



# **TREEN ALEE**

The Awakers of Grevelton



Michael Van Clyburn





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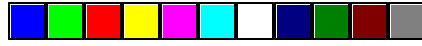
The Awakers of Grevelton

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## Prologue

The television shattered through the living room window then sank into the shrubs in front of the house. The blast echoed out to the curbside mailbox, where Treen Alee had been waiting for Shainy Billerson to return. Treen dropped their caramel sundaes, sprang off her bicycle, then sprinted towards the Billerson's often-turbulent home. When Shainy banged through the screen door and ran out to the grass, Treen embraced her in the path of the sprinkler system.

"What happened?" Treen shouted.

"He hit my mother again!" Shainy wailed, body trembling, "Now he's after me!"

Shainy screamed when her father kicked open the screen and lumbered out to the yard. He raised a bottle to his lips then puffed his cheeks while swishing bourbon around in his mouth. He glared at the two ten-year-olds and moved towards them. Treen pulled Shainy behind her.

"Get outta here, Treen!" he slurred, sprinklers splashing across his clothes and face. He wobbled closer. Treen moved her friend backwards.

"Leave Shainy alone!"

Mr. Billerson lunged at them, shoving Treen to the ground. He grabbed a strap on Shainy's overalls, yanked her towards him, then dragged her over the sopping grass.

"Treen, help me!"

Treen sprang up and circled behind him. As he reached down to adjust his grip on Shainy, Treen planted an upward kick right between his legs. After a raspy high-pitched squeal, he slowly descended until his knees squished into the lawn.

Shainy fled down Davagard Lane towards the orange glare of the Rocky Mountain sunset. "Get back here!" Mr. Billerson shouted, struggling to his feet to give chase until Treen grabbed the back of



his shirt. He thrashed about like a wild bull trying to shake loose the rodeo's best rider.

Still trying to free himself, Mr. Billerson whirled around swinging. Treen ducked his backhand, grabbed onto his wrist, then tried to pull him back. He flailed his flabby arm until her hands slipped away, then shoved her off the curb into the street. He laughed, swigged, then ran after Shainy.

Treen sat up and moved her headband from her eyes. As she struggled to stand, she noticed Shainy's mother crawling through the doorway, clothes torn, face bloodied. She realized the same could happen to Shainy and hurried over to her bike.

"Don't just stand there, help Mrs. Billerson!" she shouted to the bewildered spectators before she peddled away.

Soaring downhill like a heat seeking missile, Treen searched for Shainy and her explosive father. She had no idea how to stop him, but she'd do anything to protect her best friend.

Treen saw Mr. Billerson jogging in the distance then swerved onto the sidewalk. She peddled furiously until she'd rolled up behind him—close enough to see a squashed pack of cigarettes sticking out from his back pocket.

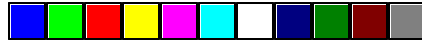
Although he wheezed like he'd soon collapse, he was alert enough to notice her behind him and shatter the bourbon bottle in her path. Treen didn't flinch, rolling right over the glass to ram the tire into his ankle. He tumbled. She veered around him. She pulled a wheelie off the curb then sped downhill again. Now she could catch up to Shainy and tell her everything would be all right.

It wasn't long before she could see Shainy's wavy red hair bouncing in the distance. Still, Treen had to stop her from running — especially now, before she reached the hectic intersection at the bottom of the hill. She stood on the pedals and tried desperately to get her attention.

"Shainy! Shainy, stop — I'm here!"

Too terrified to respond, Shainy continued to run towards the flowing cars. Treen pedaled faster, but Shainy ran into the intersection and disappeared into the traffic.

"SHAINY!" Treen screamed, longer and louder than the skidding cars that couldn't avoid hitting her best friend.



Treen gasped for air. Her legs and arms froze. The bike swerved to the curb, clanged off a garbage can, then hurled her from the seat. She rolled across the pavement and crumpled to a stop behind a parked car.

Resting her cheek on the gravel of an unfinished driveway, Treen shut her eyes and imagined Shainy safe — surrounded by the walls of books inside the Alee home library, where the two of them had studied the world and dreamed of the day they'd open Treen & Shainy's Family Fun Center. Treen would've driven the tour bus. Shainy would've flown the field trip helicopter.

None of that would happen now.

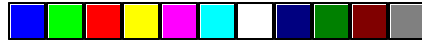
When Treen opened her eyes again, she began to gaze at a house across the street, which had lumber stacked against it. The firewood attracted her like a magnet and she rose slowly from the gravel. She ignored her scrapes and pains, wiping the pebbles stuck to her palms onto her jeans. Then, as sirens blared from every direction, she sprinted across the road towards the house.

After she'd scaled the wire fence and calmed the barking bulldog waiting below, she rushed over to the firewood, lifting an oddly shaped piece off the top. She glared at it; the crude baseball bat seemed to be waiting for her. She grasped the narrow end with both hands, took a practice swing, then hurried back over the fence.

Lumber in hand, she walked into the road to stare at the sickening chaos of flashing lights at the bottom of the hill. Trembling, she turned away from the accident, exhaled, then sprinted uphill to find Shainy's father.

A few minutes later, Treen could see Mr. Billerson two houses away. He was sitting right where he'd fallen, staring at the ground beneath the smoke that rose from his cigarette. He reached into his pocket for a tiny bottle, then raised his head to pour more booze down his throat. After he'd finished, he hurled the bottle into the road — too drunk to realize anything.

Treen stopped a few feet away, shivering as if standing nude at the center of a frozen lake. She couldn't feel the splinters stuck in her palms while wiping the sweat from her hands to her shirt. She thought of Shainy lying dead in the road then gripped the lumber tightly again.



Treen charged up to him. She planted her feet, raised the lumber, then swung at his lowered head. The blow launched the sweat off his face like fireworks and he shot backwards onto the grass.

For a moment, he lay sprawled out like a monstrous letter X. When he began to move around, Treen raised the lumber over her shoulder, ready to strike him again.

“Are you happy now?” she shouted, “You’ve killed her! You’ve killed her!”

Treen slung the weapon downward — onto the grass next to him. She began to cry; she could’ve hit him a hundred times but it wouldn’t bring Shainy back.

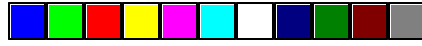
She knelt beside him. She slid the cigarette from his fingers then smothered the butt in the grass. She wiped her eyes, glared at him, then stood slowly, before staggering uphill towards home.

The next day, the Mallyview Daily reported that Shainy Billerson had died instantly. A few months later, Mr. Billerson suffered a heart attack and died in his prison cell. Shainy’s mother left Mallyview and was never seen there again.









## Chapter 1

The Smile Center's aromatic collage of fresh cinnamon pastries, vanilla coffee and omelets might make you forget you'd already eaten breakfast. The tantalizing scent flowed from the center's café, where Samantha Ryde served the morning customers.

Samantha was a cheerful Jamaican woman. She often left people in doubt with an answer of twenty-seven because her creamy brown skin and shiny thick curls made her look much younger. She could've been the world's greatest server if Treen hadn't hired her as the Smile Center manager. Although Treen was only sixteen, Samantha looked up to her and they'd become as close as sisters.

Samantha put down a tray of pastries when Treen strolled by the Café. She dashed after her boss, snaring her attention near the winding staircase that led up to Treen's office.

"Good morning girlfriend!" said Samantha, "I have your schedule ready." She studied Treen's filthy pants. "How was your gardening?"

"Fantastic," said Treen, glowing. "It's a beautiful morning and I'm looking forward to the barbeque this afternoon."

"Then come with me," she said, taking Treen's hand, "Let me show you what little work you have today." They locked arms and walked towards Samantha's office.



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Samantha sat behind her desk to finish plans for the 12:00 barbeque while Treen paced, fiddling with her earring as she studied her schedule. Her three o'clock appointment — the last of the day — hooked her attention.

"The Wellbays? That name sounds familiar, but I don't remember counseling them."

"They never have been to the Smile Center, honey. Mrs. Wellbay called this morning and say the problems between her husband and son be way out of control. She say they must come today. On the phone with her, I hear a loud struggle in the background."

"Sounds serious. Maybe they can come over now. What's their son's name?"

"Russell," Samantha said, handing over the Family Info sheet.

Treen studied the page then called the Wellbays, who agreed to come straight over. "I'll run upstairs and change," she said, handing the phone back to Samantha then rushing out the door.

A short time later, a man and woman clad in dark business suits strolled through the foyer then stopped near Samantha's open door. Their loud, tense talk was not the public behavior you'd expect from a distinguished looking couple in their late forties.

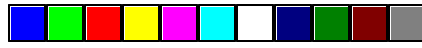
"What are we doing here?" the man grumbled, flinging his hands up. "This place isn't going to help us,"

"One way or the other, we are going to save our relationship with Russell," said the woman, adjusting her sparkling necklace. She tossed her short brown hair then added, "If it weren't for your rotten attitude — "

"Don't start with me Catherine," he said, pointing at her, "I've already been blasted enough by Mr. Blue for missing work again today..."

On and on he complained about Russell, work, and life in general, interrupting whenever Catherine tried to respond. She seemed weary of his tirade, rolling her eyes enough to convince anyone to be quiet — except him.

By now, Samantha knew they were the Wellbays. She'd stood from her desk, taken a bottomless breath, then murmured, "Well, here I go." She moved her long curls from her eyes, then marched out to greet the fiery couple.



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“Welcome to the Smile Center!” Samantha hollered, as if filming a commercial. Mr. Wellbay turned slowly to face her, then displayed a granite-like expression that made her wide-open arms fold gradually until her hands clasped together.

However, Mrs. Wellbay smiled and politely introduced herself and her husband. The two women shook hands and strolled towards The Café. Mr. Wellbay ran his fingers through his hair then surprisingly followed them.

Upstairs, Treen had changed into a different corduroy suit — a brown one with her usual matching corduroy headband. She applied eyeliner then brushed her long, tan-colored hair that matched her skin tone perfectly. Her dramatic green eyes and contagious smile often astonished people and they usually didn’t hesitate to tell her how pretty she looked. She’d always offer a polite thank you, but the compliments made her uncomfortable. She’d just never get used to that sort of attention — proof that family counselors also have hang ups...

Suddenly the office door opened. She thought it was Samantha showing the Wellbays inside, until a variety of young, disagreeing voices filled the room.

“April 26!” shouted one boy.

“Is not!” hollered another.

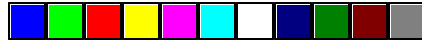
“If you would both listen to me you will learn something. It’s April 22 — end of story,” proclaimed the third.

“Can’t wait to hear what this is all about,” said Treen. She stepped out of the bathroom into the office area, where the boys had encircled her desk. They were loaded with books, papers, and pencils — even though school didn’t start for another two weeks.

Treen approached the lanky boy who towered between the shorter ones. All three wore window-sized glasses, matching brown blazers and faded jeans. Maybe they were brothers.

“What’s the problem here?” she asked cheerfully, fastening her headband.

“There is an argument about the correct birth date of William Shakespeare,” said the lanky boy, gesturing with his pencil. “Please confirm my answer of April 22, 1564, so we can end this discussion.”



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The other boys snickered when Treen shook her head in disagreement: “Shakespeare was born at Stratford on Avon, Warwickshire, in 1564, but the actual date is unknown. You see, he was baptized in the Holy Trinity Church on April 26 and since children were usually baptized a few days after their birth, his birthday is celebrated on April 23,” she added, as the phone began to beep.

The boys’ mouths hung open while Treen spoke to Samantha about the Wellbays’ arrival. “Send them up.” She then led the boys to the door and wished them good luck with their studies.

Treen stood outside the office as the Wellbays walked down the hall. Although Mrs. Wellbay approached with a warm smile and shook her hand, Mr. Wellbay kept his palms in his pockets and nodded through the doorway without making eye contact.

Mr. Wellbay walked up behind his wife, who’d stopped near Treen’s desk. She shook her head and whispered, “Beautiful,” while glaring at the mahogany wood floor, Cantera stone fireplace, and antique furniture. Mrs. Wellbay scanned it all as if she were window-shopping. She complimented Treen on the tasteful design, but except for the loaded bookshelves, Treen swayed all the credit to her mother.

“Can we get on with this?” Mr. Wellbay groaned.

“Yes,” Treen said politely, leading them to the couches near the fireplace. They declined her offer of a beverage — although Mr. Wellbay embarrassed his wife by suggesting a shot of Tequila. A huge gap separated the couple after they’d sat.

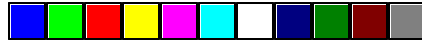
“Tell me about Russell,” said Treen, sitting across from them.

“He’s a pain in the head and I’m sick of it,” said Mr. Wellbay, looking around the room.

“What exactly is he doing that’s causing your...migraine?” asked Treen. Mrs. Wellbay giggled.

“All summer he’s done nothing but smoke cigarettes and roam the streets — looking for some rock band to join,” he said, flinging his hand up. “When school starts, he’ll skip classes. If he doesn’t skip, he’ll find a way to get thrown out of Mallyview High and I’ll miss more work trying to get him back in. To sum it all up, he’s a loser.”

“Walter, please don’t call him names,” said Mrs. Wellbay.



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“Catherine, stop defending that little punk. He walks all over us!”

“If you would stop insulting him constantly, maybe he would respect — and listen to you,” said Mrs. Wellbay.

“He only listens to me when I call him a jerk.”

“Mr. Wellbay, you can’t extinguish your son’s fire with gasoline.”

“I want him to realize how stupid he’s behaving. I’m a busy man. What’ll I do, hand him flowers and sing a lullaby?”

“That’s better than degrading him,” said Treen.

“He’s a good boy. He just has different interests than his father,” said Mrs. Wellbay, glancing at him.

“What are your interests, Mr. Wellbay?”

“I’m an engineer,” he said, staring at the pen he clicked nervously under his thumb. “Robotics and money are my interests.”

“That’s where I’ve seen your name before; I read your article in the Mallyview Daily about the future use of androids in Blue Neptune’s factories. Very interesting.”

Mr. Wellbay finally smiled. “Thank you, but it’ll be more interesting when it actually happens — and it will. That’s why my boss pays me so well.”

“Garrison Blue is a generous man,” said Treen. “He’s donated all the computers for my father’s Bookvilla, which opens in Grevelton next week.”

“So I’ve heard. But why would your father open a bookstore in grimy place like Grevelton? Mallyview Bookvilla not doing so well?”

“Mallyview Bookvilla is doing wonderful. He’s opening the Grevelton bookstore to help the city. Maybe other businesses will follow. Right now it’s too dangerous for the kids to play outside.”

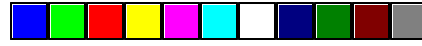
“Maybe you could tell that to my only child,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I suspect Russell has been sneaking off to Grevelton — to buy drugs.”

“When did you start having problems with Russell?”

“He was eleven,” Mrs. Wellbay said quietly. “He was involved in a terrible street fight and seriously injured another boy. He’s been



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different every since.”

“Yeah he’s different but he’d better snap out of it because I’m about to — ”

“May I meet Russell this afternoon?”

Mr. Wellbay stood abruptly. “Listen, I’ve heard all about your accelerated education and superior knowledge of *everything*. But frankly, your college degree won’t help a rotten kid like my son. You can’t repair something that you don’t have the parts for.”

Treen stood and smiled. “I’d still like to meet with him.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that,” said Mrs. Wellbay, standing. “I’ll bring Russell here *myself* this afternoon.” She then glared at her husband, who’d shut his eyes and slowly shook his head.





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### Chapter 2

Shades of yellow, red and green foliage surrounded the Smile Center's cozy backyard. The scent of pine and burning charcoal in the crisp, August air, made the atmosphere of the afternoon barbeque even more pleasant. The long grill stood packed with steaks, hotdogs, hamburgers, and Treen's favorite, grilled catfish. Everyone danced and played volleyball in such a lively manner, it appeared they could party well into the night!

Amongst a shroud of roses and lilies, Treen and Samantha sat on the Flagstone patio overlooking the festivities. As usual, they sipped coffee, held their stuffed bellies, and swore never to eat so much again. Samantha glanced at her wristwatch. "Time for the last appointment. I go and sign him in."

"Please call a tow truck to pull me up from this chair," Treen moaned.

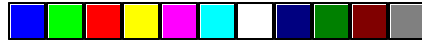
On the other side of the Smile Center, a white BMW pulled into the parking lot and stopped. With the engine still running, Russell Wellbay opened the rear door and slowly stepped out.

He slammed the door. He stared up at the square yellow smiley face painted high on the brick building and got whiff of barbecue smoke. He could hear loads of laughter from behind the facility. His frown quickly vanished when *Jimi Hendrix's* version of *All Along The Watchtower*<sub>2</sub> echoed through the air. Grooving his head to the distant beat, he followed the cobblestone path towards the entry.

Just outside the door, Russell noticed a silver plaque encrusted into the wall that read: *Welcome to the Smile Center, Thank you for stopping by*. The plaque had the same smiley-faced logo at center.

Russell knew his parents were watching him from the car. He also knew they weren't driving away until he walked inside. "Alright, I'm going," he grumbled, yanking the door open.

Inside the foyer, he stopped to scan the spacious and cool looking surroundings. "Man, it smells good in here." He tucked his hands in his back pockets, then began his own tour.



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Every colorful wall he passed was decorated with a painting, photograph, or ceramic creation. The hundreds of shelved books reminded him of the school library where he'd spent many afternoons in detention. If there'd been any more plants, or big windows, the place could be a greenhouse.

As he walked by the recreation room, he noticed some kids surrounding a huge plasma screen, cheering as they watched a *Dumbo* film. As Russell looked on, he muttered, "Funny how Dumbo's father never shows up..."

Russell saw the Information Office and walked over to peer through the glass. He studied the rear view of a shapely woman who battled the folders in the top drawer of a tall file cabinet. He quietly pushed the door back and admired her blue jean curves a bit longer before announcing his arrival.

"Hey, where's this Treen girl I'm supposed to be talkin' to?" he asked loudly, causing her to spin around and fling up a folder full of papers.

"You- scare- me- to- death," she said, her hand pressed against her wavering chest. After the last sheet of paper had floated down between them, she asked, "Are you Russell Wellbay?"

"Sometimes."

"I am Samantha," she said giggling. She reached down to pick up one of the papers — a sign in sheet that she asked him to sit and fill out.

While Russell completed the paperwork, Samantha studied his appearance from behind her desk. Although he looked like he'd been rolling in the dirt, she could see that a good-looking boy lingered beneath the grime; he had high cheekbones and clear blue eyes like his father. The cigarette tucked behind his ear was partially shielded by his shaggy blond hair that looked surprisingly clean.

Russell dropped the pen on the desk and leaned back in his chair. He studied the captivating peach walls of Samantha's office, which looked like the happy section of some museum.

"Those Jamaican paintings are cool," he said, staring at the spectacular landscapes and crowded street markets that looked so real. Samantha sparkled. She was proud of the artwork and impressed that he knew where they'd come from.





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“Wow, thank you. They are paintings of my village.”

“Maybe after I’m cured you can find me one,” he said politely.

“Your own village?”

Russell grinned. “No, just a painting.”

Samantha laughed. “Oh yes, I do that for you.” She glanced at her watch; “Where is Treen?”

“It’s Saturday. She probably went home,” he said, standing, “I’ll come back some other time — ”

“No you won’t Russell Wellbay!” She stepped around the desk and grabbed his hand. “You come with me upstairs and wait for Treen there.”

After Samantha had taken Russell upstairs, she searched for Treen, who she found in the parking lot talking to Russell’s parents. As usual, Mr. Wellbay gestured wildly, while his wife just twirled her pearls. Samantha returned to her office without interrupting them.

Treen hated to be late for any kind of appointment. When the Wellbays finally drove away, she ran inside to meet Russell. She could see Samantha inside the Info Office, pointing at the ceiling, and realized that she’d already taken Russell up to her office.

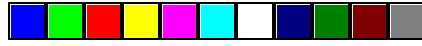
Midway up the stairs, Treen stopped moving and took two whiffs: “I smell smoke,” she whispered, and it wasn’t the pleasant aroma of the barbeque.

The scent grew stronger as she ran up the remaining stairs. She jogged down the hallway and stopped near the open office door, which revealed exactly where the nasty smell had originated.

Russell was lying on the couch puffing a cigarette! Treen stood in the doorway and shook her head. Yet, even though his smoking was inconsiderate, she walked in and shut the door without a word. She knew there’d be plenty of time to discuss his bad habit.

Russell continued to blow smoke at the ceiling, ignoring her when she took off her blazer and moved towards her desk. With no ashtrays in the office, she watched to see where he’d been tapping his burning butt. To her astonishment, he took a drag, then flicked into his palm! Yes, it was gross, but at the same time, strangely considerate.

On the same hand that held the ashy mess, he licked his thumb and index finger, then used the moisture to pinch and extinguish



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the butt. As it sizzled out, the office began to smell even worse.

Russell finally ended his disgusting display by standing to discard the mess into his pants pocket. He wiped his hands on his denim jacket then plopped back down on the couch. After he'd wiggled himself comfortable, he cleared his throat.

Treen assumed he was ready to talk. She took two cans of Pavaloo Root Beer from the small red refrigerator beside her desk, then stepped over to the couch.

She offered the soda. He stared at the can. Then he sprang forward and snatched it from her hand. As he turned the can around to study the ingredients, Treen moved to sit across from him.

"Russell, I'm Treen Alee. How are you today?"

"I don't know how I am," he said in a low tone, still staring at the Pavaloo, "That's what you're here for, ain't it?" he added, scanning the loaded bookshelves that surrounded the room.

Crack!

He'd opened the Pavaloo. He glared at the foam rushing out. "I'll be seventeen next week. I ain't about to tell no sixteen-year-old girl about my problems." He loudly sipped the foam.

"So, you know how old I am?"

"Who doesn't? There's pictures and stuff about you all over that stupid school I go to. You own this Happy Center and you're some super psychologist, right?"

"I'm a counselor. I have a long way to go before I'm a psychologist. She grinned. By the way, it's called the *Smile Center*."

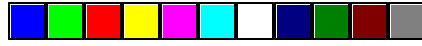
"Sorry. Look, I really don't wanna talk about my dad."

"Well, talk about something else then. Who's your best friend at Mallyview High?"

"I ain't got a best friend. I don't talk to anybody."

She leaned forward. "Russell, I can help you, but you'll have to talk to me. Besides, if you don't, your parent's may take you elsewhere — probably to someone much older." He sat up quickly and put the Pavaloo on the table.

"I hate my dad. He doesn't care about anything I want. He just wants me to learn about computers. All he talks about is these stupid robotic arms he makes and how much money he gets. I want to be a musician — a drummer — but he doesn't care. He'd be hap-



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pier if I was born without a tongue so I don't talk to him about anything. Now he thinks I'm doin' drugs."

"Are you doing drugs?"

"No!" he said, shooting forward then back. "I ain't no druggy — I'm confused enough already."

"Are you in the school band?"

"That's for nerds."

"What if you had to choose between computer classes and the high school band?"

"That ain't a fair question," he said grinning.

"I'd still like an answer."

"Okay, I'd join the band — but I wouldn't wear one of them stupid uniforms..."

An hour later, Russell had relaxed enough to tell her anything she wanted to know — and even what she didn't want to know. He listened carefully when she explained how important computerized drums had become to the music world, and why he should learn all he could about them. She even convinced him to join the band when school started, explaining that it'd be a great way to show his father how serious he was about becoming a drummer. She'd also added, "Many, many girls, dig those band uniforms..."

When a long muffled moan sounded from Russell's waistline, Treen halted her coffee cup inches from her lips, and asked, "What was *that*?"

"My stomach," he said, patting it. "I'm starvin'."

"Come on then," she said standing, "We'll walk downstairs to the barbeque."

"I ain't got any money."

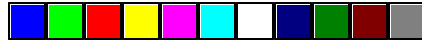
"You don't need money. Everything is free."

"Wow. You're doin' that just for me?"

Treen giggled. "No, Russell — for everyone," she said, slinging her purse over her shoulder. As she walked towards the exit, he swerved in front of her, nearly tripping over her boots to politely open the door for her.

"Thank you," she said grinning. "By the way, what happened to your clothes?"

"I was rollin' around in the dirt."



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### Chapter 3

Treen had to pry Russell from the barbecue and she finally managed to get him back up to her office. How a slender frame like his could hold all that food was beyond her. He burped several times during their second discussion about his father.

Once the session had ended, Treen was surprised by his urgency for the next appointment. He wanted to return first thing in the morning, but since her Sundays were reserved for church and her parents, he'd have to come back on Monday. In the meantime, Russell roamed the office, still shaking his head at all the books.

"This is givin' me a headache. Did you read all of 'em?"

"Yes, I'm a speed-reader. But I sure didn't enjoy all of — "

"What's the matter?"

"Shhhhh. I thought I heard a scream out in the hallway," she said, still staring at the door.

"Yeah," he said, "Now I hear it."

As the commotion rumbled closer, Treen scurried from behind her desk. However, before she could reach the door, it was shoved open.

"Get your hands off me!" cried the female, who tussled through the doorway with Samantha struggling to pull her back.

"Control yourself!" Samantha shouted, gripping the girl's arm with both hands. As Treen hurried over to help out, the only male in the room suddenly spoke up.

"Gail what are you doin' bustin' in here like that?" he shouted.

The room fell silent. The three women quit struggling and glared at him in sequence.

"You know her?" asked Treen, releasing Gail's arm.

"Yeah, I know her. She's my girlfriend."

"Was your girlfriend!" Gail shrieked, charging over to him. "How could you do this to me?"

"Do what to you?"

"You know exactly what!" she shouted, streams of black eyeliner



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racing down her face.

“Leave me alone with them,” Treen whispered to Samantha.

Russell turned his back and walked away. Gail followed. She walked up behind him, grabbed his shoulder, then forced him to turn around and look at her. This time, she vented even closer to his face.

“You told me you couldn’t leave the house last night but you went to Grevelton to see another woman!”

Russell stayed silent. Gail kept on yelling. Her frayed hair blocked her eyes, but not the beads of spit that sputtered from her mouth like baby dragon flames. Russell wiped his face then turned his back again. This time, he marched towards the window.

Except for the refrigerator hum and faint music from the barbeque, the office was quiet. Gail crossed her arms and sat on a bench near the door. Treen walked over and stood next to Russell. Together, they stared out at the orange sky.

“Would you like to talk about this?” Treen asked quietly.

“No.”

“Are you embarrassed?”

“No. I just hate getting caught.”

“So it’s true then?”

“You knew that already.”

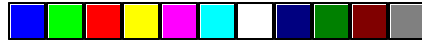
“No I didn’t. I’m in disbelief that any girl would want you — let alone two of them.”

The phone began to beep. “Please tell Gail the truth and apologize,” said Treen, walking over to the desk.

Samantha had called from downstairs to say that the Wellbays had arrived to pick up Russell. Treen paused for a moment then said, “Take them out to the barbeque until I sort out his problems with Gail...”

Treen hung up the phone. When she turned around, she saw that Russell had gone over to talk to Gail. But as he began to tell her the truth about his jaunt to Grevelton, Gail revealed the crazed look of someone who’d gone over the edge, climbed back up, and was about to leap again. She twisted the promise ring off her finger, hurling it — and a few cuss words at his head.

“I hate you, Russell Wellbay!” she shouted. After a rude dis-



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play of both middle fingers, Gail stormed out of the office. Treen followed.

“Leave me alone, Treen!” she shouted, voice echoing throughout the hall. Gail ran to end of the corridor then stomped down the stairs. Treen walked back into the office, slammed the door, then stormed over to Russell.

“Do your parents know about Gail?”

“No way, my dad would kill me. He works for her father.”

“Who’s her father?”

“Garrison Blue, that dude that owns — ”

“Blue Neptune Enterprises.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh boy,” she whispered, rubbing her forehead. “Does Mr. Blue know about the two of you?”

“Heck no. My dad says the guy hates me.”

“Russell, how far did your relationship go with Gail?”

He grinned. “All the way, baby.”

Treen’s eyes darkened. “This is far away from funny,” she said, glaring at him. “Gail took your relationship seriously. No one likes to be cheated on — especially a teenage girl. Believe me, we already have enough insecurities and confusion in our lives.”

Suddenly, the office door flew open again, walloping the wall behind it. Russell quivered, spinning around to find his father charging at him — angrier than Gail, but without the dripping mascara.

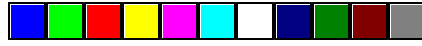
“Dad, wh-what’s the matter?” He asked, eyes even wider than his father’s.

Mr. Wellbay yanked his tie loose and pointed at Russell. “We’re going home right now!”

Russell trembled. He was so scared he didn’t realize he’d been creeping backwards until he bumped into Treen’s desk. He might’ve crawled under it if Treen hadn’t rushed over and stood in front of him.

“Mr. Wellbay, please calm down. You’re scaring him,” she said, voice rising. Mr. Wellbay marched up to her. Treen didn’t blink.

“My boss’s daughter is downstairs crying over my stupid son — and even though I’ve told Russell not to, he’s been in Grevelton, fooling around. Now get out of my way!”



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“I am not moving until you calm down.”

“Told you he hates me,” said Russell, moving Treen’s arm to stand beside her and stare at his red-faced father.

“Is that what you think?” asked Mr. Wellbay.

“Yeah,” he said nodding slowly. “That’s what I think.”

Suddenly, Mr. Wellbay lunged at him, inadvertently knocking Treen to the floor. He gripped Russell’s shirt and yanked him forward, tugging him towards the doorway. Russell resisted as if being dragged towards the edge of a cliff.

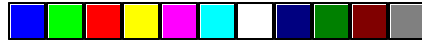
Mr. Wellbay tripped over an end table and released Russell’s shirt. However, he stood quickly and shoved his son to the floor. Russell backed away when his father reached down to grab him again.

Treen staggered to her desk while the Wellbays continued their pathetic skirmish. She opened the drawer and took out a remote control with the name *Ariel* inscribed on the front. She entered a code, then watched the office window hum open.

When Mr. Wellbay gripped Russell’s collar with one hand and made a fist with the other, Treen dashed over and pushed him into the bookshelf. After a slight stumble, he turned around quickly and kicked through the fallen books as he marched over and grabbed Treen by the sleeves of her blazer.

“Let go of me, Mr. Wellbay!” Treen shouted, unable to break free. He squeezed even tighter and continued to rant about his son jeopardizing his career.

Luckily, Ariel was on the way.



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## Chapter 4

Ariel slid down his black leather rope from the security flat, one floor up from Treen's office. Sure, he could've climbed down the fire escape ladder attached to the building, but that took too long — and it was boring. He reached the opened window, put his hiking boots against the frame, then pushed off.

Ariel soared through cleanly, landing boots first on the floor. He reached down to pick up his well-worn leather Stetson, then moved his long reddish hair from his ill shaven face. His faded jeans and Smile Center T-shirt looked too small for his tall muscular frame. He donned his hat, grinning as he walked toward Mr. Wellbay.

"Got two seconds to let 'er go," said Ariel.

"Who the hell are you?" fired Mr. Wellbay.

"Sir, I done asked you politely. I ain't askin' again," he said, standing as if he were about to draw from holsters. Mr. Wellbay released her. He walked up to Ariel, inspecting his appearance.

"What are you, twenty-five? Still mowing lawns for a living?"

Ariel chuckled. "Well, you're right about one thing; I am twenty five. But when I visit my folks in Missouri, they don't pay me to cut the grass. Now, I have to ask you to leave."

"That's exactly what I intend to do. Russell, get up and let's go."

"I ain't goin' nowhere 'til Mom gets here," he moaned.

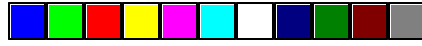
"Mr. Wellbay, please go and find your wife," said Treen.

"Didn't I tell you to butt out?" he shouted.

"Sir, come on downstairs 'til you calm down," said Ariel, lightly grabbing his arm.

"Keep your hands off me!" he shouted, jerking away from him. As Ariel moved towards him again, Mr. Wellbay hurled an unexpected punch. The blow knocked Ariel back; he rubbed his jaw for a moment then sank a punch into Mr. Wellbay's gut. Russell's father slowly sank to his knees — just as Mrs. Wellbay's high heels





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clicked down the marble outside the door. As she walked into the office, she covered her mouth and scanned the roughed up room.

“What on earth is going on in here?” she demanded, glaring down at her gasping husband. Russell lay tipped over like the furniture while Treen and Ariel stood there like two unscathed bullies.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Wellbay, but your husband attacked Russell — and Ariel here, who happens to be in charge of security. You’re welcome to stay, but Ariel will escort your husband from the facility,” Treen said firmly. Ariel helped Mr. Wellbay to his feet.

“Walter, is this true?” She pointed towards the hallway; “Did you also push that woman down the stairs?”

“What woman?” Treen asked loudly.

“I believe her name is Samantha.”

“Ariel, keep Mr. Wellbay right here until I find out what happened,” Treen scorched before storming out. Russell rose slowly, glared at his father, then followed her into the hallway.

Downstairs, Samantha was stretched out on a couch in the foyer, slowly wiggling her spine. The women who’d found her crumpled near the stairs surrounded her; they cleaned the scratch on her forehead and cheered her up. Samantha gleamed even more when Treen jogged into the circle. Shortly after, Russell joined them.

Except for the scratch and sore back, Samantha felt fine, sitting up to thank the women before they returned to the barbeque. Afterwards, Treen sat next to her, but Russell seemed embarrassed by it all, mumbling a cuss word as he marched towards the exit with a cigarette in hand.

“Mr. Wellbay did not push me down,” Samantha explained. “He was angry going up the stairs and I try to stop him before he reach your office. He pull his arm from me and I lose my balance.”

Treen stood and fiddled with her earring. “You wouldn’t have fallen in the first place had he controlled himself.” Her angry tone softened; “I’m just happy you’re okay.”

Treen helped Samantha to the Info Office then headed to confront Mr. Wellbay. Before she could reach the stairs, the sound of sneakers squeaking across the floor stole her attention — as did the whiny voice that began shouting, “Miss Treen! Miss Treen, wait for me!”



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The small boy moved so fast that he probably would've sped by and smacked into the wall if Treen hadn't grabbed him. He'd obviously come from the barbeque because he had ketchup smeared across his cheek and he gripped a half eaten burger that still looked too big for his tiny hands.

Treen knelt and took his hand. "What's the matter, little man?" she asked joyfully, as if her entire day had been wonderful.

"He told me to give you this," said the boy, breathing hard as he handed her a folded piece of paper.

"Who?"

"Don't know but he said you'd give me a dollar."

"Right," she said, reaching into her pocket. "Since you're so nice, here's five." After a stuttering thank you, the boy ran off. Treen quickly unfolded the ketchup-stained message, which read:

*Treen,*

*Sorry about what happened in your office and about Samantha. I don't know where I'm going but I'm never going back home. You're the only person I can talk to so maybe I'll call you someday. Thanks for giving that kid a dollar.*

*Russell*

Treen sprinted through the foyer and burst out the front door. She ran down the cobblestone walkway, out into the street, then scanned every direction.

Russell Wellbay was gone.

"How could you treat Russell that way? You don't know if Gail Blue was telling the truth," shouted Mrs. Wellbay, standing near Treen's desk.

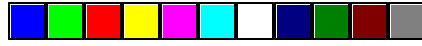
"It is the truth," her husband fired back. "She's probably crying to her father about this as we speak. You just keep quiet when we get home and I'll deal with Russell."

"No you won't," said Treen, walking in.

"What's happened? Where's Russell?" asked Mrs. Wellbay, voice quivering.

"Your son has run away."

"What did you fill his head with downstairs?" Mr. Wellbay hollered.



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

“You should be worried about what you filled his head with,” said Treen handing him Russell’s goodbye letter. “You have no idea how badly you’ve hurt him.”

“I’ve had it with your views concerning my family. It was a bad decision coming here. Come on Catherine, let’s go find Russell,” he said, storming out.

Mrs. Wellbay walked over to hug Treen. “This is not your fault, she whispered,” before leaving.

Treen shut the door and snatched off her headband. She marched over to the swivel chair, threw herself down, then stared at Ariel who sat in front of her.

“Jazz, you ok?” asked Ariel.

She exhaled. “I’m worried about Russell. He doesn’t have any money or friends around here. There’s no telling what he’ll do now.”

“Listen, I didn’t say nothin’ to the Wellbays, but Gail Blue phoned up when you were downstairs.”

“What did she say?” she asked, leaning forward.

“Strange. Gail said her father is the person who told her about Russell’s Grevelton girlfriend.”

“But that means Garrison Blue already knew about Russell and Gail.”

“Sure does. Mr. Blue was in Grevelton last night makin’ sure his donation of computers made it to Bookvilla. Guess that’s when he saw Russell with the other female. Like any decent father would do, he told his daughter about it.”

“But why didn’t he tell Mr. Wellbay?”

“Good question.”

Treen managed a smile. “Ariel, you’re pretty good with people. Maybe you should become a counselor.”

“Right, and folks’d come out my office crazier then when they came in.”



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## Chapter 5

Mallyview, Colorado was surrounded by thousands of acres of mountains and colorful rangelands and somehow, the nineteenth century houses and buildings blended perfectly with the modern designs. Often in the town square, laughter and conversation could smother the sound of a seldom-heard siren. The city was just too beautiful not to live in — exactly why Edwin and Elizabeth Alee decided to open their first Bookvilla in the middle of town over ten years ago.

Edwin loved that the town square was beneath his office window because it allowed him to enjoy the amateur musicians and mimes — at least until the wintry months shook them back inside the clubs.

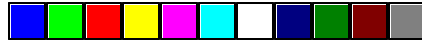
The Alee's lived six miles from Bookvilla. Their cheerful looking Tudor house stood at the center of a lightly wooded cul-de-sac at the end of St. Barron Road. Elizabeth loved the house because it reminded her of home in native England. Edwin was just happy to have enough room upstairs to build the private library he'd always dreamed of.

However, Treen and Shainy had spent more time in the library than anyone else had. After Shainy died, Treen practically moved in, pushing a cot between the tall bookshelves at night so she could fall asleep reading, then wake up and start again.

For now, Edwin relaxed in the living room with Regina Duffle, Treen's language tutor and a family friend. Not a day turned night without her dropping in for a coffee or tea conversation, which often began with her admiring Elizabeth's paintings and antique furniture.

Regina listened carefully while Edwin complained about an interview he'd given earlier in the day, where reporters from the Mallyview Daily had called him crazy for opening a bookstore in the gloomy city of Grevelton.

“Why am I'm opening a Bookvilla in a shabby town like



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Grevelton? I'm doing it *because* Grevelton's shabby," said Edwin, slapping the coffee table in sequence with his last three words. "Somebody has to help those people and we should be grateful that the crime hasn't spread to Mallyview."

"I think it's a bold and wonderful idea," said Regina, "Maybe other businesses will follow and create more jobs."

"That's what we're praying for."

Over near the fireplace, Elizabeth slammed the phone down. "Unbelievable!" she shouted, walking towards the couch. "Treen's just mentioned that a man went berserk and attacked his son at the Center this afternoon."

"You're kidding me," said Regina.

"Is Treen alright?" asked Edwin, standing.

"Yes darling, she's fine. Ariel was there. But the lad has run off and hasn't been seen or heard from since."

"That's terrible," said Regina.

"It certainly is. Even worse is that the man works for Garrison Blue. His name is Walter Wellbay."

"Oh no," said Edwin, reaching down for his coffee. "I've heard all about Mr. Wellbay's problems from Mr. Blue. Supposedly, his son Russell has turned him into a chronic meeting misser, and you can't miss meetings when your Blue Neptune's top engineer."

"Will this affect your business relationship with Mr. Blue?" asked Regina.

"Not at all. But Mr. Wellbay had better learn to control his temper."

"Now Edwin, you mustn't speak in that forceful tone," said Elizabeth, returning to her normal, joyful state. "It makes me a bit too happy."

"Maybe I'll leave you two alone," said Regina, standing after Elizabeth had slinked behind her husband and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"No, you mustn't go," said Elizabeth.

"Yes you must," said Edwin, enjoying his wife's attention."

"Quiet down, you", she whispered into his ear. "Regina, Edwin and I are off to meet Treen at the Sea Crystallore. Will you join us?"



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“I’m going there now — I have a date,” she said smiling.

“That’s wonderful,” said Elizabeth.

“Yes it is! He’s new in town, but I already think I’m in love.”

“Not again,” Edwin groaned.

“Don’t mind him Regina. He’s still a bit cranky from that interview.”

“Well I should be. Everyone’s convinced that the dreaded Awaker Gang will either run us out of Grevelton — or kill us,” he said.

“I’ve heard that the Awakers run that whole city. Some people claim the gang never goes to sleep,” said Regina.

Elizabeth giggled. “Nonsense! That’s the biggest load of rubbish I’ve heard since flying out of Heathrow.” She glanced at her watch. “Edwin, we’d better hurry if we’re to meet Treen on time.”

Treen had hopped on a nostalgic Mally Trolley, which was her favorite way to travel the spectacular city scenery that meant more to her than anything money could buy. The pine green trolleys had bulging beige leather seats, so comfy a passenger could fall asleep and miss their stop, and exactly why Treen stood near the soda bar at the rear. She sipped a Pavaloo and laughed with the locals, with an occasional glance at a sunset that definitely deserved more attention.

“Sea Crystallore!” the conductor shouted, as the trolley rolled to a stop.

“Goodbye everyone!” said Treen, stepping off. She waved until the trolley faded towards the dwindling sunset.

As she walked downhill towards the restaurant, Treen thought of Russell. Was he scared? Was he hungry? Where would he sleep? With darkness settling over Mallyview and the rest of Colorado, Russell was probably asking himself the same questions.

Treen noticed her mother’s white PT Cruiser down near the river. When her parents suddenly stepped out of the car, she hurried down the grassy hill towards the parking area.

“Mom! Dad!” she shouted, waving until she’d reached the bottom. Her parents were her best friends and whenever she could, she’d let them know it.



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

Edwin and Elizabeth were just as happy to see their daughter when she jogged up. Treen snuggled between them and they wrapped their arms around each other and walked towards the restaurant.

The Sea Crystallore, a retired passenger ship, had been converted into a fabulous seafood restaurant and jazz club. Anchored along the Mallyview River, the turquoise colored vessel had its name painted in large, fancy white letters on each side. At night, colorful neon lights outlined the entire vessel and offered a unique view from atop the hill.

A barrage of hellos and handshakes greeted the Alees after they'd walked up the ramp and entered the crowded foyer. Every Saturday evening the restaurant was packed; without a reservation, there'd be no chance to eat there — unless of course you sat on the deck with a fishing pole.

