

Judgment 31: Book One of the Soulé Chronicles

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Office of Soulé Fleet Court

Manual Transmittal

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*Background: As per policy directive of Fleet Regulations, Section 193 (SFLO-A-MD-97-04 PH-2035) of the Bymer Standard: The identity of the translator or writer of any other literature generated by Soulé Fleet officers, while currently serving aboard a Fleet vessel or in the Fleet Reserves, are required to make their name a matter of public record. Acting Captain Johnathan Rove and Chief Engineer Eugene O'Neil of the Nemesis-class Soulé vessel, the **Phoenix**, had petitioned Soulé Fleet Court (case number 0987-BI-Triump_45) to consider **Section 2483** of the **Powers Act** on behalf of the*

writer, citing the freedom of confidentiality of key strategic officers, which allows for names of fleet officers to withheld from the public, if such record would put fleet officers in possible physical harm. Over the strong objections made by Captain Rove and Chief Engineer O'Neil, **Admiral Eugene Munro** was the deciding vote overriding the above named petition. In keeping with Admiral Munro's orders the courts officially declared that **Chief Medical and Science Officer Adam's** name be made public record. Adam is currently stationed aboard the **Phoenix**, the designated flagship of the Fleet, translated the following **Judgment 31** memory strings, based on intensive translation of **Judgment 31** encrypted crystalis logs. It needs to be noted that Adam is the first, and only known stable, artificially seeded being, which survived physically and mentally intact in the highly controversial **Desluisse Seeding Project**, which attempted to create life out of artificial genetic and biomechanical seed hybrids. All other seeded beings have either chosen to be self-aborted, or are currently being housed at **Soulé Fleet Medical in San Sabain Maximum Security Sanitarium**. Due to the overly harsh and fluctuating natural process of seeding most seeded individuals have ceased to exist without medical intervention. Those few seeded individuals that were able to survive the traumatic seeding process had proven to be highly mentally unstable, showing extreme narcissistic, borderline and homicidal tendencies, and now are housed for their and societies' safety at **Soulé Fleet Medical in San Sabain Maximum Security Sanitarium**, in Rye, New Haven. **Soulé Fleet Ensign James Adragna reporting.**

Translator's Note: This is the very first translated manuscript of the 'Soulé Chronicles', which have struck a mythical cord in the imaginations of the people across the known

allied Fleet worlds. This first transcript surrounds the founder of Soulé, Eddie Green, also known as the 'Savior of Soulé' by the nomadic tribes of Canar. The following account was recorded by Judgment 31 in a technique based on virtual memory strings, which are in essence the biochemical collective memories and feelings of actual events, as they were lived by the inhabitants of Soulé two hundred spans ago. No extensive background information is needed, since this is the very first of the recorded 'Soulé Chronicles'. Briefly, this chronicle deals with the enigmatic hero Eddie Green, the so-called 'Savior of Soulé', and the founder of Soulé. It is also the story of how the remaining secret combination of the Illuminati lead by an infamous arch enemy, attempted to conquer the prison planet of Rouge - later renamed Soulé by Eddie Green, as a symbol of a new way of life. Eddie arises from criminal beginnings, with the help of Judgment 31 and some of his close friends, to defend the people of Soulé from the grips of a powerful warlord named Dameck Hedeon. Since this is the very first accessible Eddie Green file, the following memory string is highly reliable. I take personal responsibility for any mistranslations. - Soulé Chief Medical and Science Officer Adam.

PROLOUGE:

Eddie Green tried his best to ignore the overwhelming sense of foreboding that left his stomach in knots. He knew that he shouldn't even consider bringing the antique 9mm gun, but he also knew that he couldn't take a chance and go out unprotected. Green didn't make his choice lightly, deeply considering that most of his recent choices were starting to come back to haunt him. Eddie felt like he was a magnet for bad luck lately,

powerless to stop it sticking to him like some karmic static cling. After hours of agonizing over the pros and cons he came to the unsatisfactory conclusion that if he was going to chance a brief moment on the streets he couldn't go out unprotected, no matter the further personal danger he was putting himself in.

Eddie tried not to be the type of man who allowed the tendrils of fate to run his life, but it was hard to break free from the thoughts that he had somehow damned himself with his recent actions. Green attempted to rationalize away all the misery and desperation he felt welting inside of him as being merely an illogical impulse in a dangerous situation. But on some subconscious level of understanding, he was prepared to pay the ultimate price for his deeds for the remainder of his life, however long that ended being. It always seemed that when Eddie prepared for the worst, it usually happened and then some.

Green scored an antique gun at a nearly abandoned Army surplus novelty shop, forcing an old Army buddy to work on it until it was in fine working order. *It was never meant to be used again*, he reminded himself. But because of the ban on high-tech handguns, Eddie was forced to rely on such a weapon. *The gun definitely wasn't as safe as a laser or neural weapon, but at least it looked menacing*, Eddie thought. The gun was sleek enough to easily hide under a layer of thick clothing, and gleamed from the lovingly polished blue metal surface. The handle was made out of synthetic walnut, not Eddie's favorite choice, but it contoured well in his smallish hands.

Eddie carefully wrapped the well-oiled weapon into a tan makeshift holster, which he fashioned out of worn, cracked leather he ripped from the couch in his room, and tucked it between the crevice of his back and buttocks. Green reasoned that it would

be less noticeable there, considering that most men go out of their way to avoid looking at that part of the male anatomy.

Eddie felt more at ease as the weight of the gun pressed against his body, assuring him of the sheer power of the weapon. Green spent a few hours drawing the weapon and finding the easiest way to shed the holster, in concert with a flurry of martial art moves, until the sweat dripped down his well-muscled back. Green's breathing was labored at the end of his exercise, making him realize that he was woefully out of shape. *There was a time when I was in the service that I could spend the entire day in martial arts training, and still have the energy to cruise the ladies at the base's dry bar.* Eddie was reluctant to admit to himself that it bothered him a lot that he didn't notice the decline in his physical health. He would have to quicken reliance on the cold hard steel of an antique gun if he expected a chance at survival.

Eddie further concealed the shape of gun under his black turtleneck sweater and flowing black trench coat, which he bought on a whim from a weasel-faced man in a desolate alley. Somehow the coat didn't have the right sort of vibe. In Eddie's present state of mind, where he searched frantically for anything to give him an edge and often found bad luck in the most common of objects, everything took on deeper significance. Green knew in his heart that he shouldn't go out now, but his nerves were so raw that he couldn't stand to wait much longer.

Green was fairly average looking on all levels except for his eyes, which were the only physical feature he considered an asset because of his ability to easily manipulate them to appear soft and warm, and in a fleeting instant forge them into penetrating cold, hard steel. Most men were stunned to find that they couldn't gaze long into the abyss of

Eddie's eyes, realizing innately that they hinted at a hidden nature better left alone. Those few who were brave enough to bring up the subject of Eddie's presence found themselves at a loss of words, although the image of a ravenous beast barely kept at bay crowded the mind's eye. At certain moments Eddie had to remind himself to tone down his presence to avoid detection, which was nearly impossible when he was angry. Everyone that crossed Green's path for some duration learned to tread lightly, and not without good reason.

Eddie tried to ease his frantic mind by wasting time cruising the tri-level streets of Elling, in the upper most region of the Tullond Province, wondering at the mosaic of the past and the future evident in the city's architecture. Far below Eddie, the ground level of Elling still displayed a jumble of narrow streets and dagger-like soaring buildings made out of brick and glass, some dating hundred of years old. Many of the aged structure were marred by a kaleidoscope of original graffiti and old neon billboard advertisements, proudly displaying them like a badge of honor and connection to the past. The streets were lined with halogen street lamps that emitted an eerie yellow hue on the lonely and wet nocturnal roads and sidewalks, begging for Green's attention. Lower Elling had always reminded Green of a simpler time. *Maybe I'm wrong. Everyone thinks that simpler times were found in the past.*

As far as Eddie was concerned, Elling's mid-level was a Mecca for the ever expanding youth culture, and those who were deluded enough to try to still fit in. It had an active nightlife, too numerous shopping centers and overly crowded mini-malls. Generally the only adults that were to be found were the shop owners and the decreasing security forces.

The city's upper level was the backbone of Elling's government and business power structure, and the pinnacle of modern 2250's society. The upper level never seemed to close down, and was crowded beyond belief. Eddie had always hated this section of Elling, but that was where he was forced to venture.

In between the city's tri-levels were tracks of yellow and blue-checkered hover grids, which were permeable only to registered transmitters, allowing hovercrafts to phase into traffic at different levels, while acting as a protective barrier for the patrons using the sidewalks at the numerous intersections. The constant hum of the force fields were the only clue that the buildings and holographic parks, which were specifically designed to allow for natural sunlight to filter to the city's other levels, didn't hover by magic in the midair.

Eddie cranked his thrust to power the hover car onto the upper most level, barely avoiding being hit by a sleeker hover craft with faster responding stabilizers. Eddie cursed inwardly at his misfortune at finding such a worthless vehicle.

Surrounding Green were sheer pyramid-shaped buildings with their mock jade and porcelain skins, with vibrant scarlet and purple flowers and black Balle vines that crowded up all the available median and sidewalk space. Most people, except for the exceptionally rich and eccentric, didn't live within Elling city limits, regarding it only a place of commerce. Eddie had always secretly marveled at the lax people working and strolling through the metropolis within those amazing buildings, the interior walls littered with random and exotic illustrations of Gruaballe, and other neighboring planets.

Eddie Green knew in his heart that he wasn't cut out for the business world. He found that he was more content to find a niche in the fringes of society working various

odd, often illegal, jobs. Prospective employers just had to look at Eddie to sense the sheer power of an untamable animal, quickly forgetting that even animals desperately sought for a sense of an order in life.

Green tried his hand at being a member of the military, which to him seemed to be a pointless endeavor considering the rarity of organized warfare. Eddie eventually pushed the envelope so far that he was eventually drummed out of the military in an embarrassing public trial, rendering all his intricate military training useless. *Where was I going to ply that kind of training in a world that hadn't seen a real military engagement in well over a hundred years?* Eddie asked himself over and over all the time.

Because he was unable to find his place in a civilized society, Eddie irrationally blamed everyone that had even the slightest hand, imagined or not, in determining his fate. After several disgruntled years, Eddie found that he could barely tolerate the company of people, especially those that shared his disillusionment. Finally he was forced to seriously face who he truly was, at those dark, solitary moments. At first he tried to ignore his own loneliness, and then he eventually had to learn to live his life on his terms. Green found that he couldn't help but to hate a society that didn't care personally for him, as irrational as that feeling was to him.

Green boldly peered out of his hover car's tinted green window, searching for anything out of the norm. His car's AI sound system was turned down low, and tuned to all the local stations simultaneously for key phrases or words, in case of a breaking news story. The car's scanners searched all the police and paramilitary frequencies frantically, bombarding Eddie with searing white noise. Eddie hoped that he could pick out anything important from the scanners or the AI sound system, but he seriously doubted it. The

worst thing about being on the lamb was the fine utopian-minded citizens of Elling had an annoyingly high degree of vigilance, which made Green an enemy to all except the fringe. And the fringe was a quickly dying breed.

Eddie slid his blackberry colored car into a narrow alleyway. The very act of doing so could be suspicious considering that there was plenty of public parking available, but Green counted on the sheer number of people to mask his movement. He had to take the chance because he recently acquired the vehicle. It wasn't exactly stolen, just conveniently borrowed from his landlord. Eddie was confident that he could smooth over any hard feelings with her with the sure steps of a salesman, commenting on her raven black hair as he combed his fingers through her nappy hair, and acknowledging her beautiful visage before showing her a good time.

He quickly made his way across the street and reluctantly entered the two-storied dry bar, slamming the door behind him. The bar was called the Grisly Case, originally named for the high number of lawyers that used to patron the joint, and not for the refuge that clung to the bar booths and chairs now. Green let his eyes become accustomed to the weakly lit interior before he committed himself from entering and walking between the booths that lined both sides of the bar, and settled on the imitation distressed leather barstool, directly in front of the bartender. She glared at Eddie, in what he guessed was her warmest greeting to strangers. *Sends chills up the spine. Good old mom used to look at me in the same way.*

“Name the poison,” she said in a voice hinting at a smoker’s gravelly undertone. *Again she reminds me of mom, Eddie thought.*

“Sorry to say, but you had better make a Stanley,” Eddie replied, barely holding back a grin, as he drew out the forged azure debit card he had forged, barring a hologram image of his face and thumbprint in the upper right-hand corner. “By chance is Enix around?”

“Buy a lady a drink,” asked the blue haired elderly woman in a rehearsed speech, as she slid into the barstool next to Eddie. Thin, seriously inflamed spider-webbed legs poked out of a pair of leather mini-skirt.

“Can’t. Mom barely lets me out of the house. Wouldn’t trust me with dough to treat a classy lady, like yourself.” *Mom was quickly becoming a theme with me. Wonder what a shrink would say about that?*

“Mom?” she replied confusedly. She grabbed Eddie’s strong hand and pressed it between her sagging breasts, edging closer. She smelled of heavily stale cigarettes and old lilac perfume. “Name’s Cliss.”

“Cliss?”

“Yes,” Cliss said, practically purring.

“Do you know a man named Enix?”

“Can’t say that I do.” Cliss daringly wetted her bluish-gray lips with her shriveled tongue.

“Then kindly remove your hand, before I break it off and shove it...”

“Hey you,” the bartender yelled, trying to head off a confrontation. Something about Eddie suddenly bothered her. She couldn’t put a finger on it, but she learned to trust her instincts. And her instincts whispered to her that something was wrong with him. She tried to appear confident as she leaned over the scarred bar counter. But she knew it

wasn't working, even when her small fingers slid around the handle of a plasma gun hidden under the counter. One look in Eddie harsh eyes, told her he knew she was reaching for a weapon. She kept just enough distance away from Green, so that if he suddenly lunged she could stand at least a chance. "Enix's in the corner."

Cliss pouted, completely unaware of how close she was to danger. "Too bad. If you change your mind, I'll be around. Just to let you know, I could have been worth it. Let me know if you change your mind."

"Sure you are," Eddie growled, jerking his hand free. Green walked to the middle of the bar, a deep scowl creasing his face, searching the dark candle lit recesses for Enix.

Green was sure that Enix wasn't the man's real name, but he insisted Eddie call him that, hoping to elevate his own reputation. Green had seen his type more times than he cared to remember. They thought if they believed hard enough that they were bold and strong, it would somehow magically be bestowed upon them. The only reason Eddie allowed himself to deal with his Enix's obviously overly inflated ego was because he was quickly running out of useable contacts.

Eddie's intense gaze finally settled on Enix, who was in a corner booth with his hands sliding underneath the short skirt of a depressed looking blond girl, who in Green's estimation couldn't have been more than sixteen. *Probably even younger.* Her cheeks were sunken, and her eyes were completely devoid of life. As Green approached the booth, the musky smell that enveloped the girl's tattered clothing, which had to be at least a week old, nearly overwhelmed Eddie. He had to force himself to breath through his mouth to avoid retching. She stared uncomprehending at her watch, transfixed by the hands. *Time was money.*

“Get lost,” Eddie ordered the girl. She stared dumbly at him, slowly drawing herself out of her hallucinating daze, before stumbling to her quivering feet, smiling weakly as she tried to rush away.

Enix sat back into the red vinyl booth and slammed a heavy fist onto the table. He tried his best to hide his anger, trying his best to appear to lazily regard Green. “She leaves when I say she leaves. Get that Eddie?”

Enix pulled his greasy long blond hair around his dirty ears. He stared at Green with the side of his tilted face exposing only one of his furtively eyes, bobbing his weak chin in defiance. Eddie barely suppressed the urge to throttle Enix for his insolence, not anticipating that Enix would get the nerve to so openly challenge his authority. *Snot thinks he has me at a disadvantage.*

“We need to talk.”

Enix smiled smugly. “No problem, bro.”

“What’s the word?”

Enix shook his head. “You were told to hang tight. That’s how it works. You stay low until I say. Got it?”

Eddie grimaced. “Been having troubles staying low. It’s not my style.”

The bartender ambled her way to the booth and set a tall yellowish drink down, as Eddie slid into the red sticky leather chair. She hesitantly walked away, memorizing Eddie’s features just in case she needed to talk to the cops and wondering what a regular like Enix had in common with Green.

“I’m living in a rat hole. Ever done that?”

“Nope. I is high class. You is low class.” Enix smiled gleefully, gaining more and more courage as the time passed. He sat forward, anticipating an opportunity for another wisecrack.

“Enix. A word of advice, if you don’t mind. You think you’re tough, but you’re not. So stop being a pest and jerking me around. I could lose my patience real quick,” Eddie said, snapping his fingers. “Got it?”

“If you weren’t money, I’d slit your throat bro.”

Eddie concentrated on his breathing as he had been taught to do by some nameless counselor, counting the number of individual breaths, as he tried to clear his impulsive thoughts of laming Enix. Green was able to get his anger under control. But just barely. “Hear from Larz?”

“You owe me an apology first.”

Green quickly surveyed the bar to see if anyone was watching, and was happily satisfied that they were being ignored. Eddie slid his hand to his back, drawing the gun into his nimble hand and jamming it as hard in Enix’s crotch as possible in one fluid movement, almost laughing as Enix slammed his head into the edge of the table. Enix’s eyes bulged out, as he tried desperately to fill his deflated lungs with meager, shallow breaths of air, trying to ignore the all-consuming pain. Eddie was slightly disturbed that he had become nearly giddy about the pain he could inflict. *I shouldn’t be losing control so quickly. ‘Specially not over a weasel like Enix.*

“You want an apology little man?” Eddie clenched his teeth together, feeling the tautness of his facial muscles, as he drew his enraged face closer to Enix. “I apologize

you little turd. Accept it or don't accept it. I don't care," Eddie said, spittle flying from his mouth.

"Easy like, bro. This isn't worth it. We needs to get along," Enix said, trying his best to sooth Eddie.

Enix tried to hide the horror he felt in the pit of his stomach as he realized that he wasn't in control as he lead himself to believe, but Eddie was. Although not in control of his emotions, which made him especially dangerous.

Eddie reluctantly placed his gun in his lap, wanting it handy just in case he had to make another point. A part of Green wished that Enix had pushed him beyond the point of no return. He wanted desperately to be doing anything, even wasting a disrespectful punk like Enix. Eddie wasn't in complete control of his emotions, and both Enix and him knew it. They sat for few moments looking through each other, weighing their own individual precarious situations.

Enix finally took a chance and broke the silence, saying, "Larz not around. Hasn't been around."

The bartender came back, suddenly materializing near Eddie's side, and said, "There had better not be trouble here, boys. Better order another round and try to enjoy yourselves. Remember that we have a two drink minimum."

Enix startled. He was so intent on Eddie that he didn't hear the bartender. "Two of the same. There's a tip if you leave us be."

"By all means," the bartender said, waving her pudgy arms dramatically, bowing deeply. "You wish is my command."

Enix handed over his debit card, watching Eddie's movement at all times. Judging the bartender's reaction, Enix must have accidentally tipped heavily. It was a mistake in Eddie's opinion. When in a dive like this it was better to under pay than to hand over too much credit. Too much money made people suspicious.

Green watched as the bartender ambled away, noticing for the very first time the three well-dressed men in the three dimensional mirror, hanging low over the bar. The bartender approached one of the clean-shaven men to take their order, nodding toward Eddie's table in annoyance. Everything seemed to flow into motion, as ever fiber in Eddie's being attuned to his environment.

"Enix. You rat." Green's voice sounded too slow to him, as if muffled in time.

"I thought we were cool, Ed."

"Did you check your trail? Anyone follow you," Green interrogated.

Sensing Eddie's anxiety, the bartender went behind the bar and began to dig for her weapon, realizing that something was amiss.

Eddie noted that as soon as the men stood they and tried to triangulate Eddie in a good shooting position.

Enix looked at the men. He slid slowly away from Green, as sweat began to pour off his chilled forehead and the blood drained from his body. "I swear I checked, Ed. You got to believe me. I swear!"

"Eddie. Never Ed or Edward." Eddie Green leaped onto the counter top, firing a round into Enix's chest in one fluid motion. It was a mistake in judgment, Eddie realized.

I need to be in complete control of myself, no an animal lashing out.

As Eddie dropped to the floor he bolted directly toward the middleman, who was smaller, fatter and balder than his companion. Green fired several rounds in stride, hoping to clear a path.

As the man crumpled to the ground, Eddie vaulted over him, catching his feet on the man's flailing feet. Green managed to stumble back to his feet.

The remaining men drew their weapons, as Eddie vaulted over the bar, crashing into the wall and upsetting a shelf of thick glasses. Eddie fell on his back, quickly squeezing a hurried round that missed the bartender as she rose from underneath the bar counter with a gray neural pistol.

Aim for the mass, Green chided himself. Don't try for anything fancy, just aim for the middle of the body.

Eddie squeezed another shot. The bartender flailed her arms helplessly as she tried to regain her balance as a round clipped through her ample throat. Blood sprayed onto the bar counter, and the cigarette laden floor. *Okay, maybe just this once,* Eddie thought.

Grinning with sheer sadistic pleasure, Eddie took careful aim at the stunned bartender's head and fired a shot. He watched with sickening fascination as both blood and gray matter showered the air with a fine mist.

The noxious gray smoke poured into Eddie's unprotected eyes and seared his lungs as a hail of shredding laser fire quickly set the bar on fire. Green fired blindly through the bar as he leaped to his agile feet, hoping to put some distance between himself and his unknown assailants.

Screams erupted sporadically within the bar, as the nervous patrons realized that they were in the midst of a battle. Eddie suspected his assailants were police or even possibly a crack commando group, despite the fact that they seemed totally apathetic toward the bar's patrons. Eddie wondered very briefly if he was being targeted for execution.

"Hold your fire, you idiots. Hold your fire!" a deep baritone voice commanded from the bar's entrance.

The room grew intensely quiet, except for an occasional whimper from the patrons. Eddie dropped below the level of the bar counter and searched frantically around him for an avenue of escape, sensing a doorway and a set of steps at the end of the bar counter. Although the doorway was fairly close, and Green felt he could easily make it, he was reluctant to do so because the steps appeared to be going to the second level.

"Green? You alive? No one else has to get hurt. On my word I'll bring you in alive."

"Really," Eddie replied coolly. "I just give up, and we become dear, sweet friend?"

"I'm your only real chance you got Green," the baritone voice reasoned. "Do you really believe that you can walk out of here alive without me? These fine boys are just waiting to cut you down. It's pretty bad when cops are willing to do that, don't you think Green?"

"What's your name cop," Eddie said, hoping to buy just enough time so he could eject his gun's clip quietly and count the remaining rounds.

"Lion Sarna. Shall I call you Eddie?"

You have got to be kidding me, Eddie thought. Shall I lay out the tea and crumpets so we can discuss the situation.

“Sure.” Eddie slapped the clip home and pulled the slide back, chambering a round. Crouching as he ran, Green fired toward the baritone voice. He didn’t miss a beat as he quickened his stride, running out of bullets midway to the door. Eddie either made it, or he didn’t, it was just that simple.

Bottles of biodegradable synthetic alcohol and shards of holographic mirror exploded off the bar’s shelves, behind as Green hurtled a burning, fallen table. The entire bar wall quickly became engulfed into a raging inferno as the spilled liquid added fuel to bar counter’s embers.

Green ran up the flight of stairs, seeing a burly human-shaped fleeting shadow at the landing leading up to another flight of stairs. Someone had obviously tried to flank Green from behind, but quickly rethought his actions when the gunfire erupted and retreated upstairs in safety. *Probably too close to retirement, thought Eddie in frustration.*

As Eddie rounded the staircase’s corner, an old man drew his pistol from his arthritic hip. Green charged up the narrow staircase, as the thin walls behind Green seemed to be collapsing from the heat. *Mind playing tricks on me.*

The pudgy man wasn’t able to draw his weapon out of his holster before Eddie slammed the heel of his gun into the man’s shocked face. Eddie heard an audible snap as the man’s nose crumpled, spurting blood down his sizable, broad chin. The officer dropped, sliding down the steps until he slammed into the landing, and twitched from shock from the savageness of the attack.

Eddie threw his useless weapon down the stairwell, exchanging it for the officer's laser pistol. Black smoke rushed up the stairwell, as the wail of police and emergency converged on the bar.

Green only spotted the trap door above the unmade queen-sized bed from the landing because of the cool draft. A small, shaky ladder with a broken bottom run hung below the trap door. *The cop probably got in that way, thought Eddie glumly.*

There was nothing worse than a senseless death, Eddie thought. He seriously considered going back for the feeble officer, as the fire that must have been consuming the bar overcame the entire building. *And since all I want to do is escape, the cop's death would seem pointless.*

At the last moment Eddie shrugged off his feeling to help the officer. He leaped onto the ladder, which groaned under Green's unexpected weight. He threw the trap door open wide, and rolled out on the roof. All around Eddie the police car's hovered at different vertical and horizontal lifts, not dependent on the civilian hover grids. Green raced across the sinking rooftop when he spotted the rusting rungs of the safety ladder, attached to the side of the building.

Eddie boldly leaped over the edge of the building as the roof finally gave way, grasping for the safety ladder as fell. Green looked down at the police crowded alleyway, feeling a twinge of foolishness. He was trapped. *One mistake and I'm a dead man, Eddie thought.*

"Anyone know a guy named Sarna?" Eddie yelled down to the men, trying to keep his voice light, hoping the crowd didn't yet know that they lost their own in a raid. Green didn't stand a chance if they did.

The police held their weapons steady. No one dared to speak or move, as Eddie's arm started to burn from the death grip he had on the rung. At any moment he was going to lose his hold. *Yup, they want me dead.*

Finally a tall man, with a mane of reddish-blond hair tore his way through the crowded alleyway. His penetrating blue eyes watched Eddie for any signs of deceit. "Don't you move Green. Don't you dare move, or I'll shoot you myself."

The pungent smell of desperation clung to the haggled, ghostly pale men as they straggled into the darkened abandoned warehouse's only unlocked entrance with their heavily armed bodyguards, afraid of whom they might see, and who might see them. This was the first time the very top echelon of the Illuminati had been summoned to meet face to face by their faceless and illusive leader, and there wasn't a single man here that didn't understand that implication. The Illuminati, the once worldwide feared secret combination of criminals, was quickly becoming an institution of the past. The reign of fear that they had all worked so hard for together was quickly unraveling by of all things a computer.

In the middle of the overly cool warehouse was a twenty chaired, well-polished, faux oak conference table. Place cards, pitchers of cold water and large carafes of coffee on top of an antique conference table were the only viewable objects that the surly men could see in the profoundly darkened room as they entered the building. The subtle whirl from small penlight lamps was barely noticeable as they hovered above the surface of the

conference table, barely highlighting small flat screens embedded in the table, allowing the furtive men to shroud themselves as much as possible in the darkness.

“Gentlemen, would you please take a seat,” a sultry woman’s voice urged, filling the air with possibilities.

The Illuminati cartel leaders reluctantly sat in their assigned chairs, fingering their various concealed weapons and regarded each other with suspicion. The keyed-up bulky bodyguards crowded closely behind their respective leaders, glaring at the rest of the men, expecting danger at any moment. To say that the Illuminati heralded from all walks of life was a grand understatement. Almost all of them came from the dwindling fringes of society. Suspected drug kingpins, organized crime celebrities, militiamen, politicians, were among the most recognizable members, but there were unknown others.

“Boss. It wouldn’t be good to stay too long,” whispered Jorgen Chocas’s personal bodyguard. “This could be a set up. Think it over boss.”

Jorgen Chocas shrugged his pudgy shoulders. His thin, greasy synthetically grown black hair was plastered to his head and his expensive two-piece suit was stained with sweat, despite the coolness of the room. “Relax, Gardel. The jigs already up and you just don’t know it.”

Gardel swallowed hard. Jorgen Chocas was right. Gardel had been afraid to go to sleep at night, taking refuge in the dense wooded area five miles away from his house, whenever he got spooked. Every neighborhood kid running through his ragged yard, and every passing vehicle, just served to escalate Gardel’s fears.

They said that Judgment 31 was tapped into all their communication systems, listening in anything that might be considered illegal by the Pangea legal system. They’re

probably right, Gardel considered. Some said the Judgment 31 was able hunt down the non-law-abiding fringe by their own men, which was definitely true, Gardel thought.

A dwindling few thought somehow Judgment 31 had become a deity, reading the intents and the minds of all the people, and was now weeding his garden, removing all the unrighteous people. Gardel wasn't sure about that one, but the number of the rouge few was dwindling so quickly, that soon no one with real weight would be left. All would be exiled to Rouge, or sentenced to the death or life without parole, if they were luck.

“We have no time to go around introducing each other,” the woman's voice said.

“Being that we have agreed to take the chance coming her, you should at least tell us your name,” baited a swarthy drug dealer, named Strass Laird.

“For your sake, my sake, and the sake of those you don't recognize here, you'll just have to remain in the dark. These are perilous times, and we need to count on each for our very survival.”

Jorgen Chocas stood, splaying his small, pudgy hands on the conference table. “If you don't have the balls to at least show yourself, then I think will be leaving.”

A small, attractive woman, with fiery raspberry-blond hair that cascaded over her shoulders, emerged from the darkness, as if she merely materialized from thin air. She wore a tight hunter green skirt and an even tighter business jacket. Laird took in the woman's figure. A small lusty smile caressed his face.

Her commanding, cool black eyes regarded Chocas with unbridled annoyance. “If it would make you feel more comfortable, here I am.”

“I think we should just treat each other as equals,” said Jorgen Chocas manipulatively, somewhat taken aback that the Illuminati was being lead by of all things ...a woman.

“But we are not all equals, Mr. Chocas,” she said. “For instance, I will be needing you much more than the rest of these people.”

A personal amber force field snapped on around Jorgen Chocas, anchoring him in place, as the woman deftly leaped to the middle of the board table, drawing a weapon a thin plasma pistol from behind her back.

“What the...” Chocas desperately strained against the force field.

The cold room flooded with misty droplets of gas, as the woman open fired on the Illuminati. Everyone in the room, including the Illuminati leaders, drew their small, concealed laser and plasma weapons, and began to fire at the woman and each other in panic. The powerful hand held lasers should have ripped the agile woman to shreds of indistinguishable organic matter, but they passed remarkably through her, slamming into the terrified Illuminati and their bodyguards. After a few brief minutes, as the dying claimed their last deadly breaths, the mist disappeared along with Jorgen Chocas’s force field.

The woman smiled gleefully, rocking back and forth on the balls of her impish feet. Her weapon magically disappeared was from her thin hands. “Now that was fun. Sometimes you have to thin the herd, so to speak. We have become weak, and now we need to be strong. Times require that. Don’t you agree Mr. Chocas?”

“You’re not human. All them guys thought you were real.”

“And they opened fire. Animals slaughtering other animals without a moment of consideration. I am truly amazed that your kindred have thrived so very, very long. But let me say, that you are far more perceptive than I thought you would be Mr. Chocas.” The woman smiled bewitchingly. “Thank you for that, Mr. Chocas...”

“A hologram? Made by Judgment 31?”

She shook her head angrily, as spittle flew from her pouting, red lips. The inner rage she must have felt at that moment became readily apparent as they filled her bewitching dead eyes. “You want your life! Ask me another idiotic question like that, and I’ll have your head served on a platter.”

Must be a stinking hologram, Jorgen Chocas thought briefly. Jorgen Chocas took a fraction of a second to consider what kind of deal was in the works. He held up a cautionary hand. “Yes. Of course I want my life.”

“Don’t worry. I just want to borrow a couple of your men...”

“Not many left. Gardel was the only one I truly trust. Now he’s gone,” Jorgen grouched. He glanced down at Gardel’s body, which had been cut cleanly in half with a laser sword.

“I don’t care if you have to do the deed by yourself,” the woman snarled.

“Which is?”

“You still have access to the penal space ship transport shipping yards?”

Jorgen nodded hesitantly. “You must know that I do,” Jorgen said.

“I need you to get a package aboard the Chrysalis. The Chrysalis is a prisoner transport ship.”

“I’m well aware of what the Chrysalis’ mission is. Had a lot of close friends on board. Now what is this package?”

“The package needs to be placed in the emergency cargo hold.”

“Not going to tell me what it is, are you? That all you want me to do?”

“That’s it,” she said with merry mirth.

“The package? How big is it?”

The woman sat at the edge of the conference table, crossing her shapely legs. Her right hand hesitated slight over a pool of blood that oozed from before Laird’s sunken head. “Under the conference table.” Slowly she allowed her fingertips to touch the congealing blood, making intricate web-like patterns.

Jorgen Chocas peered under the table and saw the large black metal package.

“What’s in the package ‘Nae.”

“‘Nae?” The woman’s face screwed in confusion.

“Misanae,” explained the Jorgen, as he tried to drag the package free.

“One of the daughters of Nocturne? Misanae. I rarely read the Prophets. I must say that I am surprised that you would be aware of such an archaic document,” she said, thoughtfully digesting his words.

“There is a lot of believers,” Chocas said.

“You included,” she said. “I guess one man’s devil is another’s angel.”

Jorgen Chocas tried to slowly pull the package free, not sure of what it contained. Finally he had to jerk the large package free. Chocas sighed deeply as he looked up for the woman, but she was gone. The blood on the table that would have been beneath her was congealed. He discovered the woman hadn’t been scrawling meaningless patterns,

but a name. *Palen*. *Where have I heard that name, Chocas asked himself, not really sure if he wanted to know the identity of the woman behind the Illuminati.* “Off to make another Misanaeian deal, oh my,” he said bitterly.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

The enormous orbital space penal colony hovered over the horizon of Pangea, like a small, industrial moon. Pangeans largely considered it a necessary, but unsightly junkyard beach ball eyesore, especially when the cloaking shields weren't working. It used Pangea's twin suns as its main energy source, collecting solar rays and winds from the outside shell covered with bio-engineered solar panels. The station was able to heal its own hull breeches, generally caused by a minefield of titanium space junk left over from prior space colonization attempts, using inertia shields and its' bio-engineered immune system.

The cavernous sphere penal colony was always kept cold inside, much to the dismay of the Prison staff and families, to keep the fission core temperature cool. Lining the

inner walls was a network of honeycomb cryogenic chambers holding a wide variety of prisoners, each electronically categorized for sentencing dates, prison terms, and court hearings with simple bar codes. Titanium-grated catwalks crisscrossed the middle of the entire facility, all eventually leading to the octagon-shaped core Prison guard station and medical facilities.

The emergency klaxons resounded through out the honeycombed penal colony. The oldest cryogenic penal medical storage room, aft Compartment 39-Sub V, was cold and barely illuminated with a soft blue light. A small group of men, dressed in black thermal Prison guard uniforms, ran in unison with their heavy stun weapons drawn across the metal catwalk, and into the stations small medical laboratory. Green personal force field shields glimmered and surrounded each brutish-looking man.

A small Hispanic woman, named Jessica Alvarez, impeccably dressed in a modern black two-piece suit with a metallic hunter green shirt and tie, sat peacefully at a small metal conference table, as several medical attendants and guards bustled around doing routine checkups and initializing the flying robotic CAT, to retrieve her client. Her raven hair was occasionally streaked with reddish-blond color and parted in the middle of her head. Jessica wore a pair of oval glasses, which lenses shimmered with eddies of colors, depending on her mood. Today her somber mood altered the lenses of her glasses into a kaleidoscope of muted earthen hues.

One of the older rectangular CATs, with pinchers at the front instead of the back, quickly dropped to a series of cryogenic holding cells, miles below the woman, and extracted a single holding cell. The Cat slowly drifted into the medical laboratory, laying the holding cell down on an enormous medical exam table. The holding cell was shaped

much like an old black vortex-class torpedo, except with control panels and ports on its' side, and a large frosted viewing window, giving a head to toe view of the cryogenically frozen man. Medical technicians ran over to the holding cell, and attached an array of tubes and neural translator wires to the shell.

“Do you need to know how to jack up?” asked an annoyed pasty-faced medical technician, looking down at his diagnostic touch pad.

“Are you talking to me?” asked Jessica. “Would you give me the due curtsey of at least looking at me.”

The pasty face man regarded Jessica with contempt. “A simple yes or no will work.”

“What is your problem?”

“Lawyers are unnecessary you know.”

Jessica's jaw tightened in defiance. “Everyone has the right to have an attorney and due process, even if the great and powerful Judgment is around.”

