



E.R.E.B.U.S

A Novel By:



Chapter 22 - Compromised Morality

Jaida ordered Aaron to remain outside and rest while Valentina's blood healed him. He needed time to rest, and they needed to be on top of their game if they were going to survive what came next. Leila refused to leave him, coming up with the excuse of needing to keep his energy levels balanced. Cassi advised Jalen and Flare to stay back as well, so they had enough protection if another wave of guards attacked them.

Stepping through the vault door, Hunter took a deep breath feeling the weight of anxiety on his chest. Kai nervously entered the pitch-black room and the door automatically closed behind them, leaving a gap just big enough for a sliver of light to peek through. Hunter, Jaida, Cassi and Kai, all walked aimlessly through the dark, shuffling along the walls until Hunter finally found a light switch.

Flicking on the lights, only a few of them managed to power up with the rest bursting and spraying glass across the floor. Kai jumped back in shock, his heart in his throat. Jaida just shook her head, knowing that they would need to toughen up and prepare for the answers kept hidden from them.

The vault seemed to be entirely abandoned with rows of empty desks and large filing cabinets running like a library. Hunter and Cassi walked down one side while Jaida and Kai ventured down the other, brushing over files of information. "Do you smell that?" Hunter asked, his acute senses picking up on a foul stench creeping around the dimly lit room.

"I don't smell anything Hunter, just old paper," Cassi replied, pulling open a drawer and rooting through the files. "Check this out, they have documents on all of us. This single drawer has information on one person that's categorised into years. Our lives here have been recorded and catalogued in this room..." Cassi said, flicking through the papers impossibly fast.

"Who's file is that?" Hunter asked, curious as to where his own was and what type of information was recorded.

“Blake,” she shrugged, handing him the file. “Looks as if each cabinet is broken down into Squads. This one is just for the Death Squad,” she said, pointing at the label.

“I shouldn’t read it... Should I?” he asked, but Cassi didn’t seem interested and carried on further down the row.

“You find anything, Hunter?” Jaida asked, passing by him from the other side of the cabinets. Kai followed closely behind, stroking his fingers across the metal boxes but not daring to look inside.

“No, nothing yet,” he lied, opening the file discreetly and keeping to the shadows.

The paper seemed to be old, almost like parchment. It crinkled and crunched as he went from page to page, spying on the inner workings of Blake’s life at the Academy. For the most part, it was as he suspected. Each recorded year documented Blake’s increasingly violent nature, how his anger only grew and bubbled with time, instead of subsiding with age.

Hunter rolled his eyes, his curiosity finally turning into anger at The Academy for ignoring Blake’s mental state for so long. He and Kai might never have been in the position they were in now if Blake had actually received the help he needed. Shaking his head, Hunter nearly placed the file back down until an unspoken urge persuaded him to continue.

Seventh Year

February - *Despite the growth in violent tendencies over current years, the subject seems to be regressing and becoming more docile. His interactions with another male student have brought upon an unforeseen change in his chemistry, suppressing the anger. To keep the Beta Project on track, we have scheduled for a six-week treatment of EREBUS β .*

“Hunter, what are you reading?” Kai suddenly asked, walking down the row towards him.

Oh this? It's nothing, just some stupid notes on training sessions," Hunter said, closing the file and pushing it back into the cabinet before Kai had the chance to question him further. "How did you get here so fast? You were just over there with Jaida a second ago..." he asked, trying to divert the topic.

"That was ten minutes ago Hunter, we've gone down that row and several others. This room seems to stretch on forever," Kai said, becoming intrigued again with what Hunter spent so much time reading.

"Let's go find the others, we should probably stay close," Hunter said, taking Kai's arm and guiding him away. From what Hunter had read, it seemed as if The Academy not only encouraged Blake's anger but actually instilled the violent nature in him, without his knowledge.

"Hunter, there's something over here. I can't see inside, come take a look will you?" Jaida called from up ahead.

Reaching the end of the filing cabinets, the room opened up into a circular chamber with wires and cables running to an empty spot in the centre. The walls were replaced with glass window panes that peered down into a room shrouded in darkness. It was almost like a wall of mirrors, reflecting Hunter's anxieties back at him.

"Ugh, it's that smell again," Hunter coughed, an indescribable stench hitting the back of his throat.

"There isn't a smell," Cassi repeated, growing suspicious of what Hunter was perceiving.

"Can you see what's down there?" Jaida asked, pulling Hunter to the side of the room. Dimming his sense of smell he heightened his sight to peer through the darkness. But what he saw caused his fingers to tremble and lips quiver.

