

PERIMETER RED : BOOK II

Chapter 1 – Call It Home

If he had kept count, it would have been the three hundred and seventh time he had lifted something that day. However, he did not have time to keep count. The only important thing was the task at hand, and that was coming along just fine. What had once been a cluttered, dangerous area was looking much cleaner than it had hours earlier. The job was getting done.

He knelt down and carefully gripped what looked like part of an engine, preparing himself for another aching lift.

"You're one of the Renegades aren't you?"

Caden's concentration was shattered and he dropped the engine, letting out the breath he had holding. His blue eyes widened when he confirmed that the small voice belonged to a child. It looked to be a human male, with long corded hair and large brown eyes.

"They still call us that?" he asked the child in the common language, Basic. He put that question before the more pressing one.

The child nodded and pointed to Caden's shoulder. At that gesture, he remembered the tattoo that marked each of his shoulders, as well as the shoulders of his seven companions. It was the outline of what looked like a bird in flight, meant to represent freedom. They had been living in the city no longer than a few months, and they already had a reputation. Nodding, he smiled at the human boy and stood up, taking the time to stretch his sore muscles.

"I guess you could say that, but I do have a name," he replied.

The boy watched the older male get much taller as he stood, and took the hint. "Ah. My name's Kodii," the child bowed in a mannerly fashion and looked back up to Caden expectantly.

"I'm Caden," he offered, returning the gesture. As he noticed Kodii's pristine clothing, he remembered what had originally confused him. "What are you doing all the way down here?"

Kodii's features suddenly changed, and he looked off to the left while he spoke. "I know. I'm not supposed to be here... but my friend told me he saw monsters down here."

Caden's frown broke into one of his signature smiles. "And you came running, right?"

The boy made another face and shrugged. "I didn't believe them. I figured I'd just hide for a little while and then come back out," he explained. The boy sent a quick glance behind Caden, and continued, "But then I saw you guys, and I noticed your mark."

The story seemed simple enough to Caden. He decided not to lecture the boy on the rules. Crouching again, he lifted the engine in one move, and made for the large carrying bed that already contained hundreds of shrapnel pieces.

"Monsters huh?" he wiped his hands before he put them on his hips. Kodii followed his every move, and Caden found himself reminded of his younger brother, Raj. "No, there aren't any monsters down here," he admitted, walking out from underneath the building's overhang.

From the lowest point where the dirt was real, and the trash from the city's traffic collected, it was hard to see anything but the gray, rocky bottoms of the buildings. The buildings were so large that they seemed to go forever when one looked up.

"I know some beings who would want to take this away from us though." Caden continued, knowing he had Kodii's full attention. His ice blue eyes lifted, and he had to crane his neck to see the bustling city above them. With the sun setting, casting an orange/red glow onto the buildings, it almost looked surreal. Traffic not quite as heavy as that of the stuffy City One traveled in distinct lines that marked the above-ground 'roadways', and nearest to the buildings were similarly airborne walk-ways. Nothing came as low as they were now unless it was hiding, or in Caden's case, cleaning up.

As he looked upward, letting his vision cloud, he let himself drown in the surreal environment that had become his home. It was a far cry from the small Shifter colony he had grown up in. "Do me a favor and stay above this place," he said after a moment of silence. "The only monsters that lurk down here are ones who would mean to take our city from us."

"But I heard you and your friends beat the Regen," Kodii countered in such a blunt manner that Caden's daydreaming view of the city was lost in a quick shake of his head.

He looked back down at the young child, nearly laughing out loud at the prospect of what he was suggesting. "Some of them. Only a few of them," Caden tried to find words to explain. "The trees you see in the city, there are a few of them growing up above," he said, kneeling in front of Kodii again. "There are forests out there filled with millions of trees like that. The Regen we beat were just a handful out of the millions of them that live in other cities."

Thankfully, he seemed to be understanding. Caden let out a breath, but Kodii looked up again, with that same inquisitive look in his eyes. "But won't they all come after you now? How can we keep the city if there are so many more of them?"

Again, Caden's smile broke through. "We're working on that," he said softly. A moment later he stood. "Come on, work's over and we both need to get away from this place."

He called the rest of his crew to order, packed up, and made sure he saw Kodii off before heading back to what had become his home.

