

Earth Reconquered

By Kevin Berger

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Smashwords Edition

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Chapter 1

Patrolling the tightly packed, overpopulated buildings in City Central was a young cop's beat. Meandering the miniscule alleyways, barely enough for two large people to pass side-by-side--that was my life. The streets were narrow and claustrophobic. I longed for the sprawled out valleys that filled my imagination.

Heated sounds of aggressive voices came from one of the upcoming alleyways. Andy and I started walking a little faster towards the commotion. He looked at me and grinned, "Sounds like a little action". Just then the sharp pierce of a woman's scream broke through the surrounding male voices. I broke into a run and turned the corner. A girl's eyes met mine. Her face was drawn and white. Her whole body quivered.

The man twisting her arm behind her back looked happy as her face grimaced.

"That's what ya get!" one of the others said, his finger pointing right into her face.

The third one was the first to notice us coming. Soon the three turned to look at us, the looks on their faces melting into shock. They had matching jeans, black sneaker, and tight long sleeved shirts. The sleeves rolled up the same way like some sort of uniform.

"Damn, a cop!" one of them said.

Two of them bolted the opposite way down the alleyway, knocking a garbage can to the ground in their getaway. The one holding the girl seemed too shocked to know how to react. He continued holding the girl's arms, a dumbfounded look on his face, and turned her towards me, as if she could be used as some sort of human shield. She screeched again, the turn obviously twisting her frail shoulders in an unnatural, painful way.

I pounced on the hapless abuser. He pushed the girl away seconds before I was on him. With wild eyes, he took a desperate punch in the general direction of my head. It was easy enough to dodge the amateurish attack and he went by me. I grabbed his arm by the wrist as he went by, twisted sharply and pushed his arm against his back. He let out a pained cry, similar to the one he squeezed out of the girl, and I grinned as I leaned on him, shoving his face against the alley wall.

Andy came around the corner. The other two thugs were now nothing more than shadows quickly disappearing around the next corner down the alleyway. "Aah, ain't worth it," he muttered as the two got away.

"Take it easy man!" the young man wailed.

I grit my teeth as I twisted his arm behind his back.

"What's going on!?" Andy barked.

"What's going on sleaze ball?" I asked. "What are you guys doing?"

"Man, it's nothin' man! Nothing! You guys don't even have to get involved. I don't want no trouble!"

"Nothing! "three of you sleaze balls ganging up on a skinny girl," I said.

“Oh man, she’s nobody, don’t worry about it,” he said. I grabbed his shoulder and spun him around to face me. One short sharp shot to the stomach knocked the wind out of his lungs and he collapsed to his knees in front of me.

“That’s enough Jonz. I don’t wanna waste my time here. He’s right--she ain’t worth it--just animals fighting in the zoo.” Andy said. He pulled me back and we both stood over the young man as he tried to right himself, regain his composure; but the shot to his midsection left him still doubled over.

I heard the young girl panting behind us. I turned to look at her. Her arms were pressed against the alley wall. She was about my age, but her lost-child expressions gave her the impression of nothing more than a babe in arms; fragile, unable to take care of herself—perfect fodder for street thugs.

“I think he’s had enough.” Andy judged. “Have you had enough punk? What are you doing out on the streets at this time? You know its past curfew.”

“Curfew’s not the problem here punk! Now tell me what’s going on here,” I cut in.

Andy sighed. I pulled Andy aside. “There were three of them. The other two took off like cowards. This scum was holding her arms while the others were yelling and hitting her.”

Andy shook his head and turned to the girl. “What are you doing out here?”

“I’m just trying to survive, just trying to make a living? I got a right to live, don’t I?”

“Show me your identity card?”

“I don’t have one.” Her long blond hair fell over her deep blue eyes. They were the colour of everyone else’s, but they seemed to be a deeper blue. Her black dress looked expensive but worn and stained. It had seen better days.

Andy glared at her for a couple of seconds. He turned to me and whispered, “Can’t you see what this is? No identity card. She knows if she carries it on her, we’ll swipe the card and get a full hologram view of her file and all her record. It’s obvious. She’s just a whore. She’s dealing with her pimps--or customers she ripped off.”

“We don’t know that.” I said. “Besides, that’s not our problem. To me, three men attacking a defenceless woman, its clear cut, we should get involved.”

“It’s clear cut all right, customer or pimp; either way—who cares! We should get outta here. It’s too close to the end of my shift.”

“No!”

“Fine, you want justice for this little whore! You already beat the guy. You wanta get some more?”

He turned to the guy still on his knees who was still trying to recover, and kicked him. His head banged into the garbage packed against the wall. He groaned again, sighing like a newborn unable to speak any language, then seeped back into the pile of garbage.

“We should do something,” I said.

“We’re not social workers,” Andy insisted.

"It's our job to serve and protect!"

"You been watching too many movies Jonz. You make me laugh sometime. You're getting way too soft--even for you." Andy waved his hands in the air, almost stretching across the narrow alleyway.

"We should be more vigilant than ever," I insisted.

He rolled his eyes and looked up at the stars--as much as you could see from our cramped city, looking up through the dome.

"Not with this Exodus crap again! Ya gotta get with the program. Your head's up your ass dreaming about old Earth. It's gone buddy!?! We ain't gonna get all these degenerates cleaned out of the domed city before the Exodus. Vermin like this," he looked to the girl and her assailant, "they're not all getting cleaned up by us. We ain't supermen!"

"I'm just tired of all this--" I started, but Andy pulled me out of earshot of our bewildered listeners and said:

"This is our job, but be realistic. We're gonna have a harder time down there. We ain't going to a candy shop. You're getting way too gung ho about this political "new beginning" crap--don't believe everything you hear on that stupid screen."

He pointed up to the City Central screen high above us.

"The President would want us to prepare. You don't care about what a historic time you live in?! Over a hundred years in this friggin' dome! We need to--"

Before I could continue he pulled me a little farther away, looking around at the tightly packed high rises surrounding us, scanning the windows to see who could hear us.

"Just shut up! What, what are you thinking now?"

He must've known I wasn't listening to him anymore. The girl's sad eyes were all I could see.

"I know where I know her from."

"Good for you Jonz," he scowled as he looked at her. "I dunno--maybe we seen her before. Big deal. Am I supposed to recognize all the whores in the god-damned city!?"

"Last time we saw her, wasn't here in City Central."

"What?! A whore like that--where else?"

"In the outskirts."

"In the outskirts!?! Wow--she don't look like a high-class whore--but whatever--maybe she lost a better paying gig."

"Naw, she was living there."

"Okay Jonz, you got me slightly curious. How did an outskirts dweller end up being a two-bit whore on our lovely beat full of the city's scum?"

"I don't know that Stoneman? I'm not stalking her. It was a domestic dispute--remember?--that arrogant SOB beating up his wife?--had that vase worth more than our annual salary raised in his hand when we walked in--you remember?"

"Oooh yeah--but I don't remember her." He scratched his chin.

"She's the daughter who was crying on the street corner when we showed up."

Andy looked at her again, examining her timid and grimy figure, stuck on the wrong side of town--then he shrugged his shoulders and looked back at me.

"Still, who gives a crap--a rich girl who screwed up her life."

"You mean a girl who had to leave an abusive home."

"Whatever--still don't give a crap. How do you survive this job?"

"No, we're not social workers Stoneman, you're right."

She was still there with her back against the alley wall, hands out wide, like she needed the wall for support.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"I dunno," she shrugged.

"Do you usually work around here?" I asked.

She looked long and hard in my eyes and then her look relaxed and she looked down at her feet.

"Yes, I usually work here."

"I'll keep an eye out for you" I said.

She looked up at me for a second and then quickly down at her feet again.

"Get up," Andy said, waving his arm to the attacker on the ground. Strangely enough, he had his identity card with him. I swiped the card on my wristband and his holographic citizen's file came up. 'Page one of seventeen' it said at the top.

"That's quite a list of felonies. A couple of outstanding charges. Looks like you've been a bad boy," I said.

"Don't tell me ya wanta waste your time with this small time punk Jonz?"

"Is that a rhetorical question Stoneman?"

"Great Jonz, just Great. You did hear me say it's almost the end of shift?"

Andy activated the luminescent restraint rings around the attacker's wrists, staring hard at him. The attacker cowered and his eyes squinted as he met Andy's glare.

"Happy now Jonz? Another hour wasted back at the precinct processing garbage."

"But don't you feel good about cleaning up the streets?"

"Yeah--feel fantastic," he said as he pulled on the attacker's arm. "Come on you! Don't slow me down. And you!" the girl cried out slightly as Andy turned towards her "Don't let me catch you here again!"

I looked at her still standing in the same spot against the dirty wall among the piles of garbage left in the alleyway from the countless residents that filled the high row buildings towering over both sides of the narrow alleyway. As we dragged her assailant away to the precinct, I thought I saw a slight smile of relief come to her face.

Andy muttered and complained the whole hour we processed that punk. For me it was worth it.

Back on the streets, we came to the checkpoint at the end of a long street. We showed our police credentials and the lazy-eyed senior officer let us pass, barely looking up at us from his comfortable little booth along the border of City Central. The lights of downtown were less erratic, more illuminating and useful than the dank streets of our beat. The wide roundabout of downtown, with the sensational Dome Tower at the center, was always jammed with people. Some areas of the city may have been forced to sleep at certain times, but the very center was always alive and vibrant. The affluent citizens from the outskirts needed a place to party, away from their homes; and unfairly near the City Central citizens who were forced to obey a restrictive curfew.

I walked out to the edge of the roundabout. Here the people flowed by us without interruption. I looked up and felt the claustrophobia drift from me as I soaked in the impressive view of the Tower and all the wideness of the roundabout. People were drifting in and out of the stairwells up from the transit system. Jostling and laughing. The noise continued unabated from the balconies of the bars and clubs that jutted out from the lower levels of the tower. Above this cluster of party establishments, the higher levels of the towers had a collection of giant advertisements selling everything from shoes to appliances, all glitzy images; some two dimensional, some three dimensional and jutting out over the traffic in the roundabout.

Up above the streets, in the middle of all the fancy advertisements, there was a giant telecommunications screen beaming down over the crowd. It was on City News. All the news stations were discussing the planned exodus back to Earth. This night was no exception. They were constantly replaying the President's news conference from earlier in the week.

"Haven't you heard that often enough?" Andy asked.

"What?! You're not interested in the Exodus now Stoneman?"

"Course I am, but don't need to hear that same crap over and over."

"The President is just trying to inform the people about the strides we made--how Earth is finally safe again. People need to know that the terrorists are defeated."

"Safe again--spoken like a real General's son Jonz. They're gonna send us soldiers and the City Central scum first. Do you think your dad and his buddies are gonna be cutting trees for the first settlements?"

"Yeah, that's right. He's going to go from top general on the space station to lumberjack down on Earth."

"He can help with the reconstruction--no?!"

"Quit laughing Stoneman--you're not funny. Show some respect for the soldiers that risked nuclear contamination over the last hundred years."

"I'm showing the ultimate respect. I'm gonna join'em soon. I'll stick by you too. Safest assignment is near a general's son."

"Sure, now that the contamination levels are under control."

"If they really are Jonz--if they really are."

"What?! Now you think they'd send us down and let us travel past the Earth dome to get contaminated and die?! Come on Stoneman, now you're pushing me too much."

"Sorry for the reality check Jonz, but I don't believe everything they put up on that giant screen--spouted by our fearless leader." He looked around at the sights. "Why can't we spend our shift here? Be more tourist guides than anything. Easier than the scum we gotta deal with."

"That's for the senior guys Stoneman."

We made our way to the other side of downtown. A drunk woman stopped us and put her arms around Andy. She wanted her friend to take a picture of her with two strong policemen. We obliged; happy for the distraction.

The bright lights of downtown blinded us passing through the checkpoint to continue our shift on the other side of downtown, the other side of City Central. The noise of downtown quickly faded along with the lights, the jewel at the center of our domed city. The good-spirited shriek of a woman was the last loud sound we heard as we sank into the other side, right back into the heart of City Central and the curfew.

The continued ebb and flow of illegal activity was all around us. We only stopped for the more brazen, the more obvious outlaw night-dwellers. Through the intermittent light of the alleyway, loud intoxicated voices were bellowing; distracted, not paying attention to the police officers heading in their direction. The plaintive howls of tenants above could be heard, pleading for an elusive night's sleep.

Andy picked up the pace, walking powerfully towards the commotion – eager, yet trying not to announce his arrival too easily. The doorman had just realized who was beside him when Andy pushed him aside.

Inside, our arrival caused the usual sudden halt of activity; but it was more pronounced, more shocked, in these more dangerous surroundings. The room was relatively large considering the City Central location. Enough room for a dozen people to sit comfortably. The bar at the back of the room had the usual array of glasses and bottles on display, distorting the soft glow of lights from the wall in back of them. This was the only light in the bar, so it left the patrons in a shadowy haze, stumbling around even before they became intoxicated. Andy and I entered, the aforementioned silence abruptly filling the room. Andy stood in the middle, wide stance, searching out a target. One particularly nervous character fidgeted in the corner; his eyes darting back and forth helplessly in the shadows. Andy sensed the weakness and pounced.

"Do you know what time curfew is?"

The man looked around, beads of sweat starting to form on his forehead. "Who, me?"

"Yeah, you!"

"T-twelve, twelve o'clock"

"That's right, my friend – and what time is it now?"

"One th-th-thirty."

"Right again." Andy looked around, in mock approval, like a schoolteacher happy with a bright primary school student. "So what is it that you don't understand about the principle of curfew?"

Andy's face leaned in towards his helpless foe. The man squirmed; sweat now drenching his face. The man's face contorted as his mouth moved, twitching; searching for an explanation.

"You may as well leave him alone. He's just having a drink, not bothering anyone," said the bartender from behind. "If it's good enough for the golden citizens from the Outskirts partying downtown, why not us?"

Andy's head turned towards the interloper. The bartender matched his gaze, unfazed, a pair of worn eyes, looking older than their years, losing their youthful blue, and fading to an experienced, yet cynical pale grey.

"I don't think you should be sticking your nose in, buddy."

"Let's not make more of this than it is my friend," the bartender said.

The bartender was making a drink, deftly using only his left hand, his right shirt sleeve rolled up neatly, not needed, considering the bartender had no right arm. Below his grey eyes, a deep scar slashed its way across his cheek, narrowly missing the left eye. Continuing to mix the drink, bottle clinking against the glass.

"I know what you guys are all about. So do most of the guys in this bar. So don't get excited. We were all in the same situation a few short years ago."

"Ex-cop?" I asked.

"Yeah, ex-cops, and we did the next level too."

"Earth combat duty?" Andy added.

"Yeah, of course you know what I'm talking about, don't you? We were in the same position— young, gung-ho, patriotic, idealistic – sound familiar?" The bartender let out a hoarse chuckle as he distributed the drink to an eager patron. "We went through the same steps as you guys. They always start the young military recruits in City Central street patrol. Combat training twice a week. Soon you'll be going to your Earth combat boot camp. Am I right? Of course I am. We all know the routine here. We're all brothers in arms. Every one of the guys you see here--" The bartender slowly, methodically pointed out each of the dozen men that were in the bar with him. "—each one of these guys knows what you're going through, and more--where you're headed."

Until then, the bartender's eyes were fixed solidly on Andy or me, now he diverted them to his bar for the first time. His tone grew deeper. I felt unsettled.

"I remember the shuttle down to Earth. Mind you, things have gotten better lads. We've expanded conquered land on Earth nowadays. You lads will have it easier than we did, I hope. But I remember how we all felt. It's a noble fight, isn't it lads? Anyway, it was so clear before it all started. I mean, damn, we need to liberate Earth from those goddamned terrorists. That's clear isn't it? But it all got murky at some point, at some point after the mission started."

The bartender looked at me.

"When you get out of the Earth dome, it's very unsettling. You're not protected. I'd never been out of the dome before. Of course, you guys know that only a few have ever been out of the dome, at least, no one apart from the lucky soldiers making settlements on Earth. It's weird not to have a dome over your head, a solid, impenetrable dome. The security, it's what we're used to, I guess. Born, raised in a dome so when you shuttle down to the Earth dome, it's not a big deal.

You still have that security, that solid, impenetrable dome. But we're different from all the civilians that shuttle down to Earth. They go down every day by the thousands, shuttles filled with people, just a daily routine, going to work in the farms, plants, and warehouses, but there's a big difference between those thousands and us soldiers. They take underground tunnels from the dome to their daily workplace, to their farms or warehouses or plants. They always have protection from the overhead... the overhead..."

His voice stammered, trailed off, but then he got his strength back.

"The overhead bombs that you have no protection from outside of a dome. Sent by anonymous, faceless bastards from somewhere out there in that wasteland where we all came from. They're in their element down there. They've survived the nuclear destruction they reaped on the world. Right boys, we're 2184 now – right? I can't even remember. Of course it is. It's going to be one hundred years next month that they've been surviving, living, thriving in that environment. One hundred years on Earth since they destroyed it for all decent human beings with their bloody nuclear attack."

His anger grew.

"One hundred years. They prepared more domes and tunnels. Thank God we got it back from them. Thank God we got the Earth dome and its tunnels before the bombs razed the Earth, and all its cities--to the ground. Thank God for that—a battle won. Thank God for all the battles won against those monsters, but there are more to win, aren't there lads?"

Grunts of approval and head nodding went on around the bar. Andy shuffled in his spot, looking at me but then straight to the ground when I looked back.

"You don't know how it feels until you yourself are outside of the dome, feeling weak, vulnerable."

He raised his one arm to point straight at me.

"Yeah, you heard me. I'm not too macho to admit it, not anymore anyway. You're vulnerable as hell when you leave that dome and you know what the worst part is? You don't have a clue where they are, your enemy. I never saw one of them in my life, only heard stories from other Earth front soldiers--other poor bastards just trying to build that goddamn first settlement. Safe zone--my ass. You don't know what the truth is and what macho talk is. Everyone wants to tell stories about how they came face-to-face, strangled one of those bastards with their bare hands. Everyone wants to tell those stories and they do. But how many are just stories, and how many stories are real? Maybe none. But I know what I know. I never saw one, not even from a distance. Look at what's left of me though."

His one arm flicked at the neatly rolled sleeve where the other arm should be. His fingers rubbed the prominent scar stretching across his cheek.

"Look at what's left of me. They leave their mark, namelessly, out of the sky. Our tracking systems could always tell when the missiles are launched. When you're in the field, they call you, tell you it's coming--but it's always too late. Who knows, maybe not always, maybe once in a while we hit one. But we don't know out there. They're mobile. I've seen one of their hovercrafts, or at least I'm pretty sure I did. Flying over one of the countless bomb craters out on the Earth surface. We're driving them farther away, taking more territory, but the Earth won't be safe until we've taken back every square inch and that includes underground too. Who knows

what they have underground. They're so dangerous. We'll win though. It's getting better. This generation is taking the Earth back."

"Not without sacrifices from previous generations," I added.

"No, not without sacrifices, that's true, many greater than mine. I'm still here, parts of me anyway."

A heavy silence fell on the room.

Andy looked at me and said: "let's go".

We walked out.

Chapter 2

From the seedy depths of City Central, our shift always ended back at the squad room. It was like flicking on a light switch in a dark room; waking to the familiar and comfortable from a restless, anxiety filled sleep. The precinct occupied the bottom three floors of one the densely-packed sections of skyscrapers. Throughout the city, scrapers pushed up towards the dome--mostly residential--with our police station jammed in between. There was always a lot going on in City Central, but outside the precinct was usually deserted, except for the cops coming in and out--sometimes with unhappy guests.

Approaching from the street, the precinct was distinct. The outside of the main floor was like a cut out; covered with a one inch thick bulletproof, laser proof, spit proof plexiglass. Everyone could see in, but it was impenetrable. At the same time as Andy and I, Martina Lever and Doug Lloyd were coming in from their nightly shift. The three of them passed in front of me. Andy was the tallest and most imposing figure among us. He struck a cop poster boy image. Martina too, was strong and athletic; her sometimes serious look did not diminish her attractiveness. She had a strong aura around her. She had fewer issues on the streets than a lot of female cops. Doug was smaller and always slouched a little bit, appearing timid and out of place. Like Andy and Martina, I too, took a strong interest in my physical conditioning. Despite being a little smaller than Andy--maybe I was the poster boy more than him. We passed from the street into the precinct's glass entrance. There was a security checkpoint just as you walked in. We all waved our identity passes in front of the laser interface, I heard three approving beeps as Martina, Doug, and Andy passed in front of me. A hologram of our personal record appeared for the career cop guarding the entrance. Old Sergeant Waverly's glazed eyes didn't seem to register anything. He knew all of us and just grunted a tired "hello" as we passed.

I swiped my card, and I heard the familiar beep. My name, Tyler Jonz, and my record details appeared in front of the Sergeant's glazed eyes. I tried not to laugh.

"What was your night like guys?" Doug asked.

"Same crap as usual, Dougie boy!" Andy answered.

Doug frowned. "Just asking."

"Jonz shouldn't be a cop. He should be a social worker."

"Oh no, here he goes again," I groaned. We walked past the open precinct; many cops doing their paperwork--some arguing with captured criminals.

"Welcome back to Hell Central," one cop sarcastically said to us. He was stuck listening to a particularly upset detainee. At the back of the open precinct was a hallway that took us to the cop's lockers; rows of narrow, metal containers-- rows of benches in front. It was the end of night shift and there were already many cops in there changing.

"Tonight he was heartbroken over a little prostitute with cute eyes. I thought he was gonna take her home and give her a bowl of soup. He's too soft for the job man." Andy fell heavily onto the bench in front of his locker.

Martina laughed. "You two are worse than a married couple; it must be all the sexual tension. Maybe you two should just consummate the relationship and get it over with."

"I'm sure I'd go to Earth and get some mutant nuclear fallout woman that would be much more appealing than this guy" I said.

"Don't be so sure Jonz. Those mutant women got standards too you know" Andy replied. "Mind you, you could probably get one of those City Central night stalkers, right Jonz? Just like the one tonight. Why do ya waste your time crying for every whore on the streets?"

"Look, I can't help--" I stopped myself.

Martina stood up between us and clapped her hands. "That's good enough girls. Jonz, you're a social worker, and Stoneman, you're a caveman. It's settled now. Let's get changed and go for a beer and forget the night." She grabbed her clothes out of her locker and went to one of the changing rooms, muttering: "we should have our own changing room--away from you perverts--to hell with this team spirit crap".

"Sounds good to me!" Doug said, more interested in her plans for the night than her comment about women's changing rooms.

"Beer's always good," Andy said.

"Sorry guys, I'm too tired. I need to crash," I said.

"Come on Jonz, don't be sad, we all love you," Andy said.

I looked at him in surprise. I knew he was being sarcastic, but it was still surprisingly affectionate for a caveman, much better than the usual verbal club to the head that I got.

"Like I said guys, I'm really tired."

Martina wandered back to slap me on the back. "That's okay, I'm sure you'll get a real good chance to relax tomorrow on your day off, training with your dad."

They all laughed. I grinned.

When Martina came back from changing, the others were already ready and Andy chided her:

"Always waitin' for the female."

"Get used to it Stoneman," she said, "it'll only get worse when you're an old married man--that's if you can find anybody to settle for you. Jonz, you sure you won't join us?"

"Naw, like you said, gotta get up early for my relaxing day off."

"Daddy's little whipping boy," Andy said.

I smiled. I was just happy the day was over, but Andy was right. I couldn't get that girl out of my mind--not that I would ever admit that to him.

"See ya later, alligator," Andy said as they left. The three headed out without me.

I sat in the squad room a few more minutes and then headed down to the Personal Transport Pod system under the city. The PTP access stairwell out front of the station was more or less deserted when I finally got myself in gear and went out.

At one of the cross streets nearby, there was a clear booth. When you walked into it, you immediately dropped down to one of the underground PTP access rooms. The room was small and simple; if there was a line up of people they'd usually wait up on the street--only two or three down at the same time. Through the room ran a clear tube which was part of the transport system. Beside an opening in the tube was a pod, ready to be shot in the tube. The traffic and integration of the new pod was controlled by the PTP information system. As soon as one pod was occupied and the travel coordinates were set; the pod shot into the system and another popped up from underneath for the next traveler.

When I was strapped into my pod, the holographic interface popped up, inquiring about my destination. There was a map of the city and the network of tubes underneath it. All the stations were mapped out.

The Space Station underneath the domed city was a large flat utilitarian shape. Within it were the infrastructures for climate control and warehouses for food and other essential storage. The Domed City was built on top of the main Space Station. It was where all the average citizens lived and worked. Underneath in the Space Station, access was usually reserved for military and governmental personnel; or others who had a specific function to gain access to the main Space Station. The main population stayed in the Domed City; many never travelling below to the Space Station. If average citizens did travel, it was on the shuttle to Earth; to manufacturing or farming jobs in the tunnels underneath the Earth base.

Within the PTP system, the different lines had different colours, and at the bottom of the map, was a short black line with only one destination marked—Station Entrance. In italics underneath, it stated: Authorized Personnel Only.

I tapped on that destination and my personal pod was quickly sucked into the web of tubes. Different pods went by and over me in different directions, making a soft whooshing sound as they passed. At this time of the morning, I was traveling against the rush as I headed to the space station entrance; so I dropped down below the city with no one in front of me.

As I got out of my PTP, the soldiers at the main space station entrance didn't even get up to check my credentials. I suppose I couldn't blame them. The system wouldn't let me through the main steel sliding door without a positive ID check. I did get my positive check, and the doors glided open soundlessly. Before me lay two long round hallways each leading towards different halves of the space station. I went to the left and started the long walk towards the end of the hall--towards my apartment.

Even though the shiny metal, perfectly lit hallways of the space station were cold and lifeless compared to the domed city above, the portholes provided clear and breathtaking views of space outside. A view like that was normally reserved for the rich and privileged in the city. City Central dwellers had to almost bend over backwards to get a view of space and stars high above their heads, above the scrapers. My head always turned to stare out the long line of portholes as I walked towards my place. On my right were the combines in the climate control warehouse for the city above. The rumble and metallic clicking of my work boots on the metal grid walk path always hypnotized me as I passed here.

My apartment was located just before the maximum-security section of the space station at the end of the hallway. Past this point was a restricted area, reserved for government and military officials with top level security clearance.

People like my father.

I didn't want to live down there, but free rent was certainly nothing to be scoffed at. My father arranged it and I guess it was an easy commute now that I had more and more military training down in the space station. All the military gymnasiums, fields, and classrooms were down there. It didn't have much atmosphere, but it was functional and practical for the needs of my life, my planned career. Inside the apartment, it was much like a tiny army barracks. I had bunk beds despite the fact I lived there alone. It would not win any interior design competitions. Clothes and food containers were everywhere.

I had a thirst quenching glass of juice from the healthy selection in my fridge. I sighed as I kicked off my boots and removed my clothes while lying on the bed, staring out my tiny porthole.

As I stared at the stars, thoughts drifted back to my childhood as an only child. These memories sometimes felt like they were from another lifetime, slivers of comforting life memories placed there to make sense of a more stressful, driven present. Those memories enveloped me, reassured me, took me away from this metallic, cold space station and brought me to the root of what makes a human content, to the happy family I was raised in; my loving mother, my dad, and me--an only child. I missed my mom terribly, gone so young; but like a warm blanket, I was comforted by the memories. They lulled me to sleep behind the constant din of the climate control system's turbines.

**

"You're late," Brad Jonz barked as I walked into the gym. My father was taller than me. His short grey hair was always freshly trimmed. He was in the same shape as me or any of the young, athletic recruits. The only time I saw him out of uniform was in the gym; and he was still in the official military sweats..

"Sorry Dad," I sighed. "I need to rest some time, you know."

"That's enough soldier, I don't want excuses."

Compared to the densely packed city streets that I patrolled above, the gym was huge and open--especially when I trained alone with my dad. It could hold hundreds of soldiers and they'd still have room to work out. The ceiling was three stories high and it stretched across a hundred metres each way--my dad's voice would resonate throughout the large empty gym as he barked out orders:

"When you come here, you come with a military attitude. I want to see some sharpness in your senses. I want you to be ready for the challenge." His conditioned physique flexed as he made his point. "Discipline is the key. Do you think terrorists are going to care if you're tired in a battle? You have to keep these signs of weakness out of your mind. Look at your physique, it is perfect. You are a fighting machine soldier, but you need to condition your mind."

He made a slow, deliberate motion of pointing his finger forcefully towards his head. "That is what you have to work on. Now let's warm up. Ten minutes of light running and then we stretch." He slapped his hand on the running machine beside him. I looked in his hard, steel blue

eyes. His uncompromising gaze stared right through me. I jumped on the running machine and heightened the preset pace which my father had programmed. He laid out a satisfied guffaw and put his hands on his side. I glanced sideways and saw his look soften.

**

Walking up to street level from the PTP system underground, downtown seemed especially lively for a Sunday night. There was always a lot of activity, but the air had an extra charge of electricity. I scanned the clubs for my friends and found them in Martina's favourite dance club. It was a popular place but not extremely large. They had funky clear glass pillars filled with water and lit from underneath. It was one of the many visual effects that set the tone. Poor Doug looked like a fish out of water, leaning against the bar, trying to look cool. When he was in an environment like this, he got clumsier than ever; usually spilling one or two drinks a night. Whenever he approached a girl, it did not go over so well. Like his military uniform, his civilian clothes always seemed a little ill-fitting. The look he gave was an attempt at aloof coolness, but it looked more like constipation. I came up from behind and knocked his leaning arm off the bar, jostling him off balance and slightly spilling his drink on his fancy new duds.

"Aw man" he said, "watch what you're doing!"

"Sorry dude, you can't go into a bar and not expect some spilt alcohol on you."

"Yeah, I suppose." He dabbed at the stain on his shirt.

I spotted Martina. She was on the dance floor. She was in her full glory moving rhythmically to those electronic dance tunes. Watching her, she almost made that music sound good. She cleaned up very nicely for a cop. I laughed to myself. I felt sorry for any lout who tried to get farther than she wanted him to go. I whistled to gain her attention and waved at her. After a couple of attempts she noticed me and tried to wave me out on to the dance floor. I feigned deafness and incomprehension. She rolled her eyes and continued dancing for a few more minutes.

"So Dougie," I said, "did you guys have fun last night."

"Sure, after Stoneman stopped bitching about your softness--it was alright."

"That's okay. He talks like I'm the one all nervous about the Exodus, but he's whinier than ever."

"I guess we're all nervous," Doug twitched on his seat, trying in vain to catch the eye of passing girls.

The club was alive with action that night--seemed more so than usual.

"I wouldn't call myself nervous. I'd call it anxious. I'm ready to go."

"Still, can we trust everything the government says? How safe will it be?"

"Aw Doug, take it easy man. Do you want to be cooped up here forever? Think positive!"

I slapped his back and caught the sight of a fine young thing looking back at me. She reminded me of the girl from the other night.

"You're right Tyler, but you know me--worry wart--I guess."

"You ain't that bad Doug--you're a cop--takes some balls--especially now!"

"True. Man, this place is rocking tonight."

We looked around. More people were flowing in to the cramped club. I tried to keep my eye on Martina, but now there were too many people around. In a place like this, she always had guys around her--though she rarely paid them a moment's notice. She came to these places to blow off some steam from her stressful job, not get picked up.

When Martina was getting a little tired, she wandered over to us--leaving a string of disappointed guys who had been dancing around her.

"Wow, I'm sweating."

"You're blowing too much energy Lever," I said, "should save it for the job."

"Don't worry about me Jonz. I got plenty to spare."

"I'm tired of yelling. Do you guys want to go someplace quieter?" I said.

"Sure why not!" Martina said.

Doug took one last look around and then agreed.

**

"Did you hear that the Exodus is starting?" Martina asked me after we got a table on one of the terraces facing the downtown roundabouts. "They're announcing an initial list of citizens for the first round of shuttles."

"No, I didn't hear anything," I said. There was still plenty of noise from the busy downtown, but not as deafening as the nightclub.

"Yeah, they say that they're going to start with City Central dwellers. That should make our lives easier, eh boys! It makes sense though. The overpopulation is starting to get ridiculous in those neighbourhoods. It looks like the World Government is doing things properly for a change. A lot of those people are desperate in the cramped City Central. Nobody knows that better than us cops who have to deal with these conditions first-hand. To tell you the truth, I'm pretty excited about it."

"Awww," I said with raised eyebrows. "Excited! Do I hear positive sounds coming from Martina Lever, the queen of cynicism?"

"Realism, Jonz, realism is the proper term."

"Soldiers are not paid to think."

"I thought you said we were cops?"

"In this transition phase, I don't even know which we are."

"We're World Government Policing and Military recruits," stated Doug.

"Let's drink to that," cheered Martina, and we all clinked glasses.

“Look who doesn’t have any dates?”

The voice was Andy’s. He stood over us with a female piece of arm-candy draped around him. It was the sort of girl you always saw with Andy. He cruised the bars every chance he got, always looking for the same type. Fashionably dressed, with the serious gaze of a model, the girl had to have the stance and posture that stated that they were chic and hip to all the latest trends. But if you looked deep into their eyes, they had to have nothing of substance beyond their "overly-caked-with-make-up" faces. It was always the perfect match. I sometimes wondered why he bothered to change girls--they all looked the same.

“This is Tiffany,” he said.

He took two chairs from another table without asking the couple sitting there whether he could. The man gestured as if he would say something, but Andy didn’t give him the time. He motioned for Doug to move over so we could all fit uncomfortably at the one table.

“I think there’s a nice romantic spot over there.” I motioned to a table at the far end of the terrace.

“If it’s romantic, then I guess you won’t need it, eh-h-h Jonz?” He chuckled.

Tiffany looked quizzically at all of us. I figured she wouldn’t even know how to get involved in the conversation if we didn’t discuss clothes or make-up; then again, looks can be deceiving. Yet she fell for one of Andy’s lines--so probably not.

“I woulda guessed you three woulda been huddled together, discussing proper settings for your laser guns.”

“Listen to the scholar.” Martina laughed. “I didn’t know that you had depth enough to notice intellectual variances in your co-workers.”

“Why don’t you go lift some bar-bells butch?” Andy barked.

“I don’t want to embarrass the big, strong man by out lifting him.”

“My, my, the conversation certainly takes a turn for the better when you show up Stoneman,” I said.

“Can’t you guys take a joke? Relax, have a drink on me.” Andy waved his arm towards the waiter.

Martina turned to me. “I suppose if we can handle this guy. Terrorists will be a cake-walk.”

Andy laughed. Tiffany appeared startled and looked around, perhaps to see if there was a clown doing tricks.

“I don’t think we should make jokes about that. We’re all going to be going down to Earth soon; and not to the safe areas where the Exodus will begin. We’re going to the front, to battle for more land from those terrorists. We shouldn’t joke about that. It’s too serious,” said Doug.

"Geez Lloyd, you're still as bad as high school. You may have gotten the best grades out of all of us, but you always thought too much," Andy said and looked at me. "Right Jonz?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there, remember?"

"Oh yeah, I keep forgetting. You're parents kept you locked in a closet until Police Academy."

"Not really Stoneman. Just home-schooled."

"Whatever. You were hidden from sight."

"Don't think about it too much Doug; it won't do you any good," I said, turning to Doug.

"But still, you know what I mean," Doug said.

"Yeah, we all know."

"Waiter, waiter!" Andy yelled.

"Only order for the four of you," I told Andy.

"Always the first to leave--eh Jonz?!" Andy said, "Daddy making you train early?"

"That's right--or I'd stay here all night listening to you three."

I made my way away from the bright lights and towards one of the checkpoints to the darker City Central streets. The career cop manning that checkpoint looked at me, puzzled, but let me by when I showed him my ID card. It was always the old guys at these checkpoints--barely awake. The dark streets left me blind after the brightness of downtown. I looked up at the cramped towers of apartments lining both sides of the narrow street. This close to downtown, it must be impossible to sleep for the people in there. I retraced my steps to where Andy and I had been on patrol the night before. I walked into the illegal bar that Andy and I had been in the night before. The one-armed bartender looked at me suspiciously, and then allowed himself a little smile.

"I didn't recognize you without your uniform," he said.

"I'm looking for someplace quiet," I said as I pulled out a stool and sat at the bar.

"Are you sure you want to be seen in an illegal place like this?"

"If it's good enough for war veterans, it's good enough for me."

The beers flowed easily and I found myself having trouble getting up from the bar. I didn't know why, but this bar felt more real, more comfortable than any other place in the Domed City. There was no pretence about it. There were no illusions, no attempts to cover up the fact that we were orbiting around the Earth in an illusionary attempt to recreate an Earth City. It was ironic, this city.

It was two o'clock in the morning when I left. I walked out laughing to myself at the irony of what I was doing; breaking the same curfew I was sworn to uphold. The curfew that everyone ignored and we enforced only when it suited our purposes. It felt good to act like a regular person.

Near the end of my pit stop at the veterans' bar, I had stopped drinking and was starting to sober up. I guess I didn't like drinking that much. I had it in the back of my mind to get really crossed-eyed drunk for a change, but it just didn't suit me. The idea of it felt better than the real thing. As I walked out I marvelled at the more seasoned drinkers in the establishment—how do they do it night after night? I suppose it's nothing to be admired. It was the same gang as the night before, and they all bid me farewell like we were now long time buddies.

I suppose I didn't consciously retrace my steps from the night before, but that's what I did none the less. Something was drawing me in that direction and I have to admit I knew what it was.

That girl.

I continued out to the next street, not much lighter than the alleyway; and there she was, just around the corner, not straying too far from the point of our most recent encounter. I think I must have been looking for her. I knew any rational person would disapprove. I felt a twinge in my heart, and it angered me. What was I really doing there? I should be home.

“Are you okay?” I said as I spotted her.

She was startled at first. I'm sure it was not the sort of personal question that men asked her when they came up to her. Her expression became stern for a second as she looked at me. Then her face softened. “I didn't recognize you without your uniform.”

“That's okay; I didn't think you would expect to see me again.”

“I guess not.”

“I never asked you, what's your name?”

“Melissa. What's yours?”

“Tyler. Those guys, did they bother you tonight?”

“Not tonight. They're busy.”

“Where do you live now?” I asked and she took me by the hand.

We walked down the block. Here was where all the poor people lived. She was far from where she had grown up. I didn't mention I recognized her from the Outskirts.

Despite the curfew, there was always some noise in these highly populated areas. I could hear a couple arguing a few floors up. You could almost walk into people in the street, everything was so poorly lit. Without my uniform, no one rushed back into the many entrances that lined the narrow streets. I looked over my shoulder, afraid to see other cops. It wouldn't look good for me.

When we arrived at her building, she led me into the entrance with a content smile. First thing I noticed was plumbing dripping from overhead and I almost slipped at the entrance of the elevator. Maintenance was not a top priority in these areas. Many floors up, we finally arrived at the her apartment door. Inside her place, there was nothing impressive. The walls were close and all the basic utilities of survival were crammed around a room with a tiny window and a double bed in the middle. The bed appeared to take three quarters of the open space. It was not pretty, but dull light shone through the tiny window, a faint ray of light beamed into the center of the bed. Floating dust particles danced in the beam of light, making it look almost solid.

We fell together on the bed, sending a current of air through the lightened dust particles. The current sent the dust clouds dancing in many directions while we embraced. Previously, it had been awkward and forced; a mating ritual that was more expected than desired. This was different. We fell into each other's longing grasps easily, explored freely, and I felt more at ease than I ever did before. Sweat fell and intermingled, joining as one.

**

Afterwards, she nuzzled under my arm, her head lying on my chest. Her ear was right on my thudding heart. I thought she was listening to every beat, trying to be part of me. I looked around.

There was nothing on the walls. Dark square marks and unused finishing nails marked where some previous tenant had hung their personal pictures or paintings. Her bedside table was old and rickety, constantly knocking with every movement. On it was a small picture. It was a picture of a very young child. The face was misshapen, deformed, but the smile was beautiful. I picked it up to look at the picture more closely. It was a young girl, whom, despite her obvious facial deformity, beamed with a positive energy and exuberance. Melissa looked up at me, and when she realized what I was doing, shrank away.

“What’s wrong?” I said. She didn’t answer. “Is it the picture? You don’t want me to touch it?”

“No, you can touch it. It’s okay. She’s not a very attractive little girl, is she?”

“Not in the traditional sense, but she has a quality—that smile is wonderful.”

Melissa sat up; a small, sad smile crept onto her lips. “Do you really think so?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I’m glad.”

She turned over, curled up, and I could see her body shaking, probably from tears.

“Who is she Melissa?”

Melissa turned around. “She’s my daughter, Heather. She was sick though. You can see she wasn’t normal. I was just a child when I became pregnant with Heather. A single teenage daughter did not fit into my mother and stepfather’s plans. They were terribly disappointed; and then, when Heather was born disfigured, it didn’t make things better. Her heart, it wasn’t right. She was always sick. She went into the hospital when she was a year and half; and she just never came out, didn’t survive.”

Melissa shrieked when the door was smashed in.

Shadows of men coming into the apartment appeared suddenly, breaking the contentment. I was caught off guard and it happened very quickly. I had fallen into a false sense of security inside the apartment--with Melissa. They moved quickly and before I had a chance to react. As one passed in front of the window, I could see they were in uniform, but they weren’t regular cops. They were elite combat troops. There were two of them and they were around us in seconds.

"Don--don't hurt me," Melissa pleaded.

"Don't worry, I'll deal with it," I said. "What the hell's goin' on?! You know I'm a cop?"

There was silence as the two stood looking at us, in military "at-ease" stance. One nodded to the other and then put his laser rifle onto his back, looking at us, his hands on his hips.

“Tyler Jonz, you’re coming with us.”

Melissa clung to me in fear, shaking all over.

“Not so fast! Who the hell are you?” I yelled.

“You should know who we are, and you should know that you’re not supposed to be here.”

"Maybe you're right, but it's an infraction--doesn't warrant a military operation."

I sat up in bed, my shock diminishing, but my anger growing.

"Jonz, this is for your own good," one said. Their faces were covered and the one who wasn't talking to me was looking around the small apartment.

"If my father knew what you were doing--"

"If?! Is that what you think?"

They looked impatient and unwilling to get into a long discussion. Both of them came over to my side of the bed. Melissa let out a shriek. They pushed Melissa aside, and then the two soldiers each took one of my arms and pretty much picked me up.

"Okay, okay! Take it easy boys, I'm moving!"