The Alees continued through, until they'd reached the fresh seafood scent of the dining room. On the round stage at center, The Crystallore Jazzmen partied so hard on the drums, sax, bass and piano, that Treen was tempted to drop her purse and dance, even though she was dead tired.

“There's Regina, near the fish tank,” said Elizabeth.

“Who's she sitting with?” asked Treen.

“She said she was in love again,” Edwin quipped. Treen raised her brow.

Like everyone else in the restaurant, Regina noticed the Alees. While she motioned the family to her table, the well-groomed man holding her hand rubbed his goatee.

Regina had recently mentioned to Treen that she'd blown out the candles on three cakes since the last time she'd dated. When she admitted that she'd accept the first offer from any man wearing a tie, Treen replied: “A tie looks great on a friendly man; an unfriendly man might use it to choke you.”

Regina sprang from her chair to hug everyone. Her date stood slowly, messing with his cropped black hair. Regina twinkled over him during the big introduction.

“Everyone, I'd like you to meet Lance Ruof — a very special person to me.”



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“I have visited your bookstore,” said Lance shaking Edwin’s hand, “its — overwhelming.”

“Overwhelming?” asked Edwin, confused.

“Oh yes. There are thousands of books that seem to stare at my tiny, tiny brain,” he said, making a small circle with his fingers.

Everyone laughed except Treen. Lance saw her staring at him and dropped his grin like it weighed a thousand pounds. When he extended his hand, Treen continued to glare until her mother elbowed her into quick handshake. Treen apologized, saying she was tired.

Stanley Finnerman — better known as Finns, had been searching the ship for the Alees. He saw them near Regina’s table and walked over.

Finns owned the Sea Crystallore. He’d been a friend of the Alees for years and gave Treen her ‘Jazz’ nickname because of her fascination with the music. With his arms crossed in front of his bright red sweater, Finns strolled up behind the Alees.

“Why are you people standing here? You know you always got a table in this joint,” said Finns, mouth barely visible under his thick gray beard, which matched his Afro perfectly.

Treen spun around, hugging him so hard that he had to adjust his glasses and bowtie.

“I hope everybody’s hungry,” said Finns, now shaking Edwin’s hand. “Your table’s all set.”

Edwin asked Regina and Lance to join them and they didn’t hesitate to accept. Finns then led the group towards the table, where the burning candles added brilliance to the already sparkling silverware and crystal glasses.

Standing near a large colorful fish tank, Finns had taken an order from everyone except Lance, who continued to hold the menu in front of his face. When he finally lowered it, he rudely tossed it onto the table.

“There’s nothing listed that I’d prefer to eat,” he said, shocking Regina and probably insulting Finns.

“Would you like something to drink?” asked Finns, brow raised.

“No.”

Finns picked up the menu and walked away. Lance turned to-





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wards Regina, smiled, then placed his arm around her, oblivious to her discontent.

Treen rubbed her earring. She couldn't help but listen when Regina questioned Lance about his lack of appetite — and rotten attitude. Elizabeth leaned close to Treen and whispered, "That was quite rude." Edwin just stared at the fish tank and was probably still dwelling on the Bookvilla interview.

Lance didn't offer an odd explanation for scoffing at the menu. He said he simply wasn't hungry for seafood. However, he also didn't think he was rude — just honest.

"You've lost your appetite on our last two dates," said Regina. "In fact, I don't think I've ever seen you eat," she added.

"That's how I maintain this figure."

"Whereabouts are you from Lance?" asked Elizabeth.

"Paris. I am from Paris, France."

"You don't have much of an accent," said Edwin.

"My father is French, but I have spent most of my time here in the United States."

"Your mother?" asked Elizabeth.

"Let's just say I never had one," he said, presenting a poorly timed smirk.

"Lance is looking for work. He's here visiting friends — but has decided to stay for good," Regina said excitedly.

"Edwin, I'd like to speak to you about employment. Before my father died, he was the owner of a bookstore in France. It is now closed, but I spent most of my time working there."

"You've spent most of your time in a lot of places," said Treen, who'd been listening so intently that she almost sipped from her mother's wine glass — if she hadn't done so already.

"It's a short life and I like to travel," said Lance, ignoring Treen's skepticism.

"Paris is a great city. Is that where your father opened his bookstore?" asked Edwin.

"Yes. Near the top of the Champs Elysees and close to the Eiffel Tower."

"You must mean the *Arc De Triumph*. It's at the top of *Champs Elysees* — not the *Eiffel Tower*," Treen explained.



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Lance glared at her and chuckled. “I stand corrected.”

An hour later, Finns cleared the remaining dishes from the table while Treen sipped down the rest of her coffee. Throughout dinner, she thought of Russell and watched Regina gawk over her new love. Still, something just didn’t feel right about Lance Ruof.

As her father and Lance began discussing Grevelton Bookvilla, Treen brushed off her black skirt then stood to excuse herself. Elizabeth noticed her daughter’s aggravation and followed behind.

Treen had stopped near the stage to watch the slow dancing couples. She didn’t turn around when someone began massaging her shoulders because she could smell her mother’s *Estee Lauder Youth-Dew* perfume.

“Is it just me, Mother?”

“Not at all sweetheart. Lance is a bit strange. However, as for your father offering him a job, you must remember the problems we’ve had finding a manager willing to work in Grevelton. If we don’t hire someone soon, we may have to purchase a robot to stick in there.”

Treen giggled. “I understand. Guess I should lighten up — my mind is just worn out for the day.”

“It’s understandable after what happened at the Center. Your father spoke with Mr. Blue and neither of them is happy with Mr. Wellbay.”

Treen turned to face her Mom. “I just hope Russell Wellbay is alright.”

“I do as well, love. Now then, I’d better get back to the table; if I’m off too long, one of these ladies will trouble your father for a dance.”

“Are you sure it’s trouble?” she asked grinning.

“Of course it is,” she replied joyfully, kissing Treen on the cheek before she hurried back to Edwin.

Treen had barely turned to face the dance floor again, when someone else walked up behind her. The person stood so close she could feel their clothes touch hers. She stepped forward, turning to find Lance looking up at the stage as the drummer played a fast paced solo.

“Great band,” said Lance.



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“One of my favorites,” said Treen, turning her back to him.

“You don’t like me, do you?”

She didn’t answer.

Lance chuckled then pressed further. “Regina has mentioned your satellite-high intelligence. I suppose that makes you better than me. I suppose that since you’re a counselor, you’ll have no problem explaining what’s wrong with me.”

Treen faced him. His sarcasm didn’t bother her, but she was curious about something else.

“Why are you so concerned about what I think of you?”

“Because I’m in love with Regina. Your opinion of me is important to her.”

Treen giggled. “You’ve been in Mallyview for a half hour and you’re in love with her? Now that was fast. Anyway, Regina makes her own decisions no matter what I, or anyone else says. Maybe you should add that to the list of reasons you love her so much.” She marched away from him and headed back to the table. It was definitely time to go home.

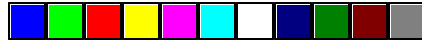
Treen reached her seat as Regina thanked Edwin for arranging a job interview with Lance. “If everything works out, Lance will be managing Grevelton Bookvilla on opening day,” said Edwin, raising a celebratory fist.

“He’s willing to work there?” asked Treen, lifting her blazer from the chair.

“He sure is,” said Edwin, glowing. “I explained everything — including the danger — and he understood.”

As Treen hooked her purse on her shoulder, Regina said, “We were also about leave, but Lance has persuaded all of us to stay for cocktails and dancing.”

Treen glanced at her mother, encouraged everyone to have fun, then walked towards the exit. She’d have to hurry to catch the last trolley.



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## Chapter 6

After hours of wandering the outskirts of Mallyview, Russell had hitchhiked to Grevelton, tired and hungry. It was past midnight and he hoped to find Tsara Orez, the girl he'd met there the night before.

As he walked past the dilapidated, graffiti splattered buildings, Russell wondered if he'd end up sleeping beside the people on the sidewalks. He moved faster when the hooded figures on every corner began hollering, "Leufarem! I got Leufarem for sale!" The distressing scenes made it clear that his life had taken a twirl for the terrible.

Nothing around him looked familiar. Since he wasn't about to ask for directions to Ding Palace — the dance club that Tsara worked in, he took his chances and headed down an alleyway. Maybe he'd get lucky and the shortcut would lead right to the club.

Near the end of the dark path, he saw what looked like a small campfire. But the closer he came to the flames, the more he realized the men standing around weren't Boy Scouts cooking marshmallows under the quarter moon. The men boozed and boasted about all the money they'd made that night, even though they had no roof over their heads.

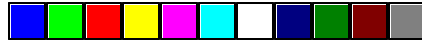
Russell could've — and probably should've — turned and run but he didn't want to look scared. However, when two men stepped out of the circle, it was obvious they wouldn't allow him to just stroll on by.

"Yo kid, come here. I got some Leufarem for sale — best prices in Grev," slurred the drunk, blocking Russell's way.

"I don't want that stuff man."

"Excuse m-me? I'll put it this way boy. How much money you got?" he shouted. The man could barely stand as he staggered closer and he smelled like soiled socks soaking in a bucket of vinegar.

"I ain't got no money!" Russell shouted, clenching his fists as the other men surrounded him. He was in huge trouble.



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“Well you ain’t passin’ here for free. We’ll just have to beat some cash out of you,” he slurred.

Suddenly, one of the drunken men slugged Russell in the head, knocking him down. Another intoxicated bum reached down for him, but Russell thrust his Adidas into the man’s face and rolled clear as the drunk cupped his bloody nose and fell down shrieking.

Russell staggered up and tried to run, but the drunks overpowered him. They held his arms back and punched away, until the sound of laughter echoed loudly from the alleyway. The drunks quit swinging and looked behind them; they weren’t hallucinating when the chuckling, burley figure marched out of the darkness and into the firelight.

“I never seen a marketing strategy so bad!” said the man, a slight rasp in his words. He removed his leather jacket, tossed it on the ground, then adjusted his black T-shirt. Rubbing his fist, he walked right up to them and glanced down at the poor kid slumped in their clutches.

“Ain’t nobody gonna buy your stuff if you treat ‘em like that,” he said, towering over the drunks. Now unless you want a severe beatin’, quit tackin’ that boy, and get lost.”

“T-Take it easy, Sheridan, we’re leaving — right now,” the drunk stuttered, releasing Russell to the ground. The petrified bums sprinted into the alley and kept on running.

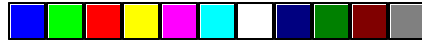
“Thanks,” moaned Russell, rising to one knee.

“Man, don’t thank me. It’s Saturday night, I got a woman waitin’, and I ain’t taken a shower or changed my drawers yet. You can thank Tsara — she sent me out here to make sure your Mally-butt wasn’t gettin’ tacked — a good decision it looks like,” said Sheridan.

“How’d she know I was here?”

“I don’t know kid,” he said, helping Russell up. “I’m takin’ your Mally-butt to her place, then I’m going to pick up my lady.”

As they marched through the brutal streets of Grevelton, the number of people who knew Sheridan Coswell amazed Russell. On every corner, Sheridan stopped to hi-five the very people that Russell had been avoiding all night. The excitement continued when Sheridan prevented a gas station robbery; the gun-toting thieves returned the money to the cashier as Sheridan had ordered — even



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though he had no weapon.

Russell felt safer walking with Sheridan, but he'd never admit it. Yet, he did admit that he liked the respect Sheridan received and wished people would treat him that way. Sheridan offered a different perspective: "Look at this messed up city, Mallyboy. Try to gain respect in a respectful place. I know for fact it'll mean a lot more to you."

Tsara lived on the first floor of a surprisingly clean apartment complex. After Sheridan had tapped on her window, she peered from behind the curtains, saw Russell's condition, then hurried to open the door.

Even in his battered state, Russell gleamed when Tsara appeared in the doorway, where the lovely eighteen-year-old panicked at the sight of him bleeding.

"Quickly, come inside. I will clean you up," she said taking his hand.

"You better teach Mally-boy how to find your crib. He won't be so lucky next time," said Sheridan, closing the door.

"I can take care of myself — and quit calling me Mallyboy. My name's Russell," he said, easing down on the pink vinyl couch situated in the tiny living room.

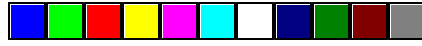
Sheridan laughed. "Sure you can take care of yourself — if you drive around Grevelton in a tank! I best be leaving now. My lady's probably asleep and it's my duty to go wake her up."

"Thanks for bringing him here in one piece."

"No problem, little sister. Mallyboy, if you go back home tonight, don't get tacked," said Sheridan, who strolled out laughing. Russell grinned.

"Ouch!" shouted Russell, as Tsara dabbed peroxide on his wounded scalp. To take his mind off the pain, he asked her about Sheridan.

"Sheridan was a gang leader until someone shot and killed his mother inside their home," she explained quietly. She'd always wanted him to shape up so he quit being a thug. Now he and his network help people protect themselves and their property — a good thing with hardly any police in Grevelton. That's why he's called King of The Streets."



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“So how’d you meet him?”

“I was living on the street and selling drugs when Sheridan found me. He got me this apartment and the job at Ding Palace.”

“Were you sellin’ that Leufarem stuff?”

“I had to. I needed money. Leufarem is dangerous and makes some people go mad so don’t touch it.”

“I ain’t no druggy,” he said, sounding insulted.

Tsara glanced down at her wristwatch then sprang from the couch. “I’m late for work! Come with me it’ll be fun.”

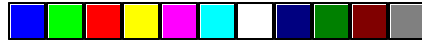
“Can’t. Them two nickels I had in my pockets were kicked out back in that alley.”

She took his hands then helped him up from the couch. “Let me worry about the money,” she said, pulling him close for a kiss. “I heard all about your bad day in Mallyview.”

Russell eased her backwards. “From who?” he asked, glaring hard at her. Tsara stayed quiet and moved to the dining table for her purse. Russell followed her around the corner.

“Well?” he demanded, as she applied black lipstick.

“Russell, you’re not the only person from Mallyview who parties in Grevelton,” she explained, combing her short black hair. “People say your picture is plastered all over that town, which is why I asked Sheridan to look for you. Now cheer up and let’s go have some fun.”



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## Chapter 7

After she'd finished reading, Treen smiled, yawned, then put her Bible on the nightstand. She then blew out the candles and submerged herself in the covers to pray for her family, the world — and especially Russell Wellbay. Her prayer was interrupted when the doorbell sounded.

"At this hour?" she groaned, rolling off the mattress and trudging to the intercom near the bedroom door.

"Alee residence," she said, pressing the switch under the small speaker.

"Hello," the voice buzzed, "This is Walter Wellbay. I realize it's late, but it's important that I speak with Edwin."

"My father is out for the evening. Is there something I can do for you?"

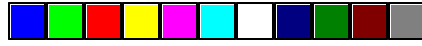
"Hello, Treen. Well, you could accept my apology for my behavior this afternoon. You were trying to help Russell and I'm afraid I've made things worse because I can't find him anywhere. Look, if he calls, just tell him I'm sorry and to please come home. Goodnight." She listened to his footsteps fade down the walkway.

Treen exhaled loudly. "You don't know what you have until it's gone — cliché but true," she murmured, dragging her feet back to bed. She climbed in and yanked the blanket over her head.

Just after two in the morning, Ariel arrived at the Sea Crystallore driving Edwin's red 1936 Buick Roadmaster, which looked even more spectacular under the neon glow of the ship. Normally the car slept in the Smile Center garage, awakened only if the Alees required a chauffer, which wasn't often since they both loved to drive and hardly ever drank.

However, after a long night of cocktails and dancing, Edwin and Elizabeth clapped when Ariel steered the Roadmaster into the restaurant parking area. Lance and Regina cheered as well since they'd also be catching a ride home.





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Ariel stepped out into the breeze and opened the doors for everyone. Edwin, Lance, and Regina climbed in the backseat, full of late night cheer. Elizabeth quietly sat up front.

With Elizabeth nodding off next to him, Ariel drove toward St. Barron Road. A different atmosphere surged from the rear, where Edwin and Lance talked and laughed like old pals. Regina offered to move from the middle to the outside, but Edwin's joke about her sitting in the road only made them laugh louder. They whooped it up all the way to the cul-de-sac.

With the Alees safe inside their home, Ariel drove off, listening as Lance directed him to the Newberry residence about a mile away. Ariel ground his teeth and squeezed the steering wheel when Lance called him "Driver."

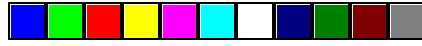
The stars and moonlit sky calmed Ariel somewhat, however the scenery couldn't keep him from shifting his eyes to the cuddling couple in the rearview mirror. He'd always liked Regina, but froze when he tried to do anything about it. Although she'd caught him staring many times before, she probably figured it meant nothing since he just smiled, tipped his hat, and said hello. After all, Ariel did that with everybody.

"Edwin and Elizabeth are very special people," said Lance, pulling Regina closer. "But I dislike their arrogant daughter."

Bad mouthing Jazz was ill advised with Ariel around. He gripped the wheel even tighter and continued to listen.

"Arrogant?" asked Regina, backing away slightly. "Treen Alee is the least arrogant person you'll ever meet. I think *confident* is the word you're looking for. Besides, she had a hard day at the Smile Center," she added, sliding further away.

"The *Poor baby*," Lance snapped. Maybe her rough day will make her grow up even faster." When Regina glared at him, he softened his tone. "Listen, all that really matters right now is you," he said, before he leaned over and stunned her with a long kiss. Even after the smooch had ended, Regina's eyes stayed shut and her mouth stayed open. Ariel ground his teeth once again and pressed harder on the gas. He could see the Newberry house ahead on the right and would definitely open the door for Lance — preferably while the Roadmaster was still moving.



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“Here we are,” said Lance as the car slowed to a halt. “Come inside for coffee. The Newberrys are visiting relatives.”

Regina locked eyes with Ariel in the mirror. Still fuming over Lance’s words, Ariel forgot all about being shy and stared back until she looked away.

“Thanks for the offer, Lance, but it’s been a long night. I know you’ve heard about a woman getting her beauty sleep.” Regina wasn’t glamorous or even the girl next door. She was more like, the cute woman two houses down.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he said, leaning to kiss her again. Ariel had hurried outside to open Lance’s door.

“Why, thank you driver,” said Lance, stepping out. Ariel slammed the door.

“Having a bad night, driver?” asked Lance, grinning.

“We need to clear up a few things,” said Ariel, clenching his fists.

Lance rubbed his goatee. “It’s interesting that you think we need to do anything together — I don’t even know you.”

“I heard them things you said about Treen. I didn’t like it.”

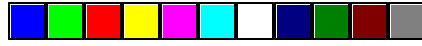
“What is this nonsense? Don’t take it out on me because you have no money and she’s too young to marry. Just shut up and drive. You are confusing me and getting on my nerves.” After a short glaredown between them, Ariel stepped closer for a few parting words.

“If Treen don’t like somebody, there’s usually something *really* wrong with ‘em,” he said quietly. “All I ask is you be gentleman-like towards her — especially when she ain’t around to defend herself. You have a good night,” he said, tipping his hat.

Regina had already moved to the front seat. As Ariel lowered himself into the car, she covered her ears and prepared for more door thunder; surprisingly, he closed it lightly then started the car. Lance glared from the sidewalk as they drove away.

“That looked like a serious conversation back there,” said Regina.

“Sort of,” replied Ariel with a no trespassing tone. When he realized he was sitting alone with her, he flashed a big smile and said, “Can I pick you up in the morning — take you to get your car?”



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Regina beamed. “That’d be really nice. But if you want to see tomorrow at all, you’d better watch the road.”

They talked non-stop until they reached her cottage. Regina grabbed his arm when he tried to get out and open her door. “You’ve done enough for one night,” she said. “See you in the morning.”

“Yes!” Ariel shouted, driving away. Picking her up in the morning wasn’t exactly a date, but it sure felt like it. He felt so incredible he tried to sing along with *Prince’s Diamonds And Pearls* playing on the radio. Luckily for the neighbors, the windows were up.

Shortly after turning onto the freeway, Ariel noticed the blinking emergency lights of a stranded car in the distance. As he drove closer, he saw the white sedan halted at a sharp angle on the side of the road, the tail end sticking out into the highway.

He slowed down and steered close to the rear bumper, where the Roadmaster’s headlights revealed the shadowy shapes of people moving around inside. Ariel decided to check it out and if everything were all right, he’d politely ask them to at least park the vehicle straight.

Ariel stepped out and could hear laughter as he approached the driver’s side of the crooked car. He kept a safe distance when the man inside began to rev the idling engine.

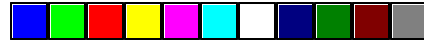
“Excuse me, you folks alright?” he shouted, leaning down.

“No we’re not all right!” said the man, who giggled and gripped the wheel with both hands. “We’re a mess. The world is a mess. Hey, did you see that pink giraffe? How about that, a pink giraffe on the highway!”

Even if there had been a pink giraffe strolling by, it would’ve been a miraculous observation since the man had his eyes shut. Was he drunk? To find out, Ariel moved closer.

Ariel could now see the woman in the passenger seat, who also laughed with her eyes closed. Suddenly, he recognized her, then looked at the man again. They weren’t strangers after all; they were the Newberrys — the same people Lance had come to Mallyview to visit.

Ariel didn’t know the Newberrys that well, just enough to say hello if he’d passed them in town. They seemed like straight folks, which is why it didn’t surprise him not to smell alcohol floating



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from the window. However, if they were so straight, why were they acting so weird?

“Mr. Newberry, how ‘bout I drive you folks on home?”

“That’s fabulous you know who we are!” he shouted. “But who the hell are you? If you’re not a cop, leave us alone — in fact if you are a cop leave us alone.”

“I’m not a cop. Name’s Ariel. I spoke to you a couple times at Bookvilla. I work for the Alees.”

“The rich bookstore people?” asked Mrs. Newberry, her eyes still closed.

The man chuckled. “Enough about books. We don’t need books we need a lighter. You got a lighter, boy?”

“No sir, I don’t smoke,” said Ariel.

“It’s not for smoking, dummy. I want to make a big ol’ fire!”

“If he ain’t got a lighter maybe the Alees do, they’re always so generous!” Mrs. Newberry screeched. She and her husband suddenly glared at Ariel, who jumped back from the car, startled by their bulging, foamy eyes. Their daughter suddenly sprang up from the backseat, laughing with eyes like her parents.

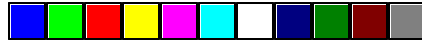
“To the Alee house!” shouted Mr. Newberry.

Ariel charged back to the window and struggled to keep Mr. Newberry from driving away. However, when he stomped the gas pedal, Ariel was forced to grab onto the door. The wild family sped away, dragging him down the highway.

Ariel’s boots burned over the road while he fought for control of the wheel. Fortunately, the car slowed as it swerved across the freeway because Ariel lost his grip, then tumbled all over the surface.

For a moment, Ariel lay on his back groaning at the stars. Then he sat up, rubbed his neck, and accounted for all his parts. He had plenty of scratches but everything seemed to move okay. After he’d struggled to his feet, he felt around his belt and realized his phone had fallen off. Unable to call the Alees, he ran towards the Roadmaster.

Although he stepped on scattered bits of his cell on the way over, he did pick up his Stetson in one piece. He put on his hat, jumped into the car, then sped away. He didn’t know if the



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Newberrys would actually drive to the Alee's home, but he wasn't taking any chances.

Awakened by the doorbell, Treen wobbled up from her pillow and glanced at the clock. She lumbered to the intercom, eyes barely opened.

"This is Treen," she whispered.

"Its Natalie Newberry, my parent's got in a terrible accident!" she screamed, loud enough to vibrate the tiny speaker and shock Treen out of her sleepytime haze.

"I'll be right down..."

Outside the house, the Roadmaster blazed into the cul-de-sac. Ariel swerved to avoid the Newberry's car, parked at the center of the circle, then stomped the brakes. The Roadmaster skidded sideways, jumped the curb, then rested on the Alee's front yard.

Ariel rushed from the car towards the front door, where the Newberry's daughter pleaded for Treen to let her inside. The door began to open just as Ariel charged out of the darkness.

"Jazz, close the door!"

Unexpectedly, Mr. Newberry sprung from the shrubs and tackled Ariel onto the walkway. As they grappled onto the grass, Treen tried to push the door shut but Natalie pushed harder and knocked her down to the foyer floor. The mad girl burst into the house to step on Treen's head, but missed when her target rolled clear.

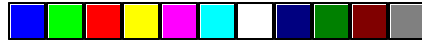
"Natalie, what's wrong with you!" Treen shouted, slowly backing away.

"My father needs a lighter!" she shouted, storming towards her again. This time, Treen sprang aside and watched her slam into the wall. Thank God, for Ariel's self defense classes.

"Will you be still?" Natalie snarled, slumped on the floor. She screamed and charged again.

Treen prepared herself, then lowered her shoulder and flipped Natalie over like a sack of wheat. The young Newberry walloped the mahogany surface and lay motionless. Treen approached her carefully.

The Crystallore Cocktails had pulled Edwin and Elizabeth deep into sleep. However, they finally heard the ruckus and thumped



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quickly down the staircase — only to be met halfway by a pale faced, foamy eyed Mrs. Newberry, who barreled up the stairs towards them.

The screaming woman dove into Edwin's knees. Elizabeth shrieked as he flipped and plummeted to the bottom. For a moment, the two women wrestled, but Elizabeth lost her balance and traveled down the same path as her husband. Mrs. Newberry continued up to the second floor.

Out in the foyer, Natalie had been playing possum. She suddenly grabbed Treen's arm, yanked her downward, then punched and clawed like a wild cat. She even snatched off Treen's headband and began choking her with it. Of course, Treen would have none of that; she broke free, leaped up, and kicked her square in the face. Natalie fell, sprang up, then ran towards the living room with Treen running right behind her.

However, the chase halted when Treen noticed her parents lying at the bottom of the stairs. She hurried over to check their pulses; holding her mother's wrist, she turned around and glared at Natalie, now dismantling the living room. "*YOU BITCH!*" Treen yelled before sprinting towards her.

Using the coffee table as a springboard, Treen leaped through the air. Her flying kick struck Natalie's chest and sent her crashing into a glass cabinet. She tried to stand, but Treen quickly jumped on top of her. She squeezed her neck with one hand, and raised a fist with the other.

"Please don't hurt me!" cried Natalie.

"I don't want to hurt you, but I will!" Treen shouted.

"You don't understand! I can't control it!"

"Control what?" she asked, lowering her fist.

"We don't need your counseling!" shouted Mrs. Newberry, who stormed up behind Treen and smashed a vase over her head. "Now, let's find that lighter!" she screeched, pulling her daughter up while Treen lay there unconscious. The Newberrys laughed while they snatched out drawers and tore the place apart.

The battle between Ariel and Mr. Newberry had rumbled into the cul-de-sac, where the wide-eyed neighbors watched from their windows and front yards. Later, the scene grew more bizarre when



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someone screamed for Ariel to turn around. He did so, but kept Mr. Newberry in a tight headlock as his deranged wife approached the circle.

“Let go of my man!” Mrs. Newberry shouted. Ariel quickly complied because she had a knife pressed against Treen’s throat, forcing her to walk out into the cul-de-sac.

“Let ‘er go,” said Ariel. He sounded calm, but his clenched fists and hunched posture suggested otherwise.

Mrs. Newberry yanked down on Treen’s hair, bending her neck even further back. The huge kitchen knife trembled in her hand. Treen’s arms hung limp at her sides and her knees buckled as she walked.

Suddenly the Alees staggered out of the house. Elizabeth screamed when she saw her daughter’s predicament, and Edwin struggled to keep her from charging over and possibly getting their daughter killed.

“If you hurt her, I’ll kill you!” Elizabeth shouted, thrashing about in Edwin’s clutches.

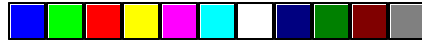
“You can have your precious daughter!” Mrs. Newberry hollered, shoving Treen to the ground. “This lighter is all we need!” she added, darting over to her husband.

“Give it to me,” said Mr. Newberry, snatching the lighter away from her. He ran to the car, opened the trunk, then removed a half empty bottle of wine. He ripped his shirt off then tore away a small piece, which he stuffed inside the bottle. “Let’s go sweetheart!”

Before she got in the car, Mrs. Newberry turned and hurled the knife towards Treen and Ariel. Ariel snatched Treen downward, adding to her aching head but keeping it attached as the blade sailed over them.

“Thanks for the lighter!” hollered Mr. Newberry, igniting the cloth and tossing the burning bottle into the trunk. After he’d hurried inside the car, he stuck his head out the window and shouted, “The world is a mess!” Then, with several police cars speeding towards the cul-de-sac, he cranked the engine and screeched down St Barron Road.

Mr. Newberry veered between the police cars, causing some to crash into houses and trees. However, shortly after, the flames en-



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gulfed the white sedan before a tremendous boom rumbled across the night sky. A scorching, orange cauliflower cloud illuminated the entire neighborhood and to no ones surprise, the Newberrys vehicle had exploded.

A detective named Dave Redworc joined the Alee family as they walked inside their home. They picked up the chairs and sat at the dining room table — the only place to sit with everything else either covered in glass, or turned upside down.

After Ariel had told of his encounter with the Newberrys on the highway, the detective was convinced that their wacky behavior was caused by drug use — a strong possibility since they'd happily blown themselves to segments.

“Have the police been to the Newberry home yet?” asked Treen, holding an icepack on her head.

“Yes,” said the detective. “A man was found unconscious inside their home.” He pulled a small notepad from his coat pocket and read his scribble: “His name is, Lance Ruof. Now, Mr. Ruof claims that the house was already trashed when he got there and that his attackers were the Newberrys. We found empty wine and liquor bottles scattered all over the living room floor — puzzling since none of you remember smelling alcohol on either of them. Was Mr. Ruof with you at the Sea Crystallore all evening?”

“Yes sir,” said Edwin, “The entire evening.”

“Did you find the Newberry’s daughter?” asked Treen, massaging her neck.

“No,” replied the detective.

Treen glanced at her mother then stood slowly to leave the table. Ariel noticed her slight wobble and followed her. Maybe she had more than a simple headache.

Ariel followed Jazz into the kitchen. After she'd shut the refrigerator, she just stood there, holding an unopened Pavaloo and staring at the colorful magnets stuck on the freezer door. Suddenly, her body began to sway and she dropped the can. She grabbed the freezer handle, but when the door swung open, she lost her grip and collapsed.

“Jazz!”





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The others rushed in to find Ariel kneeling over Treen. The detective radioed for an ambulance while the Alees ran to their daughter.

“Baby, please wake up!” shouted Elizabeth, patting Treen’s face. She still wasn’t moving.





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## Chapter 8

Outside Ding Palace, Russell admired the layers of graffiti sprayed on the old warehouse building, while Tsara explained that the art wasn't the work of vandals, "The owner got sick of people spraying over the white paint so he had the building designed that way..."

The chattering crowd waiting to enter the club didn't complain when Tsara bumped through, pulling Russell by the hand. Everyone knew she worked there and was tough enough to throw anyone out. She high-fived the husky bouncers who stood like cinderblocks near the front door, then waited inside the foyer while Russell cleared the metal detector.

*Ding! Ding! Ding!* Russell's house keys had activated an earsplitting bell that rang out into the street. Everyone clapped, hollered, and whistled like they did whenever the detector went off. Grinning like a shy celebrity, he took the keys from his pocket, put them in the tray, then hurried back through. His second attempt was ding free.

Deeper inside the club, Tsara spoke on her cell until Russell jogged up to her. "I understand," she said quietly, before switching it off and shoving it inside her purse.

"Who was that?"

"My boss. I have to clock in so I'll see you inside." She kissed him on the cheek then ran through the *Employees Only* door.

Russell limped down the black surface of the neon blue lit foyer. He then stepped inside the energetic smoke cloud of the overcrowded dance hall. He nearly fainted when he saw that his favorite band *Helmet* was atop the flashing stage. When the silhouetted front man stepped into the spotlight, Russell shouted, "That's *Page Hamilton!* That's *Page Hamilton!*" before the driving riff of a song called *Smart* cut through amps like a chainsaw.

The music blared. Disco lights flashed through the haze from every direction. Shadowy dancers moved wildly on the floor, atop



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the bar, and on any furniture that would support their weight. Normally at this point, Russell would've sprung into the mosh pit, but he'd been shoved around enough back in that alley — and besides, just weaving through the crowd was painful enough with flailing elbows poking his bruises while he searched for a place to sit. He finally spotted some empty chairs on a raised level at the back of the club and hobbled fast to get there.

He walked up the steps and made his way past the crowded pool table area. However, before he could reach the chairs, everyone began to clap and cheer and they were all staring at him. Surely, they hadn't heard that metal detector over Helmet's deafening guitar riffs.

"Hey, why are those people clapping?" Russell shouted to a well-underdressed woman partying beside him.

"You must be a Mally-boy!" she squealed, wiggling her pierced navel. "When you're inside Ding Palace, people celebrate when it's obvious you got your butt kicked. It's kind of like congratulations for surviving!"

Russell nodded slowly. "Gee thanks," he shouted. "For nothin," he murmured, wincing as he bent into the chair.

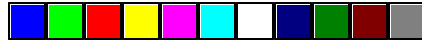
An hour later, Russell's chewing gum had failed to control his urge and he put out his third cigarette. It also didn't help that he still hadn't seen Tsara even when an opening in the crowd allowed him to watch the bar. The other waiters and waitresses continued to return empty glasses and pick up fresh drinks, but he still didn't see her.

Russell had been waiting for a clean ashtray and his third Pavaloo when he finally saw his server weaving through the crowd; his spiked green hair wasn't hard to miss. He probably could've delivered the drink quicker had he not stopped to curse each person he bumped into. However, after the waiter had climbed the ramp in his electric wheelchair, he smiled all the way to Russell's table.

"Spill anything this time?" Russell asked, glancing at the built in cup holders on the wheelchair.

"Not a drop mate. But for cryin' out loud, you'd think these idiots could step aside. Don't want to mess up me hair, ya know."

Russell laughed.



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“Listen mate, I’ve a message from Tsara for ya,” he said, placing the Pavaloo on the table.

“Where’s she at?” Russell asked, shooting forward in his chair.

“She’s off tendin’ to some emergency. Here’s the key to her flat and a twenty for a cab. Remember not to hire a taxi that hasn’t Sheridan’s name in the window. The Pavalooos are on the house.”

Russell slammed his fist on the table.

“Now don’t cha go complainin’ mate. Imagine me gettin’ home on me own each night.”

“It’s not that. Just wish she’d told me herself. What happened to you anyway?”

“Don’t know mate. Ten Long Island Teas down me neck, and I wake up with this hair. That’s why it’s difficult gettin’ home ‘cause everyone wants to bloody touch it.”

Russell grinned as the waiter buzzed away, then stood to leave. Suddenly, he heard a familiar voice over the noise.

“What’s up, Mally-boy!”

“Sheridon! What are you doing here, I thought you were with your lady?”

“She kicked me out. Said she’s tired of me being late — and it’s your fault. Where you going?”

“Back to Tsara’s place. She left ‘cause some problem came up.”

Sheridon pressed the light on his watch. “At three in the morning? Must’ve been serious. Come on man, I’ll give you a ride.”

The street leading to Sheridan’s car was lined with beat up stores and boarded doors. Sheridan talked about his troubles in Grevelton and Russell talked about his troubles at home. Sheridan said he liked Russell’s toughness and Russell said he thought Sheridan was funny — even when he wasn’t trying to be.

While Russell waited for Sheridan to unlock his vehicle, a police car zipped by. Russell held his breath hoping that the cop would keep moving. However, when the tires screeched and the blue and red lights suddenly flashed, he knew there was trouble. The patrol car made a furious U-turn then skidded to a halt in the middle of the street.

“Cops don’t patrol this area, especially on Saturday night,” said Sheridan, closing his door again.



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

“He got out and he’s coming this way,” Russell whispered.  
“Look at the size of that dude.”

“Don’t sweat it man. Just be cool,” said Sheridan.

“I am Officer Tobora, step away from the car!” he shouted, hand near his holster.

“Good evening, officer,” Russell said loudly.

“Shut your mouth!” the officer yelled, startling them. “Are you Russell Wellbay?”

“Why?” Russell asked nervously.

“Answer my question!”

“Yeah, I’m Russell Wellbay.”

“Remain here,” said the police officer, marching back to the car.

“Let’s get outta here — somethin’s wrong with that dude.”

“I hear ya Russ. I’m gonna slip inside the car and open your door,” Sheridan whispered. But the moment he touched the door, the officer switched on the high beam headlights of his patrol car. Then, he revved the engine.

“What the hell is he doin’?” asked Sheridan, who couldn’t expect an answer with Russell’s mouth locked open. Then the officer increased his peculiar conduct; he pressed down on the horn and continued to let it whine along with the redlined engine moan. Suddenly the strange cop shifted into drive and sped towards Russell!

“Russ get out of the way!” yelled Sheridan.

Russell had frozen, standing owl eyed near the trunk of the car. Sheridan dashed over, grabbed him by the jacket, and yanked him clear. The officer didn’t brake, smashing into Sheridan’s ride and pushing it over the curb until it burst through the glass of a small Gieco office.

“That dude’s trying to kill me!” shouted Russell.

“*Really?*” asked Sheridan, with huge eyes. “I didn’t know that. Come on man, *RUN!*”

With the patrol car tangled up in the wreckage, Russell and Sheridan had a good head start. However, it wasn’t long before the mad cop steered free and zoomed to catch up to them.

Russell ran hard but just couldn’t keep up. With the crazed cop gaining on them, Sheridan slowed down to wait for his breathless



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buddy. They were both panting when Sheridan picked him up by his legs and threw him onto his shoulder. “You owe me for this one,” said Sheridan, dashing away.

“He’s right behind us!” Russell shouted, looking back at the headlights while he bounced on Sheridan’s shoulder.

“Thinny, gotta reach a Thinny,” Sheridan said wheezing, referring to the alleyways of Grevelton that were much too narrow for the police to drive through. It was his first lesson of escape as a young gang member.

Luckily, three long Thinnys were just a few yards away and Sheridan kept chugging. When he turned down the first Thinny, Russell cheered as the cop whooshed by. Sheridan slowed down but kept moving. He knew exactly where he was and how to travel the Thinnys back to his car. Maybe the old clunker would still start.

Sheridan lowered Russell off his shoulder then poked his head out of the alleyway. With no sign of the police car, they jogged over to the Gioco office, crunched across the broken glass, then stood quietly in front of Sheridan’s cheerless looking automobile.

Russell stepped inside the building to inspect the vehicle. He tried with both hands to pull open the door but it wouldn’t budge.

“I don’t think we’re driving this thing anywhere,” he said.

“Pretty bad?” asked Sheridan.

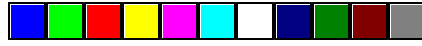
“Most of the driver’s door is in the front seat.”

Suddenly, about three blocks down, the police lights flashed through the streets. “Oh man,” Sheridan groaned, when the tires screeched and the car sped towards them. Again, he lifted Russell onto his shoulder, but for some reason, Sheridan didn’t run.

“What the heck are you doing?” Russell shouted, when Sheridan walked out into the street and stopped. “He’s headed right for us!”

While Sheridan stared into the approaching headlights, Russell faced the other way and wiggled like Houdini trying to get off of his shoulder. “If you want to live be still!” Sheridan yelled gripping Russell’s legs even tighter.

As the police officer burned towards them, he suddenly slammed on the brakes. Throughout the long, shrieking, skid, Sheridan’s eyes widened and Russell shouted, “Let me down, let me down!” The bumper stopped inches from Sheridan’s legs before the officer



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sprang out and aimed his pistol at them.

“Sheridon, clear the area!” yelled the officer, “I have a contract on him!”

Sheridon let Russell off his shoulder then stood in front of him. “I ain’t movin’,” he said calmly. “Why you got a contract on the kid?”

“That is none of your business. Get out of my way or I’ll request a contract on you.”

“Then go get it. You know where to find me.”

He glared at Sheridon, shoved the pistol in his holster, then marched to the patrol car and drove away. Bewildered, Russell limped in front of Sheridon to unload a nervous barrage of questions.

“Was that really a cop? What’s he mean he’s got a contract on me? What did I do? Why didn’t you stop that dude before if you know him?” he shouted.

“Chill out Russ! No, he ain’t a cop and no I don’t know him — but I do know the gang he’s in.”

“A gang is looking for me?”

“No, a gang is tryin’ to *kill* you and now that I protected your Mally-butt the Awakers will be after me too.”

“The Awakers?”

“Man let’s get off the street. I’ll tell you about ‘em at Tsara’s crib.”

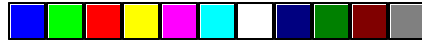
By the time they’d arrived back at Tsara’s place, she still hadn’t made it back from wherever she’d gone. They sat on the pink couch while Sheridon explained why they should worry about the notorious Awaker Gang.

“The Awakers are the most powerful dudes in Grevelton. They bring in the Leufarem and they got all the money. They must have a good reason to want you dead. When that cop started freaking out I figured he was one of ‘em.”

“But I didn’t do nothin’ but run away from home,” Russell said flinging his hands up.

“I gotta find out what’s going on before they kill both of us.”

“You gonna go talk to them?”



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“Couldn’t if I wanted to. They hide out somewhere on the North side. People wander in that area and never been seen again.”

“But you said the Awakers sell Leufarem on the street.”

“The ones that sell Leufarem don’t talk about nothin’ but Leufarem. Ask a question about anything else and they stop talkin’. People started calling em’ the Awakers because they stand in the same place for days without going to sleep.”

“How they do that?”

“Don’t know. But our problem ain’t the Awakers who sell Leufarem. It’s the Awaker assassins like that fake cop. You sure you don’t owe them money?”

“No! This is crazy,” said Russell. “If you can’t talk to them, how are you gonna find out anything?”

“I got ways,” said Sheridan, patting Russell’s shoulder.

“Why do you keep helping me?”

“I don’t know, man. But if you hit the lotto, I’ll be holding up one end of that oversized check when they take your picture,” he said, dialing a number on his cell.

While Sheridan spoke to a friend, Russell moved to the kitchen, where he’d opened the refrigerator and stood there shaking his head, disappointed to find it empty. In fact, it looked like it’d never been used. When he searched the kitchen cabinets, there wasn’t even a piece of stale bread.

“Where’s the food in this damn place?” he asked walking out of the kitchen. “Tsara can’t cook?”

“She ain’t ever made me dinner,” said Sheridan, walking towards the front door.

“Great,” said Russell. “The Awakers won’t have to kill me because I’ll starve to death.”

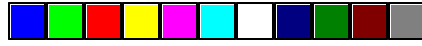
“Whatever you do, don’t leave here. I’ll be back,” said Sheridan.

“I’ll lock the door.”