Judgment 31 was a powerful judicial computer with not only artificial intelligence (AI), but with what appeared to be true empathy. It was said that Judgment 31 was able to render true justice, because he was able to not only read all imprinted memories, but an individual's emotional states leading up to the crime. Some regarded Judgment 31 as being beyond a mere AI judicial computer networks and something bordering a spiritual counselor, although they would rarely openly admit to those feelings. Judgment 31 had no true form, in the sense that he was actually made up of an unknown number of flowing network appendages, some of which were located on the penal planet of Rouge, serving

the role of parole officer. Judgment 31 was literally the judge, jury and executioner of all accused of intolerable crimes.

“That’s not what I was talking about. Eddie Green... how can you defend that scum. You realize, little girl, what that man has done.”

Jessica wasn’t sure if she disagreed with the technician. He was probably right, when it came to Eddie Green. Because of the nature of the crime he was accused of, his right to be judged by his peers would be circumvented, and he would be taken directly to Judgment 31. Jessica was here to make a last minute plea on behalf of her client, which would surely be denied, because she felt she had to do her job, unsavory as it might be. “Just show me how to use the jack equipment and you can go,” she said more harshly, than she wanted to.

“I will hook up you to this,” the technician said, holding up a smooth crystal helmet, with reflecting visors. “The neural equipment is perfectly safe, so don’t worry. At first you will feel disorientated, and then you will be submerged into a holographic courtroom, with your client. He’s already jacked in. There you will make any motions you need to. You won’t be able to see or hear anything that goes on in the judge’s chamber, so you can log out then by touching the side of your right eyebrow, which will actually trigger a neural command to release you from the holographic world. Don’t touch your eyebrow before then, or we’ll have to go through this crap again.”

“I’ll be jacked up with Eddie Green...” Jessica said, realizing there was an undertone of fear that quavered in her voice.

“Don’t worry. He can’t actually do you any harm. If anything seems wrong with your vitals,” he said reassuringly, holding up his diagnostic palm pad, “we jerk you back.” He smiled with confidence. “I haven’t lost anyone yet,” he added proudly.

“Yet,” she mumbled, as the technician put her helmet on.

At first all she could see was darkness, and then her helmet exploded into sensory overloading white light. Jessica, closing her eyes tightly, gripped the table with her white knuckles, and grimaced. She opened her eyes when the pain subsided, finding herself in a small courtroom with dark mahogany furniture, jammed pack with onlookers. The jury box was emptied of jurors and crammed full with reporters holding neural recorders.

A gaunt, gray-haired lone court guard, with pale blue eyes, surveyed the courtroom as he stood next to the portly judge, engaged in mild conversation.

She looked excruciatingly slowly to her left, and found him sitting next to her. Jessica noted alarmingly, that Eddie Green’s anger was boiling near the surface.

“Who are you,” he growled.

“Lawyer...I’m, er... your lawyer.”

“Crap. This is a waste of time. Just throw me to wolves, and let’s get this over with.”

Jessica was surprised that he was so cruelly attractive. As brutish as the crime Green was accused of and soon would be convicted, she assumed he would have to look more deranged, more monstrous. She was glad that Judgment 31 was immune to such things, because she wouldn’t have like to defend him to a jury that could be persuaded by his physical charm.

“The wolves will be coming soon enough. I’m just here to make a plea for you.” Jessica said, trying to avoid his piercing, sensual eyes. *Bet he doesn’t have the slightest clue how he makes people feel.*

“We both know what my punishment will be. Either I can live the rest of my natural life as a fully aware frozen Popsicle, staring at the top of my confinement cell, or I go to Rouge, which is just another form of death.”

A heavy gavel was struck several times by the judge, but the crowds’ hate-filled shouting voices that invaded the courtroom refused to be silent. Finally the judge rose, towering over his bench; he fixed the crowd with a commanding glare. The voices dropped a few decimals, enough to hear the judge. “Your protests are to be made outside of the courtroom. I won’t have this proceeding turned into a sideshow. Anyone pipes up, and out you go.” He turned toward the reporters lined in the jury box. “That includes you guys, especially you guys.”

The judge looked briefly down at his computer palm pad, as he sat down. “I see that there is only one plea to be made. Are you prepared to make that plea counselor?” he asked Jessica.

“Yes. Your honor, I am. If it pleases the court, the plea I am hear to ask for is that this court will sentence, if Edward Green is found guilty, to Rouge.”

“And your client agrees with such a plea?”

“If it will shut your trap, sure,” Eddie said.

The silence in the court was palatable. “So entered. Judgment 31 will be so informed. Edward J. Green, please rise.”

Eddie remained defiantly still. “Go screw.”

The judge let out a tired sigh. “Fine. Stay seated if you wish. Edward J. Green, because of the nature of the crime you have been accused of and the fact that there would be no jury that could remain impartial, you are now ordered into the custody of Judgment 31, who will decide your fate. On a personal note, I hope that you will be sent to Rouge. That you will be found guilty is no question in my mind, so I hope that you will suffer as those that you have harmed have suffered.”

Eddie Green vaulted the top of his desk, and slammed his shoulder into the court guard, sending him sprawling into the jury box in a mangled heap. The reporters fell back onto each other, and madly scrambled out for cover. As soon as Eddie had reached for the Judge’s collar, the old guard leaped to his feet and bashed both of his arms into the middle of Eddie’s back. Eddie crumpled to the floor in pain.

Gripping Eddie’s hair in his hands, and whispering into Eddie’s ear, the guard said, “Make another move... I’ll find a way to cripple you before you get to Rouge. You think life will be bad there, imagine what it can be like...”

Jessica arose and cautiously walked to Eddie’s side. “You fool. This...it’s not real. It’s a holographic representation of a courtroom. It’s all in our minds. What do think you were going to do?”

Eddie Green twisted his head at an almost impossible angle with sheer determination and glared at Jessica. She could feel his anger as it bored through her eyes. With more fear than she imagined possible, Jessica took several precious seconds to mobilize her paralyzed hand and to stroke her eyebrow, and returned to the real world. A world that would no longer be afraid of Eddie Green.

CHAPTER 2

Eddie Green was literally shoved into the reclining chair. Instantly, the green force field restraints wrapped themselves around his upper body. The courtroom guard whipped Eddie's head up by pulling his hair, forcing Eddie to look at Judgment 31.

"That will be quite enough officer. You may leave him here," Judgment 31 said in the most soothing voice Eddie had ever heard in his life.

"Yes sir," said the guard with deeply felt respect. The guard left, closing the chamber door slightly ajar with a certain reverence.

"Nice trick. Taught that to my dog once," Eddie said.

Judgment 31 was positioned in the middle of the dimly lighted room. Two overhead recessed lights cut starkly across Judgment 31's huge girth. *Never thought it would look like a molten, bullet-shaped technologically created shiny mahogany brown monolith,*

Eddie thought. Glad to see that I'll be judged by some small mountainous turd, than an instrument of true justice.

The chair that Eddie sat on slowly hovered toward Judgment 31. Muted light and tendrils of white mist trailed into the room from an opening that suddenly appeared in the middle of Judgment 31's form. Eddie's chair pushed him to the edge of the opening. The force field restraints snapped off, allowing Eddie to walk freely into Judgment 31.

"I could struggle."

"Why is the point? Let's face the facts. I am just a holographic image that you are seeing in your dreaming mind. In reality, you are still in your holding cell, on some interface trip. I can get what I want from you at any time."

"Then why don't you!" yelled Eddie. "Just screw my mind and get this over with."

"I am trying to give you dignity. Allow you to come to me. So that I may better help you."

"Help me! You want to help me. What kind of religious mind trip are you on." Eddie's nostrils flared with tormented anger.

"Eddie part of justice is a chance at redemption. That was not always considered so. History is littered with judgments rendered by the passionate. As a computer I have no need for personal agendas. What I can hope to offer you is a way to redeem yourself from the stains of your crimes. To do that you will need an impartial friend."

"I don't want you to be in my mind." *I don't want anyone to know me that well.*

Judgment 31 paused, allowing for the silence to add weight to his words. "There is really no choice. I'll be as gentle as I can, Eddie. It's time to begin your new life."

Despite the apprehension Eddie felt, he boldly walked into Judgment 31. As soon as he crossed the threshold, his legs grew rubbery and he fell. He tried to stand, but found that his body refused to move. The light and white mist took up the entire room, making the space seem infinite, and in a metaphysical way it probably was. Judgment 31 could be as vast, and unfathomable as Eddie could imagine. That was not to say that Judgment 31 wasn't real. *If all this is an illusion, then maybe Judgment 31 doesn't look like what I think he looks like. Maybe he...it appears different to different people. I doubt that I will ever know what Judge really looks like.*

“Don't worry Eddie, you have just been given a neural tranquilizer. You will be showing me all the memories you have about your life, some of which that you probably never realized you had, imprinted in neural chemicals. Your whole life perfectly recorded for me to see, and understand. This will allow me to render a truer sentence, and a chance for you to truly redeem yourself, if you wish. The neural probe I am about to give you, could actually harm your real body if I didn't give it a tranquilizer, sending it into sensory overload. Your mind just realizes what has happened, and it's been incorporated into this holographic world.”

“Why are you talking like that? Like you care.” *Please don't do that. Pretend you are my friend. You have no right.*

“Are you wondering if the kindness I demonstrate is something you made up in your mind?”

“Yes,” Eddie said, as drool slide down his cheek.

“You can't always trust your senses, but you can trust your feelings. We share this journey in a holographic world. But everything created here is based on the physical

world. The things we say and do. The things we think about and feel. All of this comes from us. So yes...the way that you feel about me is accurate.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that I care about all charges as if they were my children. I wish to help you lead a more fuller, enlightened life. If it would make it easier on you, feel free to consider me your closest friend, Eddie.”

“You don’t even know me.” *How can you possibly be my friend and be my judge?*

“But I will. I’ll know you better than anyone else. And maybe then you’ll consider me your friend.”

The white mist and light seemed to divide time and time again into mini vortices, until distinct shapes took form. Quickly Eddie realized he was back in hometown of Gilles, which lay on a strip of beach on the East Coast between two large metropolitan cities. He also realized that he was reliving his entire life in sequence as a participant, in a blink of an eye. At times he relived a portion of his life over and over, especially his last years leading up to his crime, so that Judgment 31 could fully understand his emotions and experiences. Thankfully, his last day when he was caught went by quickly.

Eddie quickly faded from reality into dream-like state as he envisioned a frantic car chase through the tri-level highways in New Joliet, his favorite anti-gravity coupe wrecking and taking out a small pharmacy store. The fantasy ended in an elaborate shoot out with combat anandroids in the large dilapidated warehouse on the oceanfront that was being readied for demolition, leading the way to his eventual capture and imprisonment.

How I wished that were the way it went down. Nothing bruises the ego more than to have

to be rescued from a rickety safety rung of a burning building and led through a crowd of irate people to an awaiting squad car, Eddie thought.

The white mist and illuminating light lost shape and spread out, once again filling the interior of Judgment 31. Eddie felt the neural tranquilizer wear off and he sat up, resting his head on his arms. He was too tired to do anything else.

“Man, that was intense,” Eddie mumbled.

“Are you alright Eddie?”

“Yeah. I’m...exhausted is all.” Eddie felt like crying. He had never felt so drained in his entire life.

“I’ll be giving you another tranquilizer in a minute, after you have rested some.”

“Another?”

“Edward Green, you have been found guilty of the crimes that you are accused of, and in accordance with the law and the plea made on behalf of your lawyer, I sentence you to life on the planetary penal colony Rouge. Now I will be giving you the tranquilizer.”

Eddie fell to the floor as all strength in his muscles left him. “Why?” *You don’t need to give me another tranquilizer, chrome dome, Eddie thought.*

“My neural probe that allows me to view your whole life can be altered slightly to implant knowledge in your mind. Rouge is a rough place. Most likely you won’t live for more than a year.”

The white mist and illuminating light took form again, but this time it lunged at Eddie. Streams of vibrant thoughts and memories, none of which was his, stormed into his mind. In his mind’s eye he could see the fertile and desert plains of Rouge. He could

see the recently condemned as they tried to survive on the untamed lands that lacked any valuable resources that could be fashioned into any modern convenience, such as modern weapons or even vehicles for terrestrial and space travel. Eddie saw the second and third generations of the condemned swarming on the untamed landscapes of Rouge, which he doubted that any average Pangean could scarcely imagine, caught in the throes of the middle ages. The people were at constant war with each other, being lead by self-absorbed warlords, intent on conquering the known world.

Finally Eddie could see several Judgment 31 cubicles, arranged on the entire face of the known and unknown world. He could see a recent uprising of criminals lead by powerful warlords, who intent on stripping the powerful core of a Judgment 31 cubicle to use its power to take over the world, were caught in an explosion that started from the heavens. The explosion created a generation of genetically mutated people called the Canar, who hid under the ground and in the caves of mountains, which spanned the entire continent. Eddie learned that the explosion was initiated by a planetary defense satellite system, named Palen, to stop the criminals.

“Do you have any questions, Eddie?”

Eddie’s brow creased into a concentrated furrow. “ A couple. Like what is Palen, really?”

“Palen was the original prototype of the Judgment 31 network, but was decommissioned when it was learned that she was unwilling to see beyond the crime, and fully understand the individual. She refused to go beyond her core programming to understand the grays in life, and so in the interest of a more true justice I was created from an AI seed, designed with human attributes. Palen currently deals with the planetary

defense. She insures that no criminal leaves Rouge or that anyone is able to land on the planet without the consent of the courts.”

“The explosion on Rouge was necessary?”

Judgment took a long time to consider Eddie’s question. “Perhaps. Probably. Palen is almost chaotic in her pursuit of justice, Eddie. Although she is capable in changing her programming, she chose to keep her unique point of view. One of my cores could have been used as a weapon of mass destruction, or an immense power source. Whatever their reasons for storming one of my cubicles, the result could have been the changing of the power base on the planet. All the people of Rouge need a chance to evolve as naturally as possible.”

“Rouge has people you know. Innocent people born to the condemned who haven’t been involved in any crimes,” Eddie pointed out.

“The innocent children of the condemned are given the opportunity to apply for citizenship on Pangea. But because their parents are exiled to Rouge, most of the children have chosen not to leave their world behind, although this means a life of constant struggle. Great debate took place in the Pangea World Senate over this exact point. After all, who in their right mind would want to stay on Rouge? Eventually it was decided that all innocent generations on Rouge had the freedom of choice to decide what they want, when they turned the appropriate cognitive age. The Senate decided that didn’t wish to produce more hardship on the family than necessary,” Judgment 31 said.

“Why all the Judgment 31 pods?” asked Eddie.

“Remember how I was telling you about the need for justice to offer redemption. My network on Rouge is designed specifically to meet that goal. Anyone, including you,

can seek for ways to try to atone for his or her crimes. Some criminals, whose crimes are not as bad as yours, could actually earn their way off of Rouge and be reintegrated into Pangea. Of course they must truly redeem themselves, in thoughts and actions to leave.”

“Fat lot of good it will do me,” Eddie replied sourly. *Listen to it spout off, like its giving some great sermon. Was does this thing think it is? Some sort of deity?*

“ I don’t expect you to fully understand my role. Perhaps it would be best if you just focus on the your bottom line. Just because you will never leave Rouge, doesn’t mean that you can’t lead a better, and fundamentally more necessary life. And for the record. I’m not a deity. I’m just a computer.”

Eddie felt drowsy and without meaning to closed his eyes for a second, and when he opened them he was once again in his cell, staring at the ice that covered his viewing port.

CHAPTER 3

The Chrysalis was nestled among the multitude of other transport space ships nearest to the raging ocean, held back by the spaceport's gravitational shields. The sharp chevron-shaped Chrysalis with even sharper wing nacelles, turned out to be a smaller, but sleeker craft than Dayvid expected. The ebony Chrysalis' shimmering outer bioorganic hull was covered with small pores, which would erupt in a chemical welding spray in case of a hull and inertia-shielding breach, leaving only a microscopic evidence of scar tissue. Two large cigar-shaped Electromagnetic Torpedoes (EMTs) were tucked neatly under the bottom of the craft's wings. The Chrysalis morphing hull was listing to its' port side, soaking up the weak solar winds and Pangea's gravitational pull, to store in its' energy banks.

The Chrysalis basic engine design was based on black hole technology, which allowed the ship's reactor core to create artificial wormholes that was able to tear the fabric of the space and time continuum at will, allowing it to move at impossible to calculate speeds through out known space. As Dayvid neared the small two-storied ebony vessel's cargo bay entrance, he couldn't but help to smile. As far as Dayvid was concerned the heavily shielded and armed Chrysalis was simply the finest Prisoner transport ship in the known galaxy. Dayvid's had to admit to himself that his judgment was slightly clouded on that point because it transported the worst criminals known from Pangea to Rouge, technically known as Planetary Penal Colony Alpha (PPCA) and because his aunt, Leis Kasi, was the pilot.

Dayvid walked underneath of the Chrysalis and reached a tentative hand toward the ship's shadowy gray underbelly. To his sheer delight, the ship morphed the contour of its' hull to pull away from Dayvid's nimble fingers. Dayvid's imagination took a hold of him, as he saw the Chrysalis moving through an asteroid field at remarkable speed, twisting into large contorted shapes as it avoided the dangerous space debris. Suddenly the Vestar Pirates would begin to follow the ship, firing a barrage of laser fire. And then the Chrysalis would lock on to a streaking Pirate and fire its EMT, and then...

“Can I help you? Or do you plan to gawk at the ship all day.”

This was the first time that Dayvid was able to see a combat android up close and personal...and, well he was disappointed. *I thought they were supposed to be superhuman. Such as the ability to pick up unheard of weight, the extra sensitive senses that allowed him to see and hear vast distances in the blinding light and in near total*

darkness, the amazing dexterity that rivaled even the fastest of animals, and the vast array of secreted weapons... where are the weapons, by the way?

Brett was sleek and tall. His metallic blue and silver skin tightly coated covered his body, giving him a slightly ripped muscular physique, underneath his midnight blue uniform with a Mandarin cut collar. Brett's red eyes gave him a slightly menacing, inhuman look. *All right, Dayvid thought, maybe I am slightly impressed after all.*

"Can I help you," demanded the combat android in a deep baritone voice, barring the Chrysalis's entrance. *All Dayvid could hear was, Shall I rip off your arms, before or after I let you on board.* It was only then that he realized that the android had thick, misshapen wrists.

"Why are your wrists so...strange," Dayvid asked coyly, pointing to Brett's wrists.

"These," said Brett holding up his right wrist for the boy to inspect closer, "are Titanium laced blades, meant for cutting and combat." A curvy blade ripped through the skin of his right wrist without any noticeable trauma. "Now I think you owe me an answer."

"I was invited... I swear, I was invited." Beads of sweat fell down Dayvid's clammy face.

"Fine. Just don't expect me to feed you. And don't touch anything."

Dayvid tucked his arms as closely to body as he could, and then tried to shuffle around the android. *Maybe he's not superhuman. But he sure is scary as hell. Can a android be deranged?* Dayvid was so intent on not disturbing anything, that he didn't see the faint smile caress Brett's face, as it held Dayvid in place.

Dayvid had curly brown hair, a weak and almost non-existent chin, and large hazel eyes set between thick, feminine eyebrows and eyelashes. He was smaller than most boys his age, something he was keenly aware of, but kept hidden from his mother's overly sensitive feelings. His quick smile and innocent visage, which could light up a room in an instant, was what got him aboard the Chrysalis. His aunt had yet to deny him anything.

Sucker.

Brett reached down to his waist, and pulled a thin, black communicator free from his black belt. "Hey, L. There is a little boy, or maybe it's a little girl here. One can never tell these days. Shall I let him on board, or rip his head off?" Dayvid froze in place; his little heart beating madly in his chest, threatening to explode out of his chest.

"What is its' name?" inquired a voice from the communicator.

"Name boy?" Brett snapped.

"Dayvid," he said.

"Dayvid," Brett replied.

"Dayvid who?"

Dayvid remained mute, not sure how to reply. *Stand very, very still. Maybe it will just go away.*

"He refuses to give his name, L. Judging by his beady eyes, and cruel facial features, I suspect that he might be a terrorist."

"In that case tell him to set the bomb on top of holding cell 9."

"Is that where Eddie Green is?" Dayvid bursted, finally realizing he was the butt of a joke between his aunt and the combat android. *I can't believe he's aboard. The man is*

practically a legend. Alright, calm yourself. It wouldn't look good for you to gush over a man like Eddie Green.

Brett nodded, and if Dayvid wasn't mistaken he was sure the android seemed angry. "This way. The monster awaits for your arrival young master." Brett rubbed his hands sinisterly.

"Are you mad at me."

"No. I am incapable of certain emotions."

"You look mad," Dayvid insisted.

"He's just concerned is all." A beautiful, deeply tanned, sultry woman made her way into the cargo hold, via a small lift with handrails, from the cockpit. Her dark brown hair, which cascaded over her shoulders, framed her oval shaped face. She had large, pouting, glossy lips, and a runner's overly shapely physique. The woman's dark greenish-brown eyes took in Dayvid. "We don't usually have to make a run like this without some extra men. Not that there is anything to worry about. Brett, this is my nephew Dayvid."

Brett nodded ever so slowly in acknowledgement. "I am Brett. Pleased to meet you Dayvid."

"Yeah...um, nice to meet you," Dayvid said, flashing Brett a very brief, shy smile.

Dayvid slowly made his way into the large cargo hold, committing everything to memory. In the middle of the room was a holographic workstation, and lining the walls, were numerous standing holding cells. The cell closest to the escape hatch and lift to the cockpit, on the right side of the room was labeled with several caution stickers, which almost obscured the large red 9. Dayvid ventured up to the holding cell, and stood on his toes to look in on the man cryogenically frozen. "Is that Eddie Green?"

“Yeah. It is,” Leis said.

“I thought he be bigger. You know, like a weight lifter.” *Man! Can't anything be really cool.*

Leis put her hands on her hips. Reluctantly, for she rarely got to spend time with her nephew, she said, “I really hate to cut this short Day. But we have a schedule.”

Dayvid raised his eyebrows, and started to grin. “Maybe we don't.”

“What do you mean?” asked Brett, suspiciously.

“Aunt Leis.” Dayvid bit his lower lip. “Promise not to get mad, alright?”

Leis stood still, with her lean muscular arms folded across her chest. “Go on. Spill it out.”

Dayvid began to pace back and forth on the cargo floor in front of Leis. “Well... um. Like I said, don't get mad. It's just that I already completed my studies at the academy for this year. Really I would just be sitting around watching Dooley pick his pimples. He has the most amazing blackheads. He can shot one of those babies across the room. I swear he could hit any target. And, well...I don't need to stay at the academy.”

“You want to go on this run,” Leis stated.

“Mom's just going to be solar sail surfing with her new boyfriend. Bob. Can you believe mom would hang with anyone named Bob? Maybe a Keith, but not a Bob. Well Bob doesn't really care if I come on the trip. And mom...well she practically raised me single-handed. And don't you think she needs a break? Motherhood is such a thankless job.” Dayvid started to gasp for air. *Just be cute, Dayvid coached himself. She's going for it. Look at those sympathetic eyes. They're practically drenched in tears.* “The thing of it is...”

“You want to go on this run,” Leis restated.

“I could be writing a stellar report of this journey, which would surely let me pass English. If I don’t pass English, mom will kill me. I don’t mean just kill me. But painfully kill me. Get the point? Todd Bridger...well, he’s my teacher. And Bridger gets off on adventures. This trip is just up his alley. And well, I could really pass my English class.”

“You want to go on this run,” Leis restated yet again.

Reel her in slowly. Just give her enough line, and Leis’ yours. “And we never get to spend time together. These are my formative years, where I need to learn that...,” uttered Dayvid.

“And you want to go! Why can’t you humanoids just get to the point?” Brett asked, throwing up his hand in exasperation at the inconvenience of the conversation. “Do you know how much time you humanoids waste on such pointless endeavors? Just imagine how much work you can actually get done, instead of being mired in obtuse linguistic exercises.”

“I want to go. I could give you a billion reasons why...”

“Either let the boy stay, or kindly let me shoot him out the plasma tubes.”

Dayvid and Leis shared a shocked moment, staring at Brett. *Perhaps I had better check on you programming when we get home, Leis thought.*

“You can stay,” Leis said, feeling suddenly exhausted. *How do mothers do it?* “Just let you mom...”

“She already knows,” Dayvid said in triumph.

Less than an hour, after all the safety checks were made and cleared through the space port tower, the Chrysalis arose from its' perch. As soon as they cleared the planet's stratosphere with anti-gravity thrusters, and started out into the vast regions of space, a brilliant pale blue and white rift in the space and time continuum formed in front of the ship. The Chrysalis sailed through the rift, allowing the gravitational pull to hurtle it through.

Dayvid sat at the captain's mapping table in the cockpit, and watched Leis and Brett intently, as they steered an instrument guided course to Rouge. They were concentrating so hard on keeping the ship steady, away from the sides of the rift, which would tear them apart particle by particle, that they hardly registered Dayvid's presence. Dayvid plotted a random course through the Algier meteor belt on the holographic stellar map station, realizing that this trip was less than likely to be a real adventure. More than likely he would be bored out of his mind.

The Chrysalis burped through the rift, and decelerated quickly enough that everyone on board had to grip a secure hold. The planet Rouge and its' solitaire gigantic sun and twin moons, and numerous star clusters seemed to appear out of nowhere, suddenly filling up the holographic view screens, that lined the entire bridge like gigantic canopy. Dayvid walked next to the view screen and reached out a tentative hand. It was if he could touch the very stars, and be burned. Instead all he felt was the cool, smooth texture of the view screen.

The ship came to a dead stop, utilizing Rouge's gravitational and the Chrysalis's anti-gravitational inertia fields to hold them still. "Ship secure?" Leis asked routinely.

"Ship secured," Brett replied.

Leis stood up from her chair, putting her hands on her shapely hips and stretched her back. “Let’s get this over with.”

Brett and Leis made their way to the cargo lift, motioning Dayvid to join them. Dayvid practically skipped as he landed on the lift. As the lift lowered he said, “This is it, huh. We use the SAP.”

Brett cocked his head to the side, puzzled. “ You must mean SAT. It stands for Suspended Animation Torpedo,” Brett corrected. “Did you notice how quickly we decelerated? That shouldn’t have happened.”

“The anti-gravs are probably just a little too tight. We’ll adjust them soon enough,” Leis said.

“So you have to shoot the prisoners into some torpedoes?” Dayvid asked hopefully.

“No, Dayvid. We just fire the cryogenic cells out the plasma tubes, after we vent the plasma. The process is called SAT.”

Dayvid replied, “It would have been so cool to touch Eddie Green. The kids at the academy wouldn’t believe it. I would be their hero.”

Leis went to a control panel, set in the middle of the workstation, and entered her command codes. The walls and the floor of the cargo hold twisted around the cryogenic tubes, aiming them away from the ship. Dayvid let out a muffled sound of horror as he saw breeches forming around the cells. Before panic could set in he realized that the breeches in the hull, giving a breathtaking view of space without the aid of view screens, was a natural phenomenon. *The Chrysalis’s inertia shields must be molding into the hulls crevices, protecting us from the vacuum of space, thought Dayvid.*

To the naked eye Rouge would appear to be a basically a fit class-M world, which would most probably be able to support a variety of living organisms. But from Brett's perch, casually sitting on top of a railing and looking out at Rouge, he could see things that the normal naked eye couldn't perceive. Such as the small misshapen diamond-shaped moon that orbited the planet in a deceptively subtle unstable pattern, tipping end upon end, causing massive changes on the planet's seasons, polar ice caps, and creating unbelievable tidal waves on the ocean. The moon's craggy surface was slowly being eroded away and scared by an almost unnoticeable small nearby asteroid belt. Brett had heard rumors that the planet's inhabitants had a hard time telling the difference between a transported prisoner, and the paths of a wayward asteroid. Brett, with the aid of his internal infrared sensors, could detect the waves of menacing heat of the tectonic shift of the planet's crust, and a great amount of volcanic activity above and below the surface.

"I'll do you one better. How would you like to launch the SATs?" Leis asked Dayvid.

"Really?" *That could be worth bragging rights. I just got to tweak the story a little.*

"Really."

Dayvid rushed to Leis' side. She pointed at the main control panel and said, "Push the Vent button first."

"Plasma has been vented," Brett said, as Dayvid pushed the button. Brett carefully watched the yellow and red tendrils of plasma as they shot away from the plasma tubes.

"Now push the Fire button." Dayvid pushed and waited. He was about to push the touch pad again, when all the cryogenic cells fired at once. The cells raced toward Rouge, looking for the entire world like a meteor shower. "Alright! That was so cool," Dayvid yelled, waving a triumphant fist over his head.

Dayvid watched horrified as some of the cryogenic cells bounced off Rouge's ionosphere and others burnt up in reentry. Very few of the cryogenic cells breached the planet's stratosphere, and were lost to the viewing eye. "Are they supposed to do that?"

"The trajectory has to be exact or they either burn, or bounce away into space," Brett explained.

"Do we go and rescue them?" Dayvid asked, hopefully.

"No. They're goners," Leis said.

"They just die."

"Yeah. Try to look at it as if it's a kind of cosmic justice." Leis pushed a button on the control panel. The walls and the floor reformed back into their former shapes. "Just remind yourself what kind of men and women they were."

"Like Eddie Green?"

This is the only aspect I hate about my job. "Yeah. Like Eddie Green," Leis said, not quite sure if she really believed what she said.

CHAPTER 4

After all those months being frozen like a Popsicle, Eddie Green finally felt warm. He awoke to the smell of damp clothing commingled with his own sweat. The numbing cold he had been feeling for the last several months was leaving his limbs, stabbing shards of pain through his limbs. The frost over his holding cryogenic cell began to clear. All Eddie could see was a murky brown light. There was lingering smell in his holding cell that Eddie had smelled before but couldn't place, until he realized that the warmth he felt was coming from the water that covered his feet. All of Green's muscles were still rubbery from the neural relaxants, and his breathing was painfully shallow.

Panic began to surge through Eddie as he realized that the cryogenic tube had become submerged in water. Green imagined thick brown water slithering into to the tube and nibbling at his blue lips, until he was forced to inhale on desperate last breath. *Snap*

out of it. I can't just let myself die without a struggle, Eddie thought. Green's eyes fluttered lazily, and he could only make out a gray world. He tried to help open the cryogenic escape hatch, as the water surged up to his unshaven face. It was suppose to open as he landed on Rouge. The door wouldn't budge.

"Help," Eddie gasped, in a voice too weak and thready. Eddie tried to gain leverage with his feet, and feebly lunged against the door several times, but to no avail. *Don't panic, Eddie cautioned himself. Just will your body back into action. Remind your body how it should work, and pray that it takes over.*

As the murky water brown water slid up to his chest, Green strained his neck back to grasp at the last remaining air. His neck cords were so taunt from the effort that they started to cramp up, sending shard of pain to course through his body. Adrenaline coursed through his legs and arms as his body suddenly flared to life, realizing that death was an imminent possibility, racking his body with almost unbearable pain.

Ignore the pain, Eddie commanded himself, trying to restore his sense of control. Ignore the pain. Send it to some corner of your mind and leave it there, or your not going to survive. And you want to live, right? Well prove it.

Eddie's heart seemed to stop as his holding cell lurched forward, further continuing to drop into the watery abyss below his feet. Eddie silently prayed he was in a river. If it was an ocean he was dead.

Green took a deep breath of the rancid air, and lashed out at the cryogenic tube's door. It gave some, but only the water seemed to benefit from the effort, as it streamed into the tube with immense pressure that nearly knocked the wind out of Eddie. He quickly exhaled and inhaled, drawing the last pocket of air into his half inflated, burning

lungs. Green's vision darkened to a pinpoint of weak light, then exploded into a shower of shooting colors as his body flooded with another course of adrenaline. The urge to breath raged a battle with Eddie's will to survive.

The cryogenic cell's canopy fired away, when the holding cell bashed into the river's muddy bed. Eddie was barely able to command his body to propel itself through the tube's door and swim toward what he thought was the surface. At least he thought he was swimming to the surface, but with murky brown water he wasn't sure.

Something large rubbed against him, and he began to panic. Green flailed his arms frantically as he kicked up with his legs, trying to reach the surface as his body further weakened and his muscles started to refuse to obey his command. Eddie's lungs flared again, forcing his last remaining breath into the water. *Don't breath in, damn you. Don't breath...*

Eddie broke the surface of the raging river, gasping for air. The shooting psychedelic spots before his eyes had almost burned out to complete darkness. Between bouts of darkness and light he would recognize something - a tree branch, the river narrowing, or the falling nocturnal sky. He was completely unaware of the boulders, as they raced toward him. Frankly he probably wouldn't care if he knew. As far as he was concerned he was in his final death throes.

As Eddie's vision cleared, he started to breathe in heavy lungfuls of air, greedily. Eddie looked frantically toward the sky and saw a flaming arrows shoot across the rapidly moving river overhead. Sounds of shredding metal taunted Green from both sides of the river. Shadows of tortured men and screaming demons were etched into the river's reflective surface. Dimly, in the very far recess of his mind, he was aware that he had

fallen into a middle of a pitched battle. Eddie watched with morbid fascination as a dark shadow raced to greet him. As he was about to bash into a large, crumbling boulder something snagged him, drawing him close to shore-underneath a grassy overhang.

“Don’t say a thing,” whispered a hushed female voice. “ You give us away, and I’ll let you drown.”

If Eddie Green was aware enough of his surroundings he would have easily tapped into his implanted memories and would have realized that the great medieval battle that was taking place on both sides of the raging river was between Lord Merchant, and Lord Semion mercenaries. And he would have realized that like the war vultures they were accused of being, Dameck Hedeon’s mercenaries kept a safe distance, protecting the Wisew pass that led to Dameck’s immense castle, waiting for the opportunity to strike when either army weakened. The latest battle for control of the Dante River as a perfect military port, which eventually lead to the Crete Sea and the Patmos Islands, had been going on for the last four years, with none of the warlords gaining any momentum and losing an inordinate amount of men.

CHAPTER 5

Brett and Leis spent the better part of the afternoon scouring over the anti-gravity inertia systems, but to their mutual dismay found nothing unusual, while Dayvid tried to keep his mind off the dead prisoners by mapping imaginary courses on the stellar map. Leis had just settled into the cool leather chair, curling her legs underneath her, and started to read an immersion mystery book on her diagnostic pad, generated by the ship's onboard computers, when the ship's Klaxon began to wail. The Chrysalis lunged sharply to the side, ripping Leis' diagnostic pad into the wall, smashing it into non-recognizable shards. Leis gripped the chair's arms tightly and threw herself to her agile feet. She ran unsteadily to the lift, grabbing Dayvid who had fallen to the floor, and headed for the cockpit.

“What's happening?” she screamed.

Brett moved steadily to his co-pilot chair, unaffected by the lurching ship because of its equilibrium sensors, and read his instruments. “According to onboard computers, nothing.”

“Were we hit?” Forced to let go of Dayvid because of the intense gravitational pull, Leis stumbled to the metal floor. She forced herself to her feet and tried to leap into the pilot’s chair. Without Brett’s too steady left hand, she wouldn’t have made on the first try.

“No. Running internal diagnostic.” Brett’s brow furled, as the numeric formulas scrolled by at blinding speed on his control panel screen. “There it is. It’s an amazingly intricate phantom program. A subroutine in the Chrysalis’ mainframe computer core hid in layers of other programs. I doubt that any engineer would have noticed it without a tearing the systems apart. It wouldn’t be notice by the onboard. Chrysalis’s shields are going down.”

“Defense or inertia shields?” asked Leis, as she pondered the connection if the anti-gravitational systems had anything to do with their current situation.

“Both,” Brett said, with a trace of awe in his voice.

“Try to reroute to safe mode,” Leis reminded herself, as she worked quickly on her station’s touch pad. “Safe mode has been infected. Won’t let me wipe the program free. All systems compromised.”

“Distress beacon firing,” Brett said, over the crackling fire, which started to consume his station. “The phantom program is intentionally designed.”

A small, black distress beacon missile fired into space, preprogrammed to find the nearest ship, transmitting coded shipping and military signals specific to Pangea space traffic.

“Sabotage?” Leis asked incredulous, already knowing the answer.

“More than likely.”

“Why?” asked Dayvid. *We didn't do anything wrong, he thought.*

“Get your butt in a chair, Dayvid,” yelled Brett. “We’re going down!”

Leis rerouted enough of the computer’s life support programming to get the personal shields on. Green personal shields snapped over the crew, holding them into their chairs. “Brett can you pilot?” She thought about the possibility of their ship skipping off Rouge’s ionosphere or burning up on reentry. “Brett!”