I looked over my shoulder at Melissa alone in her bed as they rushed me out. Her face had that lost look of the night before. I wanted to stay, but was getting the less than subtle hint that it was time for me to go. As we went into the hallway, I could see Melissa getting up and following to watch at a safe distance. She stayed at her apartment door as one of the soldiers pushed the elevator's down button. They both looked around impatiently. Fortunately, no one else was in the hallway.

"Don't worry," I said to her as she peered cautiously at us, "Everything's cool. It'll be alright."

I could hear her close the apartment door as we went into the elevator.

Chapter 3

“Wait here,” the soldier said.

The two of them left the office leaving me alone. I looked around. This office was huge. I couldn't believe we would have offices that big on the space station, with space at such a premium. The gym was huge, but I reasoned it was a training ground for many recruits. This office though--for paper shuffling for one person? It was elegant, yet sparse, unfeeling; lots of expense with little warmth or emotional investment. It was centered with one gigantic glass-topped desk, teetering on some extremely modern styled tubing for support. At the back of the desk, the wall was a vast expanse of darkness.

Quietly, with confidence and determination that marked much of his personality, in walked Brad Jonz. He looked grave; didn't look me in the eye. That couldn't be a good sign. It was his office. I had never realized until that moment that I'd never been in my dad's office before.

“I'm disappointed son,” he said. I took a breath to respond but he put his hand up quickly to stifle me. “Don't worry; I know what it's like to be young. It wasn't that long ago for me either, but it's trivial really. I have much more important things to discuss with you.” He looked me right in the eye and pointed to me. “Just promise me you're not going back there, tell me that.”

“I promise.”

He looked away for a second and then turned back with a steely stare for a few seconds.

"Good, because I've a very special mission planned for you."

I sat up straight before he continued, attentive.

"Our President gives good speeches. He tells the people what they need to know--but--the war isn't over yet."

"The terrorists--you think there are still cells operating?"

"Oh we know Tyler. We know they are still operating."

"But the Exodus--people won't be safe."

"Look, leave decisions like that up to the government. I want you to see something. Transmission On!"

With his vocal command a holographic image appeared before us. In the hologram, Doctor Svoboda, lead scientist at the station, was walking around an impressive craft. He said:

"Behold, the RMD-driven Covert, the state of the art military operations vehicle. This vehicle holds more firepower than any other vehicle in the world. It is faster and more nimble for ground or air travel than any pint-sized sports personal vehicle. It is virtually impenetrable to enemy attacks due to the strongest force field known to man. How is this possible you may ask? The key is in the name—RMD-driven--Rapid Molecular Displacement."

“RMD is a revolutionary all-encompassing system for propulsion, weaponry, and rock-solid defence. The entire vehicle is surrounded by a smooth Zerite surface. But it is not the old-fashioned Zerite. It is far more sophisticated than that. The Zerite is filled with an activated

molecular stimulant. This molecular stimulant, spread throughout the outer Zerite coating of the vehicle, is completely interconnected through the Covert's information system. The molecular stimulant can be utilized for several reasons. It is equipped to sense the air molecules around the vehicle and is capable of manipulating them in several diverse and useful ways."

In the video, Dr. Svoboda walked around proudly in his familiar lab coat, constantly adjusting his glasses.

"For propulsion, it is capable of displacing the air particles so rapidly that the vehicle can fly through the air or skim along the ground faster than any vehicle known to man.

For weaponry, the RMD system is capable of concentrating energy on the outdoor air molecules and shooting them so hard and fast that they have more force than the average missile. This concentrated air missile has attached with it electronic messages that make this propelling air mass an extension of the Covert's information system. In other words, this mass of air is not just brute force. More than that, it is intelligent, containing commands, which will guide it where you want it to go.

For defence, the RMD system can reinforce the Zerite covering with a rigid, impenetrable covering of the air molecules the vehicle is traveling through. That is a simple overview of a brilliant vehicle. But I must warn you, there is one issue which must always be taken into account during battle. The defence shield and the weaponry cannot be used at the same time. Once the RMD system concentrates its efforts on air displacement for weaponry, it then no longer can reinforce the Zerite covering which creates the impenetrable defensive shield. Of course, the Zerite surface itself provides more than adequate protection for conventional enemy attacks, but there are limits. You are vulnerable to nuclear, laser, and even the more powerful conventional missiles."

While the doctor was talking, the virtual image of the outside of the car twirled slowly to show all angles of the sleek-looking machine. I could see the virtual image was changing. The doors were opening up and the doctor got in on the passenger side. He let the camera get in on the driver's side. You could see the cockpit controls.

"As you can see, the controls are all visually based. The screen in front of you can be used for multiple purposes. While you have the joystick to manually drive--or fly if you will--the vehicle, you can also select a destination from the screen simply by touching it. If your target destination is not displayed on the screen--the standard view is of the immediate vicinity, there are button adjustments on the side to widen and shrink the view. If these views are not sufficient, you can enter longitudinal and latitudinal co-ordinates manually. This vehicle is designed for Earth travel, so all the data in the information system is based on Earth co-ordinates. This same group of interfaces is also used for weapon target selection. Try not to confuse the two."

"When the bright red border lights up around the screen, you are in target mode. That should be sufficient warning, I hope. This completes the background history and vehicle overview segments of our seminar."

"Transmission Off!" my father commanded and the hologram disappeared.

He stared at me.

"Impressive machine, isn't it Tyler?"

"Yes sir, it certainly is--but what does it have to do with me?"

He got up and walked around his desk before continuing.

"You will be the captain of this vehicle—the commander of the mission. You already know exactly what our situation, our predicament is. Even though the expansion of the safe zone on Earth is progressing well, we need to stamp out the terrorist threat completely. We know that the terrorists have some sort of network, some safe areas where they live, train, and have been prospering these last hundred years. The problem is that despite years of surveillance and constant aerial scanning of the mountains surrounding the Earth dome base, we cannot track down these terrorist safe areas. Up until now, we have sent out missions with conventional hovercrafts and all-terrain tanks to stamp out individuals and groups of terrorists. We always immediately deploy troops to where missile or laser attacks have been launched. We keep stamping out the fires, but we can't find where the matches are stored. It is up to you and your team to find these metaphorical matches. Bombing campaigns can't thwart all the ground and underground activities. We have got to start organizing missions, which go deeper than the surface; missions which enter into the terrorist network and kill it from the core. Your first real military mission will be the beginning of the end for the terrorists. Your mission will make the initial steps towards an in-depth analysis of the terrorist network. You will be supplied with the most advanced surveillance and tracking equipment, including the Covert vehicle and whatever resources are needed. We are depending on you, Tyler Jonz, and your team, the time is right for the end of the terrorist reign on planet Earth. I hope you realize the great responsibility you are undertaking and also the great opportunity that you have to truly make a difference in our society."

"My team Dad? Who is it?"

"I think your partner and Martina Lever and Doug Lloyd--they suit the purposes for the mission."

"Martina and Doug okay--but Stoneman--I don't know if--"

"Look Tyler, I'm not sending you to a social gathering--this is a mission--with SERIOUS implications."

"Okay Dad."

"We have to repopulate the Earth with the genetically-pure from the station. We know the Caucasian genetics have proved superior--Earth history and ethnic tensions have shown the errors of a diverse and weak gene pool."

"Well, you think it's perfect on the station?"

"I don't appreciate being interrupted soldier!"

"Sorry."

"--and besides, that is logistical issues--a growing population in a contained environment. But that isn't your place to question government decisions." He sighed. "I wish you could just do as you're told. If not for me, for your mother's memory."

"Of course Dad. I really am sorry."

Thoughts of my youth, my mother before her passing, those memories pained me--but it made me listen more intently.

"You understand this is a dangerous mission son?"

“Yes I do Dad.”

“You also understand that you must do it.”

“I understand that too.”

We looked at each other.

“I had Dr. Svoboda do the video seminar so he could properly explain the Covert and its operational abilities. He is also a military officer too. I know you are tired Tyler, but this is still an overview. I want you to have a good general overview tonight—something to sleep on. I want you to refocus--not waste time with distractions. The terrorist attacks are still coming towards the Earth dome. At this point it is laughable really, we can intercept just about everything they send towards us, but they keep on trying. What else can they do? The rest of the world is lying in ruins; only the terrorist vermin is left. Our problem is as the Exodus starts; we need to clear the entire globe. If you and your team are going to be successful, you must take a different approach.

Up until now, we have been reacting to terrorist attacks. We need to be more proactive, to be out in the field and searching continuously. If you look behind me I have an aerial view of the Earth dome and a mapping of the terrorist attacks over the last year. You can see there is a concerted effort to disperse the source of the attacks, to confuse us with the randomness. But if you look to the northeast, there are definitely a larger number of attacks launched from this area. I want you and your team to start searching there. We no longer will wait for the attacks to happen. This northeast area needs to be searched with a fine toothcomb; and it needs to be done quietly. Also, if any attacks happen, you will be in the area and ready to react. Go home and get some sleep son. Tonight will be your last night’s sleep in your old apartment. You, Stoneman, Lever, and Lloyd will be heading for the Earth base tomorrow for continued training.”

With this, he got up and came over to me. He put his hand on my shoulder.

“I know you will make me proud.”

And that was it.

He left.

**

I felt energized as I sprinted through the narrow, dark City Central streets. My ID card was at home, with its tracking device. If I was stopped it would be bad, but I was careful to stick to checkpoints and streets where I knew the cops—to be sure nobody asked for ID. I couldn’t leave it that way, with the girl, Melissa. I felt guilty about lying to my dad but I felt I had to do it.

It was such a strange ending to the evening. I wondered what she thought after I left. The apartments were jammed so tight together in this area that I wasn’t sure I could find her building. But then I recognized a graffiti-stained wall with ‘Anarchy Now’ scrawled angrily; and I knew her building was next. I ran into the elevator and didn’t hesitate until my hand was out to knock on the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me Tyler, Tyler Jonz. Don’t worry. I’m alone.”

“Are you sure?”

I laughed. “I suppose I can’t blame you for being nervous, but yes, I’m pretty sure.”

I could only see one anxious eye through the door she only opened a crack. I smiled and she opened the door all the way. She rubbed her eyes and yawned. She was in a bathrobe.

“I was sleeping.”

She let me in and I closed the door.

“I wanted to apologize for the scene earlier. My dad is a General. He’s a little overprotective. It’s not like I’m a serial killer or anything.”

“I didn’t think of that, but thanks for giving me something to worry about.”

We laughed and hugged. I noticed over her shoulder that her mail terminal was blinking.

“You have mail?”

"Yeah, I got it earlier. I haven't deleted it. It's pretty important."

"Important. About what?"

"The Exodus. Do you want to see it?"

"You can just tell me."

“It’s about the Exodus to Earth. I’m on the list of first settlers. Apparently it’s working by area, and they’re starting with City Central. It says the government needs to relocate the more underprivileged members of our society first—isn’t that great!?”

She turned and hugged me again. She felt warm. I was happy. I felt proud to be serving this government, these people. Any trepidation I had about my mission to Earth was gone.

We were making Earth safe so that people could improve their lives. I was happy to be with her. The squalor of her apartment didn’t matter any more. It was fleeting, temporary; our minds were both filled with the promise of the future. The seeds were planted for our destinies—and it felt good, secure. The rest of the night was exciting but peaceful; it’s always good to be sure of where you’re going, what you’re doing—even though it’s so dangerous.

Man is willing to risk everything if he believes in the cause.

**

I left her apartment in the early morning. This time it was much more peaceful; the way it should have been the first time. I called Martina on my wristband telecommunications device.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” she moaned.

“No, that’s why I called. What time is it?”

“Geez, you’re gonna have to do better than that to improve my humour.”

“Ya gotta do me a favour Martina. I’ll pay you back, I swear. Anyway, I have some information that will be very interesting.”

“What favour? What information? Slow down, it’s early.”

“Do you have a meeting this morning?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“I had one in the middle of the night last night, with my father. We’re doing a mission together.”

“What, just like that!? What is it?”

“I’ll tell you soon. Look, I forgot my ID card at home. Can you meet me at the PTP station entrance? We’ll talk.”

**

Martina showed up at the PTP station, her determined look enhanced her attractiveness. Her long blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail--her usual look. She probably had been fretting over the upcoming meeting with all the anxiety of a child the night before Christmas; so she practically dragged me along to her barracks as soon as she arrived. Her barracks were not too far from mine; the same utility based, metallic walled space station grunt dwelling. Up in the domed city, you might forget where you were; but down in the main space station, we knew we were in a metallic hunk floating around Earth. She was burning with curiosity, but wanted to talk in private. When we got into her apartment, she slammed the metal door shut too loud for her neighbours I’m sure. She pushed me into a chair.

“What is it, what is this surprise meeting and what’s the mission?”

“Nothing much.”

She grabbed me by the shirt. “Tell me Jonz, now’s not the time.”

“My, my, aren’t we emotional.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll tell you Martina. We’re going on a mission to Earth.”

“What do you mean? Going on a mission to Earth—just like that?”

“Pretty much. I had this long-winded virtual training session from Dr. Svoboda; and we’re getting a state of the art vehicle—you, me, Stoneman, and Lloyd.”

“Not Stoneman—geez, I don’t mind YOU being stuck with that numbskull, but now I have to deal with him?”

“Join the club.”

"So tell me Tyler, what's going on? --and no bull--okay!"

"Okay, okay. It's pretty wild actually. They want us going into the safe zone around the Earth dome--and beyond--searching for terrorist cells."

"I thought they were more or less--"

"Yeah, yeah, I thought so too--apparently they exaggerate the security of Earth society to appease the people--the first settlers."

"Great."

"Man, you ain't heard the best part--they got a new ship--it looks awesome."

"Fancy ship is great--I guess. Come to think of it--it's quite a mission."

"When's your meeting?" I asked.

"In an hour."

"Okay, you'll get all your answers then."

"You can be useless sometimes Jonz."

"We just have to know how to use it, not build one."

"Yeah, I guess."

She got up and looked out her little porthole window. It was perfect timing. The Earth was in full view, shining in all its glory. I stood beside her. I remember doing the same thing countless times. Staring at the beautiful blue water, the landmasses, the swirling clouds of the atmosphere; like I'm sure everyone in the space station did.

"Are you sure there are no officers going?" Martina asked, still staring down at our destination.

"Yeah, I'm sure—just us four."

"That's strange."

"Like I said, they want a fresh approach. Svoboda said he wanted 'clean slates'."

"Clean slates eh?" she laughed, "but no officers".

"Well," I started.

"Well what?" she looked at me.

"They have to put someone in charge."

"Unbelievable—you!"

"That's what they want."

"Just like I would have figured—general's son. What a shock." She paused. "Aw, what the hell. You're a smart guy and it could be worse. It could've been Stoneman."

"Why thank you, what a glowing endorsement."

"It should've been me though." She looked at me and smiled. "I remember looking out at the Earth when I was a little girl. Right from my first memories you knew it was something special. It drew me in. My parents would take me to the parks in the outskirts so we could all sit and watch it. Sometimes I would forget about playing and just sit there staring. I remember asking my mom why we don't go back right now. You know children, any waiting at all is an eternity—and this really was a long wait—and my mom—and she used to always say 'good things come to those who wait'. I always whisper that in my head when I stare at the Earth—good things come to those who wait. We all know it's our destiny to go back, but now that the time is near—it seems surreal—like it can't be true. When you dream about something so long, when it is part of your fantasies and daydreams since childhood; it's almost too much for the psyche to try and get it to bridge over to reality. Do you know what I mean?"

“Not a clue.”

She punched my arm. “You’re a truly great comedian Jonz, you missed your calling.”

“I’ll accept that as an honest statement, devoid of sarcasm.”

“Delude yourself if you wish.”

She walked to the other end of the room. She busied herself with preparing her new uniform to go to the meeting.

“Well, pervert, are you going to stand there and watch me get dressed or are you going to get the hell outa here?”

“I guess I’ll get the hell outa here.”

“Good choice.”

I headed for the door. “By the way.”

“What?”

“Thanks for picking me up at the station. I know how much you hate to get up too early.”

“You hooked me in with your ‘information’; you knew I would come”.

“Hey, a little bait always helps with catching your prey.”

“Too bad you didn’t pay attention enough to have any useful information.”

There came that smile again, transforming her into a beauty.

Chapter 4

There was the constant flow of goods and workers to and from the Earth station's underground network of farms, industries, and warehouses. Robotic manipulators whirred back and forth loading and unloading cargo. The constant chatter of people filled the air; some more jubilant as they came back from shifts, others more subdued as they were heading down to start a shift. The main port was the largest area in the space station--the edge of our floating artificial society--the beginning of travel down to Earth. For everyone apart from us, it was merely to work in the underground commercial areas underneath the Earth dome, but for us--it was different. We were actually going to explore Earth and all its beauty and dangers. As we spoke, one of the several massive clunky personnel shuttles had just entered a transition chamber. Before the large interior doors slid shut, I could see the circular outer portal door. We would soon be going through there--into space.

"Keep the circulation moving," an authoritarian voice shouted from a high balcony overlooking the entire main portal. I looked up and could see a portal security uniform on the speaker. Down on the ground level with us, portal security officers dutifully obeyed, keeping the people entering our shuttle in the proper area.

Amid all this organized chaos, the four of us stood beside our shuttle entrance; our families standing by. Andy Stoneman and his dad exchanged non-committal shrugs and an awkward handshake, while his mom patted them both on the elbow. Stoneman was easier to handle in front of his parents. It was the only time he shut up. Martina's parents came with one of her brothers. Her mom didn't want to let go of Martina's hand. Martina had to yank it away as one security officer shouted to us:

"Okay people, only passengers can remain here now. We're getting ready to board the shuttle!"

Doug Lloyd's mom was blubbering the whole time, nattering unintelligibly about how he should take care of himself--be careful. Doug looked around at everyone, embarrassed at his mother's lack of emotional control. My dad was there too, and he looked at Doug's mom as if he could not understand for the life of him what was wrong with her. Doug smiled nervously at my dad and asked irrelevant questions about the mission to try and distract attention.

When we boarded the commercial shuttle, it was jammed with many other passengers. The hostesses ran around nervously making sure everybody was buckled in properly. The four of us were far from any window; stuck in the middle of the shuttle. I remember craning my neck to try and get a glimpse of the approaching atmosphere of Earth. We entered the atmosphere smoothly, with the usual commuters continuing to read or sleep, their heads rocking back and forth lazily. After passing through the atmosphere, the flight felt different. Even in this contained environment, I felt more alive and part of a real world.

I could hardly wait. We were approaching the Earth base dome.

The arrival of any incoming space shuttle to the Earth base is through a large tube of Zerite connected to the Zerite Earth dome. Like the rest of the Earth base, this was designed by 21st century terrorists to protect incoming shuttles from land attacks by irate Earth survivors. It is

ironic to now realize the same tube protects space station citizens from the same type of terrorists who designed the system.

We took the Earth base and space station from them--now it was time to take everything else back.

The Earth dome was far different in appearance and feel to the space station's domed city. The space station domed city was designed for living, and was jammed with people trying to make the most of what was probably plentiful space one hundred years ago when it was first populated. Arriving at the Earth dome, the first thing you were struck by was how wide open it was. That first time when I came out of the shuttle and saw it; the open space made me gasp. The transparent Zerite dome only slightly tinted the majestic view of mountains.

Leading off the shuttle, people were being funnelled in a massive line to pass a security checkpoint. Beyond that there were various wide stairwells, people streaming down, heading to work. This occupied only one section of wide open floor space of the Earth base. The rest of the space was mostly empty with several heavily armed military personnel standing guard.

Away from this hub of activity, separating the mass of travelers from the more secure areas was a plexiglass fence. In this more secure area, towards one side of the dome, a military hovercraft stood in waiting. Around the base area were massive stairwells leading towards different parts of the underground tunnel system. On this side there were a couple of smaller stairwells with military personnel guarding their entrances closely.

The larger area on the secure side of the plexiglass fence had only military personnel. The security checks seemed to be going smoothly as we found ourselves advancing in the line. I was in front of my team. As I handed my ID card to the security check guard, I realized it was an android. They looked human from a distance, but their crude movements and ultra-smooth cosmetic finishing were quite apparent once you got close to them. The android held my ID card to its eyes, the familiar beep of approval, and then handed the card back to me. Andy Stoneman was right after me. He handed the android his ID card and in a very awkward glitch crushed Stoneman's card in its silicon-covered metallic hand.

"What the hell!" Stoneman protested. "The damn android crushed my ID card!"

Two soldiers hustled over, examining the situation.

"Did you see that? That stupid hunk of junk destroyed my card."

"We'll have to process you manually." One of the soldiers said. He started to lead Stoneman over to a table near an information system terminal.

The other soldier waved at the rest of the line. "Use the other line, everybody to the other line."

Martina called to me, "I don't know why they make these stupid androids. They always screw up. They should spend more time on making a machine that can process IDs properly instead of some silly doll that looks like a human being."

The soldier near us frowned.

"Nothing but a hunk of junk!" she yelled.

**

“You’d think they could get a more efficient security system”, Stoneman said as well were led away by security.

“I didn’t have any problems”, I said.

“Shut up!” my three team-mates yelled, almost in unison. I looked at Doug Lloyd and laughed.

“Would you look at that”, I said looking at the great expanse of Earth mountains lying out beyond the transparent Zerite dome. Though ground level outside the dome was not visible, the mountains and sky were clear to see as you looked up and out the clear dome. “It feels like I can breathe for the first time, like I’ve just come out of a closet I’ve been trapped for years. Already it feels like home.”

“Look there,” I said pointing off in the distance to the open area of the raised plateau the Earth dome was built on, “think what a difference that will make to the first settlers—to be able to live in wide open spaces like that. The City Central dwellers that’ll go from their cramped claustrophobic quarters to there; freedom and fresh air. We’re living in a great time my friends. We’re lucky to be alive when Earth is reconquered. It’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen.”

“Let’s see how you feel when you’re outside the Zerite dome and not protected from incoming artillery,” Stoneman added.

“You’re a real morale booster Stoneman, you know that?” Martina said.

“I hope the safe zone is really safe,” Doug said.

“Follow me,” said a soldier, stiff and official, almost as young as us. All the soldiers down here looked pretty young. We all gathered our knapsacks, heading in his direction. We were guided away from the masses of workers and to the other side of the fence. We were being led to the open area where there were just a few, less-traveled stairwells heading down below the station floor. These stairwells were reserved for military personnel. I took a last glimpse at the mountains through the Zerite dome.

We were led down a long narrow stairwell to part of the underground tunnel system. Unlike the masses commuting to work at underground factories and farms, we were led to a military barracks, which dishearteningly looked very similar to the space station’s barracks; metallic walls and floors--minus the occasional beautiful views of outer space.. It was just dark and depressing with neon lights placed periodically in the long hallways.

“Aw man,” I moaned, “this looks just like the space station.”

“That’s okay,” Doug said, “makes me feel at home.”

“‘Makes me feel at home’,” Andy said. “Do you need a teddy bear?”

“Get off his case!” Martina said.

We were led into a utility barracks with two sets of bunk beds. Andy threw his stuff down on one of the lower bunks and declared it to be his. Martina and I each took top bunks, while Doug accepted the other lower one. It was early evening and we were all worn out.

"We're away from everybody else," Doug said, looking at our small barracks.

"Yeah," I said, "I expected to be with everyone else."

"We ain't just the average grunts." Andy said. "We're here for a special mission."

"Well Stoneman," Martina said. "Don't get full of yourself until we get something done."

"Who's full of themselves Lever?! I'm just stating a fact."

**

I didn't sleep much that night; too much to think about. In the morning we were taken to the mess hall. This was more what I expected the night before. It was open and had about fifty or sixty other soldiers. These were men and women posted on the Earth base for security and safe zone patrolling. Apparently the first settlement was already completed. The mess hall had several rows of cafeteria style tables. Just in case we didn't realize how different we were, there was a separate table in one corner just for us. There was a buffet line at the opposite end of the hall from our table. Most of the soldiers were waiting in line and they looked at us, but no one spoke to us directly. We were like the new kids in school; the subject of rumours and legends, all more or less fictional. I imagine they had heard stories about our mission—they must have been curious about the special treatment. We would certainly be of interest to soldiers stuck in routine security detail.

From behind us, my father walked into the mess hall. As soon as the other soldiers saw him, they stopped staring and continued to get their food and sit down and fill up the rows of tables. We were the last in line to get food and he walked up to me, putting his hand on my shoulder and saying:

"Don't mind them; you're not part of the regular routine, so they're curious. There are special areas reserved for training for your mission, and they wonder what all the attention is about. Its human nature, people are curious about the unknown. I hope you all have that same attribute, it will come in handy out there." He pointed up in a sweeping motion to the Earth surface above us.

Nobody said much in response.

"When you soldiers are finished your breakfast, you will be led into our training facility. It's reserved for us and we'll not be distracted by curious eyes." My father looked around at the other soldiers who all pretended their attention was on their meals. We finished our breakfast in relative silence. My father didn't stay with us. He headed over to talk with a soldier waiting at the mess hall entrance and then left. After we finished eating that same soldier led us to the training facility.

**

The training facility was a vast circular area. Like all the living and working areas of the Earth station it was beneath ground level; the ground above a natural defence against the ever-present terrorist threat. The task of carving these vast areas out of a mountainside was definitely an impressive achievement, despite knowing the architects of the project. Along one side was a massive control panel centered by a giant screen. Several desks sat in front of the screen. To the

other side of the facility was a shooting gallery. Various styles of laser and conventional guns filled a gun rack just outside the range. A large area was filled with physical training equipment built around a sort of obstacle course. In the center of the circular training facility was a round podium with the RMD-driven Covert vehicle sitting on it. Right above the podium on the ceiling of the training facility was a hatch; the podium was controlled by hydraulics, which could raise the Covert vehicle up into the air through the hatch in the training roof and out into the Earth's atmosphere--beyond the protection of the dome.

"Quite impressive, eh team?" my father said from the control panel area, "let me show you around. Over here is the theoretical training area. This is your classroom. We'll spend the mornings here discussing strategies and techniques. At the opposite end is the arms training area. We'll test your proficiency. That large area over there is the physical training area where we'll spend our afternoons; and of course, where you're all staring is the vehicle you will be using during your mission."

He walked us over to the centre of the training facility; where the Covert was held slightly above ground level by hydraulic stabilizers on all four sides.

"Dr. Svoboda has already described it to all of you in greater detail than I'd be able to myself. Suffice it to say it'll increase the security and efficiency of your mission. As the week goes on, you'll all get to train in the Covert--don't worry about that. As you can see the podium has stabilizers to support the craft. The entire podium can be changed to simulator mode wherein it will simulate the actions given by the vehicle's controls. In simulator mode, the normally clear windshield and passenger windows dim becoming screens displaying simulated images of battle situations. This creates the illusion of operating the vehicle in various battle situations. The result is a very realistic simulation displaying visual images of Earth landscapes for trainees to navigate through."

He patted the Covert and waved us over to the theoretical training area.

In the afternoon Svoboda (in person this time) led us over to the firing range section of the training facility. The wall was decorated with numerous hand-held armaments of all shapes and sizes.

"You'll not need all this assortment of armaments. Through the initial phases of your mission, the Covert will be sufficient for defence, attack, and transportation. If, the time comes when you have to travel or investigate by foot, you still need some technology to fulfill these needs. Myself and my laboratory assistants have tried to develop an all-encompassing lightweight solution for defence and attack. Much of the advantage of the Rapid Molecular Displacement technology has been incorporated in this hand-held armament."

Dr. Svoboda held up a sleek gun-shaped silver armament. There was a trigger in the traditional gun position, yet it had a small control panel on its wide barrel.

"While this looks like a regular gun, it is not—it is much more. As long as you are within a thousand kilometre range of the Covert vehicle, these gun-shaped objects are actually remote terminals of the Covert's information system. You have access to many of the capabilities of the Covert vehicle."

Dr. Svoboda pointed to four jumpsuit uniforms that were on the wall beside the array of armaments. From a distance they resembled regular army uniforms, but upon closer inspection, the fabric had a unique feel--soft but durable.

“These uniforms may look like regular clothing, but they also, are not. They are activated with the same Rapid Molecular Displacement technology, which can be controlled through your hand-held terminal—or gun, if you will. Through the control panel at the top of the gun, you can enter some of the same modes as in the Covert vehicle. You can use the terminal to activate shields around your uniform. This does not have the all-encompassing defence of the Covert vehicle but it could be used as kind of an attack resistant shield. Your head and hands are still exposed and vulnerable but in the case of a shot to the arms, legs, or body; it could very likely save your life. As far as attack mode, you can still affect the outdoor air molecules and launch them as smart guided missiles. You have an interface with the system, either through the hand-held model, or controlled by a crew member back in the Covert.”

He gave us all our guns and uniforms.

“Here are your virtual training glasses,” the doctor said as he handed us each a pair. “All four pairs are connected to the central training information system and the missions you'll be practicing are coordinated. In other words, the virtual reality in your individual simulations will be coordinated with the others. You'll be in a field-like atmosphere of mountainous Earth terrain, able to hide behind trees or rocks and fire at will. You'll be able to control the modes of your remote terminal and be able to speak with a virtual teammate in a virtual Covert vehicle. Also, the four of you will be in the same virtual training sessions. We will form teams of two and you can attack each other. There will be half an hour of this each day for the remainder of the week.”

Stoneman swung his glasses in his hand and looked at me. “This should be a lot of fun.”

“Use your time wisely soldiers,” said Svoboda. “Develop your individual skills, but also learn to work as a team. General Jonz will guide these training segments for the rest of the week. I have given you information on the technology but his military skills are what you have to develop.”

**

“Direct us to four hundred meters above the attack origin,” I said to Martina. “That’s close enough to accurately neutralize the attack origin, while giving us time to put up our shields before any counter attacks.”

“Roger, captain, coordinates set.”

Inside the Covert the interior was comfortable and surprisingly stark; two seats in front and two in back. There were vehicle control joysticks available for both pilot and co-pilot. The dash had a screen which defaulted to a radar view of the surrounding area but tapping different corners would activate screens for weaponry, vehicle maintenance or any of the other of the craft's modules. As soon as the two swinging wing doors were shut the windows entered simulation mode. The effect on your senses was immediate; simulations of the surrounding Rocky Mountains were accurate and felt completely real. There was even a gentle bobbing in the air from the controlling stabilizers--just like real hovering. As the vehicle began to "move", it was equally realistic. The sensation was of truly flying. The Covert efficiently moved to the coordinates entered by Martina. In the backseat Doug and Andy each had screens listing all the situational data.

“Nearing target coordinates,” Martina said.

“Prepare to down shields and fire on target.”

“Make sure you’re in the established area before downing the shields,” said Stoneman.

“Use the heat detector to check for activity in the area surrounding the target coordinates,” I said.

“Scan completed, nothing detected,” answered Martina.

“Down shields,” I said.

“Roger Captain,” Martina answered.

Just as she dropped the shields, the Covert rocked violently. The simulator screens went blank and an error message appeared on the front windshield.

“Catastrophic decision taken. The RMD-driven Covert has been destroyed by an attack from above,” said the information system’s automated voice.

I slapped my hand on the panel in front of me.

"Damn, we messed up!"

The two wing doors opened on the Covert; revealing the training facility and my father standing in front of us, his hands at his hips--a severe look on his face. All sensory simulations stopped. The controlling stabilizers stopped moving and we exited the craft onto the training facility podium.

“You have to look at more than the ground. This simulation was based on a true event, which happened four and a half years ago. While the terrorists who’re fighting us don’t have our 22nd century technology--don’t kid yourselves--they still can be dangerous! They have 21st century technology, which can STILL be dangerous if not respected. They have aircraft capable of masking themselves to our on board radar system. You must be sure to check regularly with the ground crews operating the positioning system in the Earth base. They can detect these aircraft, which have no shield system to protect them from our artillery. Over the years, we’ve shot down dozens of these aircraft; but there might quite possibly be more out there. This was an ambush situation. The terrorists launched from a location only to draw out our hovercraft vehicles to be attacked. They are aware that shields have to be down in order to fire. You can see the results of not properly protecting your crew.”

Stoneman looked at me as we walked towards the theoretical training area. Martina patted me on the back and said, “That’s okay. We’re almost there. It’s another lesson learned.”

I nodded.

**

“Hit me like you mean it!” Stoneman said.

We were padded up and on the fighting mat together. Throughout our years in the police academy, Andy and I had sparred many times before but this was definitely our most intense session. I had usually got the better of him. Over the years, I had plenty of extra training with my father. I’m sure that had frustrated Andy even more. The others watched us from just off the mat.

“If that’s what you want, you’ll get it!” I said.

Stoneman advanced towards me. He led with a sidekick aimed at the solar plexus. I spun to the right and his leg slid off me, sending him off balance. I continued spinning around and gave him a left arm whip to the back. Doug and Martina chuckled slightly. Stoneman kept himself from falling off balance and quickly reversed his direction, coming back towards me.

I had been a little too lackadaisical, perhaps gloating a little over my first successful move, and he caught me off guard. He came up close to me, too close for me to punch him with momentum; and he powered his right elbow with a quick twist of his shoulder and caught me above my chest protection right in the throat. I felt it tighten right away and I fell to the ground gasping. I was on my hands and knees, fighting to breathe properly.

“It’s not time for a rest Jonz,” he said.

He was looking at the others with a smirk when I turned and lunged at him, tackling him with a shoulder to the gut. I heard a loud “ooff” as I felt the wind get completely knocked out of him. We were down on the ground and I was sitting on top of him. I put my hands around his throat and started to squeeze. I felt my father’s strong hand grab my forearm and pull my arm off him.

“Enough!” my father ordered.

Stoneman and I fell apart, coughing and panting, lying on the mat.

“I like to see that intensity,” my father said, “but next time, save it for the enemy. You don’t have to love--or even like--everybody on your team. But make no mistake, your life depends on working with them. So you better direct that energy towards the enemy if you want to survive. Now shake hands.”

Stoneman and I got up and half-heartedly at first, shook hands. I gripped Andy’s hand stronger and he reciprocated.

“We’ll have one last Covert simulation session,” my father announced.

He clicked the remote and all four doors to the Covert whirred up, opening up a view of the cockpit inside. We climbed into the vehicle.

“Stoneman, you’re navigator today,” my father said.

After the four of us were buckled in the doors whirred shut again. There was a click as all doors sealed shut in unison.

“Entering simulation mode,” announced the soft voice of the information system.

The windshield and all the windows lost their transparency as they faded to black. Momentarily, it was pitch black in the Covert, only the faint multi-coloured lights of the control panels dimly lighting the cockpit. I looked over at Andy. He was staring at the control panels, his jaws chomping with tension. I could feel the thudding of the podium hydraulics grabbing on to the Covert vehicle.

“Simulation mode entered,” the information system voice confirmed.

Within seconds, the blackness dispersed as the windshield and windows filled with a mountain view of the landscape just outside the Earth dome. We were out beyond the protection of the Earth dome. I could feel my heart rate increase, the sensation was so real--and I wanted to get

this right. The sky was clear with a few puffy clouds. All around us the jagged peaks of the Rockies were potentially hiding places for terrorists.

“Prepare for everything team, you’re on your own,” my father’s voice beamed into the cockpit.

“Stoneman, make sure you monitor the surrounding air space,” I said.

“Roger,” he responded.

“The known aircraft possessed by the terrorists has accurate firepower within 5 kilometres. We should adjust our screens accordingly,” Martina added.

“Agreed,” I said. “Adjust all screens to a six kilometre view.”

“There has been a missile attack coming from the following coordinates,” the information system voice droned. The coordinates appeared on the top of our screens.

“Navigator, set destination to the target coordinates,” I said.

The RMD-driven Covert vehicle headed towards the enemy.

“The coordinates were unusually far away for a missile attack directed towards the Earth base,” I said.

“This has set-up written all over it,” Doug said.

“Let’s make sure we do our jobs carefully then,” Martina said.

“There was rarely any return fire from the target coordinates. The terrorists know to retreat quickly. If we got there quickly enough, we can get them before they had the time to leave,” I said.

We attained a proper attack distance from the target coordinates.

“Prepare to drop the shields and fire,” I said. “Stoneman, monitor the screen and surrounding area for any enemy aircraft. Lever and Lloyd, check the surrounding areas, mountains and sky. Let’s be safe before we drop the shields.”

“Enemy aircraft spotted within their attack distance, Captain,” Stoneman said.

“I knew it,” Doug yelled.

“Reset vehicle trajectory towards enemy aircraft,” I said. “Lever, Lloyd, continue to monitor screens for any other enemy while we neutralize the enemy aircraft.”

We redirected the Covert towards the enemy aircraft. I felt beads of sweat building on my forehead. My palms were sweaty, my heart was pounding.

“Drop the shields Stoneman.”

“Roger, Captain.”

The shields were down. I readied my thumb on the trigger as soon as the information system voice announced the target coordinates were locked in.

I fired.

“Direct hit Captain.”

The crew let out a cheer but it was stifled almost immediately as Stoneman said, "Two enemy aircraft entering zone. One from the north, one from the south."

The two enemy aircraft were already within firing range.

"They've sufficient time to fire and possibly destroy our vehicle before the shields have time to activate," I said. I grabbed the manual joystick and pulled back, shooting the Covert up into the air. I heard the whoosh of missiles narrowly missing the undercarriage of the Covert.

"Set target coordinates to projected position of the enemy aircraft to the north in five seconds," I ordered.

"Projected coordinates set," Stoneman answered.

"One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi, five."

I fired.

Another direct hit.

I continued to fly manually. I swooped down.

"Put shields back up Stoneman."

"Shields back up Captain."

I felt the warm security blanket of our shields.

"Stabilize vehicle just within range of enemy aircraft, Stoneman."

Andy entered the coordinates and the Covert quickly achieved the target coordinates. It was an agile vehicle. We could move around with great efficiency; so much so that the outdated enemy vehicle moved as if it was in molasses. In numbers, the enemy could create problems, but alone they were in big trouble.

"Set target coordinates for the other enemy aircraft. Lloyd, Lever, make sure there are no more enemy entering radar detection."

"Target coordinates set Captain," Stoneman said.

I fired.

A direct hit.

"All crew, continue to monitor for enemy entering within the five kilometre zone."

The windshield and windows blackened.

"Mission successfully completed. Congratulations. Simulation ended."

I looked sideways at Andy Stoneman. His mouth was hanging open. He looked at me and his gaping mouth turned into a sly smile. He shoved my shoulder. "Maybe you won't kill us after all, Jonz."

"Maybe not, Stoneman, maybe not."

Chapter 5

Doug was lying on the bunk opposite me. It was cramped metallic quarters. There was little floor space between us. He was fidgeting. Here in this military quarters underground, it made it hard to realize that we were down on the Mother Planet and no longer up in the space station. He was playing with his hands, whispering things under his breath.

“Hey, can’t sleep?”

He looked over, startled. “Yeah, I guess it’s contagious.”

“I don’t know if I caught it from you. I think we both got it from anticipation.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“Don’t worry Doug. We’ve trained hard, not just this week, but for a couple of years on the space station too.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Do you think we’ll survive—the mission, I mean,” he said.

“Yeah of course. Don’t worry about that Doug.”

We were silent.

“Crap, man, I don’t know,” I said. “Who knows what will happen Doug, but one thing I know.”

“What’s that Tyler?”

“I got your back buddy.”

**

General Brad Jonz, my father, came in to the mess hall, once again startling the other soldiers. Maybe these surprise appearances were his way of keeping his soldiers on their toes.

“Follow me team,” he said.

Back in the training facility, he led us to the RMD-driven Covert vehicle. We strapped ourselves into the seats. Martina was beside me as navigator.

“Double-check the food provisions Doug,” I said.

He looked back into our limited storage space. There were thousands of military issue energy packs. Food sustenance for weeks with no taste whatsoever. It was brutal.

The podium started rising in the air, with us and the Covert lifted up high, ascending to the reality of the Earth surface above. I could see my father standing in the middle of the training facility floor, shrinking away as we rose; his shoulders square and his back straight. His face emotionless but watching intently, like a good soldier. Above us the circular dome opened; first just cracks of brilliant daylight shone in through the opening panels, then full blown brilliant

sunlight beat on us as the Covert rose out the hatch and into the openness of Earth's atmosphere. Before us for the first time, we could clearly see the expanse of the high plateau where the Earth dome was constructed. At the back of us was the dome. In front of us was the vast expanse of mountains and God knows what else beyond that. I could feel my heart pumping, not really so much faster or harder than usual, but intensely. I felt as if I was just born, as if I was leaving the womb.

“You are now outside the protection of the dome,” the information system voice stated.

“Shields up,” I said a little too loud and everyone chuckled.

“Shields up Captain,” Martina said.

I flew the Covert manually, well above the mountains, but low enough to enjoy the breathtaking scenery. At first my crew was apprehensive but we became more and more confident as we realized how the simulations and real flight were virtually identical. In no time I found myself diving and climbing in the air to the tentative enjoyment of the crew. As excitement grew we started running drills of what we'd do in case of attack. We felt cohesive as a group and it built our confidence.

“What's that over there?” Martina asked.

The mountains rose and fell across the horizon, jutting up to the heavens beyond the few wispy clouds of the day and dropping into beautiful valleys between peaks. It was all covered in an oxygen-producing green blanket of trees that stimulated the senses.

Martina was pointing to a particularly extreme drop from one of the highest mountaintops. No greenery grew on this cliff. For hundreds of feet until the valley below, bare rock proudly exposed itself. Cascading down the middle of this awesome sight was foaming and churning water hurtling violently and powerfully to a lake below. Surrounded by majestic trees the lake swirled and twisted, releasing its ever flowing water into the arms of a river that ran its way back and forth between the mountains in the distance. The mist from all this aquatic activity rose coolly in the air, floating off as if to bolster the wispy clouds that danced around the peaks. Doug and Andy craned their necks from the back seat to look over our shoulders.

I looked at Stoneman, and even the king of cynicism was blown away.

“Man, go down a bit over that,” he said.

I descended over the waterfall, with the cliff beside us. Beads of moisture formed on the Covert's windshield from the mist, another detail to remind us we had left the world of simulation. From this angle you could see the river winding through the valleys, dropping off in some areas with the white-capped beauty of rapids.

“Wouldn't you like to go for a boat ride down there?” Doug asked.

“That wouldn't be too safe Dimwit,” Andy said. “How do you think your head would feel if you smashed it against some of those rocks?”

“Wouldn't bother you Stoneman, your head is harder than those crumbly rocks,” I said.

Martina and Doug laughed, and even Stoneman had a half smile.

“Enough kidding around, let's head to the destination coordinates,” Andy said.

“Destination coordinates straight ahead Captain, within view,” Martina said.