"No..." Hunter said, slowly raising his hand to rest on the glass. Cassi and Kai cautiously approached, feeling the sense of danger emanating from Hunter.

"What is it?" Jaida asked cautiously.

"It's real," he said, shaking in despair. Lights inside the room flickered in tandem with his words, and for the first time, they saw a glimpse of what Hunter had dreamt about all this time. "The laboratory they took me to in my dreams. Where they tortured me mercilessly, where they pumped my veins with this black tar until my Enhancements finally developed."

"To torture and test on children in such conditions, it's barbaric," Jaida gasped, pulling Hunter away from the glass and into a comforting embrace. "I'm sorry you've been going through this alone, but I'm here now. And we're going to make them give us the answers we deserve, even if we have to tear our home to the ground."

"This was never our home... was it?" Kai asked softly, his memories now distorted and twisted with this forbidden knowledge. Jaida glanced up to meet his anxious gaze, then reached out her hand for him to join them.

"It might not be the home we thought it was, but we still have each other," she said sweetly, embracing Hunter and Kai tightly. "Even though we bicker and fight, we're still family. We always come back and support each other because that's what families do," Jaida assured, knowing that they needed to stay strong and united in the face of adversity.

"Guys, come look at this," Cassi said suddenly, picking up a file that had been left out on one of the nearby desks. The word **CONFIDENTIAL** was stamped in red ink on the cover, highlighting the title that Hunter immediately recognised.

"E.R.E.B.U.S.?" Hunter muttered, running his finger along the name. Images flashed in his mind, the name printed on test tubes and chambers from the laboratory. Opening the file, Jaida and Kai looked eagerly over Hunter and Cassi's shoulders, hoping there would be an answer within.

"**Elixir for Rapid Evolutionary Betterment and Universal Sacrifice,**" Cassi read aloud, following the document with her finger. "The file says it accelerates the evolutionary process within our D.N.A. It's a formula."

"I'm afraid to ask what for, but I think we already know the answer," Jaida dared to utter, fidgeting with her crystal bracelets in disbelief. Hunter's nose began to twitch again, the lingering foul stench creeping its way to him once more. Just before it became unbearable, a loud siren boomed through the room.

The walls around them suddenly peeled away into dust, and the grey paint turned to rot as mould formed on the ceiling and the same putrid stench filled the entire room for everyone to smell. As the seconds passed by, the siren dimmed to a distant hum, and the remaining lights began to flicker, guiding them to the centre of the circular chamber where the wires and cables met.

What was once an empty space that bore no importance, was now illuminated with dim lights to reveal a tall monstrous machine. Strapped into its centre was a boy of their age, whose arms and legs were strapped into place with steel structures.

Countless thick wires protruded from his body, connecting him to the machine. Around his head was a metallic helmet that cut deep into his scalp. His skin was deathly pale with a sickly green tinge, pulled tight and his face gaunt like a ghoul.

Hunter approached slowly, but Jaida quickly pulled him back as the boy's head snapped upwards and his ghostly white eyes gazed out at them.

"I'll be okay," Hunter assured her, stepping forward once more. As he came closer, the pungent smell became worse. He soon realised that it was coming from the boy, who was sweating and soiled in his own faeces. His skin was stained with urine and the floor burned with ammonia.

Hunter rid himself of his sense of smell to get closer, but that didn't help with the sight. The boy's naked body was just skin tightly wrapped around bones, with little to no muscle. Several tubes protruded from his stomach and a gasmask covered his mouth. "Who are you?" Hunter asked, trying not to show the disgust on his face.

"*I don't know,*" he replied in a quiet, pained voice. Barely able to speak the words, his breathing was heavy through the gasmask which muffled his words. "*They took that from me.*"

"Why are you in that thing, is it keeping you alive?"

"I am the forest; I am the academy. I am the reason you've escaped," he stuttered out, pointing to a wall of monitors beside the machine. Each showed a different location from around The Academy, including various environments and scenarios they had trained in.

"You're the ARC..." Cassi said, realisation striking her like a lightning bolt. "It all makes sense now!" she exclaimed, rushing towards the monitors and reading the files as she did so. "I couldn't work out the technology behind it. But it never was technology, you're Enhanced."

"I create illusions... Small pockets of reality," he said, motioning to their surroundings. *"This machine amplifies my Enhancement around The Academy, trapping everyone inside. I've risked everything to show you the way here."*

"It was you that time in the forest. You were trying to signal me." Hunter said, remembering back to the glistens of light.

"He needs to be stopped," the boy continued with a sense of urgency, his voice cracking and coarse. *"Lies and deceit for an army of Enhanced. To wreak chaos and destruction. To end humanity so it would be reborn with him as our creator... our God."*

"How do you know all of this?" Hunter pressed for more information, his heart beating furiously in his chest.