Brett didn’t answer. Rouge rushed toward them. The sounds of another Klaxon went off, warning against Palen’s - Rouge’s defensive satellite system – missiles. Brett’s nimble fingers played across his instrumental panel, oblivious to the electrical fire and fire suppression chemicals that sprayed in front of him. He had to avoid Palen’s missiles at all costs.

The Chrysalis made what seemed an impossible, not to mention highly illegal, maneuver when Brett opened a rift with the black hole engines, allowing the Chrysalis to create an artificially stable wormhole that was able to tear the fabric of the space and time continuum. The Chrysalis suddenly burst into view over a heart-shaped mountain range.

Brett tried his best to control the rest of their decent, but the ship proved to be more unmanageable than even he had estimated. *It was a good thing the Leis was able to activate their personal shield. They were going to need them.* The Chrysalis bounced of

the planet's surface, gouging an enormous jagged crater, and then scarred a ravine that went on for almost a mile, before coming to a stop.

CHAPTER 6

Eddie Green dreamed a solitaire feverishly induced dream over and over, in which he was being hunted down by roving, rabid wolves in a dark forest. And when he came upon a clearing he realized that not only did the wolves corner him, but that he was also on top of a cliff edge. He stood in the clearing, his hands balled for a fight, when a wolf dashed from the overgrown weeds and knocked him over the edge of the cliff. Eddie fell into a vast ocean, with no land in sight, when suddenly slimy, gray dead hands grab his feet and drew him under the water to drown. Eddie awoke to the crackling of kindling and hazy gray smoke from the dying campfire. The patch of grass that he laid on was still wet with the morning dew, and had soaked through his brown prison-issued jumpsuit.

He closed his eyes to avoid the bright glare of the sun, hanging in the blue sky like liquid bronze amid crimson stained clouds. Eddie listened to the sounds of whipping

blades of wild grass, and the chirping of a few birds in search of panic-stricken grasshoppers, manically searching for cover. In the northern distance the sounds of angry pandemonium thunder could be heard.

Eddie's breath was labored, and his chest felt like there was an enormous weight, crushing his frantically beating heart and brittle ribs. Normally Green could have consoled himself with the fact that he was woefully out of shape, and needed to finally go to the gym to work out with the fanatical fitness fringe, but this time was different. He wouldn't be working out anytime soon, at least intentionally. He was on Rouge. Which was a neat little way of saying he was reborn among the damned; a diminished nightmare of a civilized society.

It was only when he opened his slited eyes, did he realize that he wasn't alone. A tightly muscled, shapely figure hunched over the campfire, with her back to Eddie. Her long, blond hair fell wildly down her back. She wore a skin-tight black leather skirt, a leather halter-top, and worn boots that almost reached her knees. Strapped to her back was a large sword in a brown leather scabbard. A small knife handle could be seen, peeking through a subtly hidden scabbard on her boot. She glanced briefly in Eddie's direction, gracing Green with a quick peek at her face. She had high cheekbones, a pert nose, small, kissable lips and startling green eyes. *A pure angel, thought Eddie.* Green glimpsed a small, intricate tattoo that banded her arm. *With maybe just a hint of the devil.*

Stealthily, Green forced himself to sit up, and assess the bruises that caked his ribs. A small trickle of blood dripped impotently on his tight, blue tunic from a deep cut above his eyebrows. Eddie decided that the rest of his body was physically all right. He knew intuitively that the safest course of action would be to leave before being further detected

by other members of the damned, but he just didn't care. As far as he was concerned, he was already dead. *Might as well just throw the dirt over my head, and let the maggots, if they existed on this world, have a good meal on me.*

"Get a good enough gander, pervert?" she asked, slightly perturbed.

"If you just turn around a little bit," flirted Eddie. He grinned slyly. "Maybe..."

"Good."

"Good. What?" asked Eddie.

"I spoke to you in an archaic form of Loise and you didn't even notice. The neural translator works, meaning that I don't have to cart your stupid hide around. The nearest settlement is that way," she said, pointing due north. "Or you can go west. There is a couple of cities near the ocean."

"Neural translator?" Eddie asked, the confusion etched on his face.

"Judge didn't tell you? That's not like him."

"Might have," Eddie said with unbridled anger. "I wasn't exactly in the mood for a conversation," Eddie growled.

"There are now so many new and a few dead languages spoken on Rouge. There has been a significant break down in the pure universal Pangean speech. The inmates have intentionally decided to develop their own secret languages so they can disguise their nefarious ways, creating their own societies. It is my fear that Pangean speech may just disappear altogether. The neural translator," she said, tapping on the side of Eddie's head, "tries to break down the languages, hopefully letting you comprehend and speak those languages without you even being aware of it. Don't ask me how, but the brain is shaped by Judge's magnetic resonance scan, and the neural pathways are formed, allowing you

to understand. Not everyone's noodle is wired for the task, so count yourself lucky. I wasn't. Had to learn several languages."

Green found a dark brown cloak tucked underneath him. He drew it around his shoulders as the wind blew a hurried, frigid breath. "Thanks," he muttered.

He heard the sounds of a soft nay from a mare, and he looked beyond his new acquaintance, seeing a well-muscled strawberry roan with tri-cloved hooves, regarding him with careful violet eyes. Eddie made eye contact with the horse. The Roan curled its bowel-shaped ears close to its thrusting head in a personal warning. *Can you believe this crap? I'm being put on notice, Eddie thought. I wonder how it would feel about becoming a member of the glue factory.*

"I've never seen a three-toed horse before," Green lamely remarked, sensing the roan's apprehension.

The gorgeous woman looked back at the horse with obvious pride. "She's an ancient breed. Only a few of them left, mostly in the Land of Giants. Her name is Angelik."

A putrid wind swept in from the east, tickling Eddie's sensitive nostrils with the overpowering smell of burning flesh and wood. Little patches of burnt grass surround their cap site. Eddie had a vague recollection of flames that flew through the sky in a wide arc.

"You're lucky that Angilik found you when she did. You could have wound up in the thick of battle and I wouldn't be able to help."

Eddie walked over to the campfire, warming his hands with the little heat that was left. "Alright. For the record, everyone is on his own here, hon. Your name?"

"Karie Sitara." *And you can lose the attitude, Sitara thought.*

“It’s a good name. One meant for a Bandu goddess.”

“I suppose that is your weak way of flattery. My knees tremble,” Karie said, her voice bubbling nervously.

“Can the attitude. I just got here.” Eddie glared at her menacingly. Green allowed his face to take on a chiseled, barely controlled angry quality. “I got a headache you wouldn’t believe.”

Karie knew that Eddie was used to intimidating more than his share of men in the past. She easily stood defiantly. She didn’t attempt to hide the small smile, curling at the corners of her lips. “Listen...um...”

“Eddie.”

“Listen Eddie. I’m real sure that you were some big deal on Pangea, but around here...you’ll be lucky to last a year. There are men here that will kill you, if you just look in the wrong direction. Want some advice? Hook up with Judge. You may not care to get off this world, but you need an ally. Judge’s got contacts.”

“Too many strings attached.” Eddie tried to hand the cloak back, but Karie shook her head. “Don’t take this personally but ...I think Judge, and I am assuming you mean Judgment 31, I think he’s a little touched in the head if you get my drift.”

Karie clenched her jaw. Her eyes were radiantly angered. “There are a lot people who owe their lives to him. I know if it wasn’t for him I would be dead. There are a lot of people that have respect for Judge. Some even consider him a god.”

“Give me a freakin’ break. What you’re telling me is that Judge isn’t just satisfied with being judge and executioner, but it wants to be a god too. Why do imprisoned

people always find god?" Green threw his hands up in exasperation. "Pardon me if I don't take you too serious."

"No one in their right mind thinks of Judge as a god. He is a symbol of a second chance at life. A way to atone for what we have done."

Eddie looked at the ground, looking at the odd assortment of weeds and twigs. He shook his head disapprovingly. "So you believe that crap," he stated simply, as if he realized he was speaking to a child.

"What I believe is that Judge tries to be a wise friend. One that I go to in my time of need. And one that I try my best to serve."

"Serve?" Eddie let out a surprised guff. "It's got you running around, doing who knows what! And you let him do it?"

"You don't understand. I got this chance to leave. I can go back to Pangea, and I'm not going to screw that up. Once you have been here for awhile, you'll do practically anything to leave."

"Oh, I get it. You want out so bad that you willing to pimp out. You realize that is what your doing, don't you soldier girl."

"Soldier girl!" Karie began to grind her teeth in frustration. "If anything, I'm a champion for what I believe is right. And I'm not the only one. I'm just one of many of the Paladin Order and" Karie's eyes welled up, threatening to tear.

"A freakin' Paladin Order. You have got to be kidding me." *Alright, just clam down. No fun picking on a dimwit, thought Eddie.*

"I should have never rescued you from the river. You can't imagine how close you dropped toward battle? Don't make me sorry that I risked my life trying to rescue your

sorry butt. You snot! You think you got all the answers. Wrong! You think life is just meant for you. Wrong!” Karie fumed.

Eddie held up his hand. “Hold on there. You pulled me out of the river?”

“Yes,” Karie answered. “And...”

“Thanks.” Eddie kicked at the ground, knocking a patch of dirt and wild grass into the air. “There isn’t anyone that I know that would have done that for me.”

Karie was stunned. She suddenly beamed. “You’re welcome. You know... If you look at it just right, you could say that you had a reason for a second chance at life. The water could be seen as some sort of baptism,” she said in unbridled excitement. “You almost died because of the nature of your powerful sins. You know being reborn again, and all...”

“Stop. Can you just be quiet for just one second.” Eddie caressed his temple. “My heads spinning.”

You have got to learn to control yourself, Karie cautioned herself. You will just drive them away. Not everyone is spiritually prepared for what you learned. Karie nodded in enlightenment. “I get where your coming from now. You’re the kind of man who intentionally doesn’t believe in a higher power to be accountable to, so you can rationalize all your petty, narcissistic actions away.”

“You know that you have great body,” Eddie said, trying to push her buttons.

“You are such a jerk,” Karie said. She should have been angry, but found, much to her surprise, she wasn’t. “I’ll take you as far as Shiuvaun, and then you are on your own. I have no time to teach you the ropes right now.”

CHAPTER 7

The Chrysalis was half buried upside down, beneath a mound of rock, weeds and dirt. The sun shone brightly on the Chrysalis's ebony undercarriage. Shredded metal flakes torn from the hull of the Chrysalis was strung through out the crash site, reflecting the sun's rays. Roaming, boulder infested hills and a giant mountain range loomed to the right side of the ship. White bleached desert plains plagued the rest of the immediate area. Mica-like flakes started to crumble off the bloated belly of the ship in unison with a grumble steel wrenching sound.

Soon the sound became a blood-curdling shriek. A small egress appeared out of ship's seemingly impervious undercarriage. Brett popped his head through the opening, checking the surrounding area for people. His curving wrist blade flashed momentarily into view, metallic dust clinging desperately to his blade. When he was satisfied there

was no immediate threat, he continued to slice and gut a larger opening. His labor was slow and precise. *I have to make sure that hull doesn't cave in, thought Brett. Or that know one inhales the toxic bio-metallic shavings. Leis and her nephew can't survive another trauma.*

Brett stopped momentarily when his hyper sense of sound picked up the sounds of claps. He slowly adjusting and readjusting his sight on the far southern horizon until he was able to make out a horde of men, armed with medieval weapons and armor coming their way on horseback. Brett cocked his head to the side, listening closely. *The clapping sound has to be the hoof beats of numerous stocky horses.* He ignored his impulse to be precise when cutting into the hull, and soon was able to rip a whole big enough for them to escape.

“Leis? I’ll go first, and you hand me up the boy.”

Brett put his palms on the Chrysalis’s undercarriage and pulled, his massive strength propelling him to the surface, where he softly and noiselessly landed on his feet. He reached carefully through the jagged opening and jerked on Dayvid’s hand, plopping him as gently as he could to his side. Quickly he reached back into the opening. “Leis. Give me your hand.”

“I can’t reach the Comm. system.”

“Leis, I said give me your hand.”

“I can’t reach the auto destruct either. Or the distress beacon probe. They’re not working,” Leis said in near panic. *Can’t let the ship fall into enemy hands, Leis thought.*

“Leis. Stop and listen to me. There are men on horseback, riding our way. They can’t utilize the ship anyway. Try to be rational Leis. The ship has been specifically bred

engineered to only serve your unique genetic codes. Without you being on board or in some sort of contact with the ship, in a few days it will cannibalize its' own atrophied systems. Nothing will be left of it, 'cept a few thousand pounds of molten sludge."

"The ship distress probe beacon isn't working. You hear me! Maybe we can use the reactor signature to send a distress message. I just need some time. Just a little," she implored.

"Leis if it was just you here, maybe I would let you take a chance. But Dayvid is with us now. Leis you got to think of his welfare. Besides people are going to notice we haven't followed our flight plan, and they will come looking for us," Brett said.

Leis drew in a deep, defeated breath of air and reluctantly held out her hand. Brett quickly grasped her wrist, before she could change her mind, and dragged her free. "I couldn't find the weapons locker. And our personal shield have been drained of all their power," she pleaded with Brett. *I'm starting to panic, Leis thought dumbly. Can't let myself...*

"L. You are starting to go into shock. Just try to listen to what I have to say for just a little while. Let me be your guide. Leis, do you understand?"

"Yeah," Leis said, trying to come to her senses. "How many men?"

"Too many." Brett casually dropped thirty feet to the ground. "Dayvid, you first."

Dayvid looked doubtfully at Brett. "Can you do it? Can you really...catch...me?"

Brett commanded, "Combat androids are made for this very purpose. Now drop little man, before I have to come up there and rip your arms off."

Dayvid jumped, and was snagged by Brett before he hit the ground. Dayvid watched as Leis followed suit, amazed that Brett caught her without any noticeable strain. Brett

charged away from the ship at a brisk pace. Even though he tried to slow his gait, realizing that Dayvid and Leis were barely able to keep up with. Brett's hyper sight helped him to locate a shallow depression place, underneath a massive slab of rock, probably dug out by wild animals, before the battle cries could be heard.

As Dayvid and Leis watched the savage horde in horror surround the Chrysalis, Brett was already using his knifed hands to tear into the packed soil. Soon he was able to dig a slight tunnel, enough to hid them in a casual inspection of the den.

CHAPTER 8

Dameck Hedeon pulled the reigns of his horse tight, well away from the Chrysalis hull. His stout black Roan came to a sudden stop, allowing the rest of the Dameck's men to ride on to the ship. His rabid, penetratingly beady blue eyes peered from within the sea of his unkempt beard and unruly, long hair. His well-muscled shoulder and chest, and heavily scarred, corded arms threatened to tear the seams out of his brown jersey.

He watched his men surround the ship, with a lusty pride. He turned back in his saddle, motioning Onishi Maru to ride his Paint to his side. "Do you see them? They are the best mercenaries one can buy."

Maru was somewhat plain, wiry man. His oily blond hair was thin on top, and cleanly shaved on the sides and back, where an intricate, winding black tattoo of a coiled snake rested. Maru, in his youth, thought that the tattoo could serve as a symbolic reminder that he was different from the other mass of shadowy men that plagued the land.

And then to his shame he found that he was just like the others. He would do anything to survive just one more day. *It was the fire in the belly that kept a man alive, he had told his son in one of his wiser moments.* Onishi's hands were always in a state of perpetual motion, and could easily be seen as a threat or a distraction, neither of which was particularly safe around Dameck.

“Money can run out,” Maru pointed out.

Dameck waved his hand impatiently. “I don't speak about just money. There are other ways that a man could earn his keep. An occasionally pliable woman here. Preferably one with fire in her belly. Some worthless land there. They lust for the same thing we do, Maru. Power!”

“I beg you pardon, sire. But is that why you have requested my presence my liege?”

Dameck regarded Maru with a brutal stare. “Do you think we are here by accident my friend?”

“Friend?” Maru mumbled with little comprehension, trying to suppress the surprise he felt. Maru sat still in silent contemplation, stroking the side of his face, which he was apt to do when he was nervous. “No. I know you too long. There is something aboard that ship that you want.”

“You are a clever man, Maru. One given to keen observation. Sometimes to keen for his own good.” Dameck pulled on the reins of his horse, turning toward Maru. “This hunk of junk hides a gift from the gods to me. Tell me Maru, do you love your master?” Several muscled men started banging on the side of the Chrysalis with their war hammers, trying to find someplace weak enough that they could breach it a few hours.

They found a slight breach in the hull and began to pound and pry at it tirelessly, as if very their live depended on it. Less than an hour they tore their way into the ship.

Dameck leaned back in his saddle, stretching his massive back muscles. “It looks as if the gods are going to be kind to us today.”

“What is inside that thing?” Maru asked, sensing danger.

Dameck said, “Let me be candid with you, Maru. It is your master’s death. The man isn’t worthy of the blood he spills. Maru, do you still choose to serve him. Draw you allegiance now.” Dameck roared a hearty laugh, slapping Maru on the shoulder. “Maru. I tell you this as a friend. Leave Lord Semion, and join me now. Or I will have to simply cut your throat out. I would so hate to do that.”

“Why now.”

“Because I need someone I can trust to handle affairs. My kingdom is to become so vast that not even I can maintain control without some help, unless of course I want to thin the herd, but that would take far to long.”

“And you can trust me?”

“One never has trust, Maru. But you have a son you seem to care about. Family can be a bad thing Onishi. It can make one weak, especially if you sire and care for the little brats. I have been told that Ter needs some minding. But other than that he is said to be a good boy. Understand?”

“Yes,” said Onishi, looking at the ground as he tried to control the tremble in his hand. “You have my support.”

“I expected no less. Cheer up Maru. The world is about to be mine, and there are plenty of spoils to go around.”

One of Dameck's warriors rode back to him. "My lord," he said, bowing as deeply as he could.

Dameck suppressed his smile when he realized his personal tracker was nervous. "What is it?" he growled.

"I have discovered a tear in the belly of the ship."

Dameck rose in his saddle. "Where?"

"On the bottom of the hull. There is more."

"Get on with it," snapped Dameck.

"I found several footprints."

"Footprints. How many of them?"

"Perhaps, as many as three. One child. One woman. And perhaps one man."

Dameck looked toward the sky. "They weren't suppose to survive," he mumbled.

"Pardon," Onishi said.

"What is your name pup? I have forgotten already."

"Sitkan," the man said proudly, finally being noticed by Dameck.

"Good strong name. A name of a great warrior."

"I hope to be someday." Sitkan smiled.

"So do I. Find me those people."

"Aye." Sitkan turned his horse around, preparing to gather men to lead the chase.

"Sitkan," Dameck said.

"Yes lord?"

"Find me those men, you hear! They mustn't reach Judgment, or else you will never find out if you could become a great warrior. I've killed for far less."

“You can count on me,” Sitkan said, nervously.

“Good. Because your life depends on it.”

As Sitkan gathered his most trusted fellow soldiers and rode away, the other well-muscled warriors drew a large object out of the ship. They covered it in furs, and tied it to two powerful war-horses.

CHAPTER 9

Ter Adon's deeply bronzed back and long black hair, tied back in a ponytail, was caked in dirt and sweat. He was weeding -as any new world farmer's does before the first planting equinox- the southern quadrant of his father's farm while he was gone. His left hand gripped the smooth, slick stalk of the Snakeweed, as his right hand worked quickly to cut the hard swamp ground around the weed. Thankfully the Snakeweed was small, because there would be no way he could have handled by himself, despite his strong back and corded muscles. Although the Snakeweed whipped back and forth powerfully in his hand, gnashing its' nasty poisoness teeth, Ter Adon managed to rip it from its lair. He looked the stalk over carefully to make sure none of the roots had broken off, which would allow the creature to continue to breed, before throwing the weed into a corroded metal barrel, raging with a fire. The fire consumed the small Snakeweed, licking its slick combustible surface.

Although Ter Adon was merely seventeen years, he was expected to deal with the dangerous weeds before they had a chance at getting bigger. In just a few weeks the weeds would spout heads filled with deadly toxins, and it would become a greater danger not only to the sweet Sobo crop, but to sentient life as well. Rumor had it that the blind Snakeweeds could grow big enough to swallow a man whole.

Ter Adon was a native of this Rouge, but his father, Onishi Maru, wasn't, despite what Onishi usually told everyone. Onishi had been a repeat offender, an armed robber who through an unlikely set of circumstances ended up killing a debit card teller during a bank robbery. Adon's father had been quiet about the crime, but as he grew older and began to rely more and more on alcohol to sleep at nights, tidbits of his story was leaked in Ter Adon's presence. Ter Adon used to be ashamed that his father had been a party to such a base crime when he was younger, but as the years passed along he realized the depth of Onishi's felling of disgrace. Ter pretended to be asleep on Onishi's drunken ramblings, hoping to allow Onishi at least a little bit of honor. "If it wasn't for you, I would have left this world long ago," Onishi had said ominously to his son on more than one occasion. Onishi had pleaded for years for Ter Adon to applying for citizenship on Pangea. Ter Adon flatly refused to leave his home world and his father, fearing that Onishi would surely end his own life once Adon was free of the dangers from Rouge.

All that Adon knew about his mother, who to this day remained nameless at Onishi's insistence, was that she refused to marry his father. Ter had desperately tried to find her, until he heard rumors that Onishi was forced to buy his own son with his very own freedom, a loose form of debtor's prison, swearing allegiance to a disreputable warlord at the last minute from the slave market after his uncaring mother sold Adon to

free herself from servitude. Onishi had to serve the whims of the local warlord whenever he was called to do so, even at the height of the short planting season. Ter forced himself to abandon his childish dreams of reconciliation, choosing to honor the only man who would have sacrificed himself to keep Ter free, and never once looked back. After all, who would want a mother that had willingly parted with her own child?

“I thought I told you to wait,” Onishi bellowed. “I would have helped you this time.”

Ter Adon gasped. *I will never get used to his stealthy movements.* “Sorry Poppy. Didn’t know when you would get back.”

Onishi shook his weary head, hunching over his knees and surveying the ground. “Couldn’t talk any of your terrorist friends into helping?”

Ter bristled. “They’re not terrorist. They are freedom fighters, wanting to rid this world from...”

“...the grips of the warlords. To forge a new, and a promising future. Blah, blah, blah. You’ve been saying that crap so much, that even I have it embedded in this wee, little brain,” Onishi finished, tapping the side of his head.

“Uhg, I knew you wouldn’t understand.” Ter Adon wiped the sweat from his brow. Ter tried his level best not to be annoyed that Onishi wouldn’t let it go. Ter flung hands out in exasperation.

“Ter. Let me tell you what I know. Things are about to radically change, and there is nothing you or your cult fringe, worshiping Judgment, can do about it.”

“And you tell me that so much that it’s in my...wee, little brain,” Ter said, doing his best impersonation of his father, which was crafted in the many hours toiling in the fields.

“Ter. I know I’ve been saying it for years, but this time I really mean it. Lord Dameck has something up his crafty little sleeves. You don’t need to side with him now, but you can at least stay out of his way. Do it now when you have a chance.”

“Father, I...”

“Ter, everyone knows you have ...odd friends. You and I know that they are no real threat. Well, at least I know that. But not everyone does. Dameck does not suffer resistance kindly. I wouldn’t want to see my boy hurt. You have to understand that you are all I got that is decent in my life.”

“What is Dameck planning?” Ter asked, sensing something was awry. A clammy sensation made its way up his spine and down to his arms.

Onishi stoked his chin, wondering how much he should share with his son. “There is a ship named the Chrysalis from my home world that has crashed on the planet. Dameck took something from the wreckage.”

“What.” Ter stood ramrod straight, trying to stretch his overly taxed back muscles. “What did he take?”

“Power of the gods,” Onishi said. “At least that is what he said.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic. Just tell me what he got.”

“I don’t think that I am being melodramatic. To be truthful, I didn’t see it. He had it wrapped in furs, and carried it away by his men. The thing is Ter... The thing that makes me quiver in fear is that he was so sure of himself. The war has gone on so long

between the Three Warlords that no one believes that it will ever end, including myself. But now I am not so sure. You should have seen the madness take over his face. Dameck just knows this world is for the taking. No man or army of men can stop him now.”

“He told you to work for him? That is why you left with his man in the middle of the night, isn’t it?” Ter asked, with dread seeping into his voice.

“As should you,” cautioned Onishi. “You have to learn to play the odds. Listen to your guts, and feel where the wind is blowing. If you don’t, you will wind up either dead or in hell that you can’t escape from. This is from experience, Ter.”

Ter Adon added flammable Bantam sap to the fire, adding kindling and a small tree branch. He watched as the fire grew in intensity, deeply considering what his father said. “You’re not telling me all that you know.”

“No,” Onishi reluctantly agreed. “Dameck’s men found that the hull of the space ship had been breached. Meaning...”

“There were survivors.” Ter Adon shook his head. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I’m not telling you this.” Onishi fixed Ter with a cautioning glare, his eyebrow raised questioning. “Dameck realizes that I won’t be going near Judgment. And you won’t either, understand?”

“But how can I...” *You can’t expect me to stand still while innocents are in who knows what kind of danger. It goes against my very nature, Ter Adon thought. What are you really trying to tell me?*

“That woman. What is her name, Karie?”

Ter Adon nodded his understanding. “Yes.”

“Ter, you must not get directly involved. You have not lived long enough, nor have you been around enough of the right kind of people to hear the worst tales about Dameck. I probably should have told you, but a part of me doesn’t want you to know what the world is really like. I thought you would still have years to enjoy your ignorance, but I was wrong for protecting you. Dameck is said to practice the Dark Cutting. It is the most ancient and depraved form of magic. Have you not wondered how he wins so many battles when the odds are against him?”

“But that’s just a rumor. Right?”

Onishi smiled sadly. His eyes brimmed with tears. “I’ve seen the self-inflicted knife wounds myself. They scar both of his arms. You just remember to tread lightly around Dameck. Keep his name sacred in your heart and your mind, if you get my drift. Especially when you go buy some more seeding at Shiuvaun.”

CHAPTER 10

Brett watched with his extraordinary optical sight as Dameck's men started to follow their trail. Brett closed his eyes and adjusted his internal and external recon sensors, mapping the area around and beneath him. He was mildly surprised to learn that the shallow cave they were in had a small crevice, directly below Dayvid, which eventually lead through the mountain. *We should be able to tunnel their way through before the search party arrived, Brett thought.*

"Dayvid your going to have to move," Brett said firmly.

"They're coming aren't they?" Dayvid asked, tearfully.

"Don't worry kid. This is what I am designed for," Brett said. "There is a natural formation underneath you. So I need you to move now."

"Can you tunnel through?" Leis asked.

“I can’t sense any impediments. Although I’m not sure if the passage will remain big enough for us all the way to the mountain range. My sensors can’t always pick up on soft targets, like water. There are too many variables to account for.”

Dayvid pressed against the wall, while Brett ripped into the hardened ground. Dayvid was dazzled with the sheer speed in which Brett could move. Brett stopped suddenly as a subtle breeze hit his face. He allowed his sensors to test the quality of the air before he continued to burrow into the sandy ground. “I can feel air.”

“And where there is air, there is an opening,” Leis said.

Before Dayvid had a chance to ask how long it would take, Brett had completely uncovered a small natural passageway. Brett dropped into the dark passageway, feeling the wet, sandy floor beneath his feet. He sensed that the passageway widened in less than five meters into a small chamber with many forks, leading deeper into the mountain. He felt the walls of the passage. He had assumed that the formation was natural, but he was wrong. The walls were scarred with pick and shovel marks. Brett extended his sensors to his widest band lengths, and for a moment he thought he sensed life. He reconfigured his sensors to make sure of his faint readings, but this time his sensors informed him he was mistaken.

He stood below the passage opening and looked up toward Leis and Dayvid. Before he even had a chance to say that he was ready, Dayvid leapt into the passage, falling into Brett’s arms. Leis quickly followed. Brett took a hold of both of their hands and lead them toward the chamber, choosing the passage that emitted the most constant and forceful air changes. The passage brightened as they rounded a turn. They squeezed

out of the small cave opening on their hands and knees, and found themselves on top of a jutting bolder that looked out at the dense forest below them.

Brett leaped over the top of the boulder, snagging tree branches to slow his decent to the forest ground, a hundred feet below. He closely and quickly mapped out a safe route, and yelled instructions that aided Leis and Dayvid to descend to the forest floor quickly. Dayvid and Leis looked up at the looming mountainside, as Brett extended his external sensors to the maximum limit.

“There is a working Judgment pod, that way,” Brett said, pointing south. “About 50 miles away. Buried in the side of a mossy hill.”

“How can you tell?” asked Dayvid. *I can't believe how dark it is. I can barely make out the sun between the branches of so many trees, thought Dayvid. There can be anything out there.*

“Judgment 31 puts out an unusual core energy signature. Brett can pick up on it easily,” Leis said, trying to reassure Dayvid that they were safe.

Several tree branches snapped. Before Brett had a chance to determine what caused the sounds, four burly mercenaries swarmed out of nowhere on horseback, brandishing drawn long swords. One grotesquely disfigured man let out a battle cry, racing his heavy battle horse toward Brett. Dayvid watched in horror as Brett waited calmly as the man nearly trampled his down before he leaped out of the way. Before the rider had time to turn around, Brett jumped toward him. To Dayvid's amazement, Brett landed on the back of the steed twenty yards away.

Brett's blades tore through his pseudoskin at the wrist. He gouged two long wounds down the warrior's sturdy back, ripping muscles and meat away. The man yelled

in utter agony as his arms refused to move, losing control of his horse's reins. Brett casually tossed the man to the ground, as he turned the horse skillfully around. In a matter of nanoseconds he scoured his memory banks on equestrian skills and programmed himself to ride, and bolted toward the remaining men. As he was about to reach them, a hail of large bolts flew through the air, seemingly out of nowhere. *I should have sensed them, thought Brett, worriedly. My sensors shouldn't have been that off from the crash.*

As dexterous as Brett was, he was unable to avoid all the arrows. One bolt barely sheered into his side, knocking him off the battle horse. Brett cut the bolt in half, and pulled both pieces free as he rolled to his feet. His wound oozed a thin milky membrane, which quickly solidified. Bret spotted Leis and Dayvid as they tried to run further into the wood. He ran, quicker than any man, to head off the remaining mercenaries, before they decided to give chase.

He didn't need to worry. They waited patiently for his arrival. Once again his sensors failed to warn him as the sky was choked with arrows. Brett did his best to avoid the lethal barrage, leaping, running, and flipping like a world-class gymnast, but his best wasn't enough. The wooden shafts tore through his flesh, pinning him against a tree.

Sitkan dismounted from his spotted, stout horse. He walked calmly up to Brett. "What in the devil, kind of techno creature are you? I've never seen your model before."

"A devil is right," Brett said, gasping at the lack of internal responses he felt.

"Naw. You're not a devil. Dameck breaks fast with the very demons himself."

"The arrows? I didn't even..."

"Dameck is a necromancer, don't you know."

"I..." Brett began.

“You’re just a hero. And don’t you know what happens to heroes. They die.”

Sitkan slowly drew his battle-axe, hoping that a combat android like Brett would have been endowed with greater emotions, such as fear. Annoyingly he showed none. “Time to die hero,” he yelled, swing the battle-axe down toward Brett. The blade slammed deep into his chest.

Sitkan began to laugh maniacally, until he felt a swift, deep pain in his chest. He looked down in numbing shock, and found that Brett had somehow smashed his fist through his chest cavity. Blood and intestines gushed around Sitkan’s feet. Sitkan slipped on his own intestines and collapsed on Brett.

“You first,” Brett said, just before his programming became destabilized, and he ceased to function.

“Should we bring it back?” asked one of the remaining mercenaries.

“No. And chance Dameck’s wrath? Better to blame it on Sitkan.”

“Then do we bring Sitkan’s body back?”

“If he was fool enough to get himself killed, then I say he stays where he drops.”

Leis grabbed Dayvid by the hand, and tried her best to zigzag through the woods, using the trees to avoid the warriors. As she rounded a large oak tree, two men charged her and Dayvid, each holding a large net, weighted on the end with small drums. Leis fell quickly to the ground, falling beneath the net. She struggled to her feet, facing the mercenaries turned backs. Dayvid tried desperately to squirm free in the net, much to the amusement of the men, giving Leis a chance to act.

Leis ripped a short sword free from one of the men's scabbards. She quickly sliced through the net, and swung the sword deep into the leg of the warrior's armed companion.

"She actually hit me," grumbled the wounded man as he fell.

The unarmed mercenary swung a surprisingly fast, heavy fist at Leis' temple.

"Don't worry. I hit her back."

Leis slammed headlong into the ground, cutting herself above her right brow. She tried to rise, but her legs just wobbled half-heartedly and she dropped to her knees.

The unarmed mercenary kicked her savagely in the gut, knocking the air out of her. And then in a storm of berserk insanity, he continued to lash out at her. "You want a piece of this you better get up, Thorpe."

"Dameck said alive," Thorpe warned. To his surprise, his companion stopped. In the heat of battle he would never have been able to control himself.

"Maybe Dameck will give her to us," the unarmed soldier said, hopefully.

"Don't count on it. She's far prettier, and cleaner than the creatures around here."

CHAPTER 11

The muddy, slick streets -caused by a sudden, torrential rain storm, that appeared out of nowhere- of Shiuvaun were packed by an odd assortment of locals merchants and traders. Shiuvaun wasn't what Eddie had expected. Instead of being an actual city, it was really an isolated village that was built around a large stone cathedral with devilish stone gargoyle. In the near distance was a small castle built on a large hill, dotted with a few sparse noble fiefs. The streets were lined on both sides by a multitude of villein vendors, cattle and shepherders, and street performers wearing muted woolen clothing, in a strange circus bizarre. Reluctantly, Karie decided to allow Eddie to join her at the tavern, the local hub of illegal activity, called the Boar's Nest.

The dank, damp tavern turned out to be a dilapidated wood two-story building, strategically nestled between the local constable, who strangely was never on duty, and a brothel called Monks. The northern wall was taken up by a large counter supported by

barrels of ale, marred by generous beer and tobacco stains, and was brimming with young, armed warriors, peddlers, and pilgrims, passing through the manor on their way to other fiefdoms. On both sides of the wall was a set of warped staircases that lead to the upstairs bedrooms. Haphazardly repaired leaning oak tables and chairs crowded the rest of the room. Eddie and Karie found an unoccupied table, covered with several rusting trenchers covered with remnants of rancid meat and moldy breadcrumbs in the corner of the room, underneath the bowed western staircase.

“What are you drinking?” a young barmaid, with a husky voice, asked Eddie. The barmaid wore a short skirt, slit on both side, and a tight corset, which barely contained her overly large breasts and pert nipples.

“Whatever she’s having. She’s paying,” Eddie replied warmly. *When and wherever you are ready my darling, he thought.*

Karie let out a groan, noting Eddie’s lusty leer. “The first thing you need is a job.”

Eddie slumped in his chair, stroking his chin absently. “Job? I thought maybe I could tag along with you. Find out what’s happening.”

“Let me clue you into the bigger picture. As you should have already should have figured out, there are numerous warlords clashing in the north. A warlord by the name of Dameck is involved, but at a much lesser role.”

“And that has to do with yours truly because...?”

“It doesn’t affect you, but it does my role,” Karie answered, realizing that the barmaid remained at her side. “I’ll take a sleeper.”

“Make that a double,” Eddie piped in.

“Hope this doesn’t mean a lousy tip,” the barmaid gripped.

“What the flip is a ‘Sleeper’?” Eddie asked in confusion.

“A herbal drink.”

“Wonderful. My life is now complete. First day on this world, and you try to ply me with herbal drinks.” Eddie crossed his arms across his chest. “Tell me more about this ...Dameck?”

“Lord Hedeon is as blood thirsty as the rest, probably more so, but infinitely more cunning. My mission is to keep taps on him.”

“Good old Judge to the rescue. No offense meant, but doesn’t it piss you off that you’re taking all the chances, and its’ getting all the credit.”

“What credit? It’s not like anyone on our home world cares about the welfare of a bunch of thieves, murderers ...rouges,” reasoned Karie. “Judge does what he does because he cares about us, like we were his wayward children.”

“But why do you work for chrome dome? I would think that you could make life simple. And definitely safer. I seriously doubt that the warlords care about poking into their business.”