Sheridon chuckled. “Russ, if the Awakers find you here, this piece a lock ain’t gonna stop ‘em,” he said, walking out the door and jogging towards the curb. “Stay there,” he shouted, before stepping inside his battered car and driving off.

Russell locked the door anyway. With his stomach still growling, he continued his hunt for something to eat.





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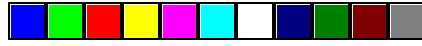
As he searched the apartment, he realized that Tsara didn't have much of anything: No pictures, no flowers, no knick-knacks, no television, and no books — nothing to suggest she even had a hobby. The pink couch was the only conversation piece in the joint.

Russell limped towards the bedroom door. Maybe she'd stashed a bag of Cheetos under her bed like he did. If not, the only option to fill his stomach would be a risky glass of Grevelton tap water.

Russell pushed the door open and hit the lights. The room had something interesting in it besides the pink blanket on the massive bed; on the floor sat a large chrome container with some kind of digital lock on the front of it. He walked over and looked down at his reflection. "What's inside that's so important?"

He'd have to wait and ask Tsara.





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## Chapter 9

Regina closed her umbrella and hurried through the entrance of Mallyview Hospital. When she'd reached the waiting area, she found Edwin and Elizabeth leaning on each other, sound asleep in their chairs. She then approached Ariel who stood near a window, gazing out into the Sunday morning rain.

"Morning, Regina," Ariel said quietly when she stood next to him. "I apologize for not pickin' you up."

"I understand," she said rubbing his arm. How is Treen?"

"Dr. Moresky says she's got a concussion but she'll be fine. Have a seat and I'll tell you about last night."

A Short time later, Elizabeth shifted her head and sat up to stretch. Edwin slumped forward but quickly snapped his head up and rubbed his eyes.

"There's plenty of java in the cafeteria," said Ariel.

The Alees turned and smiled, happy see the rest of their family sitting behind them. Elizabeth cleared her throat and gave up trying to fix her hair. "Well what are you waiting for?" she asked cheerfully, "Lead us to the coffee pot."

The cafeteria coffee smelled better than it tasted, but had enough caffeine to wake a dormant volcano. Edwin and Elizabeth looked refreshed even though they continuously rubbed their aching bones caused by the staircase tumble. Everyone discussed the Newberrys' behavior, wondering why the nice family had flipped out.

"Maybe Lance can tell us more about what happened at the Newberrys' house. Have you seen him today?" asked Edwin.

"I called, but no answer," said Regina.

"Perhaps he was badly injured," added Elizabeth, sounding skeptical.

"He traveled all the way from France, only to have his friends turn on him — then they wind up dead. He must be devastated," said Edwin, who like Regina, didn't seem to suspect any misconduct on Lance's part.



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

Ariel sat quietly. Like Elizabeth, he was probably thinking about one thing: The fact that Treen had been edgy about Lance since she'd met him. Until the police had more information about the Newberrys' bizarre behavior, they'd worry about Edwin and Regina's involvement with Lance Ruof.

During the second round of bad coffee, Dr. Moresky came into the cafeteria to inform everyone that Treen had awakened. She asked that they visit her two at a time and reminded them to speak softly. Edwin suggested that Ariel and Regina go in first since they both had to leave soon.

"Yuck," whispered Treen after a sip of coffee. She glared into the full cup before putting it back on the tray, then set the whole thing — food and all — back on the table beside her bed. Of the few things she was picky about, coffee was one of them. She forgot about the bad java when the door opened slightly and Ariel peeked inside.

"Get in here!" Treen said happily. She didn't look or act anything like Dr. Moresky had mentioned, but then again, her family always made her cheerful. She smiled when Regina nudged Ariel aside and darted past him.

"Thank god you're alright," said Regina, bending to hug her. When Ariel's turn came, they smiled at each other for a moment.

"Are we still having self-defense class today?" Treen asked. He laughed, removed his Stetson, then kissed her on the cheek.

Ariel moved two chairs next to the bed and they sat discussing the Newberrys. Treen was careful not to say anything negative about Lance. In fact, she didn't even mention him. It wasn't fair to assume anything, even with her bad vibes. Regina did mention again that she hadn't spoken to him since he stepped out of the Roadmaster the night before. But not to worry; the door to Treen's room began to open slowly and surprisingly Lance stuck his head inside.

Regina politely excused herself then rushed over like he'd been missing for weeks. Treen glared at Lance as if he was a huge pot of that hospital coffee and Ariel squeezed the sides of his hat. Gradually the door closed and the lovebirds took their whispers out into the hallway. Treen and Ariel read each other's mind.



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“Your dad really likes Lance. Said he wants him to manage the Grevelton store.”

“Yes, I know,” she said rubbing her earlobe. Let’s try something: follow Lance around today. After what happened last night — ”

Suddenly Regina stepped back into the room. Ariel nodded to acknowledge Treen’s instructions, then stood from the bed and put on his hat.

“He’d like to come in and say hello,” said Regina, sounding diplomatic.

Ariel nodded. “I’ll step out,” he said, moving towards the door.

Lance peered through the narrow window until Ariel pulled the door open and walked out. Now they stood face to face.

“Rough night?” asked Ariel.

“That’s an understatement.”

“Make your visit a quick one.”

“Planned on it.”

“Good. I’ll be standin’ right here.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Lance brushed by him and strolled inside.

Regina stood from the bed when Lance walked in. Treen sat up when he approached with the obvious question: “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. I heard that you were also injured.”

“It is nothing serious.”

“Have you spoken to the police?”

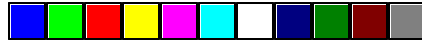
“Yes.”

“The truth will eventually come out — it usually does.”

“You are absolutely right. I am happy to see that you are doing well. Take good care of yourself.”

“Don’t worry I will.”

Regina ignored their plastic exchange then said, “Sweetie I’ll come back later. I love you.” She kissed Treen’s forehead, then followed Lance out the door. Treen could only pray for Regina’s safety until Ariel had more information about Lance Ruof.



## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 10

Daylight seeped between the curtains, waking Russell from the pink couch. He raised his head, squinted at the window, then lowered his cheek back into his own slobber. He didn't lie in it long because he heard high heels clicking across the kitchen floor and sprang up like a frog on a boiling pond. Then he marched around the corner where he bumped into Tsara as she left the kitchen.

"Russell, I didn't know you were up."

"Now you do."

"Why are you so uptight?"

"Why do you think?"

"Let me explain."

"Go head."

"A friend needed my help last night. You've been going through rough times so I knew you would understand — at least I thought you would."

"Well things just got rougher. The Awakers have a contract out on me."

"How do you know that?"

"Cause they tried to kill me last night. If it weren't for Sheridan, I'd be dead. He said not to leave here til' he finds out what's going on."

"He's right. Those people are dangerous. But why are they after you?"

"Can we talk about it after I eat something?" He reached into his pocket. "Here's your twenty bucks back," he said un-crumpling the note. "Use it to put some food in this place."

"I have plenty of money for food," she said, pushing away Ben Franklin's creased face. "I just eat out all the time."

"So, there's money in that big container?" he asked, shoving the twenty back in his pocket.

"What container?" she asked, eyes growing wider.

"The chrome one in your bedroom," he replied, before Tsara



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darted past him.

“Slow down I didn’t steal anything!” he said, walking behind her. “How could I with a lock like that on it?” he mumbled.

Russell limped in behind Tsara who stood near the bed examining the room. “What are you talking about?” she said, “I don’t see any container.”

“I must be going nuts or something,” he said scratching his head. “I swear there was a huge chrome container right there,” he said pointing at the floor.

“Maybe you dreamed about it.”

“No way. This was real. Life is getting weirder by the minute,” he said, still scanning the small area.

“It sure is. I heard on the radio this morning that some weird stuff happened in Mallyview last night. Some lunatics attacked the Alee family, then blew themselves up.”

“No way!”

“Do you know the Alees very well?”

“Sort of. I know Treen Alee.”

“Well, she’s in the hospital.”

“What happened to her?” he asked loudly.

“Radio didn’t say.”

Russell began to pace and run his fingers through his hair. “I gotta go see her.”

“Are you nuts? The Awakers are looking for you. Stay here like Sheridan said.”

“No way. I’m goin’ to see her. Are you gonna help me get to Mallyview or not?”

Tsara moved closer and kissed his lips. “Of course I’ll help. You seem to care a lot about her.”

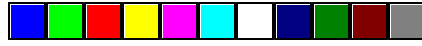
“She’s a good friend that’s all.”

Tsara pulled her purse from the table. “I’m going to get you some food. When I get back, we’ll figure out how to get you to Mallyview.”

For the next half hour, Russell paced. He wasn’t claustrophobic, but it certainly felt like the walls were closing in:

“Why are the Awakers trying to kill me?”

“What happened to that chrome container?”



## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

“Am I going crazy?”

His whole life was in bits and the only person that ever really listened to him was lying in a Mallyview Hospital bed. He had talk to her — and soon.

Tsara returned with a greasy brown bag from the *Drop Dead Breakfast House*, a Grevelton restaurant famous for causing gun-fights and high blood pressure. But the last thing on Russell’s mind were clogged arteries; he opened the Styrofoam container and quickly hogged down the scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage links, pancakes, and grits. He even used his pinky to scoop out the syrup hiding in the corners of the empty tray.

“How was the food?” asked Tsara, joining Russell on the pink couch.

“Great, but you didn’t eat anything.”

“I don’t have much of an appetite today. I’m really worried about you going to Mallyview.”

“Well don’t. Just tell me how I’m gettin’ there.”

“I bought this,” she said handing him a white plastic bag.

Russell opened it and removed the contents: A red baseball cap, sunglasses and, “Some kinda animal.”

“That’s a wig, silly. Believe me, you’ll need it when the bus pulls into Mallyview.”

Suddenly, a pounding on the door echoed throughout the apartment. Russell took the disguise and hurried into the kitchen.

“Russ, open the door!” Sheridan shouted. Tsara moved quickly to let him in.

“Where you been all night?” he asked, walking through the doorway and straight past Tsara.

“I stayed across town to help a friend.” Suddenly, Russell walked out of the kitchen.

“What is that on your head?” Sheridan asked, grinning.

“It’s a wig,” answered Russell.

Sheridon chuckled. “Why you wearin’ a curly wig?”

“Because I have to go to Mallyview.”

“Boy, are you crazy? Every cop in that city is lookin’ for you — and not just ‘cause you ran away. I got a friend in the Grevelton



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station who told me about some serious stuff going on.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Russell.

“A Grevelton cop got beat to death last night and they dragged him from a ditch this morning. His body wasn’t hard to miss since he’s six foot seven and was found wearin’ only his boxer shorts. But here’s where it gets funky: Last night in Mallyview, some whacked out family called the Newberrys, busted into the Alee’s house and tacked ‘em. When the cops went to search the Newberry’s house, guess whose fingerprints they found on an ashtray and a can of Pavaloo?”

“Whose?” asked Tsara.

“Mallyboy — better known as Russell Wellbay.”

“No way!” shouted Russell, yanking the wig off, “I wasn’t even there last night!”

“You ain’t got to convince me. I was with you, remember?”

“Did you tell that to your police friend?”

“No man, she doesn’t know I know you. But somebody’s trying to set you up big time. You must’ve been in trouble before if the cops had your prints on record in the first place.”

“Yeah, I was,” he said quietly. “I gotta to get to Mallyview and talk to Treen about all this.”

“If you’re going to make it, the bus is leaving soon,” said Tsara.

“Sheridon, come with me,” said Russell.

He shook his head. “Can’t do it man.” The Awakers will kill us if I don’t find out what’s goin’ here on and try to fix it.”





## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 11

Stretched out beneath the covers of her hospital bed, Treen spoke on the phone with Samantha, who assured her that everything was fine at the Smile Center. However, there had been an unexpected visit from Gail Blue, who demanded to speak with Treen until informed of her whereabouts. Samantha cringed when Treen asked her to call Gail and send her over to the hospital.

Later that afternoon, Treen sat up in her bed and hardly recognized Gail when she entered the room sporting a conservative ponytail and a clear, cheerful face. “Glad I brought chocolates,” said Gail, surveying the mounds of flowers on the table and floor near Treen’s bed.

However, after Gail had handed over the pink box of candy, she suddenly frowned. “I have some bad news. I was called to the police station, and they had questions about Russell concerning the attack on your family last night.”

“What does he have to do with it?” Treen asked, sitting up even more.

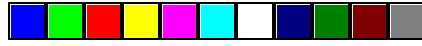
“They found Russell’s fingerprints inside the Newberrys’ home.”

Treen eased off the bed and walked over to the window. “None of this is making any sense,” she whispered, glaring out into the rain.

After a few minutes, Treen approached Gail to ask about Russell’s personality — about anything he might’ve withheld during their session. Gail explained that he was smarter and kinder than most people knew. She also said he’d given her two paintings that he’d made. “He’s incredibly gifted,” she said, before admitting that she’d left the paintings at the Smile Center. “My dad wanted them out of the house.”

“Treen, I really do love Russell — no matter what he did. I wanted him to be my first... I was sure he would be,” said Gail, picking up a lone flower and twirling it.

“Do you know the girl Russell is seeing in Grevelton?” asked



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Treen.

“Yes, unfortunately. Her name is Tsara Orez. She’s a server at club called Ding Palace. My father told me all about her.”

Treen scrunched her brow. “Your father sure keeps a good track of what’s going on around you — especially in Grevelton, a city you’ve never been to.”

“All of that started after he saw Russell in Grevelton with Tsara. Russell and I had been sneaking around Mallyview, unaware that my dad knew about us the whole time. He didn’t say anything because I kept Russell out of trouble — which kept Mr. Wellbay at work. My dad’s a control nut — but he wasn’t always that way.”

“What changed him?”

“My mother had a nervous breakdown. I came home from school one day and there she was, surrounded by white uniforms, and screaming from a straight jacket right outside the house. When I tried to touch her, she started screaming for me to prove I was her daughter.”

“How did she want you to do that?”

“I don’t know, but she probably said it because she couldn’t see me clearly; she had this gross looking white stuff running out of her eyes.”

Treen’s own eyes expanded. “Just like the Newberry’s,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Ah, nothing. Where’s your mother now?”

My father had her taken to a psychiatric ward outside Mallyview. I haven’t seen her since she got sick.”

“Don’t you want to visit her?”

“My father won’t allow — ”

Suddenly Dr. Moresky walked into the room. “Time for some medication and rest.”

“I’ll call you if I hear from Russell,” said Gail, standing. Do you think maybe you and I could stay friends?”

“I don’t know,” said Treen smiling, “I’ll tell you after I’ve tasted those chocolates...”

The bus rolled out of Grevelton Station then cruised through



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the city on the way to Mallyview. Of the twelve passengers, eleven sat towards the front. Russell Wellbay, wearing the curly black wig, red baseball cap, and sunglasses, sat clear in the back staring out the window.

Grevelton was even darker in the daytime when the street people and decaying buildings could clearly be seen struggling to exist. Judging by the way the other passengers glared out to the streets, the rain-streaked windows might as well have been their tears.

Thirty minutes later, the bus splashed past the *Welcome to Mallyview* sign. After seeing the sad sights of Grevelton, Russell appreciated the beauty of his hometown — even with the dark clouds smothering the area.

Russell stood and moved to the front as the bus pulled into Mallyview Station. The other passengers, who'd lined up behind him, probably wondered why he didn't move down the steps when the doors hissed open. Instead, he slowly poked his head out and looked both ways. "Let's move it, son!" said the bus driver.

Russell cleared the bus and continued to scan the area. He remembered the twenty in his pocket and stared at the Taxis lined across from him. A ride seemed like a good idea, until he noticed his picture plastered inside each of the Taxi windows. He'd walk. Besides, the hospital was less than a mile away.

The disguise didn't alter Russell's mannerisms; he strutted down Mallyview Main, hands in his back pockets, whistling. He smiled when he passed Bookvilla and other stores that had his photo posted near their entryways. He never imagined seeing his face in so many places!

Russell walked a shortcut through a misty Mally Park. As he crossed a wooden footbridge over a narrow creek, he noticed someone slumped over on the bench ahead of him. The person was cocooned in a shabby wet trench coat that the red leaves had floated down and stuck on to.

"Hey, mister you okay?" asked Russell rocking him slightly.

The man cleared his throat. Haven't eaten in days," he whispered through his matted beard. "Need food."

Russell pulled him up. He then took the twenty from his pocket and placed it in the man's hand. "Maybe that'll help you. I really



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gotta go now.”

A short time later, Russell reached the hospital entrance. He held the door open for an elderly woman who struggled to push out an even older man in a wheelchair. When she finally cleared the doorway, she stopped to stare at Russell. Her head wobbled slightly. Her hands trembled as she put on the glasses attached to a string around her neck.

“Nice of you to hold that door,” she said, with a sharp, sunny voice that made her seem much younger.

“No problem,” Russell said, looking down at her. He pushed the sunglasses up on his nose. The old woman tilted her head side-to-side, gazing into his dark lenses.

“Yep. You’re the boy in them pictures hangin’ all over town,” she said nodding. She glanced down at the old man’s head. “We had a son once. Dead now. Look after yourself, sonny,” she added, pushing the squeaky wheelchair down the ramp towards the parking area.

The old woman probably didn’t mean any harm, but she’d made Russell nervous enough to hurry through the doorway and jog right past the information desk. To calm his nerves he slowed down and began whistling *Casey Junior*, from the *Dumbo* film.

While Russell roamed the hallways listening for information about Treen’s room, he noticed a portly man in white who licked his lips while pushing a cart full of food. He jogged down the hall to catch up to him.

“Hey dude, you work here right?” asked Russell, slowing down beside him.

“Well, sort of. I’m a trainee.”

Russell grinned. “Me too. I’m supposed to be cleaning rooms but can you believe it, nobody told me where to get my uniform,” he said, flinging his hands up.

“I can show you.”

Russell grinned again. “Cool — but do you mind keepin’ this quiet? I don’t want my boss callin’ me stupid on my first day...”

“Don’t you worry,” he said, patting Russell’s back, “My lips are sealed. So what’s you’re name...?”

BLAH, BLAH, BLAH<sub>2</sub> was all Russell could hear as he rolled



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his eyes and hoped that the trainee would shut up. To make matters worse, the jabber was doubled from the echo in the empty hallway. Russell had considered tossing a pie slice from the cart into the trainee's mouth but changed his mind when they'd finally reached the elevator. "The uniform closet is on the third floor," said the trainee, walking through the sliding doors after two nurses had stepped out.

The trainee continued to chatter over the elevator drone. Like most people, Russell glared up at the digital numbers and waited for his floor. However, even after the elevator bumped and the doors slid apart, he had to tell the blabbering man to turn and step out.

Near the end of the hallway, the trainee unlocked the uniform closet and let Russell go in first. The trainee had to squeeze his huge frame inside — which also meant he'd shut up for a minute. Now, Russell could unload the question that he'd chosen the blabbermouth for in the first place.

"Hey dude, where's Treen Alee's room? Boss said that's the first room I'm supposed to clean."

"Room 423," he answered excitedly. "When I heard she was admitted I stopped by to thank her for the awesome barbeque at the Smile Center yesterday. Can you believe all that food and drink was free?"

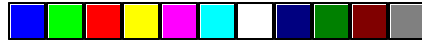
Russell glanced at the man's huge belly.

"Ah, yeah, I bet she's gonna have a *big* bill. Well, thanks for helping me out but I gotta get to work," said Russell, patting the trainee's shoulder and guiding him sideways into the hallway. He was still babbling when Russell slammed the door in his face.

Russell quickly removed the disguise and his clothes, hiding everything beneath the linen on the lower shelves. He tossed around several of the white uniforms until he found one that fit.

The polyester pants were way too tight but as long as he didn't bend over, they wouldn't tear. He balanced against the shelf to push and wiggle each foot back inside his already laced up Adidas. He then switched off the light and pulled the door open, sticking his head out into the empty hallway. He calmly stepped out and moved towards the elevator.

Except for a doctor staring at medical records and talking to



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himself in the elevator, Russell saw no one when he arrived on the fourth floor. He was so excited about seeing Treen that he jogged down the hallway until he reached room 423.

Russell pushed the door back slightly and peered through the crack. He smiled. There was Treen Alee, lying asleep in her hospital bed. He slipped inside the room then tiptoed towards her.

As he approached, Russell stepped on some foil wrapped flowers lying on the floor and the crackling caused Treen to shift her head. When he noticed even more flowers on the table he whispered, "Man, she ain't *dead*."

Russell stopped beside her and stared; She looked even more beautiful asleep. Gradually, he reached down to touch her shoulder, but his calm motion was harshly diverted when Treen sprang up and grabbed his hand. She bent his middle finger backwards and forced him to the floor.

"OWWW! It's Russell! *LET GO!*"

"Russell? Oh my goodness, what are you doing here?" she asked excitedly. She released his thumb and dropped to the floor, where they sat together on the pile of flowers.

"I was about say how happy I was to see you. Now I ain't so sure," he said, rubbing his finger. They smiled at each other, then embraced.

"I'm in a lot of trouble," he said.

"I know. Some strange things have happened since you disappeared."

"There's people after me — they're trying to kill me."

"Who's trying to kill you?"

"Some gang in Grevelton called the Awakers — *and* the police think I had something to do with what happened to your family. I wasn't even in Mallyview last — "

"Calm down, I believe you. We have to get out of here." Treen stood, then snatched the Ariel pager from under her pillow. Russell followed and watched her punch in the code.

"You feel okay to leave the hospital?" he asked.

"I feel fine — now turn around so I can get dressed."

Treen removed the hospital garb then donned a burgundy corduroy suit. She then sat on the bed to pull on her boots. Russell



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behaved himself, facing the door until she said, “All done.”

“You look real nice.”

“Thank you,” she replied, fastening her headband. She then patted the mattress and said, “Sit here.” Russell stepped over in his tight pants, then squatted carefully on the bed.

For the next few minutes, Russell explained all he’d been through in Grevelton. Treen was astonished to hear about the Awakers; from what she’d read in the paper, the gang was just some hyped up tale. However, the petrified look on Russell’s face as he talked about the fake police officer, told her otherwise.

Suddenly, the door began to open. Treen and Russell glanced over, hoping to see Ariel. Instead, an unfamiliar doctor poked his head inside. Russell sprang off the bed and pretended to empty the trashcan, while Treen stood calmly.

“Miss Alee, how are you feeling?” he asked, marching over with a clipboard.

“Where is Dr. Moresky?” Treen noticed his undersized uniform and missing nametag.

“He’s with another patient. He asked me to check on you.”

Treen walked right up to him. Glaring into his eyes, she informed, “Dr. Moresky is a *woman*.”

The strange doctor turned his head towards Russell.

“How much longer will you be cleaning?”

“Why?” Russell asked.

“Because, I’m waiting to kill you.”

“He’s an Awaker!” Russell shouted, as Treen dashed over to him.

The Awaker threw the clipboard, which had shielded the switchblade he now gripped. “There is no way out,” he said, raising the knife and moving towards them.

“Get away from us!” shouted Russell.

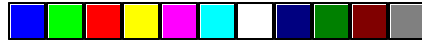
“I do not wish to harm the young lady.”

“Why do you want to kill him?” she shouted.

“I have a contract. Move away from him or I will request one for you.”

“Alright,” said Treen.

Russell’s mouth hung open for a moment before he shouted,



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“What do you mean *alright?*” Treen ignored him and grabbed a vase off the table next to her. As she stepped away, she slung the vase around, shattering the porcelain into the Awaker’s face. Treen and Russell scattered as the hitman rubbed his eyes and wildly slashed the knife. When the assassin thought he had Russell in his sight, he hurled the knife at him.

Ssschrip!

Russell had squatted too quickly and split the seat of his hospital pants. However, the knife whizzed over his head and thumped into the wall, prompting the Awaker to charge at him. Luckily, Treen raced over, sliding across the floor feet first. Her boots slammed his ankles and the bogus doctor tripped and fell.

“Russell run for the door!”

Russell tried to do so, but the Awaker grabbed his leg and dragged him backwards. Treen snatched some vases off the table and began throwing them towards his head. She hit him several times, which allowed Russell to yank his foot away and splash over to her.

Once again, the Awaker stood between them and the door. This time, he reached down to remove a pistol from his leg holster. He glared at them and calmly attached a silencer to the barrel.

“You should not have attacked me young lady. Now I am authorized to eliminate you.”

The Awaker took aim.

They held each other.

Russell shut his eyes and turned his head.

Treen kept hers open and stared into the silencer.

Suddenly a resounding crash made them all look away. Ariel had soared through the window!

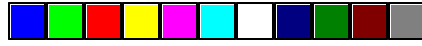
Treen and Russell leaped to the opposite side of the bed and the Awaker turned to fire shots where they once stood. As he moved towards the bed shooting, Ariel charged up and kicked him in the back.

“Jazz, get outta here!” Ariel shouted.

She’d never leave Ariel, but she did pull Russell over near the window and out of the way.

The pistol had slid under the bed. The frustrated hit man stood





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but didn't reach for another weapon. Instead, he waited for Ariel's next kick, caught his boot, then hurled him into the wall. Now, he moved towards Treen and Russell.

"You want to kill us?" Treen shouted, gripping Russell's hand. "Well come on, what are you waiting for!"

"Oh, man," Russell, whispered nervously.

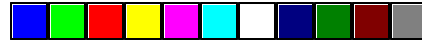
The Awaker stormed towards them. Treen waited. When he got close enough, she yanked Russell aside. The Awaker couldn't brake on the slippery flowers and careened over the pane, right out the broken window.

They hurried to the sill expecting to see a crumpled body below. However, when they looked down to the ground, they saw nothing.

"Where'd he go?" asked Russell.

"Nobody just gets up from that kinda fall," groaned Ariel, who had staggered over.

"Let's get out of here fast," said Treen.



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## Chapter 12

After Russell had gone back to the uniform closet to change his pants and grab his disguise, he met Treen on the emergency stairs. They waited there until Ariel returned from the fifth floor where he disconnected his leather rope. They moved downstairs and left the hospital through an emergency exit, which led directly to Ariel's red Humvee.

Before Treen had summoned Ariel to the hospital, he had tracked Lance from the police station, back to the Newberrys'. As Ariel started the Humvee, Treen suggested they drive there and continue their investigation of Lance Ruof.

"Who's Lance and who cares?" said Russell from the backseat. "Ain't you guys worried about that Awaker?"

"Yes we are. That's why we're going to figure out what's going on — and it starts with Lance. I'll tell you all about him..." said Treen, as Ariel drove away from the hospital.

The rain had let up when the Humvee stopped across the street, several yards back from the Newberry home. Russell donned his disguise, as did Ariel, who pulled a dark blue bandanna and fake eyeglasses from the glove box.

"Russell, I forgot to mention that your father came to my house last night," said Treen, turning towards the backseat.

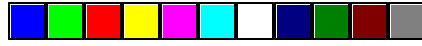
Russell shot forward and yanked off the dark glasses. "What did he want?" he asked loudly.

"He apologized for his behavior at the Smile Center. He also wants you back home."

"What's up with that?" asked Russell.

"Your father loves you — that's what's up with that," replied Treen.

Ariel tapped her arm and pointed to a white van pulling up to the Newberry house. The van paused before backing into the driveway and sounding the horn. Then, the garage door opened electronically.



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“Maybe it’s the cops,” said Russell, as Ariel turned on the wipers to clear the windshield of raindrops and sticky leaves.

“I don’t think so,” said Treen. “Wait a minute. Lance is coming out of the garage.”

Before he approached the van, Lance studied his surroundings carefully. He then moved towards the driver’s door, which slowly began to open. The person who stepped out startled everyone and left them even more confused.

“That’s my dad!” shouted Russell.

“What the heck is Mr. Wellbay doing with him?” asked Ariel.

“Interesting,” said Treen.

“I think I’ve seen that dude Lance before,” said Russell.

“Recently?” asked Treen.

“I don’t know when, but I know I seen him.”

“They’re going inside the garage. I’m going over there to take a closer look at that van,” said Treen.

“Jazz, let me — ”

“Stay here.”

Treen jumped out of the Humvee then sprinted across the street to the front of the van. She tried unsuccessfully to open the doors and couldn’t see through the black tinted windows.

Suddenly Lance and Mr. Wellbay returned to the garage. Treen kneeled on the driver’s side, where she could hear the echo of something being dragged across the garage floor.

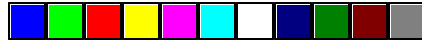
With her hair dangling in a puddle and her pants soaked, she looked beneath the van to see what they were moving. She could hear the rear doors open.

“There’s no room back here”, said Mr. Wellbay. “We’ll use the side door.”

Treen stayed put, knowing that the cargo door was on the opposite side. She looked beneath the van again and watched their feet; whatever they were moving must’ve been heavy but she still couldn’t see what it was.

She crawled along the driver’s side of the van until she reached the headlights, then crossed in front of the bumper. Peering past the fender, she could now see them pushing a large metallic container.

“Damn this thing is heavy,” said Mr. Wellbay, facing away from



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Treen. Lance put his foot atop the container and rested on his knee.

“Mr. Blue isn’t happy about what happened last night,” said Mr. Wellbay, breathing heavily.

“I don’t care if he’s happy or not,” Lance snapped, “The Newberrys drank that Merafuel accidentally. People should learn to ask before they touch something that doesn’t belong to them.”

“If you’re stupid enough to stash it in a wine bottle, you should at least lock it up somewhere,” said Mr. Wellbay.

“The Newberrys have cooked themselves. Why are we still discussing them?”

“So you’ll be more careful and Blue will get off my back.”

“Stop letting him push you around.”

“Easy for you to say. It’d be a big help if you and Tsara would get organized. What time did she deliver this container?”

Lance grinned. “She didn’t. I took it from her apartment after I looked through her bedroom window and saw someone staring like he’d never seen a stupid chrome container.”

“Who was it?”

“Some kid.”

“Where was Tsara?”

“Ding Palace where she’s supposed to be.”

Mr. Wellbay flung up his arms. “Tell Tsara to stop playing games! Mr. Blue wants the rest of the Ecnal and Arast parts transferred to Grevelton factory in the next two days-something we can’t do if she keeps messing around.”

Abruptly, Lance yanked up the container as if nothing were inside, then heaved it onto his shoulder. “Are you going to stand there, or open the door?” he asked, even though he had a free hand.

“I thought you said your arm was damaged,” said Mr. Wellbay sliding the door back.

“Anger dissolves agony,” said Lance, who dropped the container onto the van floor, shoved it back, then slammed the door. Before Lance could storm off, Mr. Wellbay reminded him about a meeting in Grevelton later that evening. Lance nodded, marched inside house, then closed the garage.

Treen moved near the cargo door as Mr. Wellbay walked over and stepped inside the van. The engine sounded; as the van rolled



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out of the driveway, Treen moved to the rear. She hopped on the bumper, gripping the door handle with both hands.

Mr. Wellbay pulled into the street then drove away slowly. Treen held on until the van reached the Humvee, then she leaped off. She stumbled, but kept her balance and ran to the door, which Ariel had already opened. The Humvee rolled away when she was safe in her seat.

With Ariel and Russell looking on, Treen jotted down some of what she'd heard while it was fresh in her memory: *Merafuel, Ecnal, Arast, Grevelton Factory...*

"Lance is working for Blue Neptune in some capacity," she said, breathing hard. "He talked to Mr. Wellbay about something called Arast and Ecnal. They also had an argument over that container they were carrying."

"That container is driving me nuts," said Russell.

"Why?"

"Cause he saw one just like it at his girlfriend's place last night. Somehow it disappeared," said Ariel.

"From Tsara's apartment?" asked Treen.

"Yeah — but how do you know her?" asked Russell.

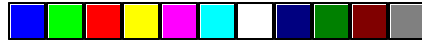
Treen didn't answer. She pulled off her headband, leaned back in her seat, then turned towards the raindrops streaking across the window. She realized now that Russell was the person Lance had seen snooping around the container.

The Humvee turned down St. Barron Road with debris from the explosion still littering the street. As they cruised closer to the cul-de-sac, the road cleared up. What wasn't clear was why Detective Redwor's car sat in the Alee's driveway.

"Take Russell to the Smile Center. I'll meet you there later," said Treen, as the Humvee stopped in front of her house.

Russell quickly opened his door and followed her out. Treen expected him to hop in the front seat, but he just stood there twirling his sunglasses. He tried to run his hand through his hair but must've forgotten about the wig; his fingers snagged and dragged the black curls to the back of his head and Treen smiled when his blond hair popped out.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" she asked.



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Russell fixed the wig, then shrugged.

“This might sound dumb since we almost got killed — but I’m havin’ a great time, you know, just hangin’ out with you.”

Treen patted his arm. “Stay with Ariel and be careful. I’ll see you soon.” She pulled her purse over her shoulder and walked towards the house.

“Please look back at me,” Russell murmured. He waited until she reached the door.

“Damn, she walked straight inside,” he whispered. He got in the car, slammed the door, then threw his back against the seat.

“You doin’ okay?” asked Ariel.

“I can’t believe I’m scared.”

“It’s alright to be afraid. Heck, you almost got killed.”

“I’m talkin’ about Treen.”

Ariel raised the front of his hat. “Why you afraid of Jazz?”

Russell turned away. He stared at her house long enough for Ariel to figure it out.

“Oh, I get it. You like her don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“This might make you feel better,” said Ariel driving off. “I’m kinda scared of Regina — Treen’s tutor.”

“*You’re* afraid to talk to a woman?”

“Oh yeah. I’m a mumblin’ idiot when I have to say something intimate.”

“What if you have to *do* something intimate?”

“Then I’m a fumblin’ idiot.”



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### Chapter 13

Near a gutted phone booth filled with empty soda cans, Sheridan kneeled by the cardboard shelters to hand out sandwiches; the unfortunate people who dwelled within never doubted he'd bring food the same time each day. He continued his good will by dishing out a case of Pavaloo.

Sheridon put down the remaining sodas and stepped over to the curb. He could hear the screechy timing belt and dragging muffler of his confidant's raggedy ride before the car even turned the corner. A trail of blue smoke followed the vehicle down the street, up to the curb. Sheridan stuck his head in the window and listened.

"You won't enjoy hearing this," said the studious looking man, who didn't match the dumb looking car he sat in. "Tsara was not in Grevelton last night taking care of a friend. She departed Ding Palace then drove directly to Mallyview."

Sheridon smacked the car top and backed away. He rubbed his stubble throughout a slow seething three-sixty, during which, the cardboard residents had stopped chewing and stared at him.

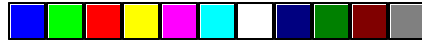
"You sure it was her?" he asked loudly.

"Positive. Some of the boys were in Mallyview last night and checked out that big explosion on St. Barron Road. They saw Tsara drive up, park, then disappear. That's all I know."

Sheridon put a hand over his eyes, shook his head, then snatched a fifty from his pocket. "Thanks for the info. Now please go fix that car," he said, handing over the cash.

Sheridon stormed in the opposite direction of the squealing timing belt. Like any human being, he hated when a good friend lied to him. He didn't even care for polite lies (such as complimenting a crappy haircut) and he couldn't wait to remind Tsara of that.

Twenty minutes later, he arrived at her apartment and wasted no time pounding the door. Tsara peered between the curtains as if the landowner was knocking for late rent. Instead, she found big Sheridan rubbing his fist and growling to himself. Of course, she



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hurried to let him inside.

“Sheridon, what’s bothering you?”

“You’re bothering me,” he grumbled, shoving in past her.

“What do you mean?”

“It ain’t my business where you spend your time, but don’t lie to me. Why’d you say you was helpin’ a friend in Grevelton when you really went to Mallyview?”

Tsara stared...

And stared...

And stared...

Finally, she turned to shut the door. By the time she’d stepped back over to him, she’d armed herself with an explanation.

“I drove to Mallyview last night — but I only went there to help Russell. I thought I’d talk to his parents — let them know he was alive — but no one answered the door. On my way back, there was a big fire and like everyone else I stopped to look then I — ”

“Like I said, it’s your business.” Sheridon slumped on the pink couch.

“I knew Russell would tell me not to go. That’s why I — ”

“Forget about it.”

Sheridon continued to sulk and although he still loved Tsara like a sister, he’d probably never trust her again.

“Can I give you a big hug?” she asked, noticing his sudden eye contact.

“You have to,” said Sheridon, “Look at the size of me.”





## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 14

Back at the Alee House, Treen said that her headaches had subsided and that she felt wonderful. She sat up on her bed and pulled on a white turtleneck, while Dr. Moresky put her stethoscope back in its case and said, “You’ll be fine but please get some rest.”

“Easier said than done,” Edwin mumbled in Elizabeth’s ear. Treen heard the comment and winked at her parents; after everything she’d told them, they knew she wouldn’t be sleeping anytime soon.

“Call me if you need me,” said Dr. Moresky, pausing in the doorway.

“The way things are going, you should just open a clinic in the guest room down the hall,” said Treen.

Although she was done with the doctor, Treen couldn’t run to the Smile Center just yet. Detective Redworc was still waiting downstairs with questions about the attack at the hospital.

“Dad, after I speak with the detective, can we discuss Lance’s hiring?”

“We don’t have to sweetheart. After what you overheard, there’s no way he’s working at Bookvilla.”

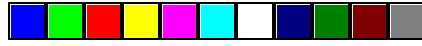
“I think you should hire him,” said Treen, her parents simultaneously raising their brows.

Elizabeth placed her palm on her daughter’s forehead. “Alright then, into bed you go — ”

Treen smiled. “Mom I’m not delirious. Lance is up to something and he’d be easier to watch if we give him a job. Believe me, he doesn’t want to work at Bookvilla because he loves books.”

Tapping his chin and staring at Treen’s computer monitor, Edwin asked, “Are you sure there’s nothing on the Internet about this Arast or Ecnal thing you heard them talking about?”

“Pretty sure,” said Treen. “There’s definitely nothing about it on Blue Neptune’s web page.” Edwin was tempted to call Garrison



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Blue and simply ask, until Treen reminded him of something else.

“When Mr. Blue donated the computers, didn’t he say he had no plans to open a business in Grevelton?”

“He said he had to think about it.”

“Then why does he have a factory opened there?” she asked, as the doorbell began to ring. While her parents stared at each other, she moved to the intercom.

“Hello, this is Treen.”

“This is Lance. What are *you* doing here?”

Treen turned away from the intercom and stared wide-eyed at her parents. Then she put her mouth close to the speaker.

“Like it or not, I live here.”

“Pardon me. I — just assumed that you would be — ”

“Dead?”

“Certainly not. I thought you would be lying comfortably in your hospital bed.”

“My father will be down shortly.” Treen released the switch and stepped back to her parents. The three of them shook their heads in disbelief.

“All right then, Sherlock Holmes, what’s the plan?” Elizabeth asked.

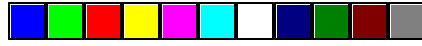
Treen stroked her earlobe. “Here’s what we’ll do...”

Edwin and Angela continued down the hall towards the front door to meet Lance. Treen took a right, under the oval archway towards the living room, where she was surprised to find a different officer sitting on the couch.

“Where is Detective Redworc?” she asked, approaching him slowly.

Like a giant redwood growing out of the floor, the officer stood and looked down at her. “He waited as long as he could, Miss Alee,” said the officer, his weighty voice as menacing as his frame. “From what I understand, you were upstairs for quite some time so he radioed for me. I am Officer Tobora.” He extended his huge hand.

After the incident at the hospital, Treen was suspicious. Shaking his hand, she studied his uniform carefully. If he was an Awaker, the quicker she found out the better.



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

Other than the officer's size, Treen noticed nothing out of the ordinary. However, as she led him to the dining room table, her parents walked by with Lance, who suddenly stopped and glared at the officer through the archway.

"Something wrong, Lance?" asked Treen, walking towards her mother.

"Not at all. I'm just admiring your lovely dining room."

"It can be all yours for ten dollars — officer not included," she quipped, walking by him.

Lance smiled then glared over at the officer again. "Edwin, may I use your bathroom?"

"Yes, go back towards the front door, it's on the left."

"What's happened to Detective Redworc?" Elizabeth whispered, after Lance had gone.

"Supposedly he had to leave," Treen whispered. "Call the station and find out where he is."

Elizabeth hurried to Edwin's office. Treen headed back to the table, puzzled as the officer stood and put his hat on.

"Where are you going?"

"Unfortunately I must leave."

"But what about my statement?"

"It must wait. Goodbye, Miss Alee."

Edwin adjusted his blazer after the officer had brushed by him. Treen joined her father beneath the archway where they watched, bewildered, as the officer marched down the hallway and out the front door. Lance stepped out of the bathroom after the door had slammed.

"That policeman is certainly in a hurry," said Lance loudly, his voice echoing down the hall.

"Very strange," Edwin mumbled.

Treen leaned towards her father. "What's really strange is Lance knowing the officer left without even seeing him," she whispered, as Lance approached.

Edwin nodded at Treen and began tapping his chin. He spun around when he heard his office door open and watched as Elizabeth rushed towards him shaking her head. Lance walked up from the other direction.



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“Lance, how ‘bout we get started with that interview?” said Edwin, grabbing his arm and guiding him towards the office. Elizabeth snatched Treen’s hand and dashed away.

“Mom, what’s the matter?” she asked, after they’d stopped in the living room.

“I phoned the front desk at the station. They haven’t a clue as to the whereabouts of Detective Redworc — although they did mention that he should be right here.” Elizabeth nervously scanned the house; “Whereabouts is that replacement officer?”

“Gone,” said Treen, who dropped to her knees and began scanning the mahogany floor.

“Sweetheart, what are you’re looking for?”

“Blood — from Detective Redworc.”

“I’ll check the dining room.”

After searching both areas and finding nothing, they stepped out into hallway, scanning the floor all the way to the front door. However, except for the furniture already damaged by the Newberrys, there wasn’t the slightest hint of a struggle.

Treen opened the front door to check outside. As she scanned the walkway, she suddenly remembered the detective’s car, parked out front when she arrived home. “Be right back!” she shouted down the hall to her mother.

Out in the driveway, Treen found the detective’s car parked in the same spot — doors locked, seats empty. She examined the vehicle a bit closer, found nothing, then sprinted around to the backyard.

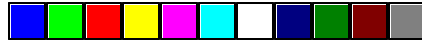
Treen slowed down a few yards back from the swimming pool. She crept closer to the edge and prayed for water without a corpse. She exhaled. Luckily, only a few red leaves floated inside the large, baby blue cylinder.

Further inspection of the backyard revealed nothing. Treen jogged to the patio and knocked on the glass, startling her mother. Elizabeth quickly unlocked and slid the door open.

“What’s happened, Love?”

“Bad news, Mom,” she said, stepping into the living room. “The detective’s car is still here.”