"I'll go low and cruise around the area in slow circles," I said. "Martina, you monitor the radar. Doug, Andy, bird's eye view boys. Tell me if you see any disturbance in the landscape."

I cruised in a slow circle around the area.

"Look, right there," said Doug.

We saw on the ground an area where the trees had been violently blown away. In the middle was a crater with the charred remains of equipment, people, or both. Whatever was there lay in an unceremonious funeral plot of blackened indistinguishable remains.

"There's a high concentration of these attack sights over on this mountain side, and look, it's perfect for direct launching to the Earth dome." Martina said.

"I'm going to go hover near ground level," I said.

I stopped the Covert directly over the sight, hovering; and slowly dropped the vehicle towards ground level. As we got closer the violence and carnage of this particular mountainside stood in stark contrast to the beauty around it.

"Well, those bastards certainly got what was coming to them," Andy said.

The violence of the blasts had eradicated the form of whatever was hit in the various missile-ravaged sites; so you couldn't see any bodies or even the equipment they used—just charred remains—dormant piles of past aggressions. They lay ominously scattered throughout the mountainside.

I suddenly heard a loud explosion. Before any of us had a chance to say anything the side of the Covert was hit. I felt my whole body shake violently as the blast rocked the vehicle. I had trouble holding on to the controls. I held tight and pulled the joystick back quickly, hoping to climb quickly in to the sky towards safety, but right away I realized that the Covert was not reacting the same way. It did climb up away into safety but there was definitely something wrong—I could feel it.

"Crap, what the hell!" I said.

"Aren't the shields up?" Andy said.

"Shields are up, we're not dead!" Martina answered.

"I don't know," I said, shaking the joystick. "It's not reacting properly. There's a delay."

"Rapid Molecular Displacement system is malfunctioning," the information system voice said.

"What?" Andy said. "What's going on?"

The Covert started dipping and weaving on its own.

"It's getting worse," I said. "I'm losing control."

"What da hell are ya doing?" Andy said.

"Shut up!" I said.

"What can I do to help?" Martina said.

"Pull back on the controls as hard as you can," I said.

We grunted and groaned as Martina and I both pulled back on our controls. We were slowing the descent, but we were fighting a losing battle. The Covert was dropping down the side of the mountainside. I could feel the underside of the vehicle brushing against the trees. I looked over at Martina and could see the veins in her hands as she strained with all her might. Briefly, I looked her straight in the eyes, determination written all over her face while I felt the Covert smashing into tree trunks. The trees were being severed and flying over the windshield, the branches rustling violently over the fuselage of the Covert. With each tree, our speed decreased with a violent jerk.

“Rapid Molecular Displacement system is malfunctioning,” the information system voice said.

We smashed one large tree in half, and its splinters showered all over the windshield—and we came to a stop, flopping awkwardly off the side of a newly created giant tree stump. We all fell on top of each other on the driver’s side of the Covert, then the vehicle slid off and started sliding backwards. Everyone was moaning and grunting in harmony as we slid down the mountainside. It must’ve been fifty feet before we stopped in the valley.

“Rapid Molecular Displacement system is malfunctioning,” the information system voice said.

“Shut da hell up!” Andy yelled.

I touched the de-activate sensor to turn off the RMD system and open the doors. When the doors opened, we all clamoured out.

“What the hell was that?” Andy said. “State of the god damn art—my ass!” he said, waving his arms and walking back and forth as if he had to pee. “State of the art, first attack, and what happens? The whole system goes belly up. Give me a god damn old-fashioned hover craft any day—at least we know what da hell it can do. What the god da—“

“Are you finished yet?” I asked.

“Finished! Finished! That thing, that thing is useless.”

“Agreed.”

He stared at me dumbly, panting like some sort of lost Earth animal.

Martina looked up at the line of trees we had so seriously and raggedly pruned--leaving a scar across the pristine mountain valley. We were deep in a mountain valley with peaks rising above us on all sides. Evergreens filled the view--and provided the cushion we needed to break our fall.

Martina said, “Thank God for those trees guys. They slowed us down. We sliced them down one at a time and it slowed us down—saved our lives. Stoneman, count your lucky stars. We’re alive!”

“Count my, count my—what?”

“We’ve got to get this thing repaired quickly or get out of here,” Doug said.

“You’re right Doug,” I said. “We’re sitting ducks here. We traveled some distance since we were hit, but they’ve got to be looking for us—and from the looks of the carnage we created in the trees—they’ll be able to find us--and now the vehicle’s in an open clearing. You’re right Doug.”

Martina was the first to get back in the Covert and see whether the information system was responding. I climbed in too.

“Try and call Earth base.”

The Covert's dash screen was black--no power.

"No response," Martina said as she tried tapping on the corners to activate some of the craft's modules.

"Tap the right corner--telecommunications" I said.

"I know, I know Jonz--whadaya think I'm doing?!"

Light taps turned into hard slaps as we tried to get some response from the dash controls.

"It's dead man!" I said.

"I can move the doors--some of the basic features," Martina said.

We were getting some limited response from the vehicle. We were able to open and close the doors. After slapping the screen controls for a while; we got some signs of life out of the information system. We were able to switch from defence to attack modes; but that was it. We could change modes yet do nothing within the modes. Of course, the basic dilemma was that the vehicle was just not moving at all. It was not responding to any attempts to get it to move, or even hover.

“The vehicle isn’t responding Captain. We better lock it up and get ourselves away from here. I’m sure the terrorists will find us soon—it’s broad Earth daylight, and the sun is shining clearly.”

“You’re right Martina,” I said. “Let’s get out of these RMD uniforms and into regular ones.”

We changed quickly, shoving energy packs into our knapsacks and taking the survival packs and guides. I fleetingly wondered whether the series of needles we received really would immunize us from dangers in our new environment, certainly not the human dangers. Hopefully the positioning system on the Covert was still operational, which meant that surely the Earth dome dispatch would be sending someone despite the fact that we hadn't been able to make a distress call.

“On the other side of this mountain, didn’t we have some attack sites? Did any of you notice while we were coming over?” I said.

“Ya gotta be kidding, right?” Andy said.

“Whataya mean?”

“I mean you expect me to notice what details were on the mountainside. Damn, I was just praying we wouldn’t smash into a million pieces running into it.”

“I think I saw something,” Martina said. “Why, what're you thinking?”

“The nearest mountain, the one the Covert had unceremoniously slid down, is dense with vegetation; huge trees all over except for where the vehicle had ripped a crease in the middle.” I turned to face the other direction. “There was that bomb site we hovered over. There were a lot of military items around the fringes of the destroyed area.”

"The terrorists must have weapons there--good chance some are not destroyed," Martina said.

"Exactly!" I said, "If we could get some weapons--we need something. We're too vulnerable out here."

"Tell me about it," Andy said, looking around.

"Here in this valley, look up there," I pointed up a cliff face towering over us, "This sheer cliff facing us, nearly devoid of any vegetation or trees. There are some areas that looked promising as cover. I saw one little plateau about one hundred feet up with some cracks in the cliff, hopefully some good place for shelter. Our new-fangled guns are ALL controlled by the RMD-driven information system. With it malfunctioning, we're defenceless."

"You saying we should go try and get some weapons and come back?" Martina said.

"Don't they test this crap properly?!" Andy said, "Everything depends on it."

"Looks like we're testing it now," I said.

"Arrogant sons-of-bitches," Andy muttered.

Some big birds cried loudly as they flapped their wings and took off in unison from the meadow. We all stared in awe. It was a beautiful sight. A chill went up my spine as I wondered what other wildlife was waiting for us deep in the woods. We had all heard stories of the animals down on Earth, but they seemed more like legend than any biological fact. We stood at the side of the Covert.

Martina clapped her hands. "Let's get going then. This ain't no sight-seeing tour."

**

"That's the continuation of the river we saw starting with that amazing waterfall," Martina said.

We were all trying to orient ourselves with what we had seen from the air--but it wasn't easy.

We had other priorities up there.

We had trekked over a small ridge and were looking down at a new valley which was wider than the one where we had crashed. This entire valley was dense with vegetation. It looked like the trees continued unbroken, virgin forest spreading off to the distance just below a long slowly dropping mountain. You could see open space and hear the dull roar of the river flowing beyond the visible mountainside and off into the distance. From our vantage point upon the ridge we could see across the valley we had just left, and the one in front of us. Beyond that in all directions were high peaks that we couldn't see beyond.

"I wonder how far it goes?"

"Farther than you've ever been in your life, Tyler," Martina said.

"From here we can see across the valley at least," Doug said.

"Can you see that?" Martina said, looking across the valley ahead and towards the mountainside climbing ahead of us. Martina was pointing out an area which looked like it had been hit.

"That's definitely unnatural," I said.

"Gotta be the attack site we noticed overhead--looks like a missile attack," Andy said.

"Good, we're headed in the right direction. If they were firing there," Martina said, "there must of been something important there."

We stood a few more minutes staring back where we came from and forwards towards the crater we saw. Everyone was panting and wide-eyed.

"Whataya doin'?! Catchin' flies? Let's go!" Andy said and we headed down the ridge and towards the crater.

What more discussion did we need? It was the only sign of life.

Heading across the valley was not too easy. The ground was soft and wet.

"Man, my goddamned boot came off," I cursed as the bog sucked my boot right off my foot.

Stoneman laughed.

"Glad I can cheer you up," I said.

We had to take a couple of breaks across the valley. Obviously, none of us were used to travelling across distances or surfaces like that. Stoneman kept muttering "Un-be-liev-able" over and over again.

"At least the ground is solid," Doug said as we finally got across the valley and started up the mountainside towards the crater.

"Yeah, it might be steep on the mountainside, but at least it's dry," I said.

"Finally, there it is!" Martina said as we approached the gaping hole in the mountain.

"None too soon," I panted, "it's just getting steeper and steeper.

Our enthusiasm was slightly abated when we arrived at the clearing.

"Look at the size of it!" I marvelled as we arrived at the crater.

It was large and round, devoid of trees apart from charred remains. The crater was surrounded by a circular ridge which spoke to the violence of the aerial attack.

"I guess we got 'em good here," Andy said.

Sure enough, it was an entrenched spot where the terrorists had been launching from, or it sure looked like it. There was a sizable crater in the middle with charred wreckage strewn everywhere.

"It must've been a while ago," Martina said, feeling some new foliage which was growing out of the carnage.

"Life always continues, I suppose, no matter how much we try and stop it," Doug said.

"Always the philosopher," Andy said, shaking his head.

We walked slowly over the area. It was hard to distinguish what we were looking at; everything was just a pile of black charcoal with new growth pushing out of it. A large barrel lay in the middle of the blackness. It was probably the artillery that was used to fire at the Earth dome or some target in the safe zone. Whatever it was, it was useless to us now. Other forms were there, maybe the body of artillery, maybe the body of one of the terrorists, it was hard to tell. I did not

want to look too closely anyway. Around the edges we found exactly what we were looking for; not one, but actually two rifles. We held them proudly as we picked them up, excited about this archaic technology. The day before, it would have been quite depressing to be stuck with an old-style gun like that, but at that particular moment we were thrilled to find it.

“Do you think they’re operational?” I said.

“Only one way to find out,” Martina said.

She pointed up in the sky and clicked several times with no response.

“Damn it! Wait, where’s the safety on this old thing?”

We looked over the guns.

“I think I have it,” I said, clicking off the safety and firing up in the air. The gunshot echoed throughout the mountains, loud at first, and fading as it bounced off into the distance. The two of us immediately shared a panicked look.

“Man, this is our lucky day,” as I pointed to a cache of bullets on the ground away from the main blast site.

“That may be an exaggeration; we came over here cause of the signs of life. No great surprise that the signs are remnants of terrorists and their weapons.”

"Well, we were lucky none of them survived to carry away the guns," I said, "and you've gotta admit--the day's getting a bit better.

"Yeah--a bit better," Martina admitted.

“It can’t get worse, right?”

“Hey, we’re still alive. I can tell by how sore I am.”

"So, our treasure hunt was fruitful," Doug said, "what do we do now?"

"Back to the Covert," Martina said.

"What?!" Andy said, "Forget it!"

"No, she's right," I said, "it's another trek, but we got what we wanted here. We've got weapons. Wandering away from the Covert is only going to make it harder for military dispatch to track us down."

"What about the damn terrorists!" Andy said, "They can find us too."

"Sure," I said, "I'm not suggesting we pic-nic on top of the friggin' craft!"

"Yeah," Doug said, "there looked to be a lot of plateaus and maybe even caves or things on the mountains on the other side. We could find a good hiding spot and wait."

"Exactly," I said, "why didn't you pay attention when I said this before Stoneman!"

"Aw shut up and let's head back," Andy said, starting to head down the mountainside already.

On the way back we didn’t talk much. We knew how much energy the trek took the first time.

"Damn friggin' bugs!" Martina said.

"This is one thing I like less than the fresh air," I added.

Through the boggy valley the insects were irritating. It made a tough trek even tougher.

We concentrated on the mountains beyond the ridge; beyond the claustrophobic mass of trees we had to trudge through. We didn't want to lose perspective of where we were and where we were headed. I saw a little animal leaping over my head. It was tiny with a bushy tail and its agility was amazing. It leapt from one tree branch to another, traversing the expanse of trees nearly as quickly as if it were flying—chirping all the way.

"Look at that stupid thing," Andy said, "laughing at us."

"I wouldn't mind being as agile as that thing," I said.

"Well, you're not; so let's get going," Martina said. She was focused and had a good head of steam going, in no mood for idle musings. She continued around the mountainside, setting the pace, and led the way across the valley and up the ridge where we had been able to look at the area.

"It doesn't seem nearly as far from here," Doug said, looking back to the crater and forward to the next valley where we had crash-landed. He was panting heavily; stopping and bending over.

"You're in crappy shape for a young recruit," Andy said.

Our pace became slower and more cautious as we crossed over the ridge and traversed the valley back towards the meadow where we crash-landed the Covert.

"I hope we don't have any unwelcome visitors," I whispered.

"Maybe the cavalry is here," Martina said.

"It's not far at all now," Doug said, looking in all directions.

We were upon the meadow and could see the Covert just across it.

Martina grabbed my arm and said quietly:

"Wait, wait--we're covered by trees here."

Just ahead of us was open marsh with no more tree cover. There were rocks where we could cross over but we'd be clearly visible from the air.

Everyone stopped and listened for any sounds.

There was nothing, just a gentle wind and the flowing water.

Martina was scouring the cliff beyond the meadow.

"There must be someplace."

"How about that?" I said, pointing to the distance. Up the mountainside there was a plateau which looked promising.

"Good vantage spot," Andy said, "and good hiding spot."

"We're gonna have to find a way to make our way around the meadow, to the cliff on the other side," I said.

"It's not that far," Doug said.

"Without getting shot jackass!" Andy said.

"Can ya shut up Stoneman!" Martina said. "If we stay along the right here; along the edge of the trees in the valley--out of the opening of the marshy areas--it'll be a bit longer but--"

"--a lot safer." I said. "I agree."

Heading out, I kept looking up through the trees, half-hoping for a government search party--and half-dreading a terrorist attack. This valley was much smaller, and even though we took a roundabout way, we made it across fairly quickly. The cliff face was easy to climb. It took us little time to climb up. As we reached the plateau, I turned and noticed how we had a clear view of the meadow, and more importantly, the Covert. There were even some rocks in front of us to hide behind while we were keeping watch. It was perfect.

"Good spot, eh guys?" Doug said, beaming.

"Absolutely," Martina said.

It was getting late in the day and the sun was disappearing beyond the mountains. Shadows grew and spread over the wilderness. We all hunkered down together, watching dusk unfold from our little clearing--in both awe and fear. The temperature cooled as we sat in a circle sucking on our tasteless energy packs. They were a functional but uninspiring bit of technology in this timeless, primitive landscape.

We took turns standing up, looking over the rocks at the Covert below, until the last rays of sunshine slowly disappeared, leaving the Covert, the meadow, and even the vast mountains under a blanket of darkness. The vast array of stars that decorate the night sky suddenly came out to play. I think it comforted all of us. Suddenly, the space station did not seem so far away. As the light gave way to the dark, strange sounds and cool winds made the night in the wilderness of Earth not nearly as inviting as the day.

"We better try and get some sleep," I said.

"Easy to say, not so easy to do," Martina said.

"Yeah, I'm pretty wound up," Doug said.

"Tired too though," Andy added. "Where the hell's the rescue party!"

**

I woke up before dawn. Martina and Andy were both still asleep. I looked over and saw Doug's silhouette leaning against the rock, staring up at the stars. He saw me getting up, sore and tired, and put out his hand to help me up.

"Thanks buddy--can't sleep," I said.

"I slept a few hours, but rocks aren't that comfortable."

"No, they're not."

We stood there staring at the stars, mesmerized as the sky transformed, our first Earth dawn. The sounds of birds were echoing throughout the valley. The stars and darkness were fading away, replaced by golden hues of red and orange. The giant fiery ball, that we call the Sun, started shooting preliminary rays up over the back of the mountains. For the first time, I thought I felt its

rays heating my environment. All the shadows that had owned the night retreated in submission. Chirping, cawing, and rustling could be heard from different directions. Signs of life were returning to the landscape, creatures of the day were coming alive. Soon enough, the sky was returning to the familiar blue we had been flying through the day before, and all the familiar sights were visible. The meadow and the Covert were clear to see, and the mountains stood in the same position as the day before, the same position as thousands, millions of days before.

It was soon after that when we heard voices. Doug and I hunched down, hiding behind the rocks. The guns were leaning against the rocks beside us and we each reached over to grab one; the security of the trigger felt good in my hands.

“Do you know how to shoot one of these things?” Doug said.

“Sure, police academy, history of guns,” I said.

The voices were growing louder. They sounded like they were trying to whisper, but they were too excited to keep their voices down.

“Look, there!” Doug said, pointing to the other side of the meadow. They were coming around the same mountainside that Martina and I were climbing the day before. I could not make out what they looked like. I could see more of the trees rustling than the actual people. They were just two figures tramping through the woods. Any thoughts they may have had about keeping quiet were disappearing as they caught sight of the Covert. They were coming to the clearing and we could see them a bit better now. They held their guns up as they made their way out to the clearing. One was pointing up at the devastation to the trees where the Covert had slid down the mountainside. The other was ignoring him and concentrating on the Covert. He crept up to the vehicle, his gun raised. Just then, Andy started stirring, talking loudly in his sleep. I went over quickly and put my hand on his mouth.

“Whad de hedd” he said, his voice muffled through my fingers.

He knocked my hand away, but I put one finger quickly to my mouth. He saw the gun in my hand, the urgency in my eyes, and he understood. He was silent and got up slowly. All the commotion had woken Martina too, but fortunately she woke up in a much quieter fashion.

“What’s going on?” she whispered.

We waved her over and she followed us. We all heard the voices now; they were talking excitedly between themselves, waving their arms and looking around.

“That’s no World Government troops,” Doug said.

“Ya think?” Andy said.

All four of us looked in silence as the two were now banging their rifle butts against the Covert. They were looking frustrated. We had left the Random Molecular Displacement system in defence mode. It had proved to be less than impregnable to missile attacks, but I would hope that it could stand up to a rifle butt. It was holding up well and we watched, wondering what to do. They were banging away for a while but then stopped. They talked for a while and then started looking around the landscape.

“I could pick them off no problem,” said Doug.

“No,” I said, but a millisecond later the gun shot sounded from right beside me.

Doug fired and one of them dropped. The other one did not even run to the woods. It was if he was frozen in his tracks as he looked at his fallen comrade. Doug fired at him too, but he narrowly missed, whizzing a bullet past the unsuspecting terrorist into the trees. He turned to run into the woods. I raised my gun to fire also, but before I had it aimed, Doug fired again and the second soldier fell to the ground. He rolled over, appearing to still be alive. Doug fired again. The soldier stopped moving.

The four of us burst into a triumphant cheer. Andy clapped Doug on the back. Doug let out a long laugh as he pumped his rifle in the air.

“Okay guys, shhh...” Martina warned. “Who knows who else is around?”

The thought brought us back to reality. We sat down again, waiting to see what our successful attack would bring as far as reprisals. I remember sitting there behind the rocks, my knees pressed into my chest, my heart pumping, thoughts disappearing from my mind. I was caught up in the moment, working on instinct like a primitive Earth animal, feeling powerful.

We sat there about five minutes, each taking turns sneaking quick glances over the rocks, but still—no sounds that led us to believe other humans were around. The birds had dispersed during our attack, but quickly returned as silence returned to the valley. We were intruding, disturbing the natural order, yet it always returned to normal.

“I’m not waiting here any more,” Andy said, jumping to his feet.

“Wait,” I said.

“He’s right, let’s go,” Doug said. His face was looking pale. The primitive euphoria of the moment had disappeared; now there was time for reflection on what had taken place.

We hurried down the side of the cliff, excruciatingly careful, as we had to be to avoid falling to our deaths to the rocks below. Doug was in front for the first time. He was down alongside the meadow while the other three of us were still halfway down the cliff. I could hear his feet sloshing in the water. He did not bother going around the entire meadow. He was cutting through it, wading waist deep in water. He was at the Covert, at the site of the dead soldiers, by the time we were going around the meadow. The entire time we were racing across the meadow, I could see him standing there, like a statue, his stance wide, unmoving. By the time we arrived beside him, the last vestiges of the look of a conquering warrior had left Doug’s face. One of the dead soldiers was on his back, the other lay face down. The one he shot first, the one who was face up, lay there, almost peacefully; his eyes open, staring straight up into the heavens like he was enjoying the landscape. A solitary trickle of blood dripped from his slightly open mouth. Apart from that, he looked positively peaceful.

He was young.

The closer I got, the younger I realized he was. We all stood staring at his angelical little face, so similar, yet so strange. He had strange dark eyes, and dark skin. He was wearing a uniform, one much too big for him. From a distance, it made him look like he was much bigger, but as you closed in you realized he was floating in that uniform, like a boy trying on his father’s clothes. As I stood over him the realization washed over me, almost drowned me in the feeling that this was indeed nothing more than a boy. Like a reed, he had just had a young adolescent growth spurt, which gave him some height; and the uniform gave him the illusion of size from a distance, but this was a boy, a young boy.

“He’s just a kid,” Doug said finally, his whole face trembling.

I looked at Doug. It was as if he didn’t know what expression to have, his mouth quivering between a smile, a grimace, a sneer—stuck at the crossroads, not knowing which way to go.

“What’s that around his neck?” Andy said.

In the center of the boy’s chest was the bloodstain from the bullet that sealed his fate. Blood was trickling down onto a long chain that was around the boy’s neck. The chain had a key on it. Andy leant over and took the chain from around his neck. He held the key in the air. It was a large, formidable, shiny metal key; with a drop of blood on the handle. Andy held it up in the air and it glistened in the sun

Martina rolled over the other soldier. He was as young as the other boy, but the look on his face was starkly different to the one with the key. His look was one of fear, of desperation, of horror. Doug never looked at that face. Later, I was thankful for that. That look was one that would haunt you.

“Do you think they got here alone?” Martina said.

“It looks like it,” I said.

“But where did they come from? We were on the other side of that mountain. It’s dense bush. That isn’t easy to hike through. Why would they come on foot?” Martina said.

“Maybe that’s all they had. Maybe these people left on Earth have been surviving with less than we thought. Those catastrophic nuclear attacks were a hundred years ago, but maybe it knocked the Earth back into the Stone Age, maybe it wiped out as much technology as it did people.”

“But we flew over the mountains from the direction they came. It looked like it was all wilderness. How could they travel through that?” Martina wondered.

“Unless,” I said.

“Unless, what?” Andy said.

“Unless they traveled down the river.”

Chapter 6

"I don't care. I want to bury them."

"But Doug, think about it. We can't hang around here, suppose there are more of them," I pleaded.

"I told you, I don't care."

"We're going. That's an order."

Doug looked at me, uncompromising, his mind set in stone. His conviction was apparent, his resolve absolute; I had never seen this side of him before. I looked in his eyes. They were bloodshot and unblinking. Without any of us noticing, it was as if he had gone through a transformation.

We were in the clearing near the Covert, beside the two dead soldiers. Martina had thrown blankets over the two soldiers. We covered them up, out of sight, out of mind—or at least we wished it would be that easy; but Doug had it in his mind. He did not want to leave them there like that, and as I looked in his eyes, I realized—Doug could not leave them there.

"Don't you understand Lloyd, we can't stay here!" Andy yelled.

"I don't..."

"Yeah, yeah, I don't care. I know," Andy threw his hands up in desperation. "Let's leave 'im here. There's no talking to him."

"No," Martina said as she started to remove her knapsack. She had one of the foldable army-issue shovels attached to the back of it. Andy started to protest to her as she removed it and started digging, but he quickly stopped when she threw him a cutting look.

We all started to dig. We worked hard digging holes; fortunately the ground was soft and the work went quickly. The two young soldiers were buried in shallow graves near the Covert. I looked around, wondering if anyone would say a few words, but no one dared—what could we say? I felt a measure of peace knowing that their final resting place was in such a beautiful valley. Dust to dust—as they say. Doug was looking at the piles of earth. I hoped he had some measure of peace too. Even though burial was foreign to us from the space station; it seemed right for these Earth dwellers.

We searched the boys' bodies before we left, but there was not much besides the key. We took their guns, which meant we had one each, but Doug refused to carry one, so I ended up having two dangling off my knapsack.

"Across the big valley," Martina said, "you could hear the river."

"Especially near the crater," I said. "It's got to be their transport."

"It's been a coupla days," Andy said. "if the government was coming for us--it woulda been a long time ago."

"So," I said, "I guess there's not much choice."

"Man," Andy said, "I'm not looking forward to that big trek again."

"He was whining about your shape Doug--turns out he ain't so great either!" Martina said to Doug, but there was no response.

We made it across up the ridge and down into the long valley. The trees were old and large, each competing with the others to reach up high to the sunlight. When you looked down at them from the side of the mountain, the brush looked as dense as the growth we had just climbed up, but when you actually got down to the valley; even though it was mucky the ground level was quite clear. All the dense greenery was high up in the sky, reaching for the sun; while we walked relatively freely among thick, strong trunks. I guess we were getting used to the uneven ground--real earthlings. As we crossed the valley, we headed more to the left than we did before. Straight ahead was the steepest part of the mountain and where the crater was--but to the left was where the river sound was strongest. Even rookie Earth travelers knew that water flowed down a mountainside. It was not long before we could hear the din of the river in the distance. The ground crackled under our feet as we trampled on dead branches and slogged through muddy areas. The bugs were in full force here, and I cursed them with every second step. Looking up through the trees, strong rays of sunlight danced through the waving leaves.

"I need a break," I said.

Andy looked at me, sweat rolling down his face. He opened his mouth for some smart mouth comment, but then reconsidered and just plopped himself down on the same fallen tree. The other two followed suit within a couple of seconds. We all sat there; alternately squinting to the distance, hoping to catch sight of the river—and then looking up to the heavens—to the beautiful sunny sky.

"Do you think it's much farther," Martina said.

"I think I see some blue over there," I said, squinting hard.

"That's probably just an illusion from the fatigue," Andy said.

"Well, even if it's an illusion, it motivates me."

"Whatever works."

And with that we started off again.

**

It was getting late in the day. The rays of the sun were shining at a greater angle. They were strong and piercing through the trees, solid like laser beams as they threw a yellow/ orange hue to the tree trunks. We were all getting tired again, slowing down, just starting to get weary when the sound of the river grew stronger and Andy was the first one to see the speckles of blue water through the trees.

"There it is," he announced.

Andy and Martina ran in front of me, their backpacks dancing, the guns and shovels clanging together. Doug trailed behind, distracted. I could hear Andy as he made it to the clearing. I could see him stripping his clothes as he cried out primitive cheers of jubilation. Martina looked as if

she was hesitating, but personal hygiene won out over any female discretion, as she stripped to her t-shirt and also went in.

They were still in front of me, but the sound of them splashing in the water was enough to begin the overwhelming feelings of relief that washed over me. I too, ran into the water as soon as I arrived. It was cold, very cold, but it was refreshing. The embankment was not a smooth or simple entry. The riverbed was very erratic, rocky; and some rocks were near the surface, busting out in beautiful whitecaps, while other areas were deep and seemingly bottomless. The river's current was strong, but not enough to wash us away, just enough to massage.

Doug arrived slowly, several minutes later, and started to remove his clothing methodically, as if in some elaborate baptismal ceremony—no expression on his face. He knelt, muttering to himself; splashing water, first on his face, and then over his entire body. Then he stood in front of us, completely naked, his arms stretched out like Jesus on the cross, dripping cold water, his skin turning blue. He looked briefly up to the heavens and did a slow, deliberate dive into one of the deep areas.

I was the first one to spot the boat. It was up river, on the same side that we had come from, pulled up on the shore. It was not any state-of-the-art piece of technology. It was something out of the distant past, out of times before cities, when the world was sparsely populated long before the nuclear war. I looked at it, almost expecting it to disappear as a mirage, a mysterious remnant of a ghostly past. When I was sure it was really there, I cried out, announcing my discovery to the rest of the team. We made it out of the water, and the chill was hitting me. I quickly put on my dry clothes, wondering if Earth was always this cold.

The boat was long and thin; it appeared to be made of wood. This was not something we were familiar with on the space station. Wood was for the rich and extravagant. From my point of view, to see this rickety craft made out of wood was a paradox. There was an engine on the back end of it. It was the only piece of modern civilization attached to this craft. I'm sure in its heyday this engine would have been slick, polished steel; but now it was tarnished and dirty. We were barely capable of distinguishing the control buttons on top of it. Beside the engine, in the boat, was a small container strapped tightly. Cords were wrapped around it several times, like it contained the most precious substance on Earth. Apart from that, there were three hard wooden seats divided up the sparse interior of the boat.

“So this is 21st century technology,” Martina said.

“I don't think this would be considered modern, even several centuries before that,” Andy said.

Doug was still in the water. I could see him in the same spot where we had gone in, swimming in circles, and spitting water deliberately out his mouth like a fountain.

“Hey Doug,” I called, “come on down here.”

He looked at me and smiled a soft, innocent smile. I don't know why, but that smile disturbed me. It seemed kind of out of place. Eventually, he made his way down towards us. He stayed in the water, wading his way upstream towards us, dragging his hands and watching the water cascade around them like a child.

“Hey, look at this,” Andy called.

In the woods just up from the boat was a new surprise. I could see a slightly rusty piece of metal jutting out from the woods. It was clear it was not part of the natural element. As we got close, I

could see what it was. It was some sort of archaic heavy artillery. It had a long barrel for a huge calibre projectile, something that would be unheard of with modern technology. It was big and bulky by today's standards, but would still be portable enough to carry through the woods—not without some sweat and tears though.

“Hey, maybe this is what took us down,” Andy said.

“Maybe,” I answered, “but who knows.”

Martina arrived beside us. “Do you think those kids that Doug shot were the ones who shot us down?”

“That's what you get,” Andy said.

“I don't know,” I said, “it doesn't look like there is anyone else out here.” I waved my arms towards the vast expanse of wilderness.

Doug was just wandering up near us. He was still in the water, naked and blue from the cold, but did not appear to be interested in us, or in the artillery we just found. He was circling the boat, rubbing his hands on it. He was very curious about the boat.

“Hey, look over here,” Andy tried calling Doug over to us, but then waved an arm in frustration when he did not respond.

The three of us stood over the artillery for a while, spouting theories as to whom it was who shot us down, yet it was all conjecture. It was getting late in the day, and I was weary. Doug finally put his clothes back on after much prodding from Martina. She was looking at him very seriously. You could tell she was worried. We decided to spend the night just in the woods, not too far from the boat. We did not dare sleep right out on the river, where we could easily be spotted by any other boats going by—or soldiers coming for this one. We had to go on. We had to try and see where this led us.

We ate and each of us tried to find the closest thing to a smooth patch in this God-forsaken forest. The cold was chilling my bones and I was starting to shake continuously. The dark fell slowly again, the shadows grew longer, but my eyelids would not wait for darkness to completely envelop.

Doug's blood-curdling scream woke me abruptly. I was completely asleep, the deep sleep of the exhausted. His scream was long and loud, echoing through the wilderness, pure terror from the pit of his gut, waking everyone. I turned and saw him in the gloom of the night, rising with the power of his scream. It sounded like he was crying the word “no”, but it was so distorted and pained you could not really make it out clearly. It was not so much a scream as a loud moan, a reverberating sound unwilling to accept the facts of recent history. Martina got up and grabbed his arm a few seconds later.

“Are you okay Doug? Are you okay?” she said.

“Leave me alone,” he demanded, heading towards the river.

“Are you okay Doug?” she implored, in motherly tones, but Doug continued to ignore her. He walked down by the river again, perching on a rock over the river, staring at it, mesmerized. I caught up with Martina and grabbed her by the arm.

“Leave him alone, he just needs some time to himself.”

“I guess so,” she relented. Yet worry was etched on her face.

I tried to go back to sleep, but it was no use.

At first I was confused by the first tapping of rain on the leaves above, thinking there was a sudden rush of tiny animal activity, but as it gained force, I realized we were about to enjoy our first Earth rainstorm. We were more or less sheltered under the trees, but you still had big cold drops slapping you in the face every minute or so. I kept looking over at Doug too. He was still perched over the river, unflinching in the exposed area, getting soaked from the rain.

The dawn would soon be arriving.

Here by the river you could not hear the increasing sounds of the morning; it was all drowned out by the constant din of the river as it flowed by. There was no sun peaking up over the mountains, the skies were cloudy and grey. The change from night to day was subtle, from black to grey, and not nearly as beautiful. Andy and Martina were still trying to sleep, but mostly tossing around and murmuring curses under their breath.

I walked over to Doug to try and talk, to try and reach out—and pull him back. It certainly wasn't safe. He sat there staring at the flow.

“Look at the flow right here, isn't it amazing,” said Doug without looking at me. “You see the curve of the water here, like a beautiful sculpture by Mother Nature. I remember back on the space station staring at Earth whenever I could, and it was the water, the water that was always amazing, intriguing. You see those gorgeous shades of blue covering the whole globe and this flow; this flow is part of that. Water condenses, falls in rain, melts in snow, flows down the rivers, into the lakes, into the oceans, evaporates in heat, flows up in clouds, and continues in a beautiful cycle. All these rivers and oceans and lakes appear like separate entities, but they're not. They're all part of the water that flows in this beautiful cycle. This water right here that is flowing threw my fingers. It is gone now, down the river. It may end up in a lake, an ocean, evaporate and come right back to this very spot or end up on a completely different end of the planet. But it is still all part of the same One, the same Whole, no matter what form it takes. Do you understand?”

“Umm... yeah, sure,” I answered.

“Look, this flow right here, this shape in the water. It appears to take on a form, but every second water is rushing through, countless tons of water is rushing by this exact spot, yet it appears to be stationary, to have a stable form, yet the actual water that creates that form is changing every second. Do you understand now?”

“What are you trying to tell me Doug?”

“I'm trying to tell you that the individual does not matter, we are all part of the same Whole. This water is a metaphor for life. No, wait, not just a metaphor: it is part of life, a living example of divine knowledge, laying here, waiting stoically for whomever wants to discover it.” He looked up at me, excited, happy.

“You're talking crazy Doug.”

“No, I'm not!” he yelled at me.

“Calm down Doug.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!”

“Okay, okay Doug.”

I tried to grab his arm, but he ripped his arm away from me and stood up to me. “Don’t tell me to calm down! I’m the one who’s thinking rationally.”

“Don’t ‘okay’ me! I’m thinking rationally, thinking clearly, probably for the first time in my life!”

He walked down the river towards the boat. I left him alone. Andy and Martina were watching from a distance, waking from their disturbed slumber. There was nothing to be done for now.

We packed up soon after that, in the rain, the pouring relentless rain. It was a dark day. The drops filled the sky. All the beautiful mountains and even trees just beyond the riverside disappeared behind a sheet of deep grey. The trees rustled as loudly as the river this morning. We loaded up the boat with our backpacks and gathered around the engine. Andy removed a cap and smelt inside, it was an old gasoline powered engine. The container strapped so carefully to the interior of the boat was most probably gasoline for the engine. Andy pressed the power button and the engine strained to start. With a little cajoling it roared into life, chugging smoothly after a few seconds, emitting smelly clouds in the air. I was standing too close and it made me cough.

We started down the river, heading by instinct. What we were looking for we were not sure. The rain was unrelenting and we had to empty the boat continuously; cupping our hands and throwing the cold water back into the river. Martina was steering the boat and Andy and I were sitting in front with our guns at the ready. Doug lay in the middle of the boat, soaked and apparently oblivious; muttering to himself.

“Crappy weather, eh Doug?” He looked at me and smiled. It was not a good look. He still had that glazed look in his eye that worried me. I tried again. “What are thinking Doug?”

“I was thinking about the soldier’s burden.”

“What do you mean?”

”We are sent to war. We are trained not to think, to follow orders. Initially, you would think that it would clear your mind, free you from responsibility, but it is not that simple. Everything is mapped out for us. We are pawns to be manipulated in the manner the powers that be require us to be manipulated—puppets on strings. Yet, we follow orders, we do what we’re told, unquestioningly, and then—”

“And then what?”

“And then we have to live with our actions, even though our actions are beyond our control. We are trained to act like robots, free from human emotion, but that’s impossible. We are human, no matter what training we receive and we have to live with our actions, we have to. That is the soldier’s burden.”

He was playing with a picture in his hands.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he replied, startled, putting the picture in his pocket.

The boat was cutting efficiently through the water, through the flow. It was hard to avoid the rocks, which jutted out from time-to-time. It was not the most comfortable way to travel. Martina

had to continuously dodge the rocks. We kept looking carefully up ahead, for any signs of life—good or bad. It was hard straining in the grey of the day, but the rain seemed to be abating. The grey of the clouds lightened a little bit at a time. I could see a little farther downstream. The river was a little wider and easier to travel, but the clouds were low lying. It was fog and it severely affected our visibility.

“This is ridiculous,” Martina blurted. “We’re open targets out here. We need to stop and wait for this weather to change.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” Andy added.

“Okay, okay, let’s stop,” I said.

“We can’t see two feet in front of our faces,” Martina continued. “What’s the use in having a gun if you can’t see anything beyond the end of the barrel?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” Andy repeated.

“Shut up!” Martina yelled as she veered the boat towards the shore. I don’t know if it was just luck, or she saw it, but there was a convenient beach for us to ride up on. It made for a softer landing than smashing into the rocks that took up most of the riverside. The rain was still coming down fairly hard and we were all soaked. Martina ran the boat into the sand with some speed, so nearly the entire boat was out of the water by the time we climbed out.

“Nobody tells me to shut up, even a woman without--”

“Get over yourself,” Martina warned.

“Guys, let’s try and—“ I started before Andy cut me off.

“You, daddy’s little boy, you don’t tell me what to do any more. It’s time for some real leadership around here.”

Martina laughed loud.

“Now that’s a laugh. You, you’re going to show leadership. Try controlling your emotions for a second.”

“Don’t tell me--” Andy started, and they were on the verge of getting physical.

“Look,” I implored, “This day is hard enough without this! Freaking out won’t get us anywhere. We need to talk it over like a group, come to a decision as a group, what we do. Do we continue exploring, for the mission’s sake? Do we go back to Covert and wait around? Whatever—as a group—we decide!”

Martina backed up with her hands to her head and sighed, “He’s right, he’s right. Freaking out won’t solve anything.”

“Okay—agreed?” I said, looking around at the others. Andy and Martina nodded. Doug was still off by the riverbank, still in his own little world. “Okay, we’re agreed. But we’re all hungry too. Let’s eat and relax a little, rest a little—we’re all worked up. We’ll talk after eating.”

The three of us sat and started to eat. We sucked back our energy packs, quickly, ferociously even. Andy got up and started pacing, Martina glaring at him as he walked away.

All the while, Doug was on the riverbank. Much like before, he trailed a hand in the water like a child. The other hand held his digipad.

“You need some food Doug, eat.”

I held out an energy pack for him to eat. He turned away from it and looked down at his digipad. He began to recite what he had written—softly, methodically:

*I've watched you flow
I've watched you ride
So filled with awe and envy
Over moss-laden rocks
And heaping boulders
Through mountains and through valleys
Arched on each side
Stand saluting trees
That enhances your beauty and your power
That low sweet rumble
That marks your presence
Extols your perfect passionate work
But in my dreams
I do more than watch
And wonder about your purpose
I ride with you
I ebb and glide
Around gentle curves and down rapids
Forget the day
I trust in you
I feel no pain or fear inside
Because I am One with you
No more human form
And it is the only time I feel real peace
To be One with you
Is to be One with Creation
And I know you will lead me to—the Truth.*

He read so passionately, with such conviction, but how could I listen to this right now? I tried to respond, but there were no words.

"I'll read to the others," he got up and walked over to Andy and Martina. He began to read again. Andy's face grew redder with each word. Only a few phrases into it, Andy exploded:

"What the hell are you bothering us about? You're writing poetry—poetry!?"

"Leave him alone," Martina began to interject.

There was noise from the woods behind us--something was approaching.

"What's that?" Andy said.

"Some sorta--" Martina said as she looked at this furry little creature with a big nose and ears amble out straight towards us.

"It's not afraid of us," I said.

"Watch out," Andy said, "it could be dangerous!"

"Ya big chicken," I said, "It looks like a baby."

Martina bent over and the cute little fat furry animal let out a tiny groan as its paws grabbed for Martina's hand. In its uncoordinated exuberance, it lost equilibrium and rolled over backwards. Everyone laughed loudly.

"It's okay little guy," Martina said, reaching out to help the little creature back on its feet.

Just then, a tumultuous roar swelled from the woods in back of us. The violent thrashing of branches moving aside came before we saw it. Sensing the danger that was upon us, I remember grabbing Doug by his shirt and yelling to the others, "In the boat!"

There was no delay in the group's reaction time. This thing, this huge grey beast coming out of the woods fit right into the ambiance of the occasion. I remember actually seeing it for the first time as I threw Doug into the boat and looked back. It was coming out of the woods, all grey fur and a giant head with tremendous teeth; some Earth beast that could easily rip all of us to shreds.

Andy turned and aimed his gun at it as soon as we entered the boat. Martina started the engine. She gave it full throttle and Andy staggered, his shot skimming uselessly off into the woods. The huge beast lunged at us as we were leaving the beach, creating a tumultuous wake in the river; which threw us farther from the animal. It gave us the head start we needed, and the beast roared at us as we went off down the river as fast as the engine would carry us.