The screen was lit up with so many tiny dots and lines that any other being would have no idea as to what it meant. Despite that, she scrolled through it, using the codes and combinations that came so easily to her sharp mind. In fact, she read through the jumbled mass of information at a high speed, caught up in a job that had been rightfully assigned to her. Technically, she had worked her allotted time, but the building's security was something so precious that she felt a third, fourth and fifth check were warranted.

Not many knew that "the Renegades" (as they were now known throughout the city) had taken up residence in the building. Outwardly, it wasn't much to look at: medium height, bland coloring, and low lighting. However, on the inside, it had been remodeled to what the group had deemed as luxurious. They each had rooms of their own, but the few who had coupled off spent most of their time in one room together. The spacious apartments were separated by thick walls, and had accessible balconies that were safe to lounge on, despite their height. The balconies were side-by-side so that the group could talk over them, but had shaded covers for privacy if that was preferred.

Chao Shiyong had made a scene of inviting them up into the main base building in the city, but had secreted them away to this nondescript structure later on that week. Of course, some were quick enough to take notice of the group's frequent trips to and from the area, but that was precisely why Kireille kept the place locked up so tight that even the Undercity Guards had to report to her before entering.

The city was not yet secure of Regen spies and assassins. It was one thing to avoid shots and attacks while outside of their new homes, but living in constant fear in one's own dwelling was not acceptable. So Kireille sat in a reclining seat on her balcony with her palm computer resting in her lap, enjoying the last of the day's light while she worked. Only when she took a break from her computer did she notice a flash of red from the corner of her eye. Her neighbor apparently had a similar idea of how to spend a lonely evening.

"They're out with Tenn," she called to Jace. "Should be back within the hour."

The earth elemental, who had been staring at the sunset with his arms crossed, sent her a baleful glance before returning his gaze to the horizon. His hair was getting longer, and the red front of it was hanging in his eyes. Like his brothers, Jace had silver hair that could match that of a Regen's. The only difference was that each of the four had a touch of their own elemental color in it.

Kireille smirked at his attitude and shrugged. "Just thought you might want to know. You can deny it all you want, but it's obvious that you miss her." Oh, how she loved to pluck his nerves. Since he had a very similar attitude to hers, it was easy for her to find just the right things to say to make him bristle.

Jace didn't bother looking at her, but she could see his eyebrows drop low over his clear blue eyes, and his shoulders hunch. "You think I don't know when she's due back? I don't need a damned computer to figure that out."

The human female merely rolled her eyes and decided not to continue. For once, she was in a decent mood. Without the pressure of her grandfather, the memories of her family, or the eminent danger of her friends on her shoulders, she was much less touchy.

"Babe! You gotta see this! We found it out on the edge of the colony!"

Kireille winced. *Now* it was her turn to bristle. Taisu's voice had a way of going from completely soothing, to completely grating. When he trotted out onto the balcony, she didn't bother looking up. "You know I don't answer to that," she objected in a low whisper

"You- Oh... well, you didn't mind it when I-"

She covered his mouth before he could finish, shot a glare at Jace just for good measure, and shoved Taisu backwards into their apartment.

Siona had not expected Jace to be home so early, much less to be in her room. He was still as moody as ever, and he usually only paid her visits when the sun was well below the horizon. Otherwise, it was she who was coaxing him into keeping her company. She leaned on the archway that lead out onto the balcony, watching him for a moment to see if he would start the conversation. It was her own way of trying to get him to open up. Slowly but surely, it was actually working.

"I'm not used it yet," he said softly. She had to hold back from going out to him right away, knowing he would back off.

"It's new, but I think I like it better," she murmured in reply. Siona was always cautious, always trying to read his mind. Jace was primarily used to dwelling in rural areas or small colonies. City life was something he was adapting to, albeit slowly.

He did not say anything more for awhile and the two just stood, watching the red glow disappear over the horizon. The lights from nearby buildings took over and the lines of

slow moving traffic lit up as well. They were far less congested than the ones in City One, but that was to be expected of a city that was still adapting to new leadership.

"I'm not used to this kind of thing. The city, lights and all." She watched him hunch up and glare to the left as Taisu's voice drifted their way. "Loud neighbors," he added and she smiled.

"You'll get used to it," Siona said, letting the smile carry her voice. "That, or we can always get even."

Jace turned and let his eyes meet hers. In the darkness, they seemed to glow blue, even underneath his perpetually drawn eyebrows. The look he gave her showed her that he was anything but angry. Then, he abruptly turned to face the horizon again.