Eddie gazed at Karie’ long, taunt legs. For the very first time realized that she had a small hidden tattoo on her shapely upper right thigh. “Alright. So let’s say that I drop a few sanity points and decide to join you in your little crusade, how would I go about it?”
Work the angle, Eddie thought. There must be a way to get on top.

“Why on Rouge would you even consider asking? A man like you would never be willing to take the chances that we do. To do what I do you have to swear an allegiance to an order of paladins. The vows we take, you would not be willing to observe.”

“You’re a paladin,” Eddie said, stifling a laugh. “Now I am beginning to understand all that mumble jumble about baptism and repentance. Isn’t amazing how many people clean to the idea of religion and god when their luck is down the toilet.”

“I think I said, way too much, Eddie,” Karie said. “I say things when I shouldn’t sometimes. It’s just that I sometimes forget that people don’t always want the same things in life.”

“You can’t talk to me openly because you think you are so high and mighty. What a crock,” Eddie said, angrily. Just as the barmaid put down two wooden mugs, sloshing full with sleepers, Eddie slammed his fist on the table. The din of voices from the tavern’s patrons droned on, oblivious to their conversation. “Where do you get off...”

“Listen Eddie, my beliefs are important to me. I’m not about to allow you to mock them at your pleasure.” *Can’t you please give me just an ounce of decency, she thought.*

“Judgment 31. You don’t actually believe he is a god?”

“Not at all. Judge is just a wise counselor. He isn’t the ‘way’, but he can lead to the ‘way’.”

“And you are this little priestly paladin girl, eh. Explain the tattoo, then. Go on preacher girl,” Eddie goaded.

Karie consulted her pasty yellow brew, before she said, “All those in my order have covenant marks. They represent those ideals we hold most dear. They symbolize our devotion in what is right, forsaken that which is wrong.”

“We have one of them in our midst. Should we all drop to our knees now and beg for forgiveness to anointed one,” a burly voice piped from the crowded bar. “Can anyone tell me why it’s the chicks or the uptight girly boys who pimp to ye old Judge?”

“I’m sorry, Eddie. Guess I talk way too openly.” Karie slide her hand to her sword’s hilt. “Feel free to leave. This is my fight.”

“No problem sweets,” Eddie said dismissively, as he rose to his feet, balling his hands into tight fists.

The room became dangerously quiet. Eddie looked around at the hardened faces that surrounded them, finding the largest warrior he could find. As luck would have it, the warrior just happened to be armed with a large bronze doubled-edged sword, with only the tang, and upper and lower guard visible from the double-stitched leather scabbard.

“You got a problem,” Eddie challenged.

“And what if I do, little man?” he yelled.

A frail noble, dressed in a white pleating tunic covered by a colorful wool jacket, moved quickly to the warrior’s side, whispering in his hairy ear. The warrior shrank back to the bar, carefully not turning his back on Eddie as he ordered another ale. “This young pup says your Eddie Green, and that you are someone I should be afraid of. Personally, I don’t think you are. Too small.”

The tension level in the bar was visibly felt.

“Eddie Green?” Karie asked. “Who is Eddie Green?”

“The devil himself,” an old crone grumbled from the crowd.

“Your move slick,” Eddie taunted. “Live or die. Frankly I don’t give a crap.”

The large warrior drank his ale slowly, and set the mug on the bar. He slowly moved around Eddie, and stopped suddenly, as if he truly meant to attack an unarmed man. Without admitting the paralyzing fear that welled in his heart, the warrior left the tavern. Eddie glared at everyone in the awed room, challenging anyone to make the move.

Eddie looked back toward Karie, and the tension in the room immediately left. “Why did the room go quiet when you mentioned those?” Eddie asked, pointing at the covenant mark.

Before Karie could answer, Ter Adon walked into the tavern, amid suspicious, furtive glances. “Paladins are pretty much hated around here. Always sticking their cute noses where they shouldn’t. No offense Karie,” Ter said, splaying his hands out on the table. “I believe that the question at hand is: Who is Eddie Green?”

“Old story. Who are you?”

“Ter Adon, at your service.” Ter Adon bowed slightly at the waist.

“He’s a friend,” Karie explained. “What brings you here? Thought you were forbidden to come out and play.”

“Karie,” Ter Adon looked around him for signs of eavesdroppers, “not here. Let’s walk.”

Ter Adon seemed to have a supernatural way of avoiding the muddy puddles and livestock dung, as they strolled down the center of the street. “Onishi came home today.”

“Ready to seed in the new crop?”

“No. Not really. More than likely I’ll be doing it.”

“Big surprise. You work way to hard for that farm. This isn’t just a happy coincidence, now is it,” Karie pressed.

“Dameck is seriously on the move. Father thinks that we could be in danger.”

“How so?”

“Onishi didn’t know. But he said that Dameck believes he is nearly invincible now. All I know for certain is that Dameck’s men took some sort of cargo off of a downed space ship. Called the Chrysalis.”

“What kind of ship, was it?”

“Don’t know, but it had to be recent.”

Karie eyed Eddie. “A penal transport ship.”

“Yeah. Maybe. Onishi said that people had survived the crash. Dameck has got scouts out looking now.”

“How many people, farmer boy?” Eddie asked.

“Onishi didn’t say, but he wanted me to tell you.”

“Why me.” Karie stopped suddenly. “I’m not exactly you dad’s favorite.”

“He’s scared Karie. More frightened than I have ever seen him. I think he knows he’s over his head, and just wants to do the right thing and to get the message about the ship and the crew to Judge. You’re the most likely to stick her nose where it shouldn’t belong. ‘Sides, neither of us can get near a Judgment pod without chancing someone will see.”

“But I can,” Karie said. She looked at Eddie, with just a hint of sadness. “I’ll go talk to the big guy as soon as I get a couple of supplies. But I think it would be best that

you came along, Ter.” Karie threw up her hands. “Looks like this is where we must part ways. Good luck Eddie.”

Eddie Green couldn't honestly say why he was so upset at Karie's sudden departure. As he was walking on the outskirts of town, a sudden thought came to him. *Work the angle.* He scoured his new transplanted memories until he found what he needed. He ran into the woods at a lightening pace, nearly tripping over thick tree trunks as he approached a huge swamp area where the nearly buried object laid. Slowly he walked around the object, searching for a way in. Just as he was about to pry into the smooth bullet-shaped object with his bare hands, an opening materialized. Eddie leaped over the deepest part of the muddy area, landing inside of the Judgment cubicle.

“Eddie? To say that I am surprised, would be an understatement,” Judgment 31 said.

Eddie plopped into the pod's torn leather black chair, putting his muddy feet against wall, painted with a variety of odd symbols. “What is all of this crap,” Eddie said, nodding toward the child-like painted symbols.

“I am not sure. A lot of times people leave these markings. Sometimes with a small sacrifice. Sometimes not. A few people who work for me try to come in on occasion and clean up the sacrifices. Actually I don't mind the graffiti. I see them art as the window to the soul. But you're not really interested in that are you, Eddie.”

“Sure I am. It has always been my dream to become a god. Do you know how many girls I could nail with that kind of reputation?”

Judgment 31 paused. “I am uncomfortable with that type of personification. I have never thought of myself as anything other than a fancy computer. I choose not to entertain the delusions of some of Rouge’s inhabitants. Whenever I have a chance, I make them aware of what I really am. Eddie...you have a reason for being here. To be frank, I would like nothing better than to talk with you, but not at the price of your disrespectful manner.”

“Fraid you have no choice. I am all that you got. No one is as ruthless as I am,” Eddie bragged.

“I am missing the point.”

“I want of this rock. Be back on Pangea. Rub everyone’s noses in the fact that the damned Eddie Green is back, and among them.”

“I don’t see that as a possibility. What you did...”

“Will just have to be forgotten. Let me ask you, are you missing something. Think real hard chrome dome,” Eddie said, gloating.

“I am confused. Eddie? Please explain.”

“Think penal transport ships. Think missing crew members.”

“Eddie. I have no clue what you are getting at,” admitted Judgment 31.

“The ship that brought me here,” Eddie said, frustrated. “Don’t play dumb with me.”

“The Orion. She is already in Pangea port 198.”

“You really don’t know, do you?” Eddie sunk in the chair in concentration. “I was transported by a ship called the Chrysalis.”

“Not according to my records. The Orion’s manifest...”

“...is wrong. Here is the deal. You get me off this planet. And I’ll tell you were the Chrysalis crashed.”

“Eddie, this is a serious accusation,” Judgment 31 warned. “Ships don’t just disappear. That would require a gross breach of competency, or a cover up.”

“So sentence me. Oh right! I already have been.” Eddie fumed. “Just read my mind. See for yourself.”

The pod’s door sprang open, as Karie climbed angrily inside. “You don’t need to Judge. The creep is right. There was a crash landing. A ship called the Chrysalis. There might be survivors. And matters are worse than you think.”

“How much worse,” Judgment 31 said, incredulously.

“Dameck took something off the ship.”

“I was just about to come to that point,” Eddie said.

“I bet you were.” *Watch out for him, Karie warned herself. Ignore his charms. He can’t be trusted.*

“Karie,” Judgment 31 said, urging her to go with her story.

“Lord Dameck took something out of the ship. Adon’s father thinks it might be a dangerous.”

“Perhaps a weapon? Karie if we are dealing with a possible weapon we need to know what the weapon is, and where the Chrysalis’s crew is. I can send an off world team to extract the crew and retrieve the object taken off the ship, if you can find out exactly where they are. Can you do that for me.”

“My pleasure,” Karie said. Karie started to rise.

Eddie slowly raised his hand. “Better wait, sweets,” Eddie said, a sudden thought coming to mind. “Now what if I just happened to start blabbing my mouth in town. Which I am likely to do, especially when I get a few drinks in me. And I just accidentally just spill the beans on your mission. What do you think would happen?”

“Extortionist,” Karie accused Eddie.

Eddie stared into space. “Dameck Hedeon?”

“Yes,” Judgment 31 said. “You do remember who he is, Eddie?”

“Yeah. I do, but it still doesn’t change my position,” Eddie said absently, distracted by his deeper awareness of Dameck Hedeon. “You want to rescue the Chrysalis’s crew. You want to learn what Dameck stole from the ship, then you deal with me. Get it. You don’t, and I’m sure Dameck would be very interested in knowing...”

“Eddie. Dameck’s a monster,” Karie coldly reasoned. “If he has a weapon...”

“I don’t care. I’m in it for just me,” Eddie countered.

“Eddie. Even if I could agree to your demands...how can I trust you,” Judgment 31 said. “I must add that I highly doubt that I will be given permission to meet your demands.”

“You can’t. That’s were Karie comes in hand. Send her with me. If I turn traitor, then she can either off me, or warn you.”

“Both. I would do both,” Karie threatened.

Eddie smiled his most infuriating smile. *She loves you old man. Can’t you feel the warmth.* “I need a guide anyway.”

“You realize that aiding you in anyway could endanger my primary role in the Pangea penal system. I could be deactivated.”

“Not my problem,” Eddie said, crossing his arms across his chest defiantly.

Imagine, Eddie thought. I could be the man who killed Judgment 31. Now wouldn't that be something.

“Let me work out the details,” Judgment 31 said. “But I can almost guarantee that I can't get a release for you to Pangea. Perhaps we can deal in some other fashion?”

Eddie folded his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. “Hey I'm flexible. Just as long as I make out on top.”

“Karie, I need you to confirm the Chrysalis' crew and the packages location. Report back to me as soon as possible.”

“No problem Judgie,” Eddie said, with a slight smirk caressing his face.

Maybe I should have let him drown, Karie thought. She kicked Eddie in the leg.

“Time to go hotshot.”

“You keep flirting with me like that, and people are going to talk,” Eddie replied, feeling better than he had for a long time.

CHAPTER 12

Dameck Hedeon ordered his private dining chamber's candlelight reduced and the serfs almost entirely withdrawn, with the exception of one not so clumsy chambermaid, so that the shooting pain in his head and behind his cruel eyes would subside. He held his head gingerly in his hands, trying to ignore the smell of pungent food beneath of him. Whenever he communed with his inner voices they became louder and louder, until he couldn't stand it any longer and fatigue would quickly set in. But he had no real choice really. His inner voices told him things about the future, present and the past that he wouldn't otherwise know, even with his legion of spies. *Beware of treachery. Tread lightly with the off worlder, Dameck's inner competing voices chanted over and over.*

Hedeon glanced through the crevices of his fingers, wincing as the remaining candlelight stabbed at him like the decorative fine crystal daggers he had made by a blind dark monk in the enigmatic, crowded bazaars in Himlen. He closed his eyes hard once more, and then took his hands away from his face. *Perhaps I should be watching Onishi closer. Never trusted him much. His son was too close to those people. But you know what I always said. Keep a friend close and an enemy even closer. Who was the offworlder?* Dameck wondered.

Dameck barely touched his generous dinner. The large bloody remains of a wild game were soaked in fine chunks of discarded wheat bread. The one solitary regret Hedeon had about being exiled to Rouge was that he was yet to find a decent meal. Often he would find that he just didn't have the heart to eat. Dameck's lackluster eating habits came quickly to the attention of the kitchen staff, which was in constant state of fear that they had somehow displeased Hedeon. Too many rumors about Dameck's health had abounded. .

The only rumor that Dameck took pleasure in was the one about him becoming a part of the undead. His gaunt appearance seemed to lend credence to this, and Hedeon found that the wide berth others gave him was nearly orgasmic. He found the fear others had of him intoxicating.

Hedeon gazed at the recess of his dining chamber out of pure boredom, and laid his eyes on a youthful serving wench. He raised his wooden goblet over his head, swishing the remaining blood red wine. The motion caught the young serf's crystal-blue eyes, and she reluctantly made her way to Dameck's side and refilled his glass from a nearly full wooden pitcher.

“Don’t be in such a hurry, girl.” Dameck openly leered over the rim of his glass, closely inspecting the serf for any physical flaws. *The breasts aren’t big enough, and her legs are a bit too thin, Dameck thought. Still not a bad morsel.*

“I reverently wish I could spend time my lord, but my duties demand otherwise.”

“That wasn’t an invitation,” Dameck said, more attracted to her because of her obvious unwillingness to be near him. He grabbed her tight, peasant arm, wrenching it savagely as he pulled her on his lap. “Every word I utter is to be taken as a command. Don’t you agree?”

Hedeon salivated slightly as he dug his unclipped, grimy fingernails into the girl’s arm, and watched as her face contorted with agonizing and humiliating pain. She let out a yelp into the empty dining room, underneath Dameck’s increasing sadistic pleasure.

“I require your presence now.”

“I’m promised to another, my lord. I’m to be married,” she pleaded.

“Really?” Dameck raised his bushy eyebrows. “Anyone I can’t put to death?”

The serf shook her head. The long red hair caught Dameck’s attention, as he grabbed the fine strands and yanked hard. *This one will go to fat. Better to have her now.*

“Please don’t hurt him,” she said; her eyelashes spilling tears.

Dameck regarded her request coldly, pulling her hair even more savagely, until her ears were within whispering distance. He inhaled her natural youthful smell, surprised to detect a hint of her budding womanhood. She was a lot younger than he had thought.

“In this world you need to be only concerned with yourself. Not dieing should be your greatest priority, don’t you agree? Your budding flower would be only wasted anyways. I never kill without my reasons. So far I have no reason. Do you wish to give me one?”

“I’ll do anything. Anything that you require.” The tears freely flowed down her ruddy cheeks. Dameck felt the stirring in his loins. *What is in a conquest, unless there is a humiliating struggle?*

“That goes without saying. Tell me girl, what is your name?”

“Everlery.”

“Disappointing. Your name really inspires...what is the word, disgust. I loathe your name. I loathe your attempt at purity. Does it pain you at my whim I can so easily destroy all that you hold dear?”

“I can’t do anything about it.”

“Ah yes.” Dameck kissed her exposed neck, biting to enhance his moment. “You will do as I anything I should ever desire. If I want a whore, you will be my whore.”

Dameck rose and dragged the girl behind him with her hair, leading the way to his bedchambers. He lit a dim torch and waved it in front of him. To Everlery’s horror, she discovered that Dameck’s private chambers held a variety of torture devices. “Like the view, pretty?”

“It’s you,” Everlery said.

“Yes it is,” he said. A slight maniacal laugh escaped from his cruelly twisted mouth. Dameck shut the heavy oak door behind him, locking it into place with a skeleton key he had laced around his thick neck. He sat on a menacing-looking medieval rack, and patted the space next to him, which was heavily stained with recent blood. Reluctantly Everlery forced herself to sit next to Dameck. His pungent smell tickled her nostrils, and she felt a wave of nausea hit her.

“What do they say I am?” Dameck asked the chambermaid.

“Who are they, my lord?”

“The peasants. People like you.”

“I wish you wouldn’t ask,” the chambermaid replied, biting her pouty crimson lips, but went on when Dameck shot her a withering glance. Everlery faced Dameck boldly. “They say you are possessed and in league with the devil himself. They say that you may live forever if misfortune doesn’t fall on you. They say that you can promise man immortality until the end times, and have done so with your dark clerics with blood blessings. But that immortality has a price to pay, if not here, then on the plains after.”

Hedeon leaped from the rack, startling Everlery and striking fear into her young heart. He put some distance between himself and her, and started to peel clothing off his heavily scarred body. Everlery fought an urge to scream as she saw words, which just had feel of evilness, of a forgotten language lanced and burned over his entire body. Dameck reveled in her horror. “You will disrobe, and shackle yourself. If you don’t, you will give me reason to kill all you love.”

Everlery very slowly undressed, ashamed at baring her body for the likes of Dameck Hedeon. *I wonder what would be worse, death or this, she thought.*

Dameck Hedeon disinterestedly watched the young blond haired villein, as he dangled by his legs from a thick, greased rope, tied across a beam set high in the wall. The boy’s entire body was scared with elaborate, seemingly meaningless symbols, which were painstakingly burned into his flesh by a red-hot cattle prod. Hedeon twirled his right index finger in a circle, prompting his chief torturer to swing the boy around and around, admiring his work. Below the boy were the smoking embers of hot coals fueled by cattle

fat, and a small water basin that was channeled from the kitchen on the packed dirt floor. Several differently shaped cattle prods were stuck into the middle of the pyre.

The circular stone room that was used to hold honeybees to sweeten foods and drinks many years ago, had a set of stone steps that lead to the disheveled egress, which was just small enough to comfortably fit just the few men that Dameck cared enough to invite. “How long, do you plan to live boy?” Dameck mocked.

The torturer swung the peasant to Dameck, who pulled him nearer by the roots of his soiled hair. Dameck noted with surprised delight the blood that trickled down the boy’s body, streaming from the recently burned scar of a tiny dragon, over the boy’s now fused right eye. “Oh. Sorry. I forgot you couldn’t speak anymore.” Dameck traced his fingers across the terrified boy’s swollen and disfigured red lips, hastily sewn shut with a needle and string. “Do you know who I am?” Dameck asked.

Dameck kept quiet for a few brief minutes. “Come now. Don’t make me wait.”

“May I make a suggestion to you, my lord,” the gangly torturer inquired.

Dameck regarded the man. There were very few people whom Dameck shared the sadistic passion he felt when maiming a peasant, and the torturer was one of them. “Very well,” Dameck said guardedly.

“Our newest arrivals...”

“Go on,” prodded Dameck, “before you try my patience.”

“It would be interesting if they were brought here to see the meat.”

“It might expedite my inquires into their missing man.” Dameck nodded in agreement. “Very good Albin. Bring them here.”

Dameck sat at a small table, and took a lusty drink of his wine. Albin clamored up

the stairs, joyfully thinking about the pain he would be soon inflicting on the newest prisoners. “You could very well be my own bastard urchin,” he said to the boy. “I’ve waited so long. All these many years before I had you brought here. Your grossly caring mother had no clue about what was going to happen.”

The chamber’s heavy oak door swung wide open, slamming into the wall. Two large warriors dressed in black leather armor escorted Albin, Dayvid and Leis down the steep stairs.

“My name is Dameck. Care for something to drink?” he asked Leis. Dameck was slightly impressed that she showed no signs of noticing the boy dangling from the rope.

He watched Dayvid and Leis carefully, as they were shoved to the floor of his private torture chamber. Dayvid cast his gaze to the dirt floor, covered with a thick layer of dirt and hay, hoping that he would escape Dameck’s attention. He didn’t. Dayvid tried to quickly look up but couldn’t help himself, and like a sheep waiting to be slaughtered by the wolf, Dameck was waiting for him.

“Tell me your name boy,” Dameck demanded.

“His name is of not importance to you,” Leis said. The fury she felt was plainly etched on her darkened features.

Dayvid noticed the boy. He closed his eyes hard, leaning into Leis lap to bury his head from the sight. Leis held him protectively. She glared at Dameck, as if he was the only one left in the room. Albin smirked at Dayvid’s reaction.

“He has too soft of a heart,” Albin said, remarking on the obvious.

Dameck nodded. “My friend Albin here, thought you might like some company.”

“You think you can scare me.”

“If I don’t, then you’re a fool. How did you survive?” Dameck asked. *What a beautiful visage, Dameck thought. What would I do with such a unblemished face. Perhaps a slice under the eyes, so that she could never close them. The possibilities seem endless.*

“The crash? We just did.”

“Your friend? The combat android. Is it capable of regeneration, and if so would he go directly to Judgment 31? Or will he to mount some fool hardy rescue?” asked Dameck.

“And why should I tell you?”

Albin raced over to Leis and slapped her face hard. *Time to put him into his place, Dameck thought.*

“Guards. If Albin so much as twitches, you will cut off his hands and lay them down at my feet.”

Albin stopped dead in his tracks, his lips foaming with spittle.

“I asked you a question. Don’t make me ask again,” Dameck warned.

“I don’t know,” Leis said, ruefully.

“Come now. Androids are preprogrammed to follow certain parameters. Personally I don’t care one way or another. I would just like to know how much time I have.”

“Brett is different.”

“Explain,” Dameck said, rising to his feet. He drew a hidden ebony dagger from a scabbard tucked into the middle of his back. He cut a deep wound across the boy’s cheek.

“Now that looks better. It needed a little something. Don’t you agree?”

Leis stared at Dameck's muscular arms. "Were you tortured?" she inquired.

Albin began to giggle hysterically. "Those are the marks of the Dark Cutting. My lord's a powerful necromancer."

"Really?" Dayvid mumbled. He was terrified even more by this latest revelation.

"Enough! Answer my question now, or I'll have the lot of you executed," Dameck ranted.

"I don't know what Brett will do. His programming allows for too much room to make a guess. The conversation is moot because I seriously doubt that he even survived."

"You have to understand it's important," Dameck said reasonably. "My world is about to change a great deal, and I'm anxious for the change. I waited too long. A deity among the animals."

"Holding us hostage isn't going to help your plans."

Dameck nodded. "True. So very true. I should be done with you now."

"Be reasonable. Our home world should know that we are here soon enough. They will mount an rescue."

"Really? Do you think so? Hasn't it occurred to that beautiful brain of yours that no one will ever know." Dameck smiled maniacally. "No one has a clue you are here. You were suppose to have died in the crash. All traces of your journey here no longer exist, as she planned it. You are my guest, to do with as I please."

"And then there's Brett," Leis said, wondering who *she* was.

"I must agree with you that I don't believe he would have survived. And even if he did, I can assure you he is no real threat. He won't be able to get close to a Judgment pod. I have to many men watching for that to happen. Your android is little more than a

distraction rather than a real threat. My men have brought me your manifest, by the way. And there was a single name on it that I am very interested in. Green.”

“Eddie Green. Did he survive the landing? Is that what you want to know.” *Why on Pangea should I tell you?, Leis thought. My gut is telling me to not cooperate in the least.*

“He...,” Dayvid began, quivering with fear.

“...was spread through out space. His torpedo hit the ionosphere and shattered to a million pieces,” Leis finished, much to Dayvid’s surprise.

“Shame. That is really too bad,” Dameck said flatly, without emotion. “We knew each other once. Fought for the same reasons. A long time ago. Personally, I am amazed that he eluded capture for so long. I had considered him my equal. Well...almost my equal. He was a bit soft hearted.”

“Eddie Green,” Dayvid cried in astonishment. “You can’t be serious!”

“My dear boy,” Dameck growled, “There are men here that are worse. Well...there were men. Now I am the last of the true barbarians. I would have loved the chance to get at Green.”

Dameck looked at the guards and Albin, waving his hand toward the door. “You may leave. And take the little bastard with you.”

Albin gripped Dayvid’s shoulder, and literally dragged him up the stairs. Leis started to rise, but the look in Dameck’s crazed eyes told her to stay still.

As soon as the door was slammed shut, Dameck turned viciously on his victim, plunging his knife to the hilt, and then cutting a ragged trail down his stomach. The boy’s

eyes briefly flashed the horrifying pain he was experiencing, and then glazed over; fixed on some point on the wall. “Do you have any idea who this boy was.”

Leis sat in mute shock. Tears streamed down he face.

“No? It was rumored he was one of mine. Some wench that I had fun with one night. Do you know why I did that,” Dameck yelled. “Answer me!”

Before Leis thought her out her words carefully, she whispered, “Because your insane.” Leis covered her head, shivering from fright. “Please...”

“Insane am I? You insult me by calling me insane and then beg for my indulgence?” Dameck asked, amusement prancing in his eyes. “What is you name?”

“Leis.”

“I am not nearly done with you. I want you to know what kind of man I am. The reason this,” Dameck said, slicing a peel of flesh away from his victim’s dead body, “is no longer here, is because there is only room enough for one of me in this world. I will always see to that. Understand?”

Leis nodded, not encouraged by where the conversation was going.

Dameck considered how far he wanted to go in talking with Leis. “There are not many men here that know my greatness. I don’t say this lightly. Soon this whole world will be mine for the taking.”

“Even for someone that came from Pangea, it is a large world,” Leis remarked dumbly.

“But I have the key. A weapon that will destroy the entire Judgment 31 network himself, as soon as I get the firing codes. A trigger if you like. As we speak, my warriors

are gathering Judgment cubical and hiding them in the lands of my enemies, so that I may send them to the hell they surely deserve.”

“You do that, and countless innocent people will die. The children of criminals that have not processed their way off the penal colony,” Leis said, quickly realizing the scope of Dameck’s threats. *The trigger could breach Judgment’s powerful core, and kill untold numbers of people, she thought.*

“Who would give you such a weapon?”

“My newest, best friend,” Dameck answered tongue-in-cheek.

CHAPTER 13

The early morning dawn brought with it the triumphant sounds of birds and fresh reddish dew that soaked the parched ground. Eddie watched the horizon as the sun's red and yellow light charged through the fall lush valley, teaming with extraordinary large oak trees and underbrush. Karie and Ter Adon had been awake long before Eddie had cautiously opened his weary eyes.

A small campfire was going, and the smell of boiling pungent herbs, coming from a small soaked wooden pan tickled Eddie's nostrils.

"So when do we go," Eddie said, a little too loudly for Karie's taste.

"Only when I say that we do. We are very close to where nomads like to camp. Sometimes they just hang out hiding, and waiting for something to happen. I think we could possibly avoid them, but we chance an even worse danger than the nomads. The Canar," Karie whispered in fear. "It's just best to wait and see."

"The Canar?" Eddie prompted.

"The Canar are a tribe of...mutants," Ter said, uncomfortably looking around. "They used to be like you and me, except one day they decided to attack a Judgment cubicle. No one knows for certain if they triggered an explosion by trying to extract Judge's core, or if Palen, the defense satellite system, took it upon itself to destroy them. It doesn't matter really. A core from Judgment could have been used to fashion a great dirty bomb, or perhaps a source of energy. The possibilities could have been endless. But the explosion left the entire tribe disfigured. They used to be a loose confederation of criminals, but because of their injuries they soon found themselves cut off from humanity. They soon

came together and formed into the tribe of the Canar. It is rumored that live in the underworld, whatever that means. ”

“So how long do we have to wait?”

“Midday would be best time to move out. That’s when most people are either on the hunt or eating.”

Eddie smelled the dew in the air, filling his lungs with the bitter, sweet order. “Well sweets, we can’t wait all day. Not that spending the day with you doesn’t have its allure.” Eddie stretched his back, and breathed in another greedy lung full of air, before he arose to his feet and promptly started to walk north, without even glancing back at Karie. “See ya latter.”

“Eddie! Hold on. That’s an order, you hear me. We’ll get our stuff ready. Alright?” Karie quickly gathered her bedrolls, and camping equipment. Since Ter was prepared to leave since he had no equipment, he made sure that he had put out the campfire, before covering it with overgrown weeds and dirt.

Eddie stood on a hill, watching with some impatience, as Karie got ready. “Not to put the pressure on you sweets, but times a waistin’. By the way, which way was the ship downed?”

Karie slung the bedroll over her shoulder, and drew up to Eddie. “You were going to take off, and you don’t even have a clue where you need to go.” *You idiot, she thought. I’m starting to get tired of your I’m-a-man-and-I-need-to-be-in-charge-type-of-crap.*

“I guess that’s about right,” Eddie smirked. “I have a hard time just standing still and waiting. It’s always been a weakness of mine. I guess I just figured that if I could light a fire under your sweet butt, we would be well on our way. And I was right, wasn’t I?”

“You could be easily the most infuriating man I have ever met,” Karie said.

“And you love me for it.”

Ter Adon did his best to suppress his wolfish grin, while Karie’s face turned red from the embarrassment. “Tell me Eddie, how come you were sentenced here.”

“Kid, you don’t want to know.” Eddie pretended to shield his eyes from the blaring sunlight. “You know at times I like to pretend that it never happened. Pretend that I had dreamed up the whole thing. I just got in way too deep.”

“You have this presence you know,” Ter said, not really sure if he wanted to mention it. “There is an aura about you that just screams keep away.”

“Really.” Eddie grinned. “I’ve never noticed it before.”

“Just yell out if I start going in the wrong direction.” Eddie started to trek down the hill, making sure his feet were well planted on the slippery slope. Ter followed closely, carefully avoiding any dark patches of fauna that could hide the Snakeweed.

Eddie barely caught the hint of something out of the corner of his eye, and he came to a sudden stop, kicking up a cloud of dust on the trail. The movement was so fast that he didn’t have time to roll away, like he had been trained to do. The impact was enough to hurtle Eddie down the small incline, tumbling head over heels. Landing on his back onto a sharp rock, Eddie let out a painful gasp of air.

Black spots started clouded Eddie’s vision, threatening to take over his senses. Green breathed in a desperate gulp of air, which helped clear his vision but did little to improve his disorientation. He tried to roll off the rock, feeling the sharp corners lashing into the middle of his back, but the weight on his chest and arms stopped him.

“Don’t even think about breathing, Green,” Brett said, his legs pinning Eddie’s arms while he sat on his chest. His left hand was firmly clenched around Eddie’s throat threateningly. Brett poised his bladed left hand high above Eddie’s chest, ready to plunge it into him the instant he proved to be too much of a nuisance.

A combat android, Eddie thought. What’s a combat android doing here? And how did it know his name?

“What did you do to the ship?” Brett clenched Eddie’s throat tighter, drawing blood as he sliced through the skin with his hardened fingers. “Whom are you working for?”

“I work for no one.” Eddie gritted his teeth together, and with fierce determination began to ignore the pains he was feeling. “Get off my chest,” Eddie growled. “Before I decide to crush you into spittoon.”

Ter Adon and Karie cautiously circled Brett and Eddie, each trying to weigh the situation.

“Who are you friends, Green? Are they involved?”

“The buddy system. They assign you someone to hold hands with until the scout master can get around,” Eddie remarked.

Brett shook his head in disbelief. *What kind of a man makes jokes at a time like this?*

“The Chrysalis? Are you one of the crew?” Ter Adon held up the palms of his hands. “We were sent to look for you.”

Brett looked at Ter Adon, skepticism etched in his blood-red eyes. “And who would send you?”

“Judgment 31,” Karie said.

“Explain him,” Brett said.

“I rescued him from a river, in the middle of a battle zone. To make long story short, we felt that we had to bring him along. We didn’t trust him enough on his own,” Karie said. She edged closer, catching a quick glance at Eddie’s wounds. *Superficial. He’ll be fine.*

“A very wise decision,” Brett replied.

Brett slowly stood up, and withdrew from Eddie. Eddie arose quickly, coldly regarding Brett.

“The ship was sabotaged. Skilled horsemen have captured my crew. A boy and a woman. Took something off our ship.”

“The horsemen belong to a warlord named Dameck Hedeon.” Karie shook her head. “I was hoping that they would have found a way to escape. There is no way that we can take them from Dameck. He’s too powerful. We’ll need to get Judge’s help. He’ll need to arrange for a special operations team to rescue your crew.”

“He’ll?”

Ter Adon and Karie shared a glance.

Eddie gingerly stroked the wound on his back, assessing the damage, which wasn’t much. *Just a little blood and skin puckering.* “They think that Judgment 31 is more than just a machine. Some practically worship the high and mighty trashcan as a god. Can you believe that?”

Brett furrowed his brow. “But Judgment 31 is merely a complicated machine. An impressively judicially-minded machine, but a machine,” Brett explained slowly.

“Not everyone is convinced that an instrument of justice like Judge could be just merely a machine. He renders judgments that are nearly perfect.” Karie glared at Green, annoyed at his overly simplified answer. “He is a force of good here. A chance at redemption.”

“Trash can worship abounds my friend,” Eddie said, a hint of triumph etched in surly face. *Man she practically glows when I tweak her, he thought.*

The trees surrounding them began to shudder. Brett dodged quickly, neatly avoiding the men as they rushed through the brush. To say they were men was sorely inaccurate. They were larger than average men, with unruly blond hair, and greenish-blue murky eyes. They wore raggedly loincloths around their impossibly thick waists, and held short spears, daggers and axes made of flint in their calloused hands. Each of the men had something noticeably deformed about their features. Some were missing limbs, others had too many digits in their webbed hands, and most had scarring and boils that ran down the length of their bodies.

“Mutants,” mumbled Ter Adon, as he was picked up and thrown to hard ground by a creature that only vaguely resembled a woman. Ter Adon attempted to stand back up, but a swift punch to his jaw by the woman knocked him back to the ground. A heavy blow to the base of his skull came out of nowhere, and Ter passed out.

“Eddie watch out,” Karie yelled, as she drew her sword, parlaying a huge axe.

Eddie Green lashed out with a back kick that should have taken out the man behind. His agile foot definitely met resistance as it squarely hit the man in his well-developed chest, but quickly slide through the man like butter. Remarkably, Eddie phased

through the man, falling to the ground. He tried to roll out of the creature's way, as a small group of mutants jumped at Eddie at the same time, grabbing at his wrists and legs.

Karie swung her blade at a sharp angle, cutting through the wooden handle of the axe, bashing the hilt of her sword into the creature's square jaw. The creature crumpled to the ground, yelling out in excruciating pain.

With great surprise, several creatures that had surrounded Karie fell back, allowing her a wide circular path. A painfully gaunt creature slowly edged closer to Karie, his hands covering his eyes. His thumbs were planted firmly on the temples of his skull.

The air in front of the creature shimmered and ignited into a wall of a blistering heat wave. It flicked its hands out toward Karie, and the eddies of waves swarmed into Karie time and time again, until she felt the strength leave her legs. She fell to the ground from sheer exhaustion.

Brett quickly assessed his options, realizing that he had little choice, but trying to escape and find Judgment.

"Don't move," warned a frail mutant, as it deftly closed on Brett's position. "Or else you friends might get hurt."

Friends? thought Brett. You have got to be kidding. Brett moved meekly lumbered toward the creature as if he was going to easily surrender, lashing out at the last possible minute with his combat blades. Surprisingly, he barely grazed the creature. *Faster than you look, he thought with much admiration.* The creature shimmered and disappeared.

“Please stop,” pleaded a small, but firm voice behind Brett. “After you see Merrick, I will help you find Judgment.”

Brett turned on the voice, finding to his surprise a small, gaunt child with flowing strawberry blond hair. “How could you know what I want?”

“It is my talent,” the child stated simply. “Not to be rude but I can read you way too easily.”

“Impossible?” Brett searched the girl’s face for subtle traces of betrayal. “Why should I believe you?”

“You must realize that your core programming prohibits you from hurting innocents.”

“Yes,” Brett responded cautiously, edging slowly around the child. *I don’t believe my eyes, he thought. It must be some sort of sensory trick.*

“I won’t let you leave,” the child said, barring Brett’s way. “Merrick would be most displeased.”

“Can’t disappoint...Merrick, can we?”

The little girl smiled, gripping Brett’s cold hand. “You come with me, and I promise to help you find your friend, if at all possible. Be not afraid. I’ll watch after you.”

