

The Smell of Smoke

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James flicked the end of his cigarette. The wind caught the ash and it seemed to rise forever away from the balcony. He pinched the cigarette out and walked back into the tenth floor apartment. As he neared the kitchen the smell of pork and vegetables overwhelmed him. He turned off the burners and placed food on his plate. The robots did a good job of harvesting food for him. They slaughtered the animals, washed the meat and vegetables. All that was left was cooking. It became ritual to get the food they left and cook a delicious dinner. He moved the pictures of the Scafins on the oak coffee table. The closest picture was of the couple, perhaps not much older than James, on some beach lounging in the sun. He slid the picture out of his view.

“Computer, play the next movie in queue.” James said as he picked up his fork.

James watched the hologram screen flicker on. It played previews of movies that never would be finished. Dinner and a movie was James’ only great joy. He got involved in the stories of the characters. He never had any interesting in acting himself, but loved watching others. James had nearly finished his dinner when he heard a clacking sound. James looked out the open door to the bright hallway. He heard the sound of the movie. It was steady, like a slow walk. James paused it and rose from the couch. He looked left and right for a robot in need of repairs. He checked his watch. The robots all stopped cleaning at seven. Every robot in the city that cleaned had been still for over an hour. James stepped into the hallway. The other apartments’ doors were closed. James walked to the railing. He leaned over to see other floors. They were empty as well. The sound did not appear to be an echo. It had come from his floor, the tenth floor, the highest in the building. He returned to the apartment. He closed the door and locked it. On the other side he could hear the sign reading “Scafin” rock back and forth. It came to rest. James

pressed his ear to the door. Nothing. The sound had stopped ever since James stepped outside the apartment. James plopped back on the couch. The movie started back at his request.

It's sad to see a man who falls this low.

James heard the deep voice close by. He looked around. First his left, then quick to the right. Nothing. *Maybe it was sound from the movie.* James often heard things in the absence of people. He had not seen a person in years. James resigned it to the supernatural something yet to be proved or disproved even in the twenty-ninth century.

As a kid he thought he saw ghosts. As an adult they waned in frequency. He had lived in this empty city for a year after being frozen and caught glimpses of things. Images, people, soft voices bothered him from time to time. James ignored it. It was the only thing he could do. The movie ended and James sat in the light of the blue screen for nearly an hour with his head lowered.

A man without motivation is weak. He cannot survive if he cannot find a reason to do so. The absence of motivation is true death, a voice spoke.

“When there is no motivation around it’s kinda pointless,” James replied. He tilted his head up. Again he checked his left and right.

“I’m here.” Something grabbed his left shoulder from behind.

“What the hell?” James shouted as he sprang from the couch. He drew his pistol from its holster.

James looked at the skeleton. It wore a fine, pitch black suit with few defining lines. The lack of lines made it seem like more than one piece of cloth. Doctors and business men wear similar suits. It had a single column of gold buttons rising to a stiff

collar that resembled a cuff. The skeleton's bones were white as snow, but where its eyes and nose were, or had been, were pitch black as well.

“What am I? That depends on the asker,” it said. “For you James Anderson, we are companions brought forward through your needy tendencies.”

“What do you mean ‘we’?” James aimed the pistol at its head.

“My wife stands next to you,” the skeleton said.

James turned to see a second skeleton. She wore a white top similar to the first but a knee length white skirt to match. She brushed her blonde hair from her face. He backed away from the female skeleton with the pistol aimed at her head.

“I won't hurt you,” she said.

James' hands shook. His aiming darted between the two skeletons unsure of which one would move first. The first skeleton dressed in black took a step forward. James fired. The bullet struck the white skull. The fragments flew like a flock of birds spiraling around each other. The skeleton screamed and became distorted. In its final scream it became a twisted mangle of clothing before it disintegrated.

“How cruel. Faking a death like that to upset someone's emotions,” the female skeleton said. James aimed the pistol at her.

James glanced back to where the skeleton stood. A figure on the couch caught his eye. James jumped back as the skeleton had reappeared unharmed. The skeleton lounged. It chuckled, but its jaw did not clatter.

“Cruelty? What is cruel? Is it cruel to deceive an attacker? Or is it cruel to shoot a man in his own house? Is it crueler still to invade another's home and deny his existence before attacking?” the male skeleton said.

“This isn’t your house,” James said firmly.