"I like the getting even idea," he muttered after he turned back. Jace seemed to take one last moment of introspection before turning back and walking towards her. "Later though," he moved past her with a brush of their clothing. "I brought food."

Siona's eyebrows nearly touched her hairline.

Emotions are like colors. They are bright and individual and they take over completely when allowed to run free. In such a case, they might mix and change tone, shifting and swaying in their own disarray. A mind could go insane if too many emotions grabbed at its core. A few at a time simply make an individual, but several can be dangerous. The trick is to separate them. Keep them distinct, whole, and bold.

Today's lesson was in wariness. It was not as easy as happiness or anger, but she had long since conquered them. The 'color' of wariness was a mix between yellow and green, and once she had a hold of it, she kept it. First, she became familiar with it, as she had been taught. From there she surrounded her very being with the emotion and once it was solid enough, she pushed it outward, feeling it envelop the room and anything nearby.

Xaverie was unaware of the hum coming from her throat, and she had become used to the sensation of her hair flying free, weaving and swaying in the air as if it had a life of its own. Wary. Unsure. Cautious. She was focused on it and soon learned that it was not a hard emotion to conquer or manipulate. The peak was reached when Xaverie felt as if she were swimming in the yellow/green and knew she had reached her goal.

Her lavender eyes opened and she still somehow expected the room to reflect the color of wariness, but it was the same white and gray it had always been. With silver streaks of blood still racing through her eyes, she looked upward to the only window in the room.

"Excellent. It looks like you're done for the day, Lady," a strange voice called from a hidden speaker. Even through the filtered sound system, the vibrating that accompanied the voice still set her nerves on edge. The Regen species had a very distinct sound to their voices, no matter which language they used. He spoke Basic now. "Tomorrow at the same time. We'll run some tests."

The girl nodded and stood, making her way out of the room with practiced care. It was secure to a point that no sound or scent could escape, and she was one of the few beings that would ever enter it. Shae had originally come with her on these training sessions (whether for his own piece of mind or hers, she still did not know), but now she made the trips to and from the place alone. The room had been built specifically for her training, as those of the Trian species were becoming well known for their hypnotic abilities. Whether they could control them or not, a Trian relied more on emotions than words to communicate.

Xaverie was a full-blooded Trian. She was such a powerful example of the species that her lack of control made her very dangerous. These daily sessions with the Regen-born Chao Shiyou, were aimed at getting her in control of those abilities.

She picked her way along the low, dark hallway that she knew only a few beings ever crossed. With the recent take-over of the city, many underground passageways were being built to throw off any spies that made their way in. There were attacks almost daily, proving that the Undercity takeover had not entirely wiped out City Four's Regen populace.

She opened a hatch in the floor of the hallway, using a code that had taken her a week to learn. In the weeks after that, Xaverie had learned the entire pathway to a point where it was fresh in her memory. With practiced grace, she dropped into a lower passage that ran on a straightaway. After ten minutes of trotting, she reached yet another side passage. The girl made sure to pull up the cowl of her cloak before she entered the area. It was a similar path, but much wider and more traversed than the others. The signature low hum coming from above also reminded her that she was just below the landing decks of the Undercity base.

Others were nearby. There were only a few today, but all were cloaked just as she was. It seemed to make it easy for an enemy to disguise himself, but it also made it just as easy for any specific Undercity member to go unnoticed. She rounded the normal corners that led her further and further underground. The air became cooler and somehow thicker. Once she reached another doorway, she eyed the area around her before typing a code into the tiny pad on her wrist brace, then placing it against the computerized panel on the wall. The door slid open with barely a sound and Xaverie slipped through, turning to watch the door close before she pulled her cowl back down and moved into the dark corridor.

"Lady Xaverie," a low, smooth voice crooned from a dimly lit cavern ahead of her. It was not a mocking tone, but it still made her slightly uncomfortable to be called 'Lady'. Ever

since Chao Shiyou had spread word that she was to have taken her mother's place as Lady of the House on Trius, many insisted on keeping the title. She slowed her pace and smiled as she made out the silhouette of a wild-haired Shifter. His companion turned in his seat and gave her a soft smile.

"Hey guys. How's the job?" she asked, as was usual in their almost daily conversations. Some days there would be only one of them, while on others, both would be gone. The two were in one of a hundred or so stationed watches, and would leave at any alert of intrusion or crime. Sites like this one were everywhere between the Undercity base and City Four, ranging from underground like this one, up in trees, or etched into a mountain's stone base. Any alert would be strategically answered and followed through by the Undercity guards.