"What the hell was that? What the hell was that?" Andy said.

None of us knew what it was, or even if we did, we most certainly were incapable of answering. Andy sputtered, wanting to say more, but garbled nonsense came out his mouth. Doug started to laugh, first lightly, then harder. I couldn't help myself; I laughed too, Martina also. We laughed so hard; tears were running down our faces as we barrelled down the river.

"That's not funny," Andy implored. "That's not funny." He didn't laugh, but he was too tired to yell any more. Even Andy had to calm down once in a while. "That's not funny," he kept muttering, barely audible underneath the noise of the engine and our laughter.

Chapter 7

“It has a trap door on it,” Andy said.

We were standing over a mound of earth and rocks, long since grown over with ample greenery, with a trap door in the center of it. The trap door on the top looked solid and was secured by a large padlock. If one had the inclination, you could get a few strong men together and move the rocks without worrying about the trap door. I fumbled eagerly in my pockets.

“Do you have it?” Martina coaxed.

“Yeah, give me a second. Here it is.” I held up the key.

“Well, don’t just stand there, try it!”

Everyone held their breath as I tried the key. The lock was wet and covered in mud. I had to clean it off before even trying. There was still some mud in the slot, so the first time I tried, it didn’t work, but the second time a soft click released the lock. My first reaction could almost be classified as disappointment; this key held such mystery, now it turned out to be only a small element in the mystery, taking us into a crude hole in the ground. I almost laughed as the key turned and opened the trap door. The door creaked as Andy and I pulled back on it, the piercing sound grating on my frayed nerves, as if warning us not to go any further. A little warily, Martina shone a light down the hole.

“Well, what do you see?” Andy asked.

“A big hole, a big deep hole,” Martina said. Her voice echoed from the hole. You could tell the depth from the little pebbles that fell endlessly down, slight echoes of the tiny projectiles could be heard.

“Let me see,” I said.

Martina moved aside. It was a deep hole alright, but at least there was what looked like a crude, but solid, ladder leading down.

“Well, who wants to go first?” asked Martina.

“Shine down the hole,” Andy said, grabbing his gun and backpack, climbing intrepidly down the hole without so much as a moment’s hesitation. He kept climbing down, getting smaller and smaller. Martina looked at me as if to say, “Does it go forever?” when the sound suddenly changed. Andy’s feet no longer sounded like they were on crumbling earth and rock, now there was a metallic echo.

“Well, check it out!” Andy said.

“What, what do you see?” I yelled down.

“Looks like back home.”

We climbed down about fifty feet before we could see Andy standing there. He had taken out his flashlight and was shining it up at us. At the bottom, there were metal shards all around. The wooden stairs led down into a metallic, much more sleekly styled horizontal tunnel; the crude

tunnel going down burrowed its way through the covering of this more modern tunnel. The four of us stood together, shining our flashlights.

“Does this look familiar?” Andy said.

It certainly did. It was exactly like the tunnels at the Earth station, and for that matter, the space station as well. You shone the light down one end of the tunnel and it continued on beyond what the naked eye could see. The other direction was blocked completely. The tunnel was crushed with tons of earth and rocks breaking through it, completely impassable. Near the bottom of the ladder were two ancient flashlights. Martina tried one. It worked, shining only a dim light, but still enough to light the complete blackness of the tunnel.

We continued down the tunnel, the familiar metallic foot-clomping sounds echoed as we walked on the floor grating. It was like home, except for the eerie darkness, only the bouncing light of our flashlights to show us the way. For a second it reminded me of my night patrols in City Central: the erratic lighting, the claustrophobic feeling, and also, the desperation.

After walking a couple of minutes, we found a control panel for lighting.

"It doesn't work," I said, tapping the control panel.

"Can't say I'm surprised," Martina said.

There was a tenuous balance as we walked down the metallic tunnel; fear of what awaited us on one side, eagerness to discover on the other. I walked in front, trying to move quickly, but also trying to tread lightly.

“What’s that?” Martina asked, pointing to a new passageway. I shone the light. The new passageway was really just an entranceway to a maintenance or security room.

“This is the exact same kind of maintenance room like in the Earth dome,” Martina said as she looked around.

Andy choked as he opened a rickety broken door to a storage closet, dust billowing up around his airways.

“Damn, this place is a mess,” he said.

“Look, someone was here recently,” I said, pointing to the remnants of some bread and vegetables lying on the ground. “This couldn’t have been here too long; it didn’t have time to rot yet.”

“The terrorists definitely came by here,” Andy said.

“It’s not like they have much choice,” Martina said. “This seems to be the only place they could have come from this tunnel and the other direction is completely destroyed.”

“At some point in the past, this passageway had to be connected to the rest of the Earth base,” I said. “They built a pretty long passageway to get all the way out here, and then they cut it off.”

“A good strategically-placed blast from any hovercraft woulda been able to cave in the tunnel like that,” Andy said.

“Sure, if you knew exactly where to aim,” Martina said. “If you knew exactly where the tunnel was.”

“So, it had to be done by World Government troops. They cut off the tunnel. I guess it must've been a weak link in dome security. The terrorists discovered it at some point and started coming through.”

“You'd have to do it to protect the Earth base,” Andy said.

“Funny that we never heard about this,” Martina said.

“We better move carefully through here,” I said.

“Will you quit saying that crap Jonz,” Andy said. “We gotta do everything carefully on this godforsaken planet—quit reminding me!”

“Yeah, yelling--that helps. Let's get going,” I said, as we continued down the tunnel, shining our flashlights down the long narrow view.

The deafening roar of a gun blast echoed throughout the tunnel. I heard the violent projectile zing by my head.

“Lights out!” I cried.

We shut off our flashlights and all dropped to the ground. My face hit the unforgiving grating at the bottom of the footpath. It was a nice non-skid surface for your feet, but not very nice to have rubbed against your face.

“Move your head,” Andy cried. He was at the back of me, moving around. He was trying to take a shot.

“Wait,” I said, just as another bullet rang down the hallway. We could hear the sounds of excited voices down the end of the hallway. “I don't want you shooting me up the ass, you moron.”

“Jonz, you better--”

“Shut up, all of you!” barked Martina.

She began to whisper, saying:

“Back up, stay low: into the utility room.”

All of us stayed low, fumbling through the dark until our eyes adjusted to the virtually unbroken darkness. There was a light coming from farther down the hallway. It only gave a dim light, barely enough to make out forms. We managed to back ourselves fairly noiselessly into the utility room. I was reassured that we couldn't be heard as the voices down the hall kept talking loudly, excitedly.

I was the last one to back into the utility room. Just as I was in, a tremendous flurry of gunfire rang throughout the tunnel. I heard their excited voices again and the frenetic metallic clicking of guns being reloaded. Within a short time, the deafening gunfire started again. When they had finished emptying rounds of ammunition in our direction, again the excited voices could be heard, and the frantic click-clicking of their reloading once more.

“Not a word,” Martina whispered.

We all had our hands on our guns now. I sat up, my back to the passageway to the utility room.

There was a long silence.

Now they were wondering what they should do. It was so predictable. Their voices started slowly again. I could not make out what they were saying. I could hear them creeping down the hallway, probably hoping to find a bunch of prostate bodies. Their footsteps were very close, it sounded like there were two of them. One hushed the other; and then there was just their heavy, excited breathing and the sound of their feet on the metallic footpath. I could feel my heart pounding. I tried hard to stifle my own breathing as I saw two figures walk past. They had an old lamp, which gave off only a dim glow. They did not even notice the passageway to the utility room as they passed by.

They continued on, past us, down the tunnel, looking for bodies that weren't there. I could feel Andy nudging me, wanting me to shoot. It would've been the smart move, militarily speaking—but something stopped me. I think it was the sound of their voices whispering as they came close. They sounded young. My hand was on the trigger. I tried to get myself to fire as they passed by, but I just couldn't. Andy was trying to push me silently, get me out of the way. Thinking back, I guess I couldn't blame him—we had just felt the wind of at least a couple of dozen bullets whiz by us; and these two were the ones that were firing.

They were by us, and creeping slowly. I got up to my feet and crept into the tunnel, right behind them. I could see the two shadowy figures more clearly now. They were both small, hunched over, thin figures. I could see the hand of one of them, which held the dim lantern raised in the air; shaking slightly, the tremors of nervousness, of fear. In the dim shaky light, they each had a rifle pointed down the tunnel.

I was right behind them and I could feel Andy just standing beside me. I pushed his arm up. He was about to shoot them. Instead I turned his rifle over. I did the same to mine, and coming right upon one of the clueless attackers, brought the butt of my gun down heavily against the back of his head. Andy did the same thing a second later to the partner; and the two of them let out gasps as they thudded to the ground. Andy and I were upon them quickly, even though it was not really a big rush. I don't think either one of them was completely unconscious, but the blows certainly slowed down their reaction times considerably. Martina opened her flashlight. The figures, the scene, no longer a murky collection of shadows; now it was lit—and we could see the two frightened, disoriented young boys pinned to the ground.

Kicking their guns to the side, away from their flailing arms, Martina said, "Now that wasn't very bright."

"Kids, again! What kinda army do these terrorists have?" Andy said.

"Not much," I said.

"We didn't know who you were—we couldn't see—dark!" one of them jabbered.

"Shut up!" the other one commanded.

"I won't. This isn't what I wanta do. Now look at us," the nervous one said.

"Shut up! What is wrong with--" His words were cut off as Andy put his hand firmly across his mouth.

"You're the one that has to shut up." Andy looked at the nervous one, hoping to get some information from his emotional ranting. "We should kill you two."

“Please, no,” the nervous one said, his face contorted and sweating. “I’ll tell ya whatever ya wanta know.”

The other one tried to release his face from Andy’s grip, but he was too small despite his feistiness.

“The little bastard bit me!” Andy said. He picked the boy up with one arm and smashed his back against the tunnel wall.

“Do what you want,” the boy cried. “I do not fear the Great Satan! I have the grace of God to protect me!”

“I’ll show you what the Great Satan can do,” Andy said.

“No,” Martina said, grabbing Andy’s arm before he could hit the boy. “Take him to the utility room, close the door, so we don’t have to listen to him.

Andy picked up the boy as his arms and legs flailed. The boy was crying all sort of gibberish. The sounds muffled as Andy threw him into the utility room and shut the door behind him. Andy was worked up, his chest heaving, as he walked over towards me, to look at the nervous boy I was still holding down on the ground. The boy was not putting up a fight any more. He just lay there, looking up, wide-eyed, bleary from immeasurable abuse, desperation etched all over his emotional face; a frightened babe in the woods with nowhere to turn.

“Please, please, I never wanted this. Didn’t know whata do.”

“You were firing an awful lot of shots for someone who didn’t know what to do, you little bastard,” Andy said.

I pushed Andy’s leg away as he hovered over the cowering boy. “Enough. Let’s let him talk!”

I frisked the boy, looking for other weapons. His clothes hung on his boney frame. I did not find anything. I let him get up and he slinked to the side of the tunnel farthest away from Andy; sitting on the ground, his knees pulled up to his chin, his arms wrapped around his legs, searching desperately for some sort of security. “I didn’t know. I tell ya. We’ve no choice. They don’t give a lotta choices. What can I do? I have nowhere else to go. I’ve nothing. If I don’t do what I’m told—I can’t—got no choice.”

“Listen kid, calm down,” I said.

He looked at me.

“I was hoping I wouldn’t be one of da soldiers,” he said. “I hoping I would get a servant job, or do some errands. I never wanted to be one of da soldiers. I’ll tell you what ya wanta know? Ask anything?”

“Okay, first of all,” I asked. “Why the hell were you trying to kill us?”

“I.. I, it wasn’t me. I only fired when I heard all the gunfire. Didn’t wanta get killed.”

“We didn’t even fire,” I said. “You and your buddy were doing all the firing.”

“I didn’t know that. I heard gunfire.”

“Whatever,” I said, not wanting to panic him any further. “Are you a terrorist?”

“A terrorist?” He looked confused. “No—we’re Holy Warriors.”

“Sounds like the same thing to me,” Andy said.

“What’s that?” I asked the boy.

“We are da spiritual workers of the world. We try to protect da world from da Great Satan, who draped da world with its shroud of death, with its bombs from da sky and its planes of destruction.”

“We must leave him to his work,” Doug said from the background.

We all looked at Doug when he spoke. It was so out of place, we were all a little taken aback, even the boy.

“You better be quiet,” Andy warned Doug.

“As you wish,” Doug said.

“Please,” he began. “I just want food and shelter. You have to believe me. Since my mother died, I have no one. They’re all gone from da poison, from da bombs I guess. I just wanta survive. I’ll show ya I wanta help. I’ll show you da gun. It’s just down da tunnel.”

He went to get up, and I nodded to show him it was okay.

He led us down the tunnel a little farther.

"What if there's more of them," I whispered to Martina. She had grabbed the boy by the arm and was ready to follow his direction--but holding on to him tight.

"This mission ain't for the faint of heart Jonz. We got to get some answers somehow."

"I can't see screw all!" Andy said. We were all shining our flashlights down the tunnel in hopes of seeing any lurking dangers--but the different light danced around the tunnel--making it very difficult.

"Smoke in the air," Martina said. Through her flashlight beam you could see smoke rising.

"Makes it even harder to see," I said.

"Must be the gun," Martina said.

"I don't like this much at all," I said. "This kid's already tried to kill us once."

"There it is!" Martina declared.

Our flashlights saw what looked like a smoking gun barrel a little farther down, from where we were being shot at.

The boy broke free from Martina's grip and ran down the tunnel.

"Hit the deck!" Martina cried, "It's a trap!"

We rolled on the ground and the boy escaped, down the hallway. I dropped my flashlight and while the others dropped to the ground there was no visibility--just spastic light breaking the dangerous darkness.

"I got it!" I cried to no one in particular as I heard and grabbed my flashlight as it clanged on the metal grating. The others composed themselves and aimed their flashlight beams down the hall at the same time as me.

"D-d-don't shoot," the boy cried, "just wanta show ya da gun--dat's all!"

He was standing beside the smoking gun, set up on a tripod to fire down the hall--but the kid was in front of the gun.

"Jesus kid," Martina said, "you almost got yourself killed again."

We walked down towards where he was standing, shaking, and more nervous than ever. His hands were up in the air. Andy walked towards him, inspecting the boy and gun that was too large for him.

"We must've intercepted some more terrorists on a new mission," Andy said.

"These kids, is that our enemy?" Martina said, disgusted. She turned to the boy. "Who sent you? Who put you on this mission?"

"Well, all of us at the holy school, we know us could be one of da chosen ones. It's considered a honour to God—so we gotta go."

"This is an honour?" Martina said.

"Yeah. Ya'll go straight to heaven—no more starvation, no more sickness—finally happiness."

Martina walked up to the boy. He cringed. "Listen, and listen carefully. You will tell us exactly where this holy school is, and then you will get out of here alive."

"When ya get outa da tunnel, ya don't go up to da city. Ya follow da river, straight, in da same direction as when ya came outa da tunnel. Ya follow da riverbank, as ya git away from da ruins of da city. It's there. Ya can't miss it. Just follow da river, straight, same direction as when ya leave da tunnel."

Martina shone the light in the boy's eyes. "Okay..." she said. "Is there any more surprises down this tunnel?"

"Whadaya mean?" he asked.

"I mean like people trying to kill us."

The boy laughed. "No, no more missions today."

"Fine," Martina said. "You go ahead of us. Your buddy can cool off until tomorrow in the utility room. I don't want to deal with him. You come back for him tomorrow—not until tomorrow—understand?"

"Yeah, I understand," the boy said. Martina pushed him in the back and he ran down the tunnel ahead of us.

**

It was almost an hour before we started hearing the singing. It was an old voice, gravelly, worn. The voice was singing about sailors out at sea; about stopping in ports and taking advantage of whatever fair maidens that were available. The song was foreign and intriguing to the ears of a space station dweller, to a young man who had spent his entire existence in a very contained

environment. The song spoke of adventure, of the wide open spaces and dangers of this wondrous and dangerous planet.

We crept carefully, not wanting to make too much noise, but as we got closer, the voice stopped for a second, listening. We stopped, only the sound of breathing, even Doug stopped his whispering.

“Who-who’s there?” the voice said.

We didn’t answer. We walked closer; my hand gripped my gun.

“Ju... just an old man, nobody else,” the voice said.

We shut all our flashlights. It took a few seconds for our eyes to adjust, but then I realized it was no longer pitch black. Off in the distance was faint light filtering into the tunnel, tainting the darkness. With every step we took down the tunnel, light was growing. Our flashlights were out and we could definitely see a haze of sunlight coming towards us.

"You see that," Martina whispered.

"I do," I said.

The tunnel was growing a bit wider; and now there was definitely light. Clear and circular, sunlight filtered down the shape of the tunnel--broken by something in the corner--it was the silhouette of a prone body lying on the ground. I shone my flashlight down on the silhouette. It was an old dishevelled man. His wrinkly eyes squinted uneasily into my flashlight and he said uneasily:

“Hey friend, who goes there?”

“Don’t worry, we mean you no harm,” I said.

“N-no, of course not,” he said, “I never thought that at all. I’m just an old man, minding my own business, looking for a quiet place to sleep—n-nothing to worry about here.” He kept mouthing platitudes to placate us; like we were security guards at some checkpoint.

“Like I said, don’t worry, we mean you no harm.”

“Are you gentleman holy warriors?” he asked as we tried to pass on.

“What do you mean holy warriors?” asked Andy.

“N-nothing. It’s just usually—I mean the soldiers heading down this tunnel—they’re usually the religious sort—on their quests—or crusades—or whatya call it.”

“No, we’re not holy warriors,” Martina said, “and not all gentlemen either. Come to think of it, none of us are really gentlemen.”

“Ha ha, good one Martina,” laughed Doug, then he mumbled to himself.

“What are you talking about old man?” started Andy, until I grabbed his arm.

“Forget about him. Let’s keep going. The entrance to the tunnel can’t be that dangerous if he wandered down for a nap.”

We walked towards the light. The tunnel twisted and suddenly the sunlight beamed into the tunnel. The tunnel widened into a room. The first thing I noticed was the damage. The sun shone brightly and we all squinted as we went up some stairs to a larger room. It was more like a ruin

than any liveable space. Dust and rubble were everywhere. Clouds of dust billowed in the rays of sunlight, through the dirty, broken windows. On one wall, graffiti was etched in deep red paint, until somewhere near the end, when the paint colour changed to fluorescent green. It read:

*Where are all the poets hiding
Have they no more pen and paper
Where is the righteous indignation
That would be so appropriate now
Who will wake the people
From their slumber of ignorance and fear
Has no one the courage
To light the path
Under the threat
Of the Neanderthal's club?*

Andy shrugged in disdain as we all read the words that hung like a bizarre greeting to this new world. Andy looked at me, shaking his head. “What kinda crap is that?”

We walked outside. The wide doorway had hinges barely hanging on to a door frame, but no door—just a wide-open view to the outside.

We were on the other side of the tunnel. I felt claustrophobic feelings drift from my lungs, from around my head. We were outside, but what was it like here? What kind of place was this? Above us was brilliant sky, the Earth atmosphere in its full glory, but the landscape bore the remnants of much violence and neglect. There were several people around us. They stared at us blankly, recognizing our difference, the fact that we were not one of them—or did they? One raggedly dressed man walked by me like a zombie. He had a deep scar which ravaged almost his entire face, from just below one eye to the bottom of his chin. I remember as he walked by, his eyes met mine. I stared at him intently. The thing that struck me was the lifelessness in his eyes. For a second, I figured he must've been blind; but he walked on, around me, clearly seeing the objects in his path. Yet he had no reaction, as if there was nothing left in life that could pull a reaction from him, nothing left that would incite emotion. It was as if too much had gone on; the results of a jaded life, only surviving; just barely alive in a harsh environment.

His blank stare spoke volumes.

Chapter 8

The tunnel opened up to a view of crumbled and destroyed buildings, not fresh carnage from recent attacks. No, this was a long history of violence that left countless scars layered through a multitude of ages; scars so deep that the abused city was unrecognizable as any sort of constructive community. This devastated city had the look of a battle weary soldier long since past his prime, unable to muster any sort of fight from its feeble form. Vegetation and trees grew on the ruins. People were traveling matter-of-factly through the scene, which was shocking to my naive eyes; yet to them it was just where they lived, part of their routine, their lot in life.

There was too much to take in.

The four of us stood there, mouths agape, wondering which direction to take.

We were by the riverside; a wide open river. A giant bridge stood in front of us, rising high in the middle of the river broken and collapsed as it tried valiantly to reach the other side of the great river. A great piece of the broken span jutted out from the middle of the river. On both sides were endless ruins as far as the eye could see. Vehicles lined the rubble of the streets; most stripped down to their bare frames, many with hunks of cement crushing their roofs in. It was a view of total devastation, the sun glaring down; brightly displaying the carnage of what was once a city. We walked out to the uneven rubble of ruptured pavement, vegetation growing out of city streets. There were some people walking around, casually at first, then someone spotted us and started pointing; they shuffled off quickly in the other direction.

“Hey,” Andy yelled in his diplomatic manner; and they scurried off even quicker, disappearing into a crevice rupturing a downed building, a quick escape through a haphazard hallway. A large building, that must have once risen majestically to many stories, but now folded over to be a couple of stories of piled cement and broken glass.

“So, this is an Earth city?” Martina said. “I think I prefer the wilderness and strange beasts.”

Just as she spoke, a little furry agile Earth beast screeched as we walked near it. It quickly disappeared down the street, bounding over stones and trees. We watched it run away and noticed the extent of the devastation. The city rose up from the river laying its wounded form across a sloping mountainside. A beautiful spot to build a city, but something had gone terribly wrong. All the way up the hill, most of the buildings were flattened to the ground; while some hardier structures had managed to stay standing, to one extent or another. There were only a few within eyesight that appeared to be in any sort of decent shape.

“Here’s the river,” I said. “The boy wasn’t lying to us.”

“That’s a relief,” Martina said. “I guess the tunnel was originally built to access this river, boat transportation around the Earth.”

“Or maybe to this Earth city,” Andy said, pointing in the other direction. “I don’t know what use it’d be now, look at this place. People actually live here?”

“It’s not pretty,” I said. “We won’t be able to figure it all out now, let’s try and concentrate on what we came here for: to find that camp and these Holy Warriors.”

“If that little bastard was telling us the truth,” Andy said. “We shoulda--”

“We shoulda what?” I said to Andy. “Did you really feel like killing them?”

Andy looked at me and then turned away, grumbling. We all looked down towards the river. This was a much wider river than we had seen in the mountains. I wondered if they were connected. Doug was already down near the banks, awed by this new spiritual master he had found. Even from my point of view, it was a humbling sight. I felt tiny next to the view of such a colossal mass of running water.

“The boy said to keep going in the same direction as when we came out of the tunnel,” Martina said.

She pointed to the opening of the tunnel and continued pointing with her finger, extrapolating down the riverbank. Her arm pointed in the direction we would have to travel, away from the ruined city, down along the riverbank.

Doug was already down by the river, removing his shoes, his feet lapping on the edge of the river. He was kneeling over, his hands caressing the surface of the water, as if divine knowledge was there for the taking.

“Come on Doug, we have to go,” I said.

He hesitated, but saw I was looking right at him and he put his shoes back on, following behind us like a child forced to go on a family shopping trip.

We decided to follow right along the shoreline. It seemed like the easiest path to follow. As we traveled along the shore, there were a lot of ruined buildings, alternately picked apart by parasites or rebuilt in a makeshift manner. At some point in the distant past, the shoreline near the city was probably an area of much activity. Along the shoreline were cracked and broken chunks of cement. Just off shore, there was a gigantic wreckage of a ship. The wreckage stood as a huge monument to failures of the past, rusted metal and green vegetation overtaking the pathetic, colossal structure. There were other boats of various sizes along the shoreline, none of which appeared to be operational. Ironically, our rickety little wooden boat from the wilderness appeared to be far more useful than this pathetic array of watercraft. They all just lay there; the only movement was bobbing and weaving brought on by the river’s current and waves lapping against their broken hulls.

This area near the city was difficult to cross. Near the shore, sometimes the hunks of cement were massive enough to act like sheer cliffs dropping off into the water. We made our way around this first section. The shoreline was erratic, sometimes not easy to walk on. As we traveled on, the shoreline got easier to traverse. The boats and broken boulders of cement were no longer there.

As we moved away from this ancient port, the shoreline was more pristine, adorned with natural rocks of varying sizes, and often there was a nice pebbled beach to serve as a scenic pathway. It was inappropriately relaxing to walk along a level shoreline; the low roar of the river to soothe you. Eventually, the collage of ruined buildings that once passed for a city faded to the background. There were still buildings around in various stages of disrepair, but wilderness was once again taking over the landscape.

“Look at those,” Martina said.

We all stared in wonder at a large group of flying birds. This was the one sort of Earth animal that I had actually heard about. We had seen other birds since arriving, but not this many, this out in the open, with such large wingspans. Birds were the one Earth creature that was popularly known in the space station. They were central to our Earth folklore. We all dreamt of the vast expanse of Earth and all its possible adventures; what better Earth creature to envy than one which could soar and swoop throughout the planet with the greatest of ease. As we continued to walk, the birds seemed to call after us, cawing frenetically as we walked by, calling out to us as if trying to draw us back to the natural order.

For a while, I could see nothing in the distance. The river was quite straight at this point and I could see far down—but nothing--no signs of civilization.

"I think it's gonna be a while," I said.

We walked for hours. This didn't seem quite the way the kid described it. I noticed that as we travelled along, the river started meandering back and forth. The current and roar of the flow seemed to diminish. We were heading inland. The mountains were still ever-present, but the actual riverside was relatively flat and easy to walk along. As we followed the river which was meandering around, I started to see some structures stretching out to the shoreline. It was not a city or a town. It seemed unnatural--isolated and separate. As we approached, I could clearly see a high fence around this desolate enclave. We were approaching along the riverside. While you couldn't call it a beach, the shoreline was wide and exposed. It was covered partially in rocks and partially in smooth sand. Just inland, the brush was thick.

"We better start moving through the bush," Andy said.

It made sense. Walking through the thick brush was hard; but I thought I saw someone walking near the fence. It would be better to travel camouflaged than out in the open.

"Damn, watch where you're going", Andy complained. He was walking behind me and a branch whipped him in the face.

"Just be glad we didn't travel through the bush the whole way. We're getting near," I replied.

We approached cautiously. Cut into the thick brush off the shoreline was the enclave. It appeared to be completely surrounded by a fence, but as we got closer, we could start to see the buildings. They were indeed completely surrounded by a metal fence, but it was a chain-link that you could see through. The top of the fence was lined with barbed wire, but it was nothing insurmountable to climb. It certainly would be tricky, but we could all make it over. Well, the actual fence wouldn't be a big deal, but being exposed for everyone to see might be a bigger problem. The brush grew right up to the outside of the fence. There was a wide-open yard on the inside of the fence, surrounding a small grouping of only slightly dilapidated buildings. The yard looked like it received some maintenance. The entire complex looked like it was hastily maintained, just the minimum labour required for utility's sake.

"Look's like there's just the one guard," Martina said as we surveyed the complex safely from the brush. We were close enough to see within the yard, but still sheltered by the foliage.

"Yeah, he doesn't look like much of an obstacle," I said.

The guard, or whoever he was, was just ambling around the side of the complex that was on the river. He was kicking stones and looking down. He had a rifle on his shoulders, but there was no military discipline in his stride, no attention to his surroundings.

“Just wait 'til he goes 'round the other side,” I said.

The others nodded in approval, constantly looking around the perimeter, not wanting to be surprised by any other guards. The building nearest us across the yard was only about fifty feet away from the fence. It was a brick building with a line of narrow windows near the top of the wall. They were too high from the ground to see into the building, but the windows were all open, and you could hear the constant murmur of voices from within. It sounded like one voice reciting something and then an entire group mimicking the same words. It was all done in hypnotic, monotone voices. I listened carefully, trying to understand what was being said, but it was too far, too muffled. All I could really make out was the aggressive, authoritative nature of the lead voice, and the robotic nature of the group who responded with the same words.

“Let’s go,” Martina said.

I was a little startled. I was concentrating on trying to understand what they were saying in the building and I didn’t realize the guard was wandering over to the other side of the complex. The others were more vigilant than me and they were ready to seize the opportunity.

Martina was the first one to jump on the fence. It clanged and wavered under her weight. Martina was a little alarmed, but being agile she managed to slow her movements and slunk up to the top. At the top was the tricky part, the barbed wire. She stood completely up, balancing on the top of the fence by holding the wire, and then deftly put one leg over the loops of barbed wire. She lifted the other leg over and jumped into the yard within the compound. She waved her arm, calling the rest of us over, and headed over towards the wall of the building nearest us. At this point, I saw Doug walking away from us.

“Where are you going?” I said.

“I’ll meet you guys when you come back. I’ll be down by the water.”

“What?” Andy said, trying to whisper, but holding back a scream.

“That guy,” Andy said, “has a serious attitude problem.”

“We have no time for that now,” I said. “Let’s go.”

I went across the fence first and over to where Martina was waiting for me beside the building wall. As Andy was on top of the fence, I could see the guard heading back over to our end of the compound.

“Hurry up,” I said.

Andy wasn’t completely balanced and fell awkwardly to the ground, landing with a loud thud. The guard was not paying any attention and Andy scampered over towards us.

“Very stylish,” Martina said.

Andy looked at her and muttered unintelligibly.

We all leaned precariously against the building, taking shelter from the guard walking along the riverside. The windows from the building were several feet above our heads, but they were all slightly open and we could hear what was being said quite clearly.

From inside, a dominant adult voice commanded, “Worship God and all His glory.”

The class of young voices responded, “Worship God and all His glory.”

“There is no way out of the darkness apart from God,” the dominant voice said.

The class mimicked his words once again.

This continued with excruciating monotony for several minutes when Andy gestured us to move along. We were about to move when the dominant voice said, “We will now hear the story of our prophet, the human incarnation of the messenger of God, as told by our esteemed head cleric.”

The head cleric could be heard clearing his voice before he began to speak, “Before Him, there were many prophets, many men who claimed to speak the word of God. Since the dawn of mankind, pagan gods sprouted out of every land, every tribe, and every little village. As civilization developed, the legends around these gods developed and became more elaborate.—yet something was still lacking.

In the 21st century a boy was born who would finally bring together the tangle of information that swirled throughout the world. Someone who could point misguided sinners in a world of darkness to the light they desperately needed. Someone who combined the teachings of previous prophets, enhancing them with the one ingredient the others claimed to have but were truly lacking—divine knowledge.

This special boy was simple and unassuming through the early years of his life. In this way, He was completely different from the other prophets. Their frantic attempts to spread what they thought were the true gospels of God were pathetically human in all its arrogance. The only mark he had which set him out from the crowd, which made people take notice, was his bizarre name—Sugob. He waited for his destiny to occur, being the true prophet of God.

The prophet of God knew what he was waiting for, knew His time would come. Dark forces formed a government that ruled over the entire world, corrupting the world with the worst vices, hedonism, and ignorance of many forms. Mankind and the forces of good had little to fight back with, the established religions weak in comparison to the Great Satan which ruled the world. For you see, this Great Satan was also a human sent from God, just like Sugob would be several years later. This Great Satan was supposed to do Sugob’s job—yet he was corrupted by the frailties of his human form. He became a terrible mixture of divine knowledge and power. Power and corruption can produce only one thing—evil. This world government leader became addicted to the superficial desires of mankind. He lusted for power, and with his divine power, came by it easily.

Yet he knew that Sugob existed.

He knew that Sugob was the same as him. He knew that Sugob’s time would come—so he acted—in the only way the Great Satan could possibly know how to act—in a destructive way.

This Great Satan enacted a plan which would bring the world to the sorry state it is in today. We are falling into the abyss that the Great Satan has pushed us into. The Great Satan ran like all evil cowards, to his hideout in the sky, dropping bombs and sending modern planes of destruction to pound us, abuse us, squeeze every last drop of life and goodness out of us.

We have the word of God as written by Sugob.

We have the only hope for our salvation.

Of course, Sugob wrote the book I hold in my hand. He wrote it as His destiny dictated, as both He and the Great Satan knew would happen. You must follow what the professor teaches you,

for it is the word of God as delivered by Sugob—there is no other true voice. This is the only true way. You will be taught the simple ways of servitude and obedience. Some of you will even be given the glorious holy mission of directly fighting the Great Satan. These chosen few are the luckiest ones, for you will fight a noble fight, and if you succumb in this world while battling the Great Satan, your death will be the most noble of all. You will spend eternity basking in your noble acts, and will no longer feel the weariness of this world. Do as you are told my young friends—and eternal salvation is yours.”

With this the dominant voice of the professor said:

“All hail the head cleric.”

The voices of the class responded in unison, as they had done so many times before. We heard the head cleric walking off and I could hear a door on the side of the building opening. I dared to peak inconspicuously around the corner, just in time to see a grey haired man in flowing coloured robes holding a large book, walk towards the next building in the compound. The building was at the center of the complex. Most of the other buildings were large, but long and single-storied. This central building was on slightly higher ground and was two stories high. It rose prominently above the rest. The head cleric walked up a wide flight of stairs to the main entrance. We watched him enter the building. There was a guard at the top of the stairs. The guard bowed obsequiously to the head cleric and opened the door for him. The head cleric passed through the doors without a hint of acknowledgment towards the young man who opened the door. The young man continued to stand in front of the entrance, about as disciplined in his guard work as the other guard walking along the riverfront.

“We’ve got to get in there,” Martina dared to whisper to us.

“Let’s try around the other side,” I said, pointing to the backside of the building.

At the back side of the central building was some overgrown bush, and at the back of those bushes were a couple of other long flat buildings. Right across the compound from the school house was a fortified round building with no windows. Surrounding this complex was the same rickety fence we had already climbed over.

“Let’s go,” Martina said, noticing the guard at the central building was now looking off towards the river.

We all ran towards the brush behind the central building. As soon as we got to the bush, I looked around frantically, checking for other guards. I could see none.

“There doesn’t look like there’s any entrance out back,” I said, looking at the central building.

At the top of the stairs to the front of the central building, there was a cement balcony which surrounded the structure. It looked like the perfect place to walk around and observe the entire compound. There was a formidable wall surrounding the balcony. It would not be so easy for the students to approach the head cleric. The distinction between the two types of residents was clear, even from a fleeting view of the compound.

“Let’s look at the back buildings,” I said.

“You two check that one. I’ll check here,” Martina said, pointing us over to one of the back buildings.

Andy and I ran over to the long, flat, single-storied building. It was probably the largest of the buildings, but was very simple in its structure. The windows were much like the ones in the schoolhouse. They were high up, a few feet above the height of a man. These windows were made to allow air and light in, but not for any of the students inside to see out.

“Give me a leg up,” I whispered to Andy, indicating that I wanted him to boost me up to look in one of the windows.

He narrowed his eyes and looked at me. “Why do I have to boost you? Why don’t you boost me?”

“Fine. If there's any armed guards in there, you can take the bullet.”

He thought about this for a second and then cupped his hands.

When I looked in, thankfully the inside of the building appeared to be deserted. It was a series of bunk beds. Just as I jumped back down to the ground, we were startled as Martina was coming up beside us. Andy pointed his gun at her, not yet aware who it was.

“Put that away, you idiot!” Martina whispered with the intensity of a scream.

“Don’t sneak up on us like that,” Andy said.

“It was nothing but a galley and some sort of physical training center,” Martina said. “There were two more guards in there, but they were busy eating and didn’t notice me. What kind of a place serves food at the same place you sweat up a storm?”

“Maybe we can get into the central building by climbing up the back balcony,” I said. “We could sneak up on the guard from behind.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Martina said.

We ran across the overgrown bush area to the back of the central building. I have to admit, standing underneath the wall surrounding the balcony was a little intimidating. It was higher than I imagined and we couldn’t see from there if anybody was observing from the top of the balcony or the building’s windows. These terrorists did not appear to be very organized, but I was sure they could still fire their guns.

“Boost me up,” Martina said.

I looked at Andy, but he put out his hand quickly. I did the same and we raised Martina as high as we could, pushing on her legs. She managed to grab onto the top of the balcony, pulling herself up. I craned my neck to look up at her. Her head was swivelling back and forth, looking for any dangers. I didn’t dare say anything so close to this central building. She must have satisfied herself that all was clear because she quickly pulled a length of rope out of her backpack and draped it over the edge of the balcony wall. She held tight and Andy, and then I, scrambled up to the balcony beside her. She pointed for me to circle the building from one side of the balcony, while she and Andy went from the other side. We moved quickly. As I passed along my side of the building, I could see the river in front of me in plain view. I looked down on the other buildings in the compound, including the schoolhouse, which was the first building we had observed after hopping the fence. Once again, I looked carefully around the corner as I approached the front of the building. The guard was looking in my direction and stood up, startled as he saw my head from around the corner.

“Halt, who goes there,” he said.

He was unprepared for me, and unfortunately for him, he was even less prepared for Martina and Andy—who were right behind him as he stood up. Andy raised the butt of his gun and gave the guard a good shot right in the back of his head. I was looking right in his eyes. His startled look suddenly transformed to one of a drunken stupor; and he fell forward, face first on the balcony, thudding heavily to the ground, unconscious. Andy looked at me, a grin growing on his face, and then he turned towards the main entrance, kicking the front door violently, even though there was no indication it would have been locked. The door swung open easily, banging against the wall as it swivelled completely open.

The three of us ran into the building, and the head cleric gasped, standing up from his seat.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

The head cleric stood, shocked, in the middle of the building. The interior was in much better shape and furnished in a better quality. A hodgepodge of different styles from different eras—yet comfortable. The whole main floor was one room. There were large library shelves used as dividers to separate areas of the main floor. It had the feel of a library where people were now camping out. There was no one else visible.

I looked down the aisles of the huge library shelves, nothing of any danger for the moment. There were stairs leading to the next level made of heavy, crafted wood; craftsmen from previous generations left their mark for this opportunistic parasite to enjoy.

“Its judgment day for you, buddy boy,” Andy said, walking towards the head cleric who cringed, falling back into his chair as Andy approached.

“Who are you and what do you want?” the head cleric said, his look darting back between the three of us.

Andy stood over him and aimed his gun.

“Don’t shoot him yet,” Martina said.

“What do you mean—yet?” the head cleric said. “I am a man of God, you must respect that.”

“Is that what you call it?” I said. “Brainwashing young minds to do your bidding is what men of God are doing on this planet?”

“On this planet?!” he said, looking at our uniforms with renewed interest. “Are you from, from the sky?”

“Yeah,” Martina said. “We were born in the clouds.”

“Why don’t we ask the questions?” Andy said, rubbing his gun barrel along the head cleric’s face.

“Look, this is a temple of God here,” the head cleric began. “We take orphans and disadvantaged children with no one to care for them. We take them in and give them food and shelter. We teach them the word of God.”

“The word of God?” Andy said. “From some character called Sugob? What kinda name is that?”

“Don’t be so blasphemous. You don’t know what you’re saying. Sugob may sound strange to the human tongue, but it is a name given to the Messiah by the archangels themselves. It should never be denigrated.”

“If this guy is just gonna talk crap, why don’t we just blast him?” Andy said. “It’s what he deserves.”

“Please, no,” the head cleric said.

“Are you running this place?” Martina said.

“No, it’s not me. You don’t understand. I have a job to do. There’s nothing I can do.”

“Well, I guess we don’t have any choice either,” I said, cocking my gun and aiming it at him.

“You can’t do that! I have valuable information. It’s Big Simon; he’s the one who is in charge here! He doesn’t want it to be obvious. Some people don’t respond to the usual intimidation. It’s been done by all the warlords. You have to understand, you need to use different methods with different people. These young kids, they’re desperate. They don’t care about anything. You have to give them something to believe in if you want to control them; otherwise they would be up to all kinds of mischief.”

We looked at each other.

“For a man who figures he’s going straight to heaven when he croaks, you seem a little afraid of death.”

“Look,” he began. “We all have a job to do. I have to do what I’m told. These people are ruthless, you know that—how else can you control a ruined city like this? We just capitalize on the anger towards the people who have put us in this situation.”

“Why do you blame the World Government?” I said.

“I will help you out in whatever way you want.”

“Why do you send these kids out to attack the Earth dome?” I said.

“There’s no harm done. We know that they won’t do any harm. We can’t really fight you—you know that! I don’t know why you continue to attack us. We have to motivate them somehow. There are a lot of kids running around the city, causing a lot of trouble. We have to at least try and control some of them. That’s why we unified the religion—to include everyone—all religious and ethnic groups—it’s for their own good. You can understand that?”

“No, not really,” I said.

“You have to give young minds something they can believe in.”

“Whether it’s real or not?” Martina said.

“Do you really think they’d be better off without it? We give them something to believe in. The human mind is goal-oriented; it’s hard to find goals for a young mind in this world. We give them that. We send some of them to uselessly attack your ‘Earth dome’ as you call it, but we know it does no harm. Most of the kids are used for more useful purposes. We have them police the city, run errands, do labour—they’re better off that way.”

“So, you think filling these kids’ heads with lies is the best idea?” Andy said, his face reddening.

“It’s not me, I tell you. I just have a job. I have no choice either. Big Simon is a ruthless warlord, probably the worst we’ve had in years, and he does not accept dissension. You must believe me. I’ll tell you whatever you want.”

“Where are your armaments?” I asked.

“Our military supplies are all stored in the bunker over there,” the head cleric said.

“Okay, who’s Big Simon?” Martina said.

“Who’s Big Simon?” he said, a nervous smile coming to his face. “Are you joking?”

He did not have any more time to say anything before the two soldiers busted in through the front door. The three of us reacted. Martina rolled behind a couch. I stood off to the side, not yet noticed by the two soldiers who were looking towards their precious leader. Andy picked up the head cleric and held him in front as a shield.

For an instant, everyone stood silent.

It was then I pushed one of the huge heavy bookshelves towards the two soldiers. For a fraction of a second I wondered if I had the strength to knock it over, but once its momentum started tipping it the bookshelf went crashing down on the two soldiers. They cried out but the shelves were merciless, showering books and wood on their heads.

“Well, I guess that takes care of--” I began, cut off just as a bullet crashed through one of the front windows, shards of glass spraying into the room. “Let’s get out of here!”

The three of us clamoured for the stairs leading up to the second story.

“After them!” I heard the head cleric shouting, the courage managing to find its way back into his voice as two more soldiers came rushing into the building, the front doors slamming violently.

Andy was the first up to the second story and was looking at a series of doors down the hall.