“Then, whereabouts could he be?”



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

“I don’t know but something tells me it was painful getting there.”

“You really think the officer who was in our home — that perhaps, he’s harmed Detective Redworc?”

“It’s possible. I mean, maybe that officer was really an Awaker. But why didn’t he attack us?” she asked, pacing.

“Phone up Russell Wellbay. Maybe this bogus policeman is the same one who attacked him.”

“You are brilliant Mother,” she said, darting to the phone.

Ariel answered the phone at the Security Flat and quickly put Russell on the line. The moment Treen had mentioned the name Tobora, Russell identified him as the police officer that had tried to run him down. “Stay inside the security flat until I get there,” she said.

Strolling under the archway and through the dining room, Edwin and Lance laughed like they’d been partying at the Sea Crystallore again. The grin across Lance’s face when they entered the living room told Treen all she needed to know.

“I’d like to announce that Lance has been hired as the Grevelton Bookvilla manager,” said Edwin, his family joining in as he began to clap.

“Please,” said Lance, gesturing with both hands for them to stop the applause. “I am just grateful for the opportunity.

“I hate to spoil the celebration, but I have to catch the trolley to the Smile Center,” said Treen.

“I can drive you there,” said Lance.

“You don’t mind?”

“If I did I wouldn’t have offered.”

“I need to speak to my parents privately before we leave.”

“Very well then, I’ll wait outside.”

The Alees waited ‘til they heard the front door close. Even then, Treen peeked down the hallway just to make sure. Their warm house had become a haven for strange happenings and Lance Ruof was growing stranger by the minute. Treen hurried back over to her parents.

“I don’t think it’s a great idea to ride with him,” said Edwin.

“Me as well,” said Elizabeth.



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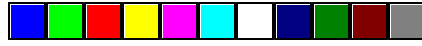
“He has to meet Mr. Wellbay in Grevelton. Whatever they’re planning won’t happen on the way to the Center,” said Treen. “Besides, this will give me a chance to pick his brain a little bit.”

“She means she’s going anyway,” said Edwin, staring at Elizabeth.

“Well don’t pick his brain too much,” said Elizabeth, “We certainly don’t want him to suspect that we suspect anything.”

Treen giggled. “And you called *me* Sherlock Holmes?”





## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 15

The first five minutes of the ride to the Smile Center yielded no conversation. With the silence between Treen and Lance adding additional heat to the already existing friction between them, she decided to try and cool things down.

“So, how’s it going with Regina?”

“Why?” he asked, staring straight ahead, both hands gripping the wheel.

“It’s just a question.”

“No one — especially you — just asks a question.”

Loudly, Treen exhaled. “You’re over analyzing — ”

Suddenly, Lance began to flicker his eyelids as if his vision was blurred. Then, when he tried to speak, a dreadful cough flew out and more of them followed. The car swerved across the center line, narrowly missing an oncoming van before Lance regained control.

“Are you alright?” she asked, still grasping the dashboard.

Lance cleared his throat and adjusted his tie. When he’d completely regained his composure, the sentence that sprinted from his mouth made no sense at all.

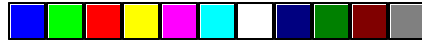
“Talk small in engages me dislikes who someone when analyze over to tendency a have I,” he said rapidly, before his eyes widened and stayed that way. It was as if his jumbled words had come out on their own.

“*What* did you say?” asked Treen, staring at him as she released the dashboard.

“I-I meant to say, I have a tendency to over analyze when someone who dislikes me engages in small talk.”

“Good point. I’ll shut up.”

Once again, Treen peered out her window. The clouds had darkened even more and the wind had picked up. When a large bird flapped by and whirled into the distance, it reminded her that animals behave strangely before a storm; she wondered if it ever caused



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them to communicate backwards...

Like most extra large pizza boxes, the one Russell carried to the wastebasket didn't fit inside, so he just leaned it up against the wall. Hearing the crumbs sizz to the bottom was one thing, but feeling the vibration of tumbling, uneaten crust was another.

He opened the box and snatched out two tattered tan edges of the once warm pizza that Ariel had ordered for them. He chewed Ariel's leftovers because he was still hungry, and still hungry because he was trying to quit smoking. With *Bruce Lee* posters plastered all over the walls of the Security Flat, who wouldn't want clear lungs and to get in shape?

Ariel sat staring at a wall of inset security monitors, where he could watch most areas of the Smile Center. He didn't plan on living in the security flat, but since he never seemed to leave, Treen suggested he move in — which he did.

"I don't believe my eyes," said Ariel, gazing at the monitor that displayed the foyer.

"What's up?" asked Russell, posing in front of a mirror, the Stetson atop his head. He strolled over to see why his new friend was so excited.

"Russ, that's Treen's tutor," he said, pointing at the screen with grin that rivaled the Smile Center Logo.

"Regina?"

"Yep."

With his grin growing broader, Ariel kept his eyes on the monitor while Regina walked towards the information office and stepped inside. Shortly after, the Security Flat's intercom sounded. He quickly reached over to press the switch.

"Ariel here."

"Hey cute cowboy."

"Hey sweet Sam. *Please* say ya' need me for somthin' in your office."

"Okay, I do that. Regina want to see you."

"You're kiddin'."

"No kiddin' — lover boy."

"Be right down," he said, tipping the chair when he sprang up.





## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

“You’re right, you are a fumblin’ idiot, said Russell laughing.”

Ariel tugged off his T-shirt then snatched a fresh, black shirt from the closet. “Any pizza crumbs on my face?” He asked buttoning up and tucking in.

“All clear,” said Russell, handing him his hat. Ariel darted towards the exit.

“Wish me luck — and stay in here,” he said, closing the door behind him.

Like a real gentleman, Ariel raced through the hall, then chugged down two flights of stairs, instead of swinging through Samantha’s office window. However, if he had smashed through her glass, it would’ve been a waste of time because he found Regina sitting alone in the Café.

Ariel took off his hat, tapping it nervously as he approached Regina’s table. She stood so fast that she knocked over her umbrella, which he moved quickly to pick up. “This thing must have holes in it,” he said, noticing her soggy hair and wet trench coat. She laughed and hugged him before they sat.

Regina said she was driving to the Alees, but stopped at the Center when news of the hospital attack sounded over the radio. Ariel said Treen was on her way, then told Regina about the bogus doctor that had tried to kill them.

Ariel didn’t mention Lance. He didn’t want Regina to think he was making things up out of jealousy. It was definitely better if Jazz told her what they knew about her new boyfriend. In the meantime, Ariel could set up a future night out.

“Umm, listen,” he said quietly, shifting in his chair. “I’m not too good at askin’ this kinda question.” Lightly, he punched the inside of his hat. “Do you think we could, you know — you know what I mean?”

To ease his suffering, Regina smiled and reached across the table for his trembling hands.

“I really messed that up,” he said, looking down at their intertwined fingers.

“No you didn’t,” she said, squeezing his hands tighter. “Yes Ariel, I would love to — ”

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” Lance shouted from



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the foyer, closing his umbrella as he approached with Treen walking beside him. Regina released Ariel's hands like they'd burst into flames, but her affection had already been realized.

"I think you two make a great couple," said Treen, stopping at the table. She moved her dripping hair from her face then leaned to kiss Regina on the cheek.

Ariel stood. He didn't care that Lance had seen them holding hands, but he did wonder why Jazz had strolled into the Smile Center with him.

"What are you doing here Lance?" Regina asked, standing.

"Good question," asked Ariel.

"My dear Regina, I was simply dropping Treen off. I saw your car parked outside so I came inside. Apparently, I should have stayed outside."

"Yep," said Ariel, nodding.

"You'll have to excuse Ariel and me," said Treen, we have business to tend to." Treen squeezed Regina's hand, whispered goodbye, then pulled Ariel's sleeve towards the foyer. She knew better than to leave Russell Wellbay alone in the Security Flat for too long.

They jogged upstairs, sprinted down the hall, then quickly opened the door. The lights were still on, but the Security Flat seemed awful quiet for Russell Wellbay to be in there — especially with the arsenal of audio equipment that he'd been offered to use.

"Where is he?" Treen asked, searching the room.

"Russ!"

"I'll check the kitchen," she said, "Maybe his mouth is too full to answer."

It didn't take long to establish that Russell wasn't there because the place was small. Other than a few tables loaded with computer equipment and a closet full of Ariel's neatly stacked boxes of gadgets, there weren't many spaces to hide in or under.

With her back to the window, Treen rubbed her earlobe and continued scan the room. As the rain pelted the glass behind her, she suddenly felt bits of water sprinkling onto her hand. She turned around and saw that the window had been left slightly opened.

"Did you leave this up?"

"No," said Ariel, who dashed over and yanked up on the pane.



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A gust of wind, rain, and leaves smacked their faces when they leaned forward to look outside.

Ariel pointed down to the red Humvee, where he'd parked earlier to sneak Russell inside the building. "I didn't leave the light on inside the Hummer!" he shouted, over the howling storm.

Ariel backed out of the bad weather and Treen did the same. However, by the time she'd shut the window and turned around, he'd hurried across the room, dropped down on one knee and began to rummage through the wastebasket.

"Ariel, I don't think Russell's in there."

He grinned. "No he's not, and neither are them cigarettes he threw away earlier. My keys are also missing. Looks like ol' Russ is takin' care of his nicotine fit down in the Humvee."

Treen shook her head in disbelief and buttoned her black leather jacket. "I'd better go down and check on him. Keep an eye on Lance," she said, pointing towards the monitor that showed him still talking to Regina in the Café.

"And if he leaves?"

"Then hurry down to the — "

Treen noticed a yellow box atop the wall unit next to her. She moved quickly to pick it up, then whispered out the words written in bold red in ink on front: "*The Tail Tracker: Follow anyone, anywhere.*" She shook the carton.

"Ariel this box is empty. Do you have another one of these?"

"A Trail Tracker? No problem," he said, moving to the storage closet. He shuffled things around then pulled out another yellow box that contained the tracking device.

"How's it work?" she asked, while he unpacked it.

"This device is a magnet that connects under any vehicle. After I install the program on the computer, you can track every movement through satellite."

"Let me have it. I'm going to put it under Lance's car before he leaves." Holding the gadget, she studied it for moment; "Is there any particular place that I should stick this?"

"Yep. Right up Lance's a — "

"I mean *under the car.*"

After Ariel had recommended the bona fide best spot to put the



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Tail Tracker, Treen checked the monitor. Lance and Regina had left the Café and now stood in the foyer.

“I’ve got to hurry,” she said, adjusting her headband and rushing towards the window. She tucked the Tail Tracker in her jacket pocket.

“Jazz, what are ya doin’?” he said following behind her.

“I’m going to climb down the fire escape ladder like Russell apparently did. I don’t have a choice with Lance standing near the entrance. Install the Tail Tracker program and I’ll be back,” she said opening the window, the wet wind bursting into the room once again.

Treen stepped carefully onto the slippery iron ladder, lowering her head from the wind speed that swirled enough to sway her. She then gripped the narrow bars and began her descent into darkness.

A minute later as she neared the bottom, Treen glanced up at Ariel and lost her balance. Her boot slipped off the last step and her knees squished into the sopping grass. She stood from the muck and noticed that the light had gone out inside the Humvee.

Treen splattered across the lawn to the vehicle. With the driver’s door locked, she smeared the raindrops across the glass to look inside. Russell wasn’t there. She wiped the water from her eyes and scanned the area in front of her.

“Russell!”

He didn’t answer. She inspected the ladder from bottom to top. Perhaps he didn’t see or hear her and was climbing back to the Security Flat. However, the only person up there was Ariel, his silhouetted figure still hanging over the pane.

For the moment, Treen gave up searching for Russell. Again, she squinted up into the rain at Ariel, flung her hands up, then signaled that she was headed to the front of the building. The Tail Tracker would be useless if Lance had driven his car away. Maybe the storm (or Regina’s charm) would delay his trip to Grevelton.

Treen peeked around the corner of the building and shook her head: “Magnificent,” she griped. Lance’s car was still there, but she’d forgotten that he’d parked along the curb — directly in front of the entryway where he and Regina had been standing.

Still, she had to get to that car. She sprang from the side of the



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facility, splashing to a halt behind an oak. Peering around the tree, she looked through the glass doors of the entry, where Regina now stood alone in the foyer. “Hope he’s in the bathroom,” she muttered, before darting over to his car.

She made it to the driver’s side rear fender then squatted to take the Tail Tracker from her pocket. She then peeked across the trunk, where she could see Regina still alone near the door and staring outside. Already shivering in her drenched corduroy, Treen lowered herself into a freezing puddle, then stretched her arm beneath the car. She felt around on the grimy, uneven surface of the underbody until she’d found a level spot, activated the mechanism, then extended again to stick it there. “Yes!” she whispered when it latched firmly to the car.

However, when someone’s hand suddenly latched onto her leg, her thumping heart could’ve shaken the Tail Tracker loose. Luckily, she looked up and found Russell staring down at her.

The rain had flattened his curly wig.

The dark glasses, (which he had no business wearing at night) were missing a lens.

“Treen what are you doin’ down — ”

She yanked him down on top of her. As they situated themselves, she put her finger to her mouth, signaling him to keep quiet.

“I’ll explain later,” she whispered. “Where have you been?”

“Smokin’ in the Hummer, but I took off ‘cause I thought I saw an Awaker.”

“Tobora?”

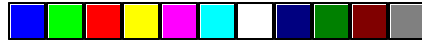
“I couldn’t tell with all the rain. But he was comin’ down that ladder.”

She lowered her head then slowly raised it again; “That was *me* coming down the ladder...”

Russell scrunched his brow. “Why were you coming down the — ”

Suddenly the driver’s door came ajar and lit up the interior. As the door opened wider, Lance extended his leg outside, his shoe splashing into the puddle. He’d been inside the car the entire time, talking on his cell — which he was still doing. With matching wide eyes and half open mouths, Treen and Russell crawled to the rear bumper.

“Don’t rush me Walter,” Lance shouted, still sitting in the front



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seat. "I'll be there when I get there," he added.

Treen and Russell stayed on all fours and peeked around the bumper. "Let's get outta here while we can," Russell whispered.

"Don't move," she said, "He's getting out."

The door thumped shut and Lance walked around the front of the car and back to the building. Treen and Russell resumed breathing. "Let's get back to the Security Flat," she said.

Ariel pulled Treen and Russell off the ladder and back inside the Security Flat. He welcomed Russell back from "Nicotine Land" then urged Treen over to the laptop.

"See that flickerin' red dot," he said, pointing at the map on the screen, "That's Lance's car. You did it, Jazz!"

"Excellent! Hey, the dot is moving. Did Lance drive away?"

"Yeah, just before y'all got back."

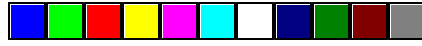
"I'm going down to my office for a quick shower. Tell Samantha to lock up the Center and you take Russell to the basement — "

"Wait a second! You can't hide me in the basement I'm already freezing to death!"

"You're going there so you *won't* freeze to death. It's where we keep our donated clothes," she explained.

"Ok, but I also need a shower so I'll go with you to your office and — "

"Nice try," she said grinning. "You can take a cold shower right over there," she added, pointing towards Ariel's bathroom. "We'll meet back here before we leave for Grevelton."



## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 16

Safe inside the Security Flat, Treen, Ariel, and Samantha, huddled around the laptop to watch as Lance's car neared Grevelton. Everyone was set to go except Russell, still in the bathroom changing into clothes found in the basement boxes. However, a few minutes later the bathroom finally opened.

"Wow!" said Samantha, causing Treen and Ariel to turn around. Russell stood outside the bathroom door dressed in tan khakis and a nice fitting white sweater. His hair was combed neatly with a part down the center. Was he trying to impress someone?

"What the heck are you guys starin' at?" asked Russell, walking towards them.

"Russ, you're lookin' real sharp," said Ariel.

"I knew a handsome boy was under that dirt," said Samantha stepping over to him. She removed her necklace then fastened it around his neck. "This will bring you good luck."

"With girls?"

"Oh, I don't know about that. Never did help me with a man."

Treen smiled but didn't comment on Russell's sudden catalog look. "Let's pack up the computer and get going", she said, fixing her headband.

"Everybody, please be careful. I don't like it that you are going to that city," said Samantha, who'd be staying in the Security Flat.

Treen gave her hug. "Don't worry Sam, we'll be fine."

After Ariel had hydroplaned for the second time he decided to slow down, realizing that everyone was bruised up enough already without him crashing into the guardrail and flipping the Humvee. Besides, there was no rush; Treen had been watching the blinking red light on the laptop screen when Lance's car had reached its destination. All they had to do now was follow the Tail Tracker into Grevelton City, only a few more miles away.

Outside, the rowdy rainstorm had stopped. Inside, Russell's snor-



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ing had started. Treen turned from the computer screen towards the rear seat, where he lay on his back — knees up, mouth wide-open, fingers intersected across his chest. She smiled when between snorts he mumbled something about Zilgian cymbals.

“Jazz, hold on!”

Before she could turn around, Ariel stomped the brakes, jerking her neck and skidding the Humvee across the wet pavement.

“Whoa,” said Ariel, after the vehicle had slid to a halt. Russell had rolled off the back seat and lay twisted on the carpet. With the wipers squeaking across the windshield, Treen and Ariel stared out at the street sign in the middle of the road. The leaning pole had been shoved into a large pothole

“Welcome-to-Grevelton,” said Treen, tilting her head slightly to read the battered sign illuminated by the Humvee’s headlights. Ariel drove around it and continued into the city. Russell groaned, pushed himself up from the floor, then squinted at Treen and Ariel. Without a word, he crawled back onto the seat and started snoring.

Cruising through downtown Grevelton, Treen glared out at the street people and slowly shook her head. She’d seen the sad images on television, but this was her first real visit to the downtrodden city.

“Hard to believe a city could end up like this,” said Ariel.

“It’s pathetic. It makes me angry that no one has tried to help.”

“That’s about to change soon as Bookvilla opens up,” said Ariel, rubbing her shoulder.

She smiled. “You’re right.”

Since there weren’t many cars on the street, Treen grew suspicious of the headlights that had been shining behind them for a while. She waited a few minutes longer to see if the car would head in a different direction, but it kept following and moved even closer to the Humvee.

“Take the next right,” she said. “We’re being followed.”

Ariel picked up speed — as did the other driver, who tailed closely around the next turn. The car continued to follow them through two more turns, the last of which resulting in a dead end street.

“Damn it,” said Ariel, as the paved road suddenly faded into dirt





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and gravel. With no chance to turn around, Ariel sped up. The Humvee barely fit between the buildings in the narrow alleyway; the tail car began flashing its high beams.

The alleyway led into the spacious, littered parking lot of an abandoned mini mall. Treen looked out the rear window and noticed that more cars had zipped into the area and zoomed towards them. The car directly behind them continued to flash its high beams as Ariel sped back towards the alleyway — the only way to escape the enclosed area. When another vehicle veered in front of them, Ariel rammed its rear bumper and forced it aside. Then, two cars suddenly swerved along each side of the Humvee; the men hanging out the windows gestured for Ariel to pull over.

“There’s at least three cars blocking the alleyway,” said Treen, gripping the dashboard.

“We won’t make it through,” said Ariel, easing up on the gas pedal. “Whatever happens, stay inside after I get out.”

“*Get out?*” she asked, glaring at him. “No, Ariel. There are at least twelve men out there.”

“I’m supposed to protect you and that’s what I’m gonna do,” he said, stopping near the first car blocking the alleyway. The pursuing vehicles stopped at the sides and rear of the Humvee.

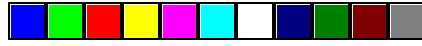
“Ariel — ”

“Jazz, lock the door behind me,” he said firmly, before a man knocked on the window and peered inside. Ariel removed his Stetson, tossing it in the backseat where it landed on Russell, still deep asleep.

Ariel thrust the door open, knocking the man backwards. Treen quickly locked the doors then watched her bodyguard finish off the stranger with a swift kick. Then, as if he were the one doing the chasing, Ariel charged several yards away from the Hummer, towards the shadowy figures who had now left their cars. What he had planned was anyone’s guess.

Treen’s estimate of twelve gangsters was way off. By the time Ariel had stopped running, more than twenty people had surrounded him.

However, as Ariel rotated with clenched fists, a large man suddenly stepped from the mob. He walked right up to Ariel and started



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talking. Treen couldn't hear the conversation, but the man's gesturing appeared to be peaceful. Just then, Russell wobbled up from the backseat.

"What's goin' on?" he asked, during his groaning stretch. He then sat with his eyes half open.

Treen exhaled. "We're in a little trouble."

Russell leaned forward, looked in the front seat, then squinted through the windshield. His sleepy eyes popped open when he realized that Ariel was outside in the middle of what looked like an ambush.

"A *little* trouble? Why didn't you wake me up?" he asked, slapping the headrest.

"Because it's too dangerous."

"Too dangerous? Look at all them dudes around Ariel — *that's* dangerous," he said, pointing.

Treen opened the door and stepped outside to listen. Surprisingly, laughter had erupted from the circle, including Ariel who was now shaking hands with the person in front of him. "Thank you, Lord," she whispered, glancing up at the stars.

She stood near the door for a couple more minutes then returned inside the Humvee to tell Russell that everything appeared to be all right. However, the instant she sat in her seat, she glanced out the windshield and noticed a fast moving silhouette busting through the crowd. The person appeared to be running towards Ariel but shoved past him and dove into the large man's kneecaps. Not only had the fool just tackled someone twice his size, he'd probably sealed his fate as the mob closed in on him.

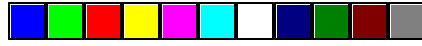
"Russell did you see that?"

"Russell?"

Treen turned to look in the backseat. He was gone. She whirled towards the windshield again and glared out, realizing that the mystery attacker was the same person who'd been snoring all night.

She jumped out of the Humvee and rushed towards the crowd. Once there, she bumped and zigzagged to the center, astonished to find Russell hugging the same man he'd just tried to knee-capitate — and they were both laughing.

"Will somebody *please* tell me what's going on," she said, her



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baffled beam expanding.

“I’m Sheridan,” he said pulling away from Russell, “pleased to meet you homegirl.” He offered one hand and rubbed his knee with the other. The gawking crowd moved closer.

“Now I understand, she said shaking his hand. Russell has told me all about you. How did you know we were here?”

“That red Hummer really stands out in this town — even more when Treen Alee is ridin’ inside. I been on the lookout for Russ and when I saw you roll into Grev, I knew there was a connection.”

“We’re on our way to check out a factory operation on the North side of Grevelton, she said.”

“Ain’t no factory on the North side. It’s just a run down area where all the schools used to be — and it’s also where the Awakers do business.

“Sheridon, come with us to check it out,” said Russell.

“Yeah,” said Ariel, “We could sure use your help.”

Sheridon had heard them, but it wasn’t until Treen smiled at him that he finally answered: “You got it.”



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## Chapter 17

While Ariel drove towards the Northside, Treen and Sheridan sat in the backseat discussing the Awakers, Newberrys, and the conversation she'd overheard between Lance and Mr. Wellbay. After she'd told him that Tsara was involved somehow, Sheridan glared out the window and cursed quietly. Later, he turned to Treen to say that his trust in Tsara had spiraled downward every since she lied to him about her trip to Mallyview. Whatever faith he had left in her had just slammed to the ground.

"Stop by Ding Palace," Sheridan grumbled. "I'm gonna sort this out with Tsara right now."

"Sheridon, relax," said Treen. "We can't let her know that we're on to her."

"I'd like to tell her off for messin' up our relationship like this," said Russell, from the front seat. Ariel chuckled.

Treen rubbed her earring while she whispered what Russell had just said: "Messing-up-our-relationship. Russell, did you smoke or drink a Pavaloo at Tsara's apartment?"

"No — only at Ding Palace."

"Was Tsara working?"

"Yeah, for a while I guess, but she left. Why?"

"The police took your fingerprints from a can of Pavaloo and an ashtray inside the Newberrys' home. Sheridan said that Tsara was in Mallyview just after the explosion — "

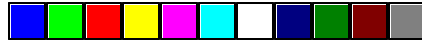
"She set me up!" Russell shouted.

"It appears so," said Treen.

"I can't believe this," Sheridan mumbled.

"Maybe this'll cheer y'all up," said Ariel, glancing down at the laptop that Russell had almost dropped. "We're gettin' close to Lance's car."

"Turn left after you pass that burned out school bus," said Sheridan, pointing up ahead. "I'll show you where to stash the Hummer."



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Unlike most of Grevelton, the Northside had bright streetlights and looked surprisingly clean. The area looked like a charcoal sketch, with the streets, walls, and buildings all several shades of gray and free of trash and graffiti. The “run down” streets of the Northside that Sheridan had described had been cleaned up.

Sheridon directed them off the main road and into the woods, where the Humvee squished over a muddy trail. Ariel drove several more yards then stopped near a gothic iron gate, the creepy heart-shaped design hanging between tall, rocky walls.

“Oh man,” Russell groaned, staring between the bars at the distant headstones, which looked spookier in the moonlight. “Why’d you pick a cemetery to park in?” He closed his eyes and threw himself backward against his seat.

“Are you afraid of cemeteries?” Treen asked.

“No, I ain’t afraid.”

“Good, then get out and push that gate open,” said Sheridan.

“Naw man, you’d better do it,” said Russell, “I gotta keep an eye on this Tail Tracker thing.” Sheridan chuckled then opened the door. He hopped out and headed over to the gate.

A mound of wet leaves kept Sheridan from pushing the gate doors completely apart. He squeezed through the crack, kicked away the stack, then motioned Ariel through.

“Follow this trail all the way to the back,” said Sheridan hopping inside again.

“Come on man, nobody’s comin’ in here,” said Russell, staring at the passing silhouettes of the spider-like trees, that sagged above battered headstones. “Why we have to park so far from the gate?”

Sheridon chuckled, his body bouncing as the Humvee crossed the bumpy surface. “Don’t worry Russ, we’re gonna crawl out of a hole in the back wall.”

Once they’d reached the wall, Ariel maneuvered the Humvee backwards against it, realizing that if they had to run, it’d be much easier to drive straight out. Sheridan took another look at the Tail Tracker map, then assured Treen that he knew where Lance’s car was parked.

After Ariel had put on his backpack, everyone walked over to the jagged exit. Russell examined the strange opening that they



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were about to climb through; “Looks like someone fired a cannon through here,” he said touching the jagged stones.

“Yes it does,” Treen said, “And it looks like the cannonball ricocheted off all these headstones because almost all of them are broken. I wonder what really happened.”

“Rumor’s got it that the Awakers used to have some kinda death battles up in here,” said Sheridan.

“Death battles?” said Treen.

“Yeah, to see who was toughest. Heard they fought ‘til someone’s head got ripped off.”

“But that don’t explain all this busted rock,” said Russell, “Unless they were fightin’ with sledgehammers.”

“I heard they tore this place up with their bare hands — including that hole in the wall.”

“Yeah right,” said Russell, chuckling.

“Russell, are you forgetting that we saw an Awaker fall from a fourth floor window and walk away?”

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Sheridan. I shouldn’t be laughin’. Guess it was different, since I saw that guy fall with my own eyes.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to believe in what you don’t see,” said Sheridan, who then poked his head through the hole and scanned the area. “All clear.” Then, creepy as it sounds, Sheridan stuck his leg through the gap, then wiggled the rest of body out of the graveyard.

Ariel climbed through last then joined the others out in the street. Coincidentally, they were all wearing black leather jackets and could’ve easily passed for a small Grevelton street gang. Sheridan zipped up, put on his gloves, then led their sprint into darkness.

Although he hadn’t been on the Northside for sometime, Sheridan still knew the area. He led them down blocks of maze like Thinnys, which offered plenty of dumpsters and staircases to hide behind if necessary.

However, so far they had no reason to hide. They hadn’t seen a single car or person since they’d arrived in the area. Sheridan continued down a long Thinny, which he said would lead them directly to Lance’s car and the mysterious factory.

They jogged out of the alley, following Sheridan across the street



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into a playground where they ran the length of the basketball court. They stopped to catch their breath beneath the backboard and Sheridan bent down to wheeze out the good news.

“Down the hill, look between them trees. That’s the place. Might be a factory now, but it used to be Grevelton City College.”

“Have you been inside that building?” asked Treen.

“Yeah. Used to be a student. Could’ve made more out of myself but I messed that up.”

She leaned down to him and whispered, “I think your doing fine.” She then stepped from the court to the mud, gripping a branch to keep from sliding down the embankment. She glanced up at the hoop and shook her head, wondering how many kids might’ve tumbled downhill after a fast moving lay-up.

Branch to branch, Treen slid further down for a better look at the building. Still, too many pines blocked her view. “We’ll have to get much closer,” she murmured.

She signaled the others to follow then continued downward. Her warning about the trees and slippery sludge didn’t help; Sheridan fell twice and Russell cursed when a branch poked his forehead.

Treen reached the bottom with little worry of being seen; pines, mist, boulders and thick foliage shielded everyone from the factory, now just across the street. Even from her bad angle, she could see three people in dark clothes and hats talking near the well-lit entryway.

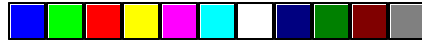
Kneeling behind a pine, Ariel had removed his backpack and pulled out a pair of binoculars. He took a close up view of the battered two level structure, which stood surrounded by scaffolding, cement mixers, and numerous cans of paint. He marveled at the large, armed guards who talked while scanning the area.

“Look at the size of those goons,” said Ariel, before handing Treen the binoculars. Ten seconds later, she snatched them away from her eyes.

“I don’t believe it. Tobora is standing over there.”

“Why’s an Awaker hangin’ around a Blue Neptune factory?” asked Russell.

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” said Treen.



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“There’s a door at the back of the building that leads to the basement,” said Sheridan.

“There were classes held in the basement?” asked Treen.

“Yeah, I-I guess you could say that. My girlfriend and me had like, human relations classes...”

“I see,” said Treen, grinning, “Well, lead the way.”

They maneuvered diagonally, away from the guards and across the slanted surface of the woods. When they’d reached the end of the building, Sheridan stopped.

“Y’all ready?”

They nodded. Sheridan exhaled then bolted out of the woods, jetting across the street with the others right behind him.

Behind the factory, Sheridan jogged straight for the concrete stairs that led to the basement. He paused only to say “Wait here,” then trotted down into the darkness of the stairwell. The others had stopped near the rail along the steps to wait, but it wasn’t long before Sheridan came chugging right back up.

“That old wooden door is now a thick piece of steel,” he said, panting.

“Any other way in?” asked Ariel.

“Only where Tobora’s standin’.”

As the wind picked up, Treen heard a fluttering noise the sound of wavering trash bags. She stepped back and stared up at the building; she noticed the flimsy coverings of the shattered, second floor windows. “I think I’ve found our way in.”

Nobody had to ask where the newly discovered entry was. Treen continued to stare up, and everyone else just followed her eyes. However, there was still a big question.

“How the heck we gonna get up there?” asked Russell, “There ain’t no scaffolding on this side.”

Treen didn’t have to answer because Ariel had already dropped on his knees and unzipped his pack. He tugged out his leather rope, which was coiled tighter than a stressed out snake.

The others watched for several minutes while Ariel unraveled the rope then clamped a claw-shaped weight at the end. He then stood to position himself below the windows.

“Stand back everybody,” he advised, adjusting the rope in his





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palm until he had a good grip. Twisting, he dipped his shoulder then flung the weight upward. With a bit of luck, it would grab on to something...

Crash!

Instead of sailing through the plastic of an already broken window, Ariel had shattered another. The heavy hook also failed to attach to anything and soared back down to an eventual thud in the mud.

"I better make sure the guards didn't hear that," said Sheridan, darting away.

"Come on man, you can do it," said Russell, as Ariel picked up the weight to try again. He hurled it back up there; the hook tore through the plastic and attached to the pane.

"Alright!" said Ariel, who tugged the rope several times to ensure it was connected. "We're good to go."

"Glad to hear that", said Sheridan running back over, "'Cause Tobora is comin' this way. Let's move!" Everyone hustled towards the rope.

Ariel went up first. Even though he'd put on the backpack again, he climbed faster than most people descend. Treen told Russell to go next while she moved to check on Tobora.

She peered around the corner and could see Tobora pointing his flashlight, inspecting each window as he inched towards her. She sprinted back to the rope, knowing she'd have to climb quickly.

Ariel looked down from the window, watching as Russell continued to climb to the top. All the way at the bottom, Sheridan pushed the rope to Treen's hand. She stared at it, then scanned it to the top.

"What's a matter homegirl?"

"I'm a counselor not a mountain climber. I may need help."

"Follow me up. If your arms get weak just grab my belt," he said, taking the rope with both hands.

"Alright. But if your pants slide off and I plunge to the ground, don't blame me because you're up there in your underwear."

With Russell now inside the window, Ariel hoped that the sill would support Treen and Sheridan who were now ascending together. Treen could've climbed much faster had she not looked down



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to check on Tobora every two seconds. Sheridan was several tugs up, when he stopped grunting and looked down at her. Breathing heavily, he whispered a suggestion as loudly as he could.

“Homegirl, quit lookin’ down and pull your butt up here!” Treen nodded then sped up.

Sheridon reached the window. Ariel and Russell grabbed his arm, hoisting him over the pane, onto the floor. Treen continued to moan her way up; she hadn’t glanced below since Sheridan’s good advice, but realized Tobora could spot her at any moment now. With one final groan, she pulled up to the ledge. Sheridan and Russell pulled her inside and Ariel hurried to haul in the rope.

As Treen hung the tarp back over the window, she glanced below then suddenly sprang away from the sill. Everyone squatted simultaneously.

“Tobora is down there,” she whispered.

“Did he see you?” Russell asked nervously.

“I don’t know but he was staring up here.”

“It’s pitch black in this room. Maybe he didn’t see you,” said Sheridan.

“There’s only one way to find out,” said Treen, crawling back to window. She stood at the side of the pane, pulled back the covering, then slowly peeked over the sill. Luckily, Tobora had walked away and continued his inspection of the lower windows.

Ariel handed Treen a flashlight and she shined the beam across the old classroom. She spotted an abundance of boxes and containers then crisscrossed between the dusty tables and desks until she reached the other side of the room. She noticed a label on one of the sealed cartons and lowered to read it.

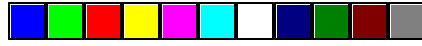
“What’s it say?” Russell whispered, walking up behind her.”

“Arast parts.”

“What’s a Arast?” asked Russell.

“I don’t know but — wait second...” She searched her pockets until she’d found the notes she’d scribbled from the conversation between Lance and Mr. Wellbay. “Quickly everyone, gather around,” she said, shining the light on the list.

“Look at these words: Arast, Ecnal, and Merafuel. Sheridan, you and Russell look for any boxes with these words on them. Ariel



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and I will open this one and check the others.” Treen gave the list to Sheridan while Russell headed towards the boxes, using his lighter to see.

Ariel slit the box open then anxiously pulled the flaps apart. Treen aimed the light inside, where they could see the bubble wrapped contents. “What the heck is this,” said Ariel, taking out the first piece.

“Sure is lightweight,” said Treen, also taking an item from the carton.

“It’s some kind of machinery,” said Ariel, over the crackling bubble wrap. Before they could open the packages completely, a loud thump sounded from across the room. Treen sprang up and swung the beam towards Russell and Sheridan, who’d knocked over a desk and scurried towards her.

“There’s arms and legs in that container over there!” said Russell, running up to her.

“He ain’t lying,” said Sheridan excitedly, “They’re hackin’ people up in this place.”

Treen pointed the light towards the metallic cylinder then walked towards it, trying hard to keep her legs from shaking.

She reached the waist high container and slowly aimed the light inside. With a trembling heart and hand, she boldly reached in and grabbed one of the limbs. Her eyes expanded as she raised it from the container and turned towards the others.

“Look at this arm,” she said, shining light on the limb. “The silicone skin looks and feels so real.”

“Silicone? You mean, it ain’t real?” asked Sheridan, he and Russell creeping closer.

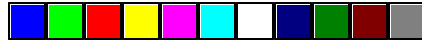
“Doe’s this look like blood?” said Treen, holding the arm by the hand, showing them the other side.

“Are those wires?” Russell asked.

“Yes. Wires are connected to every limb in that box because they belong to a dismantled android.”

“You mean, like, a robot?” asked Sheridan.

“That’s right. In his newspaper article, Mr. Wellbay described an android as a robot with the shape and abilities of a human. He didn’t mention that Blue Neptune was already using them.



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“Using ‘em for what?” Sheridan asked.

Treen flipped the arm around and studied the hand. “I don’t know. There’s wear and tear on the palm, and fingers. It could be that they’re simply running tests, but nevertheless, it’s been used.”

Treen put the arm back inside, then leaned down to read the embossed letters on the front of the container: “Ecnal-4,” she whispered. She hurried back over to finish opening the box.

Treen and Ariel ripped the bubble wrapped sections apart, where they found interface cables, sensor boards, video camera eyes, and fully assembled mechanical hands and feet.

“Wow,” said Ariel, studying the complex design of a skinless hand. “Look at this thing.”

“This is freaky. Let’s get outta here,” said Russell.

“Shhhhh,” whispered Sheridan. “I think I hear voices. Turn off the flashlight.” He crept over to the window and peered down between the fluttering tarp. In a flash, Sheridan had rushed back over.

“Tobora’s back and he’s got two guards with him!”

“Oh man,” Russell moaned.

“That ain’t all; they’re raisin’ a ladder up to the window.”

“We have to get out of here,” said Treen.

“This way,” said Sheridan.

The second that Sheridan pulled the door open, the scent of diesel fuel filled the air. With the others close behind, he jogged down the dim hallway, weaving around scattered cans of paint, tools, tiles, and stainless steel panels stacked outside every classroom door.

However, after ten minutes, Sheridan realized his guided tour of the old college would never happen; recently constructed walls, fitted with stainless steel panels, had redirected the hallways, leaving him as lost as the others.

“Look there’s an elevator,” said Russell, dashing down a corridor that was also a dead end.

“Russell, don’t!” Treen shouted, chasing after him. Before he could press the down arrow next to the shiny steel doors, she grabbed his hand. “We can’t take that elevator.” Ariel and Sheridan jogged up behind them.

“Why not?” asked Russell, “Them guards are right behind us!”



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“Someone could be waiting for us when the doors open downstairs. The sound of the elevator alone may alert them — ”

Treen stared at the doors. After a couple of distant thumps, everyone stood owl-eyed and listened as the elevator began to whine.

“Somebody’s comin’ up here,” said Sheridan.

“Let’s go!” said Treen, sprinting back down the hallway.

Treen knew they couldn’t just run down the corridor, turn the corner, and dart down the next hall — not with Tobora and the guards possibly waiting. She stopped at the end of the hallway to peek past the wall and was glad she did.

“Why are we stoppin’?” Russell asked frantically, stacking behind the others. “That elevator’s about to open!”

“Tobora and the guards are down there searching the room we broke into,” said Treen as the elevator chime sounded. When Tobora and the guards had cleared the doorway, Treen made her move. “This way!”

As she crept along, Treen watched Tobora pass back and forth inside the room. When a frenzy of fast footsteps echoed from the elevator hallway, everyone hurried inside the nearest classroom.

“Quickly, hide behind those boxes,” said Treen, standing just inside the door and pointing to the back of the room. The others filed in, twisting between the cluttered furniture until they’d reached the back wall, where they crouched behind the stacked cartons.

Seconds after Treen had closed the door she heard muffled voices outside the room. She moved her head back from the door’s center glass and stayed put.

Suddenly the knob began to turn. As the door gradually creaked open, Treen shut her eyes, pressed her back against the wall, then sucked in what little stomach she had to keep the doorknob from touching her. Heavy footsteps thumped into the room. Holding her breath, Treen peeped through the glass and stared at Tobora’s rugged profile.

He switched the light on. He studied the messy classroom for a moment, then yanked the pistol from his holster. Treen couldn’t imagine her heart rolling any faster, but it did, as Tobora stepped towards the boxes where her friends were hiding.

Whatever lay in his path, Tobora shoved or hurled across the



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room with one hand. The student desks made the most noise, bouncing off the floor and clanging together until they tangled to a stop. Treen shuddered from the racket but took advantage of it, pushing the squeaky door slightly forward, then crawling towards a block shaped paperweight on the desk near the blackboard.

Tobora was just a few steps away from discovering the others. Treen gripped the paperweight and prepared to charge over to him. Suddenly, several men in suits walked by the doorway. Treen ducked when Tobora turned around and stormed back into the hall, shouting, "Mr. Wellbay! Mr. Wellbay stop! I will show you the open boxes."

Treen stayed behind the desk until the voices faded down the hallway, then she scrambled over to the others.

"We can't stay in here," she whispered. "Once Tobora shows Mr. Wellbay the boxes we've opened, they'll tear this place apart looking for us."

"I can't believe my dad's involved with the Awakers," Russell whispered angrily.

"Well I'm not convinced that your father knows they're trying to kill us."

"What do you mean? You saw the way Tobora ran outta here to catch him. My dad's runnin' this whole thing."

"Believe me Russell, your father may have problems with you, but he doesn't want you dead, trust me. Besides, if he did, he probably would've killed you himself a long time ago. Now, you're about to get your wish to ride in that elevator because it's our only way out of here."

Treen crept away from the boxes then stopped near the doorway. With the others stacked behind her, she eased her head out the doorframe and watched as the guards and suits surrounded the room where the android parts had been exposed. When Lance surprisingly stormed out of that same room, he shoved the other guards aside and charged up to Tobora.

"Someone has broken in!" Lance shouted, pointing inside the room. "Obviously you androids are too stupid to secure this building!" Lance grabbed Tobora's jacket and amazingly hurled him to the floor. He then snatched the pistol from Tobora's holster, pointed



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the barrel at him, then fired several shots. Bits of plastic and metal flew up from Tobora's head, then rained to the surface. The men in suits fled into the room.

"I have no use for an imperfect Ecnal!" Lance shouted at the guards as he stepped away from Tobora's shattered shell. "If you other droids make any more mistakes, expect the same treatment."

Along with everyone else, Treen snapped her head inside the room and dashed back behind the boxes. They breathed fast and hard as they continued to listen to the chaos down the hall, which included the echo of Mr. Wellbay yelling at Lance about the shooting. Once the shouting had ceased, they stayed on the floor and stared at each other.

"My God," said Treen quietly, "The Awaker Gang — they're androids."

"This is crazy," said Sheridan, hand on his forehead.

"My dad's been acting weird all these years because he ain't a real person," said Russell, face as pale as the chalky floor beneath him.

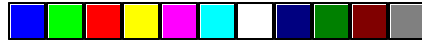
"Russell, your father is not an android," Treen whispered, her voice tense. How do think you arrived on this planet?"