“Isn’t it? Do you not know? We, James, are Henry and Marie Scafin. We are the owners of this abode you have taken refuge in,” Henry said.

“That’s just—No. That’s doesn’t make sense. You’re lying. I—” James said. He backed against the far wall. His only escape was out the living room window with no balcony to a street ten stories below.

“In your loneliness you called to us,” Marie Scafin said. She stepped towards James. “You called and called like a lost child. We have arrived to ease your mind.”

“You call this easing my mind? You’re talking skeletons. This isn’t possible! There is nothing holding you together. The Scafins are dead. I saw their bodies. The robots removed them. I have to be imagining this,” James said. He pressed himself against the wall. He felt like running, but he was cornered. Every time he closed his eyes he saw the bodies of the dead. James used the robots to clean the streets and buildings of the remains. There were millions in this city alone. They all died from the flu that spread from planet to planet and colony to colony. It did not matter where the human race was, the flu found them.

“We never said we were alive. We are not your imagination. True, our bodies are gone, but would you be able to focus if we appeared in flesh and skin? No. You cannot and could not. That would launch you into true madness,” Henry Scafin said as he rose from the couch. “What holds us together are our wills. I do not simply mean us the Scafins’ wills alone, but yours as well. Like my wife said. You called to us and we have come.”

James began to move to his left with his back to the wall. The Scafins moved as well. His targets were separated by a greater distance, which made keeping the gun trained on both of them difficult.

“Why should I believe that? Why should I believe that you aren’t my imagination?” James said. He shook as he aimed.

“You have given yourself that answer already James,” Marie Scafin said and folded her arms. “Didn’t you first think we were ghosts? Does that not provide an answer? Think about all the years before this one. There are things that happened to you that could not be explained. Why can’t we exist for your purposes? You do not deny or confirm the existences of the supernatural, but rely on it to escape your lack of knowledge. This time it is accurate. We are ghosts. We are not here to haunt, terrorize or posses you.”

“I, however, am here for those very reasons,” Henry Scafin laughed.

Chapter Two – The Man from Arcturus

Dan Hilger felt pain on the bridge of his nose. The pain grew to encompass his entire skull and part of his upper spine. He pressed his middle finger and thumb on either side of his nose and the index finger right on the cartilage. He maintained pressure for two minutes before he vocalized his aggravation in a grunt.

“Memory Flood?” Neila was at Dan’s side. “Did you take your medicine?”

“Every damn day. Every damn day with mild help,” Dan’s normally good posture began to fall. “Why is there pain with this?”

“Do you want me to call off the meeting?” Neila opened her folder. The screen flickered several times. She held her pen ready to change and announce anything.

“Well?”

“No. It’s nothing. There are things that I need to do at this meeting. It’ll go away. The doctors said that this will be gone in a month. It’s nothing.”

The elevator came to its stop. Dan leapt out with Neila at his heels recording the time at which he felt his pain. He turned down the halls as if nothing happened, that there was no pain, no irritation. A few people waited in the halls for the two. A small man holding several hologram cards approached Dan.

“President Hilger,” the man cleared his throat, “Here is the data on the engineers and their progress. We expect the city will be completely ready in a few days. No doubt the others will be calling for their services. Especially Reynolds,” the man bowed and left the two.

“General Hilger,” a soldier saluted as he spoke.

“He’s President Hilger now. We are no longer in the Arcturus system or soldiers of that military, address him properly,” Neila corrected.

“Yes, Lieutenant Fosten,” he replied.

“Secretary Fosten,” Dan corrected the man.

“Sorry,” the man fumbled with a hologram card. “This is recorded marauder activity. They have broken the treaty and began attacking civilians around the major cities. They have also attacked several military vehicles carrying supplies. Reports have swarmed in about an increase in both small town and major city areas on marauders. Bauxite activity has increased as well. We cannot locate them for sure, but we are certain there are small cells attacking both the military and marauders. If we do not act soon they will lose faith in our abilities and the numbers for the opposition will grow.” The man folded his arms.

“Thank you Sergeant Major,” Dan said. His face became stern. Neila sensed the struggle with the pain before Dan continued. “Send several squads on the marauder situation. Stomp them into line. We have an agreement. If they break it again we’ll simply annihilate them completely.” Dan took another step forward.

“Sir, here are the supply reports from districts A through J. All districts show a surplus. What are your orders,” s female soldier asked. She stood taller than Neila but shorter than Dan.