"Not bad."

"Not bad? *Nai*, it is bad! We haven't had one call all day. I'm bored, Xaverie," the wild haired one whined, sitting heavily in his seat as she entered their domed cavern. Computers were set up comfortably against a carved desktop, and one thick panel of transparent material gave her a view of a small landing area. Three bikes were parked in the 'lot', ready to shoot straight up from the underground lair and into the forest that hid the exit above.

"Vokah, *when* am I going to get it through to you that near-death experiences are not the answer to boredom?" The other cut in, lifting a brow at what could be his mirror image. Both had the same shade of blue hair, though one had his shaved on each side and spiked wildly at the top. It was obvious that they were brothers, but their personalities were opposite.

"He's right you know." Xaverie said. "It makes me happy to hear that you don't have three or four calls a day like you did a before."

At Vokah's sigh, she made a saluting gesture at Nale and smiled. "Keep an eye on him."

"I'll keep a foot on him if I have to," Nale replied with a knowing smirk. He had always been the more militant of the two. He typed at his computer screen, watching it intently for a moment before nodding once. "You're clear to go. Tell Taisu and Siona that we're still waiting for a visit."

Xaverie nodded and turned to leave. Taisu and Siona were two of her best friends, and she considered herself lucky to be able to see them more often than their own brothers did. All four siblings had the same blue hair and bright green eyes, but each of them seemed so different to her. At this point in her life, Xaverie cherished every friend she had.

"Watch my back!" she yelled over her shoulder as she made her way down the impromptu stairway into the lot below.

She pulled her cloak tight around her and straddled the bike, preparing for the long ride between the Undercity base and her new home, City Four. Once there, she would take a similarly hidden underground pathway to get to her landing deck.

The sheer sensation of her bike jolting in a straight vertical line sent her stomach in circles. A smile graced her features as she broke free of the treetops, and shifted into forward motion. Focusing on the landscape as she rode, Xaverie took the time to enjoy the scenery. Second Sunset was in full force, lighting the hilly area in a brilliant orange and reddish glow. With evenings such as these, one could almost overlook the utter danger of living in the area.

How could such a frail looking thing have become so important?

He had kept a sharp vigil over his newest weapon over the past weeks; to a point of near obsession with the being, he learned all of his habits and personality traits. In all, he seemed well trained and trustworthy, but true to form, Razhere was not one to trust. Regardless, this was his most precious weapon and he meant to keep him safe.

"That is enough, Xephryn. We will pick up with them tomorrow," he said, watching the young Trian's startlingly bright eyes meet his before nodding obediently.

The Trian was working wonders on the test groups, proving that the rumor of the breed's mind-control abilities was in fact true. Not only that, but Trians had a longer lifespan than the Regen themselves. That meant that this 'Xephryn' would be around for as long as Razhere would need him. The High Lords had gifted him with a rare being, and he meant to keep him close at hand.

Already, Razhere had planned a meeting with the hierarchy of the closest neighboring planets, Psiota and Ta'Llevny. They were the only other two inhabitable planets within Perimeter Red. The Psiotans had originally claimed rule over Second Earth (which had once been called 'Vel'sha', and been used primarily for trash dumping), while keeping at peace with the equally powerful, but culturally different Ta'Llevny. When they first discovered the existence of the mostly un-used planet, the Regen had made a treaty with the Psiotans, promising not to include their planets in its takeovers in exchange for leave to pillage and re-construct a Second Earth. Now, Psiota and Ta'Llevny were looking to be the only other inhabitable planets in all of the nearest star systems that the Regen did not claim rule over.

If Razhere could 'convince' the other planet's leaders to give themselves over, he would be the supreme ruler over not only one, but three planets. Vaj Razhere would be in

control of the entire star system of Perimeter Red. Up until that point, such a thing would have seemed impossible.

The Regen leader watched the lithe form of his Trian slave walk out of the training room on his security screen. Razhere had once worried that the Trian would get away or strike back at him for what the Regen had done to his entire species. After the decimation of Trius, nearly all of its inhabitants were annihilated. However, he realized that Xephryn had nowhere else to go. Razhere was his lord now, and this was his home. He was the only one of a handful left of his species and he was right in the palm of Razhere's powerful hand. That young male would be the key to his take-over of Perimeter Red.

Precious. That's what this Xephryn was.