"Maybe I'm a android — a defective one."

Treen glared at him for a moment then grinned slightly. "Good point," she said, realizing that Russell was hiding his fear behind humor. "We have to get to that elevator."

Even though Tobora was an android, the cold-blooded way in which Lance had disposed of him had jarred everyone. Nevertheless, Treen exhaled and led the nervous group to the door. Again, she peeked out into the hall, where she could see Mr. Wellbay and Lance standing over Tobora's body and still arguing about the shooting. Suddenly, the guards gathered to lift the conked out android from the floor — the perfect distraction for Treen and the others to tiptoe out of the room. Ariel stayed close to her, concerned about Lance's trigger finger.

However, the perfect distraction was short-lived when one of the guards shouted, "Stop right there!" Treen and Ariel had already sprinted towards the elevator, but Russell and Sheridan hadn't turned the corner yet. The guard opened fire.



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“Run!” Sheridan shouted, pushing Russell around the corner.

“Damn, the doors are closed,” grumbled Treen, stopping near the control panel and tapping the down arrow like a rapid-fire arcade game. Ariel ran up behind her with Russell and Sheridan still chugging down the hall.

Finally, the down arrow darkened and the doors slid apart. Treen and Ariel sprang inside, then pleaded loudly for Russell and Sheridan to hurry. The guard rounded the corner shooting; Sheridan ducked, zigzagged, and kept running, but Russell stumbled and fell.

“Russell get up!” Treen shouted, head bobbing in and out the elevator. The guard fired again. The other guards, led by Lance and Mr. Wellbay, charged down the hallway.

“Stop shooting!” shouted Mr. Wellbay, waving his hands, “That’s my son!”

The guard lowered his weapon then looked back at Lance. After a three second stare, he turned back towards Russell, who’d scurried closer to the elevator, then fired anyway. The bullets ricocheted; Russell dove inside the elevator and the doors slid shut.

“Oh man!” said Russell, panting on his hands and knees. “They almost got me...”

“If your old man hadn’t distracted that guard you’d be dead,” said Sheridan, pulling him up.

“Guess Treen was right about him,” said Russell, still breathing hard over the elevator drone.

“Well I’m not right about everything, she said wiping off Russell’s jacket. I have no idea what’s waiting for us when these doors open.”





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Jazz, put this on,” said Ariel, handing her a blue bandanna, like the one he was still wearing. “It’s not much, but it may be enough that Wellbay or Lance won’t recognize you.”

“Good idea,” she said taking it from him, tying it around her head.

The elevator stopped buzzing and thumped on the first floor. Ariel and Sheridan stood at the front, waiting with clenched fists for the doors to open. Russell showed his own courage, moving from Treen’s side and stepping in front of her when the doors slid apart. However, no pistol pointing guards were waiting and they filed out of the elevator, gawking at the enormous facility’s shiny interior.

“Everything’s stainless steel. The floors, walls — everything,” said Ariel, gliding his fingers along the panel next to him. He gazed up at the high ceiling — an octagon pattern loaded with big, round, fluorescent lights.

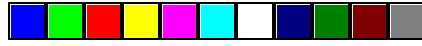
“Look over there,” said Sheridan, pointing at a dozen motionless bodies standing in a section marked: ‘Ecnal Test Area’.

“It’s like a science fiction movie,” said Russell, following closely behind Sheridan.

“Hate to interrupt,” said Treen, still holding the elevator doors open, “But could someone bring me that chair so I can keep these doors ajar?”

Ariel grabbed the chair, jogged over, then jammed it between the sliding doors as Treen stepped out. Then they rushed over to join Sheridan and Russell who’d wandered into the circular testing area to marvel at the androids.

“Incredible,” Treen whispered, stopping to examine one of the droids. Some had silicone skin and were dressed like everyday people; others were mechanical skeletons made of metal, plastic, and rubber; hundreds of neatly bundled wires curved through thousands of colorful components that appeared impossible to figure out.



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“What the heck are these?” asked Ariel, staring down at the wide, four-legged skeletons that sat higher than his waistline.

“Looks like they’re designing some type of animal,” said Treen walking over to it. She knelt to read the tag attached to the belly: “Ecnal Grizzly?”

Sheridon scrunched his brow, “What they need a mechanical grizzly bear for?”

“Oh man,” said Russell, voice shaking. “Turn around. I think we’re about find out.”

Russell sounded so frightened that he caused the others to turn around in slow, trembling sequence. They trembled even more when they saw a hairy, fully assembled grizzly bear glaring at them from the center of the circle. After the brown bear had finished shaking off the white sheet that covered it, the monster stood on its hind legs and released a thunderous roar that flowed out of its seven-foot frame and echoed throughout the factory.

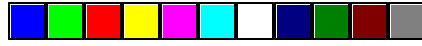
“Run!” Russell shouted, advice the others had taken even before he’d opened his mouth. The bear charged after them.

The grizzly obviously wasn’t designed for indoor use; its nails slid and pattered over the stainless steel floor every time the creature sped up or changed direction. The bear’s out of control skating reminded Treen of the fake doctor she’d tricked into flying out the hospital window. Maybe it would work again...

Dodging the clumsy bear might’ve been easy but locating the exit was not. After minutes of sprinting up, down, and all around the maze like corridors, Treen stopped. Frustrated, she put her hands on her hips, looked around, then pushed over a fiberglass mannequin standing beside her. The glare off the stainless steel walls and the continuous roar, made the search for a way out (and keeping her cool) more difficult.

“This way!” said Treen, leading the others past an endless array of computer equipment that lined the outer walls of the building. With the growling grizzly catching up, she dashed towards what looked like storage shed.

“Quickly, open those doors,” said Treen, now staring at the massive monster galloping towards her. Russell stood next to her, while Ariel and Sheridon slid the doors apart.



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“Oh man,” Russell groaned, shivering. “Here it comes!” The charging bear picked up speed and madly wobbled its head around, exposing sharp silver fangs.

“Get ready to dive!” she shouted, before counting down:

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three!”

They dove apart. As expected, the Ecnal Grizzly skidded across floor, roared into the storage container, then smashed into rack of video monitors. The bear’s momentum carried it all the way back, where it clanged head first into the steel frame. Ariel and Sheridan hurried to slide the doors shut, then listened as the mechanical creature growled and slammed its body against the walls.

However, they weren’t done running just yet. “I hear footsteps,” said Treen. “A lot of them.”

“They’re movin’ fast, but which way they comin’ from?” asked Sheridan, over the bears muffled snarls.

“Well we can’t just stand here,” said Russell flinging up his hands.

“We sure can’t,” said Treen, staring between Ariel and Sheridan’s shoulders, where she could see guards running towards them. “Come on,” she said, sprinting in the opposite direction.

After they’d stopped, cut, jerked, spun, and sprinted to elude the guards, Treen stopped in a hallway lined with offices. Breathing hard, she leaned over to put her hands on her knees. Ariel kneeled, took off his pack, and began searching inside of it.

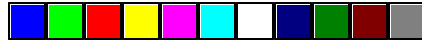
“Check it out,” said Sheridan pointing down the corridor. “There’s a forklift under that cover.”

Russell snapped his neck towards Sheridan and asked, “What the hell we gonna do with a forklift?”

“Look man, them androids are tryin’ to kill our butts. I say we go crank that thing up, raise them forks, then ride that bad boy the hell outta this damn place.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” said Treen, standing. “Let’s do it.”

“Look out!” Ariel shouted, when a distant guard appeared behind the others then opened fire. Everyone scattered in the oppo-



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site direction until another guard emerged, trapping them at center. With nowhere to run and the guards moving closer, Ariel snatched his pack, placed it over his head, then charged through the glass door of the office in front of him. The others scurried behind him, over the shards and through the shattered doorframe.

Treen and Sheridan pulled Ariel to his feet. Russell stuck his head into the hallway then shouted, “Here they come!”

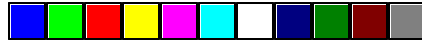
Ariel displayed what he’d taken from his pack and it looked like a grenade: “It’s just a smoke bomb made of Potassium Nitrate and Sugar. Jazz, after I pull the pin you and Russell get over to that forklift. Sheridan and me will take care of the guards.”

As Ariel and Sheridan moved towards the doorframe, Treen noticed an open briefcase on the desk behind her and hurried to look inside. She found folders, keys, a calculator, and a wallet that she flipped open. When she saw Mr. Wellbay’s frowning drivers license, she realized that they’d smashed inside his office. With no time to read through the folders, she ran behind the desk and ejected his CD drive, where a shiny disk slid out atop the tray. She put her finger through the hole, snatched it out, then closed the tray — just as Ariel sprang into the hallway and pulled the pin on the smoke bomb.

Within seconds, the dark cloud began to fill the hallway. However, escaping wouldn’t be as easy as Ariel had anticipated; a guard surprised him from behind, latching his massive hands around his neck. Ariel struggled to break free but his efforts only magnified the pain. Luckily, Sheridan heard the ruckus and ran over to help, leaping atop the guard and wrestling him down. With the area growing blacker by the second, Treen and Russell ran out of the office and towards the forklift.

Treen had glanced back to check on Russell when she suddenly walloped into what felt like the Smile Center oak tree. She crumbled to the floor then Russell tripped over her and wound up face down. When they glanced up, a massive Ecnal droid stood above them, looking even scarier as a silhouette amongst the gloom that the smoke bomb had produced.

Russell sprang up, but a crushing backhand from the Ecnal sent him spiraling back down on top of Treen. The chaos magnified



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when Ariel and Sheridan yelled out as they battled the other Ecnal.

As the area blackened, Treen felt the massive, gloved hand of the Ecnal, smack over her mouth. After a violent struggle, she pulled away, but the Ecnal quickly grabbed the collars of her leather jacket. She could barely breath as the droid lifted her off the floor. Treen's boots were three feet up when the ascent halted; the guard jerked her, adjusting his one handed grip.

"It is dark and I cannot see. Who are you?" he asked, yanking her closer to him.

"Y-You're ch-choking, me."

"I realize that. It is intentional. Answer my question please."

The droid squeezed harder. Gasping for air, Treen kicked wildly. Behind her, gunshots banged out.

"Jazz!" shouted Ariel.

"Point the flashlight over there!" Sheridan hollered.

The guard glared into the dim light moving toward him, then dropped Treen. Sheridan charged over, tackled the droid, then rolled away, allowing Ariel to fire the pistol he taken from the other guard. Three shots later, the second droid had stopped moving. Ariel pulled Treen up while Sheridan lifted Russell onto his shoulder. Ariel pointed the flashlight down the hall and led the way towards the forklift.

The smoke thinned as they jogged out of the hallway and over to the loading area where the forklift sat. Sheridan laid Russell atop a stack of pallets then darted to the forklift.

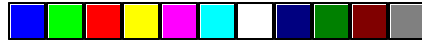
"This thing is brand new," he said, climbing into the seat. He fiddled with the controls.

"Is the key in the ignition?" asked Treen.

"Yeah. Lets fire this thing up."

Russell sat up on the pallet and rubbed his head. Other than a headache, he said he felt all right — an excellent diagnosis with a gang of guards storming towards them again.

"Come on y'all!" Sheridan shouted, cranking the throaty engine. Treen and Ariel snatched Russell up then hurried him over to the forklift. Sheridan raised the forks midway, advised everyone to hold on, then roared out of the loading area with shots banging out behind them.



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“Faster!” Russell shouted, hanging on to the frame and crowding Sheridan as he steered. “They’re right behind us.”

“I’m drivin’ a forklift not a Ferrari!”

Treen and Ariel hung on at the rear and had the best view of the pursuing androids. Ariel struggled to hold on, lowering the pack off his shoulder to search for another smoke bomb. He finally found it then gave it to Treen, who knew exactly what to do.

The guards fired. The forklift weaved. Treen pulled the pin and extended the smoke bomb. She held on to it, knowing had she thrown it, the guards would have run through smoke and into the clear. Instead, a steady black cloud streamed from behind the forklift, blinding the androids enough to lose their targets.

“Check it out,” Sheridan shouted, “There’s an exit up ahead!”

“Yes!” said Russell, “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

Treen had been glaring into the black smoke when an odd feeling came over her; she looked all around then turned towards Russell and Sheridan. As she stared at them, everything began to move in slow motion; Russell, still happy about finding the exit door, patted Sheridan’s shoulder then gradually turned and smiled at her. It was then that two guards sprang from a hallway up ahead and started shooting.

Russell ducked. Sheridan did the same but couldn’t avoid being hit. He jerked and hollered, but still managed to steer the forklift towards the guards, who’d stayed put and continued to shoot.

“Payback time!” Sheridan shouted, a hand over his bloody wound. He closed his eyes and winced as each fork burst through the guards’ chest, impaling them. With sparks flying from the damaged droids, Sheridan continued to drive towards the exit.

The forklift stopped near the exit and everyone leaped off. Treen and Ariel moved quickly to examine Sheridan’s wound. Russell’s mouth hung open as he glared at the ripped open androids dangling from the forks.

“Can you make it back to the Humvee?” Treen asked.

Sheridan unclenched his teeth. “Yeah, it’s just my shoulder,” he said, covering the wound with his hand.

Everyone had moved towards the door except Treen, who stared at the gaping gashes the forks had left in the androids. She tilted



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her head side-to-side, glaring at the punctured synthetic skin and shattered machinery. Strands of split tubing stuck out and dripped a clear white substance onto the surface.

“Treen, come on!” said Russell, holding the door open, “Let’s get out of here!” Calmly, she glanced over at him, then took a last look at the mangled droids.

“Right behind you.”





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## Chapter 19

On the second floor of the factory, Lance and Mr. Wellbay sat inside the room where they'd found the open boxes and they'd been arguing every since the Ecnal guards had chased the intruders downstairs. It didn't appear that Mr. Wellbay was in charge because two Ecnal guards stood blocking the doorway — not to mention that those same guards had dragged him into the room when he tried to help Russell.

"I'm asking you for the last time, Lance. Why are the Ecnals trying to kill my son?" shouted Mr. Wellbay, slamming his fist on the table.

"I'm curious to know what would happen if I didn't answer," said Lance. However, since I'm tired of your whining I will tell you — even though it should be obvious," he said, standing. "Because of you and your little nuisance, everything is behind schedule. The construction of this factory would be complete if you would've delivered the updated Ecnal and Arast designs on time."

"What does that have to do with Russell?"

"Are you stupid? You run off everyday to snatch the little brat from trouble and you waste everybody's time. When the little punk ran away from home, I knew you'd start your bloodhound sniffing right out of work again so I decided to do you a favor and get rid of him. BIG DEAL. You really should consider it a favor — especially since the little brat broke in here."

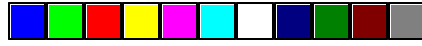
"You decide nothing when it comes to my family!" said Mr. Wellbay storming up to him.

"Walter, did you know that Mr. Blue had Tsara arouse your punk kid so he'd stay away from his daughter? I believe her name is Gail isn't it?"

"You're lying!"

"Afraid not. Besides, what reason do I have to lie? All I did was program the Ecnals to kill your son and Blue would care less if he found out — especially after Russell put his slimy hands on little





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Gail. We need finish the factory and continue the distribution of the Merafuel — a task made easier if you'd get your family crap together.”

Mr. Wellbay suddenly grabbed Lance by his lapels. “You hurt my son and I'll shut you down, you understand?” he shouted, face turning redder as the door opened.

“What's going on in here?” asked Tsara, strutting in between the guards. “Looks like he's angry with you Lance.” Mr. Wellbay shoved Lance backwards.

“Now Walter, you wouldn't kill a pitiful android like me would you?” asked Lance, fixing his tie and chuckling. He then grew silent and pointed towards him. “Grab me like that again and I'll rip your head off.”

“That's awesome Lance,” said Tsara. When will you program me to talk that way? I'm tired of being a wimpy Arast droid. Besides, I'll bet I could do a better job than your Ecnals did downstairs.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Lance.

“Have you been too busy to interface with the guards?” she asked.

“Tsara, shut up and tell me what happened.”

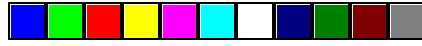
“But I don't have interface capabilities so how do I shut up and still explain what happened?”

Lance stormed up to her.

“Alright, alright, calm down!” she said, hands up in front of her. “Driving back from Ding Palace I saw some of the guards running away from the graveyard. They told me that Russell, Sheridan and two others had broken into the factory, and that all of them had escaped. Oh, by the way, the Ecnal Grizzly broke its neck inside the storage shed, and there's two dead Ecnals hanging around the front door. It looks like they lost a battle with the forklift.”

“You interfaced with the Grizzly and ordered it to attack my son?” said Mr. Wellbay, rising slowly.

Lance rubbed his goatee and walked away from Tsara. He stopped near a battered wall, put his hands on his hips, then leaned his face close to the jagged surface. “They look like, tiny, snow covered mountains,” he said, tapping the pointy concrete. Then, he



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cocked his arm back and slammed his fist into his imaginary Alps, the snow sprinkling down from the large crater now in the wall.

“Haven’t you done enough damage to yourself already?” asked Mr. Wellbay, unimpressed by Lance’s display of strength.

“It’s nothing compared to what I’m going to do to the idiot Ecnals who let them get away,” he said, rubbing the torn silicone covering his knuckles. “It’s Treen Alee. I’m sure of it. She thwarted the hospital hit and now she’s found her way here.

“If she’s with Sheridan we have big problems because he’s been asking a lot of questions,” said Tsara.

“Like what?” asked Mr. Wellbay.

“Like, why was I in Mallyview at three in the morning when I was supposed to be at Ding Palace.”

“What were you doing in Mallyview?”

“Lance, haven’t you told him anything?”

“Shut up, Tsara,” he said, turning towards Mr. Wellbay. “I called Tsara after the Newberrys went on their infamous rampage. I had her come and pick up their stupid daughter.”

“What do you want with Natalie Newberry?”

“Nothing. However, since she and her dead parents decided to help themselves to my Merafuel, I figured I’d get rid of her along with the Alees on Wednesday. She’s being held at the Grevelton Lab along with — what’s that stupid detective’s name?”

“Redworc,” said Tsara.

“I’ve heard enough of this nonsense. You two are going to get me put in jail. I’m going back to Mallyview. I’ll speak with Mr. Blue later on today, but until then, keep the Ecnals away from my son.” As Mr. Wellbay approached the door, the guards blocked his path.

“Let him through,” said Lance, watching until the guards separated and Mr. Wellbay stormed out.

“*You two are going to get me put in jail,*” said Tsara in a deep voice, mocking Mr. Wellbay. “He’s such a wimp.”

“Yes, but unfortunately, he’s a wimp that we still need.”

“Want me to call off the hit on his son?”

“No.”

“Want me to find Sheridan?”



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“No. I already know where he is; Treen Alee, Ariel Carson and Russell Wellbay have taken him to the Grevelton clinic. I’ve just messaged the Ecnal guards to go and kill all of them.”

“Your interfacing!” *Please* Lance, set me up for interfacing.”

“Why, so you can bother me all the time?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll think about it. Right now I must leave for Mallyview. I have an unscheduled appointment with Edwin and Elizabeth Alee.”





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## Chapter 20

The staff at Grevelton Clinic knew Sheridan well. His mother had died there, and now the building was under his protection. When he walked in the front door gripping his bloody shoulder, the nurses swiftly rolled a wheelchair over to him and notified the emergency room.

Treen, Ariel, and Russell surrounded their big buddy. They wanted to wait at the clinic but Treen felt it wasn't safe since the Awakers were probably searching everywhere for them. They wouldn't be hard to find with the red Humvee, parked right outside the clinic entrance.

"Everything will be alright," said Treen taking Sheridan's hand. "We'll be back for you."

"They're ready for him," said the nurse, who'd walked up behind the wheelchair and gripped the handles.

"Wait a second," said Sheridan. He pulled Treen down to him and whispered, "I know a place you can hide 'til I'm done here..."

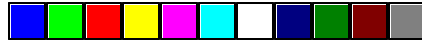
Sheridan spoke of Dale's Quality Used Cars. It didn't matter that it was 4:30 am and the place was closed, because the owner was a close friend who lived in a trailer on the lot. Dale would let them hide the Humvee in a garage until Sheridan was ready to leave the hospital, which, in his own words was, "Soon as they dig this bullet out." Everyone watched as the doctor rolled Big Sheridan away, the wheelchair fading down a long, dim hallway.

"Think he's safe here?" asked Ariel.

"Let's hope so," said Treen. "We'd better hurry to Dale's..."

Although Dale's lot was only two miles from the clinic, the scattered clunkers parked atop the weeds in front of his trailer were more than fifty miles from quality. "Must be hard to sell cars that are missing doors, wheels and windows," said Treen, over Russell's snoring.

Ariel drove to the back of the lot then stopped in front of the



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trailer, where an unchained German Shepard lay stretched out below the steps. The dog raised its head, squinted into the Humvee headlights, then flopped back to the ground. Its master then opened the door and stepped out into the cold. He shivered towards the passenger side as Treen lowered the window.

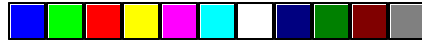
“I’m Dale. Been expectin’ you,” he said with a combination of liquor and tobacco on his breath. “Follow that rock path behind the trailer and you’ll see the garage. Door’s open and there’s a fresh pot of coffee waitin’ for ya.” With his hands tucked in the pockets of his overalls, Dale stepped back and studied the Hummer. “Lookin’ to trade this thing in? I can make you a real good deal.” The dog raised its head towards Dale, groaned, then flopped back down.

Ariel leaned across Treen’s lap to make sure Dale could hear him clearly; “No thanks.” Dale grinned. He patted the hood loudly, stepped over the dog, then headed back inside, while Ariel maneuvered the Humvee onto the stony trail.

A rickety white barn (with even more pitiful cars out front) stood atop the slight hill at the end of the trail. It definitely didn’t look like a garage and Treen realized the powerful possibility of chicken feathers floating inside the coffee pot. Ariel backed the Humvee inside then jumped out to pull the barn doors shut. Treen stepped out into a mound of hay, then weaved between the rusty lawnmowers and old tires until she reached the workbench where the coffee had brewed. The pot sat between two burning lanterns, which in sharp contrast, illuminated greasy wrenches, and two gleaming white coffee cups with matching cream and sugar bowls. “Save some for me,” said Ariel, who pulled off his bandanna and let his hair out.

An hour later, Treen and Ariel sat on a bale of hay and decided that Dale’s coffee was the best they’d ever tasted. They were also awake enough to study the disk that Treen had taken from Mr. Wellbay’s office and had established that the fluid flowing through androids was poisonous.

“Look at that red mechanism in the chest area,” she said, pointing at the laptop screen that displayed the android anatomy. “It’s called a Merafuel Pump. It pushes the fuel through these thin tubes that wind throughout the skeleton.”



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“Like blood running through veins.”

“Exactly. I overheard Lance tell Mr. Wellbay that the Newberry’s drank the Merafuel accidentally. Shortly after that, they got sick — just like Mrs. Blue.”

Ariel scratched his head. “So Garrison Blue’s old lady also drank that stuff accidentally?”

“I don’t know, it sounds shady. I think we’ll visit Mrs. Blue at the mental hospital once we get back to Mallyview. She must know something about all this.”

“Well for darn sure, that Merafuel stuff is better off inside an android than a human.”

They continued to study the disk until they’d sipped away the last of the coffee. However, the caffeine wasn’t enough to keep their eyes open so they moved inside the Humvee to rest.

Another hour had passed and Russell was still snoring. Treen had curled up in the passenger seat and Ariel had slumped forward, his forehead resting on the steering wheel —

“Wake up! Wake up!” Dale shouted, slapping the window.

Treen and Ariel took flight in their seats as if the Humvee had hit a tree. They squinted at each other with twisted faces, until Ariel turned the key so she could lower the window. Dale moved his nose back from the descending glass. Russell just kept on snoring.

“The Awakers stormed Clinic, tore the place apart!” said Dale, panting with booze breath.

Treen glared at Ariel then back at Dale. “What happened to Sheridan?”

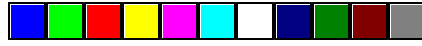
“Don’t know. Receptionist said he disappeared — even left his cell phone in the room. Dale took a trembling drag from his cigarette.

“Let’s get to the Clinic,” said Ariel.

“No,” said Treen quietly, “The Awakers are probably watching the place. Besides, if Sheridan’s gone there’s no reason to go there.”

Suddenly, like a malfunctioning jack-in-the-box, Russell popped up. “Who’s smoking a cigarette?” he asked, wide-eyed, hair pointing in every direction. Treen and Ariel slowly, simultaneously, looked back at him.

“Here you go,” said Dale, hand shaking as he extended a pack



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of cigarettes through the window.

“Russell you don’t need that,” said Treen, grabbing Dale’s wrist and politely pushing it away. “What you do need is to hear that the Awakers have raided the clinic.”

“Oh man,” he said leaning forward. That means they got Sheridan!”

“No it doesn’t because he may have escaped,” she said.

“Think he might come here?” asked Ariel.

“Naw, he’d be here by now,” said Dale.

“We have to search for him. Dale, do you know where he lives?” she asked.

“Farrington Street, not far from where you’re opening that bookstore. You’ll pass an old phone booth full of soda cans...”

When Dale had finished giving directions, Treen gave him a card, asked him to call if Sheridan turned up, then thanked him again. Dale patted the hood then stepped back as Ariel sped out of the barn.





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## Chapter 21

Ariel drove past the can-filled phone booth, which looked more like an intentional artistic design rather than a makeshift garbage bin. He continued uphill towards Sheridan's home with the sun climbing from behind the Grevelton Mountains in the rear-view mirror. Ariel pulled up in front of Sheridan's house, where Treen could see a light on through the curtain-less windows.

Ariel shut off the engine, then put on his hat. Treen fastened her headband. Russell snatched her discarded bandanna from the elbow rest then tied it around his head. Without a word, they opened their doors and cautiously stepped out.

Sheridon's colorful home stood out from the dreadful houses around it. The burgundy siding, tan tiled roof and white windowpanes reminded Treen of a house she'd seen in Amsterdam. The neighbors' ridiculously high weeds seemed to bully Sheridan's well-manicured lawn.

The wooden stairs creaked with every soft step they took up to the porch. Treen then moved towards a shattered window to look inside, where she found the interior not so cheerful looking.

"It looks like the Awakers have already been here because the house has been ransacked," she said, peering between the shards.

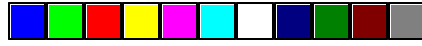
"Front door's open," said Ariel, examining the broken lock and chipped wood scattered on the porch. Treen and Russell moved behind him after he gradually pushed the door back.

They tried to enter the house quietly, but were soon crackling across bits and pieces of glass. Treen moved from behind Ariel and surveyed what had probably been a beautiful living room.

Stepping over a fallen lamp, she weaved through the overturned couches, tables and chairs, then stopped near the fireplace, where framed pictures of Sheridan's family lay scattered amongst the plant soil. Treen glared downward, shaking her head in disgust.

One by one, she wiped off the frames and placed them atop the fireplace. The last photo she picked up made her smile; the broken





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frame housed a black-and-white photograph of a beautiful African American woman, who sat near a stone monument carved with the Ten Commandments. The woman's cheerful eyes and serene smile were so infectious that Treen had briefly blocked out the surrounding mess. When she turned the frame over, the writing on back told her who the woman was: *Mom 1979*.

"I'm gonna look around upstairs," said Ariel, standing near the doorway that led out of the living room.

"Be careful," she said, as Russell walked up next to her. "We'll keep looking around down here."

Treen and Russell searched the kitchen and they could hear the ceiling squeak above them as Ariel thumped around the upper floor, slamming doors and calling out Sheridan's name. However, when they returned to the hallway, Treen heard a different noise; she grabbed Russell's arm and stopped.

"Do you hear that?"

Ra-bump!

Ra-bump!

Ra-bump!

"Sounds like it's comin' from the living room," said Russell, who darted back into the kitchen to grab a broom that leaned against the oven. Treen shuddered when the dustpan fell off the top of the stick and clanged across the floor.

With the bristles pointing behind him, Russell gripped the broomstick and led the few steps towards the living room doorway. Treen placed her hand on his back and stayed close, as the thumping grew louder. They crept up to the doorway and peeked into the living room.

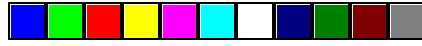
"Look over there," Russell whispered, "That coffee table's bouncing up and down!"

Treen stepped around him, into the living room, squatting for a closer look. "It's not bouncing on it's own, there's someone under the floor."

"Under the floor?"

"It's a trap door and whoever is down there can't push it up with that table on top of it."

Treen zigzagged over to the coffee table, which for a moment



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had stopped its loud hopping. However, it wasn't long before the racket started again —

“Ra-bump! Ra-bump! Ra-bump!”

“That must be Sheridan down there,” whispered Treen, watching the door move up and down.

“What if it ain't?” Why doesn't he say anything?”

“Perhaps he doesn't realize anyone's here.”

“Why don't *we* say somethin'?”

“Because it may not be him.”

“Told you.”

The door rose higher. The table began to slide off gradually and Russell readied the broomstick. Treen scanned the floor for something — anything to use for a weapon, in case someone (or something) other than their friend stuck its head out of that door.

“*Pool balls?*” said Russell, bewildered when she knelt to stuff the scattered balls into her coat pockets. “What you gonna do with pool balls?”

Treen rose with two in each hand and rolled her eyes. “I thought we'd find the table and play,” she said glaring at him, jamming two more in her pocket. I'm going to throw them of course — if I have to.”

Whoever was down there grunted loudly while they strained to raise the door. The table slid back, and a final thrust caused it roll over onto its legs. Russell readied the broomstick and Treen raised the cue ball. The wooden door flipped backwards.

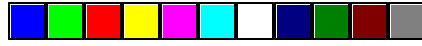
“Damn,” whispered, a weary voice from the dark square in the floor. They knew that voice and squatted to look inside. Just then, their big friend stuck his head out.

“Sheridon!” Russell shouted.

“Thank God,” said Treen, smiling.

Gripping the ladder, Sheridan stayed in the floor; he scanned Russell's broomstick, Treen's pool balls, and his battered living room: “Are y'all cleanin' this place up or finishin' a game of Quidditch?” They both laughed, dropping their weapons to help pull him out. Ariel jogged down the hall and into the living room wondering what all the excitement was about.

Although everyone was delighted that Sheridan was safe, the



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mood darkened as he inspected the damage to his house. He said he'd been hiding downstairs every since he jumped out the window at the Clinic to escape the Awaker attack.

"I could hear 'em up here, tearin' my place apart. Didn't know it was this bad," he said, rubbing his bandaged shoulder as he walked towards the window.

"Don't worry man," said Russell, we'll help you fix it up."

"That's a promise," said Ariel.

"Sheridon, with the information we found on Mr. Wellbay's disk it's just a matter time before we figure this all out. Don't worry, we'll get the Awakers off our backs."

Sheridon continued to stare out the shattered window. With the others waiting for a response, he turned around slowly and flashed a huge grin.

"You sure know how to make a guy feel better. Thanks y'all."

"We really should move away from this window," said Treen.

"Come on," said Sheridon, walking towards the trap door, "We'll go down to the hideout."

Sheridon waited for the others to lower themselves into the floor and climb down the ladder. Then he did same, grabbing the leather strap above him to pull the secret door shut. He slid the lock into its secure position then descended with the others.

Although there were no windows in the hideout, the sunset light bulbs tinted the walls and gave the small area a relaxing atmosphere. As they studied the hip looking room, each of them had found something on the wall to gawk over.

"*A Night in St. Cloud by Edvard Munch*," said Treen glaring at the reproduction. "This is one of my favorite paintings."

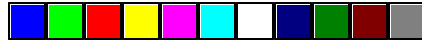
Sheridon grinned. "Whenever I'm down here alone, I feel like I'm that guy sittin' in the picture."

"Wow!" said Russell, "Here's an old picture of you outside Ding Palace with *Nirvana* and *Public Enemy*."

"I was nineteen. Best concert I ever saw."

Ariel said nothing. He just gazed at jumbo-sized poster of Bruce Lee.

"You must have a lot of girls comin' down here with all this sewing stuff laying around," said Russell, examining the baskets



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that spilled over with yarn. Sewing magazines lay scattered on the couch.

“Ah, yeah. I-I guess you could say that.”

Treen knew differently. On a table near the computer desk, she’d been admiring some unfinished, crocheted hats and sweaters. Next to them sat a stack of homemade business cards that read: *Sheridon Coswell’s Crocheted Hats and Sweaters*.

“Sheridon, I think your designs are incredible,” she said, trying on one of the hats.

Russell walked up to him. “You mean *you’re* the one sewing?” he said, lips quivering. Even Ariel glanced over from his favorite poster to hear the answer.

Sheridon looked up at the ceiling. He exhaled loudly. After glancing over at Ariel, he looked directly into Russell’s eyes.

“Alright. Yeah, I make the stuff.”

Russell’s cheeks swelled; unable to hold back, he erupted in laughter, grabbing his stomach as he fell face down atop the couch. Sheridon glanced down at him and shook his head. Then he looked over at Ariel, who’d turned his back to conceal his own chuckling. Sheridon finally gave in, bursting into laughter along with them.

“I guess being chased by androids has driven them all nuts,” Treen said quietly.



## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 22

Safe inside Sheridan's hideout, the men sat around Sheridan's computer and studied the information on Mr. Wellbay's disk. Treen paced the hideout and spoke to her mother on the phone; Elizabeth wasn't happy about her daughter's unannounced excursion — especially to Grevelton. After Treen had explained what happened at the factory, her mother grew even more concerned and told her to hurry back to Mallyview.

"I'll be home in an hour and I'll tell you the rest when I get there. I love you, Mom." Treen quietly exhaled then put her cell back in her pocket.

"Mom sweatin' you?" Sheridan asked, as Treen walked over.

"After the attack at our house — not to mention the hospital, I should've expected it. I probably should've waited until I got home to mention what happened at the factory because now she's even more concerned."

"Hate to tell you this homegirl, but we got a lot more to worry about."

"What do you mean?"

Ariel walked up to her. "Sheridan thinks the Leufarem drug that the Awakers are sellin' might be made of Merafuel."

"What makes you think that?"

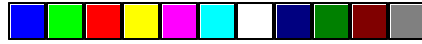
"Ariel told me what the Newberrys looked like after they drank that stuff. I see white foam comin' out of people's eyes all the time and it's always some Leuf junkie layin' on a Grevelton sidewalk."

"But Tsara told me Leuf was a pill," said Russell. "Isn't Merafuel a liquid?"

"Yes, but they could easily convert it to a tablet," said Treen. "We have to get those pills off the street somehow."

"It'll be hard. That stuff is real addictive and it's everywhere. It's the biggest reason this city's so messed up," said Sheridan.

"Hold on, hold on", said Russell, casually waving his hands in front of him. "Let me get this straight; my dad's been bitchin' at me



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about *cigarettes*, and he's out here selling drugs made of android juice?"

"We know that your father is designing androids and that's all," she said, taking the disk out of the computer. "Lance is the one I'm worried about. He's wormed his way into Regina's life and into a job at Bookvilla. It's obvious he's out to sabotage my father's plans to rebuild Grevelton, which is why Ariel and I are off to speak to my parents. Will you be safe down here until we return?"

"Yeah," said Sheridan, "Nobody knows about this place."

"Good. I'll leave my ATM card in case you have to leave here," she said, handing the card to Sheridan.

"You really trust us don't you?" asked Russell.

"Completely," she murmured, jotting the PIN number, "But if you're asking because of the card, money is low on the list of things that make me happy." She handed Russell the PIN number. "Just take care of yourselves."

"Can we get out that way?" asked Ariel, pointing towards a steel door at the back of the room.

"Normally, but I can't find the key."

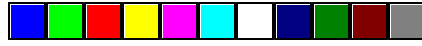
"We'll take the ladder, but find that key in case you have to get out of here," said Treen.

Sheridon followed them up the ladder and lowered the trap door after they'd climbed out. Treen and Ariel could hear the lock snap shut before they headed out the front door. They hurried down the steps towards the Humvee.

Ariel cranked the engine then sped back down the hill. Treen switched on the laptop and clicked the Tail Tracker icon, which quickly displayed the map. Treen covered her mouth when she saw that the flashing red dot had moved from Grevelton back to Mallyview. "Ariel, drive faster. Lance's car is parked on St. Barron Road..."

When the doorbell sounded, Elizabeth lowered the heat beneath a pan of scrambled eggs, then dashed from the kitchen to the front door. She yanked it open and found Lance standing there, arms crossed as he leaned against the house grinning.

"Hello, Elizabeth."



## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

“What brings you about this early in the morning?” she asked, a slight quiver in her voice.

“I’d like a word with your husband.”

She narrowed the door. “As I said, it’s quite early. He’s working in his office.”

“Well it’s never too early if man’s working in his office,” he said, shoving the door back and strutting into the house.

“I haven’t a clue what you’re on about,” she shouted, storming up to him, “But this my house. You can’t simply walk in as you please. Do you understand?”

He glared at her. “Shall I go back outside and we start over?”

“What’s going on down there?” shouted Edwin from his office at the other end of the hall. The moment he saw Lance he hurried towards him.

“Good morning, Edwin,” he said loudly. May I have a word with you in private?”

“That’s a good idea,” said Edwin trotting up, ignoring Lance’s handshake offer.

“Why, may I ask, is it a good idea?”

“Because I’ve decided not to hire you.”

Lance rubbed his goatee. He glared at Elizabeth then back at Edwin. “Tell me why,” he said, calmly.

“Because of some questionable activities on your part.”

Lance stared at the floor. “Don’t you find it reasonable — maybe even polite, to discuss the problem with me before you pass judgment?”

“I have reliable information. There’s no need to discuss the situation any further.”

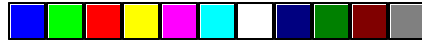
Lance moved closer to him. “What gives you the right to discard me in this way?” Edwin accepted the challenge and stepped closer, their noses nearly touching.

“Because it’s *my* store. You know, Lance, the truth can take you a long way in this life.”

“So can lying.”

“Maybe so — but you’ll eventually get caught.”

“Now I see where your stupid daughter gets her stupid philosophies — directly from her stupid father.”



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“Get out of my house!” he shouted, shoving him.

“No problem,” he said, removing a pistol from his blazer and gradually aiming towards him. “As long as you come with me.”

Edwin grabbed Elizabeth’s arm and yanked her behind him. “What’s going on here Lance?” he asked, voice trembling, eyes growing wider.

Lance giggled. “Well, let’s see. You’re standing in front of me — in your own home I might add, about to wet your pants because a gun is aimed at your head. Elizabeth, you look like you’re about to scream but please don’t. A person looks ridiculous when they scream and besides, I’d have to shoot you. Now then, where is your Ariel pager?”

“What Ariel pager?” Edwin asked.

“Don’t play with me!” he shouted, pressing the barrel against Edwin’s cheek.

“It’s in the desk in my office,” he slurred.

“Show me. For your sake you had better be telling the truth.”

Hands in the air, the Alees moved down the hall. Lance smiled as he followed them and even twirled the gun on his finger when he began to whistle Happy Birthday.

The moment they walked inside Edwin’s office, Lance ordered Elizabeth to sit in front of the desk, while Edwin hurried around to get the pager out of the drawer. Lance snatched it from him, tossed it on the floor, then crushed it with his foot. Suddenly, the doorbell sounded.

Lance gestured with the pistol for Edwin to sit next to his wife, then walked up behind them; “Make one sound and I’ll send you up to the clouds — if that’s the direction you’re headed.” He walked over to the door and peered down the hall, where he could see someone coming into the house.

“Elizabeth? Edwin? It’s Regina! Front door’s open!”

“Hello Regina,” Lance hollered, waving. “Come on down to Edwin’s office. We’re all having a *great* time in here!”

“Be right there!” She hung her blazer and purse on the coat rack, then glanced towards the kitchen. “Smells like something’s burning...”

Lance stood at the end of the hall while Regina looked inside





## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

kitchen. When she saw smoke floating from a pan on the oven she leaned out the doorway and shouted, “Tell Elizabeth I’m turning off the oven because her eggs are on fire!”

Lance laughed. “Sure thing, honey,” he shouted, closing the door. He walked up behind the Alees again. “This is extremely interesting don’t you think?”

“I think you’re extremely nuts,” said Edwin.

“Ah, an insult. How bold of you.” He leaned down, close to Edwin’s ear; “Let’s see how bold you are when I shove a book up your nose, he whispered.”

Regina opened the office door and strolled in happier than a birthday girl on Christmas. Lance sprang away from Edwin and grinned as she walked towards him.

“Hello everyone! Lance what are you hiding behind your back? Flowers for me? Elizabeth, Edwin, why are you sitting there like that? At least turn around and say hello...”

“That’s why I never liked you,” said Lance, snapping the pistol from behind him, “You ask to many questions — now get over there!” he shouted, shoving her. Regina’s high heels caused her to stumble and fall. Furious, Edwin sprang from the chair. He thought twice about throwing a punch when Lance pointed the pistol at Elizabeth.

“Sit down, Edwin,” he said. “Now.”

Gritting his teeth, Edwin lowered himself back into the chair. Regina trembled on the floor, glaring up at Lance as he stepped towards her. She tried to push away, but his hand shot down like a cobra and yanked her up. He dragged her behind the desk, jerked her upwards, then shoved her into the swivel chair. Shortly after, two large men barged through the door.

“Now I can put this stupid thing away,” said Lance, shoving the pistol inside his blazer. “One of you Ecnals, guard the hallway.”

“Who are you?” asked Elizabeth, voice trembling.

“You mean, *what* are we,” said Lance. “Maybe I’ll tell you later — that is, if I haven’t killed you first.”



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## Chapter 23

My parents still aren't answering the phone," said Treen, staring at her cell as Ariel sped towards St. Barron Road. "I hope we're making the right decision by going to the house first."

Ariel glanced down at the Tail Tracker map in Treen's lap. Lance had left St. Barron Road a short time ago and was now headed down the highway. "We can still turn around and go after him," he said.

She exhaled loudly. "No, keep driving to the house. Just because my parents aren't picking up the phone doesn't mean he's done something to them."

However, Ariel knew something was wrong. Not only because Edwin and Elizabeth hadn't answered, but also from the slight quiver in Treen's voice and the way she'd been twisting her earlobe — things Jazz did when she talked about Shainy. He turned down St. Barron Road then pressed hard on the accelerator.

The Humvee rolled into the cul-de-sac. Treen shut the laptop then snatched her house key from her pocket. Before the vehicle had completely stopped, she opened the door and leaped out. Before Ariel had turned off the engine or clicked off his seatbelt, she'd sprinted up the walkway, unlocked the door and burst inside the house.