“Place the surplus in containers that can be moved in a moments notice. We need quick action when it comes to supplies.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Sir!” She was gone in a second, like all the others.

Neila huffed as Dan cleared his throat with relief. The two regained their rhythm and came to the meeting room. Three guards were on either side armed with both rifles and a short sword. Dan paused at the doors.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Neila said. She rubbed his back.

“Yeah, it’ll pass. It always does,” Dan massaged his temples. Images flashed in his mind of things he had forgotten. Missions, people, names all came back to him in a rush. There was no pause in the images until the pain subsided. Without the medicine curbing the pain and frequency of the memories Dan would be worse than a migraine victim. He had witnessed others in his predicament curled into balls on the floor yelling for aid or at the images they saw. He saw some reenacting the memories. He refused to look so weak. He pushed forward, taking the medicine and completing his duties. He would not fall prey to the pain caused by being cryogenically frozen ten or more times.

“How about I cook dinner tonight?” Neila grabbed his elbow. “Steak, just like our first date.”

Dan looked at Neila. They had been married for a few years, but he was amazed when she responded to him like that. He had seen her in battle. She was ferocious. At times like this he could see nothing but kindness in her brown eyes.

“That would be lovely,” Dan put on his glasses. “Let’s go forward.”

A guard from within the room opened the doors. Dan and Neila entered the doors as if it were any other day. Dan sat down while Neila remained on his left standing. All of the elected officials had at least one guard.

“Let’s start the meeting of the Allied Territories,” Dan said. “Germaine you have the floor from last meeting.”

“We need more supplies for our smaller cities. Everyone in our territory is barely getting by. Food is the main concern followed by clothing and water,” Germaine stopped as Dan’s hand rose.

“Azure has a surplus. I’ll directly give you some of our supplies. In fact I will redirect fifty percent of our surplus now,” Dan looked to a woman much older than himself. She was worn by time and the struggles of the last twenty years. He listened to Neila make the orders in her computer pad. When Neila stopped, Dan cleared his throat, “Sarah, the floor is yours.”

“We need more troops. On my trip I saw a plethora of troops in Azure. Marauders are making things difficult. I understand it is a problem in every entity of A.T. but we cannot even begin to quell the problem. We lose ten percent of goods every month. Luckily, we have been able to sustain that low of a percentage, but using decoys has become costly. We cannot maintain our current operation situation. Helios needs troops,” Sarah pounded the table.

The room became quiet. Dan’s posture broke and he leaned forward. He placed his right elbow on the table. Next, he brought his head to the palm of his hand covering his mouth. Dan began to relax. Everyone sat up as he did this. In the last couple of months he had slackened in his nature. At times he could be serious and others lax and cool. Dan stared at Sarah for a little longer before his index finger tapped on his face.

“What says everyone else?” Dan sat up, “We agreed four years ago that Haven was the capital of the Allied Territories. We agreed that Azure, as the home territory needed to be secure. With the current flux of Bauxite making their way from Jupiter to Earth, invading us and disturbing things, Azure needs to be safe. What should be done?”

Silence again entered the room. It took a minute for someone to clear their throat. Kingston started to open his mouth, but was shot down by a fierce stare from Neila. Reynolds, however, ignored Neila's piercing eyes.

"Many of the marauders are backed by Bauxite. We should infiltrate those marauders and see what the situation is. If they have a link to Bauxite we study them longer. If not, we crush them absolutely. There is no room for that attitude in this world," Reynolds rocked in his chair.

"I'll get a squad on it Sarah. This squad will do just as Reynolds suggested," Dan turned to Reynolds. "I suppose you spoke up to secure your turn?"

"Since we are on the topic of turns, we need engineers and such to fix Maraks energy problems. Right now they all seem to be Azure, specifically Haven. We have been working at half capacity for a little over year now. We need—"

"We cannot spare any at this time," Nelia said.

"Don't give me that. Don't chime in just because you are here. You are only an assistant Neila and—"

"Reynolds," Dan said softly. Dan and Reynolds eyes met. Dan had caught him in a stern, death-like stare. "We are trying our best. Right now Haven and many other cities close to its size in Azure are in trouble. They are working at less than half."

"The engineers have been in Azure for too long," Reynolds coughed. "We need more help. Every thing is locked in your territory trying to make things right here. What about the rest of us? We're citizens too. I've got people complaining of brownouts." Reynolds words were solid, but his breath lacked strength. He forced himself to go forward even as each suck of oxygen choked him.