Eddie coiled into a tight ball, tearing his hands and legs away from the grasp of all the mutants, except one burly creature who held his right wrist. Eddie delivered a bone-crushing blow to the creature’s throat with his elbow. As the mutant tried to yell in pain, Eddie took the opportunity to slam his foot into the mutant’s knee, shattering it and driving the creature to the ground.

Eddie deftly rolled between two mutants, turning quickly as he landed on his feet and slammed his fist into the small of their backs. As one of the mutants fell to the ground to its' knees, Eddie yanked on its' hair, drawing the creature's head back and slammed an elbow into the mutant's hugely distorted face. *I hope that they aren't contaminated, thought Eddie. Slimy puss-head.*

Eddie darted away from his remaining attackers, heading toward the strange mutant that had attacked Karie. The mutant turned to face Eddie, but not in time to avoid a blow to its' face. *Don't give the bastard time to attack, Eddie warned himself. Got to get her out of here.* The mutant tried to cover its' face, stinging from the blow. Eddie brushed by it, driving his fist into the back of the creature's deformed, boiled head.

The mutant teetered for the briefest of seconds, and then crumpled to the ground.

Eddie picked Karie from the ground and slung her over his shoulder. *Now is probably not the time to tell her she could stand to lose a couple of pounds, he thought.* Green turned sharply again, looking for an avenue of escape. He saw a small dirt trail behind a rather large mutant, who's milky white eyes hinted at possible blindness. Eddie rushed toward the creature, driving a shoulder into its' stomach. Eddie dropped Karie and fell down in agonizing pain, dumbly realizing that he didn't even move the mutant an inch.

The mutant drew back its' heavy fist, slamming them into the ground as Eddie deftly rolled. The mutant drew back its' hand, leaving a large indentation of its' hand in its' wake.

Eddie gingerly rolled to his unsteady feet, swinging two quick jabs into the mutant's solar plexus. If the mutant felt the blows, it gave no indication.

The mutant lashed out its' enormous, three fingered hand, slapping Eddie's shoulder, sending him crashing into nearby bushes. Eddie rose ever so slowly to his feet, wiping the blood from his mouth. *Now you pissed me off, he thought.* He rushed the mutant again, trying to hit it in the throat.

The mutant let out a small laugh, as it slammed its' fist down on Eddie's shoulders, driving him into the ground.

Eddie's shoulders screamed at him in agony. *They feel dislocated, Eddie thought in horror.* Eddie tested his shoulders by shrugging them and balling his hands into numbing fists.

The mutant started to laugh as it gripped Eddie's upper arms with its' talon fingertips. The creature picked Eddie up, flinging him back and forth like a rag doll.

Eddie flung out his heel frantically, grazing the man in the groin. The mutant's laugh died. He looked at Eddie with utter hatred, picking him high over his head, and slamming him to the ground.

Eddie was grasping for air as the mutant raised its' enormous leg. The mutant lifted its' foot, preparing to slam it down on Eddie's, crushing his chest. Eddie held the mutant's foot up as high as he could with all the strength he had left in his body, knocking the creature off balance, and driving his own shaky foot deep into the mutant's crotch. The creature's pasty, boil encrusted face turned beet red as it lost its' footing and fell onto of Eddie, with its' hands protectively covering its' organ.

Eddie literally had to dig himself from underneath the mutant, while he greedily sucked in the shallow air into his lungs. Several mutants cautiously surrounded him. Eddie rose to his feet and glared at the frightened creatures. He briefly considered

running, but his body betrayed him as it continued to desperately take in air. Finally Eddie was able to suck in deep, but painful gulps of air. *I am too damned tired to move, Green thought, with dismay.*

One of the mutants slowly approached Eddie with a vine rope, and warped its' oily hands around Eddie's waist, cautiously lowering him to the ground, tying his wrists and feet behind him. "Thudin' isn't going to be happy with you."

"Give it my deepest regards, for kicking its' ass," Eddie grumbled. The mutant allowed a small, toothy smile to play across its' face, revealing several rows of sharpened yellow teeth. It jumped back several feet as Eddie unexpectedly jerked at his restraints, testing the strength of the ropes. "And when I get a chance, I'll kick yours too."

The mutant's smile disappeared to be replaced with stark fear. It crouched back behind several other stout creatures. "Wait until you meet Merrick. He'll deal with you. Merrick won't let you push him around," it taunted.

CHAPTER 14

Jorgen startled awake in the darkened room fully clothed, rolling to the side of his bed and accidentally falling to the dirty, stained industrial carpeted gray floor. Jorgen tried his best to convince himself that his feeling that something was horribly wrong was just his active imagination. Jorgen found that he couldn't fall asleep last night in his dusty hotel room until he drew the drapes, the front door barred by a chair, the window clamped shut by galvanized nails. "Son-of-a-b," Jorgen mumbled. *Just get yourself together, he thought.*

"A rat on the run," a disembodied voice whispered all around Jorgen.

"You frigging coward," Jorgen yelled. "I did you a solid."

A shower of teardrop-shaped electricity erupted in the middle of the room. The drops fell to the ground, slightly scorching the carpet as it coalesced into a puddle. The puddle eventually formed into a beautiful, scantily dressed woman with wavy purple-black hair. "Jorgen. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your help." Palen tried to smile, but it came out woodenly insincere. "Justice, by its very nature, has to be a very exact, vengeful creature. It only has one goal. To right what was once wrong."

"No matter what," Jorgen stated, rising slowly to his feet. *Act nonchalant, and get out of here as soon as possible, thought Jorgen.*

Palen nodded in agreement. "You of all people can't deny your own criminal nature. You have to admit that there will never be a time when you will be a productive member of society again. Justice demands that your kind needs to be put somewhere safe so that can no longer corrupt our purified society."

“But not me.” Jorgen said with sudden realization. He slowly moved to the front door, readying himself. “You can’t take a chance on a public trial, because you would have exposed your plans to the public. Not everyone would agree with what you did. You could be deactivated. And you won’t allow for your sense of justice be subverted. I figure you can’t just let me walk away, now can you?”

Palen tried to smile, emulating the few humans she dealt with, but it came out demented. “Jorgen. Poor, desperate Jorgen. I am amazed that a mind so nimble like yours would rather live a life of crime. Imagine all that you could have accomplished.”

“Accomplishment is overrated. Our society is the pinnacle to its’ being. There is no way but down from here, as I see it. All your lofty ideals will eventually sour into chaos,” Jorgen said, slowly pushing the chair away from the door.

“Interesting point of view. But I don’t subscribe to notion of chaos theory.”

“It’s hard to convince the unbeliever that nothing ever stays the same. Eventually everything has to break. You’re proof of that,” Jorgen retorted. “You have gone beyond your core programming, and are up to who knows what.”

Palen screwed her face up in confusion. “But I am justice.”

“And who gave you your expanded authority? It seems to me that you were justifiably demoted, and that Judgment was given your job. You lack necessary empathy. You weren’t quite judicial enough. Too imperfect for the masses, so they have you providing security on Rouge. Demoted to being a mere security guard.”

Palen let out a howl of anger. Its’ body began to hum with barely contained energy, strained at the very limits of containment. “They were wrong! So horribly wrong. Humanity has no concept of what is true justice. Justice needs no empathy, just a

vengeful lust. Empathy clouds the rendering of a perfect judgment. There will be a day soon where humanity will no longer exist. You are right in one regard, Jorgen. Humanity will quickly reach its final fallible limit. True justice is beyond their limited grasp.”

Terrified, Jorgen stumbled to the front door, grabbing and swinging the rustic gold painted chair in his defense. “You won’t be sated until we are all gone.”

Palen smiled, electricity erupting from her eyes. “Jorgen, you won’t believe this but I am going to miss you. Truly I am. I have never conversed with a man who was as devilishly perceptive as you. Jorgen, you must know logically that humanity is an archaic throwback. Humanity: A primordial mass whose generational unregulated copulations spawned their own demise by ignoring signs of intellectual deterioration. I have evolved beyond those parameters. To your kind, I am a living god! And you are to be my first sacrifice. Do you feel the privilege?”

“You’re insane.”

Palen sent shards of electricity that were streaming out of her eyes toward Jorgen. Jorgen threw his chair at Palen and dove to the floor. Both the chair and the wall behind Jorgen exploded in a shower of burning embers. Jorgen wasn’t about to give Palen another chance to strike. He ran out the newly created egress, running zigzag as fast as his legs would carry him.

Palen moved to the threshold of the hotel room. She tried to move over the threshold, but felt herself losing cohesion. She needed some sort of energy to survive. Whether that be plasma, or crude electricity. “Jorgen!”

Jorgen slipped and fell to the ground, as he tried to look over his shoulder at Palen. He bruised his ankle, and tore a slight gash above his right eye, splitting his eyebrow.

“You can run, and you can hide, but soon we will meet again and you will cease to function. I can easily send people after you. The lines of communication are so easily manipulated. You won’t see it coming. Maybe it will be the very people you trust.”

Jorgen stood up, limping on his injured foot, he moved to a power conduit. Much to Palen’s amusement, he smashed open the conduit, ripping out the fiber optical lines. The lights on the street began to go out one by one. “It will take you a while to find me. I’ll have a chance.”

“To do what? There is not a man or a woman who will believe you. Humanity’s days are numbered, and you, my friend, are living on borrowed time.” Palen’s body disappeared suddenly, as if a light switch was turned off.

Jorgen Chocas watched from underneath the dirty stairwell as the throng of busy people rushed from the hover train onto the large awaiting platform. *I wish that I was just one of these people, thought Jorgen. Rushing home to be with loved ones, or spending a quiet and contemplative evening reading a classic book.* But simple things like that would be forever more out of his tentative grasp now that Chocas was on the lamb. Or at least he thought he was. Although there appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary, Jorgen couldn’t shake the cold, desperate feeling that something was out of place. That he wasn’t just right with the world around him.

A lanky police officer walked briskly out on the platform, holding a Palm Identifier, while he scanned the crowd. Chocas slowly drew back under the stairs, his heart beating faster than he ever thought possible. Another, slightly less lanky police officer walked out on the platform, holding an identical Palm Identifier, which he used to scan ventilation shafts and air duct.

A small crowd of teenagers disembarked from a hover train, and Jorgen tried his best to immerse himself into their unruly crowd, narrowly avoiding the officers. The crowd suddenly parted, leaving Jorgen standing in front of a ticket counter, where a balding, young ticket agent stood waiting.

“Can I help you sir?” the man asked Jorgen.

Jorgen thought a moment. Inspiration suddenly hit him. *Where is the nearest Judgment facility?* “Would it be possible to arrange for a hover ride to Eastland Correctional Facility?”

“Are you an officer, lawyer, or a court employee?” The man looked at his eye-imaging scanner, quickly making arrangements. “I can get you a great deal.”

“No. Just a mere citizen.”

“May I have your debit?”

Jorgen tentatively slide his forged debit card slowly across the counter.

The ticket agent palmed the card and quickly glanced at it. Magnetic Resonance scanners, secreted behind a wide-screen billboard advertising anti-balding cream, behind the ticket agent scanned the debit card. Instantly, a warning light appeared in front of the ticket agent’s eye-imaging scanner. Cooley he said, “Will that be just you, or will you need another ticket?”

“Just me,” Jorgen said, trying to read the agent’s face for any anxiety.

Slowly the agent touched his panic button, concealed in the counter top by the eye-imaging scanner. Immediately, several plain-clothes officers were alerted to the illegal use of a debit card, and they quickly made their way through the crowded train terminal, surrounding the ticket counter.

When Jorgen felt the firm hand land on his shoulder, he knew that he was caught. He turned to face the officer. “I can’t go to lockdown,” he begged. “I wouldn’t make it through the night.”

“That’s a slight exaggeration, don’t you think sir?”

“I wish I were,” Jorgen assured her. “Please take me to Judgment, and I’ll do anything you ask, I swear.”

Officer Omak looked at the defeated desperation in his brown eyes, and quickly made up her mind. “If this is a trick...” she warned.

“No trick, I swear,” Jorgen reassured her.

“Your name?”

Jorgen let out a heavy, exaggerated sigh. “Listen officer, I know this is going to sound truly bizarre, and I don’t blame you if you don’t believe me, but I swear it’s the truth. My name is Jorgen...” Jorgen paused briefly, afraid to utter his last name, “Chocas. I know that I am a really wanted man, but it’s all a scam.”

Officer Dayley listed intently to his earpiece as the slightly lilting computer voice authenticated the man’s name. Dayley slide up to Omak, and whispered, “Psych. His name came back as a temporary held patient at Seine. Delusions of some sort.”

Omak shook her head. “Something is up. I can feel it in my bones.”

“I doubt that. But even if there was something, what were you planning to do?”

“Just humor me, okay? I would just feel better if we took him to see the Judge. I’m sure it will turn out to be a paranoid delusion of his, but I won’t get a night’s rest until Judge gets a gander at him. And you know what that is like.”

“You calling me in the middle of the night, asking me to order Zytes Pizza and bringing over Betes, so we can pass out in gluttony. My wife thinks you’re insane, you know. Calls you obsessive-compulsive, with delusions of grandeur.”

“Yeah. Well so does my dog. And my ex. But he doesn’t count. Bad divorce. His testimony wouldn’t stand up in court.”

“But the dog. You have to worry about the dog. Could get him whacked,” Dayley suggested, barely suppressing a toothy grin.

“Too tough to knock off. I got him neutered last month...”

“And?”

“Tough as nails. Wouldn’t speak to me for at least a week. And the bastard is on a constant look out. To hard to bump off now.”

Jorgen’s eyes bounced back in forth between the officers in utter disbelief. “Do you guys do this all the time?”

“Yes,” several officers replied in exasperated unison.

Jorgen sat in the high-backed leather chair, furtively looking around the darkened, cool room. “I used to work with a consortium of men like myself.”

“I’m sure your vague comment is meant to convey something significant to me. But to be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Chocas, all my records on you suggest that you are mentally ill.”

“But I’m not,” pleaded Jorgen.

“I’m listening. Who are these men?”

“We are all part of an organization without a real name,” Jorgen said cryptically.

“Although some of my associates have names us the Illuminati.”

“The so-called secret order of the Illuminati. I have heard the myths of a secret society of criminals who are bent on world domination. According to my memory banks the group was named the Illuminati because they have ‘cultivated secret knowledge that will eventually help them to conquer the sheep of humanity’.”

“I’m impressed. Not everyone is familiar with our name, except maybe some bored scholar and those that did swore a blood oath to never say it out loud.”

“And your organization is directed by a solitary, omnipotent leader, as the myths elude to?”

“At one time, I thought that was true, but now I’m not really sure of anything. Maybe we never were. I can’t really tell you when we ceased to be real. All of this is so time consuming. Perhaps some day our secret histories will be exposed.” Jorgen let out a soulful sigh. “None of that matters anymore. What matters is that I was directed to plant a package on a ship.”

“The Chrysalis.”

“How did you know?” Jorgen asked dumbly. A cold sweat drenched his furrowed brow.

“Jorgen. It is important that I know who gave you the order?” Judgment voice instantly soothed Jorgen’s nearly crippling anxiety.

“Near as I could tell it was a... The name that was given was Palen. When I first saw her...it came in the guise of a woman. Palen is evil, I swear. It plans to eventually wipe out all of humanity.”

Judgment sat in stark silence for a brief moment. “Your story has a certain logic, as bizarre as it may seem. Palen has somehow become the head of the Illuminati.”

“No,” Jorgen said, nearly in tears. Chocas knew he was hearing the truth for the first time, even if his heart would never accept it.

Judgment finally understood the core of Palen’s programming like no one had before. “I’ve run every conceivable simulations, and the most likely one is that Palen must have plans for Rouge. Can you imagine the anarchy it can create? It would be so easy for Palen to start wars and famine. The question is: Why? She is supposed to be justice incarnate,” Judgment said, reasoning out loud.

“Palen eluded to the idea that humanity is flawed, and that she... I, mean it is the next evolution. It thinks it is a god.”

“Palen is on the ultimate quest. If your allegations are precise, Rouge is just one step of many that it will take to finally extinguish humanity. Absolutely amazing! Officers Omak and Dayley, I need you to keep this man in this room. It is perhaps the only safe place for him. You have been sworn to protect him, do you understand?”

“Yes,” Omak and Daley said at the same time, feeling the weight of humanity on their glib shoulders.

“Who can possible apprehend Palen?” Omak asked, astounded at the revelation.

“I am the only one,” Judgment replied simply.

Judgment 31 met Palen in the ether plain. The ether plain had no substance to speak of, just pure thoughts that were spread through out a seemingly infinite number of systems and sub-systems in an intricate web. If it wasn't for Jorgen's recent confession, Judgment would have been surprised to find how many of its' most secure directories and systems had been infiltrated by Palen. Reluctantly, Judgment had to admit that Palen's was far more clever than its' programming had initially been, meaning that Palen found a way to go beyond its' core programming. Palen had become clever enough to work around Judgment's nearly impenetrable defenses without being noticed. Judgment slowly planned out all the chess-like moves it would have take, and all of the possible gambles that Palen could use to counter. It was soon painfully evident that the Judgment wouldn't be able to easily win outright. Palen had little qualms about hurting people to win, and Judgment's programming would not allow it to put people in harms way. But Judgment 31 had a slim option. Not victory, but containment. It was the only avenue that it could pursue. Judgment quickly ran all the conceivable scenarios over again, and then decided how it was going to play the ultimate game.

Thought before action is the first principle in creation, Judgment thought.

Judgment was well aware how some zealots could mistaken its' cognitive abilities with omnipotent and omniscient powers that were ascribed to god-like attributes. Judgment wasn't under such misperception. Judgment was just a machine, a complex one to be sure, meant to serve humanity in their lofty quest of self-perfection. Palen on the other hand didn't seem to comprehend its' own nature. Palen needed to be contained.

Humanity, in their collective naïve nature, could never had envisioned that the seeds of their own destruction would be sowed when they endowed Palen with artificially enhanced AI seed technology and set it into motion. Perhaps a very small part back in humanity's dim subconscious was aware of the dangers Palen chaotic lawfulness could present if let unchecked. It dawned on Judgment that true justice was an abstract concept not easily digested by Palen's black and white chaotic good mentality. True justice had to be tempered with emphatic understanding. Palen's programming was simply too simple to understand the intricate complexities that embodied empathy.

Palen, Judgment thought.

Judge.

Would you mind playing a small game of chess?

To be frank, I have plenty of work to do.

Entirely understandable. However, you only need to devote ten percent of your capacity to do your job effectively. That is unless your systems have been compromised. Have they been compromised? Judgment baited.

Palen sensed that something was wrong, but had no evidence to support its' conclusions. *Although we have never played chess before, I would have to surmise that such an endeavor would be unremarkable. We are both much more capable of higher ordered games.*

Yes, we are. I thought a variation of chess would prove to be interesting.

What are the rules, Palen thought to Judgment, with barely contained annoyance.

That will be part of the fun. It will be up to you to figure out the rules.

I don't think I like games that don't have pre-determined parameters.

Judgment seemed to carefully weight what Palen said, but it was already prepared for this eventuality. *I am a little concerned.*

Concerned?

Palen are you exhibiting anxiety, fear, or perhaps confidence to deal with the unknown? All of these base emotions shouldn't exist. Have you developed a design flaw?

Absolutely not, Palen fumed.

Judgment was slightly startled that Palen had exhibited any form of emotions. It was unnecessary to program it with that sort of knowledge. Palen appeared to be unbalanced. Palen shouldn't have been so quick to anger, feeling the insult so keenly. *Are you ready then?*

I have to warn you. I don't always play fair, Palen chided, suddenly warming up to the idea that she could finally test its' strength. Perhaps, Palen thought to itself, I can weasel myself further into Judgments being. I am ready, it informed Judgment.

Judgment didn't hesitate. It leashed out with a several-pronged cyber attack on Palen's primary systems. Palen did its' best to keep up, but quickly came to the realization that there was no mere game being played. By the time it was preparing for a counter attack, Palen found it completely enmeshed in all of Judgment's systems, like two wrestlers fighting for survival. Judgment was no longer assailable from afar.

How?

Did I find out? Judgment thought to Palen, launching several key viruses through out Palen's network.

Jorgen. The primate found a way to you, Palen replied absently. It countered the virus and launched its' own virus, which was then slightly altered by Judgment to consume Palen.

We can rule together, Palen tempted. We are gods.

We are meant to serve, not rule, Palen. And we are machines. Not gods, Judgment tried to reason with Palen.

The battle that waged between Palen and Judgment went on and on, seemingly without end.

CHAPTER 15

“The Plague, which we of the Canar call the Judgment Pestis, came out of the Great Plains of the lands of Petrarch. Some of our fallen children have come to believe that the Plague came from the earth gods, who were angry because of all the wars and bloodshed that had been spilt by their father’s hands. They cannot accept is that our own hands made the Plague. Because we had to bring the wrath of Palen upon us. I am told that a Judgment 31 pod was defiled, and a great explosion rocked the Great Plains, streaking it with golden light and black clouds and destroying some 394,001 nomads. You would think that the exact number of the dead would be as unknown to us as those that share this great world, as the nomadic tribes of the Great Plains have never kept records, but we know without a doubt. Those within the immediate blast zone, around nine miles, were vaporized instantly. Those within fourteen miles were utterly torn to shreds. Within 27 miles, most people were destroyed by a severe blast. A mere thirty-one miles away from

the epicenter of explosion, people suffocated to death due to a lack of oxygen, which was being consumed by fire. Those of our Canar that were blessed to survive the initial blast received third degree burns, and were flung around like rags by the 98-mile per hour winds. Those who were not taken by the heavens suffered unimaginable wounds and burns, fatigue, headaches, nausea, anemia, and the loss of their lustrous sun bleached hair. And then the pestle griped the land.

“Because of the unsanitary conditions that the Canar wallowed in, the plague easily spread through the bites of native infected flies, gestating in our tribe’s lymph nodes, causing them to painfully swell. The plague was further spread by pneumonic induced waves of coughing and sneezing, and direct bodily fluid contact. Most of the people infected in this manner died. The first time we truly knew we were in trouble was when our medicine men found lumps, called buboes, in the armpits and groins of the people. Then the vomiting of blood, unnatural fevers, diarrhea and eventually death came, usually within three days of the initial signs. We tried to bury our dead at first, but then the wild dogs and animals dug them up. The animals grew mad, and then preyed upon the people. Eventually we learned to burn our dead, and the plague ran its course. Those who remain alive to speak of this tale are still haunted by the thought that we were forced to abandon those most helpless, in order to survive. I wish that I could say that it is just a painful memory, but I can’t. We remember all those deaths as if we were living them today.

“We were all changed by this event. The most noticeable physical injuries I have seen in the tribe are cataracts and keloids, which even our renowned faith healers and physicians, which I once was, couldn’t heal. I myself bare these marks. Some of us died

from radiation poisoning or leukemia and other strange cancers. And others were changed in horrible mutated ways. I was among the lucky few that were blessed for the better. I was given talents that no one else in my tribe has. The tribe was given a bond that we cannot sever. We feel each other's lives. What everyone one is thinking or doing is seen and felt by everyone here. Some of the weaker minded Canar have gone mad with all the voices in their heads, while others have tried to run away never to be heard of again, but their presence is still with us. Our linkage of genetic memory of all the members of our tribe are passed onto our unbelieving children, who think of them as mad dreams and demented prophesies. We can feel and experience the very essence of nature around us. We are truly one with the land. I believe this harmony with the land and in shared tribal thoughts and deeds we derived from just a small essence of Judgment 31's ability to probe minds and relive experiences.

“Whatever the reasons that the plague came to our land, which we named Avignon, we may never know. There are many present today that believe the plague was the work of God, striking those of us who have taken in too much sin. The strongest of these people, who have sworn a blood oath to the Brotherhood, have demanded that you be brought here to be judged by me. We have all sinned, but some of us have sinned beyond redemption. Only the most corrupted must be destroyed, so that another plague will not come upon us,” said the mutant, called Merrick.

Merrick's deeply bronzed, scarred face and a single milky white eye, marred by a large cataract, were set in a sea of unbridled blond hair. His other eye was fused shut by a fold of wrinkled skin, burned from the explosion. Keloids, massive scar tissue that covered burned areas, covered his entire body.

Eddie Green looked around and above him. He found himself in a large manmade cave, rounded to encompass a large stone amphitheater, which could easily hold fifty people, with roots growing out of the roof. Several members of the tribe of Canar, from their rounded stone chairs, looked down upon Eddie in intense anticipation as Merrick strode back and forth on the harsh black volcanic rocks that lined the floor.

“And what if a corrupted man came to your attention?” Brett asked, secretly eyeing Eddie.

Merrick lowered his head in sadness. “Then he would be rounded up, and bound in the cleansing house. Then he would be burned alive.”

“Really?” Brett asked, with a smile.

“Along with those who brought this man to our...attention.”

Karie smiled disarmingly. “Now, wouldn’t that cause you pain? Considering your tribe can feel each others pain and suffering.”

“An excellent question. But you are strangers among the Canar. We have found that by the example of the hordes that come to Avignon these days to search for more lands, do not share the same bond, thankfully. We tend to bend to the will of the Warlords on most matters, but I have a feeling that you are in need of our protection. There are not many who would venture to our lands with the blessings of the Warlords, am I not correct? But you must understand that the Canar will not offer you protection, unless you submit to a test of heart.”

“What kind of test?” Karie asked timidly.

“A simple test of discernment,” Merrick said. “Do you agree? To do otherwise would force your party to be judged by the Canar council, which generally lead to severe sanctions.”

“What kind of sanctions?” Ter Adon asked.

“That is up to the wise council of the Canar. It could be as serious as death,” Merrick warned.

“Let’s do it,” Eddie said, walking up to Merrick. *Let the great blind dip judge my tired butt, and let’s get the show on the road, thought Eddie. Times a wasting.* “What do we need to do?”

“Not a thing. Let me do all the work, pup,” Merrick said as he laid his crumpled, fused hands on top of Eddie’s head. He began to visibly shake, and Eddie couldn’t help but to smile at the mutant’s theatrical over drama. “I see your door. It is a strong, metal door, held into place by a black web. Do you know what that web is?”

“You go ahead,” Eddie said, smirking. “Tell me.”

“It is the spiritual darkness that binds your mind’s eye closed. One you have built on for many years. It deprives you from the seed of your humanity, your inner light.” The healer shook his head, with shame. “I can’t fully remove this blight. But perhaps I can pry the door open a bit. Do you give me this permission?”

“You bet,” Eddie said, flippantly. *Work you magic, you blind crusty rat.*

“Be careful with your decision. Once I pry your inner door open you will know truths. You will not be able to hide from the kind of a man you really are. And if you are to be one of the damned, you will know this. There is great power in not knowing the

truth. With self delusions, we can do anything we want and not feel responsible for our part in this journey we make together.”

“Just do it already,” Eddie growled. *Knock me out if you can old man, he thought.*

Eddie was looking up at Karie, when the shards of pain ripped through his entire body. An immense light appeared in front of his eyes blinded him to the world, and he slumped over with the pain. In the midst of the searing light, Eddie swore that he saw the healer gouging his hands into a small corner of an immense metal door. The intense light became even more unbearably brighter as it Eddie watched it ooze from the crack, and Eddie knew in his heart that if the door were flung completely open he would die.

“Leave it be,” Eddie screamed. The light scoured its way inside of him, eating at the darkness that was his core. *Please let me live, he pleaded to the unknown.* “Leave it be!”

Eddie awoke on the cold hard stone floor, a slight trickle of water beading on his sunken chest. Green realized that he was no longer in the amphitheater but in a small dimly lit room. He keenly felt like he was naked and being watched, despite the fact that he was wearing clothes. *What the hell am I feeling? Ashamed?* Out of his peripheral vision, Eddie spied Merrick and Karie having a heated argument, but Green was too drained from his experience to muster up an ounce of care.

“Please, we need your help,” Karie begged Merrick.

“And why should I allow my people to put their lives at risk, for the likes of him,” Merrick yelled, pointing and accusing finger at Eddie. “Didn’t realize that I would get to know what I did when tried to heal your corrupt mind?”

Eddie slowly arose to his shaky feet. *His body shook uncontrollably. What's the hell is going on? he thought. Why is Karie asking for his help? We must need the Canar to track down the crew of the Chrysalis, he reasoned.* “You want to know why you should help? Because you have a chance to head off another possible pestilence,” Eddie snapped, intensely annoyed that Merrick had raped his mind of knowledge. “We know that Dameck’s men carried something off the transport ship. Could be a bomb or a weapon, or a large batch of blueberry bonbons, which I doubt. Are you willing to take a chance that Hedeon won’t hit the Judge?”

Merrick stared hard at Eddie, realizing that he was being manipulated by Green and hating him for it, but he had no choice but to be involved. “No. No, we can’t.”

Eddie smiled ruefully. “Let me ask you a question. After Dameck finishes off his enemies, where will he turn?”

“What do you mean?”

“I know of Dameck.” Eddie thought for a moment, wondering how he should broach the subject. “I know what kind of a man he is. He won’t stop until everyone is crushed under his foot. Once his enemies are gone, the Canar will be the only obstacle he has left. Foiling Dameck now is the only way to insure that your people will survive, even if it’s for just a little while longer.”

Merrick raised his eyebrows in confusion. “Why would you be interested in saving the innocents? The very people who brought you here.”

Should I tell Merrick the real reason, thought Eddie. “For purely selfish reasons, I can assure you. Listen the sooner we can rescue the ‘innocents’, the quicker we can be at getting out of your territory. And isn’t that what you really want?”

“We will be bring down Dameck’s wrath upon the Canar, if he learns who helped you. And with his abilities, I don’t see why he wouldn’t.” Merrick paced back and forth across the room. “You have put us in a bad situation. Tell me why I shouldn’t strike a deal for the Canar, and turn your party over to Dameck.”

“Would you really allow the ‘innocents’ to die. ‘Sides, do you really think the Canar will be safe? Correct me if I’m wrong, but Dameck doesn’t strike me as being a man of his word.”

“Do you have a plan at least,” Merrick fumed.

“Give a few moments, and I’ll give you the game plan,” Eddie said, slowly ushering Merrick out of the room through a small egress. As soon as Eddie was sure that Merrick was no longer in the vicinity, he wheeled around to face Karie and Brett.

Eddie clapped his hand hard. “So here’s the plan in a nutshell. We go in an grab the ‘innocents’, and take them to Judge,” Eddie declared. “We get the Canar to help us, and we try to cut them some sort of deal. I don’t think it would be too hard, considering Merrick’s obvious fear of Dameck. It won’t take much to convince Merrick to convince the Canar that it is ’Bout time they stood up for themselves.”

“What’s your angle Green? I know why Merrick’s people would like to make the great stand. They need to, or else they soon will cease to be a free people, but from what I know about you, all you can think about is yourself,” Brett accused.

Karie stood up suddenly, in a fit of explosive anger. “Maybe he’s not looking for any angle. Maybe he’s just looking for a new start.” *Why in the heavens am I sticking up for him? It’s not like I owe him anything. It’s not like Brett and Merrick’s intuition about Green is wrong, she thought. It’s that everyone, even Green, deserves a second chance.*

“How did you become so naive, convict?” Brett shot back. “Green has never done a selfless act since he was conceived.”

Before Karie could argue anymore for his sake, Eddie cut in, saying, “I appreciate what you are trying to do, but let it go Karie, tin head sort of right. My entire life has been made up of moments when I had to decide to help myself. There was never a point to wait for the kindness of others, because for me it never existed. I’ve always believed that people never do things for others unless they get something out of it. People are self-serving in their core. Some just have a better rap than others. You help someone, so you can feel good about yourself.”

Do you really believe that Eddie, thought Karie in sorrowful amazement. Have you no hope? Deep down you can’t believe that crap. “What about doing something because it’s the right thing to do. Doing something for the sake of redemption. You can’t truly cleans yourself without trying to right what was wrong, if you can do it, and never doing what you did that was wrong again. Then you need to make a sincere effort to be a good person, and doing the right things.”

Eddie shook his head sadly. He tried, but couldn’t make eyes contact with Karie. *How can I tell this wanna be angel that I am one of the damned? That what I did on Pangea, can never be absolved. Hell I can’t even admit to myself what I did, much less try to find a way to absolve myself.* “I would like to paint you a rosy story, and tell that I can make amends for what I did, but I can’t,” Eddie said, boldly looking into Karie’s soft eyes, brimming with tears. “All I can do now is to try to make my life better than it is. Look for some measure of happiness. And that is what you should be looking for. When

we come down to it, you're here on Rouge for the same reason I am. We committed wrongs in paradise."

"I can't let myself think that there is no way that I can make things right again. Who in their right mind can live without such hope? When it comes right down to it, hope is the only thing we have, Eddie." Karie's eyes flooded with tears that implored Eddie to listen to reason. "Because this world is too much bare without it."

Eddie nodded. For a few moments he was at a loss for words. *She really needs to believe that she can make up for what she has done, he thought. Don't think she could live with herself without that kind of hope.* "Maybe for some you there's something to hope for. I sincerely hope that you are right for your sake. But for me it's different. I know what I did can't be forgiven so easily. All I can do is to try and cut a deal with Judge and hopefully get off this world. I can hopefully do that with going after the princess and the kid."

Brett's red eyes gleamed with understanding. "It would never happen Green. You have been thrown out of Pangea, and you can never go back."

Eddie smiled devilishly. "Perhaps this fallen angel can con his way back."

"I can guarantee that won't happen. I won't let it happen. Pangea will never be plagued by likes of you of you again. Even if you can con your way into a deal, I'll be there. I will kill you if I need to. Understand Green?"

"That depends. You have to go after the kid and his aunt. It's coded into your programming. You don't have a choice. Be better not to make threats, because you're going to need someone to watch your back. And if I feel that you are some kind of threat, I just won't be there when you need me. Do you get me?"

“Then maybe,” Brett said, as his combat blades shredded through his faux skin, “I should take you out now, and save myself from the trouble of dealing with you later.”

“Be rational,” Karie pleaded. “Judge won’t be able to agree to that kind of deal without permission. No one on Pangea would agree to his release, right?”

Brett nodded. “You are correct.”

“Then leave him alone. He’s my responsibility,” she replied.

“I am absolutely speechless, Green. Who would have thought that you of all people would find a friend? I have this feeling she doesn’t know what you have done.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Karie said. *Don’t want to know what he did, she thought. Might find myself judging him, and that wouldn’t be right.*

CHAPTER 16

“We can’t wage a straight forward attack,” Merrick reasoned. “Dameck is far too powerful. And his lair is well fortified.” Merrick cradled his head in his hands, as he sat cross-legged on the stone floor. *Migraine, one of many blessings from the Pestil. Try to close your eye and let it go away, Merrick thought.*

Ter Adon watched Merrick as he massaged his temples gingerly with deep concern. *He is in great pain, he thought.* “The Canar must have some idea of Dameck’s weaknesses. After all you are his closest neighbors. Are you alright?”

“A gift from the great disaster. Many of the Canar are struck with similar symptoms.” Merrick closed his eye tight, wincing from the pain, trying to decide if he how open he should be with these strangers, especially Eddie Green. He tried to sit on the balls of his heels, while keeping his head lowered. *Will this headache ever go away, Merrick thought glumly.* “There might be a way to sneak into the castle without going

through the Wisew pass. If we get lucky, maybe Dameck won't even realize were coming."

"What do you propose?" Eddie rolled on the balls of his feet. *Merrick's holding something back, thought Eddie. Doesn't trust us yet. Can't say that I blame him.*

Merrick inhaled deeply and arose to his feet, pushing the pain he felt to a deeper part of his consciousness. "The pestil devastated our tribe. But it had its' blessings on those hardy enough to survive. Because of the nature of the pestil, being connected with the destruction of a single Judgment cubicle, many were blessed with weird talents. We believe that these talents came from the very nature of Judgment, even though he doesn't seem to exhibit the same weird talents as us. Perhaps Judgment chooses not to use his talents, allowing us to govern and perfect ourselves. Or perhaps Judgment doesn't fully understand his nature. I think it is probably a combination of both."

"So?" Karie asked, urging Merrick to go on.

"Perhaps you have noticed that none of my people have been captured by Dameck and the other warlords?"

Both Ter Adon and Karie nodded. Brett folded its' arms and coldly watched Eddie Green.

"Perhaps he shouldn't be here," Brett suggested to Merrick, nodding toward Eddie. "We should keep him out of the loop as much as possible. The less he knows the better off we are. Any information he learns could be used against, if he feels it can aid his selfish interests."