“Keep going up,” Martina said, never leaving the staircase, continuing up.

Martina and I rushed through the door and found ourselves out on a flat, gravel roof atop the whole complex. It was a clear view of the area. The only two storey building. We were on a long flat roof covered in stone.

Andy came up quickly behind us. “They’re right behind us!”

“Then close the damn door!” Martina yelled.

“What!”

“Close the damn door!” Martina and I yelled in unison as we saw a soldier reaching the top of the stairs. We both kicked with our legs at the open door, swinging the heavy wooden door shut in the face of the rushing soldier. I heard the door slam and the pained groan of the soldier as he started tumbling down the stairs.

“Block the door!” Andy yelled.

“With what?” I said.

We all looked around the large flat roof. There was nothing up there, just the gravel that composed the roof.

“I tell you what,” I said to Andy. “You shoot whoever comes through—that ought to discourage them.”

Andy aimed his gun at the door. Martina and I looked around. There was some sort of telecommunications or utility pole up there. There were several heavy cables leading down towards the ground, in the direction of the armaments bunker.

“Let’s do what we came here to do,” I said.

Martina looked at me and I pointed down along the line of the cables. We both looked at each other, then the daunting trip down the cable, and finally around the roof once more—hoping for another solution which didn’t exist.

“Man, you gotta be kidding!” Andy groaned.

“You can take the stairs if you want,” Martina said.

I grabbed my towel from my backpack and twisted it up, flipping it over the cable, and wrapping each end tightly around each hand. I pulled down hard on the cable. It felt strong.

“Wish me luck,” I said.

I pushed off with my feet from the security of the roof. I heard Martina’s voice starting to say something, but I was already sliding down the cable. I could feel my momentum picking up as I slid along the cable. The ground was coming towards me—and it didn’t look very forgiving. A thought flashed through my mind about how delicate human bones were compared to cement or bedrock, but before I had a chance to work up a good scream, my feet were whooshing into brush that was growing beside the armaments bunker. It grabbed my legs and threw me into another clump of vegetation. I felt branches and leaves abusing my body from head to toe, but they cushioned my fall and I stopped there, tangled in some growth, but right on the safe ground. I waved my arms and legs in every direction, freeing myself from my entanglement--just in time.

I heard Martina’s screams as she landed right in the same spot where I had been.

“Nice ride,” she said, rising to her feet.

We looked up in time to see Andy’s legs flailing in the air as he catapulted himself down the same cable. Andy came down a little farther than where Martina and I landed, coming down feet first; but his momentum sent him running at a speed which was beyond what he could handle, and he tumbled over forward, rolling against the fence that marked the other side of the compound.

Martina and I looked at the locked door to the armaments bunker as Andy dusted himself off and made his way over to us.

“Should we try and get in?” I said to the others, looking at the main building.

There was a lot of commotion and noise going on over there, but they didn’t seem to realize yet that we had already gotten ourselves off the roof. The students were rushing out of the schoolhouse, looking around and making a lot of noise. I could hear the screaming of the head cleric’s voice above the rest. It sounded like complete panic.

“I’ll get us in,” Andy said, rashly aiming his gun at the lock on the armaments bunker door.

“I don’t think that’s a good--” Andy fired before I had a chance to finish my sentence.

I squinted, waiting to be blown to kingdom come, but fortunately for us, all that was destroyed was the lock to the door. Martina looked at me, the same horrific anticipation etched on her face, but then relief as nothing happened. Andy kicked open the door and the sunlight of the day shone in on a large collection of 21st century armaments. I could see anti-aircraft guns piled along the back of the room. The barrels reminded me of the charred large calibre barrels we had seen on the mountainside. There was a large assortment of various types of rifles and handguns stored around the room. Nearest the door were boxes of grenades.

I heard screaming from the roof we had just left. I looked up and saw two soldiers up there, one of them pointing down towards us.

“We’re spotted,” Martina said.

We looked around. The fence was maybe ten feet at the back of the armaments shelter.

“You guys get over there,” I said, pointing Andy and Martina towards the fence.

“What are you going to do?” Martina asked, probably knowing the answer, but wary of what was about to happen.

“Like I said, let’s do what we came here to do.”

I grabbed one of the grenades as Martina and Andy were already starting to climb the fence. I could see looking over at the main building that all attention was now drawn to us. I looked back again at the fence, saw Andy and Martina were both over and then I pulled the pin to the grenade.

As I was running to the fence, I remember praying that there was a decent delay before that grenade exploded; but I was not counting on it. I climbed that fence in lightning speed, oblivious to the gashes from the barbed wire I was giving myself. I was running at breakneck speed through the brush on the other side of the fence, just behind Martina and Andy, when the fireworks started. There was a constellation of explosions. A tumultuous deep roar seemed to well up from the ground and flick like you were cleaning a carpet, sending it waving off under my feet. My feet felt the instability of the ground but we were still too close and I did not turn back to see what was going on. I felt the warm rush of powerful wind pushing at my back. Pieces of god-knows-what could be heard flying through the bush as the three of us ran for our lives. After a minute or so, we stopped and looked around. There were continuing explosions billowing in the air. My heart was pounding and my ears ached from the after-effects of the explosions.

Chapter 9

I looked at Doug; a lost confused look on his face.

Now I could empathize.

Like innocent children suddenly realizing the world was totally different than the sheltered view from underneath their parents' protection; we walked back towards the city without a sense of victory, without the gratification of a job well done. On the way back we looked cynically to the crumbled structures of the city, with more questions than when we had gone the other way--when we were confident in our mission.

In place of that confidence was just hollowness and confusion.

We headed back towards the opening of the tunnel. All of us wanted to retain our sense of direction, to maintain the orientation we had developed coming out of the tunnel. It was not too difficult to find. We just had to retrace our steps along the riverbank. As we walked along, a couple of children dressed in rags with wild long hair were running beside us, talking excitedly. They went by us quickly, in the same direction towards the city.

The city stretched out in front of us in all its horrific destruction. We could see it stretch up the rolling mountainside that it was built on many years earlier. I thought of the original settlers; who knows how many countless years earlier. I thought of the generations who had built this city throughout Earth history. I wondered how sad it would be for them to gaze at this landscape.

We went by the port again. I could see that here the river was littered with boats. It was only the larger ones that could be seen above the surface, but looking down into the water there were bits and pieces overgrown with green growth swaying in the water; ghosts of a noble past.

The tunnel was innocuous. We almost went right by it. You couldn't see the actual tunnel from the street, but the building around the opening was a hangout for all kinds of people. I wondered why they would hang out there. None of them appeared to want to venture down the foreboding tunnel; maybe the location near the water was considered choice—maybe they were waiting for the messiah to come out from the hole, save them from this wretched place.

“Look, the boy from the tunnel,” Martina said. “The one who directed us to the terrorist camp.”

Lying near the entrance of the camp, his face swollen and bloody, tears welling up on his face, was the nervous boy.

“What happened to you?” I asked, staring at his pathetic state.

The boy looked up, squinting, the defensive reflex of one who is used to constantly accepting abuse. “Leave me alone. I wanta be alone.”

“What happened to you?” Martina said.

“I done whachya told me, I told ya the truth—ya know it—and look at me.”

“Did you let your friend out of the utility room?” she asked.

“That's what I did. That's why I got da beating. He said I betrayed da cause. He said I would go to hell for dis.” He paused. “Hell can't be worse than here.”

His abused face fell into his hands. You could see his head trembling as tears rolled between his fingers. "Is dere really a hell?" the boy asked me. "Is dere really a heaven?"

"I think so, but it's not like they told you."

"Why?"

I didn't know what to say. I looked around at the others. Doug moved forward, kneeling down before the boy, looking sympathetically at his bruised face. The boy looked up at Doug. "I don't know all the details, my little boy. I don't want to lie to you—and if someone tells you they do have all the answers, don't trust them. We are all simple human beings, and your question is too vast for our tiny minds to fully understand. There are more questions than answers for us on our voyage."

"What voyage do ya mean?"

"I mean life, my dear boy. I mean life. Just remember one thing."

"What's dat?"

"You can never understand the complexity of heaven and hell with your mind, even as an adult."

"What hope do I have?"

"Patience, you can understand it, but only with your heart and with your emotions; and you know what my heart tells me?"

"What does it tell ya?"

"That the entrance to heaven can not be reached through anger, through bloodshed. It can't be. You must search to unify, through love, to become whole, part of the whole."

"Jesus," Andy looked at me, "Lloyd's getting crazier by the minute. He's turning into a guru."

The boy was looking down, thinking hard. The boy got to his feet, starting to walk off quickly.

"Where are you going?" I said.

He turned around, apparently surprised I still wanted to talk. "I have an uncle who used to live on da other side of da city. I wanta go see him if he's still alive."

"If he's still alive," I muttered to myself.

We looked up the mountainside. The daytime sun shone down on the city, revealing the sordid details of a less-than-perfect city.

"Look at this place," I said, turning around to get a full panorama of our environment.

"What about it?" Andy said.

"I don't know Stoneman--nothing I guess--same crap--but every person I meet, every moment I spend here--the city seems to look a little different."

"Very deep Jonz, very deep--but where the hell do we go from here?"

"This city may be a mess," Martina said, "but it's the only place we'll get any real answers."

"--or real dangers," I said.

"Do you want to head back in the tunnel--wander the woods again?" she said.

"No, not really."

We all looked at our surroundings. Sloping up from the port the grandeur and ruins of the city rose up a mountain side.

"There seems to be a lot of activity up there," Andy said.

"How do you think they're going to react to us?" I said.

"I don't know," Martina said, "but I don't feel like waiting on my hands for a government rescue team that may never come."

We started heading up the mountainside.

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"Do you hear that?" Martina said.

There was a roar of a vehicle, something with a powerful engine. We looked towards the sound and saw dust clouds rising in the distance, towards the top of the mountain. I could hear the dull sound of shots coming over the growling of the engine.

"Well, whoever that is, it proves someone is living here," I said.

"But what kinda maniac?" Andy said.

We walked up the hill. It was similar to climbing the mountains in the wild, rough and uneven. As we moved up the mountain, towards the vast majority of buildings, we could see people looking out from broken windows. At first, we wanted to run after each one, thinking they were a rare sight; but soon we realized that this city was more populated than we realized; citizens were everywhere in this downtrodden metropolis—but they trod wearily. They didn't gather in large numbers out in the open. They knew more about their environment than we did.

They saw us walking with our uniforms and guns, and they gave us a wide berth, avoided us. Around one corner there was an open area with several people lying on the ground. They did not run from us. They lay and moaned painfully. It was not the panicked cry of someone unused to pain. It was the moan of people who wore their pain as a fact of life, as a daily routine. They called us over with waving arms, pleading for us to do something, but we didn't know what to do. They were deformed and horrible to look at, but I felt helpless. I don't even think they knew what they wanted us to do, so we walked on.

I was shocked as a woman walked by me. Her skin was a dark brown and she had strange tight curly dark hair. Was she another deformed person? --or part of the primitive people who wandered Earth? She appeared to be perfectly able to walk and move normally. Like all the others, she looked at us with fear and scurried off into one of the buildings. Her eyes looked so white in contrast to her dark skin, it was very strange. We walked on like this for about an hour, our mouths open in awe, our hands gripping our guns, not knowing where to go—where to start.

It was then that we saw someone coming towards us on some leg-powered vehicle. As he got closer to us, I could see it was a young boy. He struggled to travel through the street and all its obstructions. It was difficult because his leg-powered vehicle pulled a trailer behind it. It was a two wheeled vehicle that looked flimsy and made of tubes. The trailer also had two wheels and it

made loud creaking noises from the bar that connected it to the vehicle. It was full of an odd collection of junk. The boy came right up to us.

“You people aren’t from around here.”

“No,” I said, “we’re from out of town. You’re not afraid?”

“Why? I gotta make a living. I can tell you’re not from here. I know everyone here. Do you wanta buy anything? Do you have gas to trade?”

“Who’s running this place?”

“Who’s running the place? Big Simon runs it I guess. Are you sure you don’t have any gas? I know lots of people. You can get what you want if you have gas. Are you sure you don’t have any?”

He looked directly at me. This boy too had strange features. Olive skin with dark eyes and thick, black shiny hair; yet he couldn’t be the victim of some nuclear mutation, he looked so healthy.

“Who do you know?” I asked. “Where can I get what I want?”

“Wow, you guys really are new to town. I work in the market. Everyone trades there. What do you want?”

“What can I get?”

“Like I said, whatever you want. The out-of-towners come in with meat and vegetables. They trade us for whatever we scavenge in town—whatever you want. But gas, that’s harder—are you sure you guys don’t have any?”

“No, we don’t. Show me this market.”

“Follow me.”

He bounded along the streets. Fortunately for us, he had a hard time negotiating the boulders with his vehicle and cumbersome trailer, or he would’ve left us far behind. Whenever we ran into a clear patch of road, we had to run to keep up. We arrived at a long wide building that was still mostly intact. The far end was collapsed, but apart from that it was quite serviceable. The boy led us in and there was the constant sound of activity resonating through the interior. The entire interior of the building was a wide open space with merchants selling diverse wares from makeshift stands.

The interior of the building was long and narrow. You came in one end; there were stands and collections of wares to sell cluttering both sides. In the middle was a pathway that led out to the other side. When we entered, the merchants near us stopped their bartering and looked at us. The boy walked up to one of the merchants nearest the door.

“I brought new customers,” he said.

The old man at the stand smiled at us and whispered something into the young boy’s ear. The boy looked perturbed and went off.

“We have already paid Big Simon’s men. We don’t have any more money,” he said, looking at our guns.

“We’re not here for your money,” I said.

Andy pushed me aside. "I'll handle this. Who's Big Simon?"

The man looked confused. He turned to the woman that was beside him listening and asked her something. They both shrugged their shoulders while looking at each other. "Look, we don't want any trouble, but we can't give things to everyone with a gun. We're poor people."

"Who's Big Simon?"

The man became flustered. He started offering us everything that was on his rickety table; everything from a steering wheel to a dusty collection of old paper books.

"That's okay," I said. "We don't want anything from you. We just want information."

"I... I don't want trouble. I'm just a simple merchant. You go see Big Simon's people or the holy warriors. I'm just a simple man."

A loud crashing came from the other side of the market. A table and all its wares came loudly thudding to the ground as two large young men laughed and berated an old merchant couple. The woman screamed in shock and this irritated one of the large men. This man wore a scruffy jacket with cut off arms, showing his large muscles. He raised his hand to strike her and she recoiled in fear. This made the two goons laugh even harder.

We walked to the end of the market. Strange fat birds in cages squawked and items fell to the ground. On either side of the market, there were gaping holes which were filled with more wares that spilled out into the surrounding areas. The only clear path was the main path down the middle of the building. The customers who had occupied this space were all trying to retreat to the merchant areas behind their stands.

All trading had stopped. Everyone was looking back and forth between us and the commotion with the two ruffians. I yelled at the two men and they looked over at us quizzically, sizing up the four of us. They seemed less confident and joyful in their sadism when they noticed our guns; though they were still defiant.

"Who are you people?" one of them barked.

"We're business travelers from out of town," Martina quipped. "What's going on here?"

"None of your business," the other one spewed, slightly smaller but just as muscular. He too, wore a jacket with cut off sleeves.

The two goons looked at each other and one began reaching into a pocket inside his jacket.

"None of our—" Andy started, lunging at the one who just spoke. He ran up to him, his gun displayed, cross-checking the goon across his chest with his weapon. The goon fell over backwards, landing on his butt. There was a large crack from his handgun going off as he pulled it out of his jacket. The gun spun away from him on the market floor.

Andy moved forward and pointed his gun at the larger goon: "you gotta gun too asshole!"

"Naw, not me," the larger goon said, raising his hands in the air. Andy went over and picked up the handgun.

Lying prone on the ground, the goon who was knocked down looked around at the merchants, who quickly stifled any smirks or guffaws that were starting to come out.

"That'll teach you to threaten old ladies."

There was a gasp from the crowd.

“You can’t do this,” the bruised ruffian said, standing up and dusting off his filthy clothing. “We’re just collecting our dues. Big Simon won’t take this sort of thing.”

There was a muted chuckle from the crowd.

“Watch your mouths,” the other goon said. The crowd quieted.

“Get the hell out!” I yelled, and we advanced towards them. They gathered themselves, turned and fled. I caught one with a kick in the backside as he was leaving, sending him forward more quickly. He looked back, but kept fleeing none the less.

“That’s right, run back to mama,” Andy said.

While we were confronting the goons, Doug had been showing a photograph to many of the people in the market.

“Do you know this woman,” he asked. No one seemed to know her.

“What’s that picture Doug?” Martina asked.

He tried to hide it, but Martina had hold of his arm and looked at it.

“Where did you get it?” she interrogated Doug, but he just walked away.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“I think he got the picture from one of the dead soldiers—maybe a relative.”

The people in the market were still wary of us, but the recent display of chivalry had them looking at us with more positive interest. I remembered one man in particular that stared at me. He was another of those dark brown people, with a shiny bald head. His eyes stared as if he were trying to interrogate me with his gaze, trying to gauge my character from afar.

“Thank you, thank you,” this little old lady said, holding on to my arm.

“No problem,” I said to her, then I turned to the crowd that was now staring at us and said: “We are from far away, a very foreign land from this town. What happened here? Why is the town in ruins?”

They looked at each other, no one knowing what to say or who should answer; then the man we first saw when we came in moved forward. Like the others, he was shabbily dressed and smoothed the few long straggly hairs that were still on his bald head--maybe trying to look more presentable. He said, “The town has always been like this. What can you expect, under these conditions? Where you come from—it’s not like this? We see people coming from different lands, but it’s always a long journey, looking for something better. Where you come from, it is better?”

Different people started crowding around us and excitedly asking the same type of question. Men, women, children; they had lost their initial fear and were now filled with curiosity.

"I can't understand what you're saying," I said to no one in particular, "you're all talking at once."

“Yes, where we come from is better than this,” Martina said loudly, attracting attention and silencing them.

“But, your town, why is it like this?” I asked.

“What do you expect under these conditions?” the man repeated.

“What conditions?” I continued.

There was silence, until one man piped up, “Because of the bombs.”

Everyone shrugged or laughed, as if that was obvious.

“Well, of course, the bombs every few years, what do you expect under these conditions,” the man said. “We try to rebuild, but the bombs take everything away, destroy all our work. Only the war mongers can thrive in this atmosphere.”

“There are bombs here?” Andy said.

“Why, where you are from there are no bombs?” a woman said. Again, the crowd clamoured around us, heightened anticipation about our response filled the market.

“There are bombs where we are from too, but we are protected.” I said.

“Protected? How?” the woman said.

“By the dome around our Earth base,” I said.

They all recoiled, gasping slightly. Everyone looked at us in fear, as if we were suddenly transformed into hideous monsters. They went back to their stands, tried to continue like normal, as if nothing had happened; but it was an act, they were suddenly afraid of us.

“Death to the Great Satan!” one youth screamed defiantly from the back of the hall, bolting out the side seconds later, fumbling across a pile of merchandise, spreading it around the ground. The merchant shouted after the fleeing child.

Everyone looked at us for a reaction. They tried continuing their normal activities; busying themselves with their market, but all the while, each kept one fearful eye on us, suddenly filled with horror at our presence yet trying not to let it show. This was a crowd that was used to this; continuing with daily life, busying themselves, yet always insecure and waiting for something to happen. Our presence was new, but if anything, worse than the usual. Only the bald dark man continued to stare at us, unblinking; yet even he fumbled with some fruit on a stand, making airs that he was otherwise preoccupied. The bald dark man furrowed his brow, seemed puzzled that we did not chase after the obstinate youth.

“Why do you react this way?” I said to the crowd.

No one looked my way, they all looked down, busy, busy, constantly busy. I glared one way, then the other, but no one would look at me.

“What the hell's going on?” Andy said. He grabbed one of the men by his scruffy shirt. “Speak, what's going on here?”

“Let go of him, Stoneman. You're only making things worse. People, people, we mean you no harm!” But now they were no longer convinced, no one wanted to speak to us, until one little man, skinny and slouched, crept up beside me and said slyly:

“I believe you sir. I know a noble soul when I see one.” He grabbed me by the elbow, to lead me aside. I knew this man was trouble, but we were desperate for information, for someone to talk to us. “I know that you are obviously noble warriors; against the crude likes of Big Simon and his

henchman. This town has been under his control for too long. Are you—are you lot with the holy warriors?”

“No—the World Government” I said, “besides holy warriors are controlled by Big Simon.”

“The World Government?” he laughed. “And the holy warriors controlled by Big Simon?! Very funny sir, World Government! The story about being from the big dome, that’s good strategy, have them in fear, eating from the palm of your hand.”

I ripped my arm from his grasp. “Look you, I don’t know what your game is, but I’m telling you the truth.”

“This guy knows less than us,” Martina said, “forget about him.”

“Sorry, sorry,” the man said. “But look at you. The uniforms are clean, makes you look important, but the guns are not very modern, typical of what the thugs around here would have. It looks to me like you’re trying to appear like something you’re not.”

“I don’t care what you think,” I said, walking away from him.

“Please sir, please,” he grabbed my arm again. I raised my arm to slap him and he recoiled. “We’re all friends here,” he said. “I’d like to discuss something to our mutual benefit.”

“I don’t like the sound of this guy,” Martina said.

“Well, I guess we’re not getting anything out of this bunch here,” Andy said, waving an arm towards the crowd. “Let’s listen to what he’s got to say.”

“Now there’s an intelligent man,” the skinny man said, a smile growing across his dirty face. “I know someplace we can talk.”

“Are we gonna follow him?” Martina asked.

We followed him as the wary eyes of the crowd watched us leave. The bald dark man walked out at the same time as us. Some other people entered the market as we were leaving. They were on two-wheeled leg-powered vehicles like the boy who brought us in. They had huge baskets of differing products on their backs as they rode in. I suddenly realized how hungry I was. The man who we were following saw me eyeing a basket of vegetables.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “We can have something to eat where we’re heading.”

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The man led us down a particularly narrow street. Trees grew over top of it, lending ambiance and soothing shade. It was much hotter in the city than when we were in the mountains, and the shade was welcome. He actually had a door to his establishment—or maybe it was his house; I wasn’t sure. We walked into an open dark room; the only light coming through the open windows. Throughout the city, from what I could see, there was rarely any glass in windows—apart from broken shards lying on the ground. The room was divided up by rickety tables, and there was a bar in the corner. It certainly felt like a makeshift bar or restaurant, but it didn’t look like it was used too much, so it was hard to tell.

“Would you like something to drink?” the man inquired, going behind the bar. We all looked at each other, the answer was obvious. The man laughed and poured out four glasses of brownish liquid.

“It’s aged for six months, an excellent vintage,” he said.

I was so thirsty that I recklessly drank half the glass without even tasting it. The others looked at me for my reaction. I’m sure I wasn’t very helpful, because the booze tasted awful, but I needed to have something, so I knocked the rest of the glass back.

“Well, he’s still alive,” Martina said.

The others soon followed suit. Within a few minutes, the dark bald man from the market wandered into the bar. He sat in the corner; the bar man who led us in eyed him suspiciously, then asked what he wanted.

“An ale please, barkeep,” he said.

“What do you have to pay?” the bartender asked.

“I have fresh tomatoes,” the bald dark man said, showing an open bag.

The bartender walked over and looked in the bag. “I’ll give you a drink for the bag.”

“Come now, barkeep, you can spare two.”

“Okay, two.” The bartender went and got the dark man a drink, then turned to us, his broad smile returning. I trusted him even less now.

“Do you want bread? I have fresh bread and tomatoes.”

“Yes,” Andy said.

The bartender prepared us a tray of bread and tomatoes and we dug in, eating his food, drinking his booze.

“As I was saying,” the bartender said. “We have mutual interests. We all want this tyrannical rule of Big Simon to end. We can work together.”

“First of all, we don’t really know who Big Simon is, and second of all, how could you possibly help us,” Martina said.

“Okay, okay. If you still want to continue with the charade that’s fine with me. You’re from the dome city, with your old 21st century guns; that’s fine. Now let’s discuss how we can work together.”

“No offence friend,” Andy added, “but you don’t look like you would be much help in a fight.”

“Me, no, of course not; but I have friends, friends that can help you gain power.”

“Look,” I said. “We’re not interested in becoming the new warlords of this God-forsaken city. Replacing one nut job with one of your friends, who is probably another nut job. No interest to us. We want to make things better around here.”

“Of course, of course, that is what I want too. Don’t get me wrong. We have the same interests, the same desire for these poor, downtrodden citizens. Simon, he’s not good, not good at all for this town. I have friends, friends that are interested in change also. But we need numbers, like Simon.”

“Like Simon,” I said. “Maybe that’s what I’m afraid of—like Simon. What makes your bunch so different from the rest?”

The bartender laughed. “I suppose we’re all the same, in a way. But you will meet my friends. They come here every afternoon. We've been looking for people to join forces with us, to help implement a change.

We ate his food and drank his raunchy booze.

"I'm so hungry," Andy said, "that this meal tastes a lot better than it should."

"Especially the booze," Martina said and we laughed. I thought I saw a frown creep in on our host's plastic smile.

I was just about to start talking to the bald dark man when our host's friends arrived.

“Ah—here they come now.”

In walked a man, followed by two others, who did not look very much different from the two we had dealt with in the market. They had more guns though, I don’t know if that made them better, but certainly more dangerous. The one in front was obviously the leader, smaller than the other two, but walking with his back completely straight and his arms held wide from his body--as if trying to amplify his tiny frame. The three eyed us suspiciously.

“Who are dem?” the leader said to the bartender.

“They're friends, Dan, friends I met at the market. They had an altercation with Simon’s men, sent them packing rather nicely. You would've enjoyed it immensely.”

“Nobody would send me packing so quickly, right boys?”

The two followers chimed in their approval. Dan turned a chair around backwards and pushed it close to me. He sat down, his arms on the top, a handgun hanging in one hand, looked straight at me, perhaps a foot from my face. “So, you think you’re tough enough for this town. I haven’t seen you around. Did ya get run out of your last town? A girl—what she here for—pleasure?”

Martina jumped at the provocation. She used one arm to hold Dan’s gun hand down, and held her rifle to his forehead. “I don’t approve of that sorta talk.”

Dan laughed. “Easy little lady, easy.”

His tone changed, mellowed. “I’m just playing, seeing what I’m dealing with. Good choice Ralphy.” He said to the bartender. “We need people like youse in dis town, to free it from da grips of Simon.”

“And maybe put it right in yours,” I said.

“We're all the same, I reckon. We all want what we don’t have, now don’t we? But its time for change, time for Simon ta go. He getting fat and lazy, living on the mountaintop. He been dere since de last attacks. He was lucky to get to de top of de hill—he’s had his run—time for someone to gut de pig—right boys?”

His henchmen laughed. They were two barrel shaped goons.

“Maybe he is an animal that needs gutting,” I said, “but maybe there are others too.”

Lights flashed from the 21st century gunfire exploding in the tiny place--the sound deafening.

There was one good window in the outside wall to the street and it quickly shattered in the gun battle that erupted. Between gunshots, hunched behind his bar, I heard Ralphy groan as he heard his front window shatter.

"Down," Martina cried and I kicked over the table we'd been eating on. Dan's gang had initiated fire and Big Simon's men were concentrating their return fire on them--but the space was tight and anybody could've been hit.

Martina, Andy, and I ducked down behind the table I kicked over. I could've sworn I felt the wind of a bullet go by my ear.

"Fire," Andy cried.

Big Simon's men were now firing everywhere as they retreated back out the bar door. They were also looking for cover. We fired shots out the door and windows. Doug sat frozen in the back of the bar, lying on the ground. Simon's men knew they were in a prone position and scurried off, the gunfire abating as we were all vulnerable.

"They can't be far," I said, poking my head above the table to look around.

My intuition was proven correct as a hand reached around the doorway corner, firing a shot into the bar. The wooden table I was crouching under shattered as the bullet slammed into it. It was not going to be much protection from their gunfire—about as useful as the Covert's Rapid Molecular Displacement system.

"Is there any way out of here besides the front door?" I asked Ralphy, as quietly as I could, retreating back towards the bar at the back of the room. Andy and Martina were lying flat in front of me, while Doug was lying with his back to the bar, making strange whining noises.

"No, no way but the front."

"Don't they have building safety codes around here?" Andy quipped.

"Great, you pick now to turn into a comedian," I said. "Ralphy, there's no way out back?"

"No!"

"On the roof?"

"No, well maybe."

"What do you mean, 'well maybe'?"

"Well maybe you can get out there. This was a three story building. The third floor collapsed on the second. The stairs are over there, but I never really bothered going up there. I didn't want to move things around and collapse it on my bar."

"Definitely no safety codes here," Andy said.

"Shut up!" Martina said, "Just stay down."

"They're gone," Andy said, the only one daring to stand up, "They don't wanna get hit either. They're probably waiting for us to try and leave."

"Just stay down Stoneman and keep your gun ready," Martina said.

"I'm going to try it," I said.

"I'll go with you," Martina said.

"No way," Dan said. "We'll go out in force. There are seven of us wid guns. They gonna get the first one or two, then we'll have em."

"Okay Dan," I said, "you first."

"I was tinkin more of the coward in de back." Dan pointed to Doug.

"Yeah, okay Dan, we'll make that Plan B. I'm going to try my idea."

"You're gonna go--"

"Shhh... Danny boy," I said. "We don't need to announce our strategy."

The hand reached around the corner where the door was and shot again.

Andy dropped to the ground and said: "Eat this you bastards!" He returned fire out the door.

"Oooh," Dan moaned.

This time the bullet caught the big-mouthed Dan in the shoulder. He screamed in pain and fired several rounds into the cement wall of the front of the bar. There was no time to lose, I headed for the stairs in back of the bar, or should I say, what was left of the stairs. Dan was making quite a commotion of it. The dufus made a spectacular diversion. That was fine with me. He was expendable.

"You goddamn--" he yelled in pain as he walked towards the door.

"He's lost it," Andy said, looking at Dan recklessly stumbling towards the bar entrance, firing the whole time.

"No boss," one of his henchmen yelled, but still kept himself in the back of the bar.

"Move!" Martina yelled as she pushed us towards the back; even Doug reacted slowly. "Come on Lloyd, you too!"

The stairs were jammed with blocks of cement. It was no wonder that Ralphy never bothered trying to go upstairs. There was a crack between two giant cement pieces. I stretched my left arm straight up through the crack and felt up through the hole. Climbing up on some rubble on the ground, I managed to reach high enough to get a grip on the floor of the second story. I pulled myself up, but it was too hard with one hand. The passage was tight and I dropped my backpack. I held my rifle tightly in my right hand.

I managed to get my right arm through and through my gun up. I pulled myself up, scraping my chest and back on the rough-edged cement pieces.

"Damn," I said, trying to keep my voice low.

"Just keep moving," Martina said from just below.

There was no time for pain or minor wounds, so when my head popped up to the second floor, I knew I would pass.

It was not so much that the passage was tight, but the hole was full of rough, unforgiving edges. Despite the painful squeeze, I got my arms through and was able to drag my body up. I picked up

“I’m injured, get over here.”

As one of the goons opened the door, I kicked it right back in his face, catching the hapless bum’s head between the door and the cement wall. The injured one got up and ran into the street. The goon caught in the door fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes. I rushed into the room to find a shocked man about to fire with his bazooka. Seeing me, he tried to pull the gun into the building, but the barrel banged clumsily on the side of the building. It was not the best arm for quick, close-range battles. He would’ve been easy to knock off, staring at me dumbly with wide eyes, but I hesitated. He also ran into the street, leaving his deadly bazooka lying on the ground.

The other one managed to run through the door that had knocked him out moments earlier. The three of them found themselves disarmed, open, and vulnerable in the street. The next thing I knew the three started beating a hasty retreat down the road. I looked around the corner just in time to see them heading around the corner; the two healthier ones labouring with the wounded one in between. I waited a minute or so, listening for sounds, but all I could hear was grunting and groaning from Dan inside the bar.

“They’re gone,” I announced before walking out into the street.

As I looked into the bar, Dan’s cohorts were looking at each other, wondering what to do with their wounded leader. Martina stood in the middle of the bar, with the others rising from their hiding positions.

“Who took the shot?” I said.

“Twas I,” said Martina.

“Good shot! You hit one. I saw two goons carrying a third one down the street. They’re gone now.”

“Let’s not hang around here. Who knows how many there waiting to come outa the woodwork,” Andy said.

"You should see what those maniacs were going to use to shoot at this bar," I said.

"What was it?" Ralphy asked.

"Aw, forget it," I said, "You probably don't want to know. Hey, Ralphy, so where do these guys hang out?"

“Everyone knows that, at the top of the hill. There are still some mansions standing,” Ralphy looked around.

I looked at the bald dark man in the corner of the bar. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, fine. Thank you for asking.” He was rising to his feet, wiping dirt off his pants. Looking at him, he seemed out of place, not quite primitive enough to survive this vicious world.

“Let’s get out of here!” Martina announced and we went out, our guns still ready.

As we passed out the door, Dan, prone on the ground, groaned. “What about me?”

We looked at each other for a second and Martina said:

“Take it like a man.”

Chapter 10

The sun was starting to set again; another day gone in this whirlwind. It did not register how things were flying by us—discoveries and revelations happening at a manic rate. It was like there was no more room for hesitation. Anarchy was no longer just a word to me; it had taken on real meaning.

"They had a god damn bazooka in there!" I said, pointing to the row house across the street from Ralph's bar. "They were getting ready to blow the place to kingdom come."

Martina and Andy listened and stared at the row house for a few minutes.

"Thing'll be too heavy to carry," Andy said finally.

We walked down the road and Martina said: "Let's go down the alleyway--get outa sight."

"Ya gotta admire those crazy bastards for their drive," Andy said, still looking back at the row house which contained the bazooka.

"Here's good," I said. We went down an alleyway that had walls on either side of us--protection--out of sight.

"I'm still pumped," Andy said, "you know what we gotta do?"

"Yeah, I know," Martina said. "I'm getting tired already of hearing his name."

"Big Simon," I said.

"Yeah, Big Simon," Martina said. "We've got targets on our back and I don't feel like hiding. That's what we came here for in the first place--right?! Clean out the terrorists."

"Ya gotta be kidding me Lever," Andy said, laughing. "You gonna talk about our mission. We got plopped in the middle of a savage world with a crappy ship and no backup. Did you do anything to your dad recently Jonz? Piss him off?"

"Don't know what you want me to tell you Andy. You know him too. Maybe I did."

"Whatever Jonz--just joking. I guess Lever's right. We have to do something. Where's Lloyd?!"

"Damn," I said, "he's still in the street." Doug was wandering in the center of the street, looking lost. Andy went over and grabbed him by the arm and brought him over to us.

"What is wrong with you Lloyd?!" Andy said. There was no response.

"We've got to go after Big Simon," Martina said. "Maybe we were abandoned, but I've got to make some sense out of this mission."

"There you go, calling it a mission again," Andy said.

"What do you want to call it?!" Martina yelled.

There was silence, but despite our frustrations, we all wanted a piece of this Big Simon character.

"Up the mountain, that rat Ralph said, didn't he?" I said.

“Fire!” Martina yelled, and Andy, Martina, and I aimed and fired into the grill of the truck.

I thought there was no chance, could see this being the end, our bodies rolled over by this immense hunk of violent steel—but we wanted to go out fighting. I could hear us all screaming in unison, Martina’s face locked in a fighting scowl, as we unloaded our guns towards the vehicle. As it came upon us, there was a bright fiery explosion. Yellow and orange clouds of fire billowed out from where the vehicle used to be. I felt the force pick me up and throw me like an insignificant speck. I rose up in the air, flying backwards with the greatest of ease. It was a release of everything—the tension, the anger, the confusion, the pain.

Then—blackness.

Earth at a domed station. We watch the transit in awe. Many stories and fables are told about you and your society. The few curious people left on Earth who make an effort to understand our surroundings, like myself, know you exist, but everyone wonders about who you really are. The space station and its residents have taken on an almost god-like persona—to many here on Earth—it is more of a devil-like persona. Many vagabonds and travelers who wander into town with a stolen or found weapon have claimed to be from the domed city or space station, just to provoke or intimidate, but you do look different. I could see it in your eyes.”

“What do you mean?”

“The way you looked at everything in this hell-hole. You could see the true shock on your faces. You could tell it truly was all new to you. Everyone, even the out-of-towners, they have a look of worn desperation on their faces. I have traveled and met many strangers on this planet, people from far away, but there is no salvation here on Earth, everywhere is in ruins, at least as far as I can tell. The strangers, the travelers, they can try and pretend, pretend they're different, but you can see it in their eyes. You, you and your friends, I really thought you were different--but it's just so hard to believe.”

“Is that why you followed us?”

“Yes, that's why.”

“What is your interest in us?”

He started to speak, and then paused, but then composed himself to say, “In the middle of this cruel desert of oppression and lawlessness, I'm trying to keep the flame of history, science, the truth, alive. I am like one of the Celtic monks of the dark ages. Fanatical forces ruled the world during the darkest times in medieval Europe, trying to stamp out the flame, trying to keep people mired in ignorance, using religion as an excuse to stamp out the dangers of literature, of science, of independent thought. Now we have warlords, they had the same back then, coming from barbarian tribes, coming from remnants of once powerful empires; ruthless megalomaniacs striving to conquer and control. During these dark times, isolated on their island, away from the hostilities of the mainland, the Celtic monks worked quietly, timidly, away from the powers that ruled and oppressed, under the guise of religious salvation. They maintained and translated the works of the ancient Greeks, the writings of history; they kept the flame alive through the dark ages. It is essential.”

“What is Europe?”

Samuel laughed. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh. I guess your life really has been isolated. I have so many questions too. I can see that your life experience has kept you quite apart from Earth and its history. The point I was trying to make, in a most roundabout way, was how essential it is to keep the flame alive, the flame of knowledge, of history, of humanity's story.”

“Why is it essential?” I asked.

“Why essential! Because the world will not stay like this! Reason, rationality, order—it will return! And we need to know our story.”

“Why?”

“Because... because those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it.”

“I don't really know what--how that's gonna help?” I said.

“Look,” Samuel said, “I’m sorry to be so adamant. You’re a young man, part of a system, this world, this situation, is not your creation.”

There was a long silence.

“No, you’re right, I said, “I have to wake up. I’ll tell you what I know about my life and society, but first, help me to try and understand. How did you end up here, holed up in this bunker?”

“I will tell you Tyler. I’m sorry. I should leave you time to heal, but I’m so anxious. I can see you’re anxious too. We can help each other—to understand. Where should I start?” Samuel rubbed his bald head as if stimulating it into action.

“I guess you have to go back two generations. You have to go back to my grandfather’s day, before the great apocalypse, before 2084. My grandfather was working with an illegal organization called Amnesty International. First of all, you have to understand the world as it was. The burgeoning science of telecommunications became more and more tightly influenced and controlled by governments and business interests. International trade brought countries closer and closer together.”

Samuel began to walk around me, waving his arms passionately.

“Soon, the divisions of countries became a nuisance to the few most powerful corporations. Countries were merged on a regular basis, freeing up trade routes, reducing cumbersome duties and separate domestic and foreign trading policies, until there were only a few countries left in the world. Sometime after the middle of the 21st century, there was a great international referendum, and the world government was created. This was all done under the guise of democracy, but the fact is, if you control the media, you can control democratic elections. The masses were easily appeased; just reassure them that everything is all right. Tell them what they want to hear.”

“My head is killing me Samuel,” I sat up, rubbing my forehead, “where did your family fit it to this?”

“My grandfather lived in this world; this world eaten up and controlled by the few, the most powerful—and he fought the good fight—to keep the flame alive. Together with his compatriots, they fought against the tyranny that kept the world down, but it was no use. My grandfather, same as my mother and myself, are strong proponents of non-violence. What is the point of violent struggle against the biggest, strongest bullies in the world? You’re attacking their strongest point, victory is impossible. In the 20th century, great civil rights leaders like Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King proved that irrefutably. Unfortunately, there were many others that did not have the same peaceful approach to revolution. Throughout many walks of life, from diverse ethnic backgrounds, terrorists --as they were called-- sprung out of the woodwork—fighting fire with fire. The world was becoming a very unsafe place. There were always bombs going off in the major urban centers. It was a fearful time. It was easy for the World Government to point to these violent extremists, their horrific actions; and then vilify everyone with an agenda against the government—peaceful or not. Ironically, these terrorists did more to solidify the World Government’s hold on power than anything else. These terrorists were playing right into the tyrants’ hands, attacking their strongest point—and common people were the ones paying the price.”

He sat down in his chair, slumping; his speech less passionate.

"In my opinion, both sides of these violent confrontations were cut from the same mould. They need each other to survive, to thrive in their world of lust and anger. It's the people in the middle who really suffered--are suffering--people who wanted a peaceful, just society for all—like my grandfather."

Samuel got up again; this time walking over beside me--staring at me intently.

"But my grandfather was not a pie-eyed optimist. He could see things weren't going well. It was he who created this shelter, and in it, he created databases of as much of world history, literature, art, and science as he could amass. He also kept his own journal. His personal account of what was going on. He was alive on that fateful day in 2084 when the cataclysmic nuclear attacks devastated society as we knew it. He had already taken to living in the shelter with his wife and two kids. It was a terrible way to raise a family, a terrible way to live; but what choice did he have? The only solace he had was knowing he was keeping the flame of knowledge, of the truth, alive. It was this legacy that he passed on to my mother, and now to me. But I have no family, no one to leave this legacy to; and I wonder what the importance of it is now. I wonder if man will ever come out of this dark age."

Samuel sighed and walked over to his desk, looking at the primitive computer boxes he had stored beside them.

"These databases, they contain as much of human history as three generations of my family have been able to amass; but for what? What've I really done? I report on the never-ending cycle of bombs, fights between warlords, and the amalgamation of religious beliefs into one all-consuming hatred of the domed city, of the shuttles coming from the space station. You, my dear friend Tyler, have become the Great Satan. You, and all your World Government brethren have become the unifying factor for all the fundamentalist crackpots, at least in this corner of the Earth. These religious terrorists, they corrupt young, desperate, angry kids. They send them off to attack your dome, to be murdered. This is your great threat. I think more than anything, this fascination, this obsession with these misguided fanatics, is more to distract you from your government's real goal."

"Distract us from what goal?"

"I don't know. I am here in my hole, trying to decipher whatever I can. Sometimes I think I'm weak, just a coward. I shelter myself, apart from the real world, keeping my journal; all the time hoping that someone else does something to improve the world. And then I can give my report—hand in my homework. Do you think what I'm doing is worthwhile?"

