

Chapter 1

Malachi Baxter pushed a hand through his hair and scowled at the computer screen. He hadn't built a website since high school. How did he get stuck with this job? Oh, right. Business degree. Which meant handling the finances and such, but the website? He scooted away from the machine and stood. He needed to talk to his brothers.

He stepped out of the tiny office at the back of the bakery and into a wall of heat. His oldest brother, Jonah, was measuring ingredients into a huge mixing bowl. His lips were moving, but with his brother's face half-turned Malachi couldn't quite lip read well enough to make out the words. Was he singing? He touched Jonah's shoulder.

"Hey, Mal. Done with the website already?"
Jonah set the measuring cup aside and dusted his

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hands on the apron tied around his waist. “That was fast.”

Malachi shook his head and sighed. “We need to hire someone. It’s an investment that’ll pay off in the long run. If I do it, it’s going to look like someone’s ten year old put it together over the weekend.”

Jonah laughed. “That bad?”

Malachi nodded. He’d drag his brothers back to see what he’d been playing with all morning if they insisted, but it was embarrassing.

“All right. Let’s check with Micah, but if you say we need it and can afford it, then I’m game.” Jonah strode across the kitchen to the swinging door that led to the front of the bakery where Micah manned the counter.

Malachi sighed and followed.

Micah handed change and a bag of bread to one of their regulars—Malachi searched his memory for the name and came up blank—and turned when the light above the door that served as the hearing impaired version of a doorbell flashed and the customer left. “Uh oh. If Mal’s out of the office, something must be up.”

Malachi clutched his stomach and feigned laughter before sticking his tongue out.

Jonah shook his head. “Nothing serious. Mal thinks we should hire the website out.”

“Rusty?” Micah raised his eyebrows.

Malachi signed, not bothering to speak along with it since they were alone in the bakery. “When was the last time you did a website?”

“Fair enough. Works for me. You notice I didn’t volunteer to do any of that stuff, right?” Micah squatted and collected a towel from under the counter. He ran the cloth over the display case, scrubbing at some imagined spot. “Do what you think is best.”

Jonah nodded. “Agreed. And since you’re handling all the business end, I don’t really care about details. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders and won’t dig us into debt.”

It was good his brothers had faith in him. Someone needed to. He nodded and eased back through the door into the kitchen. No point in hanging around out where customers came to gawk at the deaf man. In D.C. he hadn’t been a novelty. There were all sorts of people in the greater metropolitan area that made up what had been home his whole life. And mostly people didn’t bother staring at the ones who were different. In Arcadia Valley different stuck out. Oh,

they were nice about it. Malachi doubted anyone genuinely had any motive other than learning about something they didn't encounter every day. But that didn't keep him from feeling like a circus sideshow because he couldn't hear. He hadn't felt that way since right after the accident that cost him his hearing when he was young.

Back in the office, he pushed the door mostly shut, a signal that he was involved and shouldn't be disturbed if at all possible. A quick search online revealed what he suspected, there were more web designers in the world than made sense. How did he sort out the bad ones and find the good? Malachi drummed his fingers on the desk and reached for his cell phone to tap out a quick text to his sister, Ruth. The B&B had a nice site with a lot of the same kinds of functionality that they'd need. He set his cell back in the charging cradle that flashed brightly when his phone vibrated and turned to the computer. It was mid-morning. Ruth was probably cleaning rooms and wouldn't get to her phone for a while. But there was no rush.

With a glance toward the door and only the barest twinge of guilt, Malachi started up Orion's Quest and logged in. There weren't many players online in the middle of the morning, but there were

always folks in other time zones, or people, like him, sneaking in a battle during a slow time at work. He skimmed the activity log. No one he played with was on, but he'd been storing up solo missions. Maybe he could knock one of them out. If his ship was repaired. He'd parked it in a dry dock when he logged out the night before, there should have been enough time for the fixes to be finished. And if not, he'd wander this outpost—where was he again? Didn't matter, really. Some new outpost on the edge of civilized space, getting ready to head into the frontier and see where his fortune lay. Before that, he could use an armor upgrade. Maybe some new weapons. If he had the cash after he paid for repairs.

The chat bar at the bottom of his screen notified him that Scarlet Fire had logged in. His heart sped up and he grinned as he opened up a direct message box.

“What are you doing on in the middle of the morning? Don't you have work?”

“Ha ha. I could ask you the same thing. Slow day?”

Malachi glanced at his cell phone cradle before typing again. “Waiting on a text. Thought I'd check on my ship, maybe start a quest.”

“Need a first mate?”

Colorful lights flashed in the corner of his eye. Of course. He sighed and grabbed the phone. Sure enough, Ruth had come through with the contact info for her web designer. “Never mind. Gotta run. You’ll be on tonight?”

“Of course. See you then.”