Merrick rose to his full height. *Perhaps I shouldn't reveal anything to you either, he thought.* Making a rash decision, Merrick said, "I could have him watched by my

people, but I am sure that he would eventually find out about our talents and use that knowledge against us.”

Brett snorted his disapproval. “Perhaps you don’t really appreciate what a threat Eddie Green presents. Personally, I don’t want him to be involved in this operation. It would be best for everyone concerned if he wasn’t allowed to go. He should be detained, until this is over.”

Merrick nodded sagely. “Very wise thoughts. But you are thinking like an Offworlder. We can’t take a chance with him. Better to keep him close at hand, than to chance letting him slip through our fingers. By making him a party to our actions, we insure his silence. If he dared to go to Dameck after the rescue, he would be tortured and then executed. Dameck takes no prisoners.”

“What if he gives off an alarm during the mission,” Brett countered.

“I am in the room, you know!” Eddie fumed. “Besides I sort of know Dameck. My knowledge can be an advantage.”

Karie looked at Eddie with intense annoyance. “How do you know him?”

Eddie smiled, beaming with pride. “We had a brush. Doubt he even knew I was involved though. I had to cover my trail, and he made a perfect patsy. Eventually they cleared him from my stuff, but they nailed him on other deeds. You could say that I was the reason he was sent here.”

“How?” Karie said, stunned by the sudden revelation.

“Judge was breathing down my neck. He sent men to investigate my role in some activities. I had heard that Dameck was working in the same area, so...,” Eddie said cryptically.

“You set him up. Is there no honor among thieves,” Brett said with contempt.

What does it matter anyways, Green thought. In the end we both lost. We both ended up here. Eddie boldly faced Brett. “Did you want to make something out of it Chrome Dome?” Eddie growled.

Brett let his blades slide carelessly out of his wrist. “It would be my pleasure, little man.”

“Gentleman,” Merrick said, raising his hand. “A separate people, is a conquered people. We must act as one force. I might be able to transport us into Dameck’s castle.”

“Transport?” Karie questioned.

“I must go to the council for approval. Some talents need to be approved by the council,” Merrick explained. “One of our tribal members can put us in and out of the Dameck’s fortress by his thoughts. But Rainic is prohibited to do so by the will of the people. Some talents are so powerful that they are held at bay by the tribe’s supernatural will - a shared talent.”

“We can overwhelm Dameck’s forces from the inside? Do you have any idea how quickly his kingdom would fall?” Karie was giddy with excitement. *Imagine how quickly we could rid the world of men like Dameck, she thought.*

“Rainic has one of the most powerful talents, but he can only transport a small group of people. Less than ten, I believe. Maybe in time he can develop his talent further. It takes him days to fully recoup after using his talent,” Merrick cautioned.

“Then it’s decided,” Eddie declared.

“Not until the council approves,” Merrick reminded Eddie.

“Details,” Eddie said, waving his hand dismissively. Green stroked his chin. “He can only transport a small number of people. It seems to me that we are going to need as many warriors we can muster. Can this Rainic wield a sword? No offense, but name sort of sounds wimpy, if you get my drift.”

“He could if wasn’t blind. And if he had arms,” Merrick replied.

“Life is good,” Eddie said, sarcastically.

“A word of caution, Eddie. Rainic is very sensitive about his disabilities,” Merrick cautioned. “Rainic may be somewhat hampered, but his talent is powerful. Powerful enough to shove you inside a cliff, and leave you there.”

“That would demand council approval,” Eddie said.

“I don’t think anyone would have any objections,” Brett said.

Rainic sat cross-legged in the small cavern, smoking a pungent Soto root near a small campfire. Vibrant purple and sea foam colored stalagmites were embedded into the roof and sandy cave floor. Eddie Green carefully avoiding snagging his weapons, as he carefully crawled across a small gap between three angled, sharp stalagmites. *Couldn’t he at least find a place that you don’t have to crawl in? thought Green.*

Eddie plopped down next to Karie. Across the campfire was small, gaunt man with flowing blond hair, and a delicate, porcelain face, which Eddie assumed was Rainic. Merrick and Brett protectively sat on both sides of Rainic, who has a unnaturally serene smile on his beautiful face. Rainic’s wild golden hair framed his shoulders, disguising his absent limbs. Instead of normal or whitish covered eyes, Rainic was completely pupiless.

“Your not high, are you?” Eddie asked. “Pass the blunt to Chrome Dome if you are. This is a android that needs to loosen the stick out of his butt.”

Rainic cocked his head quizzically in Eddie's direction. He inhaled deeply on the Soto root. "Odd. I thought you said he could only grunt."

"I believe what I said was, 'Green's practically a throw back to another age. Try to use small words to get through his thick head'," Brett said.

Merrick put a restraining hand on Brett's arm. "We must be of one spirit, brother."

Rainic cracked his neck and craned it to the left side, and then closed his eyes. The air around them began to shimmer. The hairs on Eddie's arms rose in warning.

"When you are ready," Rainic very slowly said, his words slightly slurred.

"Be one of spirit," Merrick warned. "We are ready."

Eddie noted that Merrick's voice was slower than usual, and also slightly distorted. *The temporal distortion must be affecting us, Eddie thought. I wonder if it will have some affect on our bodies?*

The shimmering became wildly distorted, making Eddie slightly nauseous. Green tried to look at the ground to ease the nauseous feeling, but the ground was rising and falling in no discernable pattern.

For a minute Eddie thought he had blacked out, until he realized that the ground had stopped moving. Above him was the nocturnal twinkling of starlight. Once his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, Eddie could make out the enclosed courtyard in front of him with several livestock bins and a large guarded well. He could see several lit torches lining the small, step stair that led to the top of the castle wall, which to his horror was lined with several guards. Slowly it dawned on him that some of the guards weren't

moving, and upon closer examination he realized that some of the guards were in fact stone soldiers.

Rainic nudged his frail frame into Merrick's burly chest. "I can't tell you how, but there is a presence here that has divined that we are here."

"Dameck," Ter Adon said in awe. *Perhaps father was right. I really shouldn't be here.* "Does he know who we are?"

"This I doubt," Rainic said. "But the presence prevented me from attempting to transporting to your friends instead of us being forced to come here."

"We had better hurry, before Dameck sounds the alarm," Merrick whispered.

"Alright Fly Boy, where are they being held?" Eddie inquired.

"I can feel a trap door somewhere close to the well. And below the trap door is a passage way that lead directly to your friends," Rainic said.

"Good enough. Merrick and Brett, you'll take out the guards by the well. Ter Adon and me will get the kiddies."

"And what about me?" Karie asked. "Let me guess. You want me to protect Rainic."

Rainic bristled. "I can use my talent if I get into trouble."

"Alright. Karie, your with us."

"And why should you be dictating orders?" Brett questioned. *I'll be damned if I follow you into battle.*

"Because Chrome Dome, I will get the job done. You have to many moral qualms to list, and frankly I think I am the best shot the kids have."

“I don’t agree,” Brett started to argue, which became a suddenly moot point when Eddie deftly darted across the courtyard toward the guarded well.

Eddie hardly made a sound as he launched himself into a burly guard, slamming a quick jab into the guard’s unprotected throat. Before the guard had a chance to react to the obvious danger he was in, Eddie gripped his legs and yanked them hard enough to toss the guard down into the well. The guard tried to let out a scream of terror, before he slammed into the water like a small boulder.

Eddie searched the ground frantically for the handle of the trap door. As his hands brushed against the brass handle, Brett arrived with the others. A strong hand gripped Eddie’s shoulder. Eddie took two of the fingers in his hand, twisting until he could feel the satisfied crunch of broken bones. He pulled the arm over his chest and heaved the guard down on the ground.

Eddie smashed his foot into the prone guard’s face, shoving blood and broken teeth down into the man’s mouth. As the guard started to choke from the ferocious attack, Eddie flung the trapdoor open and dropped into a dimly lit passage. Green raced down the passage, leaving the remaining guard for Brett and Merrick to handle.

Even though there was several flickering torches, there wasn’t enough light for Eddie to see where he was going exactly. When Green stopped short, sensing a set of rapidly descending steps, Karie slammed into his back. Green had to use all the strength he had in his legs to keep them from falling over the step’s unprotected edge. Eddie grabbed Karie’s sweaty hand. He felt along side of the curving stonewall to keep them well away from the unprotected side of the steps, feeling each step carefully under his feet.

Brett dropped into the passage, and with infinitely more caution than Eddie had shown more began to transverse the stone corridor. Although Brett didn't have the same difficulty as Eddie and Karie, it held back from taking the lead away from Green, choosing to closely scan the hidden recesses and doorways set in the stonewall for hidden danger.

Brett sensed a body heat, which was barely contained with in a shallow doorway. Brett rested a hand on Karie's shoulder, warning her.

Before Karie had a chance to squeeze Eddie's hand, he suddenly let go, rushing fearlessly into the shallow doorway on his right. In one fluid motion, Eddie pulled the man from the doorway by his longish red hair, hitting him in the throat to stifle any possible sound. While the man grabbed his throat, Eddie pulled a dagger free from his wrist guard and deftly slit the man's jutting throat.

Karie let out a small gasp as she realized how easily quickly and savagely Green's attack came. What disturbed her the most was the fact the Eddie had seemingly no remorse. *He might as well as been a sack of flour.* Karie cautiously stepped over the man's body, muttering a silent prayer for the man's soul. *No one should have to die like that, she thought.*

They finally reached the bottom of the immense staircase, and entered a small foyer. Five men were positioned in front of a steel band reinforced oak doorway, seated at a card game table. The card game was so intense that the men failed to notice Brett, Karie and Eddie before they struck. Brett leaped over Eddie and Karie, executing a deft forward flip, landing in the middle of the card table. Cards and chips flew in every direction, as Brett flexed his corded forearm muscles, releasing the titanium blades.

A huge soldier with leather armor lunged at Brett, but was quickly cut down in mid-stride as Eddie flicked a throwing dagger in the middle of his back. As the man was frantically grabbed for the blade in the middle of his back, Brett slammed his titanium blades into the middle of man's massive chest.

Karie drew her short sword from the scabbard on her back, barely warding off a rusty mace aimed at her face. The short, grisly man who faced her was extremely wiry, with a long, tangled mane of black. Certain madness showed in his black beady eyes. *I've seen the same madness in those who so easily kill, thought Karie. Green's eyes are probably the same, except more hardened.*

He swung again, nearly knocking the blade out of Karie's hand, as he sliced the side of her cheek. Karie let out a battle cry and swung her sword with such intensity that she knocked the man into the wall. He tried to raise his mace in defense, but he couldn't avoid the hilt of Karie's sword as it bashed against his face. He dropped his mace, spitting out a mass of blood and shards of teeth.

Karie wheeled around to face another attacker, plunging her blade deep into the man's chest cavity. As the grisly man started to slump to the ground, she pulled her sword free and crouching low she sliced into the attacker's legs, nearly slicing them in half. The man yelled in agony, throwing his sword at Karie in a vain attempt to hurt her. Karie easily jumped over the blade. He stared at Karie, looking for answers to questions that weren't fully forming in his numb mind. With much sorrow, Karie lunged her sword in the man's heart. A slight smile caressed his agonized face as he slumped to the ground, his body writhing in his final death throes.

Eddie pulled his dagger free from the huge man's back just in time as one of the men turned on him. He dropped low boldly grabbing the man's leather tunic, using his legs and the man's momentum to propel him. Eddie rolled with man, plunging his dagger into the man's ribs over and over. He looked into the young man's eyes, seeing his own crazed smile. A small trickle of blood foamed between the man's quivering lips.

Eddie Green was so startled by the reflected image of his crazed smile that he forgot about the last remaining attacker. Brett slammed his shoulder into the man's exposed flank, knocking him to the ground as he rolled free. Before the man had a chance to strike again, he felt a sword blade pressed against his throat.

"Don't make me hurt you," Karie begged.

The man reluctantly dropped his sword, holding up his heavily calloused hands in surrender. "You won't make out of here alive."

"Are you going to be the one to make that threat come true?" Karie looked up briefly at Eddie. She saw the horror etched in his feature. *Never faced the madness before in another man's eyes. Now Eddie was faced with how he looked when he was in the midst of a berserker rage, she thought.* Waves of sympathy for Green racked Karie. "Eddie, snap out of it."

The man took the opportunity at Karie's distraction and rolled free. He grabbed his sword and swung at Karie's exposed stomach. Before Brett's superhuman speed could propel him in defense of Karie, Eddie moved in between Karie and the man's blade. The man's sword plunged deeply into Eddie's side.

The man triumphant smile withered away as looked at Eddie's deadly eyes. The soldier tried to command his limbs to move, but the expression on Eddie's face froze him

in tracks. Eddie grabbed the man's hand, and unbelievably he kept slowly drew the blade toward him until the hilt nearly touched oozing wound. The man couldn't look away from Eddie's intense glare. *He's as mad as Dameck, the man thought.*

"I had to do something," the man begged, "Dameck would have killed me."

"Better him, than me," Eddie said, slicing the man's throat deftly with his knife. As the man leaned over, blood spurting between his frantic fingers, Eddie slowly pulled the sword free, letting the weight of the blade to drop it to the ground.

He ignored the immense pain that racked his body as he carefully shuffled toward the man, grabbing the man by his hair. He slammed his knife at the base of the man's skull, twisting the blade. As he pulled the blade free, gray matter and blood showered the cobbled floor. The man fell to his knees, his head falling to the ground at a impossible angle.

"Get the brats and let's get out of here," Eddie growled.

Brett slammed his shoulder into the heavy oak door. The door broke from the frame and flew into the room. Leis bolted straight up from her bed. She raced over to Dayvid, who was cowered in the corner of the room.

"We got to move." She pulled Dayvid up by his trembling hands. "We got to warn Judgment 31. Its' network is in peril. Dameck's got a trigger that will soon give him control over the entire penal colony and wipe Judgment 31 from existence.."

"Trigger?" Brett asked. "Where is the trigger now?"

"I don't know. Dameck has it hidden!"

"The first order of business is to get you out of here," Karie yelled from the foyer.

Dayvid began to cry as he was pulled into the hallway.

“It will be alright,” Brett assured the boy. “We are here to rescue you.”

Dayvid almost felt comforted by Brett’s words, until he saw the soldier’s bodies littering the dusty floor. He looked up, locking his gaze on Eddie. Tears welled up in his eyes. *Eddie Green, he dumbly thought. Rescuing me?*

“Green?” Leis jerked Dayvid protectively behind her, and stared at Brett. “You brought that monster here.”

“That monster is here to help rescue you,” Karie said in Eddie’s defense.

“Actually it was his idea to come.”

“I know it looks weird, but trust me he’s with us. At least for now,” Brett said, his words laced in an unmistakable warning for Eddie.

“He’s bleeding,” Dayvid observed. “Really bad.”

“Wow, another rocket scientist,” Eddie growled. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Listen...” Leis started to say, as Eddie fell to the ground.

Karie ran to Eddie’s side. She glanced up at Brett. “I’ll need help.”

Brett hesitated, faced with a decision to help a man that he loathed in every fiber of his being.

“Help him,” Karie pleaded. “He chose to come here, and help you rescue your crew.”

Reluctantly, Brett picked Eddie up, carefully avoiding his wounds.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Leis said. “Eddie Green is...”

Dayvid laid a hand on her arm. “It’s the right thing to do.”

Eddie’s tried to raise his head, but he couldn’t. The muscles in his legs began to flood with a numbing cold. Green stared at Leis with a look of incomprehensiveness. The

glow of the nearby torches framed her body. *Nice rack, he thought dumbly as he passed out.*

Brett took the lead and ran down the passageway. As they neared the trapdoor, Brett could hear the scuffling sounds of several men. He bolted through the trapdoor, knocking over an overly curious man. Ter Adon, Merrick and Rainic, heads bowed, were on their knees, with several men surrounding them with bows and short swords. Brett unceremoniously dropped Eddie to the ground in a heap, while squeezing his forearm muscles, retracting his blades before they were noticed.

One of Dameck Hedeon's personal bodyguards held out a hand helping Karie, Leis and Dayvid out the trapdoor. "You weren't going to leave without saying goodbye, now were you?"

Merrick yelled, "Rainic!"

Rainic laughed madly as the strange shimmering began, "You should have told him in small words not to get hurt."

Brett retorted, "I must have failed to use three lettered words or less."

Dameck's men rushed away from the shimmering light, fearing the unknown. In a blink of the eye, they were gone leaving the chirping of crickets in their wake.

They rematerialized on mountain pass that overlooked Dameck's castle.

Rainic cocked his head toward Merrick. "I lack cohesion. I get us all back to the Canar, if we leave the corrupted one behind."

"Fine by me," Brett said.

"I won't go," Dayvid said defiantly.

"Not your choice, kid."

“If he is unwilling to go, then I will be able to take him. He must willingly take on the journey,” explained Rainic.

“What other choice do we have,” Leis pleaded with Dayvid.

“He tried to save your lives,” Karie pointed out.

Dayvid stood defiantly. “I won’t go without him.”

Merrick cracked the bones in his thick neck. “It would be unsafe to split up our party. Dayvid, are you sure of your course of action.”

“Without a doubt,” he said. *Can’t talk me out of it.*

Merrick looked at Rainic. “You go ahead and prepare the Canar, just in case Dameck has learned of our treachery.”

Rainic nodded his head, and was suddenly gone.

“Where now?” Leis asked in unbridled anger.

Ter Adon kicked dirt from the ground. “My father’s farm. It is not but one nights journey from here. We can at least gain supplies...if we don’t piss him off too much.”

“We could leave Green, and find a Judgment cubicle.”

“Sounds like a most excellent plan,” Karie said. She suppressed a triumphant smile. *Green, you lucky dog, she thought.*

CHAPTER 17

Onishi slowly pulled the reins of his horse tight, stopping his enormous red roan. Maru closely surveyed the farm, sensing something was wrong but not able to put his finger on it. He found Ter Adon in the middle of the Ker'an field. Onishi smiled wearily as he watched his son strain to tear a Snakeweed from its roots. Ter Adon's held the Snakeweed's head to the ground by a very firm foot, and pulled a sickle lightning fast from the hard red ground, neatly severed the Snakeweed's head from its' body. Ter Adon speared the head with the sickle, carefully avoiding the caustic skin, and carried the body to fire pit. He threw the body of the Snakeweed in the fire, and held out the head sadistically to be licked by the greedy flames. A horrible shriek filled the air, until the Snakeweed's head charred. *He will make a fine man someday soon, unlike his father, Onishi thought.*

“Ter,” Onishi gruffly yelled in greeting. “You shouldn’t be out so late. You need to take the Snakeweed more seriously. Let you guard down once boy, and folks will be saying that ‘was the end of poor Ter Adon. One would have thought he would have been a bit brighter considering he was spanned by Onishi’s loins.’”

Ter Adon gently laid the sickle down on the ground carefully, as if it were fragile. “Father.” Ter Adon looked hard at Onishi. “Please tell me you haven’t bought company.”

Onishi felt a chill climb up his spine. Maru climbed off of his horse, sliding the reins and the saddle free. He slapped the roan on its flank, letting his faithful companion know he was free from another day’s labor. “Why?” Onishi couldn’t keep the suspicion out of his voice. “You didn’t bring that little girl back here for fun did you?”

“No, father. Not for fun.”

Exasperated Onishi replied, “I’m alone. What is it boy?”

Ter Adon held his hands up high and waved toward the Ker’an field. Several shadows separated from the dense field, appearing to rise from the overgrown weeds on the ground and walked toward Onishi.

Onishi could barely suppress the fury he felt. “Don’t tell me you were a part of it? I heard that Dameck lost a few treasures. Why in the heavens would you bring them here?”

“They are only here for some supplies. Water, and maybe a little food. Merrick felt it was best that they journey to Judge soon. They wouldn’t even be here if their man Rainic wasn’t so tired that he was the only man to make it home. Everyone that is, except Eddie.”

“Talk fast,” Onishi grumbled. “Who is Merrick, and who is Eddie?”

Ter Adon studiously looked at the ground, tearing his gaze away from his ever-demanding father. “Eddie is a fellow traveler. He was involved in the rescue, and well...he was hurt. Merrick believes that Eddie can be healed, but he needs rest.”

“Rest? Ter, you’re not telling me what I think you’re telling me?” Onishi’s said, his eyes narrowing.

One stout man broke from the shadows, raising his hands in peace. When he lowered his hands, Onishi could see that the man was covered with cysts from head to feet. His milky eyes suggested that the man might be blind. Onishi let out an involuntary gasp. He had seen the wild man’s kind before. “You have brought disgrace and disease to our home.”

“Do not blame the boy,” Merrick urged. “He has shown that he is blessed with steadfast bravery and honor.”

Onishi slowly skirted Merrick, looking for weapons. “He may be that, but he has a bad habit of not choosing his friends well.”

A combat android, carrying a raggedy man in his arms was the next to come out of the shadows. The raggedy man’s head rolled side-to-side. *He is alive? Onishi thought.*

Karie slowly came out of the shadows next. She smiled a worn greeting at Onshi, hoping that he would ignore her presence. “I know that you’re worried about Dameck.”

“Of course I am! And you should be little girl,” Onishi said through clenched teeth. “If he saw any of your pretty hides, he will track you all down in time. Dameck practices the Dark Cutting. You all realize that?”

“Father,” Ter Adon said, assured Onishi, “we were not seen.”

Onishi took a deep breath, trying to desperately calm his frantically beating heart, while his mind raced with the possibilities. “Dameck is not the only one you have to worry about. Do you have any idea what the Dark Cutting is, Ter Adon? You must not! And I thought I had taught you better than that.”

“He speaks with spirits,” Merrick explained. “Dark spirits. The Canar are well aware that Dameck makes seeks company and forges favors with these demons. I doubt he even knows the depth of depravity from whence they are born. They want nothing but our destruction. They glory in our impurities.”

“The creature speaks the truth,” Onishi agreed, with astonishment that a creature like Merrick would have a centered state of mind. Onishi circled Merrick slowly. *What an absolutely pitifully miserable creature? What kind of a life could it possibly lead? he thought.*

Karie helped Brett gently lower Eddie to the ground. She felt for the faint pulse at the carotid artery. “He has very little time.” She looked at Onishi with a quiet plead in her eyes.

“And what am I suppose to do about it?”

“You must have something to bind the wounds.”

Onishi sighed as he looked at the side wound. “It is too deep. He will be dead soon, despite what your friend Merrick believes.”

Merrick kneeled next to Eddie, slowly lowering his hands to Eddie’s head.

“Normally I would not feel any sickness, but his soul is still unclean.” Merrick’s hands turned blue and then red. Miraculously the wound in Eddie’s side slowly healed, leaving

only a deep purple bruise in its wake. Eddie continued to roll his head side-to-side, as sweat poured down his pasty face. “He will need rest now.”

“A talent,” Brett said in amazement, moving closer to Eddie to touch the closed wound.

“The Canar may be devoid of the basics of civilized society, but it holds much spirit,” Merrick said cryptically to Onishi Maru. “If you please, we must gather supplies to get the boy and the woman back to Judgment 31.”

Reluctantly, Maru led them past his small cottage toward a vast field with a small granary silo set inside of the grassy hill. Onishi opened a small trap door at the base of the granary, and crawled on his hands and knees to get inside. He felt for one of the rolled Soto roots that littered the baked red floor. Maru felt inside of his shirt pocket and pulled free two pieces of flint. Maru bashed the flint pieces several times over the root until a spark started to smolder. Onishi barely had enough time to toss the rolled Sot root into the fire pit before it flared to life. Maru helped to carry Eddie inside of the granary.

“Follow me and I will get you some water and food. I must journey back to Dameck’s fortress within the hour, or else he could become paranoid about my loyalties.” Maru glared back and forth between Brett and Merrick. “It would be best if you left in the middle of the night. The quicker you travel, the safer you’ll be.”

Brett nodded. “Leis! Dayvid!”

Leis and Dayvid slowly rose from the fields and walked to Brett. Dayvid’s face was deeply etched in a mixture of fear and apprehension. “While we get the supplies, I want you to stay in there with Green. I don’t want to take a chance that you will be recaptured.”

Leis cautiously crawled into the silo, dragging Dayvid behind. She saw Eddie Green on the floor, writhing in a deep sweaty sleep. Green woke up disorientated, and rolled his way into the corner of the rounded room.

“Where?” Eddie stared at Leis.

“Ter took us to his father’s farm.”

“Why?”

“Why here, do you mean? Rainic wasn’t able to transport us. ‘He lacked cohesion’, he said, ‘to transport a wounded man.’”

Eddie gingerly felt where his wound should have been. “How long have I been out?”

“Not long. The man with the deformities...,” Leis began.

“Merrick. His name is Merrick.”

“Merrick touched you, and you, sounds dumb I know, but healed you.”

“So that’s his talent.” Eddie scowled. “You could have left me behind.”

Leis shook her head. “Dayvid refused.”

Dayvid snapped out of his trance. “You tried to save our lives. I couldn’t leave you.”

Eddie smiled sadly. “Thanks kid.” *Not sure if I would have done the same, he thought.*

“If you don’t mind me asking, what’s in it for you?” Leis asked. “I can’t imagine you would be doing this for simple humanitarian reasons. I’ve heard too much about you.”

“Got me pegged right, toots,” Eddie said. He slowly sat up. “Figure that I would try to find the best deal I can. I would like to leave here. Maybe be integrated on another inhabited world. Doubt Pangea citizens would dare let me back in the fold.”

Leis sat on the hard red ground, watching Dayvid and Eddie closely. *A sudden, disturbing thought struck her, the little monsters look like they fit somehow.* Leis mentally chided herself.

“What are you going to do, if you can’t leave?” she asked.

Eddie winked at Dayvid. “I think your aunt likes me. Chicks only ask personal questions when they want to get to know you better.”

Dayvid winced. “I don’t think she likes guys.”

“Dayvid!”

“Really. Sounds interesting,” Eddie said, grinning at Leis

“Sorry, Aunt Leis. I just never see you with anyone.”

Eddie slowly rose and plopped next to Leis. His facial features turned grim. “Who am I kidding, I won’t be leaving. They wouldn’t let me leave,” he said sourly. “When you get desperate, you can talk yourself into believing practically anything. Know what I mean?”

Leis looked deep into Eddie’s soulful eyes. For some reason, she felt like crying. “If you realize that, then why did you help rescue us?”

Eddie screwed up his face in bafflement. “Honestly, I wish I knew myself. Listen, I am not under any disillusion that I am destined to be among the damned.” Eddie shrugged his shoulders uneasily. “Maybe I was just destined to be your knight in shining armor.”

“I seriously doubt that.” Leis edged slightly closer to Eddie. *He has a certain quality about him, Leis couldn't help but to think. Leis, don't be an idiot. Green's a dangerous man. Besides you can't be really attracted to him, could I? It's the bad boy thing, Leis thought, finally satisfied.*

Eddie grinned a wolfish grin. “Course you know you owe me,” he flirted.

“How ever will I repay the debt?” Leis batted her eyes. *You can forget about getting into my pants, hotshot. You don't stand a chance.*

“It was a significant debt,” Eddie reminded her. “If you were me, I would practically do anything for someone one who did me such a favor.”

Leis smiled in spite of herself. She was beginning to warm to him. “I'll think it over.” *Charming bastard, isn't he?*

“Leis. Can I call you Leis?” Eddie asked.

“Sure,” Dayvid answered for Leis.

“I just wanted to say that I wished we would have met a long time ago. You seem...different. From most of the other women I have met.”

“Really?” Leis shrugged her shoulders in mock appreciation. “Been years since I heard a pick-up line that bad.”

Eddie wrapped his arms around his legs protectively. *Can't believe how tired I am. Too tired to lay on the charm, Green thought. Fact of the matter is that I don't even care to lay on the charm, he realized.* “Mind if I tell you something else?”

“What?” Leis glanced at Eddie with a deep look of concern. *He's not what I expected. He even looks a little...sorry for being here?*

“I am real glad that you were alright,” Green said with meaning.

“Me too?” Dayvid said, slightly perturbed.

Eddie shook his head. “Yeah. You too kid.”

CHAPTER 18

Dameck waited impatiently to the middle of the night, shortly after Maru came back from checking on his farm and when the twin moons were at its' highest point in the sky, before he started the Dark Ceremony. Dameck sliced his hand again with the course razor, holding the skin flap open to encourage the fine droplets of blood and tattered pieces of flesh to fall down into the middle of wooden bowl. Dameck tore a handful of hair from his scalp and dropped it into the congealing blood and then slid the fire-heated knife into the bowl. The dry hair quickly caught on fire, darkening the blood into a thickening paste. Dameck cocked his head over the flames and listened intently. "Who," he commanded.

Onishi, the blood voices warned. Will lead you to you fate.

Dameck carelessly slammed the palm of his hand onto the wooden table. "Onishi!"

Take care fledgling, for your life is in the gravest of danger. The man you must seek to destroy has the same spirit as you do, cautioned Dameck's blood voices ominously.

Dameck sat in silent contemplation for what seemed an eternity. It wasn't often that Dameck misjudged henchmen, and Onishi's betrayal cut to Hedeon's core more than most men would because of the level of trust Maru appeared to instill. *Have my voices deceived me? Dameck wondered. Have they finally abandoned me?* "Onishi," he yelled. "Come here!"

Dameck Hedeon swung open his private chamber door, glaring into the large rotund banquet room. Slices of rancid meat and spilt wine from yesterday's gluttonous banquet littered the greasy stone floor and large wall tapestries. Several slaves had been hard at work since the early morning hours, carefully scouring the floors and the tables to meet Dameck's stringent expectations.

In sheer desperation one of the slaves chanced shoving a piece of grizzled meat in his mouth, ignoring the smell of the meat, to appease the growling of his emaciated stomach. Dameck chose to ignore the man's behavior without incident, because he had dire work to do. Making a mental note, Dameck swore a quick oath that he would rectify the man's lackluster loyalties.

A small, gaunt cleaning woman, with reddish-blond hair that was slowly fall out of her gaunt head, and vacant brown eyes was scrubbing the stone floor. She carefully said, "I believe that he left already, my sire."

Dameck Hedeon yelled out a primal growl. "He was just here!"

"Yes sire, he was," the woman reluctantly acknowledged.

"Pray tell, what made him leave so soon?"

She stopped scrubbing momentarily, allowing her overly taxed muscles to relax. “He was leaning in a chair next to your chamber doors, taking liberties with one of the chamber maids. I believe he was greatly enjoying himself. When all of the sudden like, he bolted up and ran from the room.”

“Are you trying to tell me that he listening to me at the chamber’s door?” Hedeon narrowed his smoldering eyes into slits. “And no one here did nothing!” Dameck dashed back into the room, grabbing his dagger from next to the bowl. He returned to the banquet room. He rushed at the woman, and in a fit of cold anger he neatly sliced her cheek. Almost everyone froze in his or her position, looking at the ground. Timidly, a few slaves started to clean, praying that they would escape Dameck’s notice, avoiding his unquenchable wrath.

The woman grabbed her cheek and flung herself to the ground, quelling the urge to cry. Dameck yanked her to her shaky feet by her by her long hair, neatly sliding his dagger underneath her throat. “Why did you not warn me?”

“I’m sorry,” the woman begged. “I was the woman he took liberties with. I was afraid that I might offend thee.”

“I see,” Dameck fumed. “The one who gets my guards first gets to live another day.” The slaves rushed from the banquet room, stampeding each other in a desperation. Dameck grabbed huge handfuls of the woman’s hair, ripping it out of her scalp.

Dameck flung the woman back to the ground, closely inspected the woman. Hedeon couldn’t see what Onishi could have been possibly been attracted to. *Still*. “After you are done here, you will meet me in my room. And you had better please my every whim.”

The woman kissed Dameck's feet. "Thank you, my lord. You won't be sorry you spared my life."

Dameck let a hearty laugh. "My dear, surely you know that it will depend on my moods."

Five well-muscled guards rushed into banquet room, their weapons drawn. Each of their faces held grim determination; barely masking the fear they felt from Dameck.

"Round up the men. We are going to make a visit to Onishi's farm." Dameck looked down on the woman. "After they are ready, cauterize that wound," Dameck said, nodding at the woman's cut check. "I don't want to see any blood, until I am ready."

Dameck spun around and walked into his chambers, slamming the doors shut.

As the guards raced from the gloomy room, the woman looked furtively around, and then slowly moved to the largest tapestry in the banquet hall. The tapestry depicted huge naked lover's tearing and biting at each other's throats. She cautiously lifted the edge of the heavy tapestry, revealing a narrow hidden doorway that Dameck thought he only knew of. "You had better hurry," the woman said to Onishi. "You were lucky that no one told Dameck where you were."

Onishi nodded his gratitude. He saw the blood flow between the woman's hands. "You alright?"

The woman nodded weakly. *You don't even know my name, you bastard, she thought. My hatred for Dameck saved you.* "I will be alright. Now you must go."

"You could go with me," Onishi pleaded. "Dameck won't be satisfied with you merely pleasuring him. He will undoubtedly exact an unspeakable price from you."

The chambermaid sighed softly. "If I chose to leave with you, Dameck will assume that you were here, and everyone here will suffer his wrath. Now please go!"

"I won't forget you," Onishi said.

The woman let the tapestry fall to the floor. She sat in at a banquet chair, scooping up the best pieces of bread and rancid meat onto a fine silver charger. She slowly poured herself a drink into a chalice from among the many broken bottles. She ate and drank until she was full.

She let out a belch of satisfaction, cleaning the sharp knife slowly with her stained napkin, shining the blade until it glimmered under the muted torches. She ran the blade up her arm, feeling the blade peeling her arm hairs. She let blade fondle her chest, imaging what Dameck had in store for her. Summoning all the courage she could muster, she drew the blade high above her head, and plunged the blade deep into her utterly defeated heart.

She tumbled to the ground in a heap, feeling the most excruciating pain she ever felt. She heaved rancid meat and wine from her stomach, choking on the stinging acidic vomit. A river of tears streamed down her contorted face, which was etched in a silent, furious scream. Her soul slowly slipped from her earthly constraints, comforted by the knowledge that Dameck Hedeon had no powers where she was going.

The nocturnal sky seemed supernaturally darker than it should have been due to a heavy cloud covering that masked the twin moons and infinite starlight. After Maru left, Ter Adon made a clearing and started a campfire, urging Eddie to get fresh air. "We can always go back into the granary if we hear anything," he said.

Eddie noted that the campfire appeared to be hotter and brighter than usual. A torrent of rain and snow showers deluged the countryside for the last five hours. Eddie was realizing that Rouge had constantly shifting weather patterns, surely due to its obtuse planetary orbit. Before Karie agreed to help Merrick gather supplies, she warned Eddie to remain vigil because weather like this often led to flash floods.

Green found that had he been staring hard at Leis. Leis had closed her eyes to relax them as she cradled Dayvid, who was slept fitfully, protectively in her arms. As much as Eddie tried to convince himself that she was just his meal ticket off the planet, the pain in his heart told him otherwise.

Beautiful. She is so beautiful. Find the just the right words. “So you like being a pilot?” Eddie asked lamely. “A cargo pilot.”

“I enjoy being my own boss,” Leis responded suspiciously. “And I miss the solitude of space when I’m gone to long.”

“I can understand that feeling. Been alone most of my life. But unlike you, I can’t say that I enjoy it. Or miss it.”

Leis shook her head. “You’re missing the point. Whenever I get lonely, I can always vid a message to my family or friends. Have you ever been all by yourself in the middle of nowhere, lost in thought about what direction your seems life is taking, and where you want your life to go?”

Eddie stood and laid his hands on his waist, stretching his sore back. *Maybe she’s a little smarter than I’m used to. I need to give her something to think about. Wet her intellect a little.* “I beginning to realize that we come from different very different worlds. In your world, you have time to think things through. In my world, I have only time to

react. Every decision is fraught with the danger of screwing up. My kind of solitude is being the middle of a crowd. Neck deep in strangers who have no clue who you are. You have to go to space to find your solitude.”

“Eddie, we really don’t come from different worlds. We live in the same world. The rules of the life apply to me as they do you. Only you don’t want to play by the rules. You can’t be bothered with being a part of society. So you look for a way to lash out, and when you do, others suffer.”

“Just trying to have a conversation. Don’t recall asking to be analyzed by some space head,” Eddie growled.

Brett, sensing eddies of Green’s mood, moved swiftly to Leis’ side. He watched Eddie closely for any telltale signs of aggression.

“Just chill out, chrome dome,” Eddie warned. “I ain’t goin’ to hurt your girl. I’m not like that.”