"I don't know how to answer. It's all coming too fast. I don't know what to believe any more."

Samuel looked at me carefully and nodded in agreement. I think he understood what I meant, had sympathy for my struggle. I had to ask him:

"Your skin, your face, is that natural? Or because of the nuclear fallout?"

He was a little shocked, but then quite amused.

"You've never seen anyone like me, a black man?"

"Black? You're not black, more of a light brown."

He laughed.

Samuel came up the ladder and closed the trap door again. He went behind some more bushes and came out with a leg-powered vehicle with a trailer on it.

“This is my bike,” Samuel said. “You get to ride in the back.”

I looked at the crude trailer, made up of a box-like cage. It did not look very comfortable. Samuel saw the way I looked at the trailer and said, laughing, “You didn’t complain on the way down here.”

"Maybe it wasn't the explosion? Maybe it was the ride in your trailer that has my body so racked up?"

"Seriously doubt THAT!" he said, laughing.

We went out on the road, if you could call it that. It was more like a clearing along the riverbank. We bounced along this byway, heading in the direction of a rickety old bridge that crossed the river. It looked only in slightly better shape than the completely unusable bridge I had seen on the other side of the city. When we made it to the foot of the bridge, he stopped and smiled at me.

“Yes, we have to cross it. It's safer than a boat. The current is very strong.”

the banister leading upstairs were broken. I noticed a painting of a pompous ex-homeowner posing stiffly, held up on the wall by a knife right through the canvas. There was loud arguing to be heard from upstairs.

The sound of people obsessively preoccupied with other matters eased Samuel's edginess. Silence would've been much worse, like a dark bedroom to a frightened child. We could here the sounds of townspeople.

"They must be up there," Samuel said.

"Let's go check it out."

Then, more than ever, I wished I had my gun. The sound of Martina's voice as we got to the top of the stairs made me feel more secure.

"Let's all calm down," I could hear her saying.

At the top of the stairs, there was a hole in a wall, which in better times had once been a doorway. Inside was a large room a long table as its centerpiece. There were all kinds of people around the table, and they all spoke in unison. The sound was shrill and piercing. Martina was standing in the middle, alternately waving her hands and then holding them to her head, as if it were about to explode. She was fighting for order, fighting to control the heated argument, trying to let level heads prevail, but it looked like a losing battle.

Andy was in the corner, holding his gun tightly, as if he were debating on opening fire on the whole lot of them. Martina turned and saw me. Her look went from frustration to joy.

"Thank God Tyler, you're alive!"

"I could say the same thing," I said and we hugged.

Andy came over. Even he looked happy to see me; maybe he was just glad to see someone less talkative than the dozen people crowding the room. No one else seemed to notice my arrival. They were passionately arguing their points of view.

"We need to make this house a focal point of the new democratic movement," one voice yelled.

"What difference does it make where we set things up? We need to discuss real issues," another voice shouted over top of the other.

There was one woman speaking so loudly that it came out in a shrill piercing scream, of which nothing was decipherable. She kept forcing herself into the middle of the melee, causing the crowd to be in constant motion, mostly moving around the table to get away from her.

"Awww," Martina gasped. "Let's go to another room."

We went to one side of the large room and into a corner bedroom. There was an odd assortment of furniture in the room. A mix and match assortment of the best things that could be pilfered from the surrounding area. Samuel, Martina, Andy, and I took refuge in the room, closing the makeshift door constructed out of a huge piece of flat wood. It did not drown out the voices completely, but it muffled the more annoying decibels.

"What's going on here?" I asked.

"Democracy!" Martina said.

“Their warlord is gone. It's left a vacuum which everyone has an opinion on how to fill,” Andy said. “It makes me want to support a new tyrant, just to shut 'em up. I'd like to find that Dan guy. He could do the trick. Who's this?” He said, pointing to Samuel.

“Don't you remember?” Martina said. “He's the one who took Tyler off the street when we killed Big Simon.”

“Sorry, I didn't remember. I was a little busy at the time.”

“Where's Doug?” I asked.

“I was hoping you'd know where he was,” Martina said.

“We'll have to deal with that tomorrow. It's getting late already.” I said.

The crowd in the room was getting more and more rambunctious, and it appeared that no two people had common opinions. Everyone was trying to shout down the others.

“We're not equipped for this,” Martina said. “We're soldiers, not diplomats. Why haven't they tracked us down by now? You all still have your security passes?”

Andy and I nodded.

“These people, they're driving me nuts with all their panic!” Andy said.

“They know the routine,” Samuel said.

“What do you mean?” Martina asked.

“Big Simon is gone,” answered Samuel. “No matter how distasteful he was to me, or many others in the city, he has now left a vacuum. There are always gangs of marauders, scavengers wandering the city. To greater and lesser degrees, these gangs are willing to do what it takes to make better lives for themselves. There are remnants all over of a previous, more advanced, society. Most of us spend our time picking valuable tidbits from this past world from the rubble; useful items to make our lives a little easier. These gangs do the same thing; except they might be more likely to search for guns as opposed to myself, who might find a functioning fridge, or stove, more valuable. So, we have this vacuum of power, left by our dead friend Big Simon; now comes the struggle, the fight for power. These people in the other room are dreamers. They hope to build something by the people, for the people; but it won't come like this.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because the situation is highly unstable right now, that doesn't help their cause at all. Do you think these dangerous gangs are just going to stand by while a bunch of do-gooders take charge? No, there will be a much more primitive altercation, a much more aggressive altercation—soon enough. That is probably why they are so excited. Those people know this as well as I do, they've lived through it many times before. They've seen warlords rise and fall. They know the routine. You guys are probably the only thing that gives us a temporary stability.”

“Whadaya mean?” Andy said.

“You took down Big Simon. You've built a quick reputation. That'll keep the others at bay--for a while.”

“For a while,” Martina repeated.

**

Night fall was coming yet again. The house had turned into a commune for the brave civic-minded citizens in the area. All the rooms were taken up by groups of people; a young couple with two kids in one large room, several of the older, more vocal members in another. Without really discussing it, Martina, Andy, Samuel, and I readied the room we were in for ourselves. The kitchen downstairs was powered by a working generator and was stocked with food; a bountiful luxury in this town. We ate and went back to the room. I asked her how the battle went after I was injured.

“We didn’t know what we were doing, Andy and I. We really were just defending ourselves, but I guess there was a lot of people watching, people who were sick of Big Simon and his goons. After the truck blew up, I could hear cheers coming from the streets and alleyways on both sides. It was like we accidentally became freedom fighters, but that wasn’t what I was thinking of. You were injured, Doug had disappeared at that point, and Andy and I were just trying to stay alive. It’s funny really, the way it happened. After Big Simon getting cooked, the rest of his men were leaderless, and none of them seemed to have a clue what to do. Citizens were bolstered by the victory, and one big, strong guy came out with a shovel and smacked one of Big Simon’s thugs right in the back of the head. The shovel on his thick skull made a resounding smack, and it sent off another cheer. Before we knew it, we were in the middle of a revolution. Someone grabbed the unconscious thug’s gun and we found ourselves in the middle of a mob heading for this house. I thought there would be more fighting, but there were not many more of Simon’s men. Anyway, the few that I saw were running away. They had no leader, and certainly no will to fight.”

“So, how’d you end up here?”

“It was like the mob thought of us as leaders, but they really led us to this house. It was kind of strange. It did appear to be a routine. It must be crazy to live in a world like this.”

“We’re finding out quickly enough,” I said, walking towards the window.

The sun was going down over the jagged skyline of the city. Andy and Samuel had already started nodding off in respective corners of the room, weariness left little room for formal ‘good nights’. I looked around at this strange room, a microcosm of the whole city, perhaps the whole planet. It was oddly furnished with broken antiques and industrial metal boxes. I guess that was the culture—whatever you could find to suit your needs—and the people who were most recently living here—the warlord and his cronies—they were the ultimate ruthless scavengers.

I sighed, looking out the window.

“We should try and get back to the Earth dome now,” Martina said, coming over beside me to look out the window.

“Yeah, we can’t stay here fighting every gang in the city. It’ll never end.”

“We did pretty well for a couple of days here,” Martina said.

“Yeah, I guess so; we’ve got to get back though.”

In a rare show of chivalry, the three men left the sole bed for Martina to sleep in. She normally would scoff at any preferential treatment due to her gender, but the fatigue let her accept it

On all sides were row houses. We were a few streets down the hillside from Big Simon's mansion and there were many residences. One particular row house looked almost intact. It had a working door that was slightly ajar. The three of us barrelled through the door, into the startled home of a family. I could smell recent cooking, surely from the dinner of that night. It was a small, open dwelling. There were gasps from a couple and two or three children that were sleeping on worn mattresses bunched together at the back of the room.

“Ssshhh...” Andy said to them, and they obeyed; eyes open like big saucers. We slunk into the darkness beside the family. Martina, Andy, and I huddled together in the opposite corner to the family.

“Moommy,” one of the small children cried, but was quickly stifled by her mother putting her hand over the child's mouth.

Outside, the frantic shuffling of the commandos' feet could be heard. One voice was heard barking orders. A moment later, the soft light and buzzing sound of the hovercraft could be heard passing by, and then silence fell.

Suddenly, I could feel my heart pounding, and hear the panicky breathing of everyone in the room. It was the sound of racing metabolisms trying to be stifled by their owners.

We sat.

We waited.

It felt like an eternity until I heard the crunching sounds of feet on tiny stones just outside our building; the sound of the door squeaking open, and one more person with panicky breathing. A flashlight panned over our heads. Everyone ducked, even the family beside us. I thought we were in the clear when the child started to cry. The flashlight shone in again, this time panning lower, across the innocent family, and landing squarely in my face, white light blinding me.

“In here!” a voice shouted.

I did not have my gun anymore, but there were stones all over the ground. I picked one up and launched it at the commando who had turned sideways to call his compatriots. It landed squarely on his chest. He made a loud gasp as he fell backwards. We rushed towards him and I landed on him first, picking him up and smashing his head on the ground. His laser gun shot over my shoulder and the light it emitted showed his grimace as his head hit the ground; his face relaxing as he lay there—out cold. I grabbed the gun from his hand as I could hear the sound of feet rushing towards me. Martina was standing beside me. She was the only one who grabbed a gun as we left the house. She chose this opportune moment to start firing at our adversaries. I aimed the laser gun also, and fired. The remaining commandos jumped sideways, out of the way of our fire. We turned and ran down the street. They followed at a distance. This time we managed to put some more distance between us.

“Let's circle back,” Martina whispered to us.

“Why?” Andy said.

“Get them from behind,” she said.

We made a large circle around the house. This time a little less panicked, a little quieter. We came around from underneath the same street that we had originally escaped from the house. There was a low murmur and the faint light of the hovercraft idling over the houses in the next

street. Its eerie glow looked out of place in this crude city. As we approached from behind, I could see a driver inside. The commandos on the ground were walking below it. They were all in the same area now.

“The backyard,” Martina whispered, as we came back to the side of Big Simon's mansion.

“The uniforms,” she said, and I understood.

“What?” Andy said.

We snuck unperceived around the back of the house. The hovercraft and commandos were looking for us the next block over. Martina, then I, then Andy, leapt over the same backyard stonewall we had escaped over moments before. There they were sleeping like babies, the unlucky two commandos who we jumped coming down the stairs. The two of them were slumped in the back doorway, like a couple of drunks.

“Looks about your size,” said Martina smiling, touching the uniform of one of the commandos.

Andy and I each put on the uniforms of the unconscious commandos. They also had soft helmets and night vision glasses, which made the perfect disguise; and of course, we took their ray guns.

“If we can get the hovercraft pilot's attention, then maybe we can get him to come down and get us. Andy, you can fake an injured leg to get the pilot to drop down and pick you up. We'll catch him by surprise, for sure.” I said.

“The trick will be to do this away from the other commandos. On the ground, they would be in a better position to see we're imposters,” Martina said.

We climbed on the wall and looked around. It was easy to spot the hovercraft patrolling above the houses on the next block.

“Let's go,” I said, and the three of us were back over the wall again, heading across the street. As we passed through the alleyway, some of the Earth animals that were disturbed earlier were still whimpering. I could hear the owner trying desperately to quiet them. I guess there were plenty of people who heard the commotion, but were trying to stay quiet, and more importantly, stay out of the battle. This was not a society where you called the police when you heard a commotion in the middle of the night. You just clutched your loved ones and prayed the aggressors would go away.

As we made our way over to the next street, I peeked around one of the houses, very cautiously. The hovercraft was heading slowly up the street, right in our direction. On either side, commandos were looking into most of the houses, at least the houses that weren't collapsed.

“The hovercraft is passing right by us, it's a perfect opportunity; but there are commandos following beside on the ground. What the hell can we do?” I said.

Martina looked around the corner, seeing the situation. “Just get ready to get the pilot's attention. I'm going to cause a distraction.”

“Wait,” I said.

She had run across the street, just before the hovercraft's searchlight had reached where she was running. Moments later, from in back of the other side of the street, I heard gunfire; the loud blasting of a conventional gun. All the commandos rushed to that side of the street. The

"Let's get the hell outa here Jonz!"

I took off straight up into the sky. I didn't want to hang around at street level and see what happened next. I felt relief as we rose in altitude, felt like one of the river birds soaring in freedom. Distance from the city was good, like chains lifted off the soul. I could only imagine the burden that life-long city dwellers carried with them. From up there I looked down. It was mostly darkness, with the odd light here and there. As soon as the battle was over, my mind started racing about what to do next.

"We've got to contact my father," I announced.

Andy was lying back in his seat. He didn't respond. Martina lay slumped in the corner, still out cold.

In the telecommunication interface was an address book of many military personnel. My father -- being a top general-- was there, with a holographic prompt before calling, ensuring the caller really wanted to disturb such an important officer. I replied in the affirmative to the holographic prompt. There was a short buzzing and my father answered quickly.

"Hello, hello," he said.

"Dad, dad, it's me, Tyler."

"Son, is that you? Thank God you're okay. You're in a hovercraft?"

"Yes Dad, I can't, there's so much to explain, there're some renegade soldiers, where are you?"

"What's going on son?"

"Just where are you dad? We HAVE to talk."

"I'm at the Earth base, you have to come here. In your navigational mode, there is a preset destination for Port 7B. You will be asked for a password. It is a high security port. The password is 'RealExodus'. All one word--capitals for the first letters. Did you get that?"

"Port 7B, password 'RealExodus', got it Dad."

I entered the destination and the hovercraft started racing along the night sky. There must've been a lot of clouds in the Earth atmosphere that night, because all I could see was pitch black. I felt the pull of the hovercraft as it accelerated towards its destination.

"It'll be okay soon, it'll be okay soon," I kept repeating to myself until we saw the Earth base coming towards us.

"Jonz, are ya sure we should--"

"Whadaya mean Stoneman?! We can't go this alone."

"But who can we really trust?" I looked at Andy. He was staring at me.

"Well, my dad--that's for sure. Who else--I dunno."

"I'm just saying--" Andy's voice trailed off, but I was distracted as the Earth base was approaching rapidly.

The hovercraft descended softly, perfectly, with the automated landing system guiding it. As we came down, I could see the glow of the Earth dome increasing. Inside, military personnel could be seen working the dispatch. I looked at them.

"I wonder where this gang was when the Covert went down in the mountains?"

"That's what I'm saying Jonz. Maybe we--"

"I don't know what you're trying to say Stoneman, but just shut up for now. My dad'll get this straightened out."

We came down to Port 7B, and its antechamber glided open smoothly.

"Man, it feels good to watch modern technology in action--eh Stoneman?"

Andy didn't answer.

There was a series of landing lights around the porthole entrance to 7B. I didn't need them since the hovercraft was landing with the automated system. We entered the antechamber and the door to the interior of the Earth dome opened up.

There in front of me was my father.

I could see him through the hovercraft's windshield as we docked into the port. The winged doors to the hovercraft opened automatically and my father came over, smiling. He took my hand and helped pull me out of the hovercraft. To feel his hand supporting me, helping me out of the hovercraft was so comforting. The tension disappeared from my system.

"I'll get Lever," Andy said as he carefully removed the still unconscious Martina from the back seat. He came behind us, Martina in his arms.

"There you are," my father announced.

"Dad, I'm so glad to see you--":

"That's nice."

Then my father turned his back on me and signalled to the commandos standing beside him. All I remember was how they pointed their laser guns straight in our faces. I heard Andy yell "Hey!" and then the light from the laser guns hit me. I blacked out.

Chapter 13

When I awoke, I tried to sit up, but I couldn't move. I tried again, feeling pressure on my wrist and ankles, my hips, and around my head. I was tied down—flat—on a hard table; bright, impersonal neon lights beamed into my eyes. A shadowy figure leant over me, just a dark undefined shape; an ambiguous shadow. I couldn't see him, the lights were too blinding. I blinked my eyes again, trying to wake from this strange dream. My arms were restrained--my shoulders and back sore on a cold surface--all these sensations were too vivid, too real for it to be a dream.

"It's awake now," the voice said.

"Do what you want with it. It's served its purpose," another voice said.

I tried to look at him. My eyes were adjusting to the blinding light. The shadows of Dr. Svoboda and my father were receiving detail, taking the familiar features that I was familiar and comfortable with.

It was a large laboratory. In horror, I realized there were many others in the room as well. In long, neat rows, there were giant glass cylinders, lit from underneath, and inside were naked humans floating in liquid. There were tubes fed into the cylinders. My head was held tightly by a metallic brace, but in the slight amount I could turn my head, I strained my eyes to look on either side as far as I could. The rows of ominous humans floating in jars were on all sides. I realized that different rows had humans of different ages in them. Some rows had adult men, some had adult women; while others had children, and right in front of me, as I looked beyond my shackled feet, were giant jars like the others, they looked empty. Then I realized at the bottom were tiny babies, curled in fetal positions, floating just above the sickly glow of the lights at the bottom of the jars.

"What is this?" I blurted out.

They just looked at me.

"What is this?" I blurted out again, crying.

"That," my father said, walking towards me and looking at me, "is none of your business."

"How can you say that? Dad, what's going on?"

My father was walking away, but then he returned, with an annoyed look on his face and said, "Do lab rats have the right to ask questions of the scientists experimenting on them? Do plants being genetically engineered have requests for what type of foliage they will have? No, I don't think so."

"In mother's name, please tell me—please!"

"All right, all right. I suppose you are slightly more intelligent than a lab rat. I guess I could spend a few minutes with you. You are a genetic experiment—part of Project Cleanse. Are you satisfied now?"

I looked at him. I couldn't speak. My vocal chords were working, but it was all too much. The emotions were paralyzing my throat.

“You see, you are not my son. I have no son. You are grown from a jar, just like the rest of our genetic farm here. Do you understand?”

“But our family—mother,” I said, choking.

“Yes, I was quite proud of that. Would you like me to explain to your lab rat Dr. Svoboda?”

“I do not feel this is necessary,” Dr. Svoboda said.

“Go on, Dr. Svoboda, explain how it works to our little experiment. We can give it that much. Despite it being an abysmal failure, it does have a certain intellect.”

“You see, you were grown here,” Dr. Svoboda said, “we’re going to repopulate the Earth after the final cleansing of the planet. Over the last hundred years, we’ve worked hard to create the perfect genetic formula for the new human population—free it from the genetic mish-mash that has the world in its current state. It was long ago that the World Government realized that this was the bane of Earth’s history and development.”

Dr. Svoboda sighed in disgust, looking away from me, turning to my father and saying, “Really, I find it quite ridiculous to be explaining myself. It is obviously a failed attempt. I don’t want to treat it like a colleague.”

The doctor walked away to another table, examining the rows of jarred humans, busying himself in other matters. My father stood looking at me. His stare was cold, no longer feigning interest or concern for me. I looked at him. He too turned away from me. He went to speak to the doctor. “So, is there any point in keeping him alive?”

“I would like to examine the brain, while he is still alive,” the doctor said.

I closed my eyes tight, hoping to open them and wake up in my barracks, my safe little sterile apartment; but it was not to be. I opened my eyes to see the same rows of naked humans floating in glass cylinders.

“What about mom! How can you betray her memory this way? How can you do this to your own son?”

Brad Jonz laughed as he heard this. He walked back over to me.

“Listen son,” he said. “Don’t kid yourself; those are not real memories.”

“What do you mean?”

“There has been much research into the human brain here. Dr. Svoboda is in charge of all scientific development, but there are many departments—genetics, chemistry, mechanics, it is all quite interesting. We are doing fascinating work here.”

“How do you get people to work—their morality—they”

“We do not involve every individual scientist in the global plan, silly son. That is for us to control, just like you. We’ve made an attempt with you, the first accelerated growth genetic human creation; we’ve attempted to control you through subtle, obviously too subtle, means.”

He poked one of his fingers at my forehead.

“There is an area, right here which can send messages to the brain as you drift off into sleep. I think you will find this part quite fascinating actually. You see, we have combined our neurological expertise with the advances in computer technology. After all, they both relay

impulses as data to transmit messages, information. Computer technology is really just a less-polished version of the neurological system. But circuitry has been advancing greatly recently. While we're still far behind the complexity of the human brain, we can add a little patch here or there—maybe enhance, add value to the data stored, the processes activated—in the human brain. Well, there's a chip in your brain. It is attached to the area of your brain which relays messages as you drift off to sleep. It activates at night, and sends you a simulated memory of mommy, of daddy, of family life, and all that crap.”

“You mean, you mean my family memories are not real?”

“Fascinating, isn't it!”

“Then, who are my parents?”

”You have none; aren't you listening!? You are the first living experiment done here in the laboratory. Our scientists have grown you here in these cylinders. It is quite beautiful actually.”

His tone became almost loving, caring.

“We have examined the genetic code and given you perfect genes. We cannot create DNA strands artificially, but we have managed to splice strands from various DNA samples. We have been able to select characteristics, which would be preferential; features that are common to the most successful ethnic backgrounds--along with other genetic characteristics that you would know nothing about. Other worldly you could call it." He laughed out loud. "To grow, to reach the adult form you have now didn't take the same time as a regular human being. It's approximately ten times as fast as the old-fashioned natural growth. You were only released just before starting police academy. The earlier memories you have were triggered by the chips in your brain.

“It's funny actually, the way the brain works. I remember you reminding me of things in the past that we didn't even give you simulated memories for. Isn't that funny? I suppose the actual simulated memories we installed acted as a catalyst for your brain to enhance and expand this artificial world—or you're just a bullshitter.”

He laughed again.

“Anyway, I took on the role of your father because we wanted to keep tight wraps on this project. The less people that know the full story the better. I have to admit Tyler; it has certainly tested my patience; you and your sensitive, questioning ways. I thought that your loyalty would come with all the memories we implanted, but obviously, we made a mistake. There has to be more extensive control of the brain. We are working on a complete information system with a complete memory package, along with military training and behaviour control--or maybe the opposite--no artificial memory and full education from inception. It's all part of the experimental process. So you see, my dear Tyler, you have served your purpose. We have learnt much. We'll do better with future prototypes. But you're quite useless right now.”

“You, you monster,” I said.

“You see, you see, that is what annoys me. What kind of a soldier is that? You have a superior genetic makeup, but your constitution is weak. We HAVE to do better.”

“Why, this mission? Why did you send me out?”

“Why? That’s a funny question. We had to at least test how you'd perform in the field. We invested a lot of time in you. We didn't want it to be a complete waste. Early on, I could see how flawed you were, but with all the time and energy expended by myself and Dr. Svoboda and his team. We had to at least run you through a couple of tests, get as much information as possible, to help in the continued development of this project. We have to remain focused, not flush every bad experiment prematurely. It wouldn't be professional.”

He spoke as if it were all so obvious, as if he was merely stating facts.

“You didn’t do that badly actually, apart from breaking our latest vehicle. Anyway, that's all immaterial right now. You should be proud that you were the first working artificially created human being--well, a hybrid really--but you couldn't understand that. Now, you can be the first artificially created intelligent being who is dissected alive. Like I said, we have to make sure we get the most information possible from all our experiments. The doctor wants to examine your systems for any abnormalities. It's the inevitable conclusion.”

"You've always been like that Brad Jonz," Dr. Svoboda said, sarcastically emphasizing my father's name.

"What on Earth do you mean by that?"

"I wasn't really thinking about Earth, but that's another story--eh Jonz?"

"If you have a problem--out with it Doctor!"

"Don't get defensive. It's just--you've always been like that--having to talk too much--boast to someone. You think you'd learn."

"Are you trying to blame ME for past failures?!"

"No, forget I said anything," I heard the clicking of Dr. Svoboda’s heels as he came towards me. It felt like hammers beating on my forehead, "Can I get on with it now?"

"Yes, yes," my father said, walking away, "do what you have to do."

Every sound, every sight, every touch, was agonizing to my frayed and tortured senses. The emotional pain was beyond what any physical torture could inflict.

Dr. Svoboda was staring at me.

“Doctor, please, this is inhuman. It is wrong!” I pleaded.

"Inhuman. Interesting choice of words. Perhaps you're right."

He remained expressionless. As he stood over me, staring at me like an object, he reached overhead. I continued to plead to no avail. He pulled down an apparatus connected to a hydraulic arm. There were several different coloured lights coming from the apparatus. He positioned it over my head. The doctor touched buttons on the apparatus, and it started to whirl. The different multi-coloured lights disappeared and all the energy focused on one red light beaming down on my forehead. It was hot and getting hotter. I could feel beads of sweat forming on my forehead.

“This will hurt considerably,” he said to me. “But there's no alternative. You see, I want as little damage to the brain as possible. So, no mind altering drugs. This laser will disintegrate the bone from your frontal lobe. Unfortunately for you, it has to be done gradually. It is a pity you have to die in such a painful manner, but it's for the greater scientific good.”

He began to busy himself with preparing his dissection tools. There was a sterilization unit beside me, and he was making sure he had all the necessary equipment. The buzzing laser was getting hotter and hotter.

“What’s that?” Brad Jonz said.

I heard muffled noises, a commotion outside the giant metal slabs; the security doors to the laboratory. Over the intercom, I heard a frantic voice, “Dr. Svoboda, this is General Jonz. Open the doors at once, there are hostile troops out here.”

“Voice simulation,” Brad Jonz yelled suddenly, "de-activate the automated security access."

“What's going on?” Dr. Svoboda cried.

“My voice--it'll allow entry.”

But it was too late. The doors opened.

"Don't worry, I'll shut them out," Dr. Svoboda said.

The security doors strained to close, making a painful whirring sound.

"They jammed--something's in the door!" Brad Jonz cried.

I strained to see what was going on, but my head was held rigid by a metal brace. The red beam was burrowing into my forehead, getting even hotter. Dr. Svoboda slapped repeatedly at a control panel.

“Why did you let them get in, you idiot?” Brad Jonz cried.

Dr. Svoboda ran towards the doors at the other side of the laboratory. Through the jammed doors, I could see Martina’s head sticking through. A laser fired just over her head. It was Brad Jonz firing. All his talk of what a soldier he was, but when he was nervous, he couldn’t hit a stationary target. Martina squeezed through the doors and rolled on the ground, her weapon up in the air.

“Watch it Andy,” she cried, and I could see Andy hesitate before coming through the same hole.

“Hurry,” I yelled to her.

Brad Jonz fired again; this time his shot did not even come close to Martina.

"Where did they go?" Brad Jonz said.

"They dropped to the ground," Dr. Svoboda said as he rushed towards the back of the laboratory, "they must be down one of the aisles."

“Hold the doors! Hold the doors!” Brad Jonz cried as I could hear doors opening and shutting at the other end of the laboratory.

"I told you to wait," Brad Jonz cried as I heard the doors shut. "Damn controls!" I heard the sound of him frantically slapping the wall--then a laser blast--and Brad Jonz cried out in pain.

"Got'im!" Andy said.

“Quick, get over here!” I yelled, "get this thing offa me!" I struggled in my restraints as the pain increased by the second.

“Oh my God!” Martina cried as she ran over beside me.

“Move this God damn thing away!” I pleaded.

Andy leapt over and knocked the apparatus. The red buzzing machine was now pointed to a spot on the ground. Martina was looking at the controls and found the panel for the restraints that were holding me. With one big click all the restraints released. I stood up, adrenalin pumping through my system and yelled to Andy, “Give me that gun!”

He handed it over and I aimed it directly at the apparatus. I fired and it exploded into pieces cascading all over the lab table and floor. I stood there naked, armed, my chest heaving, my forehead pounding in pain; but it felt great just to be alive.

“Put this around yourself Jonz,” Martina said, throwing me a lab coat. “We just want to save your butt, not look at it.”

The security doors were whirring constantly, trying to close--banging against a metal bar.

“Get that bar out of the security door out. We need some time to think—regroup,” I said.

Andy went over, grabbing the bar out from the security doors. They slammed shut.

Martina and Andy wandered slowly around the lab. As they looked around, the incredible nature of the room was sinking in with deepening anxiety. The long, ordered rows of illuminated jars, with human beings of differing ages, floating, bobbing; somewhere between life and death, their expressions statuesque, the light ominously deflecting through the liquid, giving them movement between the light and shadow. Martina looked at me. Her fear, her inability to communicate, spoke volumes.

“How did you get here?” I asked her.

“This place,” she said.

Andy was walking slowly down the rows, staring at the tiny babies along the front row. He grasped his laser gun, as if he might have to use it on one of the cylinders. His jaw was tight, and you could see his teeth gnashing. It was a hard sight to accept.

“We’ll figure it out together. How did you get here?” I said.

"This place Jonz--it's--"

"How didya get out Martina?" I grabbed her arm.

"I started waking up when you were landing the craft Tyler. I'm sorry--this place--it's freaking me out. I-I could hear you talking as we were landing, but I was so out of it. I could hear but it was like a dream still."

"When we landed, you were awake?"

"Well, kinda--but I was still out of it. It was only when Stoneman dragged me out of the back of the hovercraft that I was almost ready to speak--and then--"

"Then they turned on us."

"Exactly. I rolled on the ground and my eyes opened wide. I could see what was happening--but I dunno--it was just instinct. I faked like I was still out."

"That was a good move."

Martina laughed.

"I wish I could say I thought it out--but it was just instinct. The commandos thought all three of us were incapacitated. It was on oversight. I made them pay for that! Another hovercraft arrived. They loaded me in there and sent me off separately. They thought I was out, so they left me on the floor beside Stoneman--but I could see and hear what was going on. I overheard the coordinates of where you were sent. After your hovercraft left, the two remaining commandos, they didn't have a clue. They thought both of us were out cold. I managed to knock one of the bastards out, taking his laser gun. The other had no time to react before he found himself paralyzed and incapacitated."

"But how did you get in here Martina? How did you get in here? Not with your ID?"

"If you wait, I'll tell you Jonz! This place--it's freakin' me out. What did I do--oh yeah--I got hold of the telecommunications unit. I was able to find recordings of your father's voice. We returned to the main military port. I was sure someone would confront us, but it didn't happen. We blended into the mass of military crafts. This was definitely a renegade mission or else the military dispatch would know something was wrong. We would've been caught. It seemed the only logical solution. I transferred your father's voice recordings to a hand held unit from the hovercraft. Andy was recovering from his paralysis and I dragged him here."

"Whataya talkin' about Lever," Andy protested, "I was walking on my own!"

"Not at first Stoneman. Whatever--we made it to this zone here. I heard the coordinates before they took you off. It was away from the main military areas; a door without guards—you'd miss it if you didn't know it was here. It's a friggin' hiding place--for a few powerful madmen."

She waved her arms at the laboratory before continuing.

"I'm telling you, from the outside, it looks like it's just a storage closet; not even a guard out front."

"She's right," Andy said. "We even double-checked the coordinates. We couldn't believe we were in the right zone."

It was an ingenious hiding place for their insane project. The door wouldn't open without proper security clearance, but neither would any other door in the military sections. If any other personnel tried to pass and were refused, they would just know they didn't have clearance. They wouldn't know this unassuming door held the highest level of security possible.

"Anyway," Martina continued, "we used the voice recordings of your father's voice to fool the voice detection unit."

"Now—here we are—and where the hell is here?" She looked at me again.

I found my clothes beside the lab table. I shuddered when I thought about it.

"This is some sort of hideous project," I said. "They are trying to create a master race; some genetic purity crap. All they've taught us--everything we thought was true--all lies?"

"Are all these people dead?" Andy said.

"You don't get it," I said. "They're growing them."

"Growing them!?"

"Yeah, I don't know all the details," I said.

“Let’s try and find out more before my friggin' head explodes with questions,” Martina said, trying to log onto a holographic information system interface near the dissecting table. “Make sure those damn doors are shut properly.”

"The front is secure," Andy said as he passed through the laboratory to the back doors. "The back is secure too. Sleeping tight General?" He said as he passed my father's prone body. "Svoboda got away?"

"Yeah, out back," Martina said.

“Access denied. Only Level One security personnel may access this system,” an automated voice said.

Martina slammed her hand on the laboratory control panel. “We can’t get in!

“We can’t, but he can.” I said, pointing to General Brad Jonz’s slumped body, and then the palm recognizer located in front of the holographic information system.

“I get it,” Martina said.

She helped me carry my father's body over to the palm recognizer.

"He's heavier than I thought," she said as we raised his body.

"I'll hold him," I said, "place his palm."

"Welcome, further verification required," the automated systems voice said, “Eye recognition required, place open left eye in lower right hand corner of logon screen.”

I picked up General Jonz’s head, opening his unconscious eye and held it in the logon screen. A faint green light scanned across his pupil, and then the system said, “Welcome to Project Cleanse, General Brad Jonz. Which module would you like to access?”

A higher definition, larger, wide-screen interface appeared. I had never seen a hologram with such clarity. On it was written the names to several modules of the system.

“Enter the history module,” Martina said.

On top of the control panel was a scaled down replica of the giant hologram visual interface. I touched the history module and a new interface appeared with subsets of the history module.

“Let’s listen to the overview,” I said, hesitating, wondering how much information I really could take.

The system started the overview. The system's voice began describing what it viewed as the terrible state of human society a century earlier.

Ominously, the system's voice said: "It was then that work began on the Earth base and space station."

Proudly, the narrator described how "an elite team of experts worked secretly to produce the glorious results we now know as home."

"I may be sick listening to this," Martina said before the narrator said how "before Project Cleanse, the Earth was tainted with many weak ethnic groups. Once the chosen people were evacuated to the space station, the cleansing of Earth began. The only practical way to remove the existing Earth’s population was through the dispersal of strategic nuclear attacks.

Systematically, bombs were distributed around the world with the goal of removing the existing flawed population. The chosen people would be safely housed in the space station, and supplied by the Earth base."

"My God, that's why we're all blonde hair, blue eyes, fair skin," I said.

"There are so many more types of people on Earth," Martina said.

Coldly, the narrator explained how "years of constant bombings has made great gains in eradicating the flawed population that blocks a successful future for Earth, yet this population has shown stubbornness that continues to hinder Project Cleanse's successful completion. Also, the population in the space station has shown genetic flaws during the years the society has developed. These two factors led the next generation of World Government officials to make certain alterations to Project Cleanse.

First of all, it was decided that the nuclear arms first launched in 2084 to remove the flawed population on Earth were not technologically advanced enough to properly cleanse the Earth. After attempts at recreating existing sonic bombs were unsuccessful, armament research returned to nuclear development. We created a more efficient nuclear device that can spread evenly and completely. It will be far more effective at removing the existing Earth population. This bombing campaign will fittingly commence in 2184, the centennial anniversary of the commencement of Project Cleanse.

The second alteration to Project Cleanse was made due to the genetic flaws of some of the chosen people in the space station. While originally, World Government officials thought that selecting people from Earth's existing population would be good enough to ensure genetic superiority for Earth's new population—this was proven to be false. We have seen crime and subversive behaviour develop in our City Central area of the space station city. This is why the second alteration to Project Cleanse will be the relocation of City Central dwellers to Earth. They are now added to the rest of the flawed population which shall be removed during the centennial cleansing campaign.

Modern technology has also allowed us to make one more alteration to Project Cleanse. Advances in genetic and neurological engineering have allowed World Government scientists to refine the genetic selection process. Research has enabled us to splice DNA strands to select and guarantee genetic perfection. This technology has been coupled with growth acceleration developments to allow us to produce and grow genetically perfect human beings. Computer technology also plays a part in education of these new minds. We are able to implant circuitry to provide educational and behavioural aids for this perfect race of humans. In keeping with the spirit of our glorious pioneers, we will use this latest technology to create a perfect race of humans to repopulate the Earth—to reconquer Earth for the powers of good. This perfect race, along with World Government officials and top business leaders, will help us lead Earth to a more fruitful and harmonious future."

For several minutes, no one said anything.

"This just can't be real," Andy said finally, jumping up and looking around.

"It can't, but it is," Martina said, leaning over in her chair and grabbing her head in her hands.

"Are you trying to tell me," Andy said, "our government, our leaders launched all these nuclear attacks? It wasn't any terrorists after all. This is some unholy scheme—can this be possible?"

“I’m not trying to tell you anything,” Martina said, her nerves frayed. “We’re all finding this out together.”

“I can’t help thinking of our nights patrolling City Central,” I said. “I can’t help thinking of all the people we met. Andy, do you remember the vets we met in that illegal bar? All the innocent people, just trying to make ends meet—all because of their genes—its insanity.”

“There must be some logical reason,” Andy began.

“Logic!” Martina said. “In this madness?! Look, they selected who they wanted to repopulate the Earth; then when they see the same flaws, the same troubles in society; instead of rethinking their plan—they get even crazier. Now, we’re going to grow perfect people—Lord God—it’s madness, pure and simple!”

“Did they start the Exodus to Earth—the resettlement of City Central dwellers?” I asked.

“Look if we can find anything in the system,” Martina said.

I went back to the main menu of the system.

“Here you can look at entries in the database by chronological order,” I said. “Let me order things in chronological order, see the most recent entries.”

“Try that one,” Martina said.

It was a report on the Exodus to Earth of City Central dwellers.

“So, it’s happened. People have been relocated to the Earth settlements in the safe zone,” Andy said.

“Yes,” I said, “look at all the recent entries--what do they have?”

“This one,” Martina said, “Cleansing to commence as soon as Exodus is complete. This doc has details of the bombing. It can all be controlled by Brad Jonz and Svoboda. Look at the last line: There is no reason for any delay.”

“Dr. Svoboda is out there,” I said.

“Do you think he would try to go forward with this plan on his own?” Martina said.

“Why not? According to this, all the launching controls are available at the Earth base. We have to do something about this now.”

“How many people are involved in this?” Martina wondered. “Look in the administrative functions, see how many users have this level of security.”

We searched for several minutes through the different modules of the system, until we finally happened upon administrative functions.

“There are only three users with this level of security,” I said.

“Your father, Dr. Svoboda. Who’s the third?” Martina said.

“A Dr. Duval. I’ve seen him in the labs at the station. He gave me a physical once. I think he works for Svoboda.”

“Probably one of the scientific team.”

“My father said that most of the scientists didn’t know the full plan.”

"Let's worry about Svoboda for now. Try to add another user," Martina said.

"Okay, here we go--New User," I said.

"Please place palm on pad," the system voice said, "now proceed to eye scan." It felt slightly warm as the scanner went across my eye.

"Project Cleanse has new conspirators--us," I said.

"What about the President?" Martina said.

I searched through the menu system again. I saw a political media control module. I went in. Inside of it was another module called presidential simulator.

"What is this?" Andy said.

Suddenly, the hologram in front of us displayed a perfect representation of the President. His form slowly turned, like a new product on display in a showroom. At first, it shocked me when his image came up; it was so life-like. It was like he was right there in front of us, floating, waiting for commands. On the side of his image were many menu options such as speech, movement, dress, facial expressions; everything needed to simulate the President.

"They've been simulating the President, maybe they took him hostage or something," Andy said.

"Or maybe he's just a simulation," I said.

"That's crazy," Martina said. "They couldn't get away with that."

"This is crazy and the rest?--is what?!" I said, waving my arm.

"I know, but it's just too much," Martina said.

She started walking around the laboratory, but there was no comfort there; just more of a horrible reality none of us wanted to face. The eerie twirling of the holographic presidential body over all of us, in the center of the laboratory, added another layer, another burdensome fact, to an already macabre plot.

"Where do we go from here?" I said.

"We've got to see the President," Andy said.

"Can't you see, he doesn't exist!" I said.

"What, now you're making things up!" Andy said.

"Wake up," I said.

We both got to our feet.

"Hold on guys," Martina said, "let's keep it together. I don't need to deal with this crap too! There must be some way to get in contact with the President. We have access to a top security information system. I know the President usually only sees the public from the balcony of his high rise residence downtown; but this system—we have to look—it must give special access to General Jonz and the doctors. These are top decision-makers. One positive thing, the President does not appear to have access to this system, to Project Cleanse and all its details. I don't think he is part of this sick plot."

"I don't think he exists," I said.

Andy waved his arms in frustration.

“Well, I hope you’re wrong,” Martina said.

“I do too,” I said.

“Okay, then, let’s hope for the best,” Martina said. “Let’s try and work with the assumption that the President is alive and not part of the plot.”

“That could be very dangerous,” I said.

“It’s our only chance Tyler,” Martina said. “We have to try.”

I searched through the system, through the political media control module. In it, I saw a connection to a top secret access to the Presidential suite.

“This is how we have to go. We have to see if there’s anybody in power who can help us,” Martina said.

“All right, but I don’t think we’re going to find anyone there. We’re on our own.”

“You don’t have any proof of that,” Andy said.

“No, just going by what I’ve seen so far,” I said.

I looked at General Brad Jonz, the man I knew as my father, slumped in the back corner; suffering under the effects of a laser gun’s paralysis mode. He looked so innocent lying there. My thoughts turned painfully to my childhood, or what the circuits hardwired in my brain had given me as simulated memories. The memories floated in my head, suddenly feeling like intrusions, like poison placed there by a corrupt regime. It made me feel sick to my stomach; but somehow they were comforting. All my memories that comforted me turned out to be simulations. I couldn’t think about it, it was making me weak. I had to try and forget reality, save the comforting emotions that kept me from going insane. No matter how corrupt and misguided he was, I had to save the emotions that said he was my father, for my own sanity. We needed to do something with him. He would wake up soon.

“We’ve got to tie my father up,” I said.

Martina looked at me and said, “Do you want me to do it?”

“No, I can handle it.”

Chapter 14

"You know, I hate to say it, but I keep wondering why we don't get arrested," Andy said.

"We don't have enough problems?" Martina said. "Geez Stoneman!"