Treen jogged down the hall towards the living room, shouting for her parents. Ariel raced in behind her and immediately launched himself up the staircase. So far, the only noise in the house was the noise they made themselves.

After a ten-minute search of the downstairs area, it was obvious that her parents weren't there. Ariel thumped down the stairs and jogged into the living room where Treen stood glaring out of the patio doors.

"Jazz, everything's in order upstairs," he said breathing hard.

"Down here also. There's no sign of a struggle. My mothers car is not in the garage, and their cell phones are off."

"Maybe they went to Bookvilla?"



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

She shook her head. “I called there.”

“What now?”

“We’ll wait here a bit longer to see if they come home or call.”

“If they don’t?”

Gradually, Treen turned around. Her green eyes had faded a shade darker. “Then we’re going to get Lance.”

Treen opened the laptop and displayed the Tail Tracker map, which now showed Lance parking somewhere along the highway. She glared at the blinking red light, wondering where the heck her parents could be.

“Come on,” said Ariel, grabbing her hand, “I’ll buy you a Pavaloo.”

“Sounds great.”

Before they moved to the kitchen, they took off their jackets, locked arms, and strolled down to the coat rack near the front door. It would be the last stroll they’d take for a while.

Ariel hung his jacket on the iron coat rack, then turned away to stretch. Yet, as Treen shuffled through the other coats for a hook, she noticed a tan leather strap, hanging across a dark blazer. She pulled the blazer open, where the purse was tucked inside. Frantically, she untangled the strap, snatching the purse and blazer down.

She knelt and shook the contents of the purse onto the floor. Ariel didn’t have to wait to hear who the items belonged to because he’d seen Regina carrying that purse before. Once the purse was empty, they stared at one another as if they’d found the items among the wreckage of an airliner — a doomed flight in which they had no idea Regina was a passenger.

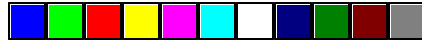
“House keys, car keys, money, credit cards — all here.” said Treen.

“Jazz, it’s time to go after him.”

“Put Regina’s things back in her purse. I’ll grab the laptop.”

Treen jettied back from the living room. They snatched their coats off the rack then dashed out the door towards the Humvee, convinced that Lance had kidnapped her parents and Regina. Once again, Ariel sped off down St. Barron Road while Treen opened the Tail Tracker and glared at the blinking red light.

Lance’s car had been parked for sometime, but was now mov-



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ing on the highway towards Blue Neptune. With his radar gun scanning the road for police, Ariel pushed the Humvee to 95 mph. At that speed, it wouldn't take long to catch up to him.

After several miles of weaving between cars and rigs, Treen pointed up ahead: "There he is!" Ariel accelerated until he reached the bumper, then realized that the Alees might be in the car. He decided against ramming Lance off the highway and into the woods.

Ariel pulled up alongside the car and Treen lowered her window. When Lance saw them, he waved and smiled like a little boy whizzing past his parents while on an amusement ride. Treen signaled him to pull over and he did so immediately.

Lance was already waiting outside his car when they stepped out. Treen stormed up to him and ignored his greeting.

"Where are my parents and Regina?" she shouted.

"What is this, a traffic stop?" he asked chuckling. I have no idea where your parents, or Regina are. Actually, I left your home not too long ago; I went there to ask your father some questions about my new job but no one answered the door. I waited outside for a while then I left. Why are you harassing me? Has something happened to your parents?"

"Maybe you can answer that question," said Ariel, looking inside the car. "Open the trunk."

"Why?"

"Because my mother and father have disappeared."

"And what makes you think — "

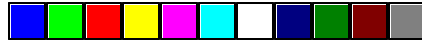
"Just open the trunk!" Treen shouted.

"Very well."

Lance turned towards the trunk and took the key from his pocket. They stood on either side of him, watching as he unlocked and flung up the lid. However, when they peered into the spacious interior, not a spec of dirt littered the carpet inside. Lance stepped back and crossed his arms in front of him.

"Are you happy now?" he snarled. "May I go?" Treen and Ariel glared at him, as he slammed the trunk, got back in the car, and screeched away.

"That little Einstein is beginning to heat up my circuits," said



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

Lance, driving through downtown Mallyview. “How did she find me on the freeway? She couldn’t have been near the house when I had her parents removed — she and that idiot cowboy would’ve tried to prevent it...”

Suddenly, in the middle of heavy traffic, Lance stomped on the brakes. His car screamed to a halt in the two-lane road, with the vehicle behind skidding to avoid a smashup. Although the car had stopped inches from Lances bumper, the close call sent the driver into a rage.

“What the hell are you doing!” the man shouted, leaning from the window and shaking his fist towards Lance, who’d stepped out of the car. “There’s nothin in the road — get out of the way you idiot!”

“Idiot? I just used that word,” said Lance, calmly closing the door. With his hands on his hips, he glared at the man.

“Did you hear me?” the driver yelled, “I said get out of the way you jerk!”

Lance adjusted his tie, grinned, then stroked his goatee. Hands in his pockets, he strolled over to check out the man’s car.

“Nice Mercedes,” said Lance, examining the shiny black hood. “Let’s make sure you didn’t damage anything.”

“What are you talking about?” said the man, still in his seat, “My car didn’t hit yours.”

Lance ignored him. Then, as if he were petting a Persian cat, he glided his fingers over the hood. The sound of horns echoed through the street, as the traffic jam continued to grow.

“There it is,” said Lance, placing his fingertips beneath the edge. “I knew something was broken.” Suddenly, Lance jerked up on the hood, shattering the latch. He then grabbed each side and rocked it wildly, twisting the metal around until every nut, bolt and hinge popped loose. With the mangled hood now in his hands, he stormed to the window and glared inside the car. The terrified man had sunk so low, he could barely see over the steering wheel.

“Sit up!”

The man sank even lower.

“Tell you what, I’m going to make some noise until you comply.”



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Lance raised the hood above his head then clanged it down on the top of the car. He repeated the unbearable racket until the man sat up and shouted, "Alright! Alright!" His hands shook as he shielded his face.

Gripping the hood with one hand, Lance glared down at the man. He then reached inside the window, grabbed his collar and said, "Be careful how you speak to someone because you never know what type of day they've been having." He then backed away from the door and hurled the hood across the street.

Lance stormed back to his car and immediately lowered himself beneath it. In a matter of seconds, he found what he'd been searching for: The blinking light from the Tail Tracker. Just as he'd suspected, little Einstein had found a way to follow him. He wiggled around, stretching his arm until he reached the magnet, then yanked it loose.

He stood, taking a moment to analyze the gadget, which he handled as gently as a baby bird. "Track this," he said, curling his fingers slowly and crushing the mechanism in his palm.



## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 24

Down in the hideout, Russell and Sheridan quit talking and stared up at the ceiling. They could hear the floorboards squeaking under the footsteps that pounded throughout Sheridan's living room, and the deep, muffled voices definitely didn't belong to Treen and Ariel.

Sheridan crept over to the ladder and climbed to the top, where beneath the trap door, he heard what sounded like clanging tin cans. Suddenly, he sprang off the ladder, pounding his injured shoulder when he thumped onto floor.

"What the heck are you doing?" asked Russell, kneeling next to him. "You coulda broke your neck!"

"That's a lot better than burnin' up!"

"What are you talkin' about?"

"I smell gasoline!" he said, springing up. "We gotta find the key to that back door before they torch this place!"

Russell quickly began dumping the baskets of yarn. Sheridan yanked out the messy drawers of the computer desk and flipped everything onto the floor. Frantically, he sorted through the scattered staples, stale mints, papers, coins, and other out of the pocket items.

"I smell smoke!" Russell shouted, balls of pink yarn unraveling in his hands.

Sheridan stood from the mess, dashed over to the ladder, then climbed back up. Russell was right; the smoke was coming from the living room and seeping between the cracks of the trap door. Without the back door key, the only way out was upstairs.

Sheridan unlocked the trap door. If whoever had started the fire was still in the house, he'd have to fight them off. No way was he — or Russell — going to burn alive without a fight.

However, as motivated as Sheridan was to get them out of there, the wall of flames that greeted him when he raised the trap door quickly watered down his aggressive attitude. The fire had con-



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sumed the living room and blocked every angle out of the floor. He let the door drop then leaped off the ladder again.

“We ain’t got much time,” said Sheridan coughing as black smoke began to fill the room.

“I looked everywhere for that key!” said Russell flinging his hands up.

“We gotta keep lookin’!” Sheridan shouted, flipping the couch and shaking out the pillows.

After several minutes of furniture hurling, they still hadn’t found the key. Above them, the flames had begun to crackle through the floorboards, causing the hideout to heat up and fall apart.

“Watch out!” Russell shouted, when a section of the ceiling collapsed. They darted to the other side of the room as the flaming floorboards smashed down right where they’d stood. The couch, coffee table, and other burning furniture from upstairs slammed to the hideout floor. Sheridan snatched up a screwdriver from the desk mess, then hurried to the steel door. He jammed the tool between the crack and tried to force it open.

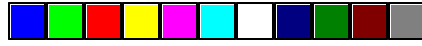
Bulky black smoke swirled out of the flames that squirmed and sizzled throughout the room. Soon, more sections of burning ceiling crashed down and trapped Russell and Sheridan against the wall that housed the steel door. Russell had coughed himself down on one knee, then fell over. Sheridan dropped the screwdriver, grabbed his throat, then collapsed next to him.

Through squinted, watery eyes, Sheridan glanced over at Russell’s silhouetted face; it looked as if Mallyboy had simply fallen asleep in the hideout turned hell. As Sheridan began to fade, a thunderous bang suddenly blared over the other noise and morphed into an excruciating drone. Thinking it was probably the final section of ceiling crumbling down on them, Sheridan glanced over at Russell one last time, sealed his eyes and braced his body for the impact.

Rrrreeeeboom!

However, the only pain Sheridan felt was the sunlight that seeped between his lashes when he cracked his eyes to see what the racket above his head was. The steel door had been ripped from its hinges by Ariel’s rope — and the Humvee that was now dragging





## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

the clanging metal slab up the concrete steps!

With the door out of the way, Treen rushed down into the inferno. Sheridan was already trying to stand; she helped him up, guided him out to the stairs, then hurried back and dragged Russell out. Ariel dashed down the steps, tossed Russell over his shoulder, then sprinted back to the top. Treen grabbed Sheridan's arm and hustled him away from his blazing home toward the Humvee, parked about thirty yards away.

Russell lay stretched out in the backseat. Sheridan staggered to sit up front, but before his neck could limp back to the headrest, he sprang out, scampering near the headlights to vomit. Treen joined Ariel who'd opened a bottle of Hildon mineral water to sprinkle on Russell's face.

"Will he be okay?" asked Ariel, as Treen felt Russell's forehead, cheeks and neck. He was so hot that the water warmed as soon as it touched his skin.

"Depends on how much damage was caused by the smoke inhalation. Let's hope oxygen is the only medication he'll need."

"Glad it's all I need," Sheridan rasped, wobbling up behind them.

"You feelin' better?" asked Ariel, patting his back.

"Y'all saved my life — I gotta feel better." Just then, the remaining section of his house crashed down. Sheridan was so happy to be alive that he didn't pay much attention to the rubble. "Come on. Let's get over to Dale's and take care of Russ."

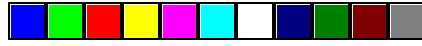
Ariel sped toward Dale's lot. The crisp air swirled through the open windows, relieving Sheridan and Russell's polluted lungs and circulating the smoky scent from their charred clothing. Treen sat in the back seat with Russell's head resting on her lap. She continued to pat water on his blackened face and hair, until he finally started to cough and move his head around. When he finally opened his eyes, Treen leaned over to hear what he mumbled.

"Am I dead?" he whispered.

She smiled and shook her head. "No, you're not dead."

"Then, gimmie a cigarette."

"Here's your cigarette," she said tilting the Hildon to his lips and pouring it slowly into his mouth.



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## Chapter 25

After two hours of recuperation at Dale's car lot, Russell and Sheridan walked down the steps of the trailer looking brand new in the thrift shop clothes that Dale had driven into town to buy.

Sheridon glared down at the German Shepard; the dog had fallen asleep with the butt end of his burnt jeans in its mouth. Sure, the stinking pants were useless, but he needed his chewed up wallet, lying near the dog's tummy. He squatted for it, then began tucking his scattered cards and coins back inside. When the dog shifted its paw, Sheridan chuckled when he found two more quarters — and the key to the steel door...

Pacing the rows of rusty cars, Treen and Ariel discussed the conversation she'd just had on the phone with Finns, who'd sputtered all his words when she told him of her parent's disappearance — and who she suspected of kidnapping them. Garrison Blue frequented the Sea Crystallore and Finns avowed to wait on his table with a pleasant attitude — and big ears.

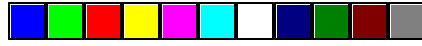
Treen noticed Russell and Sheridan walking away from the trailer and hurried to greet them. Everyone was anxious to hear about their next destination.

"We're going back to Mallyview to talk to Doris Blue," said Treen.

"But she's in a mental hospital," said Russell. Gail says her dad won't let anybody see her."

"So I've heard. We'll work it out when we get there. Mrs. Blue may be the only person who can help us figure this out."

Everyone thanked Dale then jumped into the Humvee. Treen leaned forward, tapped Sheridan's shoulder, then slipped some money into his hand. Sheridan knew what the green was for and motioned Dale closer to the window; "Be ready, man, cause we might need you again," he said, stuffing the \$100 note into the chest pocket of his friend's overalls. Through his cigar smoke, Dale smiled then stood upright to deliver his customary slap atop the



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Humvee as Ariel pulled away.

“It’s Treen Alee, I don’t believe it!” squealed the muscular receptionist, who’d sprung from his chair when she and the others entered the hospital foyer. “What can I do for you?” he asked, now standing behind the counter centered in the massive white foyer. With the others behind her, Treen walked up, put her elbows on the counter, then rested her chin atop her intersected fingers.

“I need to speak with Doris Blue. It’s in reference to one of my clients.”

He exhaled loudly and shook his head. Gosh, I’m sorry Ms. Alee. Doris Blue is not allowed visitors — it’s been that way since the day she was admitted.”

Treen noticed the roving doctors over her shoulder and knew she’d better quiet the conversation. She gestured for him to move closer, then whispered, “Why isn’t she allowed visitors?”

“I don’t know,” he said, so softly she could barely hear him. “But her husband gives a lot of money to this hospital and what he says usually goes.”

Treen slowly reached for his hand then held it gently with both of hers. “Listen, it’s imperative that I see her — a matter of life and death. My parents are missing and I need your help...”

“My goodness. I could lose my job — but if your family’s in danger — ”

“If you lose your job I’ll give you another one. You have my word.”

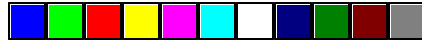
“Alright. I have to page the guy that’s watching her.”

“Won’t he question you?”

He grinned. “No, he’s a friend.” Treen thanked him before he stepped over to the intercom, then she motioned the others towards the couches in the waiting area.

A short time later, an older man in white garb stepped from the elevator and nodded towards Treen as he hustled past the waiting area to the information counter. After a quick chat with the receptionist, the assistant walked back over and said, “This way, Ms. Alee.”

“I’ll be back shortly,” she said to the others, then followed the



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man into the elevator.

It seemed like Mr. Blue was hiding his wife from the rest of the world. Not only did the elevator stop on the sixth and final floor, but her room was also the last one at the end of a long, hazy hallway, illuminated by the lone window just outside her door.

“Are there other patients on this floor?”

“Just her,” he said, pushing the door open. “You’ve got twenty minutes. If she gives you any problems, I’ll be right out here.”

Treen stepped into the room’s narrow hallway, glancing at the flowery paintings that adorned the crème walls. She moved further inside and could now see Mrs. Blue near her bed, glaring out a sun-rayed window that overlooked the Mallyview River and miles of distant hills and mountains.

However, the sunlight, the paintings and the magnificent scenery were no match for the gloom that had settled inside Doris Blue’s dwelling. Treen stopped a few feet away from her and cleared her throat.

“Mrs. Blue?”

“Who are you?” she asked without turning around.

“My name is Treen Alee.”

“Bookvilla. Your father owns Bookvilla.”

“That’s right.”

“Been there. Nice store. How’d you get in here?”

“A friend.”

“My husband knows?”

“No.”

“Better hope he doesn’t find out.”

“Mrs. Blue, may I speak with you briefly?”

Slowly, she turned around. She walked towards Treen with her arms crossed in front of her blue hospital garb, then stopped directly in front of her. Shifting only her eyes, she studied Treen top to bottom — bottom to top.

“You’re a beautiful girl,” said Mrs. Blue with a slight smile. “But look at the state of me.” As she began fixing her frayed, peppered curls, Treen gently grabbed her wrist and slowly pulled it down from her hair.

“You don’t have to do that. I think you’re beautiful too.”



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An endless smile stretched across Doris Blue's face, revealing perfect teeth that sparkled brighter than her now cheerful brown eyes. "Let's have that talk," she said, taking Treen's hand and leading her towards the window.

Mrs. Blue stopped in front of the pane then suddenly lowered herself on the floor. Treen glanced over at the table and chairs near the wall, then also sat on the floor. They faced each other and smiled.

"This is my favorite place to sit," she said, staring up at the hazy rays.

"I like it also. It reminds of my fathers library at home. My best friend and I used to sit on the floor and talk, all day long." Treen glared up at rays.

"Used to?"

"She's, gone now."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Guess I might as well be gone too, living in this place."

"Why are you here Ms. Blue?"

"You won't believe me if I tell you — nobody ever does."

"Try me."

"Well, truth is, my husband should be locked up in here — not me. He's the crazy one. He's an evil man. Soon as Blue Neptune started losing lots of money, he started using technology to do bad things. He killed professor Mera you know."

"Professor Mera?"

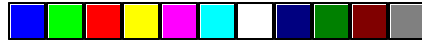
"The German robotics engineer. Mera built two androids so human like, that businesspeople and weirdoes all over the world offered him zillions for them. But he wouldn't sell them — or the technology."

"Why?"

"Because the fuel that allowed them to function also made people sick. Another problem was the two prototypes. They became aggressive towards everyone except Mera."

"Couldn't he re-program them or something?"

"Apparently he did that with one of them but not the other. The prototypes were in high demand because their energy source was the Merafuel running through them. They also connected online, which meant they had the whole Internet for a brain. That's how



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the droids picked up a multitude of viruses and started to misbehave.”

“Anyway, right before Mera died in an explosion in France, my husband did what no one else could; he convinced Mera to sell him the androids and the Merafuel.”

“Have you seen the two prototypes?”

“Not that I know of. I did hear Garrison say that once the new droids were built, he’d name them after prototypes.

“Ecnal and Arast?”

She shook her head. “Not sure.”

Treen glanced at her watch. “So how did you end up in here?”

“Some foreign engineers arrived in Mallyview and started building a lab on our home property. When one of the labs was completed, I got nose. I took a key from my husband’s box and drove the golf cart out to the building. I couldn’t believe it when I walked inside. There were androids everywhere. I touched one of them. The skin felt real. Then it grabbed me and I screamed. It-it wouldn’t let go,” she said, voice cracking.

“It’s all right,” said Treen, taking her hand.

“Do you think I’m crazy?”

“No you are not crazy. Those androids do exist.”

“You’ve seen them?” she asked leaning forward.

“More than once. Tell me what happen next.”

“Well, I finally pulled away from the droid. But when I tried to run out of the lab, a man appeared in the doorway. He asked what I was doing and shoved me backwards. I knocked over the android and it landed face down with nothing covering it’s back — just a zillion wires sticking out. Then it started shaking and shouting, ‘Blue killed Mera, Blue killed Mera.’ Then the man went berserk and yanked it up from the floor. I watched him dismember the droid with his bare hands. After that, he took a vile from his pocket, pulled me up, and forced me to drink all the liquid inside. Last thing I remember is spinning on stretcher with bright colors flashing everywhere and I could hear my daughter screaming. I woke up strapped down in this hospital.”

“This man that attacked you, what did he look like?”

“About six foot. Black hair, black eyes, a goatee — ”



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“Time’s up Ms. Alee,” said the assistant poking his head in the doorway.

“Thanks Doris”, she said standing. “I have to go now but I won’t forget about you.”

Doris stood. “Hope not,” she said embracing her, “I hate this place.”





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## Chapter 26

Sandwiched between Regina and Elizabeth, Edwin tried to keep track of time in his head. The ride had been straight and smooth for more than an hour, uphill and bumpy the next thirty minutes. Yet, when Elizabeth's PT Cruiser slowed to a stop, he realized their captors weren't far from their destination.

However, where were they going? Before Lance had them shuttled away from St. Barron Road, he ordered them tied up and blindfolded. Now, Edwin could only listen to every sound — big or small, as the driver's window hummed open.

The scent of fuel and burning rubber drifted to the backseat; Edwin heard a deep voice say, "Card." Shortly after, the same voice asked, "Where will you park this automobile?"

"Below," the driver replied.

"Fine. I will open the entrance."

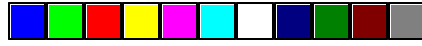
Edwin could feel Elizabeth and Regina's bodies jerk when a tremendous drone echoed from outside the vehicle. When the blaring whine stopped thirty seconds later, the voice outside returned. "Drive through."

The Cruiser bounced over several more feet of rough terrain then suddenly began to glide over a flat surface. With the window still lowered Edwin listened; the drone had started again — louder this time — with an echo that seemed to howl behind them as the vehicle rolled ahead. When he heard the cylinder sounding resonance of vehicles swishing by from the opposite direction, he knew they were traveling fast through a tunnel.

A mile or so later, the Cruiser began to slow down; Elizabeth leaned left onto Edwin, he onto Regina, as the driver turned hard right. Then they all tipped forward when the vehicle plunged, as if descending from a roller coaster puke peak.

Once the Cruiser arrived on level ground, it weaved slowly, completed a series of turns, then finally slowed to a stop. The engine was shut off. The front doors opened and closed simultaneously;





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the rear doors opened one after the other. Elizabeth was yanked away from Edwin first, Regina seconds after. Then a massive hand latched on to Edwin's arm; he fell sideways, dragged from the center of the seat and outside the vehicle, where they yanked him to his feet.

"Edwin? Sweetie you all right?" asked Elizabeth, voice shaking.

"Yeah, honey I'm — "

"Be quiet," said the voice behind him. He shoved Edwin forward. "Let's move."

Even with the blindfolds, the captors shoved them along. Edwin could hear Regina shriek and knew she'd stumbled because he'd already tripped over the scattered debris himself. However, their captors did show some compassion, warning of the upcoming ascent.

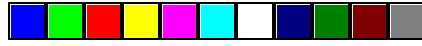
Edwin and Elizabeth had always kept themselves in terrific shape. However, Regina was panting uncontrollably by the time they'd reached the top of the lengthy staircase. She'd already been warned twice to keep moving, so when she stopped a third time, the man behind her wasn't so nice, pushing her into Elizabeth.

"Well if I'm about to die, at least I lost twenty pounds first," Regina wheezed, leaning against her.

Edwin listened to the cars whoosh by. The staircase had led back up to the tunnel, and they were now being led down a sidewalk along the road. They walked another ten minutes before they stopped, their captors being asked again to show their cards. Then like before, the deep drone began. This time they were standing right in front of the noise, which sounded like a thousand electric garage doors opening at once.

"Walk through," said the voice, similar to the one Edwin had heard at the tunnel's entry. As they continued forward, the drone started again. When the noise subsided, all Edwin could hear were blips, beeps, and fingers tapping atop computer keyboards.

After their captors had removed the ropes and blindfolds, the Alees and Regina wobbled down onto a couch. They batted their eyes, and rubbed their wrists, scanning the black marbled, octagon shaped room that certainly didn't resemble a place where a person



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would be held hostage — especially with lavish furnishings like the fully stocked bar at center. Their captors walked over to a digital panel, punched in a code, then walked out. After the doors had hissed shut, Regina glared at the bar. “I need a drink.” So did the Alees, who stood from the couch and followed her over.

Regina stood behind the bar holding a blue bottle. The more she turned it, the more her eyes grew. “Chateau d’Yquem Sauternes, 1787? This is a — ”

“\$64,000- bottle- of- wine. Thomas Jefferson loved it and introduced it to George Washington,” groaned Edwin, so tired that he sat at the bar with his face down on the counter.

“Go on then,” said Elizabeth, eyes closed, resting her cheek on Edwin’s back, “Get that bottle opened.”

When the sliding doors hissed apart an hour later, everyone turned away from the empty blue bottle and watched Lance stroll into the room. He adjusted his tie and walked up to them grinning.

“I see you’ve found Mr. Blue’s bar. For his sake, I hope your taste buds are worth \$60,000. You’re lucky I didn’t fill that bottle with Merafuel — you could’ve wound up like the Newberrys.”

“Who cares?” Edwin asked, his back to him as he sipped his wine. “You obviously don’t plan on releasing us.”

“Don’t use that lame psychology on me. If you wish to know you’re fate — simply ask.”

“What kind of a man are you!” Regina shouted, springing off the stool. “You lied to me about everything!”

“Amazing,” said Lance. “I didn’t realize you had this, aggressive side — I think I like it.” He sighed. “Then again, maybe it’s just the pathetic words of an intoxicated female.”

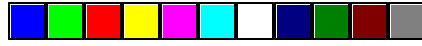
Regina wasn’t drunk. However, the insult, along with everything else, caused her to blow up. She tried to slap him but he grabbed her hand and smiled. “You want to know what kind of man I really am?” he asked, crushing her fingers together.

“You’re hurting me!”

“Let her go!” Edwin shouted, pulling her away from him.

“We’re well aware of the type of man you are — so piss off!” Elizabeth shouted.

“That’s what makes me sick about you humans. You assume so



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much — and know so little.”

If they were confused by Lance’s choice of words, they looked even more puzzled when he snatched off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt. The women had moved behind Edwin, peering from behind his shoulders.

“I damaged myself tearing someone’s car apart,” said Lance, pulling his shirt open. “Have a look at the scratch.”

Using both hands, Lance dug his fingers into the six-inch scar on his left breast. Edwin moved backwards until the women were squashed against bar. He could feel their bodies wavering against his own vibrations as Lance stretched the skin apart. When a rainbow of wires and shiny mechanical parts were exposed, Regina screamed and crumbled to the floor. Edwin and Elizabeth trembled.

“What the hell are you?” shouted Edwin, over the hissing doors.

Lance looked over at Tsara who’d stormed in, then released the wide-open skin that slowly formed back to a narrow slit. Then he glared back at Edwin again. “I’m an Ecnal-4 android. The best ever built.” He winked. “How ya like me now?”

“I like you a lot,” said Tsara, smiling at his perfectly sculpted physique. She stepped closer to him. “But right now we have a big problem with Mr. Wellbay.”

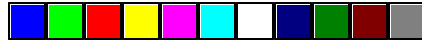
Lance grabbed his hair on each side. *“THERE IS ALWAYS A PROBLEM WITH WALTER WELLBAY! WHAT IS IT NOW?”*

“He walked into Blue Neptune and told Blue that he’s quitting. He said if Blue or anyone else messes with him or his family, he’s got evidence that will destroy all of us. Blue said to — ”

“Forget what Blue said.” Lance rubbed his goatee. “Tsara my dear, you’re about to depart on you’re second attack mission.”

“You’re going to re-program me!”

“That’s right — to kill Walter Wellbay. If I send an Ecnal, he’ll suspect something. We must hurry.” Lance glared down at the Alees who’d been tending to Regina, then reached down to pick up his shirt. After he and Tsara had filed out of the room, Edwin lifted Regina from the floor and carried her to the couch.



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## Chapter 27

Momma used to say, ‘Love pronounced backwards is Evil,’” Sheridan joked, responding to Samantha’s question about why he never married and why he didn’t have a girlfriend. Ariel and Russell were listening intently, until Treen walked over from her desk, ending her phone conversation with Finns.

“Garrison Blue just held a staff dinner at the Sea Crystallore,” said Treen, carrying the laptop. “He promoted someone to fill the head engineer position because Mr. Wellbay just resigned.”

“No way!”

“Yes way, Russell. Finns also overheard two rookie engineers bragging about their work at a secret lab in the Grevelton Hills.”

“What they hiding way up there?” asked Samantha.

Treen placed the laptop on the center table and displayed Mr. Wellbay’s designs. “They’re assembling these Ecnal-4 and Arast-0 androids for — ”

Treen’s lips stayed apart. She didn’t blink. She leaned closer to the screen, glaring at the names typed in bold letters above each droid. Then, she stared at everyone.

“Jazz, what’s wrong?”

Treen intersected her fingers then exhaled as she cupped her hands atop her head. “Love pronounced backwards is Evil,” she said, re- quoting Sheridan’s mother. Sam, loan me your pen.”

Everyone gathered around when she knelt by the table and began to write down the names of the androids — backwards. She started with Arast-0.

“T-s-a-r-a, and the zero spelled backwards is, orez; Tsara Orez!” said Treen, giving her forehead a quick smack. Next, she wrote out Ecnal-4. “L-a-n-c-e R-u-o-f — Lance Ruof!” Again, she smacked herself.

Russell stood shaking his head. “Oh man. Please tell me, you’re not sayin Tsara’s an android.”

“I think Tsara — and Lance, are both androids. Doris Blue heard



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her husband say he would name the new androids after the prototypes; looks like he simply used the names in reverse. However, this also explains Lance's strength and why I heard him speaking backwards; Because of Internet viruses, Lance has been gradually malfunctioning for a while now."

"I can't believe it," Russell whispered, I made out — with a robot." He stepped over Sheridan's feet, brushed by Treen, then slogged towards the little red refrigerator.

"Little sister's an android? I need some air," grumbled Sheridan who stormed out into the hallway. Samantha followed him.

"I don't understand somthin'. If Lance and Tsara have all these mechanical issues why doesn't Mr. Blue just send 'em to the scrap yard?"

"Good question, Ariel. Apparently, Tsara's problems were sorted out a while ago when Mera scrapped the Arast Internet capability. As far as Lance goes, even with the viruses, he's still a highly intelligent droid. On a whim, he designed a new Space Shuttle after the Columbia burned up. He got rid of the heat resistant tiles that flew off and created a uni-bodied Shuttle made entirely of heat resistant material. Too bad the design is on that disk and not at NASA."

Treen waited for Russell to finish his Pavaloo and for Sheridan and Samantha to come back into the office. Sheridan looked much calmer — especially with Samantha holding his hand. However, when Treen gathered everyone around the table to discuss the dangerous journey they were about to take, Samantha herself needed calming.

"With all these big cities in the world, why would Mr. Blue take Grevelton?" she asked. Why your parents?" I am so worried about all this."

Treen removed her headband. "Criminal activity works best when kept low key — exactly why Mr. Blue let's everyone think his drug selling droids are simply a street gang called the Awakers. It's the perfect environment for corruption — an environment that will change when my father opens Bookvilla..."

Samantha sat next to Treen. "Girlfriend, you must be quick and find Mom, Dad, and Regina."

"We will Sam," she whispered. Treen put her headband on, then



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looked up at the others, who were all staring at her. “We’re leaving for the Grevelton Hills tonight. Are you guys ready?”

“I’m ready,” said Ariel.

“Me too,” said Russell.

“Them hills are rough y’all — real rough — but I’m ready too,” said Sheridan. “Any idea where this lab is? The Grevelton Hills cover miles and miles...”

“As *my* mother would say, ‘*I haven’t a clue.*’ I searched the disk but there’s nothing there about the lab. Russell, do you remember your father ever mentioning the Grevelton Hills Lab?”

“No, but maybe there’s somthin’ about it on his computer at home. I still got a house key.”

“Great idea,” said Treen. Perhaps we can also find some information on Professor Mera...”

No one answered when Russell called home, so everyone put on their jacket and headed towards the door. Russell didn’t know where his father was, but he knew his mother had evening class until nine o’clock — less than an hour away.

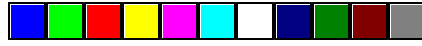
“Treen, I know you get sick of me saying this, but please be careful.”

“I will Sam — and I don’t get sick of you saying that.” Treen patted Sheridan’s arm. “We’ll take care of him for you.”

With so many people strolling the streets beneath the sparkling black sky, Ariel cruised the Hummer carefully through downtown Mallyview, towards E. Kester Avenue where Russell lived. Treen gazed out at the collage of colorful lights illuminating the cozy stores along the sidewalk. As they moved closer to the town square, she gazed up at her father’s office window on the second floor of the bookstore.

As worried as she was about her parents, the glowing green Bookvilla sign above the entryway, quickly reminded her of their strength: Two failed bookstores, a bankruptcy, and several loan rejections. After all that, her parents had made it, and helped her make it as well. She’d find them — no matter what.

Ariel continued to drive down Mallyview Main, which eventually led into the intersection where Shainy was killed. The area couldn’t cause Treen to ponder the accident because the accident



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was always with her — a deep scar that she'd learned to live with. She'd been on Davagard Lane only twice since the accident, but the street connected to E. Kester Road and was the best place to park clear of Russell's house.

After they'd parked on the hill, everyone jumped out and followed Russell home. They walked quickly instead of sprinting, so they wouldn't draw any more attention than a wanna be rock star, teenage counselor, Missourian cowboy, and former Grevelton gangster, already had to the folks enjoying the nippy night air from their porches.

When they'd reached the house a short time later, Russell noticed all the lights on and signaled everyone to hide behind the hedges. "Great. That's my dad's BMW in the driveway," he whispered. How we gonna check the computer now?"

"We'll wait for bit, maybe he'll leave," said Treen.

"And if he doesn't?"

Bap!

Bap Bap!

"Jazz, those were gunshots!"

"My dad!" Russell sprang up and sprinted across the lawn.

"Russell wait!" shouted Treen, she and the others chasing after him.

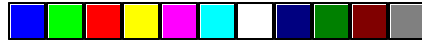
Russell shoved through the slightly open front door. He ran so fast he slipped on a throw rug, crashing into a display case full of crystal trinkets. He scurried through the living room, up the stairs — most of which he skipped as he scampered to the top.

Shortly after, Treen jogged up to the second floor and stopped in the hallway. No Russell. No sounds. Ariel and Sheridan hovered behind her, unarmed except for their loaded fists. After a short, uneventful search, they found Russell, cradling his father on the bloody floor of his computer room.

"Quickly, call Dr. Moresky," said Treen, handing Ariel her phone. She and Sheridan then hurried to Russell's side.

Treen wanted to examine Mr. Wellbay, but Russell wouldn't let him go. However, she could see by the amount of blood soaking his shirt that he might not last very long.

"Mr. Wellbay? Mr. Wellbay, it's Treen — can you hear me?" she said quietly.



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“Yeah, I-I can hear.”

“Who shot you, Mr. Wellbay?”

When his father started to cough, Russell shifted to give him more air. Mr. Wellbay cleared his throat a few times before he answered, “Tsara — Tsara, shot me.”

“But, the Arast droids aren’t designed to attack...”

“No, they’re not,” he whispered. “It’s Lance. He — re-programmed her — like last time...”

“What happened last time?”

Suddenly, Mr. Wellbay’s slow blinking eyes shifted toward Sheridan. He stared at him for a moment then whispered, “She — your mother...”

Sheridon glared at Treen. Russell leaned closer to his father.

“Dad, what are you tryin’ to say?”

“Lance, he sent Tsara...sent her to kill Sheridan, but she killed his mother instead.”

Sheridon pushed Treen’s hand away and launched from the floor. He marched behind the computer desk, where he snatched down an elegant sword that hung on the wall. Gripping the weapon, he steamed towards the doorway; Treen and Ariel moved in his path.

“Sheridon, please stop,” said Treen.

“I’m goin’ to look for Tsara!”

“Then let me go with you,” said Ariel.

Treen grabbed Sheridan’s hand. “Look at me,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry about your mother. But you’re still alive, and we’d like to keep it that way. Please Sheridan, let Ariel go with you.”

Sheridon stared at her; “Thanks, homegirl,” he whispered. “Let’s go, Ariel.”

Treen knelt next to Mr. Wellbay again. He’d lost even more blood. She hated to question him in his condition, but she needed information fast.

“Mr. Wellbay, do you know where my parents are?”

“Had...nothing to do with it...I swear.”

“I believe you,” she whispered. But do you know where they are?”

Bap! Bap! Bap!

“Russell, get down!” Treen shouted, crawling quickly to the





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doorway to investigate the gunshots. As she peered into the hall, she could see Ariel and Sheridan battling two Ecnal guards. Then, out of the ruckus ran a dark haired Hispanic girl, who sped towards the staircase. After a swing of the sword chopped off an Ecnal arm, Sheridan shouted what Treen had already suspected.

“Tsara’s gettin’ away!” Treen bolted from the room, sprinted down the hall, then rumbled down the stairs in pursuit of the Arast droid.

However, as Treen rushed into the living room the chase came to a sudden, bizarre halt. Tsara had leapt atop the couch with her gun pointed at a large portrait of Russell’s parents.

“Don’t be frightened, Mrs. Wellbay,” said the confused droid, speaking to the painting. “I’m only here to kill your husband.” She then aimed the barrel at his head —

Bap! Bap! Bap!

The framed glass shattered and tinkled to the floor. Treen charged up behind Tsara, tackling her off the couch and onto the floor beneath the portrait. After a lengthy scuffle, Tsara hurled her back over the couch and Treen landed on the opposite side of the room!

Tsara tucked the pistol inside the holster attached to her tight fitting Ecnal-4 security uniform. Then she strutted over to Treen, still crumpled on the carpet.

“Are you crazy?” Tsara asked, “How dare you attack me in that manner?” She moved closer to examine her face. “Wait a minute, you’re Treen Alee aren’t you? Yes. Russell showed me a picture of you that he keeps in his wallet. I don’t like you at all.”

Rubbing her head, Treen staggered up from the floor. “Believe me, Tsara,” she groaned, “The feeling is mutual. Now where are my parents?”

“No need to shout. I won’t tell you anything. I will however, rip your head off.”

“You love it, don’t you? You love the aggression that Lance’s re-programming has given you — that’s why you shot Mr. Wellbay. Why don’t you shoot me? What’s the matter, did Lance tangle up some wires in your head?”

“I see why Lance calls you little Einstein — you’re very smart



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... in an aggravating sort of way.”

“Well let me aggravate you further. Why are you working for Mr. Blue when he killed your creator, Prof. Mera?”

“What are you talking about?” she shouted, moving closer. “Don’t you dare speak of my Mera that way, he blew *himself* up — accidentally — trying to perfect Lance and me!”

“I’m telling you the truth — ”

“Shut up!” she screamed, slapping Treen’s face. As Treen stumbled backwards, Tsara grabbed, lifted, then threw her across the room again, where she landed near the fireplace. Tsara then fled the room, shoving past Mrs. Wellbay who suddenly entered the wide-open front door.

“My God, what’s happened?” asked Mrs. Wellbay, who’d dropped her purse, keys, and textbooks before rushing over to Treen, still lying on the floor. “There’s an ambulance outside. Who just ran out of my house? Did you find Russell? Where’s my husband?”

Just then, Dr. Moresky walked in with two medical assistants and stood near the doorway. To make matters worse, Ariel and Sheridan suddenly thundered down the steps — the latter still gripping the sword and startling everyone downstairs except Treen.

Mrs. Wellbay looked around at everybody, until her eyes landed back on Treen. “What is going on in my house?” she demanded.

“Treen,” said Dr. Moresky, “Where’s the wounded man?”

She exhaled. “He’s upstairs,” she said, unable to steer the awkward situation from a collision with Mrs. Wellbay. Before Dr. Moresky could take one step, Mrs. Wellbay stormed up to the second floor. Treen hurried over to Ariel and Sheridan.

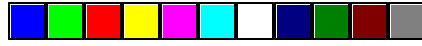
“Please tell me you didn’t leave those Ecnals lying in the hallway,” she whispered as the medics walked by.

“They’re in the backyard,” Ariel murmured.

“The backyard?”

“Yeah,” said Sheridan. “We threw em’ out the bedroom window.” Ariel offered a high five. Sheridan smacked his hand, but neither of them smiled because they realized they were far from finished.

Less than an hour had passed before Treen heard footsteps thumping down the stairs. She, Ariel, and Sheridan all stood, when



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

a stoned faced Dr. Moresky walked into the living room, then shook her head.

“I’m sorry. Mr. Wellbay has died.”

Gradually, Treen lowered herself to the couch and stared at a picture atop the coffee table — a picture of a smiling Wellbay family gathered near a lake. She’d been glaring at the photo before Dr. Moresky had delivered the dreadful news, hoping the family would get a chance to reach that level of happiness again.

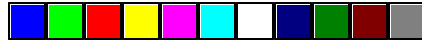
“I’ve arranged for the body to be removed,” said Dr. Moresky. “Again, I’m sorry everyone,” She added, heading back upstairs.

“Maybe we should check on Russ,” said Sheridan quietly.

“If you don’t mind I’d like to speak with him alone,” said Treen. “While I’m upstairs, bring the Humvee and load up the Ecnal droids from the backyard.”

“Where you want ‘em?” Ariel asked.

“Dump them right in front of Blue Neptune’s expensive doors.”



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## Chapter 28

Treen could hear Mrs. Wellbay crying inside the computer room. However, when she peeked inside the cracked door, Russell wasn't there. The medics spoke quietly with Dr. Moresky while Mrs. Wellbay sat next to the bulging white sheet that covered her husband's body.

Suddenly Treen heard faint music from a room at the end of the hall. The trumpet stood out most. She jogged towards the sounds, stepping on and around bits of metal and plastic, left over from the Ecnal limbs that Sheridan had severed.

When she'd reached the open door, she could see Russell sitting at the side of his bed, face in his hands. A rotating disco light flashed a rainbow of colors around the dark room; as the trumpet continued, Treen recognized the song: *Miles Runs The Voodoo Down*, a 1969 musical masterpiece featuring Miles Davis. She was more than surprised to find Russell listening to it.

However, as Treen shut the door and moved deeper inside the room, she could see that Gail Blue was right: there was more to Russell Wellbay than just a desire to be a rock and roll drummer. Of course, posters of *Helmet*, *Nirvana* and *Hendrix* adorned the walls, but right next to them hung the *Bee Gees* and *John Coltrane*. A Bible and several books about Picasso and Van Gogh lay scattered on the bed and floor.

Russell had lowered his head so much that Treen could see only the back of his leather jacket and, for the first time in a while, the counselor didn't know what to say. She sat on the bed, put her arm around him, and just listened to the music.

Russell raised his head a short time later. He glanced at Treen, who took both his hands and quietly said, "Talk to me."

"I didn't get a chance to tell my dad — tell him it wasn't me..."

"What did you need to tell him?"