“Reynolds, I will do this. I will send three of our top engineers to examine each of the reactors.”

“That’s not enough. We need more.”

“These people are the best. They can assess a problem in a few hours. They are adequate.”

“No. I want more.”

“Fine. I’ll send fifteen. The three top people will each have four others to help them. I doubt they will move as efficiently as the three alone, but I am getting tired of this,” Dan leaned back in his chair, “Any other things or is everyone satisfied?” Dan watched hands and heads signal yes. “Meeting adjourned.”

The soldiers opened the doors. The eighteen representatives and their escorts left. Neila watched Dan as he listened to the grumbling representatives enter elevators. Dan remained in his chair for a time not saying a word. He sighed every few minutes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He leaned back in the chair and looked up to Neila.

“Did you hear them? Their thoughts?” Dan asked.

“Yes. Their attempts to hide them are weak. Some despise you completely. They don’t ask for their needs for fear of being denied. We could simply give them the excess if you desire. We know what they want it any way.” Neila reached down and rubbed his temples.

“I just wanted to check on what they were thinking is all. This headache is driving me crazy, but I can hear their voices. They even tried to pry into my mind a few times. Reynolds nearly killed himself with an attempt. Telepathy can be fun. Do you remember from out in the other systems?” Dan said.

“Yes. Mainly from when I was a low ranking soldier.”

“Aren’t you glad you came under my command? You have risen to power like me.” Dan watched Neila sit on the conference table. She crossed her legs.

“Without doubt. May I ask what memory came back to you? Does it really hurt to feel a memory come back that strong?”

“The Memory Flood. Yes, it hurts to have something forced like that...” Dan stopped. He moved towards Neila. He let a hand rest on her thigh at the edge of skirt before he moved slowly up. Dan felt the small knife she kept on her outer thigh. She was always prepared. He pulled his hand back and rested his head on her lap. “The memory itself was...strange. It was about someone, or rather our history together. All of it surged into my mind, but most importantly the last day we saw each other.”

Dan Hilger watched several soldiers perform rigorous fitness tests. He compared their previous results with the new data. Many of the soldiers’ abilities had doubled or tripled. Strength, speed, problem solving, telepathy and even mild telekinesis had increased. Soldiers who could barely have moved pencils with their minds could now push close to hundred pounds. One soldier’s potential had sky rocketed. Many of the tests before rated him a “C” level, but now he could easily surpass an “A” level. Dan thought he could possibly reach Nexus in psychic abilities. The soldier, unfortunately, was resistant and had no drive to become better because he was already “the best.” Dan also considered those who had different reactions. Their abilities increased as well, but their potential to improve was zero. Many of them became psychotic or refused to take orders. They acted like their predecessors Nexus and Second Nexus. They were cold and solid in

their varied beliefs. A few wanted to rule the universe, while others wanted to destroy every person in it.

Dan watched these men and women as well. He had become head of the Nexus Project. These soldiers and many others across the galaxy had become his responsibility. Dan had no use for the insane infected. He rounded up an execution squad. They were the most loyal superhuman combatants left. The others had been infected with a rare flu and the genes that made them super human became something different. It spread to squads and either drove the individuals insane or increased their individual powers immensely. The same soldier the flu mutated in was the one whose potential now seemed like a threat. Dan decided to eliminate the insane. The crazy ones were somehow not contagious and could be disposed of with ease. With the soldiers he went to each cell and shot them. Some regenerated if they had not been shot in the heart. Dan would walk up to these individuals as they healed and finish them off with his own fifty caliber pistol. Destruction of the brain was the only sure way to kill many of them. A very few had to be burned after being shot twice.

Once this was finished Dan rounded up the non-insane infected soldiers. They, the twenty-nine of them that remained, stood around in an empty room awaiting orders. Dan was about to flip the blinds when a young female soldier stopped him. She handed him a handkerchief.

“Thanks, Neila,” Dan whipped away blood that had landed on his face. He made himself as presentable as he could. He opened the blinds, “Soldiers of Arcturus, the most dedicated soldiers of our military.” Dan paused for a few shouts. “The flu you have been infected with has been essentially altered in your bodies. It will no longer affect you.