"Yeah, why didn't anybody intercept our hovercraft back up here?" I said.

"Exactly!" Andy agreed. "We're flying renegade back to the space station--and military dispatch doesn't intercept us?!"

"It just shows you how isolated this 'Project Cleanse' really is. There are only a few conspirators." Martina said. "That's a good thing. Let's worry about what's ahead of us here." She was looking at the floor numbers going up in the elevator. At the top of the floor menu, 'Presidential Suite' was written in prominent letters.

"When we get to the top of the elevator, let's be ready," I said. "This is for keeps right now."

"I didn't even know this access existed," Andy said, wiping beads of sweat off his forehead.

"They don't broadcast the access to the Presidential suite," Martina said, clutching her gun tightly.

"With all the crap we learnt recently," I said, "this isn't much."

"It ain't gonna be nothing when those elevator doors open," Andy said. "One thing guys, I want you to know that despite all the smart talk, I really--"

There was a bright bing sound that interrupted Andy. The elevator stopped.

"Presidential Suite," the automated voice announced, "restricted area--top level security personnel only."

The elevator door swung open.

"Okay, go," I said.

We rushed into the room. The three of us looked around in circles, searching for dangers--an assault situation—not what we found. It wasn't what we expected inside the residence of the most powerful person in the World Government. Looking from outside, up from the street--the actual penthouse suite looked very impressive. The outer walls were all windows, with picturesque views of the domed city and off into the cosmos beyond the dome. The tower stood higher than anything else in the domed city; therefore it had an unimpeded view of space beyond the station—of the stars and planets. The presidential suite was the only floor with a balcony. Below it was a circular tower of glass leading to the nightlife below—downtown. Looking up from there, you imagined a luxurious residence fit for royalty.

"Man, this looks familiar," I said, pointing to a control panel that stood in the middle of the hollow shell of an apartment.

"This isn't what I expected," Martina said, walking around the entire circular apartment.

Along all the windows were bits of furniture placed towards the possible prying eyes or telephoto lenses that could see this far up. If you looked in the windows, you would see all the

trappings of a real lived-in apartment. Yet, from the center where we stood, there was a bare cement floor, an information system's elaborate control panel; and lots of open space.

"Well, one thing's for sure," I said. "No one lives here."

"I'm going to try and log on here," Martina said. She sat down at the control panel identical to the one in the Project Cleanse lab, and went through the security checks of her palm and eye.

"Welcome to Project Cleanse Tina, where would you like to access?"

"Look," I said, "enter the simulation mode".

"Un-freaking-believable!" Andy said, "look at all the visuals, every facial expression and movement the president could ever make."

"Look at the arm waving," Martina said, "I'd seen him do that in every speech he makes--and over here is the audio options."

"Good evening fellow space station citizens," the simulated President said as Martina clicked on Standard Opening.

"No need to get too innovative--keep it standard. Here we go, I've set up the President for an upcoming speech. We can use the default settings and you simply need to input the speech data and--there ya go! --a Presidential speech."

"Look, look," Andy said, "if you look into this Political Media Control Module--there's Harrison--his last opponent."

"They're all fake!" I said, "every damn one of them."

"With the same detail," Martina said, "I could create and manipulate all of them."

"Ready to fool all the gullible citizens," I said, slapping my hand on the control panel.

"Looks like you control the World Government now Martina," Andy said.

"This is deeper than we thought," I said.

"It's not deep enough? What do you mean?" Andy said.

"Not only did they create our President, but they're creating all his political opponents. They not only control the current government, they've been simulating all the major candidates in our elections. Democracy, as we know it on the space station, is a simulation manipulated by my father and Dr. Svoboda. It's all a damn illusion. They've fooled us into believing we live in a democratic society, but they control everything."

"I wish I could argue with you on Tyler, but, but I don't see any other friggin' explanation." Martina admitted.

I went to the window, looking outside at the domed city, my home, where I had grown up; the only home I had ever known. Now I looked at it with new eyes. I smiled as I looked down at the streets I used to patrol, the streets where I thought I grew up. What a fool I was. My memories had my entire early life in the military sections of the space station. Home schooled by the military, no childhood friends, the only tangible relationships were from the police academy. Just my mother and father. No siblings. Little did I know that was when I came out of my tube; all memories up until then were artificial circuitry, installed by madmen. I thought of my mother. Those comforting, warm memories.

All artificial.

I felt sick to my stomach.

It was an amazing view from up there, one I had never seen before. I was up close to the dome and felt the closeness of outer space, of the distant cosmos. The city looked so small from up here, insignificant. Sadly, the City Central area which often would be bustling with action was now empty from the infamous Exodus. They had taken all the life, all the vibrancy, out of my home; and it made me angry. They had done the same thing on a grander scale to the planet I thought my ancestors came from; and it made me even angrier. I was overwhelmed by the whole situation, but the flow of life was leading me in a certain direction.

I was started to think like Doug!

I was one of the few innocents to have this information. I had to do something. I thought of Samuel, the man I had met so recently down on Earth; one of the most intriguing people I ever met. I realized now what he meant about the importance of the information, of history, of the truth. On the space station, we were kept far away from the truth of history.

What did Samuel call himself—the keeper of the flame?

I was one of the few privileged, or should I say cursed, to have extremely valuable information; and I knew I had to do something. I had to keep the flame alive. The streets along the extremity of the city were still well lit. Yes, the more affluent, the elite members of society in the Outskirts were continuing with life as usual. Were they aware of the atrocities that were being committed in their name? Were there other conspirators? Did they care? Was it ignorance of political events, cunning deception, or complete lack of caring?

I heard the familiar binging sound of the elevator.

“We have visitors,” Andy said.

"Be ready," Martina said. We aimed our guns towards the elevator doors.

"Back up, back up," I said, retreating, looking around for cover.

Before the doors were open more than a crack, we opened fire.

Like a dangerous light show, laser beams flew everywhere and I dropped behind the furniture along the window.

"There's three of 'em," Martina said. The three commandos quickly ducked behind the control panel close to the elevator.

"Someone's still in the elevator," I said.

I saw someone still in the elevator, ducking to the side of the doors, retreating to safe territory. It was my father. Andy and Martina took cover behind other furniture near the apartment's balcony. A laser smashed the furniture beside my head. A large chunk of wood splintered in front of my eyes.

“Watch yourself,” I yelled to Martina and Andy. “Their guns are on terminate.”

There was no answer, but Andy let out a primal yell as he stuck his head above a counter. He launched a barrage of fire towards the control panel and the open elevator door.

Sparks flew everywhere.

Smoke filled the air.

Technology disintegrated under the laser barrage.

There was silence for a moment; only the sizzling of fried circuitry, after-effects of Andy's offensive. Carefully, like a tiny Earth creature venturing out into the savage wilderness, I poked my head above my hiding place to see what had happened. On either side of my head, laser fire brushed by me, smashing a window. I heard the crashing of glass, the tiny pieces tinkling and falling endlessly to the street far below. We were at the penthouse apartment of the tower of City Central. The surrounding ghettos of City Central had been emptied out by the Exodus the population eagerly anticipated, but the downtown core was alive with action every night—filled with the young revellers from the Outskirts.

This night was no different.

I dropped down again, taking refuge behind the furniture. With the outside window now smashed behind me, along with all the chaotic sounds of fighting, I could hear the dull murmur of street activity below. The sound of lasers firing back and forth filled the room. I rose again, this time not having to look around. I fired where I knew the commandos were hiding. Again, the system's control panel was hit. I thought I saw one of the commandos falling backwards, but maybe it was just wishful thinking.

Martina and Andy rose to fire, and then I was sure, the other commando was on the ground. They were behind the control panel, protected from direct fire, but they must've been sent flying by the rocking of the panel. I stood up to look. The two were crawling on the ground, dazed. From the elevator, I saw the nightmarish figure of the man I thought was my father; and he threw something into the air, landing in the middle of the room. I saw the metallic cylinder as it lay there; the familiar red light beeping, getting faster and faster. The elevator doors shut.

"It's a grenade," I yelled.

Andy and Martina looked up, seeing the two commandos dazed on the ground and the elevator door shut. Andy ran over and tried to pick up the grenade, but we all knew that was useless. This type of grenade was fixed with a powerful suction and magnet apparatus—they stuck to wherever they were thrown—no matter what it was. There was no way to dislodge it. The red light beeped quicker, but there was still several seconds between each beep.

"We gotta get outa here!" Andy said jabbing on the elevator controls.

"Is there another elevator, another exit," Martina said.

We took off in opposite directions looking around the circular floor of the suite. It didn't take long to run around the big empty space. We were trapped. Martina and I nearly ran into each other after our trip around the apartment. We both stared into each other's anxious eyes, then our attention diverted to the ever-increasing beeping sound coming from the grenade at our feet.

"The commandos," I said. "Let's check their utility belts."

We ran over to the two unconscious soldiers.

"Bingo," Martina said. "They have climbing lines attached to their belts."

Their belts were actually full harnesses, and attached to the harnesses was a tightly wound thin, strong, climbing wire. We quickly started removing the two harnesses with the belts on them. I

tried hard to focus on what I was doing, work towards the only thing that could save us, without panicking over the dreaded bomb that was creating all our stress. My father had set a long time delay, giving himself plenty of time to escape. The horrific beep beeping was pounding in my head, but I concentrated, I focused. It was only when I had it half on, and Martina the same, when I stopped, realizing.

“There are only two!”

Martina and I both looked at Andy.

“Just get going as fast as you can,” Andy implored. “The first to the bottom removes his belt and clicks the recoil button. It shoots up to me and then I’m off.”

“But-- ” I started.

“Shut up and move Jonz! There’s no time,” he yelled. “It can’t hold both of us.”

We got our belts on. We attached the combination suction-hooks at the end of the climbing wire to a central pillar, and then we both ran for the balcony. Looking over the edge, I realized I was a little afraid of heights, but I quickly thought that I was more afraid of ticking bombs.

“The line’s secure?” I yelled to Andy.

He pulled on both our lines to check them. “Yeah, gooo!”

We both leapt over the balcony and fell ten or fifteen feet before the line tightened and we were stopped, dangling in the air over the city. It was a frenetic view, a completely different angle to a familiar place. The lights of downtown below, the now abandoned City Central around it, the calm suburbia of the Outskirts, the dome itself, danced in front of my eyes.

“Release your line as fast as you can!” Martina cried.

I released my line and I could see Andy out on the balcony. He was checking the line, making sure they were secure. I can’t remember the last look that was on his face. I just remember him checking our lines. We dropped quickly down the side of the glass tower. We were trying to go as quickly as possible, I remember that. To this day, I still see him checking our lines, worrying about us. He must've heard the increased frequency of the grenade beeping. He must've known it was about to go off.

The heat of the explosion wafted into my face as I came to the end of the climbing wire, Martina dangled beside me, like a roughed up puppet. Tiny shards of glass rained down on top of us as we hung there, only about twenty feet above a covered terrace on ground level. I released my line as quickly as I could, and I fell into the covered terrace. Martina did the same beside me and the cover broke our fall. We landed on tables.

I heard the tables cracking and chairs flying as we thudded down not too far from some patrons’ heads. I heard the sound of people screaming and yelling. We'd created quite a commotion. Night time partygoers had their attentions quickly diverted, but I realized soon enough that few were looking at us. Quickly, I detached myself from the harness and clicked the recoil button, but the wire didn't recoil up into the air. The harness bounced around over the canopy where we landed. The wire was no longer a taut line running vertically to the Presidential suite at the top of the tower. I could see the line meandering around the downtown area, the harness following close behind.

I picked myself up and ran into the street, looking up at the destroyed Presidential suite.

"Aaaandy!"

Chapter 15

“We’ve got to get back into the elevator,” I said.

“But how? Its shaft travels up the center of the building and I think the only exit is at the Presidential suite,” Martina said. “There’s no access from ground level.”

“We’ll make a damn access. If we have to, we’ll use one of these,” I said, taking out my laser gun.

There were police starting to come over from the security checkpoints into City Central. We were right downtown. We were at street level, the same area we were partying before we had left on our Earth mission. The same roundabout was always filled with space station citizens. It seemed like a lifetime had come and gone since then. The police were talking on their communication devices, yelling narratives of the scene to dispatch. One noticed me with my laser gun and it attracted his attention. He took out his gun and aimed it at me.

“Freeze, Police!”

I put my arms in the air, looking at the panicked officer coming carefully towards me. I knew him.

“Robbins, it’s me, Jonz—Tyler Jonz.”

Robbins, another young cop only a few years older than me, recognized me and put his weapon down. “Jonz, what the hell is going on here? Did you just scale the tower?”

“Yeah, we’re trying to stop terrorists threatening the government. We were fighting them upstairs, when they pitched a grenade.”

“The President, was he up there?”

“No, he wasn’t. He’s safe. There’s no time to explain all that. The terrorists escaped down a special security elevator traveling down the center of the building.”

“There’s another one apart from the elevators going up the sides?”

“Yeah. It’s only for top brass. Quickly, we’ve got to get into that elevator shaft. We’ll have to use our lasers on full force. Can you keep people away from us?”

“I have to check with my captain,” he said.

“There’s no time! I’m on a special mission for my father. We HAVE to hurry.”

There was a moment’s hesitation as he looked at me.

“Okay, let’s go.”

The explosion had drawn everyone out to the large circular roundabout surrounding the central tower. It was the widest street in the entire dome city and it was packed with people. Normally, the bar we walked into would be teeming with humanity; but everyone was outside, even the bartenders and waitresses.

“What was that noise?” one bartender said.

"It came from the top of the tower," a girl answered.

"All of you, get off the street, let us handle it!" a cop was vainly trying to control the growing crowd.

"Make sure your laser is on full force," Martina said.

We both adjusted our guns as we went to the center of the bar. It was the dish washing area. We saw the central pillar standing behind some sinks and dish racks. The cop followed us. "This is an elevator shaft?" he said.

"Yeah," Martina said. "and it's about to have a big hole in it soon. Watch your eyes!"

We both aimed our guns at the central pillar and started firing.

"It's strong as hell this thing," I said, our guns aiming a constant laser at the central elevator shaft metal pillar.

"Just keep firing!" Martina said, "it's gonna be quicker this way than digging with a kitchen spoon."

We both started coughing as smoke started filling the room. Sparks were lighting up the shaft.

I heard a metallic cracking sound and then a loud thunk.

"I think we made a hole," I said.

"It's working," Martina said, "widen it a bit."

As soon as the initial hole was made, it became much easier to widen. The surrounding shaft wall almost flaked off once it was pierced. We made a hole that either of us could fit in easily. I approached.

"Careful Tyler, let it cool off."

It was hard to wait, and the smoke had to dissipate anyway before we could see anything. Finally, a few minutes later, we could look up and down. In a way I was disappointed. I don't know what I expected, we didn't have the time to really form any theories; but I looked up, then down—and I saw nothing but dangling cables and darkness.

"Let's go," Martina said, pulling on one of the larger cables to make sure it was secure, and then jumping on to it.

"Don't you think, maybe--"

"No time to think Jonz. He's getting away."

"What about Andy?"

"There's no way Tyler, no way he could've survived. We've the whole world to worry about now."

She was right. I looked into the shaft again, looking up and then down. It was dark and smoky. The crumbled bits of cement I knocked off while climbing onto one of the cables fell off down the shaft. I heard the pieces falling and falling, seemingly endlessly, before hitting something down below. It would be a long drop that was for sure! I made sure my grip was tight as I started down; Martina was already about twenty feet ahead of me, disappearing into the darkness.

“What do you want me to do?” Officer Robbins yelled down, his voice echoing.

“I dunno. Make sure nobody drops anything heavy down the hole!” I said.

As I got down the cable, the light from the hole started fading. I looked up and the cable dangled precariously. Momentum started me rocking and I banged against the side of the elevator shaft. I was in good shape, but my arms were starting to tire. When I found myself swaying in the air, not knowing how close the bottom was; panic was beginning to set in.

“What the hell are you doing?” Martina yelled up.

“Trying to stay alive!”

“Well, quite rocking the cables,” she said.

We both plodded carefully downwards. This time I made sure my legs were wrapped safely around the cable below me.

Soon, light started increasing in the shaft, and to my surprise, it was coming from below. I was looking down with optimism at the light from below when I heard Martina cry, “Whooo hooo, all right!”

“What is it?”

“The bottom man, the bottom.”

I heard Martina’s feet hit the ground and I knew there was not much more to go. We both found ourselves on top of the elevator, light beaming in from the seams between the elevator top and the shaft. There was a lighted room down there. We opened the trap door on the elevator roof and dropped into the elevator. The door was already open and my eyes squinted from the bright white neon lighting. As my eyes adjusted, I realized we were in a station, much like the ones in the PTP that the general public could use. But this system had only the elevator to access it, and there was not a soul around. It was eerie to stand there.

“It only goes in one direction,” Martina said. “That eliminates another decision.”

“It’s the same one we came in on.” I said. “I guess there are only a few places to go. It’s not like the PTP.”

“I don’t know, look at this pod,” Martina said. The pod was longer and more spacious than the ones from the PTP system.

“Better quality for the VIPs, but still only built for one,” I said, pointing to the only one available.

“We’re wasting time. Get in.”

“I guess we have to share,” I said, opening the pod door.

“We’re going far Jonz.”

I sat down and Martina sat down on top of me, cramped, but we both fit in.

“What sort of destinations do we have?” I asked.

“Let’s see, the interface shows we have four choices: laboratory, military office, science office, and presidential suite. I guess Presidential Suite would be out of the question, so that leaves three choices.”

“We better go to the laboratory.”

“It’s your funeral,” Martina said.

“Your sarcasm is grating right now Martina.”

“Just push the frigging button!”

“Hang on.”

The pod shot off. The pod meandered around the tube system.

The pod came to a smooth stop at the laboratory station. It was deserted, but there were no stairwells leading up in several directions like in a typical PTP station. There was another elevator, just like the one leading to the Presidential suite.

“What crazy surprises do they have for us now,” I said.

“No choice Jonz. We’ve got to stop those bastards.”

“Let’s go,” I said as we entered the elevator.

The doors shut behind us.

"I'm gonna develop a fear of elevators soon," I said. We had our guns out and ready.

"I'm getting a fear of damn near everything," Martina said. The elevator rose.

When the elevator stopped, the automated voice said: "Secondary Project Cleanse Laboratory--restricted area--Second level security required."

Martina looked at me and said, “For Andy.”

“For Andy,” I acknowledged as the elevator doors slid open.

The laboratory had much equipment and cots. I saw some cylinders but they all looked empty.

Dr. Svoboda was there, sitting in front of a control panel. My father’s image was up in a hologram. They were communicating as Martina and I walked in.

“These recent situations force us to speed up the timetable,” my father said.

As we walked in, the doctor fumbled in his chair and fell to the ground. He was startled and grasped for something. He tripped and rolled on the floor.

“Looking for something doctor?” Martina said as we approached him.

“What's going on?” my father asked.

I could from his projected hologram that he was in yet another control center.

“You need to finish up and join me at the Project Cleanse Dispatch doc—” my father said, before the doctor lunged out and shut down the telecommunication.

“Okay, he’s at the Project Cleanse Dispatch,” I said. “Didn’t want us to know that, did you doctor?”

Martina and I both advanced towards Dr. Svoboda. He was paler than usual, wearing his usual lab coat.

“There is no reason for you two not to be involved in our work,” he began.

“Are you for real? Come off of it doctor,” I said. “You were getting ready to dissect me like an animal very recently.”

“Now, now,” he said. “You have to understand, it's not personal. We are working for the betterment of mankind in general. There is no time for personal feelings. Your situation, or even mine, is not important. We need to put that aside to work for the future.”

“Wow, even yours.” I said, gritting my teeth. “Even your situation is not important, how noble of you doctor. I am really quite impressed. It appears to me that your motivation is much more selfish than that. Now that your life is in danger, you're willing to change everything, take us on board as new partners, right doctor?”

“Well, we can adjust, a few minor changes; the main goal is still the same.”

“Oh, really doctor? The main goal is still the same and what is that?”

“The betterment of mankind,” he said.

I laughed.

We were approaching the doctor. I could see beads of sweat on his forehead. I realized at that second that my laser gun was still set at maximum force. I was ready to squeeze the trigger; hunger for revenge was seething in my body. Martina looked at me.

“Hold on a second Tyler. We need this guy.”

I looked at her.

“You must realize how important this work we are doing here is,” Dr. Svoboda said.

“You call this madness important? Maybe, but not in a good way,” Martina said.

“Madness, is that what you see? Do you have any idea how much work is involved here? This is not some college project. We are on the verge of perfecting human genetic makeup. It will be the foundation of Earth's new population. The flaws that have tainted humanity and been the source of so much conflict and misery will be gone. Do you understand what that means? It would be madness not to share this brilliant discovery with the world.”

“I've been to Earth Dr. Svoboda,” I said. “Maybe you could fool some space station dwellers who hadn't seen any of your so-called 'genetic deviants', but I know better. I met a man, doctor, who knows more about history, about life, than you could ever understand.”

“Don't fall for some primitive mumbo jumbo young man.”

“Primitive mumbo jumbo! Oh doctor, you'd make me laugh if you weren't so ruthlessly evil. You think you're a great thinking mind, don't you? You think because you have amassed so much scientific knowledge that you're open-minded, able to see the world clearly. Well, let me tell you something: I have met people, different types of people, that at first shocked me, scared me; but then, as you speak to them, you realize—we are all the same. You've bought into an obsession, a simple-minded primitive prejudiced way of looking at the world—and then you've dressed it up with all kinds of fancy scientific window-dressing and decor—but, you know what? It's built on a foundation of ignorance and lies—which makes it valueless and, more than that—just plain wrong! People are the same—good doctor. It's not genes that make any difference. People like you, in power, are just trying to justify their oppressive control. That's it doctor—and you're one of the main problems.”

“You don’t understand,” he started.

“I do understand doctor. I understand you missed one basic fundamental in life. We're all the same species. You're a scientist, aren't you? You're searching for differences, tiny features, skin colour, eye colour, reasons, excuses for your agenda. The reality is we're all very similar.”

“You're young,” he said, daring to stand up and walk over to a central column with a sliding door as access. “You're very young; the two of you, but you have shown great character. We don't have any soldiers who are privy to the full project, apart from you two.”

“We used to be four, and then three, and only two now,” Martina said.

“Yes, but that's the past,” he said. “We have so much to do, and you two could help us improve the future.”

“You don’t have a clue doctor,” I said. “You’re life is dissecting the world to its parts, while remaining oblivious to the whole. Besides, you've some nerve, the only reason we are privy to the full project is our own doing. You don't need or want informed soldiers.”

He put a hand on the column control panel and said, “That’s not true. It's true that it wasn't part of the original plan, but plans can be changed. We can adapt. Project Cleanse has adapted to changes through the generations. To prove to you that I want you two involved, I will show you something. In here, is my greatest achievement; I want to share it with the two of you.”

“Careful, doctor,” Martina said.

We both had our guns pointed at Dr. Svoboda as he touched the button on the control panel to open the sliding doors.

"Freeze Doctor!" Martina said, but Dr. Svoboda didn't listen.

"There's a vehicle in there," I said.

"We've got to stop him Jonz!"

Svoboda jumped into the vehicle. The sliding doors starting closing behind him. The closest to the doors, I threw my body between them.

“Don’t let him get away,” Martina cried.

I felt the doors slam on my chest.

They weren't like regular elevator doors. The force was stronger than expected. It knocked the wind out of me and I grunted as the air left my lungs. My gun fell to the ground at the base of the vehicle. I pulled my body into the launch area but the doors closed again, this time on my ankle. I felt hot pain shoot through my leg, radiating up from the ankle. I pulled my leg in, and the doors closed. Martina was banging on the doors from the other side. I found myself, winded, injured, unarmed; leaning on the vehicle. Dr. Svoboda gritted his teeth, looked at me and quickly played with some controls. The wing doors of the vehicle started to close. I kicked the driver’s door back up with my sore leg, and the pain rekindled. I threw myself at the doctor.

“Get out of here, you failed experiment!”

He hit me repeatedly in the head as I tried to get in. I was trying to pull him out of the driver’s seat. I tried with all my might to get at the controls of the vehicle, but he managed to beat me out of the way. I managed to get into the back seat, but my head was reeling. I could taste my own

blood in my mouth, and one eye was stinging. I fell across the seats in back. I could see smoke coming from between the sliding doors to the entrance of the column shaped launch pad. Dr. Svoboda shut the doors to the vehicle. He entered a few commands into the vehicle's system and the system's voice announced, "Destination—Earth Base—Port 12A—Top Level Security Clearance Required. Please place palm for verification." The system scanned Dr. Svoboda's palm and eye. "Security clearance accepted. Destination acknowledged."

The vehicle thrust up in the air, like a speck of dust caught up in a powerful vacuum cleaner. We were tossed up. We found ourselves floating softly for an instant, about a hundred feet above the space station. From this vantage point, all that could be seen was the huge surface of the station.

I lay there for a moment, trying to regain my strength, feeling the air slowly returning to my lungs. The doctor had his back turned, staring straight out the front windshield when the tiny shuttle directed itself and accelerated with great speed. The force pushed me back in my seats.

I felt for my belt. The doctor heard me pulling it off my pants and he turned around, startled. I had time to wrap it around his neck. He gasped for air as I tightened the belt. He fought hard and it took all my strength to hold him. My head was aching from the beating and my limbs screamed in pain as I strained to keep that evil doctor in my grasp. His feet thrashed at the control panel and the shuttle jerked around aimlessly. It did a 180 and climbed into the air. Dr. Svoboda and I were thrown around the shuttle. My head slammed against the windshield. The doctor started hitting me as my grip on the belt around his neck loosened.

Looking out the window, space and the station swirled around as the shuttle spun out of control. We were heading right for the hard side of the station. The doctor saw it too and screamed as we careened towards the tough surface. I sat at the controls and pulled back as hard as I could. We rose, but it was as if the station went on forever. No matter how much we climbed, all we saw was the station surface; and it was approaching quickly. I kept pulling back with all my might on the controls and we scraped the side of the station. The shuttle jerked off again to the right as we continued to take off upwards. The doctor had been trying to stand up when we were sure we would hit, and now that we had just scraped against the side of the station, the impact sent him flying to the side of the vehicle.

He was knocked out cold.

The instrumentation and controls were very similar to a standard hovercraft, but not quite the same. I managed to control the shuttle as we passed beside the station. I pulled away from the station and towards open space, so the navigational errors I made while trying to learn the shuttle's controls had less effect. Soon I steadied the craft.

"Stability regained. Continue to Preset Destination?" the automated system said.

"Negative," I said. "Return to Departure point."

The automated flying system proved to be much smoother than my manual attempts. We approached the station portal and I could see a cylindrical hatch opening up. We hovered over the top of it for a second, then the craft was sucked into the cylinder, and I found myself back in the launch pad for the secondary Project Cleanse laboratory.

I heard Dr. Svoboda moaning. Hydraulic stabilizers came out of the launch pad and securely grabbed the craft. While checking the control panel's screens for any warnings, I heard from the back seat, "You've been way too much trouble young man."

I felt a sharp pain in the back of my head. There was no way his weak little scientist's fist could hurt that much. I felt another shot in the back of my head and almost passed out, but I managed to open the wing doors and lean out. I was lying flat. Svoboda had to come to the front to get at me. As he climbed over to the front seat, he was off-balance. While he was in that prone position, he was crawling over my legs. I kneed him and he went flying over top of me, banging his head on the winged door, and tumbling out onto the launch pad floor. I closed the winged doors, locking myself in the craft.

With the craft securely attached to the launch pad, I opened the launch cylinder's hatch out to the exterior. Svoboda had gotten up and was climbing on the shuttle. He was looking straight at me through the windshield. His screaming was muffled as I was locked into the shuttle. His face was red and his teeth clenched. He looked up wide-eyed as the launch hatch started opening.

He was sucked out the hatch; hurled out into space like a rag doll.

I closed the outer hatch, decompressed the shuttle's chamber, and opened the launch cylinder's doors, just in time to see Martina standing there, anxious and curious.

"What happened? Where's Svoboda?"

"He went for a ride outside."

"What! He's outside? Is he still alive?"

"Would be pretty hard."

"Then, he's dead?"

"I don't know. I hear he's got good genes. Maybe they're strong enough to hold his body together when launched into space."

Chapter 16

We were in a speed shuttle designed for the select few; out and headed to a nearby port--the Project Cleanse Dispatch. It was still night. The distance between the station and Earth dome seemed much shorter than in one of the clunky shuttles regular citizens used. It was not long before I could see the new settlements below us. Apart from the eerie glow within the dome of the Earth base, across the plateau were some lights in the buildings and a pair of headlights of some vehicle creeping along in the wee night hours.

“There it is,” Martina said.

The automated navigation system was leading us to a port near the front of the Earth base. The shuttle circled around the front of the dome. We were hovering down on ground level and approaching slowly. In front of us was a cylindrical hatch, below the floor level of the base. I could see the dispatch and a few soldiers working on the main floor. The hatch opened to a basement level I hadn't realized even existed.

“Be ready for anything,” I said as the cylindrical hatch opened.

“Easy thing to say,” she answered.

We both had our lasers out, ready to fight. I felt cornered, awaiting danger while trapped in a tiny shuttle. My hand was on the control to open the wing doors.

“Open those doors now Jonz. I want to be ready to hop out.”

I opened the doors and felt the warm wind of Earth's atmosphere; a warm, pleasant night. The hatch was completely open now and the shuttle passed into a smaller, less impressive room than I had expected. There were video screens all around the sides of the room, monitoring different areas. In the center of the room was a familiar style control panel. It was just like the ones at Svoboda's main laboratory and at the fake presidential suite. As we entered into the room, the shuttle automatically moored beside another identical shuttle.

Martina and I slipped out of the craft, as silently as possible. Right in front of us, with his back to us, was my father working at the control panel. As we approached my father from behind, the system's voice announced, “Launch sequence at five minutes. Supplementary dome protection enabled.”

“Svoboda, where were you? You shouldn't hang up on me in the middle of a transmission. You were supposed to be here over an hour ago,” my father said.

We continued to creep up to him, our guns pointed straight at the small of his back. I noticed his back suddenly become rigid. Losing his relaxed gait, you could see his movements take on an uneasy feel. He quickly entered a few commands into the system and turned around slowly.

“So, you two are still alive.”

“Sorry to disappoint you General Jonz,” Martina said.

“Why are you so calm?” I said, my gun pointed square between his eyes.

He laughed. “If you wanted to just shoot me, you would've done it already. If you want to talk to me first, I may have some things to tell you that might sway you in another direction.”

“You have that smug attitude again,” I said. “The same one you had when I was strapped onto the lab table in the main laboratory.”

“Well, let’s put it this way. You can kill me now, but there's something you should know first.”

“What is that?” Martina said.

“The launch sequence is underway.”

“We’ll stop it,” I said.

“That would require my identification.”

“Don't worry about system access. Your big mouth is going to get you in trouble.”

“My, my,” my father said, “how arrogant of you; giving yourself top security access, a couple of rookies like yourselves. Anyway, that’s not good enough.”

“Whadaya mean?”

“Do you think I would let just anyone control the project? It is only I, not even Svoboda has the proper access. Don’t tell him, he'd be quite angry.”

“Don’t worry,” Martina said. “I don’t think he'd care right now.”

“So, I guess I may have a gun to your heads too, or to everyone on Earth, right Tyler? You wouldn’t want anything to happen to your girlfriend, would you? Or any of your poor buddies from the slums?”

“How dare you talk about people like that! Turn the thing off, or I’ll kill you right here—damn you!”

“Let’s think a second now son,” he said. “Do you really want to do that?”

“Turn it off!” I yelled.

“No, what're you going to do?”

“I’m going to kill you and use your palm scan and eye scan to stop the bomb launch.”

“My, how ruthless. I didn’t think you had it in you, son,” he said. “You’ve improved since we sent you on that experimental mission.”

“Was that it,” I said. “You bastard—the mission—just a psychological test for your fancy experiment?”

“You HAVE to check prototypes in the field, Tyler--both vehicles and genetic creations. We figured we could kill two birds with one stone, both you and the Covert.”

“What’s he talking about Tyler?” Martina asked.

“Now’s not—not the time—Martina,” I said. “That’s crazy? Even if it was true, you could track our coordinates maybe--but how could you monitor us? We were off on an Earth mission.”

He laughed. “Crazy, you say. Don’t label something as crazy just because you don’t understand it.”

“What's he talking about Tyler?” Martina implored.

“You're a master manipulator, aren't you?” I said. “A little distraction, is that what this is?”

“It's just the truth,” he said. “Take it as you wish.”

“It's impossible, to monitor us would--” I said.

“It's starting to sink in now,” he said. “If we could fill your brain with circuitry to simulate memories, how hard would it be to put in a tracking device?”

“Be quiet!” I yelled.

“What crap are you spouting?” Martina said.

“How about other things? The eyes are wonderful organs. They transmit visual data most efficiently. Don't you think if we knew enough about the nervous system, we could maybe be able to intercept that data? Don't you think that'd be a perfect way to monitor someone?”

“Shut up!” I yelled. “That's insane!”

“Really,” my father said, pointing to one of the monitors on the wall in back of him. “Does this video feed look familiar?”

I looked at the screen. It was like looking at a thousand mirrors, one inside the other--looking at a screen that was displaying exactly what you saw. Inside the screen was another vision of the surrounding area and that screen itself within. An infinite series of views from my eyes. I looked away for a second. I looked back.

"My eyes, my eyes are the monitors for this, this video feed," I said, looking at Martina's bewildered face.

"That's not pos--," she said, looking back and forth between me and the screen.

“And why not install a positional tracking system right in the body? I mean, we wouldn't want to rely on you carrying your identification card,” he said.

“Please—father—no,” I said.

“Look at you,” he said. “Are you going to pass out? This is why you're nothing but a failed experiment.”

“Will someone tell me what's going on?” Martina pleaded.

“Please, stop,” I said.

“You see what I mean?” he said. “Some of your performance in the field, it was quite acceptable, but the emotional and mental weaknesses make you virtually useless from a military perspective.”

My father leant on the control panel, touching a control. I felt the control panel swivel.

"The ground is moving," Martina said.

I felt myself lose balance, tumble to the ground.

"He's getting away," Martina cried as she fell beside me. "Pick up your gun!"

"Not so fast General Jonz!" I cried.

"Quick, before he gets into the shuttle," Martina said as she looked around for her weapon.

I fired, but the laser deflected harmlessly off the windshield.

"Damn!" Martina cried. She'd found her weapon and fired; but it also deflected harmlessly off the windshield--sparks flying off a corner of the laboratory wall.

"He's getting away," I said. "The portal is opening!"

Warm night air blew in from the open portal as my father's craft took off into the night.

"Quick, get into the other shuttle," I cried.

"What about the bomb launch?" Martina said.

We stood over the control panel; feverishly scanning it.

"There it is," Martina said.

She slammed her open palm down on the button, the mechanical whirring sound, which had been escalating suddenly diminished.

"Done," I said.

"Getting used to these controls," Martina said, "now let's get him!"

We both jumped into the other shuttle. The last thing I heard as we closed the shuttle's doors was the system's voice saying, "Launch sequence aborted."

We took off into the night sky.

My father's shuttle could be seen in the distance. The first orange rays of the sun were seeping into the deep black sky; a new dawn was coming.

"There he is," Martina said.

I could see the red and orange lights of my father's shuttle in the distance. He wasn't moving fast, maybe setting coordinates, maybe not even having any idea where he was headed. Anger built quickly in me as I pulled on the pilot joystick and sped towards his shuttle. We were approaching him from behind when he started accelerating.

"He's not going to get away that easily," I said.

"I'm going to prepare the attack system," Martina said.

"We have to do what we have to do," I said.

We were getting close enough to see clearly the details of the taillights. His shuttle rose abruptly straight into the air.

"He knows how to fly that thing," Martina said.

His shuttle disappeared from our view.

"Can you see him on the radar?"

"He's looping Tyler, right over top of us. He's coming down from behind."

I turned hard to the right, not to continue in a straight course, not to be an easy target. Good thing I did, because a missile swooshed by the pilot's side of the craft moments later.

The one thing I had in my head was to keep flying erratically, unpredictably, or we were going to be hit. Another missile zinged by the left side of the shuttle. We were running scared. Military dispatch was trying to make radio contact with us. We ignored it.

“Get me in position,” Martina said, ready at the controls of the attack system.

I pushed the controls down to dive towards the ground.

“What the hell are you doooooiiiiing!” Martina cried as the ground rushed up towards us.

I was trying a loop just like my father, but heading downwards. I remember just concentrating on pushing the controls forward with all my might, trying to get the craft to loop as tightly as possible. We were completely upside down and the ground felt like it was brushing on the top of the vehicle. I heard Martina screaming as we came back around on the loop.

As we came around top again, my father’s craft was in front of us. He was turning sharply to the right. I don’t know whether it was just dumb luck or good strategy, but I managed to turn off to the right at the same time as him, finding ourselves again right on his tail. Seizing the opportunity, Martina fired three times in succession.

“We got him,” she declared as a slight explosion erupted and my father’s craft dropped off sharply to the right.

His craft was reeling out of control, heading back towards where we came from. I could see the craft trying to climb. We were still over the safe zone around the Earth station, not too far from the newly constructed settlements.

“He’s going down for sure,” I said. We turned to follow.

“I think he still has control.”

“Not very much.”

It looked as if he was struggling to land the wounded shuttle in a somewhat successful way. The first lights of dawn were still very faint, so we couldn’t really see. I strained to see what was happening.

"No big explosion, no big impact," I said.

The shuttle's radio suddenly blurted out contact with military dispatch, “Craft 7542, you are performing illegal manoeuvres, please respond immediately.”

“Crap, they keep trying to get involved. What should we say?” I said.

“Absolutely nothing. Let's land,” Martina said.

I flew the shuttle down towards my father’s landing spot. I descended, scoping the landscape for the wounded vehicle. The dawn’s light was increasing with each passing minute as we searched over the shadowy-orange surface of the safe zone’s plateau. There were different tufts of growth and small trees growing everywhere. As I looked around, everything looked like a shuttle for the first millisecond. We were right down on the surface, hovering maybe ten feet above it, scouring around, when Martina said, “its right there!”

My father’s shuttle was nose down into the ground. It had been a rough landing, but the vehicle was still intact.

“The winged doors are open,” I noticed. “He’s on foot.”

We were hovering down beside the vehicle now, on ground level. We both got out of the shuttle, our guns ready.

“Look, footprints on the ground,” Martina said. “There. Leading off in this direction.” Through the increasing light of dawn, we could see the silhouette of the new settlement appearing in the direction that my father had run.

“Let's go get that bastard,” I said.

“Okay,” Martina said. “Let's get a move on.”

She started off in front of me, heading for the town, ready for action and then she suddenly stopped, remembering. She turned to me and said, “Tyler, what was he talking about? All that business about circuitry to simulate memories, intercepting visual data from the eyes—what was he saying?”

“I was born in one of those cylinders, Martina. I was the first prototype.”

She grabbed my arm and stopped me.

“What? Didn't you know then?”

“No. I had no idea. They have implanted memory circuitry in my head. I just found out about all the rest, what he said. I can't explain. I don't understand it really. They, my father and Svoboda, they seem to be the only ones who know the full story.”

Martina frowned. She looked at me, and then down at the ground.

“You can't look at me anymore.”

Looking up she said, “No, no, it's just too much to take in.”

“I know, imagine me.”

“We're wasting time. We need to find your father.”

“I'll go on foot. I don't think he has a weapon.”

“Don't assume that. He's a dangerous man. We have to assume he's armed. Maybe there was something in the shuttle.”

“That's true. You take the shuttle, patrol around the area. I'm going on foot.”

“Tyler--” she said, but I was already running towards the town.

It was hard to face someone and tell them the dark secrets that I was carrying. Hell, if I was faced with someone like me, I wouldn't know how I'd react. I had to immerse myself in our new mission—the one we had assigned ourselves—to save the world from tyranny.

It felt good to run.

Chapter 17

The Earth base was in the middle of a large mountain range, but was built on a huge, flat plateau. The first settlement and the safe zone around the Earth base were all on the same extensive plateau. The geographic metaphor was vast and appropriate; a large flat plain within the rocky and dangerous mountains. Leaving the dome of the Earth base, everywhere you looked on the horizon were majestic mountains, but the plateau around it was flat.

I was out on the flat plain running towards the settlement. Behind me was the round glass bowl of the Earth base shining in the morning sun, surrounded by mountains. From this vantage point the dome was formidable and it spoiled the pristine view of the mountain range. --but I didn't look back to the dome for very long. I was looking ahead to the settlement which was visible at the far end of the plateau.

Around the entire plateau area, World Government troops kept vegetation cut to the ground. Around the town, some trees were allowed to grow; and I could see them along with the humble buildings of the town. There were attempts to give the town some ambiance, but you could see it was thrown together haphazardly. From a distance it looked like a decent little town, yet as you approached it looked crude, put together without any care, no real finishing touches--still waiting for the human touches that could only come with time. I ran hard. Adrenaline must've been pumping strongly through my system. It had to be a good mile across that plateau on foot, but I felt no fatigue. I knew who was in that town--and I feared the latest arrival in their midst.

As the town got closer, I could see the outskirts take more definition. There were several even rows of houses with some higher buildings towards the back of the town--towards the mountains.

I arrived in the town. I was surrounded by the buildings. Maybe it'd seem cozy under different circumstances. There was just enough superficial ambiance created to fool the sheep herded into this doomed town. The edge of town ended abruptly; the rows of identical houses stopping suddenly--like town planning was given only a minimal amount of energy. Along these edges, there were a few people on the streets. I almost ran into an old man. He looked at my gun and said, "Hey, I don't want no trouble." Backing away from me with his hands in the air, he looked backwards towards one of the entrances to a row house.

"Did you see a man run into town, probably injured? One who wasn't here with the Exodus?"

"I don't want no trouble," he repeated, backing up a little more quickly to one of the houses. From that house, I could see an old woman looking at him and me in horror--gesturing for him to come in.

"Forget it," I said and he ran into the home, slamming the door.

I looked around. The only other people were a young couple, with strange haircuts and rebellious clothing.

"It's important I find this man," I said to them. "He's dangerous, dangerous to everyone in this town."

The young man said, "He's injured a little all right, hobbling on one leg, heading in that direction. I think he ducked into one of the buildings on the right. He looks mean man. I'd watch out for that dude."

"You don't know how right you are," I said, running down the main street.