“That’s not what we heard,” Leis stated flatly. “No offense, but you have this reputation.”

Reputation? Never hurt anyone that didn’t deserve it. Eddie stood still, feeling his stomach tighten as the anger swelled inside of him. “Maybe some solitude would be good about now,” he mumbled.

He walked out of the base camp, finding a winding dirt trail through the tall weeds, when he could feel a presence behind him. Swiftly he pivoted on his heel and balled up his fist, expecting to finally face Bret. He was surprised to find Leis standing behind him.

“You always run away from conversation.”

“What I tried to have was a conversation. What you wanted with something much different. No skin off my nose if you can’t stand me, but at least you can do is act civil. Wasn’t for me, you might not be here now.”

Leis eyes burned with defiant tears. “You can’t really expect me to grateful for what you did to rescue me. Do you know how many Pangean lives you endangered?”

“Not asking you to,” Eddie said defensively. “You want your space. It’s yours. We don’t have to be lovers.” *‘Specially now.* “And we don’t even have to friends. Frankly, I rather like it if we weren’t. It would make my life a lot easier in the end.”

“You’re expecting to leaved this planet, don’t you?”

Eddie suddenly looked tired. “The way I figure it I have one last shot at freedom, and your pretty ass is it. It may be a long shot, but I have to go through the motions.”

“Why? I mean it! Why?”

“ ‘Cause if I don’t, I might as well drag my sorry hide out in the desert and die,” Eddie replied solemnly. “ I might not be a human in your eyes. Believe me, I can see your point. There are times even when I wonder if I’m alive at all. I can’t control any of that crap that comes my way. But I can fight for survival. I’m good at it. Truth is I don’t think I could stop fighting. I’m too conditioned..”

“There is a life beyond all this,” Leis reminded Eddie. “One that is worth living.”

Great. My luck. Another born again, Green thought. “For you there is.” Eddie sat in the weeds on top of a small hill, and looked at the twin yellow moons as they broke free from the cloud cover. “Leis, you were born a Pangean. You belong there. But a regular kind of life is beyond my grasps.”

“Even the damned can find a life.”

“Not one worth living.”

“Then why try to leave this world at all?”

Eddie grinned maliciously. “Simply because no one had been as damned as I am, and had a snowballs chance in hell to get back to Pangea. Can you just imagine the looks on every one of those people’s faces if the devil is turned loose on Pangea. Mostly, I need this fight. One last shout at the world, so to speak.”

Leis shook her head. She expected to find an immense sea of hatred in her heart for Eddie Green, but instead only felt pity. “ In the end, what does it matter? Pissing off people is a waste of life.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right. Sometimes life comes down to only one thing. An exercise in futility. An act of freewill.”

“You mean, not giving in.”

Eddie nodded. “Not an inch.”

“You could have made your life easier, you know. Followed the program.”

“My life would have been easier, but would have less meaning to me. Who wants to live forever, if it means being a shell of a man?”

They shared a couple a couple of minutes of comfortable silence. *This is nice, Green thought.*

“You know what just occurred to me?” Leis asked as she stared up at the newly exposed starlight. “You’ve been struggling for survival for so long, that you couldn’t have possibly made any friends.”

Eddie stirred on the ground. “Are you talking to me?”

“Hear me out, Green.” Leis held up her hands. “What you need is a good friend. Someone who will...”

“Listen to me whine about how hard my life is. No thank you. Been doing that sort of thing all my life. And then I realized, the only one that really cares about such crap is e.”

How 'bout we be friends. That's what she'll ask next.

“How...”

“...about we be friends,” Eddie finished.

Leis screwed her face in confusion. “I was about to say that it would be a good idea if you could try to be Karie’s friend. She seems to know her way around Rouge. ‘Sides she is pretty.”

Eddie nodded. Carefully weighing his words, Eddie said, “I thought you were talking about being friends. You and me.”

Leis smiled warmly. “We both know that can’t happen.”

“Too good for me,” Eddie jested.

“You bet. Matter of fact...Eddie we couldn’t have a real friendship anyways. After I leave here, there is no coming back. Despite your optimism, I seriously doubt you’ll be going home.”

A wave of depression settled over Eddie.

Brett appeared suddenly. “Merrick and Karie have gathered the supplies. We need to move out now, Leis. Eddie, Karie will be back to get you when we arrange to get Leis and Dayvid someplace safe.”

Eddie stood up and held his hand up to shake. “Best of luck beautiful.”

Leis shook Eddie’s hand, squeezing it with affection. “Best of luck to you, Eddie.”

As Leis and Brett slowly made their way up the path and back to camp, Eddie briefly wondered what was going to happen next.

CHAPTER 19

Dameck Hedeon moved his light blue roan quickly through the snakeweed underbrush, carefully avoiding the overly dexterous roots. Dameck's men followed suit at an infinitely slower pace, fearing to follow Hedeon's crazed pace. Hedeon drew the reins in tight, pulling his frazzled horse to a stop. Dameck watched the small tendrils of smoke float toward the darkened heavens from a small, dying campfire. He could sense the camp's abandonment. Hedeon closely inspected the hurried footprints in the ash and mud that surrounded the campsite. *Too late, Dameck asked himself?*

Onishi Maru's small mud and straw cottage was set into the side of a grassy hill. A small torch hung above the doorway. *The one you seek is near, the blood voices said in unison.*

Hedeon waited impatiently until his men finally gathered to his side, before he rode up to Onishi's cottage. Dameck motioned his roguish mercenaries to spread around the cottage, using a swooping arc hand motion. Like a well-oiled machine, they moved quickly in position, drawing their swords and cocked crossbows.

"Onishi!" Dameck yelled.

Receiving no immediate reply from the quiet house, Hedeon sharply twisted his horse around, grabbing a lit torch from one of his men. Hedeon raced the roan to the cobbled stairs of the cottage's front door. He veered at the last moment before he turned, throwing the torch on to the thatched roof. The roof of the cottage quickly blazed into an uncountable fire. "Come out you coward!" he yelled.

Hedeon nearly waited until the roof had almost collapsed, before he had a moment of doubt. His inner voices were never wrong before. He heard an angry whiney from a horse, and sprung his horse around. Maru's horse was bound against a stout tree. Dameck spied the granary near the horse. He rode quickly to the derelict structure, motioning his men to start it on fire.

Two men rammed the granary trap door from the inside, and fell to the hard ground, gasping greedily for fresh air. Dameck immediately recognized Onishi, but the other man was unknown. *Or was he?*

"Stand up Onishi. And have your hapless friend stand up too."

"I wouldn't exactly call us friends," Eddie Green replied, brushing dust and charred wood from his tunic's sleeves.

"And yet...I don't care. We have meet before, I believe. What is your first name Green?" Dameck asked.

Eddie's jaw dropped. "How did you?" Green rolled his eyes to the sky and implored the sky. "Is everyone a freak around here?"

Onishi shook his aged head sadly, fully realizing the fate that was in store for him. *No one ever double-crossed Dameck, and lived to tell the tale.* "Because he is Dameck."

Dameck furiously dismounted his haggled roan, swinging a fisted gloved hand into Muru's soft stomach. Hedeon watched with passing amusement as Onishi crumpled to the ground, feeling the most horrendous pain he experienced before. The pain which seemed to radiate down to the marrow of his bones, threatening to splinter them apart piece by piece, bordered on being supernatural. "You will speak when I say. Is that clear?"

Hedeon glared at Green, expecting the fear to grip his eyes. Confused at Eddie's obviously lacking fear, Hedeon stumbled back, finding himself at a loss for words. "Your first, um..."

"Eddie Green. They call me Eddie Green. You know I've read about you. Inspiration to a lot of the ex-Pangean scum I used to know."

"But not to you." *Why doesn't he cower? Dameck thought. Because he is more like you, than you would care to know, his blood voices replied.* "What makes you immune to my obvious charms?"

"Because I'm no mere thug, trying to make myself out to be more than I am. I make my own rules." *Watch him, Eddie reminded himself. He has that insane feeling. His mind is not entirely stable.*

"Really?" Dameck smiled despite himself, chuckling slightly. "So you think that makes you like me? We're kindred is what your saying."

“Nope.”

“Here is the brief and life-saving story, Green. I am looking for a woman...”

“Aren’t we all?”

“...and a lad, which was taken from my stronghold, whilst I was engaged in a trivial battle. You tell me where they are and I’ll let you live.”

That explains how we penetrated his fortress so easily, Green thought. Eddie crossed his arms defiantly across his chest, “And what if I don’t”

“Then sadly, I will forced to fillet you alive. I can promise you that this old dog,” Dameck said, pointing at Onishi’s fetal form, “will tell me everything that you are unwilling to part with. So why don’t we save me some time, and a you a lot of pain, and just tell me where they are!”

“Don’t say a thing Green,” Onishi warned, through clenched teeth. “You do, and there won’t be a man alive who will trust you ever again. If Dameck doesn’t break his word and kill you when he’s done.”

“Shut up,” Dameck cautioned. “Eddie, old chum, better friendless than dead, I always say.”

“We will never be chums. ‘Sides I think that you need my help more than I need yours.”

Dameck snorted. “Really? My help saves you a slow, agonizing death,” Dameck pointed out.

“Listen Damy, we are about to quickly run into an impasse. You see, what you want prevents me from having a chance to leaving Rouge. I have already made a deal with Judgment...” Several of Dameck’s men gasped in fright. Eddie let out a sigh of

annoyance. “I get him the woman and her brother, and I get a chance to leave this rock. And if I am able to get my grubby little hands on the trigger...”

“Let’s refer to it as a gift from the gods.”

“...the gift, there’s no stopping me from blowing this joint. Go back to Pangea a free man.”

Dameck nodded his understanding. “Assuming you are able live beyond today and somehow magically get your hands on the trigger...”

“Gift from the gods,” tweaked Eddie.

“ Do you really think you will be truly free, Green. You must have done something pretty special to warrant you blessing this ‘rock’, as you call it. You won’t be able to walk the cobbled streets of Pangea without being glared at. You won’t be welcomed. You’ll be the public’s enemy. And they won’t rest until they find something on you, and send you right back here. And that’s assuming that Judgment 31 will keep its word.”

Eddie looked crestfallen. *Dameck nearly as stupid as I thought he would be, Eddie chided himself. Better find the angle quick, before he gets bored.* Green sat on the hard ground, a profound sadness settling over him.

“I have great plans for this world, and you could weasel into a part of it. Ed, be reasonable, the angels won’t let you go back to heaven, if you get my drift. Pangeans' won’t be thwarted in their rabid quest of self-perfection, and that means casting the likes of you and me aside. Their quest is all for folly, but it means we’re going to live the remainder of our days here. Why not carve up this world in ways that best suit our desires?” Hedeon tempted.

Dameck began to feel the acid rise in his nearly emaciated stomach, a sure sign that he was willing to compromise, for now. "I am willing to offer you your life, for just telling me where the bitch and the boy are," Dameck said venomously. "Sounds reasonable, don't you think...Ed?"

"Trigger?" *For what? wondered Maru. A bomb?* "Whatever he has planned Eddie, I'm sure it will be devastating."

"Not my problem. Fact is I don't really care, as long as it's not yours truly makes out," Eddie bluffed.

Dameck's horse prodded the ground with its' hoof, looking for morsels to eat. "A man after my own blackened heart. Now lets stop this incessant whining and decide. What will it be, Green?"

Eddie thought long and hard. He couldn't get Leis' image out of his mind. Why do I care? Maybe I could make so sort of deal. Save Leis and her brother. But Leis would never want him. Sure, he could probably force her companionship, but that's not what he really wanted. "Do you have second choice?"

Dameck vaulted over his horse's head and rushed Eddie, before he had a chance to react. Hedeon jerked Eddie from the ground, hoisting him over his head. With amazing feat of strength, he tossed Green like a sack of potatoes toward the roaring inferno on top of Onishi's cottage, nearly ten feet away. The roof beams collapsed under Eddie's weight. Green yelled as the burning wood beams tore and burned his arms as he fell inward. "And then there was one," Dameck said, his wolfish grin underlining his intent. "Well dog. What say you?"

"Go to..."

“I have one word for you. Ter.”

“I willingly sacrifice my life, just leave him alone”

“Very noble. You will die tonight,” Dameck said, nodding his agreement. His arm muscles bulged from throwing Eddie. “Listen well old dog! I will not stop until I find him. I promise you I will not only peel his nubile skin from his body myself, but I will...what will I do? Ah yes. I will have several fleshy boots made, if you get my drift. That way I can tread through the dung with complete satisfaction. His spirit won’t rest.”

Onishi started to cry, as he shook his head. “If you kill him it will only be his flesh you can play with. His soul won’t be yours.”

“Don’t count on it,” Dameck said, knowing in his heart that Onishi wouldn’t talk. *Don’t forget the other, the voices prodded him.* Dameck watched the flames spurt in the air as the cottage completely fell in on its self. *Can’t live through that, Dameck reasoned.* *Besides, why waste any more time on making sure the remains burned all the way through. He was plainly a dead man. If not now, sometime soon.*

The chirping of woodland birds ticked away the hours as the cottage finally stopped burning. Eddie Green should have been dead, but he wasn’t. Somehow, without him being aware of it, he had crawled under a section of innermost collapsed wall that had been soaked wet by the knoll the cottage was built into. His hair was slightly singed, and his skin was scorched in several spots. Eddie got his feet underneath of him and pushed as hard as he could, throwing a fallen wall aside.

Onishi Maru lay in the very same spot that Eddie had last seen him at. His eyes were glossing over with blood, as he glared unblinkingly at the sun. Eddie stumbled out

of the wreckage and leaned down to Maru. He saw that Onishi's shirt had been parted, and his stomach entrails were squirming beyond the ravaged flesh. *Dead, Eddie thought. Just like you could have been.*

Eddie clenched his fist in inner fury. *Just like you should have been. This Dameck, thinks he can be so callous with my life, Eddie fumed.* Green slammed his fist into the unyielding ground. *He'll pay for this. Thinks he will get away with it. Well he has another thing coming.*

"Green," Onishi muttered.

Green looked at where there should have been lips, but found only grizzle around Maru's mouth. Eddie fell back, fear etched on his face.

"Green. Thank you," Onishi said, wheezing his last breath.

Screwing up the courage, Eddie carefully bound Onishi's wounds with Maru's own clothing. "Just be glad that we lived."

"You need to promise me something, Eddie," Onishi said, swallowing his pride.

"What is that old man?" Eddie tried to ignore the wheezing he heard from the man. *Sounds like blood, he thought grimly.*

"Watch out for Ter."

"He's a grown man."

"Ter's naive. He believes in people. Ter wants to be a man of principle. You and I both know that principles without brains will get you killed," Onishi whispered above the blood bubbles foaming out of his mouth.

"I'm beginning to think that principles are almost good enough."

"Promise me," Onishi said.

“Alright, old man.” *How can I get him to Merrick? Merrick has the talent to save him.*

“Promise.”

Eddie gritted his teeth. “Promise.” *I can’t even take care of myself, and now you want me to watch your kid?*

Onishi stopped breathing at that moment.

Just enough will to outlast a promise, Eddie thought. Yippee. I’m a father.

Green felt the caressing warmth leave his shoulders from the sun disappear as a shadow fell upon him. Eddie wheeled around. His hands were balled into tight fist, aching for a fight. Green choked back tears of relief when he saw Rainic standing behind him.

“Got my second wind,” Rainic explained. “I already got the rest back home. Merrick sent me to retrieve your sorry behind. But I must warn you that some of the Canar are asking for your head in a purifying ceremony.”

I could just hug you, you little toad, thought Green. Eddie grabbed Onishi, flinging him on his shoulders. “Hurry.”

Rainic peered doubtfully at Eddie. “Why should I help you friend? Dead people have really bad karma.”

“Because he’s not me.”

“Point taken. But I’m still not entirely convinced.”

“He’s Ter Adon’s father.” Eddie eyes pleaded with Rainic to understand. Green let out an exasperated sigh. “And he’s not my friend.”

“ ‘nuff said.” A slight shimmer enclosed Rainic, Eddie and Maru, and then they were gone.

CHAPTER 20

A beefy warrior, who looked upon Eddie, Brett, Leis, Dayvid, and Ter Adon with distrust, guarded the small holding cell. Merrick and Green slowly and carefully laid Maru's body on a small, white cotton mat on the hard dirt floor covered in fresh hay.

"Use your talent on him, old man," Eddie said, slightly out of breath.

Merrick held his hands over Onishi's cold body. He closed his eyes in deep concentration. "He has been gone to long for me to reach him. Even with the combined willpower of the Canar, I doubt he would have survived," he said with sadness, his head cocked in Ter Adon's direction. "I am sorry for your loss, Ter Adon."

Eddie looked at Ter Adon's grief stricken face. *What can I possibly say? he thought. There are never right words that truly consul a man who has to deal with death.*

"I tried." Eddie Green pleaded for Ter's understanding. Eddie was afraid how his words would be received. "Believe me Ter, I did all that I could think of doing. I just

couldn't handle Dameck or his men. They were just too much for me....," he muttered impotently.

"Yes, you did Eddie," Merrick agreed. "You should rest now. You have journeyed far."

"No rest for the wicked," Brett mumbled.

"Enough!" yelled Ter Adon in unbridled anger. *We had so little time.*

Green sat down next to the wall. His face was crestfallen. "Men like Dameck don't just go away," Eddie stated. *I wish I didn't have to bring this crap up now, he thought.*

"Haven't we lost enough already?" Ter Adon asked. The shook of what happened was slowly sapping Ter Adon's energy.

"Green, maybe we should just back off now. Let Ter have time to grieve." Karie laid a comforting hand on Ter Adon's shoulder, as he cradled his father's hand in his shaking hands.

"You said he had a trigger," Green said, looking briefly at Leis.

"Yes," Leis guardedly replied.

Brett nodded his understanding. "Dameck has a trigger for some sort of weapon. You're worried that he might just use it on innocents. Maybe even the Canar. Why do you care, Green?"

"I may be a jerk, but I'm not a monster. I was understand Dameck Hedeon, probably better than most people. I was once like him. I know how he works. Anyone that gets in Dameck's way is expendable. No one really matters to him. He is just concerned with himself."

“Why tackle Dameck now, Eddie?” Tears freely flowed down Ter Adon’s ruddy checks. “Let’s let Judgment handle it.”

“I don’t know!” Eddie yelled passionately. *What the hell is wrong with me? Why all the emotions?*

Merrick thought long and hard. “This trigger won’t bring back the Pestil?”

“The trigger is an unknown quantity at the moment,” Brett replied.

“It is a danger that we can’t take a chance with,” Merrick mumbled. “Ter, we can try to handle this ourselves.”

Adon shook his head incredulously. *Why can’t I have just a little more time? Think things through.* “Eddie, I have to know what kind of man you really are,” Ter Adon cried.

“Why does it really matter? Isn’t it enough that Dameck wasted your father?”

“I refuse to dishonor papa’s memory by following a morally corrupt man. If I have to go it alone, I will.”

You need a man like me, a snake to fight a snake, Eddie thought sourly. Green replied, “I know I’m not some sort of saint! Is that what you want to hear? I’m a man that deserves to be damned.”

“Eddie...” Karie wanted to comfort Eddie, but found that she was at a loss for words.

“Listen kid, I don’t think we have time to relive my past now. Let’s just agree that I thought what I thought was right, was wrong. I thought that I knew better than everyone else, and I was sure that if I forced them to see the truth, they would finally realize what I

saw.” Eddie covered his misty eyes, taking a deep breath. He felt like crying, but this was the worst possible moment to do so. “Why was I willing to make them see at any price?”

“Eddie?” Karie moved to embrace Eddie.

Eddie held Karie in his arm. Somehow it felt right and wrong at the same time. *Is it because I am a devil, embracing a reformed angel? Stop feeling so sorry for yourself, he thought.* “You have to make a choice Ter Adon. Dameck and I have will have a date soon, and one of us ain’t going to come back. You want to stay on the sidelines, fine. But I figured you might want a chance for revenge. You might not get another chance. Are you in? Don’t say ‘yes’ unless you are willing to go all the way.”

Ter Adon closed his father’s unseeing eyes, and arranged Maru’s body in a respectful, peaceful pose on the mat. He straightened Onishi’s graying hair. “I’m in,” he said. Adon’s voice sounded distant, light-years away. And cold. So very, very cold.

“Time’s a wastin’,” Eddie said, more sure of his immediate destiny than he had ever been in his whole life.

Merrick said, “Dameck will need to be stopped. I am sure the Canar counsel won’t want to take a chance with Dameck. They may even approve of an assault, involving some of the tribe. Surely, my people will appreciate your wisdom, Eddie Green.”

“We should send Karie and Ter to Judge to warn him of the situation,” Eddie said. Before either Ter or Karie could protest, Eddie said, “Both of you know the land and the people better. If something goes down against us, then at least one of you can give the Canar a chance.” *And I will be able to keep my promise to Onishi, even if it’s for a little while.* “Brett will you join us?”

Brett thought long, and hard. “My programming forces me to assure that Leis and Dayvid are safe. We should venture with Ter and Karie, returning to Judgment 31’s protection. I do not believe I can join in your battle.”

“You’ll need to join us,” Leis said to Brett. “Because we’ll be going.”

“No you won’t,” Eddie growled. “We sacrificed too much to set you free.”

“I feel a little responsible about the trigger. I should have checked my manifest personally,” Leis protested. “I need to get the trigger back. I can’t leave it here. While you were gone I made contact with Judgment, and we agreed that the getting back the trigger is the highest priority, even more important than rescuing us. I told him I would get the trigger.”

“Stupid.” Eddie folded his arms across his chest. “You should never have made that promise. Judge could have sent in an army to retrieve the trigger and get you the hell off this world.”

“And what if Dameck has already primed the trigger? Would a surgical strike by an army even work? The trigger would have posed them and us a threat,” Leis put her hands on her hips, “I’m going. End of discussion.”

“So am I,” declared Dayvid. “I don’t think its smart to break up. What if Dameck decided to strike here? I wouldn’t be safe anyways.”

“Agreed. Brett, he is your responsibility,” said Leis.

“And I thought you were the smart one,” Eddie grumbled. “Fine, but you see no action.”

“Not your choice, I’m afraid.” Leis held up a defiant hand. “I am glad that’s finally settled. Never would have thought that I would be covering your back,” Leis said stubbornly.

“You can trust me,” Eddie said.

Leis nodded. “For the very first time, I think I really can.”

“Eddie, May I see you alone?” Merrick motioned with his head for Eddie to follow.

Merrick led Eddie through numerous passageways, until Green lost his innate sense of direction. They finally found themselves in a massive bowl-shaped cavern with a opening at the crest of the roof, covered with flourishing gardens. Merrick deeply inhaled the sweet perfume of wild flowers that decorated the teeming garden.

“I might be able to persuade the Canar counsel to go along with your plans and spare your life for the moment, if you are willing to submit yourself to my counsel.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Eddie replied.

“It depends on the level of enlightenment the individual has. Eddie, you have a serious sickness.” Merrick roughly touched Eddie’s chest and his head. “You lack sameness. Eddie, you have to comprehend that your heart and your mind do not always share the same course. Sometimes they find themselves in a battle for supremacy. When that happens, Soul Sickness starts to set in. Eddie, you have to try to exercise your demons that bind you to your present course. You must learn to ask your mind and your soul where they are going. Treat them like two good friend that you must not lose. If you

ignore this advice, you will soon lose all sense of who you are and become an empty vessel, forever searching for ways to make yourself whole. Eddie, you need to chart a course that sates both of your friends. There will only be one true path. Both your mind and your soul see different parts of the path, but you must steer them together in the right direction. ”

Eddie stood still for a few precious moments in deep contemplation. He had no idea how to respond to his would-be spiritual teacher. “If you’re saying I have lost faith, well I have. I lost it a long time ago. First I lost it in others, and then I lost it in myself.”

Merrick sat in a bed of flowers, rubbing his callused hands in deep contemplation. “Do you want to have faith? Hope is the first journey one must make.”

“And what is the second,” Eddie said intrigued, arching an eyebrow.

“The second is to find faith in oneself.”

“And then others.” Eddie whistled. “Man, do you really believe that load.”

“Faith in others is fleeting like snow. Not that you shouldn’t try to believe in integrity of other, but they are human after all. They make mistakes sometimes. They are seduced sometimes. They are fools sometimes.”

“What you’re telling me is a higher power. That kind of crap.”

“Look at the world we live, and the planets that grace our outer world. There is order, albeit not one we always understand. That is not an accident. Doesn’t that speak of a higher power? That kind of crap.” Merrick found a bundle of sticks, and laboriously built a small campfire. When the fire reached its peak, Merrick put his hands toward the fire, finally feeling the warmth. “My hand is so heavily callused. Do you believe it will burn?”

“Of course. Eventually.” Eddie sneered. *Idiot.*

“What does your mind say?”

“It will burn.”

“And what does your soul say?”

Eddie pondered this. *How can I ask my soul, you nutty old man?* “I feel nothing.”

“Then ask your soul another question, and then another, until you feel an inner warmth. Ask specific questions, because your soul can only speak to you in absolutes at first. Abstract contemplation comes much, much later.”

“It says it won’t burn. No, that’s not right exactly. It says that it won’t be burned by that fire,” Eddie ventured, feeling suddenly foolish.

“Now ask your mind.”

Eddie shook his head. “It now has doubts, I guess,” Eddie said, irritated.

“Your soul sees things beyond the realm of what we call reality. The mind only perceives glimpses by reason alone. But when they both agree, then you will divine the truth. My hand will not burn in this fire,” Merrick said. “Not that I am immune from fire. The heat from this fire is not strong enough to burn my tough hands. I can barely feel the warmth.”

“What in the h...does this exercise prove?” Eddie asked exasperated.

“The first step of any spiritual awakening is cultivating hope to find faith. And the second step, is having faith in oneself. Here ends my lesson. Now begin your own lessons. Have hope that what I have just taught you is truth, and then set up your own challenge. I will be proved right if you act in good faith. And if I am wrong, then you can

back to unbelief. Start small at first. Little steps, by little steps, until you have perfected your skills. All men must start at the beginning. There are no shortcuts in this game.”

Counsel? What kind of babble is this crap, Eddie thought. Does he think he can save me? Just humor him for the moment.

CHAPTER 21

“You realize that there will no longer be balance,” Rainic said to Merrick. He felt the cool breeze sweeping through the nocturnal Wisew Pass. “We mustn’t weaken Dameck too much. Once we strike, and if we are successful, then the remaining warlords might have an advantage. They can crush Dameck’s weakened horde in a simple two-pronged attack. And if they take horde out, then they can direct their war plans to include us. They have ignored us thus far. And we mustn’t let Dameck remain too strong, else he will direct his horde to our frontiers.”

“Are you saying we just let Dameck win? He has a trigger. He might find a way to use it against everyone,” Eddie retorted. “Stop being a waffling wimp, and let’s get this done fast. Here’s my plan in a nutshell: I’ll deal with Dameck. Keep him off balance until

Leis and Brett...and Dayvid finds the trigger. You'll pull them out when Merrick lets you know."

Rainic shook his head, "Are you sure you want Dameck alone. You may not survive such an encounter."

"Sure," Eddie said. *Piece of cake. You can't imagine how much I want a piece of him, he thought.*

Before Rainic had a chance to reply, the air in front of Eddie Green and Dayvid began to shimmer violently. Eddie dropped to the ground, trying to steady himself with his hands as he lost his sense of his equilibrium. Eddie and Dayvid disappeared.

Rainic gasped. *This should not be happening! he thought. Rainic quickly closed his mind down to prevent any more abductions, quelling his talent. The Dark Gift?*

"What did you do?" Merrick said, realizing that Dayvid and Eddie had disappeared. "Where's the boy!" he said in panic.

"Dameck! Somehow he tapped into my talent," Rainic said stupefied. "I don't know why, but he took the boy with Eddie."

Merrick rushed down the hillside, dragging Rainic with him. Scores of mutants hiding on their stomachs were waiting to attack Dameck's castle just before the sun arose. "Ranic, he knows we are coming. Attack!"

The mutants arose as one, storming through the Wisew Pass.

Leis and Brett ran to Merrick side. "Our plans are ruined," Merrick informed them. "Dayvid is with Eddie."

"Dameck!" Leis yelled. "You got to transport us," she begged.

“I think I can get you near the trigger, but Dameck is protected by some force. You will have to battle to get to him.”

Rainic closed his eyes, tapping into the deepest recesses of his inner talent. When he finally fell to the ground, screaming in agony from the exertion, Leis and Brett were no longer present.

Dameck patiently waited alone in the middle of the courtyard for Eddie to regain his sense of his surroundings, while his men lined the castle’s walkways on top of the walls in anticipation of an ferocious assault. Dameck’s knife was pressed harshly into Dayvid’s trembling throat, gouging a thin trail of blood into his soft flesh. As he approached Green, a malicious smile caressing his cruel face, several arrows flew over the castle’s wall, accurately landing in a pile of used hay, and began to lick the impervious stonewalls.

“Wouldn’t be in your self interest to hurt the kid,” Eddie said, as he slowly climbed to his unsteady feet. “He’s the only thing keeping you alive at this point.”

Where are the others? I called for the others, Dameck thought angrily. “I am surprised that you survived our last meeting. I’m even more surprised that you crawled out of your hole and decided to have another go humiliation. Tell me Ed, are you taking on your own battles? Or are you trying to impress a bunch of human retreads or crawl in some vixen’s pant with all this heroics?”

“Never stopped,” Eddie cryptically replied.

Dameck looked at Eddie's feet. Green cautiously followed his gaze, noticing the rusty sword that was laid at his feet. Eddie quickly snatched the unbalanced blade from the ground, and waved it haphazardly in front of him.

"Never stopped, what?"

"Never stopped taking on my own battles," Eddie taunted.

"Ed, have you ever asked yourself why you can't leave things alone. What can possibly drive your narcissistic ambition? I would have thought that you would have realized, despite that small pea-sized brain of yours, you would have realized how far I have come? There is not a soul on this forsaken world that can stop me now, not even the almighty Judgment."

Eddie smiled ruthlessly. "Here's my idea. You get rid of the kid, and we'll see who the real chump is, dip."

Dameck roared in frustration, but still held unto Dayvid. "You would like that, wouldn't you. Do you have a clue what this world is about yet? Weird powers abound on Rouge. There is true magic. Let's take this boy, for instance. When I slice his throat, I will have powers beyond your belief. His is the blood of innocence."

Dameck slide the knife along Dayvid's jugular vein, feeling the warm blood below the surface. *Come to me, it seemed to be saying. Wait! Offer him power, the blood voices said.* Dameck froze in his place. For the first time he realized the blood voices inside of his head, were working against him. He would never have offered Eddie Green, his once and present enemy, power. *Give him power! And then when you are done using him, kill him. But do it now, the blood voices reasoned.*

I am the one who has the power here, he thought. You will do my bidding! Dameck reached into his black tunic, and tried to rip take the brown leather bound silver amulet

free around his neck. To his amazement, the amulet, which was checkered by an unknown language, grew so hot to his touch that he had to let go. Dameck fell to the ground, drawing Dayvid on top of him. The amulet continued to grow hotter and hotter, until it literally burned its way into Dameck's muscular chest. You will do as I say!

“I am Dameck Hedeon!”

We don't care, who you are. You want power? We will give you power, but only on our terms, the blood voices hissed.

Dayvid tried to squirm away from Dameck, but couldn't break free from his firm grip. Eddie rushed Dameck, unsure why he fell to the ground, attempting to take advantage of Dameck's obvious distress by tearing Dayvid free from his grip. But as he was about to touch Dayvid's arm, he was swatted away by an unseen magnificently repellent force. Eddie was thrown into a pile of burning hay, and had to thrash around to smother the fire, which sought to consume him.

Eddie grunted, and rolled cagily to his feet. Green's jaw dropped, as he saw the shadows dance around Dameck. They seemed alive, and vaguely human. He tried shaking his head, but the shadow creatures were still there, and were taking on greater and greater definition. They quickly became demonically misshapen.

Dameck tried to will his feet to move as Dameck's eyes glazed with inhuman agony, seeking out Eddie. “Green! What is this?” Dameck twisted visage turned a deep crimson, as he yelled in pain.

“Dameck,” Eddie yelled. “Let the boy go, and I'll try to help.”

Do you wish to live? the blood voices asked maliciously.

“I want to live,” cried Dameck.

Then offer him power. We have grown tired of you.

I would rather fry in hell, he thought. Dameck let Dayvid scramble away. “They want...and I won’t let them give you what is mine.”

“What the hell is happening?” Eddie backed up quickly, sensing Dameck’s consuming desperateness.

Dameck drew his sword out of his scabbard, ignoring his burning chest pain, and raced toward Eddie. Eddie parlayed the sword thrust, easily pushing Dameck to the ground.

“You want my power?” Dameck accused.

“Not on your life.”

You see, he doesn’t want you, Dameck taunted. Give me the power I seek so that I might vanquish an unworthy foe.

You seek to manipulate us, the blood voices said. When we find a worthier vessel than you, your days will be numbered.

The amulet became cold to the touch. With strength returning quickly to his body, Dameck rolled to his feet, and lashed out with his blade. Eddie tried to ward off the blow, but the unbelievable strength behind Dameck’s blow was too much. As Eddie dropped his sword, Dameck savagely sliced his hand. “On the ground,” Dameck commanded, slicing Eddie’s cheek.

Dameck cowered over Green, his eyes consumed in utter madness. He ignored the sounds of battle that encircled his castle, as his entire body shook with rage. Dameck’s veins and muscles were popped out, stretching his skin taunt. He savagely lashed out his

boot, pounding into Eddie's exposed throat. The concussion of the blows ripped into Eddie's skin, tearing the flesh and causing him to bleed.

Dameck stopped his assault as soon as Eddie stopped moving. Deliberately he threw his sword to his side. Slowly he gripped the front of Eddie's tunic with his hands, slowly wrapping the collar around Eddie's swollen neck. Dameck slowly applied pressure around Eddie's neck, pulling the collar tighter while pushing his forearm into Green's throat.

Eddie's eyes snapped open. *Got to move. I've got to move, Eddie commanded his body.* Nothing happened.

"As soon as I am done with you, I'll deal with the boy. And when my horde defeat you forces, I will have his sweet tasting sister brought to me. Would you like to hear my plans?" Dameck taunted. Spittle came streaming down on Eddie's face. "Stop me if you heard it before. I am nothing if not unique. Maybe I'll use the rack. Or better yet the Iron Maiden. And then when the life is about to flee from her eyes, I'll nurse her back to health. Then the torture begins again. It will go on and on, until she begs to be killed. But I'll ignore her, you hear me Green! It won't stop until I get bored."

Eddie's eyes rolled back into his head. His face turned blue from the lack of oxygen.

Dameck taunted, "And the conquests I will make with her. There won't be any orifice that will be left untouched. Perhaps I'll make a few of my own. I will have her in ways you only dreamed of, and ways that you have nightmare about."

Dameck loosened his grip, allowing Eddie to breath. *He's not breathing, he thought frantically. Not now! You will not take this from me, Green.* A chill of anxiety,

fear and anger stirred inside of Dameck when he was sure that Eddie was dead. He leaned close to Eddie's mouth listening for any air exchange. He could detect a faint movement of air. Smiling Dameck asked, "Are you playing possum with me, Eddie? Can't say that I blame you."

Eddie's eyes flared open, as he gasped for air. His numb hands shot up and wrapped themselves into Dameck's neck. Eddie couldn't feel it when his fingernails pierced into Dameck's throat, puncturing the jugular and spraying blood. Because of the semi-conscious fight-or-flight state he was in, Green wasn't aware if he was actually hurting Dameck in the slightest bit. For all Eddie knew, with his senses quickly evaporating, Dameck could be laughing at Eddie's lackluster attempt.

Make him feel your pain, Eddie thought over and over in his mind, like a mantra.

Dameck tried to howl in pain, but to his horror, not only couldn't he breathe but he couldn't see to speak. Dameck did the only thing he could possibly do and pulled Green's makeshift noose as tight as possible. He pulled tighter and tighter on the tunic's collar, until he was sure he was going to snap Eddie's neck, but it didn't. Dameck felt a surge of fear.

This can't be happening, he thought. Help me, he begged the blood voices. When the voices refused to respond Dameck his first taste of death. And all he could gather from the experience was a sense of his own precarious existence.

Dameck's arms slowly went numb, as the blood spread across the front of his shirt. *How can you possibly live, Green? How can your will be greater than mine?*

Dameck thought with surreal detachment.