"About that stupid street fight that happened a long time ago — the one that started all our problems."



## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

“Your mother had mentioned the fight. She said that you had seriously injured a boy.”

Russell sprang from the bed. “That’s the problem Treen — I didn’t hurt anybody! I couldn’t have — I left before the fight even started!”

Treen stood and grabbed Russell’s hands. “It’s all right,” she said, guiding him back to the bed. “Take a deep breath, then tell me what really happened.”

He exhaled. “Somebody had slashed somebody else’s bike tire — really stupid stuff. I hung around for the trash talk, but when they started shoving each other, I got outta there. I’d promised my parents to stay outta trouble.”

“On the way home, I stopped to wait for the light to change so I could cross Mallyview Main. There was a lot of cars goin’ by — a lot of cars. Over all the noise, I thought I heard somebody screamin’. I looked around and didn’t see nobody ‘til I looked up Davagard Lane. This girl — she was runnin’ down the hill — straight for the intersection...”

Treen’s heart began to gallop. Her hands trembled. She started to sweat and stood to remove her headband and jacket. Russell kept talking until she walked over and glared at the wrinkled newspaper headline tacked above his dresser: *Local Girl Struck and Killed*. A smiling photo of Shainy Billerson led off the article.

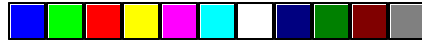
“You all right?” Russell asked, stepping over to her.

“Yes,” she whispered, wiping her eyes. “Could you, please finish your story.”

She continued to stare at the headline. When she glided her fingers down Shainy’s picture, Russell realized that Treen had known her.

“I couldn’t figure out what Shainy was runnin’ from. There was nothin’ behind her — no stray dog, nothin.’ I was sure she’d stop but she didn’t. She ran right into the road...”

“After she got hit, the cars just kept coming. Those stupid people. I ran into the street, wavin’ for ‘em to stop. Almost got hit myself. I ran up the street where she was lying by the curb. She was in real bad shape, but when I got down next to her, she looked at me and tried to smile.”



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Treen turned towards Russell and grabbed his arms lightly. “You mean, she was still alive?” she asked, voice cracking. “Shainy was still alive?”

“Yeah. But all I could do to help her was hold her hand and pray.”

“Russell, how much longer was she alive?”

“A couple minutes. Last thing she said was, ‘Tell her I love her, and don’t forget — ’ ”

“The rain,” said Treen, lowering her head. “We once spent a rainy afternoon inside a cave — best day of our lives...”

After Treen had gathered herself, she immediately apologized to Russell. Even though the accident was still fresh in her mind, it happened five years ago; Russell’s father had died less than two hours ago, without knowing that his son never threw the stone that had partially blinded a neighborhood boy.

To save their own rears, the other kids swore Russell had thrown the rock and all the parents — including his own — believed them. The blood on Russell’s hands and clothes didn’t come from the injured boy, but from a dying girl named Shainy — a girl he didn’t know until now.

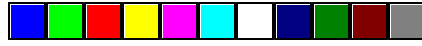
Tsara had arrived back at the Grevelton Hills lab and hurried to inform Lance of her encounter with Treen Alee. Lance didn’t handle the news well, hurling a chair through an office window.

“If you wouldn’t have shortchanged my programming, I could’ve shot that little winch.”

“Shut up, Tsara! I provided the quickest update I could, given the amount of time I had to work with. What really matters is that you killed Walter Wellbay. I’ve been unable to interface with the Ecnals I sent with you, which means I cannot find out if that bonehead is actually dead — ”

“He’s dead all right,” said Mr. Blue, surprising them when he marched inside the office with two huge guards, “But who authorized you to kill him?”

“Well, well, if it isn’t the mighty Mr. Blue,” said Lance walking over to him. “Are you a depressed person?” He asked studying his clothes, “You seem to prefer gray suits. Perhaps you wear them



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because they match your hair?" I think I'll call you Cobweb — but only because you've been in business so long."

"Be quiet and listen carefully. I flew up here because Blue Neptune security found something extremely disturbing on our surveillance cameras — two mangled droids tossed on the steps of my building by Treen Alee's thugs. I suggest you get serious."

Lance turned towards Tsara, his video eyes as wide as quarters. "You let those nitwits destroy my Ecnals?" he shouted.

"I'm sorry Lance I — "

"They are not *your* Ecnals," said Mr. Blue.

"Listen, Cobweb, as long as I have half the Merafuel formula stored in my memory, they are mine."

"Yes, but don't forget who has the other half — and all the money to build them. You'll cease to exist without Merafuel. However, I'll just keep on breathing money — with or without you droids."

Lance chuckled and stepped closer to Mr. Blue, until the burly bodyguards blocked his path.

"Out of my way!"

Lance's shouting, didn't faze them, nor did the insane glare in which his neck swelled and his face vibrated. The bodyguards would've rolled their eyes if they hadn't snatched out guns and aimed at his head so quickly. Mr. Blue then stepped from behind his wall of protection and stared at the arrogant Ecnal-4.

"I don't always use droids for protection. These are *real* men, trained to dispose of artificial attitudes such as yours." Lance looked away from the barrels, glared at Garrison Blue, then laughed.

"Let's talk about money", said Lance, who'd turned his back and stepped away like a college professor in mid-lecture. "Of course, I don't give a kangaroo's butt about your cash. However, I have scanned your financial reports and it appears that you can barely afford the parts for the droids — or even lunch for that matter. Without us building ourselves, working in your factories — and selling Merafuel pills, there would be no Blue Neptune Electronics!" Face it Cobweb, you need me and I need you."

Mr. Blue stepped right up to him. "I am in charge, Lance. Get that through your malfunctioning microchips — fast."



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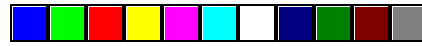
“Yes sir,” he said, saluting him and stomping a foot on the floor. Tsara giggled.

Although Mr. Blue had admonished Lance for sending Tsara on an shooting assignment, he realized it was the best thing to do — especially when Tsara showed him the damaging information she’d found on the hard drive, ripped from Mr. Wellbay’s computer.

“What would you like me to do with the Alees?” asked Lance. “Oh, and let’s not forget the other hostages: My ex-girlfriend, Detective Redworc, and Natalie Newberry — all locked up somewhere downstairs.”

“Keep them here until you find that Treen Alee bunch. Then take them all to the Grevelton Bookstore and burn it down.”





## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 29

Deep in the Grevelton Hills, Treen crawled out of her tent then stretched in front of a magnificent sunrise. She walked over to the wooded ridge and stared down at the river that twisted its way through the pines, past the golden aspens.

It had been a devastating night back in Mallyview with the death of Mr. Wellbay, then a long ride to the Grevelton Hills — a trip that included a stop at Dales for several cans of spray paint. Although the ride had started smoothly, it ended bumpy, after the Humvee had bounced across an hours worth of rough terrain.

Treen sat on a boulder and yawned; the coffee maker atop the portable generator gurgled, sending vanilla fumes into the slight draft. The familiar aroma reminded her of the Smile Center and how much she missed her workplace.

However, none of that mattered without her family. As she scanned the endless peaks that towered over the forest, she just knew she'd find her parents alive — even though for the moment, she still didn't know the lab's location. At least she'd narrowed it down to the Grevelton Hills...

Treen noticed movement inside the larger tent, then lined three more Styrofoam cups atop the Humvee's hood. One by one, her three disheveled friends crawled from inside the vinyl shelter, eyes half open, hair sticking in every direction — except Sheridan, who rubbed his low buzz. The sleepyheads turned in unison, then lumbered towards the pines.

“Hey, I made coffee. Where are you guys going?”

Ariel and Sheridan kept moving. Russell stopped his stagger and slowly turned to face her. It took a few seconds to find her since the pine green corduroy she wore blended perfectly with the background.

“I don't know what a girl does first thing in the morning, but a guys gotta take a — ”

“Never mind Russell! Should've known better,” she muttered.



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Once the men had returned from their relief mission, they sat around the Humvee, alert enough to drink coffee and eat cinnamon pastries. However, they'd hardly said a word.

"Are guys always this quiet in the morning?" asked Treen, sipping her coffee.

"Depends," said Ariel, hat tipped over his eyes.

"On what?"

"Who you're lyin' next to when you wake up," said Sheridan."

Treen laughed, but also noticed their sluggish behavior. To help enliven them, she suggested they hike down to a stream she'd found and splash their faces with the cool water. When no one moved, she pulled them up one by one. "That way," she said pointing, pushing each of them downhill.

The men returned a half hour later, fresh and ready to go. They'd be searching for the lab without a map and knew they'd be hiking all day.

"Wow, check out that gun," said Russell stepping towards Ariel while the others loaded their backpacks.

"This is no ordinary gun," said Ariel, displaying the bronze colored piece. "It's a flare pistol that'll come in handy if we get separated."

Another useful item would be the spray paint; when the smoke bomb went off at the factory, Treen realized that the droids could be blinded as easily as a human. If the paint were sprayed in their video camera eyes, the droids would collide with each other, run into trees, or maybe even step off a cliff. Either way, it would make for an easier escape.

With everyone packed up and ready to hike, Sheridan called for a huddle. He warned them about wild animals, traps, and the Grevelton City cast offs, who'd moved to the hills for a variety of different reasons.

Treen listened carefully but nothing Sheridan said scared her or put a dent in her optimism. "No matter what's out there, we're going to save my family," she said, spreading her intensity around the circle.

"That's right, and we're gonna get Tsara too," said Russell. He glared at Sheridan, who nodded in agreement.



## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 30

Colorado has 54 peaks over 14,000 feet,” said Treen breathing heavily after climbing a steep hill. “Hopefully that lab isn’t at the top of one of them.”

“Man, we been hikin’ three hours straight,” said Russell, sitting on a montage of multihued leaves, his back against an aspen trunk.

“Too bad we’re not out here on vacation,” said Ariel, admiring layers of mountains and a collage of gold, rusty red foothills. “This is my kind of country.”

“Y’all ain’t gonna believe this,” said Sheridan, squatting next to Russell, “But I’m a leafer.”

“Really?” said Treen, with a huge smile. “Me too.”

Russell’s mouth dropped open. “So you guys are druggies?”  
Everyone laughed.

“No Russ, they’re not druggies,” said Ariel. “A leafer is someone who travels around the state to look at the colorful fall foliage like you see in front of us.”

“Oh.”

“As beautiful as it is, those black clouds in the distance are trouble. There’s a rainstorm headed this way,” said Treen.

“How can you tell?” Them clouds could go in any direction,” said Russell.

“Close your eyes.”

“Okay their closed.”

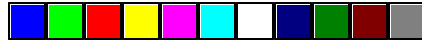
“What do see?”

“Nothin”

“What do you smell?”

“Kinda smells like the Mallyview River, but there’s no water near us — *yet*.” When he opened his eyes, Treen had walked away.

After another hour of strenuous hiking, the storm rolled in. The strong wind blew pebbly rain and earthy debris in every direction. They struggled uphill, grabbing trunks and branches to pull through



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the gust until they'd trudged to the top.

"Over there!" Ariel shouted. He splashed towards a cave, stopping near the dark entry to take the flashlight from his pack. As the others sprinted through the mud towards him, he turned on the light and ducked inside.

Treen ran up next. After she'd stepped into the cave, she paused near the opening to wait for Russell and Sheridan, who splattered up shortly after. Treen pulled off her headband then dropped to the damp, stony surface, along with the others, soaked and out of breath. Ariel must've moved deeper into the cave.

Although the entrance was small, the uneven rock above them rose high enough for Treen and Russell to stand. Big Sheridan? Well, he had to crouch slightly.

However, what had happened to Ariel? He'd ventured around the curved wall and hadn't made a sound since.

"I don't even see the glare from his flashlight," said Treen, peering down into the blackness.

"I can't see nothin' either but I'm goin' to look for him," said Sheridan.

"We're going with you", said Treen. We'll move slowly and stick together."

Sheridon led them into the darkness, guiding his fingers alongside the jagged wall. Treen had latched to his belt and held Russell's hand as he walked behind her.

Nevertheless, the cautious steps that Sheridan had taken didn't prevent him from stumbling over an object in his path. Since Treen didn't let go of him or Russell, they fell together and wound up like pretzels twisted in the darkness.

"Damn," said Sheridan."

"Wait a minute. There's something poking my leg," said Treen.

Sheridon chuckled. "You better find out where Russ is."

"I'm right behind you Treen."

"Then this better be a flashlight," she said, grabbing the cylinder shaped object. She felt for the switch, moved it forward, then lit up the area.

Unfortunately, the light belonged to Ariel who they still couldn't see, even as Treen shined the beam up ahead of them.



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

“I don’t understand how he could disappear without us hearing anything,” said Treen.

“Maybe this leads to the lab and them robots got him,” said Russell.

“This stinky cave ain’t fit for a bear — not even that mechanical one we got rid of,” said Sheridan.

“We may not find the laboratory in here, but we will find other people,” said Treen.

“Why you say that?” asked Sheridan.

Treen pointed the flashlight down to the surface. “Look at the different footprints. I don’t know which are Ariel’s, but I do know he only has two feet.”

The light allowed them to move faster through the curvy cave, but it also exposed a pathway of trash: Soda and beer cans, filthy garments, animal bones, plus an array of wrappers and empty tuna cans lay strewn about.

“Some Grevelton bums must be livin’ up in here,” said Sheridan, holding his nose, as the stench grew worse.

“Look up there,” Treen whispered, lowering the light. “It looks like a campfire. Judging from the shadows, there are three people sitting around it.”

“Looks like one of em’s getting up, Russell added.

The shadowy figure took a few steps closer and stopped. Whoever it was had obviously heard them.

“Yoo-hoo! I hear you over there,” the man squealed. “You might as well come on out ‘cause we got your friend over here.”

“With a voice like that, he can’t be too dangerous,” said Sheridan.

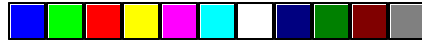
“Now don’t try nothin’ funny, I got a pistol over here!”

“That changes things a little,” said Sheridan.

“We don’t have much choice but to go over there and find out what he wants. Let’s go,” said Treen.

They moved towards the fire. The giggling man ordered Treen to quit shining the flashlight in his eyes, then told her to turn it off.

As they moved into the large area, the refreshing breeze that flowed through the cave had long disappeared. Unfortunately, it’d been replaced by a thick, unpleasant odor so indescribable that it



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most likely developed from a combination of filth.

Although the other stranger held Ariel at knifepoint, Treen was relieved to see that her friend was all right. He sat in front of the fire, the contents of his backpack dumped out amongst the trash.

The men had captured Ariel right in the middle of their lunch; a skinned, half cooked rabbit, hung over the fire; another dead rabbit lay nearby but hadn't been prepared for cooking. It appeared that these scruffy, smelly men had been occupants of the cave for some time.

"Sit down," said the man with the gun.

"What do you want from us?" asked Treen.

"The questions come outta *my* mouth sugar, now sit your butt down. Your longhaired friend, Ariel, won't say what you're doin' here, so one of you's better tell me somthin'."

"Who you callin' long haired?" said Sheridan, "Look at you two Bigfoot-lookin' bums.

"We got a wise guy in our cave," said the man holding Ariel. Then, as he stared at Sheridan, he gradually stood. "Hold on here," he said moving closer, "I know you."

"Where from?" asked Sheridan.

"You the King of the streets from Grevelton ain't cha?"

Relieved, Russell exhaled. "It's all good, Sheridan, that dude knows you."

"The King of the Streets, is a nosey sack of pigeon puke," grumbled the man, who'd moved even closer to Sheridan's face.

"That's interesting," said Treen. "I didn't smell pigeon puke until I came back here."

Sheridan grinned. He tried to remember who the men were, but couldn't. Then, the man raised the large hunting knife to Sheridan's face.

"Still tryin' to remember? Well let me help ya. My brother and me was tryin' to borrow a hotel cash register when you beat us up and called the cops. But see, we got away. Now we do as we please.

"Then why are you hiding here?"

"You got a big mouth, little girl," said the pistol wielding stranger. "Maybe we like it here."

Normally, Sheridan didn't forget a face — especially someone



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he'd busted. The thick beards and long hair that the men sported had thrown him off. However, slowly, he began to remember...

"The goofy Rondo brothers?" said Sheridan, looking back and forth at them, as if watching a tennis ball. "Y'all couldn't commit a crime if you was the last people on earth. By the way, you *stole* that register — and it had cash in it."

"That don't matter now. You don't seem to get what it means to be a Rondo brother."

"A Rondo is an instrumental composition typically with a refrain recurring four times in the tonic, with couplets in contrasting keys — "

"Shut up, girl!" the gun-toting Rondo shouted. "Were big time gangsters now and you gonna help us get back to Grevelton."

"How?" Sheridan asked.

"A police helicopter been up here lookin' for us. We need money and a car to get up outta here.

Treen glanced over to Sheridan who appeared more puzzled than she did. "When did you see this helicopter?" she asked.

"Flies by everyday and it flies real low. They been lookin' for over a year and can't find us!"

"Could you two stop laughing for a moment?" Treen asked loudly. "Have you seen the helicopter today?"

"No!" And if you thinkin' about flaggin' it down, and turnin' us in, think again!"

Treen had heard enough banter from the Rondo's. She reached into her pocket, pulled out some money, then walked right up to knife wielding brother.

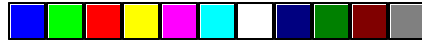
"If you want me to help you, put the knife away," she said displaying the wad of bills. Instantly, he dropped the knife and he snatched the money and dodged his charging brother who shouted, "Gimmie some! Gimmie some!" Hollering happily, the brothers knelt by fire to count the water logged notes.

Treen took advantage of the Rondo's infantile counting procedures, gathering everyone together near the cave wall.

"Those two are silly but harmless," said Treen.

"But they got that gun," said Russell.

"It's a cap gun. It's hard to see it in the dark, but the end of the



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barrel has a plastic red tip.”

Ariel exhaled loudly, then glared up and shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it, Ariel,” said Russell. “Least the knife’s real.”

“What about the helicopter?” asked Sheridan, “Think they’re tellin’ the truth?”

“Yes I do,” said Treen. It may or may not be the police, but one thing’s for sure: it’s not up here searching for those two.”

“Them dingbat brothers been up here so long they don’t know Grevelton’s barely got a police station, let alone a chopper,” said Sheridan.

“You guys stay here,” said Treen.

“Two hundred dollars!” shouted a Rondo, as Treen approached. “How much is that apiece?”

“It’s one hundred dollars each,” said Treen. “Listen, I can’t help you with a car. But I’ll distract the helicopter if you leave now.”

“And how you gonna do that?”

“When it flies by, I’ll wave my hands like crazy. When they see a young girl down here, they are sure to land. That should give you enough time to make a break for it — and if the police ask, I’ll even tell them that you saved our lives.”

“I like this idea. But how we know you’ll keep your promise?”

“Are you kidding me? Do you think I’d mess with the powerful Rondo brothers? “Come on, I’m not that stupid.”

“You know what, I like you! Got anymore money?”

Treen smiled. “Don’t push it”

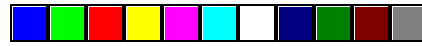
The Rondo brothers gathered a few things to stuff inside their plastic bags, including the rabbit lunch. As they prepared to leave, Treen approached with one last question.

“This helicopter, what does it look like?”

“Ain’t you ever had the police after you? It says *Blue* on the side. You know, like *NYPD Blue*?”

Treen smiled as wide as she could. “You’ve just made my day.”





## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 31

You really shouldn't worry so much, said Tsara, sitting atop a desk in the Grevelton Lab's security room. She'd been watching Lance pace and talk to himself since one. Now the clock read two and he was still ranting.

"Until little Einstein and her roving idiots are found, I'm going to be a nervous, whacked out mess. So be quiet with your cheer," he snapped.

"Her intelligence frightens you?"

"Shut up, Tsara."

"If you feel like she's closing in on you, she probably is."

"What are you talking about?"

"Is your system overloaded? She's probably somewhere in these hills if you haven't found her in Grevelton or Mallyview by now. Face it, that chick is smart — and we don't know what Wellbay told her before he died."

Lance analyzed what Tsara had said, then realized she was probably right.

"Organize a large group of Ecnal's and get them out into those woods! I'll have the Grizzly brought up here."

Just outside the cave, everyone sat together and finished the ham sandwiches that Treen had prepared. Glaring up into the drizzle, Treen prayed that Garrison Blue's helicopter would pass overhead; all they needed was a general direction to the lab and they'd be on their way to rescue her parents.

However, by late afternoon, the helicopter hadn't flown overhead, nor was it heard in the distance. Treen was sure that the Rondo brothers were telling the truth, but not so sure the chopper would appear that day.

"Ariel, you and Sheridan keep watch. In case we need to stay here tonight, Russell and I are going inside the cave to clean up the Rondos' old apartment."



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“Yuck,” said Russell.

“It was a disgusting job, but someone had to do it,” said Treen, stuffing the last of the Rondos’ trash into a deep crevice — the best she could do with no trash bags.

“Nothin’ bothers you does it?” Russell asked, following her to the fire.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” she said, feeding the flames with woodchips. “I just try to think things out before I act or speak. It narrows down life’s inevitable mistakes.”

“Wish I could do that.” He exhaled, then sat close to the crackling heat.

“You can, but you have to practice everyday,” she said joining him. You’re already a nice guy and that’s a good start.”

Russell smiled. Really? You think I’m a nice guy?”

“Yes I do. But remember, it’s easy to be a nice person when people are nice to you. The challenge is being nice when other people aren’t so nice. I remember being classified as a child prodigy while in college and I was picked on everyday. However, before I graduated, I’d befriended many of the people who’d made fun of me. She laughed. “Don’t get me wrong, I still get mad at people now and then.”

“Wish I’d known all this before my dad died. So how do I practice everyday? Should I go out lookin’ for mean people to be nice to?”

“Treen laughed again. You won’t have to do that. Plenty of them will find you, believe me. Just keep your guard up.”

“Man, you have all the answers.”

“No, Russell, I don’t. But that Bible on your bedroom floor does...”

Ariel and Sheridan had moved back inside the cave when the rain started again, sitting close enough to hear the chopper if it flew by. Over Sheridan’s snoring, Ariel heard some peculiar noises. He shook Sheridan’s arm to quiet him down, but woke him instead. Sheridan jerked forward and leaped up.

“What happened? Where’s homegirl and Mallyboy?”

“Shhhhh, they’re still in the back,” he whispered. “I think I



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hear someone coming.”

“I hear it. Maybe it’s an animal.”

“I’ll check it out.”

As Ariel crept towards the opening, all he could see were pines and boulders. He paused to listen again; the noise had stopped. Yet, when he moved to stick his head outside, a large hand suddenly gripped his collar and yanked him from the cave.

“Ariel!” shouted Sheridan, whipping out a gun and charging out after him.

In front of the fading fire, Russell waited anxiously for an answer to his question. Treen smiled, twirling her headband on her finger while she searched for an answer.

“Let’s talk about this later,” she said. “We really should check on the others.”

“Come on, Treen. Just say yes or no.”

“All right. Yes. Yes, Russell, I am in love with someone.”

Russell frowned. “Does he live in Mallyview?”

“No. He lives in — what was that noise?” she said, springing up from the fire.

“I didn’t hear nothin’.”

“Well I did. Something’s wrong, let’s go!”

The popping sounds grew louder as Treen and Russell neared the front of the cave. Once they realized they were hearing gunshots, she told Russell to get down and they crawled to the opening.

“Russell, stay to the side,” said Treen, gunshots echoing through the valley.

“There’s Ariel and Sheridan behind them rocks!”

“Oh no,” said Treen, “Look behind them!”

At least twenty Ecnals dressed in black, buckled uniforms had stormed up the hill behind Ariel and Sheridan. It’d be impossible to escape now. They put their hands up and the droids forced them out into the open. Then, hands on her holsters, Tsara strutted her curves from behind the wall of Ecnals and scanned her new hostages.

“We have to get out of here,” said Treen, darting to Ariel’s pack. She pointed the flashlight inside and searched until she found the



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smoke bombs and flare pistol.

“They’re coming this way,” said Treen, handing Russell one of the bombs. “Just pull out the pin and throw it.”

They removed the pins in sequence, then hurled them out. The same black cloud that had formed back in the factory had once again blinded the bewildered androids.

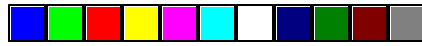
“Let’s go!” said Russell.

“Just a moment, I want to see if Ariel and Sheridan can get away somehow.”

“Surround the captives!” Tsara shouted. Grab them until the smoke has cleared and if they try to run, pull their arms off!” she ordered.

With no chance to help them, Treen grabbed Russell’s hand, darted from the cave, then sped through the charcoal cloud, into the woods. The last thing they wanted was to leave their friends behind, but it’d be much worse had they all been captured.

They didn’t look back while sprinting between the pines, until the rising flutter of a helicopter grew to a frightening volume. Just as the Rondo brothers had said, the aircraft flew low, and Blue was painted boldly on its side.



## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 32

When the smoke had finally faded outside the cave, Tsara was incensed. She wanted nothing more than to capture Treen Alee and make Lance happy, but once again Treen had eluded her.

“If you idiots had stormed the cave in the first place we would have her!” Tsara yelled. Then she walked over to Sheridan and Ariel, now in handcuffs.

“We let these pathetic wanna-be heroes keep us from our mission?” She glared at Sheridan. “You look angry, big brother. You’d like to smash me to pieces wouldn’t you?”

“You gonna pay for killin’ my mother.”

Tsara adjusted the collar on her slinky uniform, then took off her hat.

“I didn’t realize you knew about that,” she said smiling. “After living in a city like Grevelton, your mother’s better off dead. Didn’t Treen Alee train you to think positively?”

“Don’t let her bother you, Sheridan. She hasn’t got much time left,” said Ariel.

“What are you talking about?” Tsara asked. “It is you who should be worried.”

“You can kill us but that won’t save you,” said Ariel, staring out into the wilderness. “Treen’s out there and all the computer chips in the world won’t help you or Lance.”

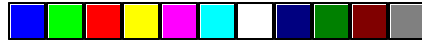
“Eliminate them!”

“That’s enough, Tsara!” shouted Mr. Blue, storming between the droids and followed by none other than Lance.

“What are you doing here, Lance? You asked me to handle this,” Tsara whined. “I’m trying to make you happy — ”

“Quiet!” shouted Mr. Blue. “I am in charge here!”

“Now look what you’ve done, Tsara,” said Lance, “You’ve upset Mr. Cobweb. It started with that smoking mess he saw from the chopper and now you’re trying to kill these two before he can say goodbye,” he added.



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“Where is Treen Alee?” Mr. Blue demanded.

“She’s escaped into the woods along with Russell Wellbay,” said Tsara.

Mr. Blue glared at Sheridan and Ariel, but said nothing. “Take these two back to the lab and throw them in with the others until I get there — and find Treen Alee!”

“Not to worry, Cobweb. I’ve set the Ecnal Grizzly in attack mode and it’s searching for her as we speak.”

After trekking upwards in the mud for so long, Treen and Russell barely had enough energy to slow themselves when they finally began to slide downwards. They stopped to rest near a pond crowded with aspen trees. All they could hear was the tapping of leftover raindrops that rolled off the leaves to the surface.

“Aren’t you glad you quit smoking?” Treen asked. Breathing fast, he turned to face her but didn’t answer.

“You really should close your mouth,” she said, “Many, many bugs are flying around out here.”

“Look, over there at that shack,” said Russell, pointing across the pond. “It’s kinda rickety but at least we wouldn’t be out in the open.”

“Let’s check it out.”

They jogged along the water, circling to the opposite side and continuing fifty yards to the shack. Treen had barely touched the door but it fell back and hung on by the center hinge. She walked inside and squeezed her nostrils; the rotten smell reminded her of the Rondo brothers. Maybe they’d just left or maybe it was one of their old hideouts. Either way, the only items inside were tree stump chairs and a lopsided table with *Grevelton Sucks* carved into the warped wood.

After they’d removed their packs, they sat on the stumps and talked about Ariel and Sheridan’s capture. Even though she knew it wasn’t her fault, Treen felt sick about the situation. She stared out of a broken window and watched the storm clouds drift away.

“So what’ll we do now?” asked Russell.

“We’ll have to leave soon and find out where that helicopter was flying to.”



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“If we do find the lab, what then? You saw all them droids. There’s only two of us.”

“We’ve already proven that these droids aren’t flawless. If we want to save our friends and family, we have to keep outsmarting them. As far as Mr. Blue goes — well, you can see the results of his decision making thus far. His own stupidity will most likely take care of him.”

A short time later, they stood to put on their packs. They froze. They stared at each other. The crackling outside the limp door grew louder. Then, a thunderous growl blew through the shack. A grizzly had found them.

“Treen, we gotta get outta here!”

“Hurry, put on your backpack!” she said, as the bear ripped the door down. The monster couldn’t fit its whole body inside, but jammed its head through the doorway and roared, mouth full of silver fangs.

When Treen saw its shiny teeth, she knew it wasn’t a real bear — but the Ecnal Grizzly from the factory. Russell was halfway through the window when she dashed over, grabbed his ankles, and yanked him down to floor.

“What are you doin’?” he shouted, rubbing his head. Just then, the grizzly galloped around to the window and stood, its seven-foot frame rising above the shack. Russell scurried behind the table.

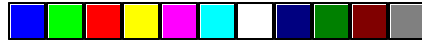
Treen knew they couldn’t outrun the mechanical beast, and that the only thing separating them from the Grizzly’s mouth was the shaky old shack that the bear had now started to pounce on.

The grizzly’s nonstop thumping atop the roof, fired sharp pieces of wood down into the shack, before a large section of the roof fell in. Treen and Russell stared up through the jagged hole at creature. It stared down at them and growled, struggling to keep its balance.

“Get under the table!” Treen shouted, afraid that the rest of the roof was about to give.

The grizzly couldn’t stay up and settled back on four legs. With very little of the shack remaining, they couldn’t stay hunched under that table.

“Somehow we have to blind that thing. It’s our only chance to get away,” said Treen.



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“Are you nuts?” How we gonna get close enough?” I say we make a break for it!” said Russell, scrunched beneath the slanted side of the table. “We can’t outrun it if we’re stuck in here.”

“We can’t outrun it, *period*. That might’ve worked back in the factory when it slid all over the place, but outdoors, that Ecnal Bear is faster than a cheetah...”

The bear seemed to holler even louder as it circled the decaying structure, pausing only to slam its head against the walls that amazingly still stood.

“Quickly, check your backpack to see if there are any sandwiches left,” she said.

Bewildered, Russell moved his head upward and forgot about the low end of the table. “Owww! We’re about to get eaten — and you wanna eat?” he said, rubbing his head.

Treen couldn’t waste time explaining. She grabbed the backpack herself, digging inside until she felt the sharp edges of wrinkled aluminum foil.

Two flat and soggy sandwiches remained. She reached out from under the table to pull in the longest, thinnest piece of wood that the grizzly had conveniently punched down from the roof. She then slid the sandwiches onto the stick; she took out Russell’s cigarettes and lighter, then reached into her own pack for a can of spray paint.

The grizzly passed by the doorway. Treen put on her pack, picked up the items, then crawled away from the table towards the window.

“Treen, what the heck are you doin?”

“Just take out your paint and get ready to run.”

A few steps from the window, Treen held out the soggy shiskabob. The droids didn’t eat but were equipped with smell sensors. Hopefully, the scent of ham, mayonnaise and mustard was enough to keep its fangs from her fingers. Mimicking the friendly call normally reserved for cats, Treen informed the bear that dinner was ready:

“Here grizzly, grizzly, grizzly.”

When the bear’s profile appeared in the window, the shiskabob began to tremble. Treen exhaled, trying to slow a heart that wanted out of her chest.





## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

The grizzly turned its massive head and faced the window. Treen watched its nose and, just as she'd hoped, it moved all around.

The Ecnal grizzly lumbered closer. Treen noticed that the creature had quit looking at the snack on a stick to stare at a bigger meal: her. She realized then that droid was verifying her image — the image it had been programmed to kill.

Suddenly — and just as she had hoped, the grizzly launched its head through the window frame. Treen leaped away, onto a pile of debris, then looked up to find that the trap had worked: The grizzly's giant head was stuck inside the window frame!

Violently, the grizzly twisted its head trying to free itself. Treen lit the cigarette, grabbed the spray paint, then moved slowly towards the creature. The bear roared so loud that Russell had covered his ears.

The shack was moments from caving in. Treen was taken aback by the anger the grizzly displayed; it wildly rocked its head from side to side, its roar now exceeding an unbelievable level. She snapped from her daze when Russell came up behind her, spray paint in hand.

"Ready when you are!" he shouted, the walls beginning to crack. Their knees shaking, Treen and Russell ran up to the mad bear and began spraying its face.

"Get more on the eyes!" Treen shouted, cans hissing.

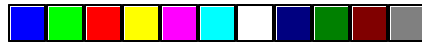
"I'm tryin!" Russell had sprayed half the grizzly's head to an ugly lime green.

With the grizzly's eyes now covered in paint, Treen snatched the cigarette from her lips. She gestured for Russell to stand back then hurled the burning tobacco into its open mouth. The creature roared. Then, with a powerful thrust forward, it tore down the section of wall and caused the remaining shack to sway.

"Russell, run!" shouted Treen, as the grizzly spun in circles, its head still jammed inside the detached window frame. Russell took her advice, but only after she'd grabbed his hand and sprinted out with him. They ran towards the pond, but didn't make it thirty yards before —

**KABLOOM!!!**

The explosion echoed throughout the valley. Treen and Russell



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dove into the sludge, but stood quickly and continued to run towards the pond. Once they'd made it to the water, they dropped to their knees, breathing hard as they splashed their faces.

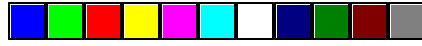
"That cigarette, it did all that?" he asked, pointing his thumb over his shoulder.

Treen pulled her headband down around her neck then splashed her face again. "Yes. Hate to say it, but your cigarette saved our lives. The Merafuel inside the grizzly — its extremely flammable, same thing happened with the Newberry's car."

He put his arm around her. "I'm glad that bear's gone."

"Me too."





## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 33

When they arrived back at the lab, Lance immediately escorted Mr. Blue to the security office, a room loaded with video monitors, cameras, and experimental equipment.

Lance was proud of the Ecnal Grizzly; Mr. Wellbay had drawn up most of the droids, but Lance had designed and built the grizzly all by himself.

“Have a seat, Cobweb. Let me show you how awesome my Ecnal Grizzly really is,” he said, switching on the monitor. “Nothing could make me happier than to see little Einstein in it’s mouth right now...”

However, when the monitor warmed up and came on, the expected live view from the grizzly’s eyes, had turned to scrambled fuzz on the screen. “What is happening here?” Lance snarled. After several failed attempts at restoring the picture, he gritted his teeth and turned towards Mr. Blue.

“I take it you were recording the movements of the Ecnal Grizzly,” said Mr. Blue. “Why don’t you simply rewind, so we can follow the events leading up to the disconnection.”

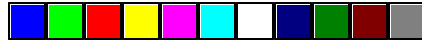
Lance wanted to do just that — but not with Cobweb around. He knew that Treen Alee had done something to the grizzly and didn’t want to suffer the embarrassment of watching it unfold.

Nevertheless, that’s exactly what Lance did; he sat there with the boss and watched as Treen Alee and Russell Wellbay spray-painted the eyes of the expensive creature. His perspective splattered, Lance sprang off the desk as the picture went blank. He charged up to the flat screen, ripped it from the wall, then smashed it on the floor.

“That’s right, you should be angry. You’re allowing a teenage girl make a complete joke out of us!” shouted Mr. Blue.

“Listen, Cobweb,” he said pointing, “I don’t need your criticism!” I’m going out there to find her myself!”

“Good. Maybe you can do a better job than your ferocious bear!”



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Tsara didn't bother knocking. She could hear them shouting through the door. She walked inside, looking ready to deliver more bad news.

"Sorry to interrupt, but the Ecnal Grizzly is — "

"We know about the paint!" Lance snapped.

"What paint?" asked Tsara.

"The paint that Treen Alee has doused my grizzly with."

"Did you bring the grizzly back for repair?" asked Mr. Blue.

"Repair? The Ecnal grizzly has been destroyed. Somehow, it blew up; we found scattered pieces of it not far from here."

"It's little Einstein! She blew it up!"

"Are the other Ecnals still searching for her?"

"Yes sir," replied Tsara.

"Order them to shoot to kill. I've had enough of this," said Mr. Blue.

The Alees were speechless when the doors slid apart and Ariel was shoved inside. Sheridan stumbled in next and the doors quickly shut again.

Regina was so happy to see Ariel that she leaped from the couch and nearly tackled him. She found out fast about his banged up body when he groaned during her tight squeeze.

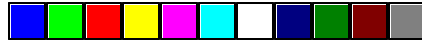
After Sheridan's introduction, everyone moved to the bar, where Edwin popped the top on another \$64,000 bottle of wine. The Alees knew that Treen was in danger, but were happy to hear that she was alive and making it difficult for Mr. Blue to carry on with his scheme.

"We can't bust that door in," said Sheridan, sipping the wine, "So I say we get them droids to come in here, beat em' down, then take off."

"That's the best idea I've heard all day," said Edwin, hurling the cork across the room.

"We'd better wait", said Ariel. We know that Jazz is out there planning something and if we rush we could make things worse."

Everyone agreed.



## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 34

To avoid Blue Neptune's off road vehicles, Treen and Russell chose their cubbyholes carefully and kept their clothes and faces smeared with muddy camouflage.

However, hiding here and there wasn't helping them find the lab any faster. In fact, in the hour since they'd left the peaceful pond, they'd probably moved less than a mile, and were now lying on their stomachs in a field of wildflowers. With only a few hours left of daylight, Treen prayed for a break.

Then, they heard the helicopter.

"There it is!" said Russell pointing at the fluttering speck in the sky. "It's comin' right at us."

"Hurry, into the woods..."

One hundred yards later, they stood shielded amongst the evergreens. As the aircraft grew louder, Treen took the binoculars from her pack and scanned the area they'd just fled — a good decision with the chopper hovering, then descending where they'd once stood.

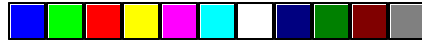
The wildflowers flattened beneath the rotor wind. Steadily, the blades quieted, until the noise from the aircraft had stopped completely. The doors opened. The armed pilot that stepped out didn't surprise Treen, but the passenger did: Lance Ruof had taken matters into his own fists.

Lance and the pilot moved away from the chopper, stopping to speak to the guards that rolled up in their black vehicles. Lance pointed all around, sending each of them in a different direction. He then motioned the pilot to follow him towards the forest.

"Earth to Treen," whispered Russell. "You see Lance walkin' towards us, don't you?"

"Yes, let's go," she said grabbing his hand.

As they zigzagged through the evergreens, Treen stopped suddenly when she noticed how quiet the surrounding forest had become; only moments ago, she could hear the distant motors and



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nearby voices patrolling the area...

“They’re sneaking up in on us,” she whispered, leaning against a trunk.

Russell dragged his hand down his face, then left his eyes shut. “We’re runnin’ outta places to hide.”

Treen stared up at the massive tree she’d been resting against. “No we’re not.”

Russell opened his eyes and looked up. “Let’s do it.”

The higher they climbed into the foliage, the more the tree wanted them off. Its wet branches poked and scratched their hands and faces and even sent two angry squirrels to try to scare them to a painful plummet. However, Treen and Russell survived even their own bickering and finally rested upon secure branches, balanced high above the ground.

The golden leaves beneath their dangling feet were pretty, but blocked their view of the ground. Instead, they listened; the continuous, crackling twigs and rustling leaves were suddenly drowned out by a blaring voice.

“Treen Alee and Russell Wellbay are in this area!” Lance shouted. “Find them and kill them. If you are unsuccessful, it’s not a problem; I’ll simply toss all of you into the crusher and build new Ecnals. Move out!”

“We’ll be dead before we find that lab,” Russell whispered.

“No we won’t. I have Tail Tracker in my backpack. I’ll connect it to the helicopter, then let Lance lead us to the lab.”

Russell stared at her. “Are you tryin’ to make me fall off this branch? How the heck we gonna get over there?”

“Carefully — but I’m going alone.”

“No Way!”

“It’s less conspicuous and it’ll be easier for me to climb back up here —

“Without my butt in your face, right?”

“Yes.”

Branch by branch Treen climbed down the oak. She could now see the Ecnals combing the area, most of them headed away from the field of wildflowers.

She could’ve descended closer to the ground, but as the area



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

around the oak cleared, she wasted no time. From eight feet, she leaped down into the leaves, got up, then sprinted towards the helicopter.

Russell grew uncomfortable up in the oak. Still wearing the backpack, he sat crouched over, gripping the branches. Any thoughts of a quick nap were erased by the height, or the by the fear that the girl he loved might get herself killed messing around with some helicopter.

He tried to keep still because the dried mud on his clothes and shoes began to crack off and fall through the foliage. Even when he quit breathing and blinking, the chips of mud continued to fall.

Still lurking in the area, Lance and his pilot stopped a few feet from the oak. “Those stupid kids are around here somewhere, I know it.

“Excuse me, sir,” said the pilot, but I believe I heard something near that tree. She pointed over Lance’s shoulder and he turned and jogged towards the oak.

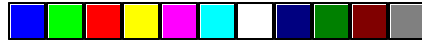
Lance glared up at the leaves, listening to what sounded like fizzling sand. He rubbed his goatee then moved closer to the trunk.

As he studied the footprints surrounding the oak, Lance chuckled and rubbed his goatee faster; he realized the prints were much too small to be Ecnal boots. When he heard another shuffling sound from above, he turned towards the pilot. “I’ll be right back.”

As swift as a cat, Lance scaled the oak. He’d climbed twenty feet when he heard Russell whisper, “Treen is that you?” Then, glaring up at the soles of his feet, Lance launched his head up between Russell’s legs, giving him a jolt that almost made him made him fall.

“Sorry to disappoint you, punk!” Lance shouted, with a quick punch under Russell’s chin that knocked him out instantly. He slumped forward then flopped down a few branches before Lance grabbed the back of his jacket. “Come here, stupid,” he said, lifting him with one hand. After some rough maneuvering, he tossed Russell over his shoulder, and climbed back down.

Russell twitched and panted when cold water splattered on his face. When he cleared his eyes and looked up, he saw the pilot staring down at him. Ecnals surrounded the oak; Lance popped



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into view and squatted next to him.

“Where is she?”

“Who?” he moaned, struggling to sit up.

“You like playing dumb? See how you like this,” he said, grabbing Russell’s collar. Lance lifted him over his head, then hurled him ten feet into the brush. He wiped off his dingy black suit, then strolled over to grill him again.