However, it can affect others. The genes in your bodies have changed as well. We are attempting to isolate those new genes that allowed you to reach new heights. I would like to apologize that we cannot let you run freely. We have to contain you now. You will now be put to sleep and frozen in cryogenic tubes for research until we can isolate the genes and flu.”

The soldiers shouted words of hate. A few tried to punch and kick down doors. One banged on the glass that separated them. The sleeping gas pumped steadily into the room regardless of the fact. Everyone succumbed in a few minutes the one Dan had already identified as being superior to the others. James Anderson, the soldier whose potential and strength excelled everyone else, he continued to bang on the glass. Everyone around him fell asleep in three minutes.

“You said I would get to work on Jahsin as a mechanic,” James Anderson said. “You told me to join your program and you could get me on the ship. All I want to do is be a mechanic on that ship. I didn’t want to fight pirates or anyone else. You lied, you bastard! It’s the only reason I joined the military and you stole it from me. Let me out so I can kick your ass.” James shouted as he pounded on the glass.

It took a total of five minutes for James to drop to one knee. Another four minutes later James lay on the floor asleep.

“Let’s begin the next chapter of this project and rewrite history.” Dan looked to his soldiers.

Dan looked to Neila. She remembered the day they froze and killed the test soldiers. They sat in silence for minutes before Dan rubbed his forehead.

“The only reason I remembered is because I received a report that James Anderson’s cryo-number has been found. He’s actually on Earth and has been awoken. With any luck we’ll find him even if he’s been awake for eight months wandering around.” Dan smiled at Neila. “Red is also on the move. I want you to watch over him. Bring a strong squad that he won’t challenge. One-on-one neither of us are a match for him. Also be careful Second Nexus has apparently made it to Earth as well. It seems like we’re all gathering now.”

“Gathering or pulled to each other?”

Dan barked out a short laugh. “Pulled. Like damn moths.” Dan thought about his last memory of James. “Was it a mistake to mess with that flu and James’ DNA? Should I have just killed everyone? We lost 214 trillion people after it was said and done.”

“You have become a little unstable. I told you being frozen so much was dangerous. The doctors say you’ll stabilize out once the Memory Flood is gone. It wasn’t your fault anyway,” Neila walked up to Dan. “You were stripped of your power and your replacements began working on the flu. You were only an instructor. They brought the near extinction of our race upon us. Once we have Red and James things will start over. They are already starting now,” Neila kissed Dan’s forehead. “I’ll bring them in and kill Second Nexus. There won’t be any blemishes on our records now.”

Chapter Three – The Man That Does Not Sleep

Max and Sara forced Red to lie down in the back seat of the hover car. Red tried to resist, but he was too weak. He bled from every major limb and had several gunshot wounds. Sara punched Red.

“Lay still! We are trying to help you,” Sara said.

Even in the moonlight Red could see Sara’s rosy cheeks and pale skin. He tried to sit up again.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” Max said. He unpackaged another set of gauze. “Something is wrong with your regeneration. And you seem incapable of hearing us telepathically. It’s like you’re getting interference or something. Hold still dammit!” Max shoved Red down.

“It’s not a big deal,” Red said. He looked up at the big crescent moon that lit the empty desert.

“You fell from a cliff after being shot by that bitch Neila,” Sara said as she wrapped tape around a loose bandage. “You got lucky she didn’t kill you with that fifty caliber rifle.

It had been an hour ago but Red remembered the pain of the breaking bones. They jutted out at strange angles before his body pulled them correctly. The knitting of his bones felt like someone had jabbed a knife into them over and over. He used to be able to regenerate with ease. In the last week his whole body seemed out of place.

“I can’t die like that anyways,” Red huffed. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal,” Sara said. “Even after we got away your injuries opened back up. You’re lucky the bleeding has just stopped.”

“C’mon now it’s not that big of a deal. I’ll recover. I don’t know what’s happening with my body or power, but I can handle it.”

“Whatever.” Max taped the last gauze wrap. “Just get some rest while we drive to town. We have to be careful now and take the long way back.”

Red closed his eyes. He and the Bauxite soldiers were running through the trees and dodging the gunfire of Neila’s troops. When they had come to an embankment Neila managed to land an accurate shot to his right lung. The fifty caliber round had made Red think of how it must feel to be hit by a truck. He went tumbling down the slope, unable to slow himself. Each time Red extended a limb to ease his descent he felt the burning of torn muscles and nausea from breaking bones. Red stopped and pain overtook his senses. He looked at his twisted arm. He watched his body straighten itself. His flesh gave the sensation of a slow crawl as it pulled his bones together. Red opened his eyes. He didn’t need sleep. The itching of slow healing wounds would have kept him awake.