Malachi took two minutes to run down and spring his ship from the repair facility. At least that way when he did have time to play he’d be ready to go. With a final check that he’d set himself to be able to scoot out on a mission as soon as he logged back in, he exited the game and opened a web browser. He liked the website for the Fairview, but there was nothing wrong with checking out other references just to be sure before making contact.



“You sure you won’t come to church with us?”
Ruth frowned as she signed.

He shook his head. Sunday morning was hard enough with everyone staring at Ruth signing during the sermon and special music. And then, out in the foyer, anyone who tried to talk to him either yelled, as if that was somehow going to help, or spoke slowly as if it was his brain that had been

injured and not his ears. Both made it more challenging to read lips. He didn't need that on Wednesday night, too. "You don't have to babysit me. I'm okay."

"Don't you think if you were around them more it would help? The people at church are really nice, Mal."

"I believe you. I'm just...it's hard to be the weird new kid again. I thought that was behind me. In D.C., even if the people didn't know a deaf person personally they'd been exposed to enough differences that they could just treat me like a person without any adjective attached. I don't want to be 'the deaf guy.'" Mal threw his hands in the air when he finished signing and turned to head upstairs to the room he shared with his brothers at the B&B. And that was another thing they needed to address. Sharing a room with them temporarily was fine. But now that they were all settling here? Something had to give. And Ruth needed the space back, anyway. He'd seen her telling people she was booked up when, in reality, it was just her brothers taking up space.

Ruth touched his arm.

He turned, flinching inside at the sorrow written on her face.

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“I’m sorry. You didn’t have to move out here. If it’s that bad...you don’t have to stay.” Her shoulders fell.

Was it possible to be a bigger jerk? He held out his arms and waited for her to walk into them. Since it was just Ruth, he could speak without worrying she was listening for the telltale signs of his deafness. “I’m glad to be here. If you’re all here, then it’s where I need to be. It’s just...hard. And...I miss Mom and Dad.”

Ruth leaned back and held his gaze, her eyes filling with tears. “I do too. Every day. I thought the years were supposed to make it easier.”

He smiled and kissed her forehead before releasing her and tucking his hands in his pockets. With Ruth it was never an issue to talk without signing. Even if he didn’t know what he sounded like. Half the time he imagined it was still the voice he remembered from his childhood, but it had to have changed as he’d grown up. Maybe, if he was lucky, he sounded a little bit like Dad. At least in his mind, Dad’s baritone had been warm. Friendly. “Do you need me to go tonight?”

“No. No, I don’t need you there for me. I just think you might find something there for you.”

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He scoffed but didn't ask exactly what she had in mind. As a recently engaged woman, Ruth was probably scouting the single ladies with an eye toward her brothers. But he'd been in high school when he'd given up on the delusion that he'd ever marry. The few deaf girls he'd dated had wanted him to turn his back on his hearing friends. And the hearing girls had treated him like he was a project. No. He was better off imagining love with someone like Scarlet Fire online than trying to navigate the real thing.



Malachi clicked on the mission, double checked that he had all the required equipment on board, and opened the map. He chose the first star system he'd need to visit and set the ship in motion. It wasn't instantaneous transport, which made the game a little more fun. Things could go wrong en route. There were pirates for one, and the handful of people who were irked at him for beating them to prizes. Most of them got over it and remembered it was just a game. But there were others who needed a stiff dose of reality. He tried to steer clear.

“Started without me?” Scarlet Fire’s chat message popped up.

“Just barely. You can still join if you want.”

“Sounds good. I’ll beam in?”

“Perfect.” Malachi closed out of the armor customizing screen he’d been in and ran through the halls of his ship to the transportation hub. He verified that it was her and clicked to allow her to join the party. Her avatar materialized. He swallowed. It wasn’t as if he didn’t run into roughly the same avatar all the time—you could only customize your clothes and hair—but something about hers always made his heart stop. Which probably meant he needed to get a real life. “Welcome. We’ll hit the first system in about two minutes. How was your day?”

“Got a new client. Always a good day. Even better, they’re a referral from a previous client and they’re local.”

“Don’t you do web design? Why does local matter?”

“Doesn’t necessarily. But sometimes it helps if there are hiccups.” Her avatar’s hair color changed from bright red to blonde. “What do you think?”

“It’s different.”

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“Is that good or bad? Was trying to go a little more real to life.” The hair changed back. “Maybe that’s not a good thing?”

She was a blonde. It didn’t fit his mental image. Not surprising as he’d essentially un-animated her avatar and dressed her in normal clothes when he was forming it. But...blonde worked, too. “No, I liked it. It just took me by surprise.”

“Don’t you ever want people to know the real you?”

He shook his head and tapped the keys to dock the star ship at the port where they’d find the first leg of their mission. The best part of online multi-player games was having the chance to be who he really was without first waiting for people to get over the fact that he was deaf. “Not really.”

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