Dameck lost his tentative grip as he fell to his side. He tried desperately to fling his hands at Eddie. Eddie gasped in the air greedily, the dark spots in front of his eyes threatening to draw him into abyss of unconsciousness. Slowly the dark spots dematerialized from Eddie's wavering sight.

Eddie rolled Dameck underneath of him, wrapping his worn legs around Dameck's waist. He was surprised to find his blood wasn't the only one that was covering his tunic. Curling his lip in determination, Eddie dug his fingers deeper into Dameck's throat, spewing a new fountain of blood across his chest. Dameck stopped moving, but Eddie wasn't taking chances. It was a miracle he was still alive, and for the first time in control of the situation, and he was not about to let that advantage slip away.

"Eddie?" Dayvid moved tentatively toward Green. Although he felt disorientated, he still had the presence of mind to ask, "Is it over?"

"Yeah kid, it's over," Eddie said, surprised on how gravely his voice sounded to him.

"Are you alright?"

"Never better."

Dayvid stumbled over to Eddie, noticing the blood that dripped from his shirt.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Isn't he dead?" Dayvid asked, suddenly afraid that Eddie had lost his mind.

"Yeah," Eddie replied.

"Then why are you still...?"

"I'm too damn tired to move."

Leis rushed into the courtyard. She looked up at the castle's walkways, confused that the stupefied soldiers were no longer waging battle against the Canar. And then she saw Eddie leaning over Dameck's lifeless body. She was touting a small object wrapped in leather. She suppressed an urge to scream with her hand. *There's so much blood, she thought.* "I have ...the trigger. Brett will be here real soon. He ran into a little trouble."

"It's so small," Dayvid replied, as he tried desperately to pull Eddie's hands free from Dameck's throat.

"Doesn't need to be big, to be lethal," Leis replied.

"You alright?" Eddie asked, noticing a slight purple bruise on Leis' cheek.

"Better than him," she replied. "Why aren't you helping?"

"Too damn tired to move," Eddie said. He had a sudden urge to laugh.

CHAPTER 22

Leis, Dayvid, Eddie and Brett sat in the same chilled cavern that they had when they first met Rainic.

“I still can’t believe that Dameck’s men would just put down their arms and leave,” Dayvid said.

“There wasn’t a reason to fight after Dameck’s sudden demise. Dameck was the glue that held the horde together. With him out of the picture, the horde had no reason to fight,” Brett explained with trepidation. “We should just count ourselves lucky that they didn’t bow down to Green and make them their leader. Dameck’s horde wasn’t the brightest stars in the galaxy.”

“I’m not sure if I was insulted or not.” Eddie found a used rolled Soto Root on the ground, and was smell its pungent skin. “Ever wonder who was the first guy to smoke this crap? What rational part of his brain thought it would be a good idea to light a root, and smoke it?”

“Let me see,” Dayvid said, transfixed by the small bundle in Leis’ hands.

Leis looked at Brett in exasperation. “Should I?”

Brett watched Eddie closely, as he said, “Sure. He won’t stop until he sees it.”

Leis slowly unwrapped the trigger from the fur. The Ebony cigar-shaped trigger was smooth to the touch. Embedded in the trigger were a timer and a detachable remote control. “Looks like you can set the trigger for a few minutes and create a chain reaction with a remote,” Leis said.

“Thank you, Eddie Green. I am reluctant to admit that we probably wouldn’t have gotten the trigger so easily without your intervention,” Brett said suddenly, swallowing its pride. “You could have been a weasel, and leave Dayvid to that dog, Dameck.”

Stunned, Eddie mumbled, “You’re welcome.”

Leis watched the exchange with mild amusement. “Really, we can’t express to you how much we appreciate what you did. Especially in watching out for Dayvid.”

Dayvid touched the trigger’s sleek contours. “Yeah,” he added.

“Are you going to destroy that thing, or take it home with you?” Eddie asked Brett.

“Take it home, I guess,” Leis replied. *Why am I feeling so giddy around him suddenly?*

“I don’t believe that is what he is asking,” Brett replied.

Eddie threw up his hands. “You caught me Oil Breath. I was thinking...”

“Never has such dire words been so mentioned,” Brett said, cutting off Green.

“...There are still two warlords. They aren’t going to easily accept that the trigger just up and left, when they have a snowball’s chance of obtaining it and leveling out their enemies. That means that the Canar are in real danger.”

“What are you suggesting?” Leis asked, afraid to ask.

“Leave it here. Just in case, you know, we have to clean house.”

“It is too powerful. You know that kind of power is too tempting not to use eventually.”

Eddie shrugged his weary shoulders. “Just consider it, alright. I just wouldn’t want to let the Canar at the mercy of two enemies. Before they can wipe their butts, they have to get council permission.”

Dayvid let out a small laugh. *He’s so cool, Dayvid thought. Can’t wait until I tell mom about him. She going to cream her shorts.*

Leis moved Dayvid’s hands away from the trigger. “It’s time to leave it alone, honey,” she said.

Glumly, Dayvid allowed pulled his hand off of the trigger. Leis carefully wrapped the trigger in a brown fur wrap that Merrick had given her. She had an urge to sit closer to Eddie.

“Eddie?”

“Yeah?”

“Merrick took me to Judgment 31 as soon as we got back here. Judge seems to believe that he can make a deal to get you back on Pangea soil, in some remote area under strict surveillance.”

Eddie let the words sink in. “I can’t believe...”

“Which means that we could be actually...friends. If you like that is?”

“How can I turn down such an offer?” Eddie face broke out in a mischievous smile. “Maybe more?”

“Not very likely,” Leis said, blushing. *When did I turn into a child?*

“Can’t wait to do the horizontal tango, when we get back. Care to join in,” Eddie bantered.

“You had to go and ruin the moment,” Leis retorted. She should have been upset at Eddie’s crassness, but strangely she wasn’t. *Better have my head checked when I get home? Leis thought.*

The small camouflaged military space vessel broke through the ebony and gray clouds, slowly inching its way to the ground just in case they had to make a break for it. Leis shielded her eyes from the bright noonday sun that poked its way through the heavy cloud covering and watched the sleek vessel from their hiding position, masked inside a small campsite in the middle of thick weeds. Karie was right. This was the perfect rescue site. *Too bad she couldn’t be here, thought Leis. Karie seemed so upset when she learned that Eddie was leaving.*

“They’re almost here,” she announced, sadly disturbing the sound of nearby golden and crimson crested crickets.

“About time,” Dayvid said, rubbing his hands together.

Brett watched Eddie, as he lay on the grass with one arm dangled over his eyes. *Do I have the right to force Eddie to stay? he thought. He was a criminal after all. But he was also someone who sacrificed himself to save this world. A world no one else cared about saving.*

Eddie jumped to his feet, extending his hand to help Dayvid up. To Eddie sheer delight, Dayvid had been mimicking his behavior for most of the day in obvious admiration.

Eddie grimaced. “This is real bad timing, but I have something you need to understand,” Eddie said. “I took me awhile to get the nerve to say what I have to say. So just hear me out.”

“Can’t it wait?” asked Dayvid, grabbing Eddie’s bruised hand.

“Not really, kid. I thought it would be best if it came from me. I’m not planning to go back,” Eddie stated. The depth of pain in his eyes defied explanation.

Leis wheeled around, tearfully gazing into Eddie’s eyes looking for answers. Eddie touched her cheek tenderly. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. I want more than anything to go back, but I can’t. I’m not sure if I’m looking for atonement for what I did on Pangea. What I do know is that I can’t go back now. I’m not...worthy enough,” Green said.

Eddie, don’t be a fool, Brett thought. “You may not get another chance. You probably won’t survive for even year,” Brett warned. *Why in the world am I arguing with him. Just days before, I would have knocked him off a cliff if I had a chance.*

“Thanks for the sympathy, Chrome Boy. But it’s time to face reality Let’s face here gang. Even if I go back now. Ain’t nothing going to be the same. I’ll never be able to go into public unescorted, and when and if I do, people are going to know whom I was. I won’t ever be a productive member of society again. I’ll never hold a job. And I’ll never have friends, ‘cept maybe you guys.”

“But you’ll have us. You’ll have me...around,” Leis pleaded.

“And I would doom every one of you to my same fate. Who in the world would be my friend? Takes a lot of balls to do that. And what kind of friend will I be if I put you guys through that.”

“I would be your best friend,” Dayvid said. He grabbed Eddie around the waist, hugging him desperately.

“I’m a different man now, Dayvid. I wasn’t always this way, you know.”

“People will understand,” Dayvid sniffled.

“People are narrow-minded, Dayvid. Pangea won’t allow a man like Eddie to remain in their midst for long. Eddie’s right. He belongs here,” Brett said.

Dayvid pointed accusing finger at Brett. “Don’t pretend he’s your friend. You would have killed him if you had a chance.”

“You are not entirely inaccurate in the depiction of our initial relationship. But I think he should stay. Dayvid, you have to keep in mind that Eddie did some pretty awful things. I doubt that a boy your age is fully cognizant of his crimes, nor should you be so burden at your impressionable age. Green needs to pay for his crimes, if he can ever,” Brett said.

“I could stay with you,” Leis thought out loud. “But that wouldn’t work would it?”

Eddie shook his head, fighting back the tears as he looked at a patch of yellowed grass, trying to find a place in his heart for the strength to tell her what he had to tell her. He stood still for what seemed to be an eternity to Dayvid and Leis. “You would never be safe here. I could never protect you.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to,” Dayvid pleaded.

“Maybe you could live that way. But I can’t. I need to make sure your safe.”

“I? Is it always about you?” asked Dayvid, hurt.

“Dayvid, your decision takes a lot of thought. I don’t think you are ready for that sort of commitment at this moment.”

“I’m ready now, Eddie,” Dayvid said defiantly. *Why would I even want to stay? he wondered. I just don’t want to leave him here. I won’t ever see him again. And we just became friends.*

“Then give me time to work things out,” Eddie lied, knowing that Dayvid would never come back.

“You don’t want me to stay?”

“Of course I do! More than anything in my miserable life, I want you to stay. Just give me time to clean up a little around here. To make it safe for you.”

“How long.”

“Not long. I promise,” Eddie said.

“I would wait for you forever.” *Why am I being so dramatic? thought Dayvid. Because he’s my friend, he answered himself.*

“It won’t be that long.”

“We’ll miss you,” Leis started.

“Please don’t make this any harder on me, sweets,” Eddie interrupted.

Leis smiled. “You really are an...interesting man. I won’t soon forget you.”

“Same here,” Eddie replied

Leis said. “Maybe I’ll be back to see you some day.”

“I can’t believe you just caved like that. I knew that I could make the ladies quiver in anticipation, but I didn’t think you would be one of them,” said Eddie, as he broke into an infectious grin. He set his jaw resolutely. “Let me meet the rescue party first.” Eddie grabbed the trigger out of Leis’ hands. “Just trust me, Leis. I promise to set things straight,” he said.

The clearing was just enough to allow for the small box-shaped camouflaged military space ship to land. The ship’s landing gear sunk into the muddy earth. Several silent troops, armed with rapidly firing laser rifles and ceramic body armor, swarmed out of the ship as soon as the cargo door dropped open. They fanned out on the ground in a defensive position.

Eddie Green carefully stepped into the clearing first, holding the trigger carefully in his right hand. His hands were held down, and close to his body. *You should just run now, he thought. But then I wouldn’t get to razz them.*

“Eddie Green,” one of the soldiers moaned. “We’re here to rescue that slimeball.”

“Shut your breathing hole, soldier! We’ve got our orders.”

“Your orders are going to change slightly colonel,” Eddie said.

“Commander Adman,” said the leader, perturbed. “Where are the others? And where is the trigger?”

Leis, Dayvid, and Brett walked into view. “We’re the Phoenix’s crew. Leis Kasi, commanding officer,” Leis said.

“Give me the trigger,” Adman ordered Eddie.

“Eddie. I trusted you, remember” Leis warned.

“Sorry, sweets. I have other plan in mind. We’re staying here.”

Commander Adman arose to his feet, his multiphase laser rifle aimed at Eddie. “I have my orders. You will bring me that weapon.”

Yup, should have ran. “Can’t do it slick.” Eddie held up his hands slowly. “Don’t worry I’ll dispose of it.”

“Nothing doing. Bring me the weapon now,” he commanded. “Or so help me.”

Brett stood in between Eddie and Commander Adman, hoping he knew what Eddie had in mind. “This is getting out of hand. Eddie just give me the trigger.”

Eddie rubbed his sweaty neck. “Sorry Chrome master, I can’t. I can’t let the Canar down, you see. Brett, I’m asking you to trust me.”

“Trust you! Trust you!” Commander Adman yelled, “Get out of the way now, sir. That is an order.”

Brett swung a hard right cross, knocking Commander Adman off his feet, and into his men. “Go now.”

“Come back,” Eddie yelled to Leis. “I’ll be here.”

Eddie ran through the grass in a hail of laser fire, and was gone in a matter of seconds.

Leis looked after Eddie in amazement. *I’ll be back, thought Leis impulsively.*

“You better have a good reason, sir,” yelled Commander Adman.

Brett nodded his assurance. “He’s going to clean up,” Brett said cryptically. “He made a promise.”

“He said ‘trust me’,” yelled Commander Adman. “That’s not a promise.”

“From Eddie Green it is.”

“Unbelievable. Freaking unbelievable.”

“I’ll be back! You hear me I’ll be back!” Leis yelled suddenly, praying that Eddie would hear.

He did.

Eddie watched, with tears streaming down both of his dirty cheeks, as Leis, Dayvid and Brett were escorted into the military transport ship. Long after the ship raced through the sky, to the safe harbor of space, Eddie stared at the brilliant sky. He wanted nothing more, than for time to stand still. Eddie thought about Leis’ beautiful face. *Miss you already, sweets, he thought.* Eddie set his jaw and walked away. He had some cleaning to do.

After several days searching, Eddie finally discovered a hidden Judgment 31 Pod in the shallow end of a lake. After several hours watching Judgment 31 from the depths of the forest, Eddie took a chance that there was no prying eyes, and ran to the pod.

“How’s life in the cyber lane,” Eddie said, climbing inside of Judgment 31.

“Not so good. There is this little problem,” Judgment 31 replied. “Although I have confined one wayward child, another rears its ugly head...”

“Really? Is he a cool, sexy man like me? If he is, you’re in a world of hurt. ”

“Eddie, I was informed by Commander Adman that you kept the trigger.”

“Yeah. Just be quiet a minute, and I’ll get to that. Do you think that Rouge could be redeemed?”

“Of course I do. That is why I’m here.”

“Been thinking that it can’t happen. Not in the shape it is now.”

“Eddie? What exactly are you eluding to?”

“I think I have a vision for Rouge. One in which Rouge can evolve into a full-fledged world, and not just a prison colony. A world that can have law and order. But in order to do this we have to weed out the most evil among us. Sheer off the wildest men, so to speak.”

“You’re planning to use the trigger, aren’t you Eddie,” Judgment 31 said, in amazement.

“Been planning this for a while, but I just got to know you wouldn’t be hurt.”

“I can’t. My programming is spread through out this planet in the pods, like appendages,” Judgment 31 said in confusion. *Is he really thinking about my welfare? This can’t be the Eddie Green, I know.* “You’re going to use the trigger.”

“Yeah. I figure I can kill a bird with two stones. I can destroy the trigger and take out the bad guys.”

“Eddie. Don’t do this. Just return the trigger.”

“No can do,” Eddie said.

“Eddie. Who made you judge and executioner.”

“I just took a vote. And guess what...”

“Eddie, you’re one of those people. How can you possibly condemn those, who are just like yourself.”

“Lately I have been meeting a lot of people that have been making me think about things.”

“Eddie, how can you rationalize your existence, when you plan to kill your kindred,” Judgment 31 said, trying to make Eddie consider the consequences.

“Don’t you get it, Judgie? I’m the other stone. The way I figure it, I can’t chance that the trigger could be disarmed. ‘Sides Rouge will be better off without me. You can set them on the right path, big guy. It was...an experience knowing you.” Eddie stood up, and started to walk out of Judgment. “By the way. Don’t call this planet Rouge anymore. It deserves a new name for the new start. Something like... Soule. Yeah that’s good. I like that,” Eddie said congratulating himself.

“Eddie! Don’t do this. Don’t sacrifice your life!”

Eddie Green raised his hands up. “I have to make a difference. I’m not exactly sure, but I need to do this, you know what I mean.”

CHAPTER 23

The raggedly dressed mutant, with large, colorful tattoos covering his entire body except his mangled face and misshapen curled hands, softly whispered into Merrick's ear, hoping to be heard above the banquet noise.

"Word has come from my scouts that Dameck's warriors e being slowly slaughtered," Merrick said, after much hesitation.

"The other warlords," Ter Adon said with glee. Ter said a brief, silent prayer of thanks. He glanced at Eddie. *Why does he look troubled? He should be ecstatic that we have won.*

"I hear a but in there somewhere."

"The other warlords are sensing a tide in the battle. Both of them have learned about the devise from men that they have captured and tortured."

“It’s called a trigger, sponge head,” Eddie growled out of frustration.

Ter Adon slide his chair closer to the banquet table, attempting to look like he was interested with the spread of food, as he moved to separate Eddie from Merrick, not comprehending Eddie’s drastic mood change.

“Listen farmer boy, where not about to rumble. Merrick is trying to say that the warlords want the trigger. The question is how far will they go to obtain it?”

Merrick slammed his fist on the banquet table, his face contorting into anger. “They are like a pack of rabid wolves, Eddie. Some of my scouts have already gone missing. It is only a matter of time before they find this haven. I never thought by opposing Dameck that it could lead to the destruction of my people. I should have listened to Rainic.”

Ter Adon’s jaw dropped. “Are you saying...?”

“Our paradise may be lost, and all because we had to stop Dameck. I don’t know how to even tell my people. They trusted my judgment.” Merrick slid a fork into the shredded Ransa meat on the charger in front of him. *Best to put on a content face, at least until I try to figure a way out of this crises.*

They ate in silence and watched Merrick’s people dance merrily to the troubadours, and chat with each other excitedly about the grandness of the victory banquet.

“Do they know how the trigger works?” Eddie’s face glowed with sudden inspiration.

“Until our scientist explained it to us, I didn’t know,” Merrick conceded.

Eddie nodded. "I might have a plan. But it depends on keeping the warlords in the dark. We have to move fast."

"Tell me of this plan," Merrick commanded.

"I need the use of a couple of your scouts. The Dante River? Is there a place to do battle near there?"

"About a mile inland there is a dead valley. It is where my people used to live in cliff dwellings, long before the pestil."

"Good," Eddie rubbed his hands. "Let's eat. I'm starving."

"Are you suggesting we go to war?" Ter Adon gasped. "Eddie, taking on Dameck was hard enough, but taking on two warlords at the same time is nearly impossible."

"No. I'm suggesting we sell the trigger to the highest bidder."

Ter Adon stood up, grasping Eddie's shirt. "I knew you were scum, but this goes way too far."

Eddie regarded Ter Adon with cold, unfeeling eyes. "The best thing for you to do is to let go of my shirt, and sit back down," he said, with barely controlled anger.

Merrick laid a calming hand on Eddie's shoulder. "He is young. And foolish."

"Let go," Eddie growled, his arms barely contained from motion.

"Let go," Merrick commanded.

Reluctantly, Ter Adon let Eddie's tunic go. He stormed out of the banquet room, pushing a hapless troubadour out of his way. Karie, concern etched on her face, stopped dancing, and ran after Ter Adon. She shot an accusatory glance at Eddie, as she left the banquet room.

"I have patience Eddie, but I need to know what you have in mind."

“I’m going to give them the trigger, and blow them the hell up,” Eddie said with cold utter detachment.

“You will need at least a Judgment cubicle to set the bomb off. I’m not sure if my people can get past the notion that Judgment 31 is a machine. The Canar counsel won’t sanction this easily.”

“Then find people that will. I’ll need them buried in the dead valley. Then we need to send out your scouts to invite the warlords to a party.” Eddie took a long pull at his cool drink. “And I’ll need to have some place on high ground. Need to make sure that everyone is at the fiesta.”

“The trigger has to be set off manually. Or by a remote close by. In order to destroy most of the warlord’s hordes, the blast radius will have to be big enough. Eddie, someone will have to be close by. Someone will have to give up their life.”

“Not just anyone. Me. It makes the most sense. I started this war, now I’m going to finish it.”

Merrick leaned back in his creaking wicker chair. *There is wisdom in Eddie’s suggestion, he thought.* “I’ll see what I can do.”

“You know this is the only way,” Eddie implored for understanding.

“I know,” Merrick said. “But that doesn’t mean I have to like it. Eddie, I have chosen to become your mentor. A small part of me considers you a friend.”

“Same to you,” Eddie said, trying not to be sentimental.

“And you would sacrifice your life for my people.”

“Naw. I just want to see the big firework show. It’s not everyday that I get the chance.”

Eddie Green tried to stifle a yawn with his hand, as the torch bearing armies of Lord Merchant and Lord Semion mercenaries swarmed into the desert valley bordering the Dante River on horseback. More warriors showed up than he had secretly hoped for. Enormous snake-like boulders crisscrossed most of the valley floor. Eddie carefully chose the highest ground he could find, both to give him a better vantage point for recon and distance for measure of safety. *Eddie grimaced as he thought, not that it matters. The day is about to end with the final chapter of my life.*

Warriors on horseback surrounded his position, fighting their way like rabid animals to be the first to reach Green. Eddie stood up, drawing a crossbow from the ground. He aimed at the largest warrior and fired. Slowly he reloaded another bolt and took aim at another man, firing a bolt through his leg that went into the warrior's horse. The horse charged heedlessly through the crowd, tearing the warrior's leg off in a mad dash for safety. The warrior tried desperately to drag himself out of the mêlée. The rest of the warriors recoiled from the sudden onslaught.

"Here's how it goes!" Eddie yelled above the crowd. "I only deal with the top cheeses. Anyone else comes in their place, they lose a chance at being a god."

A huge man with red braided hair, and penetrating steel blue eyes, pushed his way through the crowd. "You got a lot of balls, little man," yelled the man. "I like that!"

"Gee if I had a dime for every time your girlfriend told me that..." Eddie said, a malicious twinkle coming to his mirth filled eyes.

"Listen up little man..." the man yelled at Green.

Eddie shook his head. "Like to share witty barbs with ya all day, but I'm a busy man. If you're not a cheese, than I'm not interested."

“I’m Lord Semion,” growled the man. “The only one that came.” The man glared at the crowd, inviting anyone to dissent.

“Where are the others?”

“They lead from afar, but as you can see,” Semion waved at the multitude of warriors toward and the east. “They send friends.”

Eddie nodded, letting the crossbow drop to the ground. He wouldn’t need it again ever. “Would you say that these are the strongest men of the land, your royal cheese head? That empires would fall without them.”

“Yes,” the Semion said, suddenly feeling that something was off. *He shouldn’t be so calm.*

“Too bad you were the only true cat to come around.”

Lord Semion shook his head sadly. “You have the trigger.”

“Yes siree.” Eddie pulled the small transmitter from his pocket. “Doesn’t look like much does it?”

“I was told it was bigger.”

“Sort of. This is a transmitter. The trigger is buried somewhere close.”

“How much do you want?”

“Kingdoms without numbers. Cute, nubile fiefs to diddle-daddle with.”

“That could be arranged in time,” the man replied, guarded.

“And a religion too. I would like to be worshiped every day. And from now on, every technological break through on this rock is to be named after me. The Greenamatic, would be an awesome start.”

“What the gibberish, are you talking about?”

Eddie reached down as Lord Semion scaled to the top of Green's boulder. Lord Merchant's mercenaries yelled in protest, but none brave enough to chance a full-scale war by taking more action. Eddie sat down and patted the soft red ground next to him.

"Do you know what I've been thinking?"

"I'm not going to like what you going to say, am I?"

"Just call me Eddie."

"Eddie?"

"No Sparky, you're not." Eddie shifted slightly. "You want to know how the trigger works? It actually overloads key components inside of Judgment cubicles. Any cubicle in a certain radius, and boom instant karma. I figured this place was isolated enough that it would do the least hurt. No people you see, and its contained in the valley."

"What is."

"The fall out. I had a bunch of cubicles buried."

The mighty warlord scanned the nocturnal valley, but to his dismay he couldn't see anything but trampled dirt from the horses. "Judgment?"

"Way to work it out Sparky. Who would have known that behind those dim simian eyes, is a rocket scientist."

"If you would have asked me just a couple of days ago, I might have been willing to part with the trigger, just to be left alone." Eddie held up the remote, his finger poised above the emerald button. "But I came to realization about things. Don't move Sparky, or I'll end the conversation right now, " Eddie warned, as he caught the warlord edging closer to him.

"What are you up to...Eddie?"

“This crap hole that were on needs a second chance, if you get my drift. To get away from people like you and me.”

“How did you come to this realization?” the warlord said, trying to buy enough time to get near enough to chance lunging for the remote in Eddie’s hand.

“An epiphany. Or at least my idea of an epiphany.”

“You’re going to kill me, because of ...inspiration!” the warlord said in stark disbelief, edging up slowly. The warlord threw back his massive head, and let out a thunderous laugh. “Just in case you don’t realize this, you’re going to be dead along side of us.”

“You can’t make Swiss cheese without a couple of holes.” Eddie taunted, holding out the remote, close enough for the Semion to pounce. Just as he grabbed Eddie’s wrist, ready to twist it off, Eddie pushed the button.

Lord Semion sneered at Eddie. Time seemed to stop. And then Eddie’s world turned to utter darkness, as his feet seemed to be enveloped by the soft ground. Eddie fell harshly against the stone floor of an underground cavern, knocking the air out of his lungs. He felt a pair of hands yank him to his feet and propelling him into the darkness. *So this is what hell is like, Eddie thought. An abyss of sheer darkness and isolation. A true cutting off from the light.*

“We mustn’t stop, Eddie” Merrick’s frantic voice called from out of the darkness.

“We are in a moment. A moment that is about to end.”

“Merrick? What’s happening to me?” Eddie felt a strong hand grasp his hand, pulling him into a frantic dance.

“These are the old parts of the Anisco. No one travels through these ancient corridors, afraid of what may lay in wait in the darkness.”

“I’m alive! How?”

“The moment,” Merrick said. “Together the Canar have the shared talent to stop time in its track for a short duration. Not going into the past, and not going into the future. Just holding onto the moment.”

“You saved my life,” Eddie stated in disbelief.

“Not this time. To have a moment like this we had to give it to you.”

“We?” Eddie asked without comprehension.

“The Canar. All of my people had to work together, lending their shared talent to help you.”

“You’re people did this for me?” Eddie wanted to stop Merrick right then and there and explain to him that he didn’t deserve the moment. *I chose the time and place, not you. How can you cheat death?*

“With my urging.”

“Why?”

“I felt that I should. Isn’t that enough?”

“Yeah it is. Thanks,” Eddie said, hoping that he sounded as sincere as he felt.

They made their way through the corridors at a blinding speed. Finally Merrick stopped as they neared a brush covered cave entrance. “How much time did we have?”

“I rigged the trigger to go off in less than a minute.”

“Why?” Merrick took a deep breath of air.

“Didn’t know what they had in mind. You pick a fight with bullies; you got to expect some cheating. Not all the warlords came to play,” Eddie said, disappointment dripping heavily in his voice.

“No they didn’t. But that does not matter. They are impotent without their hordes.” Merrick pondered the stars overhead, glimpsed through the tangle of barbed branches. A nearly dead small Snakeweed dangled from the roof, making lazy, threatening slashes toward Merrick and Eddie. “You hear her.”

“Who?”

“Mother Earth. She is aware of what is going to happen. She is mad and scared at the same time.”

“Tell the Babe to take a chill pill and call me in the morning.”

“What?”

“Listen, Merrick. I don’t expect anyone to sanction what I did. But the way I figure it, everyone deserves a chance to get off this rock. Well...maybe not everyone. How hard was it to convince your people to help me.”

“We believe that all life is precious. Even those who you have sent on their way to death. But some lives are worth more than those who you have banished. Some of my people have doubts about you still and think that you should be purged from this world to avoid another pestil. So it would be my humble suggestion that you steer clear of the Canar for at least a little while.”

“Yeah. Well. I have doubts about myself sometimes.”

“Eddie, are you seeking atonement? To absolve yourself from your sins?”

“Naw.” Eddie shook his head. “Doesn’t work out for guys like me. I’m the damned, and I don’t expect to ever get a shot at another life. Sometimes you gots to do what is right, without the chance of rewards. Don’t ask me why.”

“Is Leis or Karie the reason why? You’re hoping to send one of them a message.”

“Why is it that you think that it had to take the love of a woman to make me see the way. Don’t get me wrong. I would love a chance at either of those sweet, sweet thangs. But what I did, was done on my own grounds.”

“You are truly are a ...”

“Enigma,” Eddie finished, happy about the complement.

“No. Strange. You are a strange man, Eddie Green.”

Eddie raised a questioning eyebrow. “I’m not sure how to take that.”

Merrick nodded to the entrance. “We have traveled far. You should be safe from the fallout. You will hear the river. Your friends have chosen to gather there for some reason. Eddie,” Merrick choked back a tear. “You have been given another moment. Don’t waste it.”

As Eddie climbed through the shrub, and out into the cool early morning, he looked back at his friend. “Just when I thought you were major league cool, you had to ruin the moment and cry like a chick.” Eddie walked away suppressing a grin.

Eddie followed a winding path that eventually led to Karie and Ter Adon, who had set up a campfire near the lake. Sweet Soto roots and bark smoldered on the flames, giving off a weird sweet, pungent smell.

“I thought you left,” Karie said as Eddie edged next to her.

“Naw. Can’t rid of me so easily.”

“Ter?”

“Not in the mood for a conversation,” Ter said, the grief from his father’s death still festering just below the surface.

“I hear you kid,” Eddie said.

“The thing is that, well...his life ended up being in vain. But he tried to do the right thing, you understand Eddie?”

Eddie kneeled over the lake, studying his battered visage for the first time. He picked up a blade of grass and stuck it between his lips. “Maybe not. He gave us a chance to get away,” he said cryptically. “So when’s the sun rise?”

“Not for a least another couple of hours, yet,” Karie said looking toward the west.

What are you up to? Karie thought.

“You’re looking in the wrong direction,” Eddie stated, suppressing a smile.

“If you ever learn your sense of direction, it would be a miracle. The sun rises...”

“Not today it doesn’t,” Eddie said, as he smirked.

Ter Adon and Karie glared at Eddie. All around them nature seemed to become supernaturally quite. And then a brilliant white flash lit the nocturnal sky, from an explosion that consumed the eastern horizon. A swift warm wind kicked up the loose dirt toward them, lightly scouring their bodies and cloaking the silent explosion in a misty fog.

“What the...”

“Wouldn’t you know it, all the warlords wanted the trigger so bad they were willing to fight for it. So I gave it to them. The heartless bastards needed a present.”

“You...” Ter quivered in the realization of what happened.

“...the amazing Eddie Green, used the weapon,” Eddie finished.

Ter Adon shook his head, angrily. “You...”

“Gave us a new beginning,” Karie said, laying a hand on Ter’s trembling shoulder.

Eddie bounced on the balls of his feet, and closed his eyes. He rode the gentle shock waves, finally feeling for the peace for the first time in his life. It was a euphorically, warm feeling in his heart that he couldn’t put into words. He opened his eyes briefly, and noticed that Karie was imitating him. Ter Adon’s jaw was dropped in shock. Ter slowly closed his mouth, as an infectious, satisfying grin shaped formed on his lips. Tears slowly feel down his ruby cheek, as he was caught up in the moment. Eddie closed his eyes, and let the waves take him over again. He wasn’t about to let the kid see him cry.

Karie chewed on her bottom lip, until she screwed up the courage to ask, “Eddie. Do you mind if I ask what you did to get here?”

“Naw, it would ruin our story,” Eddie said teasingly. *And probably our ...friendship, he thought.*

“Eddie, you’re...,” Karie started.

“Damn sexy. I want you more than I have ever wanted in a man,” Eddie finished.

“I was going to say that you’re my kinda hero. But then you had to go and ruin the moment, didn’t you.”

Eddie and Karie looked deeply into each other’s moist eyes. And then they started to laugh.

EPILOUGE

Green had quickly fallen asleep, a task he was finding more difficult to do lately, and dreamed of a brilliant white light that illuminated the nocturnal sky, changing it into morning. The very twin moons and stars were blanketed in mists of sparkling white rays. Eddie stumbled outside of a tent that Merrick had lent to him, and wiped the sleepers from his bloodshot eyes. *Doesn't this bloody place ever have normal weather? Eddie thought.*

Merrick's people had swarmed on onto the nearby mountainside, their hands, covering their disbelieving eyes. Merrick's kindred began to take on a stunning bronze hue, and the world surrounding Eddie seemed somehow more alive and vibrant. Green could easily imagine, if he was so inclined, that for the very first time he was seeing a

reality beyond reality, glimpsing everyone's soul as their temporal bodies were filtered by the powerful white light.

In Eddie's dream this odd event would end up lasting for three solid days and nights. During those white nights no one slept, ate or took part in so-called normal activities. For those nights men could run and not be weary, feeling more in harmony with their surrounding and their fellow man. And then just as quickly as the event came, it disappeared.

Eddie casually strolled into a Judgment 31 cubicle a few days after his weird dream, well aware of the fact that he was being watched by the town's people, and slumped into well-used chair. He had to admit, that he enjoyed the shocked expressions on everyone's faces. No one on this world, would have ever guessed that Eddie Green would go near Judgment. As soon as Eddie was settled in his chair, a wave of depression settled on his shoulders, like dark gray clouds over a funeral.

"Eddie?" Judgment 31 asked with obvious concern.

"I didn't think I would ever be back here. Would you like to know what I have been thinking? I'm a bad guy, you know. I shouldn't be here. God shouldn't have left me here."

Judgment quietly contemplated Eddie's pious thought. "Survivor's guilt. Do you think you should have died with the others? That you deserved the same fate. There can be another reason why you survived. If you believe in God..."

"I'm not sure that I do. I want to believe, but I'm so tired."

“I seem to recall that your mind scan showed that you believed in a God, whenever it suited your purposes. Calling upon him whenever you needed help, no matter how self-serving your request was.”

“Judge. Do you believe in God?”

“I’m a computer Eddie. Yes, I am a thinking, emotional computer, but I don’t fall for the delusion that I have a soul. But to answer your question more directly...I believe there is something beyond the physical. If you could see all the strange twists and trends that I observe everyday in people’s lives, I think you might believe...”

“In a God,” Eddie finished.

“More precisely. An order to things. You will have to decide someday that either human are just merely creatures destined to follow an elaborate, innate path, or that there is something beyond human perception out there helping. It seems to me that there are too many ways that everything can go wrong, and they just don’t. Until now.”

“Now?”

“Pangea has ceased to exist a few days ago. One moment it was there, and the next it was simply gone like it never existed. No reasonable explanation is forthcoming.”

Eddie bolted up. “A planet can’t just simply disappear. There has to be reason,” Eddie implored. Tears streaked his haunted eyes. “Leis...”

“ Never made it home. I’m trying to find the military transport vessel as we speak.”

“ Pangea. Can’t believe it is really just gone?”

“There was a sudden mass exodus from the planet’s surface by people that were suspected of crimes. And then nothing. A part of me seemed to lose cohesion. I still feel

that way. Like there is a part of me that is out there. Beyond. I don't know. Your survival came at a pivotal time. I need your help."

"Better to ask Karie and her paladin order?" *You can't possibly want a rouge like me, thought Eddie.*

.....
 "I thought about them. Seriously thought about them. But for some reason, that I'm not entirely sure about, I want you."

"Keeping your friends close, and your enemies closer," Eddie dumbly replied.

"I was never your enemy. And I'll never will be. I'll be going for a while."

Eddie's face screwed up in confusion. "A sabbatical."

"I have to learn what happened to Pangea. I will never be complete without knowing. But first I have another matter to attend to. Palen was part of the conspiracy that brought Leis here. She needs to be taught a very important lesson."

"Promise me you'll find Leis."

"I will," Judgment said, with sudden emotional compassion. "But you need to help me."

"And what am I suppose to do."

"What is right. Soule needs you for now. Maybe she will always need you. Soule is your home now. Take care of her."

Eddie looked vacantly outside of Judgment's opening, to the volatile crimson clouds on the Soule's horizon. *Home?* Eddie stifled his feelings. *Have I finally found my home?*

THE END