"I've seen, I've heard. The things they did to us; the things they've taken from us. It's all because of him."

"Because of who... Julien?" he asked, desperately, needing the truth.

"Cronus," the boy whimpered, fearing the mere mention of his name.

"If you're the source of the illusion, are you also causing my dreams?" Hunter asked, but the boy shook his head.

"I am not the one giving us those dreams," he stated hoarsely.

"Jaida, Kai, help me get him down," he called them over, but the boy began to shake furiously in his shackles.

"No!" he yelled in his weak state. *"The machine controls and amplifies my neurological activity. If you want to escape, you need to completely sever the connection. You're going to have to kill me."*

Silence befell the room as Hunter stared wide-eyed at the deathly-looking boy before him. He'd never imagined taking someone's life, he was always so careful when fighting to cause as little pain as possible.

Jaida and Kai froze, horrified and unsure of what to do.

"I can't kill you," Hunter said, determined to get everyone out safely.

"If you want to leave then you don't have a choice," the boy replied, his voice growing faint and ghastly. *"I can only change small details. This machine is part of me and forces me to use my Enhancement. The only way to stop the illusion is to break the connection."*

"He's telling the truth," Cassi said, examining the machinery closely. "These wires are connected to his spinal cord, and that helmet seems to be attached directly to his brain."

"We can't kill him!" Hunter exclaimed, refusing to take an innocent life.

"There is no other way," Cassi said calmly, trying to make them see sense.

Kai remained silent, fear of the unknown locking him in his own mind. Jaida buried her head into Hunter's chest, the situation becoming too intense to take in all at once.

"I've been in excruciating pain for years," the boy said, suddenly gasping for air. *"Death would be as much freedom for me as escaping would be for you."*

It was hard to swallow, but Hunter couldn't argue with the reality of their situation. His eyes had been opened to the truth and weren't blinded by lies and false realities anymore.

He had no choice.

"Hunter?" Jaida looked up at him as he pushed her away gently.

He couldn't look at her or Kai.

Ignoring the voices around him, he focused solely on the boy in front of him. Dulling his sense of sound, Jaida's pleas for him to stop fell on deaf ears as he came closer to the now smiling boy. Staring him dead in the face, Hunter looked into his glazed white eyes before closing his own.

"I'm sorry," he whispered out, gripping tightly onto his sword. His legs quivered and his body trembled, but he pushed through the doubt and regret inching forward.

But before he could seal the boy's fate, a warm hand reached out to hold his forearm and pull him back. Opening his eyes, he saw Leila gazing at him with an air of understanding. She shook her head and pushed Hunter's arm down, so his sword was no longer raised.

She turned to the boy in front of them and reached out her hand to cup his face. His skin was deathly cold and dry to the touch. She began to drain his vitality and a red aura surrounded them both as it slowly poured out from his body, weakening him further. Even when his eyes began to roll to the back of his head, she didn't stop.

Only when the boy smiled with relief as the last breath of life drained from him, did she step back.

His body fell limp, falling into a deep slumber in which he wouldn't ever awake.

"I won't let you compromise your morality, Hunter," she said, glancing between him and Jaida. "Aaron needs me," she stated, merely brushing past him and leaving the scene of despair behind her.

A few seconds later, the loud siren began to blare once more and red light bled into the room. Hunter turned to see Jaida with tears streaming down her face. She pushed him away violently as he tried to console her.

"You were going to kill him!" she said with disbelief, unable to come to terms with what was happening.

"I had no choice," he said, trying to reach out but she batted him away again.

"You came to that decision awfully fast," she said, the colour in her eyes diminishing. "There's always a choice," she said, turning her back, unable to meet Hunter's gaze.

"Give her time," Kai said as she walked away from Hunter.

No matter how raw and deep the last few minutes cut into them, they knew it was only a fraction of how Jaida felt. She constantly trained to ensure she had complete control over her Enhancement. And now, she was beginning to realise she had no control, that everything had been forced upon them unwillingly.

Just as Hunter was about to speak, a deafening siren boomed around the room as the red lights began to flash furiously.

"We need to go," Cassi said, grabbing as many files and documents as she could carry. Hunter looked between Jaida and Kai with regret, they were both at breaking point and he had no idea how to hold them together.

Aaron had been shot, and Leila had just killed a boy they'd barely known for minutes. Time wasn't something he could afford to waste, he had to step up and take charge. The only solace Hunter could find in such a dark moment was that the boy strapped into the machine, could finally rest in peace.