The ride to town took six hours. Red knew they started in Ouachita National Forest and ended somewhere in the Mojave Desert. The closest reference was a digital map Red found showing the lay of the land in 2243. The states borders no longer existed, like many of the cities marked on the map. Red edited the cities and added towns as necessary. He added a town called Overton located in what used to be Nevada that they were entering.

Red stepped out of the hover vehicle and was greeted by townspeople, daylight and an intense, dry heat. The citizens gave aid where it was needed and took in the soldiers. Many were groggy from sleep. Red, however, did not require sleep; he only needed to sit and eat.

“Dismantle the cars. We left no trace of where we traveled, but Neila and Dan aren’t idiots. We need to rest right now. Don’t act like you are doing anything abnormal.” Blood in Red’s legs flowed upward and gave him the sensation of being light. He walked into a house with a sign reading “A. Dutta.” After he made himself a plate of food he sat with his back to a table. He decided to rest in front of a window.

Red watched people outside the house for hours. He ate very little, talked even less, and moved no more than a foot every hour. The only visitor he recognized on any level was Amita; it was her house that Red stayed in. She came from an Indian colony. Even though India, as a country, had changed or ceased to exist like all the others. Colonies aligned themselves with these old nations without any second thought. Her colony had been peaceful and lived within an area called The Ring. Several years after the virus had been cured her parents moved her from the colony to Earth through the rallying cry of Dan Hilger to band together. She was intelligent and determined. When Amita walked in Red looked at her as if the sun had appeared for the first time.

“Do I always scare you like that?” she said.

“It’s more like I over sense you. Your thoughts are so different from the others. I filter all the nonsense out, but when you walk in it’s like someone is screaming at me. Your will can’t be ignored.”

“You’re really nice to me for someone who everyone calls a grouch.” Amita sat next to Red. “I’ve always wondered,” Amita smiled, “your name comes from the color of your hair right?”

“Hm?” Red stroked his hair. “Yeah. I was called Red Reid because of my hair. I guess it was the alliteration or something stupid like that. Then people just called me Red, because of my hair and you could drop the ‘I’ from my name and get the color.”

“That’s a little neat.”

“Not really.”

“Sure it is. I’ve never had a nickname. I’ve always been Amita. It’s like everyone is in love with saying my whole name and not fond enough to give me a nickname.”

Amita folded her arms and looked out the window. “Everyone sees me simply as I am.”

“I think it’s the way you talk and act. It’s almost childish, but to me I see an understanding that differs from everyone else. Like how you thought of my over sensing you as a compliment. Most people would have stopped at the screaming part and thought I meant yelling in anger or something. They would have interpreted me as thinking of them as loud and obnoxious. You took it for a description.”

“Well, I don’t speak loudly, but I do like to be heard.”

“Speaking of hearing, do you hear that?”

The two listened as hover vehicles approached. They whirled overhead in circles. They zipped by slower and lower by the second. Amita stepped toward the door and mouthed “one minute” to Red. She slammed the door and Red lowered the blinds. A soldier jumped from a hover car above Red’s view. He landed a few feet from Amita who crossed her arms.

“Can I help you?”

“We’re looking for this man.” The soldier handed her a holo plate. It projected

Red's face, but no information like other "Wanted" holo plates. "He's a criminal of the highest level. He's beyond 'A' class and highly violent."

"I saw him earlier today. He and a group left their hover vehicles with us. We dismantled them for the parts and batteries for our harvesting machines. They left, I think, west or south. It was so early today. Most of the town wasn't even awake."

Amita's voice was soft and smooth. She never fumbled a word and maintained a playful tone. "They were armed like marauders, but they didn't shoot first, so we let them in. If we knew they were criminals we would have killed them ourselves."

"They are extremely dangerous. It's best that you let them go. We will investigate their vehicles now. We also ask that all citizens enter the streets so that we can search the buildings."