The main street contained a bunch of modest residential houses crammed together--identical entry doors and picture windows along both sides of the straight street. Looking inside, I could see lights being flicked on. The sounds of residents rising in the morning. One frightened old woman stared wide-eyed at me as I passed in front of her house. There were so many doors. He could've ducked into any one of them.

Then I heard the sound of a woman screaming.

It came from a little farther ahead. I ran up to the door. It was swinging open, the doorframe busted. I held my gun high in one hand, pushing the door open with the other. There in the middle of a modest kitchen, was a young woman, breathing heavily, panicked, but trying to keep quiet. My father had his arm securely locked around her neck. The room had a kitchenette and living room all together. I could see one of the kitchen chairs lying on its side--cracked down the middle. Glistening in the morning sun filtering through the front window of the house, was a knife blade; it was held in the white-knuckled fist of my father. He was holding the knife across the neck of the girl. She was looking at the blade, looking at me, crying.

"Does she look familiar?" my father said.

I looked deep in her panicked eyes. She looked at me. I did recognize her.

"Melissa?" I said.

"That's right," my father said. "Looks like I still have an ace up my sleeve."

"You just never stop, do you. What makes you tick?"

"You wouldn't understand. You're too small-minded, sleeping with some whore, instead of concentrating on your destiny."

"My destiny Dad, what is that?"

"You don't have any now; you blew it a long time ago."

"I bet you still have a destiny, don't you Dad?"

"Stop calling me that?! I had to put up with it before--but you know better now!"

"Sorry to bother you Dad--old habits die hard. You shouldn't have put that crap in my head if you didn't want it to take."

I looked at Melissa, the knife pressed against her neck, unable to speak.

"Why don't you let her go? Why does your destiny always include hurting others?"

"Stop worrying about superficial details and think of the big picture!"

"The big picture—is that what you call it? The big picture of a clean Earth, free of all the vermin, the genetically inferior ethnics that ruin everything; the big picture of your heaven filled with perfect people, doing perfect things, perfectly. What happened to your big picture Dad? Wasn't

this grandiose madness started with the chosen people taken to the space station? But then what happened?"

"There are always phases to any big project."

"No, I'm sure the madmen who implemented that phase were just as sure as you are now that they had the solution to Earth's problems."

"You're too simple to understand; the situation is more complicated than that. These people, barbarian terrorists, they still run free on the Earth. You were down here, you know it's true. Look at the terrorists still attacking us, jealous of democracy and freedom, a bunch of religious fanatics. I know more about it than you could even fathom--not just Earth."

"You leave the world in a state of anarchy, desperation; and when there are groups of angry fanatics that lash back at their tormentors, you use it as an excuse to punish everyone. You're right, I've been on Earth. I've seen the warlords, the terrorist extremists, but I've also seen a lot of ordinary people, innocent people; trying to survive. Why do you keep dropping bombs on them?"

"We haven't had many bombing campaigns recently, but we had to test our weaponry. Besides, with the development of the stronger bombs, these people were all expendable. If you hadn't screwed everything up, we would've made a clean sweep. You messed up the first bomb, and now I can't launch the others. It would've cleaned everything up."

"Just let her go. She has no part in this."

"Sure she has a part. Do you think I chose this house by mere coincidence? I made sure I knew her address all along. Now, you're going to let me go and take your shuttle; and she won't get hurt."

I steadied the gun in my hand. I already had it pointed square between his eyes; and I squinted, ready to fire. He looked at me, smiling. "You wouldn't dare. You don't have it in you. Besides, think a little. Don't do anything rash, out of anger, just for yourself."

"I'm not doing this for myself. I'm doing it for all of humanity."

I fired my gun.

My hands were steady and the beam hit him square between his eyes. He fell over backwards, the knife clanging to the kitchen floor, his body smashing into the fridge. His face smouldered from the full power of my laser gun. Melissa cried out and ran towards me. She almost knocked me over. I looked at the hideous corpse of my father lying on the ground.

It was over.

And I felt only relief.

I was waiting for some preset circuit in my head to prompt some sort of appropriate emotion. I was sure that my eyes would have the image in front of them altered by some computer-generated graphics art software. I felt like a complete automaton, waiting for an electronic impulse to react—but nothing came.

Then, I felt the warmth of Melissa's soft, quivering body, she grabbed me so tightly. I could feel her panicked little heart beating rapidly against mine. I felt her humanity, her frailty, and it made

me sense mine. They had tried to build a perfect soldier. They had created an overly emotional young man.

I dropped my gun to the ground and wrapped my arms around Melissa. It felt good. She was crying and quivering when she said, “Why would he choose me to attack—why me?”

“Because he knew I cared about you.”

She moved her head from my chest and looked up in my eyes and smiled. It felt good to see that smile. It warmed a battered, abused soul.

The shuttle went by the street in front of us.

“Martina!” I cried, turning to run into the street.

“Where are you going? Don’t leave me here with this body.” Melissa pleaded, holding onto my arm, stopping me. I looked at her. She was frail as a dried plant leaf, beautiful to see, but could be crumpled to dust easily. I didn’t want to leave her. It felt comfortable, felt right.

“I need to go, but I’ll be back” I said.

“Do you promise?” she asked.

“I promise.”

I was out the door, looking down the street. Martina was cruising through the town slowly. I was about half way down the long straight street. I shouted out, “Martina, back here!” Walking out to the middle of the street, I could see residents warily looking out their windows--an intrepid few opening their front doors. I stood in the middle of the street, waving my arms.

I saw the hovercraft veer and come towards me. Within seconds, she flew over and landed the shuttle. Residents backed into their houses, looking on from behind their newfound fragile shelter. Martina opened the hovercraft doors and came out to see me.

“Where is he? You found him?”

“I found him all right.”

Melissa came out of her house. She stood a few feet away from us.

“Who’s she?” Martina said.

“My father was holding her hostage. He always looks for any strategic advantage, any little benefit. He knew Melissa was my friend.”

Martina looked at me and then Melissa. She said, “Anyway, your father, where is he?”

“He’s... dead. We don’t have to worry about him.”

“Where—how?” Martina said.

“His body’s in there. I shot him. He had a knife to Melissa’s throat.”

“So, you saved her life, congratulations,” Martina said. There was a tone, a hint in her voice, which I couldn’t understand. Melissa came over to me and slipped her arms around me again. It felt comfortable.

“I have to go,” I said to Melissa.

It was difficult prying her arms from me, but there was still so much to do. Our time together was so short, but Melissa was leaving a permanent impression on me; she had come at such a tumultuous, transitional stage in my life. Everything I counted on was whisked from underneath me, and I needed someplace to land.

She was beside me for a soft landing.

Martina and I went back to the shuttle. She didn't speak, just looked at me strangely with that cold look I couldn't figure out. We went back to the crashed shuttle. The young couple who had been in town was now out at the crash site. We landed just behind the couple and neither one noticed us at first, but then the girl tugged on her boyfriend's shirtsleeve. He was mesmerized by the fallen vehicle and initially didn't react, but after several tugs, she got his attention. Both of them looked at us and the boy said with a chuckle:

"I guess you didn't get your driver's license very long ago?"

Martina was in front, and in no mood for his humour. She just glared.

"Sorry," the boy said.

His girlfriend was tugging harder on his shirtsleeve now. She was pulling him away, back to the town, like a dog on a leash. As they were getting out of earshot, I heard her chastising him vehemently. The boy yelled, "What?" as they headed back to town.

Surprisingly, the shuttle was not really in very bad shape. There was a tail fin that was nicked during the battle. My father had managed to land it fairly well, skidding along the ground, probably saving his life. There didn't appear to be any major structural damage. It was just the tail fin that needed to be redone.

Inside all military vehicles was a structural remoulding kit with structural compounds to heat and shape elements for fixing such minor damage. Martina and I reworked the missing small tail fin. It took a few minutes, but soon enough, the second shuttle was fixed.

I looked at the Earth base looming large in front of us. I looked behind at the town and its outcast residents. The two extremes so close together, could I bring them closer together?

"We better get a move on," Martina said. "There's a scanner drone from the dome."

Scratching my head, I looked at the two shuttles in front of us.

"Which one you want?" Martina asked.

"I'll take the repaired one," I said. "Before anything, I have business to take care of."

Chapter 18

Walking towards the heart of the city, I saw more people than I did coming from the tunnel on the other side; but here, the conditions were even more squalid. This was not a place controlled by the warlords. The warlords naturally levitated to the carcass of rich neighbourhoods, picking the bones of whatever meat was left. This was not the remnants of any affluent area. This was the remnants of a working class neighbourhood.

I saw several gangs of youths walking together along these squalid streets. Here the homes were missing roofs and walls; planks of wood or metal were used to patch together makeshift buildings. Remnants of rusted ancient vehicles and machines littered the streets. These youth gangs were menacing some of the innocent citizens trying to get on with the difficult job of survival. When you saw regular people passing by in this anarchic society, they were often carrying some scrap they hoped would be useful, or maybe fruits or vegetables they wanted to trade in the central market. These people would move quickly, looking back and forth nervously; always checking out who was around, who was a danger. In a world without laws, without police, ordinary people moved warily; trying to stay safe. When they saw me, these people gave me a wide berth. I was the unknown, and battle-weary people just trying to survive had no interest in searching out the unknown.

The gangs were another story.

One particular scruffy gang of youths was taking special notice of me. One thing that struck me was that they were better dressed than most. Like everyone, their clothing was a mix of whatever they could find, but all their clothing looked new. To me, it was a bad sign. They looked like they'd get the best of things from their ruthlessness—in a world without laws; ruthlessness is a strong advantage. You take what you want. They were about six or seven, all appearing to be adolescents, talking loudly, boisterously—no fear. They looked at me with interest, seeing my nice clothing and a couple of fancy-looking things hanging off my belt. They came towards me, an air of antagonism for all to see.

“Hey,” the one in front yelled out.

He walked in front of the others, seeming to give directions. His eyes were wide-open, intense. He didn't just look around, he glared. He intimidated with his eyes. He exuded confidence as surely as if he was carrying a billboard spelling it out for everyone; and now he was coming towards me, with the others following closely behind. As he got in front of me, he stopped, legs spread wide. His blond hair and blue eyes would've made him fit right in at the space station. He had the toned physique of a police recruit. He had an old-fashioned rifle in one arm. He stroked the barrel with one hand and looked at me with the other. He had was wearing a bright red blazer that looked like it was from some old style military dress uniform. He waved his arm, his gang surrounded me. They were like limbs of his monstrous body, extensions of his will. He looked me up and down.

“What is that stuff you have on you?”

“Why, what do you want?” I said.

The leader smiled and repeated what I said, laughing and looking around to his gang. They were all laughing.

“I get the feeling you clowns aren’t going away,” I said.

The leader appeared taken aback for a second by my brashness, then the silly smile returned to his face and he said, pointing to my laser gun and hand-held terminal, “Hand those things over.”

“Just that simple, hand it over.”

“You see this block. We run this block. What we want, we take—and you had the misfortune of coming into my territory. So, follow the rules; and hand those things over.”

“You’re your own little warlord, have your own little space. How many of you are there in this hellhole of a city? You probably think you’re special, but you’re not. Well, I can’t get rid of all of you, but your time at the top is over.”

I took out my laser gun. His smile stayed on his face, but grew uneasy. Maybe he did have some fear of the unknown? As I raised my gun casually, not like it was a gun at all, he pointed his gun at me.

“That gun is your key, isn’t it?” I said. “I don’t think you’d have much of an advantage over regular people, or be able to get these morons to follow you—without your gun—would you?”

I shot his gun barrel. The barrel of the gun broke off. He stared open-mouthed at his now useless phallic symbol. He looked at me, realizing the stranger in front of him was indeed dangerous. Three of his gang had already fled at the sight of the bizarre laser blast.

The balance of power had suddenly shifted.

It was part of the precarious balance of power that was part of the culture of the ruined city. These thugs were comfortable bullying the regular citizens who had the misfortune of living amongst them. They were also comfortable running when they saw superior firepower. It was a primitive system. You chase the ones you have power over, and run from the ones who are more powerful than you. I had proven myself more powerful and they turned to run. The leader was the last to go, not relinquishing his position over me too easily; but when he was alone and saw his now useless gun—he did run.

I stood there, realizing I could make a most-feared warlord in this world; but that was not my style. The irony of this world was the central role the very-organized World Government played in it. Through years of hypocritical abuse, the World Government had destroyed Earth civilization; leaving ruins with nothing but desperation to thrive.

I stood there alone, knowing absolutely—power was not my drug—not my addiction.

I checked my hand-held terminal to make sure I was heading in the right direction. I had the device set to constantly monitor Doug’s identification card. I could see that I was near. It was hard to navigate these streets. They were not consistent in any way. You’d go around a corner and there would be heaps of cement and rubble blocking the way; vegetation growing through the cracks. The vegetation lent a soft green touch to a harsh landscape.

Around another corner, the street was much better cleared. This street was populated. Some citizens had made the effort to clear the area and convert some of the ruins to habitable lodgings.

Along the side of one of the buildings, a pained voice called out to me, “Help me, please. Can you spare anything?”

I looked over at the young man lying there with an old man’s voice. His face was misshapen--unnatural. His legs were twisted in strange ways, probably useless for moving, just dead weight. People moved around him, oblivious; too busy trying to help themselves—how could they come up with a solution for him? My attention was diverted by a wild-eyed man screaming down the street. He was coming in my direction, shouting out to everyone with a sense of urgency. When he got close to me, he looked right at me, pupils dilated, wild grey hair standing straight up, and screamed, “Prepare yourself, the apocalypse is coming!”

A woman stuck her head out a window and said, “It’s already here, you crazy old fool.”

I kept going. Farther down the same street, I narrowed the location down to one of the more ramshackle houses. The door was barely attached to its hinges, and I peeked in through the door. A startled woman sitting at a plain table said to me, “Please, I have nothing.”

“No, no—I don’t want anything.”

“I’m a tired woman without anything of value. You won’t get anything here.”

“You have to understand. I’m not here to rob you. I’m looking for someone, for my friend.”

Her face changed. With a pensive look, she examined my clothing; stared at my face.

“You’re wearing the same strange clothes as Doug had on when he came here. You are his friend?”

“Yes, Doug—that’s it exactly! Is he here?”

“No, he’s not here now.”

“Do you know where he is?” I asked.

“Yes, he’s out gathering wood for me; winter will be coming soon.”

She pointed to a makeshift hole, which could’ve served as a fireplace. I looked around and wondered how cold it’d get in this cave. One thing was for sure, I wouldn’t want to spend a winter here and find out.

“He’ll be back soon. He’s a good boy,” she said. She looked up at me with curiosity and said, “Why does he stay here, doing so much for me?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing?”

“He knew my son, I know that. He musta seen him die,” she said, her voice trailing off, her body started to shake as her eyes rimmed with tears. “He doesn’t say anything. He just does whatever he can for me. God sent him here to help me through my mourning. I don’t even know for sure where my son is... I’ve never seen his body. But they all end up the same, once they’re eaten up by those Holy Warriors. They take our youth, our children; and take advantage of their anger, their youthful frustration. Look at this place! Is it any wonder? Raised in this hell, they see nothing—no future. You work for the warlords, maybe get some better scraps than the rest of us, or you become a Holy Warrior, brainwashed and delusional, give your life purpose. I guess he just wanted a purpose, my beautiful boy.”

“How did Doug find you?” I asked.

“He was looking everywhere, with a little picture of me. He was asking everyone about the picture, trying to find me. That’s how I knew he was with my son, my only remaining reason for living—what a nightmare this all is.” She looked around at her house. “I gave that picture to my son when he wouldn’t listen any more. I wanted him to have something to look at, to remind him, to give him a grip on reality—his past. His father had pictures taken of all of us. His father ran errands for Big Simon. We were doing okay in those days.” She paused to look at a picture she took from her pocket. She stroked it lovingly like it was the most precious thing in the world. “One of Big Simon’s men had a camera. He’d take pictures of people who did what they were told, just as a token, a scrap to keep us in line. My husband was a good man, a loving man; but he had no backbone. He did what he could to provide for us, and that’s what he did. My son was so devastated.”

“Devastated?” I asked, sitting on the chair opposite her at the simple table.

“When my husband was killed. I heard it was just a game, just target practice or something like that. His life was nothing to them, just like crushing a bug. They took everything from us—that’s when I started to lose my precious, beautiful boy. He was still so young. I tried my best, but he was too filled with anger. He was getting more and more distant. He wouldn’t spend any more time at home, wouldn’t help me any more. I could see him drifting farther and farther away, but what could I do?” She reached out and grabbed my wrist, her worn wrinkled eyes looking intently at me. “I have nothing. He had nothing here. I tried to give him hope for the future, but it was all just words.”

Her voice trailed off. I put my hand on hers as she sat there, shoulders slumped, head down. Then she looked up, eyes swollen with tears and said, “Then Doug found me, as if sent from heaven. I couldn’t survive the winter without him. He fixed the fireplace up. He does everything for me. He won’t talk about my son, but the way he looks at me, a mother knows. He saw my son die. I see it in Doug’s eyes. I want to know, but he goes away from me whenever I ask. I just want to know what happened? He’s always busy. All he does since he came here is work for me. He’s so nice, but so strange. Who knows what he has seen? Was he brainwashed by those evil Holy Warriors too?”

“No, he wasn’t.”

There was a pause. Just then, a shadow blocked the doorway to the dark house. I turned quickly. Doug was as shocked as me to come face to face to each other. It was as if entire lifetimes had come and gone since we had last seen each other. His eyes darted back and forth. He dropped the pile of wood he had in his arms.

“Hi Doug,” I started to say, calmly, trying to ease his tension—but before I could react, he grabbed his backpack that was lying near the entrance and bolted out the door.

“Doug!” the woman cried.

I ran out, calling to him; but he was running away from me. I took off after him. I could hear the woman moaning as we fled away. He bounded up and over a crumbled pile of concrete, towards the outskirts of town. I saw him looking back at me, terror in his eyes.

“Doug, Doug, what are you running for?”

Soon, I was out of breath. He was relentless in his flight, unwilling, unyielding in his decision to get as far away from me as possible. I was getting sweaty, tired, as he led me away from the

buildings; ironically, we were heading near the area where I had hid the shuttle. I found myself led away from the city again, to where there were more and more trees, and he was pulling farther away from me. Wiping the sweat from my eyes, I was losing stamina; then I realized I had lost Doug. He had always been slower than the rest of us. Where did he get his energy?

I stopped.

There were few buildings in this area. It was well traveled, much of the trees chopped down; most probably taken away for use as firewood. I looked over an embankment and saw a large flat area, cultivated, with many plantings all in a row. It was a collective garden of some sort. People were bent over, tending the fields as I made my way over the embankment. I saw a few farmers looking at me nervously, and then looking quickly towards a small hill around the middle of the collective farm. One man looked at me, then at the hill, back and forth; until he saw me staring and then knelt over again, busying himself in the garden.

My breath was coming back to me. I walked slowly through the rows of carefully planted vegetation and crept silently up the hill. From the top of the hill, you could see the entire area was surrounded with these farms, some fenced off as claimed property. As I looked over the top of the hill, I saw a man's head duck beneath some rocks on the other side. I stood on top of the rocks and there lying down trying to hide, was Doug.

"Don't come any closer!" he warned, standing up in front of one of the gardens.

"What are you talking about Doug? I'm your friend."

"My friend," he said. "I have no friends from up there."

"What do you mean? Your family, your friends are all from up there."

He looked up to the sky. His face changed expressions, from shock, to anger, and finally to a look of excruciating pain. It was then that he reached into his backpack and pulled out his gun. I was shocked, not even anticipating this sort of thing. I put my hands out, not even thinking of bringing my own gun out.

"No Doug—no!"

He put the gun to his own head. My knees grew weak. I could feel the blood drain from my face. I think he saw the pain he was putting me through, and he looked puzzled.

"Why do you care?" he asked.

"You're my friend Doug. I couldn't stand for it to end this way."

He took the gun away from his head, looking at it with the curiosity of a child; as if he'd just found it on the ground. He placed it down carefully on the ground, showing respect to its inherent danger; and then knelt down at the garden, starting to work.

I walked over. He was no longer afraid of me. It was as if he thought I was a stranger and just recognized me. I sat down beside him, watching his hands as he tended the garden.

"Where did you learn to do that?" I asked.

"I found her here—the first day. She was working on the garden. I watched her and asked her what needed to be done. It was how we met, how I started to make amends."

"For--" I started, then realized I couldn't say it. "For what happened?"

“Yes. I've been working here in the mornings, and then bringing whatever wood I can find back to the house in the afternoon. In the evenings I managed to rearrange the stove; one section had caved in since it was used last spring. I don't go to the market to trade the vegetables. I don't like too many people around.”

“Don't you want to come home with me Doug?”

He looked at me, puzzled, and said, “I am home.”

It was said very matter-of-factly, as if I had not noticed an obvious truth. He continued his work in the garden.

“It is easy to destroy; anybody can do it. It is strange the way human nature works. We give so much value, so much prestige, to the bullies of the world; to the arrogant who have the muscle to destroy, to take over weaker opponents, crushing them at their whim. But that's easy. Any child can step on an insect, destroy it. But I have examined tiny insects here in the garden, they are amazing. Did you know the Earth is crawling with all different types of insects? Not just in the wilderness—everywhere.”

I found myself starting to scratch all over.

“I've seen them on the plant leaves, looked at them closely. They are amazing creatures when you see them from that perspective; the huge bulbous eyes, the claw-like, practical arms and legs—thousands—I guess millions—of different types all over the place. Each of their tiny intricate features evolved over countless millennia to perform various functions. Anyone could destroy one of those—but try and create one—now that would show true intelligence and power.”

He continued to busy himself in the garden.

“I don't need any skills to come and steal from other gardens. You see those types of people coming here every day, laughing and feeling superior. Let's see them do something constructive. All these plants, starting from tiny seeds; with only water and the nutrients from the soil they can grow to impressive plants like these.” He pointed to some large rows of plants. “The power of creation, truly amazing. I can't do that—no person can—but I can help. I can encourage, facilitate; by ensuring the plant has the right conditions. I can't create, but I can be part of the process; part of true power and light. It is the most any man can hope for in his life.

It is the fall now; I have learnt it will soon be time to put the garden to sleep for the winter. The winter is a time for the garden to rest. They tell me it is a cold, desolate time. I hope I can survive it.”

“I hope I can too,” I said.

Chapter 19

“Why did you bring him here?” Martina cried.

“We need someone with experience, with some maturity,” I said.

“I was going to call my parents.”

“Your father is a career military man. I don’t know if he’d be able to handle what we’ve learnt.”

“Are you trying to say we couldn’t trust my father?”

“If you didn’t live with the experiences you had lived through recently. Could I trust you with this information? Or would you turn me in as a subversive, a nut?”

Martina exhaled loudly and crossed her arms.

She was about to answer me, but stopped herself. Meanwhile, Samuel walked throughout the maze of cylinders containing developing humans. I warned him, tried to describe what he’d see; but it was beyond words. With all his maturity and wisdom, there was nothing in his life experiences that could help him deal with what he was being shown.

His face was fixed in stone as he ambled through the main laboratory at the Earth base. The two of us arguing were of little consequence compared to the grave reality he was trying to absorb. History was his passion, his purpose in life; but none of what he knew would have conjured up such a nightmare. Martina and I grew quiet as he came beside us at the control panel. We both looked at him, waiting for some sort of input. He walked by us, sitting down at the control panel.

“You’ve a great deal of important information here. You did a good thing to contact me Tyler.”

He sat down and started trying to filter through the informational database.

“How do we know we can trust you?” Martina said.

Samuel turned and looked at her.

“I guess you don’t really know. It’s too late to worry about that now. Tyler took a chance, followed his instincts. Maybe it was a little reckless, but you’ll learn soon enough that he made a good decision.”

“I hope so,” Martina said.

“Listen young lady, try to understand something important. You’ve a great deal of information here, but no matter how important, it’s not the complete puzzle. You’ve discovered valuable information about the present and how the people of the space station, your society, have been deceived by its rulers. Yet, you’ve received virtually no truthful information about your past or where you came from. You’re struggling to comprehend too much information without any history behind it—that is where I can help. Together, we have a more complete picture of what it is we’re dealing with.”

The night's sleep rejuvenated me. I remember waking in the familiar surroundings of a military barracks. Our team area was isolated and right near the lab. Despite this fact, I was feeling settled and oblivious to the tumultuous events of recent days. I looked at my messy barracks, almost expecting a call from my father. Then, it hit me—reality splashed in my face like ice cold water, thoughts flooded back into my mind. My calm disappeared, as I thought of Samuel alone in the main laboratory.

I got to my feet.

“Tyler, what's wrong?” said Martina. “Is Samuel still at the lab?”

“I guess so. He can't go anywhere else. He'd stick out like a sore thumb. I don't know what we'll do now.”

“We better get down there.”

We headed to the main laboratory. We walked into the eerie surroundings and could see Samuel busy behind the control panel.

“Have you been here all night?” I asked.

“Geez, don't scare a person,” he said, jumping sideways. “Yes, I've been here all night. This plot is truly insane.”

“It doesn't seem possible,” Martina said.

“It IS possible Martina,” he said.

“Are you sure they were acting alone?” I said.

“I couldn't answer that with absolute certainty. I have figured out quite a lot from the information I have here.”

“What've you learned?” Martina asked.

“Obviously, a vast project like this can't be put into action with just two or three people. Yet, you can have hundreds, or thousands, working on a project with only a select few having the high-level knowledge of the project's true goals and directions. I've found evidence of a hierarchical command structure. All tasks necessary divided into carefully defined components; many scientists and researchers working on the individual components, yet few with the high-level knowledge of the project's main goals and direction. I can see only one other person having access to this laboratory; and that profile appears old and inactive. My guess is he could've died or been cut out of the elite group. There is a highly sophisticated automated system for maintaining and nurturing these growing humans. They'd been testing nutritional requirements for the experiments.”

“Don't call them that!” I said. “They're human beings.”

“Sorry Tyler, I didn't mean anything.”

“There's an automated system which provides all the nutritional requirements to the people in these cylinders; a kind of feeding tube. I think some people here are being starved to death and others are being overfed, just to see how they react.”

“Can't you do anything about it?” I cried.

“Yes Tyler, I think I can. I will standardize the automated feeding requirements for all the people here; so that they receive the healthiest requirements as per the research they have performed up until now.”

“We need to tell the people what's going on,” Martina said.

“I don't think that'd be a good idea,” Samuel cautioned.

“Why not?” Martina asked.

“Even though the current situation is far from ideal; we have to move cautiously. Stability is essential. The reality is there is a huge void in leadership of this society. Another factor is the powerful technology that your society controls. As an Earth dweller, I know what damage it can cause. If we rush into anything, make some sort of declaration of the truth, what will happen? I'll tell you that we don't really know. I know what it's like to live in a world with that huge, gaping void where political leadership should be and it can get pretty ugly.”

“What're we going to do?” I asked.

“Let me have some time to work on it,” Samuel said.

“The explosion, the presidential residence!” Martina said. “We've GOT to explain it.”

“What's that?” Samuel questioned.

“The presidential simulator. It's time for a presidential address,” I said. “Even the President is fake. It's all a hologram.”

“Oh well,” Samuel rubbed his head. “That'll have to be priority number one.”

My mind was spinning.

Samuel had busied himself in his plans. Surrendering some control, we were walking away from him, dissatisfied in the unknown solution we desperately wanted to be a part of. As we slowly moving away from him, he said, “Think positive you two, stay positive. We're in a unique situation. I've studied a lot of history, and humans keep making the same mistakes over and over again, but how many times has the greatest military power in the world had a chance to start with a clean slate? Run by pacifists disinterested in domination over other cultures. I'll tell you how many times—zero. Historically, military might comes hand-in-hand with the most ruthless and the most power-hungry. Now, look what we have here: three people who just want the world to move in a positive, humane direction—and we have all the power. Think about it, my young friends. It is an exciting situation, completely unique.”

**

“Nothing's the same anymore, is it?” Martina asked as we stared at each other. I leant back on my military cot. We were in the barracks, managing to sneak in without being seen by any of the other military personnel.

“No, everything has changed now.”

“It used to be a place of mystery, of dreams.”

“I wished it could go back to that again. The reality is not nearly as romantic.”

“Neither is our own little space station.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“So, Melissa is your girlfriend?” Martina said.

“Why do you ask that?”

“I’m not allowed to ask questions?”

“No, I guess it’s no problem. I haven’t known her long enough to call her a girlfriend. Let’s just say I wouldn’t mind.”

We didn’t talk much after that, just stared down at the ground—with new perspectives—thinking of Earth. No longer with the innocent eyes of youths, now we looked with the cynical eyes of hardened soldiers. What a difference a few slivers of time makes. Sometimes those slivers can cut right to the heart of the matter.

When we got back to the lab, I could see that Samuel was working with the presidential simulation module. To my surprise, he had a pen and paper, archaic tools for our society. He had a pile of pages filled with some of his work. He was staring at them with a look of satisfaction as we walked towards him.

“You know you can create text documents in here,” I said.

“Thanks for the news bulletin young man,” he said. “But I’m not from the dark ages. It just so happens that I’m comfortable working with pen and paper. It may be a little bit more work, but where I come from, it’s always good to save energy. We don’t leave our computers running twenty four hours a day. I’ve been working on a presidential speech. My goal is a smooth transition to a real government. I think we can all agree on that.”

“Let’s hear it,” I said.

“You want me to read it?” he said.

“Sure, why not.”

“My fellow citizens of the world,

I am here to address you on some pressing matters facing us all. I know that you all are aware of the bomb that went off in my presidential suite. One primary reason for this address is to ensure you all that I am alive and well; and have survived this attack. I want all our citizens to realize that I’ve decided to stay in high security enclosures as we root out all those responsible for this attack.

I know many of you probably assume this attack was somehow perpetrated by Earth terrorists. In a way, I wish this was so; but it was not. The attack was perpetrated by World Government military rebels who were trying to undermine the stability of our government. I can assure you that these rebels are a small minority of our primarily loyal troops, and they’ve been rooted out over the last few days. The government is stable and strong; still firm in its conviction to run in a democratic fashion. Yet this situation has caused me as an individual and leader, to do much soul-searching.

I will be leaving politics in the not too distant future. I will continue with my functions as President as long as it takes to organize an election and have a smooth transition to a new government. I want to make it clear to all of you that my primary objective is for our society to evolve in a positive, democratic way. We must all realize that democracy is never achieved. It is an unattainable ultimate goal which we must all stay diligent if we hope to approach it. We must keep working towards this ultimate goal at all times. As a society, we can never rest; we can never relax and say: we live in a democratic society.

In every society, there are always forces, lobby groups, business interests, politic interests--working against democracy--against the true freedom of elections--against the freedom of the press--against the freedom of speech. These forces will never go away in any society, at any time. This being said, we cannot let this destroy or conquer our spirit as a people. We must continue to work, to fight, for what is right.

At this point, generations have passed; all of you have lived your entire lives on this station, with maybe a sojourn to the Earth base. This cannot continue. The Exodus that has already commenced must continue. This will create a far greater complication in our governmental system. We must learn to integrate with those who inhabit the Earth. Yes, you have heard me right. For far too long, we have simplified our governmental decisions by labeling all Earth dwellers as 'terrorists'. There's no doubt, there are terrorists that live on Earth; and they must be dealt with harshly, but military intelligence has discovered many enclaves where common people, peace-loving people like ourselves, have survived and live now on Earth. There must be a place for these people too in our society.

There is only one way for us to truly achieve peace in our lifetime. We must value all lives the same. There can no longer be different tiers of rights and privileges. It is the only way, my dear friends. If not, war will be with us forever. It is the natural by-product of a world of haves and have-nots. Through these two fundamental principles of a just society—democracy and equality—we will have a solid foundation to build a legitimate future. It is my sincere hope, my fellow citizens; that we will all work together towards this goal. This is why I hope that you all get involved.

Leadership needs to come from the people. We need new leaders with fresh views. I hereby pledge to set up a fund for new parties and fresh campaigns. If you can meet minimum requirements of party and leader support, you will have access to the same limited campaign funds as all the other candidates. There will be equal airtime on the World Government networks for all these established candidates. The time has come to say 'No' to victory for the rich and powerful; for the ones who can buy as much public relations and exposure as possible—it is time to say 'Yes' to true equality, true democracy. I dream of a better world, my fellow citizens, a world not for the chosen few—a better world for all of us.”

Chapter 20

The winds blew long and hard, impeding my progress as I trudged, struggling along the plateau. Clear of vegetation, clear of any windbreaker, the winds had long and far to build up strength.

I kept walking.

At the back of me, the Earth dome was getting smaller, and I had no problem with that. In front of me, the town that held the outcasts from City Central, it grew slightly larger with every step, grew closer in view and spirit. The winds pushed hard against me. I had to stop for a second. My eyes burnt as dirt whipped into my face. The pain seared to the center of my head. I winced, holding my hand to my face. Forces were working against me, it was nothing new.

My head was still aching. I held it in my hand as I made good time across the plateau. I stopped for a second, listening to the howling of the wind. It was primitive and powerful, it was nature like I had never known. I felt angry, felt robbed of a true life. I was grown in a glass cylinder, and when I left I was stuck in a space station, with fabricated memories in a fabricated world. This world was real. Even if it killed me, I preferred to be here.

The sky was filled with clouds, moving quickly across the horizon. The clouds were laying a dark blanket across the atmosphere, the sun trying to push through the cracks in between. It created a mix of dark and light across the plateau, constantly changing, unpredictable.

I continued to walk towards the town. Melissa would be waiting for me there, I was sure of that. Maybe I could make some real memories to hold on to, to comfort me.

Maybe I could make a real life.

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Chapter 1

The fresh mountain air did me good.

It was looking to be a glorious day.

Breathing in deeply, I sat at the edge of the plateau, just on the edge of town, looking up at the majestic mountains that surrounded us. I could never take this for granted—not with my history.

I rose and started heading back to the village. There was much to be done on this beautiful day.

The village was primarily uniformed rows of pre-fabricated buildings; each building was home to a different family. The buildings were nothing fancy, just a hastily constructed village.

"Morning neighbour," old man Alvaro said as I walked down our street.

"Morning, Gino, how's the wife?"

"Gotta be great, she's married to me," he laughed. "You always first one out in morning. You baby wake you up early again?"

"No, no, my little Sean's an angel. He never does anything wrong."

Gino laughed again, the creases on his old face were long, but part of his charm. "That's a good poppa--always love your kid--no matter what. You space station people, you like to get up early--no?"

"Eh, I think it's more the army or police way. I was always forced to get up early by someone. Morning, Mrs. Lee!"

Mrs. Lee grunted in response.

"She not nearly as nice as her husband," Gino whispered to me as Mrs. Lee disappeared back into her house. "Why for she stick her face out? If she not want to say hi? I don't envy her husband."

"Now Gino, this town is too small and tightly packed for gossip--especially with Mrs. Lee. She'll eat you alive."

"You right, you right Tyler. You a smart boy--like my boy always was."

The smile disappeared from his face.

"Thanks, Gino,. I gotta go in for breakfast. I want to spend time with my baby before work."

My row house door groaned as I opened it.

"Shhh, shhh," Melissa's mother, Mary, ordered as I entered as quietly as I could. Melissa got her good looks from her mom, but in the morning, Mary always had on pyjamas and a thick housecoat--and her long blond hair was twisting every which way.

"What can I do?" I whispered.

"Shhhh, shhh," Mary said again.

The interior was as stark as the outside. It consisted of an open living room and kitchen area; and a staircase on the side leading up to two humble bedrooms. Our row house was slightly different from the rest along the street. Melissa insisted we convert the back pantry on the main floor to our bedroom. Sean slept in there with us. She wanted us to be closer to the kitchen and bathroom. Our baby son Sean slept with us.

I crossed the living room area to peer into the bedroom. Melissa's lay sprawled on her back, her mouth open and snoring. She was cute and beautiful in her exhausted state. Her beautiful blonde hair was as frazzled as her mother's. When I opened the door, the morning light shone in on the bed. I closed it hastily and quietly.

"The baby finally fallen asleep," Mary said.

"Good, they both need some sleep. I can't wait until he starts sleeping nights."

"That's normal. He just came out of the womb, no night or day. You have to give him time to adapt to our world."

"Yeah, I know; but not more than two hours in a row. It's brutal. How long did it last with Melissa?"

"Well, it can vary with different babies. Some adjust to sleeping nights right away. Some it takes longer..."

"Yeah, but how long was it with Melissa?"

"I remember my friend Johanna's baby was sleeping ten or twelve hours a night after a couple of months. She even used to wake her up to make sure she was okay."

Mary laughed but I just repeated "Yeah, but how long with Melissa?"

"It was about a year," she said gravely, wiping her dishwashing wet hands on her housecoat.

"A year!" I moaned.

"Ssssh, sssh," she warned again.

"Okay, okay." I went over to the sofa and sat down heavily; feeling exhausted, defeated. I looked out the window. It was a view of the uniform row of identical lodgings just across the street.

"Only Mr. Alvaro and Mrs. Lee are out yet this morning."

"That's cause you get up at the crack of dawn. You even beat the old people like the Lees and Alvaros."

"I don't get much sleep anyway."

Mary came over and put her hand on my shoulder: "...but look at what you get out of it, little Sean, the love of your life".

Tired, I gave Mary a faint smile, then looked back to the street.

A delivery vehicle was passing soundlessly; its square box storage in stark contrast to the hovercraft base that powered it--a hybrid of old style Earth trucks and modern technology.

"I better get my ass in gear,. the delivery trucks are already starting to arrive."

The baby cried. He wanted to be fed. Mary got up, opened the door wide, and went into the bedroom. She went to the crib we kept beside our bed and turned to Melissa.

"Melissa, you shouldn't have the baby in bed with you! You know that's dangerous."

"Mom, please. When I know the baby's beside me, I never move in that direction..."

"You don't know that," Mary insisted, "you could move in your sleep. You don't know."

"Okay, okay, I promise, I won't," Melissa waved her hand sluggishly.

Mary looked at me and rolled her eyes as I came into the bedroom and she stormed out.

"Did you learn your lesson?" I asked, closing the door.

"Drop dead Romeo," she said as I leaned over for a kiss. "You'll have to stand over the crib and pass Sean over to me every hour or so, twenty four damn hours a day."

I lay in the bed beside them, my arm reaching around my newborn baby and joining hands with Melissa, our arms surrounding, protecting Sean.

"That sounds like woman's work," I said.

"I'll make you a woman if you want. Lean over here and I'll remove those precious family jewels of yours, that men are so proud of."

Her head was still on the pillow as little Sean started sucking on her breast.

"Wow, nasty! What did I do to deserve that comment?"

"Nothing, just offering--don't mess with a tired, hormonal new mother."

With that she fell asleep again, the baby feeding beside her. I looked at the two most precious people in my world.

A natural mother.

A natural child.

Sean finished feeding and rolled over, like a contented little fat man after a big steak dinner and a couple of beers. He was just starting to feed properly. In my ignorance, I had never thought of that; the dilemma of getting a baby to breastfeed properly. It was not part of my military training. I looked at this precious new life in wonder. I gently tucked one of my hands underneath his head and neck, the other underneath his bum. I raised him gently as he dozed, laughing at the drop of breast milk drooling down his tiny open mouth. His arms stretched out momentarily as I raised him in my arms, but he stayed sleeping, content with his full belly.

I carried him out to the living room.

"Going to get some food for the day," Mary said. She had just pulled on her coat and was getting ready to leave. "Bye bye."

Carefully, I sat down in the living room, happy to have a few minutes alone with my little Sean nuzzling up close. Daddy was still foreign to him. He was still all Mommy's property. It was only in his sleepy state that he didn't notice it was not Mommy holding him. That was okay. I knew it would change soon. Melissa and her breast milk might have been his whole world, but Daddy was at the door, biding his time until he would be let in. The warmth of my little family was healing the wounds of my bizarre life; replacing my artificial memories with real ones. I

wondered if I would ever feel normal; have enough distance from my past--my secrets that I only shared with Melissa. I cherished every moment of true natural family life. I suppose all new parents did, but I knew I was different.

"Aww, we've got no more time for this," I said to my little boy as I noticed more and more activity in the street.

Our town was a simple one; the first one built after the infamous Exodus.

Some things I wanted to forget.

Others, I didn't.

Over near the convenience store was a Recharging Station for all types of vehicles and aircraft. There were all the necessary landing pods and recharging units. That was where I worked. Being a blended town, everyone was always asking and telling their life stories. I suppose that aspect attracted me. It meant the population was more tolerant, willing to accept and appreciate different cultures. Yet, that was also a danger for me. Those inquisitive people wanted to know my story too. The Earth citizens in our town were naturally curious about Space Station life, so they'd ask. I managed to sell my personality as kind of reclusive--not much of a talker. It wasn't really who I was, but it was a great disguise for someone with a lot of secrets. I liked neighbours like the Alvaros, but I mostly kept to my little family.

I just wanted to blend in--not be seen.

Night and sleep were always hard for me; too much thinking. In my young life, I had learnt how different I was; but having a regular family, a regular job, and a regular life--it made me feel like I could fit in. It brought peace of mind.

Sean turned in his sleep, nuzzling up to my chest. His tiny little arms reached around me--probably looking for a breast that was not there. Mistaking me for Mommy, he rolled towards me; seeming to place an affectionate hug. He was still sound asleep, but I could feel his tiny heart beating against me.

So fragile.

So tiny.

A loud explosion filled the air.

The front door exploded; ripped open, smoke and wind billowing into the room. The door flew from its hinges and cart wheeled across the room like paper in the wind. Smoke and sunlight filled the room.

I was stunned, frozen, unprepared.

I clutched Sean tightly to my chest.

Three figures swept through the door and burst into my home.

They were soldiers in uniform.

"What do you want?!" I demanded. "Who are you?"

"Don't make this harder than it has to be," one of them said through his helmet microphone.

"Take off that helmet!" I shouted as I started to rise, holding my baby tight in my arms. "I want to see who's invading my home--you coward!" Starting to rise, I held my baby tightly.

One of the soldiers grabbed my arm, jostling Sean, whose eyes opened wide, startled and he began to cry.

"Quickly!" The soldier closest to the door ordered.

I could hear Melissa starting to call out "'Tyler, Tyler, what happened?"

"What are you doing?" I said.

The soldier closest to me pulled harder at my arm, his other arm reached for Sean. Lashing out, I kicked him as hard as I could. He staggered backwards. Sean wailed. It was then I noticed the third soldier aiming his weapon straight at my face.

And then everything went black.