brow, not really understanding how that could be considered as practice.

“I wasn’t playing,” she scoffed and placed her hand down on the bar whilst keeping her arm raised up. The shards started to vibrate and create a twinkling sound. They then rushed from the bar and up Jaida’s hand to form her signature crystal bracelet. “I’m trying to hone my concentration if you must know,” Hunter nodded, not sure what else to say.

For some reason, Jaida was being dismissive of him. Noticing Hunter’s slight awkwardness, she sighed and relaxed slightly from her tense posture. “Sorry if I’m coming across as rude. I’m just stressed with all this extra training and we still can’t beat any of the other squads. It’s starting to make me think we’re just not good enough anymore. That I’m not good enough.”

“You’re joking?” Hunter chuckled, reaching his hand out to place it over Jaida’s’. “If anyone is to blame for this team not doing well it’s me. We should have won that race today but we lost because of my own stupidity, not yours. I’m too naïve,” he said, his head dropping in disappointment.

“That’s not true Hunter,” Jaida smiled up at him lifting up his chin. “You aren’t naïve, you just care. It’s not a bad thing to have feelings.”

“In this place, it seems like the strongest people don’t have feelings,” he said, referring to the Death Squad. “If empathy is such a good quality to have then why is it that their complete lack of it allows them to excel?”

“You can’t compare yourself to them,” Jaida said, standing up from the bar to reveal a slightly transparent pink kimono-style dressing gown that floated seamlessly around her body. “They have no one, not even each other. When they finally fall they’re going to fall hard and have nobody to help them pick up the pieces.”

“Am I a bad person for hoping that happens sooner rather than later?” Hunter asked, unable to hold his tongue. “Blake’s on a warpath. I overheard him planning on doing something horrible to Jalen, just because he has a crush on Kai.”

“What’s happened there? Before today, as far as I knew, Blake and Kai were inseparable,” Jaida asked, concerned for the youngest member of their squad. “It was probably the only thing holding back Siren and Brokh.”

“I honestly don’t know,” Hunter sighed, frustrated with everything that had happened that day. “He’s never been this distant, it’s like he’s trying to hide something. I mean... he told Aaron about the breakup before he told me! Aaron can’t keep a fucking secret to save his life and Kai knows that!” Hunter exclaimed, not realising how loud he was speaking.

“If he’s keeping secrets I’m sure it’s for a good reason,” Jaida said, hoping that would reassure Hunter, but it just tugged on a raw nerve instead.

“You know, Blake knew I was listening to him today,” he said, thinking back to what he said in the ARC. “Something happened between those two and it broke a dam of secrets. Kai’s going to drown if he tries to keep them all back, Blake will make sure of that.”

“No he won’t,” Jaida said, placing a reassuring hand over Hunter’s. “We’ll be there to protect him, no matter what they throw our way. Just like you’ll be there when Brokh finally comes for me,” she smiled up at Hunter, knowing that he would protect her from even the biggest of monsters.

“Will you two just shut the fuck up,” Leila snapped, appearing in the doorway and startling the two teens away from each other.

“How long have you been standing there?” Jaida stuttered in embarrassment with her eyes wide.

Leila stood smirking, the long black t-shirt covering her upper thighs rode up slightly when she leaned against the door. Her face was written with bemusement. “Were you eavesdropping?” Jaida prodded, folding her arms in annoyance.

“Spying on you two getting cosy at night isn’t exactly on my list of things to do,” she huffed, pushing past them both to get to the sink.

“We weren’t getting cosy. I... we were just...” Hunter tried to speak but his words had become mumbled as the thought of him and Jaida ‘together’ ran through his mind.

“Save it,” Leila said abruptly, waving him off. “I’m leaving before you two drag me into an emotional monologue about friendship or better yet... love,” she said, strutting past them with pointed glances. “Please, for the love of Cronus keep the noise down.”

“Ignore her,” Jaida sighed as Leila fled the room.

Without a word, Hunter stood up from the bar and turned to embrace the shorter girl. He rested his chin on top of Jaida’s two-toned hair, who wrapped her arms around his topless body, the sensation tickling Hunter’s skin. “So why are you awake at this time then?” Jaida asked, still nuzzled into the crook of Hunter’s neck. He sighed pulling away from the hug to run a hand through his damp sweaty hair.