“Tell me where she is!”

Russell lay face down, twisted in the shrubbery as if a parachute had failed to open. When he didn’t answer, Lance reached down and pulled him up. Russell’s head sagged, arms limp at his sides —

*“LET HIM GO!”*

In sequence, the mob of Ecnals turned and aimed their rifles. There stood Treen Alee, seemingly unafraid and glaring only at Lance.

“I said let him go, Lance.”

Lance hadn’t moved since Treen appeared. With the other Ecnals staring at him, waiting for a command, he just glared at her. Then, he unclenched his fingers and let Russell crumple to the leaves.

Wide-eyed, lips apart, Lance stepped towards her. He stopped a few feet away and rubbed his goatee. He moved closer, tilting his head side-to-side and staring in amazement.

“How can a girl of sixteen years do so many things?” he said, gazing at her. “It doesn’t add up. It does not compute. Do you think you are smarter than me?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. I just want my family back. If you’d like to evaluate your intelligence, take the total Turing test.”

Lance laughed. “The Turing test is for lower class computers and droids. It is far beneath me.”

“Fine, then we’ll play chess later. Just tell me where my family is,” she said angrily.

“Incredible. You stand here alone, surrounded by guns, yet you continue to make demands. Aren’t you the least bit afraid?”

“No. God’s got my back — something professor Mera could never program you to feel. You and Tsara are confused because your creator is dead and Mr. Blue killed him.





## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

“What are you talking about?”

“Garrison Blue organized the explosion in France so he could own both of you and the Merafuel plans. Of course, you believe that Mera sold everything to Blue — just like everyone else. What I haven’t figured out is why Mr. Blue doesn’t get rid of you. What do you have that he wants?”

“Kill her!”

The Ecnals fired. Treen dove into the bushes and pulled the pin on the last smoke bomb. She laid it in front of her then bolted from the shrubs, sprinting through the evergreens towards her only escape: The helicopter.

Running faster than she ever had, she slowed to glance back at the Ecnals charging out of the smoke cloud. When they started shooting, she weaved and ran faster.

Sprinting through the wildflowers, Treen was thirty yards from the helicopter when she suddenly realized that she’d actually have to fly the thing. Her mind had definitely been working too fast. Sure, she’d spent time with Shainy in the helicopter simulator, but Shainy was superb. Treen? Well...

Treen yanked the door back then climbed inside, where she faced an assortment of buttons and switches. “Okay”, she said breathing hard, “Cyclic stick, forward, backward, sideways; collective stick, up, down, hover.”

The Ecnals stormed closer. Several bullets clanged off the aircraft and Treen got the rotors churning. The chopper shook and vibrated as the blades spun faster and faster. The Ecnals tried to get closer, but the rotor wind slowed them down. They could only watch as Treen Alee took off!

Yet, it didn’t appear that Mr. Blue’s chopper would stay up for long; the aircraft jerked, spun, and wasn’t gaining much altitude. Nonetheless, Treen continued to battle the control sticks and foot pedals, until she was able move away from the gunfire. It was ugly and she was far from receiving her license to fly, but she’d definitely made progress.



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## Chapter 35

Even though she'd escaped and now had decent control over the chopper, Treen worried about what Lance might do to her family and what he might've already done to Russell. If she could locate the lab before he returned, there'd be a much better chance of finding everyone alive.

Soaring above the wilderness, Treen noticed a construction site — an unfinished road that curved out of the trees, towards a mountain that stood about a mile away. When the chopper buzzed overhead, the two steamrollers below kept moving, but the orange clad workers looked up and waved — probably oblivious to the fact that Mr. Blue and Lance had missed this particular flight.

Treen continued to follow the stretch of road that had been left unpaved. However, she'd soon have to clear the mountain, change direction, or land. Suddenly, in the distance, she could see a row of black SUV's lined up near the face of the mountain. She guided the chopper closer, where, on the opposite side of the trucks, stood two men dressed in black, and a metallic shelter. "I think I've found the lab," she said smiling, slowing the chopper to a hover. "But where's the entryway?"

Treen wiped her eyes, then wiped them again, and again. Sure, the helicopter rocked slightly and she was tired, but not tired enough to imagine the face of the mountain rising like a garage door. Without a single blink, she continued to stare and sure enough, the face of the mountain had begun to raise — a humongous, granite door, which blended so perfectly with the outer rocks that no one outside Blue Neptune's weirdoes would've ever found it.

"Unbelievable," said Treen, as the massive door opened completely. The line of vehicles slowly began to roll inside the opening — wide as a hanger — with vehicles also exiting.

Suddenly, the guards outside the shelter began to point at the helicopter. Some of vehicles moving to enter the tunnel veered out of line and sped in Treen's direction. They'd just received word



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that the helicopter had been stolen.

Still hovering, Treen spun the aircraft around, where she noticed more vehicles headed towards her — probably Lance and the rest of the Ecnals she'd left out in the wildflowers. She spun again. The guards from the front aimed their weapons and fired. The helicopter rocked out of control. Treen glanced up at the tunnel, where the wall of granite had slowly begun to close.

The droids probably thought Treen was an expert circus pilot with the helicopter swinging circles and dodging most of their bullets. Truth was, every since the first few bullets had cracked the windshield, she'd lost control...

The guards continued to fire at her and Treen made a decision — a crazy decision, which seemed to fit her insane circumstances perfectly. Her family was somewhere inside that tunnel and she was going in one way or another: “I hope there's enough room for a helicopter,” she whispered, thrusting the aircraft forward.

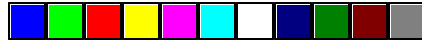
Treen wanted to close her eyes, but the odds of her living through this were bad enough already. The opening was definitely wide enough for the helicopter, but the lower the door moved, the lower her chances were of flying inside. She adjusted to the proper altitude, then made her move.

“Steady, Treen! Steady! Oh, Jesus, help me...” After a drastic dive, the aircraft soared beneath the door, and into the tunnel with room to spare! Paying close attention to the well-lit outer walls, she held it steady and zipped over the cars, startling the droids beneath her.

Treen's erratic flying caused chaos in the tunnel; the vehicles below swerved and collided, with the fiery crashes adding to the constant roar of the rotors.

Fortunately, for the wobbling aircraft, the tunnel ran straight. Treen sailed down the orange-lit cylinder with no cars, guards, or gunfire in sight. However, in the distance she could see that her trip was probably headed for an explosive end.

Like the entry, several guards stood beneath and around a metallic shelter, which probably housed the controls to the massive granite door ahead of her — a closed door that would soon cause the explosion of the Blue Neptune helicopter. Even if Treen could



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swing the chopper around and somehow fly safely out of the tunnel, she wouldn't. There'd be no turning back at this point.

With trembling hands, streaming sweat, and a heart fluttering as fast as the rotors, Treen tried to control the helicopter and figure a way out of the mess she was in. Just then, she noticed the illuminated emergency exits that lined the outer walls along a narrow sidewalk. It didn't matter where the doors led because they appeared to be the only way out.

Treen began a gradual descent, but rushed the landing when she noticed the SUV's speeding towards her from each direction. Without shutting the rotors down, she leaped out. Her hair blew everywhere as she dashed away from the unstable aircraft, towards the nearest emergency exit. If she hurried, she could make it inside the door before the guards even realized she jumped out.

"Be open, be open, be open," Treen whispered rapidly, reaching for the doorknob. Although the small door was much easier to enter than the colossal one she flown through, she was just as relieved to slip inside.

Treen knelt on a dim platform, situated between stairs that led up and down the mountain walls. She snatched off her pack then snatched out Ariel's holster and flare gun because soon, the Ecnals would surround the chopper and boy did she have a surprise for them.

When Treen peeked through the door, the Ecnals were driving up to the helicopter, which had been rotating on it's own for several minutes. As the guards stepped out of their vehicles, Treen realized that her fiery plan would work even faster when she noticed fuel spilling from the bullet holes that had pierced the chopper.

She waited for as many droids as possible to surround the helicopter, but when some of them began to shake their heads and back away, she knew they'd found she wasn't inside.

"Please, Russell, don't be over there," she whispered. She aimed the flare gun through the cracked door then fired towards leaky fuel. She then slammed the door and ran down the stairs.

Kla — BOOM!

The helicopter blast was small compared to the explosions that



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followed when the Merafueled droids met the flames. Add in the number of SUV's that blew up, and the tunnel had become a massive fireball.

Panting, Treen could feel the surface rumble as she neared the bottom of the long staircase. She continued to pray that Russell Wellbay was nowhere near that chopper when it exploded.





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## Chapter 36

Treen stepped off the stairs and entered an area with dim, orange lights like the tunnel. It appeared to be an underground parking garage, with dozens of Black SUV's parked atop a marble surface. Surrounded by the rugged guts of the mountain, she stared at steep ramp that probably led back to the tunnel and hoped that no vehicles would come rolling down it.

As Treen walked past the last of the vehicles, the marble surface turned to rocks and dirt. She weaved between forklifts, bulldozers, and hoards of construction equipment, until she found a dark area to rest in. She moved behind a barrier of chalky cement bags to hide, groaning when she hauled a bag off the top to sit on.

She pulled off her headband. She put her scraped up face in her scraped hands to cover her eyes. She thought of her family and friends and what Lance might've done to them. At that moment, she crawled to her knees and bowed her head.

"God, I know you're watching all of this and thank you for taking me this far. Lord, I need you to help me finish this and save my family. I can't do it without you..."

After her prayer, Treen sipped her Hildon water and stayed positive. The fact that she'd made it inside the tunnel and was still alive to think about it was remarkable — and what a grand entrance it was! Shainy would've been proud of the wild flight, but not so happy about the helicopter's demise.

A short time later, Treen stood and fastened her headband. However, as she pulled on her jacket, her arm froze in the sleeve; she listened to the erratic footsteps headed her way. Had the Ecnals found her?

No. It couldn't be the Ecnals. Androids don't breath heavily and yell "Owww!" when they trip over construction equipment. However, Treen did know someone that might, and the 'Owww' sounded just like him. She switched on the flashlight. The beam streaked through the dust and lit up his battered face.



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“Russell!”

Treen ran over to him. Russell tried to reach out and embrace her, but collapsed at her feet instead. He wasn't unconscious — just exhausted.

Treen dragged him behind the cement bags, then took the bottle of Hildon from her pack. When Russell saw the water, he sprang up and snatched it from her hand. He didn't stop gulping until Treen eased the bottle away to show him it was empty.

“Once you've caught your breath, I'm dying to know how you escaped,” she whispered.

“Likewise,” he groaned, lying on the bags. “Didn't know you could fly a helicopter. Treen, you gotta promise me something.”

“What is it?”

“Next time you fire that flare gun, could you, make sure I'm not around. I barely made it out of that truck...”

Treen wanted Russell to rest a little longer, but the sound of distant engines wouldn't allow it. She hurried to put on her pack, grabbed his hand, then jogged away from the cement.

Mr. Blue must've had a thing for stainless steel panels and maze like hallways. Although the area beneath the tunnel was far from complete, the next area they entered resembled the Grevelton factory — only much bigger. Treen didn't want to get lost in the corridor puzzle, but the headlights behind them had quickly crisscrossed through the construction obstacles and moved closer. She led Russell into the hallways, determined to remember the way out.

“What was that?” she said, stopping after an object clanged beneath her feet. Russell reached down to the chalky surface and picked up a shield. When he turned it around, Treen snatched it away.

“This license plate, it's from my mothers car — they're here!”

“Yes!”

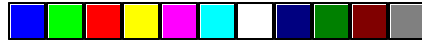
“Look at those tire tracks,” she said, aiming the light on the powdery surface, “Maybe they'll lead us to the car and we can drive back into the tunnel.

“But we ain't got a key.”

“I have a spare.”

“Can I drive?”

“No — ”



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Bap! Bap! Bap!

“Come on!” Treen shouted, ducking the bullets. She snatched Russell’s hand then fled down the corridor, her eyes fixed on the tire tracks.

Treen and Russell banged heads more than once and were forced to take a detour from the tire trail when more Ecnal guards appeared. Treen blazed around another corner where the tire tracks had resumed; in the distance, she could see that the path was a dead end — a dead end with the rear of her mothers white PT Cruiser facing her!

The Ecnals rounded the corner shooting. Treen and Russell zig-zagged the rest of the way until they’d reached the Cruiser and jumped inside.

“Do you know how to drive?” asked Russell, nervously looking over his shoulder.

“Yes,” she said, trembling the key into the ignition.

“Backwards?”

“Can’t be harder than flying that helicopter,” she said, starting the engine. When the bullets shattered the rear glass, she shifted in reverse, turned her head towards the rear, then pressed the gas pedal. The back end rose slightly but the vehicle didn’t move. Puzzled, Treen looked over at Russell, who reached down, pressed the button, then lowered the handbrake.

She exhaled. “Thanks.”

Treen stomped the pedal again and this time, the Cruiser shot backwards. Sparks flew as she swerved and clipped the walls. The approaching Ecnals continued to fire, but had nowhere to run in a hallway that the Cruiser barely fit in. One by one, Treen mowed the droids down. FLUMP-FLUMP-FLUMP-FLUMP!

Russell ducked in his seat when the Ecnals charging from the front, fired at the windshield. Treen pressed even harder on the gas and continued to ricochet off the walls until she’d reached the end of the corridor.

Finally, Treen backed out of the hallway and the Cruiser looked as if it’d been spit from a trash compactor. However, the scores of bullet holes and dents weren’t enough to stop her from speeding out of the maze and back into the construction area.





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### Chapter 37

Where the hell is Lance!” shouted Mr. Blue, after the granite door inside the tunnel (and outside the lab) had risen, allowing black smoke to pour into the research area.

“He is searching below for Treen Alee, sir”, said an Arast that had dashed in from the tunnel.

“How did she get in here?” he hollered.

“With your helicopter sir. She caused the explosions that have destroyed over fifty Ecnals.”

With the lab growing blacker, Garrison Blue jogged out into the tunnel. In the distance, he could see flipped SUV’s and burned out droids strewn along the road. When an Ecnal tried to pass him, he grabbed his arm. “Give me that!” he said, ripping the gun from the android’s holster.

“Sir, I am not authorized to release my weapon.”

“Says who?” he shouted.

“Master, Lance.”

“Oh yeah? Well since you don’t know who you work for, *you’re fired.*” Bap — Bap — Bap — Bap!

Garrison Blue watched the Ecnal drop, then glared at his scattering employees and droids. With his empire falling to pieces, he took the gun and stormed towards the Alees’ holding room.

Stepping through the sliding doors, Garrison Blue scanned the wide eyes of everyone in the room. Ariel and Sheridan were ready to jump him until they noticed the gun trembling in his hand.

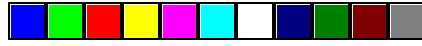
“Let’s go Edwin,” snarled Mr. Blue, pointing the gun at him.

“Where?” he snapped.

“To the intercom. You’re going bring that daughter of yours out of hiding.”

Edwin glanced at everyone and smiled. “Funny, when we heard the explosions, we figured Treen had killed you already. She must be tired or something.”

He moved closer, then aimed at his head. “You’ll do as I say



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because I always get what I need. If you would've stopped trying to save Grevelton with your bookstore and meddlesome business ideas, you wouldn't be in this situation."

"What about your business ideas?" Sheridan shouted. You messed up a bunch of people with that Leuf drug and you don't even care?"

Garrison laughed. "No, I don't care. Whether you like it or not, Grevelton is the home of my drug selling droids — or Awakers as you street bums call them. Soon, I'll have them in bigger cities — something I can't accomplish if Mister Do Good here runs them off the street!"

"That's why you had Mera killed," said Ariel, to steal the droids and the fuel.

"Yes, I had Mera killed, but he'd be alive today if he would've just sold me the invention. Now enough of this — let's go, Edwin!"

"You might as well shoot me because I'm not going anywhere with you."

"A bold face in front of the wife. I admire that."

"You should," said Elizabeth, "After what you've done to your own wife — coward!"

"Very well, Edwin, I'll just shoot you then drag your wife to the intercom — "

Suddenly, the doors hissed open. Accompanied by two of the largest Ecnals, Lance and Tsara walked calmly out of the smoky hallway and into the room.

"Move the captives near couch and watch them, Lance ordered the Ecnals. Tsara and I will care of Blue."

"What is going here?" asked Mr. Blue. Have you found the Alee girl?"

"No, but we will," said Lance, rubbing his goatee.

"How could you be dumb enough to let her fly the helicopter into the tunnel?" asked Mr. Blue. Ariel and Sheridan high fived to that news, while the Alees and Regina stared wide eyed at each other.

"Garrison, if I were you, I'd shut up," said Tsara, snatching the gun from him.

"Allow me," said Lance, who grabbed Mr. Blue by his lapels,



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lifted him off the floor, then slammed him down on his back. Mr. Blue tried to stand but Lance kicked him back down.

“Wh-what’s the matter with you?” asked Mr. Blue, gasping.

“Little Einstein informed us that you orchestrated the death of our master, and we didn’t believe her. Now that we know the truth, you’re going suffer for it.”

“Sh-she’s lying! She’s trying to disrupt you’re programming — to turn you against me!”

Lance walked right up to him. “You are so stupid. Did you forget that you installed cameras and microphones in these rooms? Tsara and I have been upstairs in the security office listening to every word you said — chump.”

Mr. Blue stood and began to back peddle until he thumped against the bar. Lance stayed put and watched him squirm until the intimidation forced a feeble excuse.

“L – Lance, please — I did this for you! If it weren’t for me, you and Tsara would’ve never made out into the world!”

“Who said we wanted out?” Lance shouted. “Maybe we were just fine where we were! Master Mera was our best friend and most of all, he stayed away from people like you!”

“Let me finish him,” Tsara shouted.

“You can’t kill me,” If you do, there’s no more Merafuel. You’ll shut down...”

Lance rubbed his goatee. “Tsara, you can rough him up a little; just make sure there’s enough of him left to tell me where his half of the formula is.”

Tsara charged towards him. No one in the room grimaced as she hurled him into wall after wall, with a few slaps in between. When she’d finished, Garrison Blue lay face down behind the bar.

“You may want to have a drink while you’re back there,” said Lance, sitting on a barstool, ”This is going to get worse.”



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## Chapter 38

Treen and Russell had been crawling through a large air duct for over half an hour. They didn't know where it would lead, but it was their only chance to escape after the Ecnal guards had blocked the ramp leading up to the tunnel. They'd abandoned the Cruiser, dodging more Ecnals and bullets to sneak up inside the dark cylinder.

Now they'd reached the end of the air duct where Russell lay on his back, trying his hardest to kick the lid off. After a few more bangs, the metal cover fell and clanged below.

With the constant buzz of an alarm blaring from the speaker next to the duct, Russell looked down into the smoke. It was hard to see how high they were until someone passed under him. It was an eight-foot drop. He dangled his legs for a moment, then leaped down into the cloud. He stood quickly, opened his arms, then waited for Treen to jump. He cushioned her fall, then took her hand as she led him down the foggy corridor.

The lack of visibility allowed them to search the area freely. Many of the offices were huge spaces that had been blown out of the mountain wall. "Looks like the *Batcave*," said Treen, studying the blinking computers and walls of rock surrounding them.

"Look, way down there," said Russell pointing. It's the tunnel!"

"That air duct led us right inside the lab. Come on Russell, we have to find everyone before the smoke clears."

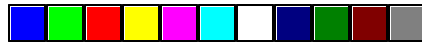
Running towards the tunnel, Treen noticed consecutive steel doors that resembled elevators and jogged up to look at the panels outside each door.

"These are not elevators," said Treen, staring at the blue, numbered buttons above a card slot. "They're rooms."

"How we gonna get inside?"

"Good question. Let's look around."

The massive foyer near the mountain door was packed with



## **TREEN ALEE** The Awakers of Grevelton

communication tools: desks, computers, telephones, fax machines, monitors — enough equipment to cover a football field. However, only a few scattered people and droids remained.

“Where is everybody?” asked Russell.

“The droids are programmed to stay clear of flames, and can’t see very well in this smoke. As for the humans, once the door to the tunnel opened, the smoke was probably unbearable...”

“But the smokes clearin’ up. There’s video cameras everywhere,” said Russell, looking up at the surrounding lenses. “Think Lance might be watchin’ us?”

“Maybe...Russell that’s it! If they have security cameras, they have a security room — ”

“That’s right! Maybe they got cameras watchin’ your parents and everyone else!”

Treen knew it would take forever to locate the security room without directions and with the smoke continuing to clear, they were running out of time.

She pulled off her pack and took out the flare pistol; she had an extra flare, but didn’t know how to load it and didn’t have time to learn.

“Keep my backpack. I’ll return in moment.”

“Where are you going now?”

“To bluff that Arast droid sitting at the desk.”

Treen remembered that the Arasts droids had been built for administrative purposes and were normally passive. However, after Lance had re-programmed Tsara with an attitude, she was taking no chances. She ran up behind her, put her arm around her neck, then pressed the flare gun against her head.

“Unless you want this flare to ignite the Merafuel in your body, you’ll tell me where my parents are or where the security room is,” said Treen struggling to hold her.

“You’re choking me,” she wheezed. Treen loosened her hold to let her talk. “I don’t know anything about any parents or merry fuel, but the security room is upstairs...”

Treen released her. The chubby woman slowly spun around in her swivel chair and rubbed her neck. “Excuse me, but you’re Treen Alee, right? I noticed the headband...”



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“That’s right,” said Treen, still aiming the flare gun.

“My daughter loves the Smile Center. She says you’re her hero. Treen’s jaw fell. She glared at the bleeding cut on the woman’s hand and the nameplate on her desk that read, ‘Martha Perkins.’

“You mean — you’re human?”

“I hope so. I handle inventory. It’s my first day,” she said coughing.”

Treen lowered the gun. “I am so sorry.”

“Here,” she said, handing Treen a card, “You’ll need that to get inside the security room — or any other room with a code panel. It’s a master card — no pun intended. Just stick it in the slot and punch in 12-32-20. Oh, and good luck finding your parents.”





## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 39

Russell quickly, over here!” said Treen, stepping over a shattered monitor, lying the floor of the security room. She darted towards a wall of more monitors, which was four times the size of Ariel’s security flat set up. Treen scanned every screen until she found what she’d been searching for.

“There they are!” she shouted pointing at screen labeled, RM 58, “Mom, Dad, Ariel, Sheridan, and Regina!”

“Alright!”

“Look in room 75, it’s Natalie Newberry and Detective Redworce...”

Their joy subsided when they looked at RM 58 again and noticed that two Ecnals had stepped into view. They aimed their guns at her parents and everyone else near the couch.

“What are they all lookin’ at?”

“It’s difficult to tell from this angle. Maybe we can change the view.”

Treen studied the control panel below the monitors, where a zillion switches awaited her examination. She looked the panel up down and across. Once she’d found the camera controls for RM 58, she pressed each button until she had the perfect angle. Camera 4 focused on the bar, where they discovered what everyone in the room had been staring at.

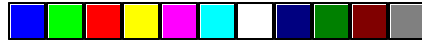
“It’s Lance and Tsara.”

“Man, who’s that they’re kickin’ around?”

Treen moved closer to the screen. “It looks like Garrison Blue. Wonder why they’re beating up on him?”

Treen looked down at the panel and adjusted the volume. Now, through the large speakers on each side of the monitor wall, they could hear Garrison Blue pleading for his life. With his hands up in front of him, he slowly backed away from Lance and Tsara.

“Please, if you just let me live I’ll tell you where my half of the formula is,” said Mr. Blue, suit covered in blood.



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“That sounds like a deal to me,” said Lance, who then charged up to him and yanked back on his hair. “Where is it?” he snarled.

“Fireplace — behind the fireplace at my house...Pull it open — you’ll find a silver briefcase and the formula’s inside!”

“If you are lying to me — ”

“I’m not lying to you!”

“Good.”

Still gripping his hair, Lance forced Mr. Blue over to the wall.

“Wh-what are you doing?” he shouted.

“This is for killing Master Mera”, said Lance, glaring at their blurred reflection in the black marble. “Goodbye Garrison.”

Treen and Russell looked away from the monitor, as Lance slammed Mr. Blue head first into the wall. When they looked up again, Lance stood over Mr. Blue’s crumpled body, rubbing his goatee.

“What a pathetic sight,” said Lance, who then lifted his leg to get Mr. Blue off his shoe.

“Lance, you’re amazing,” said Tsara, putting her arm around him, “But I wish you would’ve let me kill him.”

“Shut up Tsara. Fun time is over. I’m going to Blue’s house to get the formula.

Tsara had squatted next to Mr. Blue and put her hand on his neck. “Well I hope he was telling the truth about the location of that formula, because he’s definitely dead.”

Treen turned the volume down. She quickly moved behind Russell, unzipped the pack, then took out the flare gun. It was time for another bluff.

“You’re gonna have to learn to load that thing.”

“You can say that again,” she said, grabbing his hand. “Come on, we have to hurry.”

Treen and Russell had to be careful. The smoke was no longer thick enough to shield their faces while they jogged down the stairs towards RM 58. Then again, after watching the droids run from the burning tunnel, she doubted that any of them would challenge the empty flare gun she gripped.

They sprinted down the corridor and beneath the air duct they’d crawled in through. Then they continued down to the shiny sliding doors. Above the first door was a shield labeled RM 01. Treen stared





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all the way down the curved wall; 57 doors to go.

A short time later, they reached RM 58. Russell watched their backs while Treen slid the card into the slot and punched in 12-32-20. A buzzing voice from the small speaker said “Enter,” and the doors slid apart.

“Grab the card,” said Treen, before she burst inside, gripping the flare gun with both hands. Russell ran in behind her and the doors slid shut.

Treen flashed a smile at her family and friends, who shouted her name even as the Ecnal guards ordered them to sit back down on the couch. Lance and Tsara, who were preparing to leave, backed away from the flare gun.

“Get over here and shoot her!” said Lance. One of the Ecnals charged over.

“Drop you weapons!” Treen shouted, Russell standing close, “I promise you, I’ll blow your leader through the damn wall!”

“Ecnal guards, do not listen to her. She is trying to confuse you! If she fires that flare gun everyone in this room will burn!”

“They have to listen to me because I now have the other half of the Merafuel formula.”

“You’re lying!” Tsara shouted.

“You think so? Before you killed Mr. Wellbay, he told me where it was. I broke into Garrison Blue’s house and took it from behind the fireplace.”

“Lance, do something. She must have the formula — how else would she know — “

“Shut up Tsara! Alright little Einstein, an even exchange; your family for the formula.”

“Deal.”

“All right Ecnal guards, let them go.”

Treen kept the flare gun aimed at Lance and Tsara, even while everyone celebrated around her. Then, while talking to Ariel and Sheridan, Russell said a bit too much.

“After Lance killed Mr. Blue we knew we had to get down here...”

Lance stared at Russell. Then, raising a brow, he glared back at Treen.



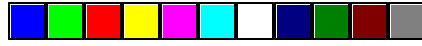
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“How would he know I killed Blue? Unless — ”

Lance looked up at one of the cameras.

“You tricked me!” he shouted, charging towards Treen. He knocked her to the floor, punched Edwin who’d tried to stop him, then ran to the sliding doors. “Kill all of them!” he shouted, before exiting the room, Tsara dashing out behind him.





## TREEN ALEE The Awakers of Grevelton

### Chapter 40

Ariel, Russell, Sheridan and Edwin, lay strewn on the floor. The Ecnals that Lance had left behind were just too powerful to beat — and they were about to finish the job!

However, the men had managed to hold the guards off long enough for Treen to move Elizabeth and Regina into the clear, then charge back over with the flare gun.

“Stop!” Treen shouted as the Ecnals moved in for the kill. They turned towards her. “You know what this flare will do to you, right?”

“Yes, but we have orders to kill you,” said one of the guards.

“True. But you’re no longer in control. Your orders were to kill, not be destroyed, which is what’ll happen if you don’t leave this room now.”

“But Master Lance said — ”

“Forget Master Lance. He doesn’t care about you. He cares only about the Merafuel. Why would he leave you in here, knowing I have this gun?”

The guards stared at one another. Then, they turned and walked towards the doors. The guard looked back. “Thank you Treen Alee, for allowing us to exit safely.”

Treen exhaled loud enough to drown out the hissing doors. She then glanced over at Ariel and held up the flare gun. “Could you *please* load this thing...?”

Now that the room was clear, everyone embraced, shook hands and kissed — the latter involving Regina and Ariel. However, even though Garrison Blue’s body lay twisted in a corner, everyone realized that the ordeal wouldn’t end until Lance and Tsara were shut down.

While Ariel loaded the flare gun, Treen dashed out of the room, into the foyer. She ran along the curved wall until she reached RM 75, then stuck the card in the slot. She punched in the code then smiled along with Detective Redworc and Natalie Newberry who sprinted out the door.



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Ariel had the flare gun loaded when Treen returned with the freed hostages. She put the gun back in her holster, then led the whole group out of the room.

Everyone followed Treen into the tunnel towards the narrow sidewalk. They all stopped when they noticed that the Ecnals and Arasts had for some strange reason, filed into the tunnel and stood frozen in the middle of the road.

“What are they doing?” asked Russell.

Suddenly, behind them, the mountain door began to roar shut. An alarm blared through the tunnel, along with a digital voice that buzzed, “Lab destruction in three minutes. 2:59-2:58-2:57...”

“Mom, Regina, take off those high heels — we have to haul ass!”

Sprinting down the sidewalk, Treen searched for a vehicle that wasn't burned up or flipped over. She could see the ramp leading below, but didn't think there was enough time to get to the Cruiser. Then, a black SUV moved slowly up the ramp and stopped before turning out into the tunnel. Suddenly, Tsara leaped out with a machine gun; Lance waved at Treen and sped away.

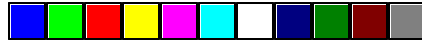
Tsara sprayed the bullets. Everyone scattered from the curb, dashing into the road to duck behind the wrecked vehicles. Sheridan and Russell leaped inside a bashed up SUV where they found the key still in the ignition. With the bullets clanging though the hood, Sheridan turned the key; the engine sounded much better than the SUV looked.

“2:20-2:19-2:18...”

“I've had about enough of Tsara,” said Sheridan, shifting the vehicle in gear.

“Me too,” said Russell, ducking when the bullets shattered the side window.

Tsara kept firing as she sprinted towards the others who'd knelt behind a barricade of twisted metal. Sheridan stomped on the gas pedal. The tires screeched. The SUV banged through a wall of debris and swerved towards the Arast droid. Sheridan slowed and steadied the vehicle, aimed the grill at Tsara, then pushed the pedal to the floor again. He and Russell shut their eyes as their big truck smashed Tsara into segments. Soon after, the SUV skidded and



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Russell jumped out.

“Come on!” he shouted, waving the others to the open doors.

“1:59-1:58-1:57...”

Treen sprinted with everyone else toward the mangled SUV, which she hoped would run long enough to get them out of the tunnel. While everyone else quickly piled inside, Treen glared down at Tsara’s shattered frame. Ariel jogged up and put his arm around her. “Come on, Jazz,” he said quietly.

With everyone packed inside the sputtering vehicle, Sheridan swerved around the burned out helicopter, then continued towards the exit.

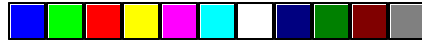
“Hurry,” Russell shouted, pointing ahead. “That other door’s goin’ down!”

“Don’t worry we’ll make it,” said Sheridan, who zigzagged past the remaining debris and sped into the clear.

The vehicle reached the end of the tunnel then zipped beneath the descending rock. Sheridan switched on the headlights, the SUV bouncing over the terrain and into the darkness. Then, as if the vehicle’s sole purpose was to get them out of there, the engine died. Everyone jumped out.

“:04-:03-:02-:01-:00. Destruction in progress.” Those were the last words from the computerized voice.

No one knew what to expect. Would there be a huge explosion? Would the mountain collapse? In any case, the group sprinted away before the mountain door closed and whirred forward like a gigantic trash compactor. It might’ve moved slowly from the start, but the door picked up speed, tearing down every light and slamming everything on the tunnel road backwards. Treen realized now that the droids at the opposite end stood waiting to be crushed between the two monstrous slabs of stone. Moments later, a tremendous boom echoed from the darkness of the tunnel. The ground rumbled; anything left inside would’ve been flattened.



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## Chapter 41

All the lights had gone out near the tunnel entry after the mountain doors had collided. It was cold. The moonlight allowed Ariel, Russell and Sheridan, to collect firewood, keeping everyone warm until they found another vehicle to drive back to Mallyview.

Treen had walked away from the fire. She stood near the tree line and stared up at the moon. If she didn't get back to Mallyview and stop Lance, he'd take the Merafuel formula from Garrison Blue's home and she didn't want think about what he'd do then.

"Jazz, you all right?" he said, hand on her shoulder.

"Yes, Ariel. Guess I don't have to tell you what I'm thinking about."

"Cars are scattered everywhere and Russell and Sheridan are checkin' for keys. If they don't find any I'll start hiking back to the Humvee."

"Lance will be gone by then. We have to find a way to catch him — "

Treen and Ariel had heard crackling twigs and turned around. The silhouettes of Russell and Sheridan moved closer and they pushed something up the slight incline.

"We found a motorcycle," said Sheridan, panting over to them. "It ain't gonna hold everybody, but I figured if we don't find a decent car, one of us could ride it back to the Humvee."

"Good idea," said Ariel reaching for the helmet in Russell's hands. When he had it, Treen took it from him and put it on.

"Oh man," said Russell, turning away.

"Naw, homegirl, you ain't goin' after Lance by yourself."

"Do you even know how to ride that thing?" asked Russell. Treen tightened the chinstrap, sat on the dirt bike, then lifted Sheridan's palms off of the handlebars.

Adjusting her fingers around the grips, she studied the bike carefully.

"Yamaha YZ426F. 426cc, liquid-cooled, 4-stroke with Titanium



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valves — probably a 2001 or 2002 model,” she said. Mouths wide open, the men stared at each other.

“Doesn’t matter anyway,” said Russell. We couldn’t get it started.”

“You’ve flooded the engine. With a four stroke, you can’t get excited and start kicking away. She demonstrated: “Find neutral, engage the hotstart and decompressor, kick it a couple times, then release — ”

Veroom-veroom-veroom!

“Tell my parent’s I love them,” she shouted, “And keep searching for a car. If you find one, meet me at Garrison Blue’s residence. If not, I’ll be back for you!”

“Yeah, but pick us up in a car,” said Sheridan handing her his gloves, “We saw how you left that helicopter!”

“Jazz, be careful!”

“Fry him!” said Russell.

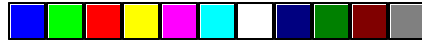
Treen patted the flare gun, tucked in the holster on her hip, then sped down the moonlit trail.

Since she’d been traveling with no headlight, Treen was fortunate to drive onto Blue Neptune’s freshly paved road, which wined downhill and led right out of the Grevelton Hills. Later, with the cold air numbing her face, the Yamaha buzzed through Grevelton City towards the highway to Mallyview.

The big digital sign outside Mallyview National Bank, displayed a temperature below 40 and a time above midnight. Treen was only minutes from Garrison Blue’s neighborhood and prayed that Lance’s car would still be there.

When she arrived at Garrison Blue’s enormous property, Treen shut off the engine and coasted to a halt in front of a 10-foot wrought iron gate, which stood opened. She hung the helmet on the handlebars, removed Sheridan’s oversized gloves, then slinked between the gates.

Just as Mrs. Blue had mentioned, several structures were situated across the clean-cut property. Treen continued to jog down the cobblestone driveway for over three minutes and the four-columned, brick mansion was still two hundred yards away. She ran faster.



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Now, she could see a spectacular marble fountain, flowing at the center of the roundabout driveway. It probably cost more than a house on St. Barron Road. The water sprinkled down on the wide rear end of a black Porsche 911 — a car that belonged to Lance Ruof.

Treen reached the fountain then glanced up at the illuminated Knight sitting atop his horse and extending his sword. She dipped her hand in the cool water then splashed her face. She then took the flare gun from its holster, checked inside the Porsche, then and crept towards the front door of the mansion. The columns towered in front of several arched windows and the roof seemed to reach the stars.

Lance must've forgotten to take Garrison Blue's house keys after he'd killed him because the front door had been ripped from its hinges. Treen crept inside, all the way to the large foyer.

Bits of dried mud curved across the white marbled floor and led into then living room. The sprinkled dirt probably fell from Lances shoes when he stormed through the house. Treen passed a giant chandelier hanging above a snake-like staircase then studied the statues, paintings, and nineteenth century furniture until she saw the fireplace, standing half open like a door.

Treen approached the fireplace then paused to stare at the family photos atop the ledge. Suddenly, the fireplace door opened all the way out. Treen fled behind a bookshelf, as Lance Ruof crawled out laughing, briefcase in hand.

"I've got it!" Merafuel is all mine!" he shouted.

"Hello Lance," said Treen, stepping out into the open with the flare gun aimed at his head.

"Little Einstein! What brings you to this materialistic mansion?"

"Finally we agree on something. Now give me the formula."

"I need it!"

"Why? You've destroyed the other droids."

"They had too many faults! I'm going to start all over just like professor Mera did when things didn't pan out. This time, Tsara and I will design and build them ourselves — without flaws!"

"I'm sorry Lance. Tsara won't be helping you with anything. She's been shut down."





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“You destroyed her!”

“No, it wasn’t me but she’s gone just the same.”

“I will build her again myself!”

“You’re not leaving here with that formula.”

“Fire that flare at me and we both perish.”

“If you force me to, then that’s how it’s going to be.”

“Out to save the world, are you?”

“No. Just Mallyview and Grevelton. That’s all I have energy for at the moment.”

“Suppose I give you the formula. What do you suggest I do then?”

“If you programmed the other droids to shut down, I’m sure you can do the same for yourself.”

“No chance,” he said, moving towards her.

Backing away, Treen had been paying too much attention to Lance and too little attention to the area behind her. She stumbled over a table, dropped the flare gun, then watched it slide across the floor.

“It is a complete joy to see you finally mess up,” he said.”

Treen looked up in time to see the bottom of Lance’s shoe barreling down on her. She rolled clear and crawled after the flare gun, but he grabbed her ankles and yanked her towards him. After a short struggle, he pulled her up by her jacket.

“Having fun?” he asked, before hurling her several feet, where she bounced off a couch and fell next to a glass-top coffee table.

Lance marched towards her. She slid herself under the table and lay shielded by the loveseat. She peered through the glass to see which side he’d come from but it was difficult because the tabletop was littered with items, like a bust of Socrates and an open book that lay face down. Treen leaned closer for a glimpse of the chapter: *Asimov’s Laws of Robotics*.

Lance walked up to the couch. Treen slid out from the other side of the table, sprang up, then sprinted to grab the discarded briefcase.

“Give me that formula!” Lance shouted, giving chase.

Treen saw the dark silhouette of the flare gun beneath the French doors and dropped the briefcase. She didn’t need the Merafuel for-



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mula, and she definitely didn't need Lance Ruof chasing her any longer.

The moment that Lance stopped to reach down for the briefcase, Treen began her slide across the floor. She reached the flare gun, grabbed it while still sliding, then turned over on her stomach. Now facing the Ecnal leader, she stopped her momentum and aimed as he charged toward her.

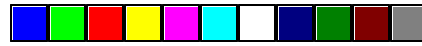
Treen fired. Like a miniature missile, the flare soared out. In a split second, it struck Lance directly in the chest, knocking him backwards and onto the floor, where he shook violently. Treen froze, staring at the sparks that shot from his burning frame.

Surprisingly, Lance staggered to his feet. Still holding the briefcase, the disoriented droid's entire shell caught fire and began slamming into the walls. Treen smashed through the French doors, realizing that the droid was about to blow.

After she'd hobbled up from the glass, Treen hurried away from the house and jogged past the fountain. She struggled another twenty yards before she began to stagger; exhausted, she fell face down in the grass.

Moments later, a deafening explosion tore through the house. The ground shook. The mansion burned. However, Treen didn't look back because she knew Lance was gone.

And she was too tired.



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### Chapter 42

Does anybody have scissors?" shouted Edwin, as Elizabeth wiped the lint from the back of his sharp looking black tuxedo.

"I'll find some, sir," said a member of the staff inside the fabulous Grevelton Bookvilla. With the Grand Opening only minutes away, Edwin would need something to cut the red ribbon with.

Ariel and Russell's tuxedos looked just as sharp, and they helped Finns organize the refreshment table. Russell glared out the window, wondering what was keeping Treen and Samantha; his question was answered when the people waiting outside suddenly began to clap. Samantha had parked her car near the curb and Treen stepped out.

"*Oh man,*" said Russell, gazing at Treen's sleek lavender dress and of course, the matching headband.

"She looks great," added Regina who'd walked up beside Ariel and took his hand.

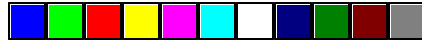
Treen smiled all the way inside, but frowned when she noticed someone missing from the family and friends who gathered near the entryway.

"Where is Sheridan?" she asked, still searching the place.

"He hasn't shown up," said Edwin, "But we'll have to get on with the opening." With the crowd practically begging to come in, she knew her father was right — but she didn't know that he had a Sheridan surprise for her!

All three levels of the elegant store were packed, especially the third floor café, where the vibrant atmosphere was more like the opening of an amusement park.

Treen sat at a table in the café sipping vanilla coffee with all her friends from Mallyview including Mrs. Wellbay, who'd just arrived and surprised Russell. Treen had also mentioned why she arrived late: she'd gone with Gail Blue to meet her mother upon her release from the mental hospital.



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“Good Afternoon everyone!” Edwin shouted. “Welcome to Bookvilla and the Bookvilla Café! Before we continue, I’d like to introduce you to the new manager. If you live in Grevelton, you probably already know him. Here he is, Sheridan Coswell!”

Everyone stood and cheered as big Sheridan strolled in. He looked uncomfortable in his tuxedo, but his smile was relaxed as ever. Treen, unaware of Sheridan’s hiring, smiled at her parents, then walked over to congratulate one of the best friends she’d ever had.

After Sheridan’s thank you speech, it was time to party. Russell surprised everyone when he grabbed a microphone and ran up to the stage. Luckily, he didn’t sing. Instead, he stepped in front of the instruments to announce the band that he’d somehow arranged to play. “Get ready everybody, here’s *Helmet!*”

When *Page Hamilton* picked up his guitar and blazed the first chords of a song called *Unwound*, the younger crowd sprang from their chairs. The older crowd? Well, they just stared at one another.

Treen stood gracefully from her chair. She managed to glide through the moshers and over to Russell, who flailed in every direction. Calmly, she reached out and took his hands. Then, in perfect rhythm, they began to waltz and the older crowd sprang from their seats to join in.

THE END