“They’re getting worse,” was all he needed to say for Jaida to understand immediately.

Everyone in the flat knew about Hunter’s night terrors. They’d progressively gotten worse and worse, even Leila had shown some concern behind her teasing. Grabbing his hand, Jaida pulled Hunter over to the dining table and sat him down in front of the large glass window.

“Tell me,” she smiled, wanting Hunter to release the stress that had been building up from the dreams. Looking out the window he watched the pitch-black water ripple calmly under the moonlight. The lake was by far the most beautiful part of the Academy; how the water would dance as the wind raced over it was soothing, the reeds flowing with the motion. Every so often bubbles would surface from the water, hinting at an entirely different world below.

“I was in the same place, the one I’ve told you about before. It’s cold, damp and dark...” Hunter trailed off, seeing Jaida’s reflection in the window as she nodded for him to continue. “It’s dark because I’m blind, but I can hear everything there. The slightest breath would give me this excruciating pain in my head,” Hunter shut his eyes, finding it hard to relive the memory. He could still feel the pulsing. “There was a girl there too. She told me her name but it’s hazy... I can’t really remember much else, they’re like distant memories that have been locked away.”

“Listen to me,” Jaida hushed and placed her hand on Hunter’s shoulder. “We’re stressed, tired and disappointed. We’re all experiencing it differently and you just happen to be pouring it all into your dreams,” she explained, but Hunter didn’t seem convinced.

She gently slapped his cheek before pushing herself up out of the chair and holding out a hand for him to take.

“What?” he looked up bewildered.

“Take it,” Jaida motioned with her eyes. As he did she pulled him from the seat and across the lounge. Jaida took two jackets from the coat stand beside the door and threw one to Hunter.

“Where are we going?” he groaned as Jaida zipped up her pastel purple jacket.

“You’ll see,” she grinned, pushing him through the door.

He struggled to put on his own maroon hoodie as Jaida dragged him down the staircase and through the Leviathan lobby. There were one or two people lounging about still in their training gear. It was likely they had gotten stuck with the late-night session. The glass walls were projecting a serene deep blue ocean bed, with various sea critters sleeping amongst the sand.

Jaida pulled Hunter along until they were outside and then guided him down a rocky path towards the lake. Trees towered over each side of the pathway allowing only small beams of lunar light to show them the way. Moments later the pathway opened up to reveal a small grotto, hidden by surrounding bushes and conifers, overlooking the sparkling moonlit lake.

“What are we doing here?” Hunter asked, confused. Without a word, Jaida simply let go of his hand to search through the bushes and shrubs.

“Whenever I’m upset or feeling down, I come here to relax,” she finally replied as she continued to rummage.

“But why? It’s not like there’s anything here,” Hunter said, unable to see the appeal.

“There is if you know where to look,” Jaida said, pulling back one of the bushes. A dim yellow glow began to break its way through the darkness as Jaida parted the bush even further. Suddenly a cluster of fireflies flew out and fluttered around the hidden grotto.

“I still don’t see...” Hunter began but Jaida was quick to silence him with a wave of her hand. She then carefully removed her crystal adornments and let them float up to the fireflies, trapping them inside several crystal balls. They began to glow a luminous pink as the light twinkled through the darkness. Jaida carefully orchestrated them around the area as if they were dancing to an unheard song.

Two motes of pink firelight flew beside Hunter, floating for a moment before spinning around him. “Ok ok, this is pretty amazing,” he chuckled, unable to peel his eyes away from the performance.

“Magical, isn’t it?” Jaida chuckled, glad to see a smile creeping its way onto Hunter’s face. “It’s calming to watch them dance, it gives you some freedom from the thoughts in your head.”

Beams of burnt pink light danced around them, twinkling with a heartbeat of their own. Despite living in The Academy for most of their lives, there was always something new and beautiful to discover.

“I just wish I knew what these dreams meant,” he sighed looking towards Jaida. Shadows cast beautifully across her pale face from the crystal glow. She stared back at him, the motes of light freezing in place one by one.

“They don’t mean anything Hunter,” she replied sweetly, bringing the lights to float beautifully around her body. “These nightmares that are trapped inside your head, they aren’t real. You need to find a way to just... let them go,” she smiled as the crystal balls shattered, amethyst dust raining down on the grassy meadow as the fireflies flew back into the shadows leaving the two teens standing silently in the dark.