At this an old man huffed. He reached behind his chair to reveal a large bell. He struck the bell several times. People poured from the buildings, coming to the sound of the bell. Those in the fields ran to the old man. Within a minute everyone in the town came forward. The Bauxite soldiers, dressed in civilian clothing, appeared in the streets as well. Red remained seated. The leader of the soldiers ordered a search. More soldiers leapt from their hover cars. Their numbers nearly equaled the town members. Red tapped into a man's mind outside. The man heard Red telepathically and followed his direction. The man looked up at the hover cars as they appeared from thin air. He knew they were all going out to use cloaking devices. Slowly, he counted the soldiers and vehicles as the man examined the scene. Seventy-five and thirty respectively. Red exited the man's mind and shifted in his seat. A soldier pushed open the door. The man paused as they locked eyes. Red entered the man's mind. He saw the man's childhood in the wake of the virus.

There was Neila taking him in and training him under Dan's instruction. Red got a glimpse of the force Dan had built thus far. He ignored all of this after a few seconds and focused on his task. In seconds, Red altered the man's mind to become invisible to the soldier. The soldier stooped lower and inspected the house. As the man examined each room, he never moved an inch. The soldier stepped outside and gave an all clear. The soldiers completed their search in twenty-two minutes. A woman approached Amita. She took off her helmet. Neila's presence towered over Amita's thin form.

"I appreciate your cooperation. We have also received your request for more ammo and will deliver. As payment next month we expect the usual grains and such."

"Of course we can oblige that now. Those criminals left us a great deal of materials to repair our machines. We should be ahead of schedule once we have eight working machine instead of two. Even with people in the fields we can only do so much."

"We all suffer from a lack of numbers these days. We will also cleanse the area of any marauders we see. Until next month." Neila snapped the helmet back on her head. The soldiers left in half the time they arrived.

Amita, as well as several others, stumbled under the absence of Neila's pressure. Neila probed their minds the entire time. She had brought several to the brink of death. They remained upright through their wills and pride. Red stepped to the doorway, but remained in the shadow.

"This is as close as I can get. If light touches me they'll know I'm here through their devices. I can't give them a clear image to hone in on with their satellites and telescopes. We'll leave in three days. I'm sure she's circling the town waiting for us to

make a move, but she has to move on soon. They have mobilized hundreds to look for us, judging from this one appearance. I'm sorry you all had to suffer for this."

"It's not like that," Amita said. "We want to be free from Dan. It's not your fault."

"It *is* my fault." Red vanished from the doorway.

Red pulled the hood over his head. Amita entered the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water. Red removed the hood and looked at her. She gasped.

"Am I going to have to call you Black now?" Amita ran her fingers through Red's dyed hair.

"No," Red laughed. "I'm going to go by Samuel. It was my maternal grandfather's name. I can't let people know who I am. Something as simple as changing my name and hair will help."

"You still don't have to go," Amita said. Her eyes wandered around the room. She was unable to meet Red's stare.

"This is the only way. There's someone I want to find. He just appeared on my radar. My psyche detection is the best if a person isn't trying to conceal themselves. It's time for us to go."

"I still don't think it's your fault," Amita said. "We are part of Bauxite too. As Bauxite members we have to protect our people. We've undergone rigorous mental training to shield our minds to be aid for everyone else. All of us here want to stop Dan from controlling us. If things stay as they are, we will have to leave for Jupiter to be safe. Bauxite exists to stop dictators and tyrannical rule. We're doing this because we want not to because you forced us to."

“I can understand that, but I have a history with Dan and Neila that exists before you were born. I let things get too complicated then and they spiraled away from me.”

“But is it your fault Dan has risen to power now? I’ll admit the man can sweet talk people, but it’s not like you pushed him forward.”

“It was my absence that all of this has—”

“That is not important. We’re here to stop them now and that is all that matters,” Amita said as she folded her arms. Red avoided her stern gaze as it worked its way through his body.

“Donovan may do something stupid. I can sense it even though I can’t sense him,” Red said.

“Why would he do that?” Amita leaned against the counter. She tapped her foot in agitation over Red’s subject change.

“He hates them more than I do. They tried to kill him a few times. They’re the reason why he went AWOL. Eventually he convinced me to do the same. He has a calm hatred sometimes that leads him to be exceedingly bold. He will no doubt try and confront one of them head on.”

“That would be bad.”

“No, he could kill them individually as long as they haven’t gotten too strong.”

The two of them turned as the door opened. Max waved to Red.

Red and select Bauxite soldiers gathered into three hover cars. The cars were civilian type, but fitted for combat. Red jumped into the light truck hover car. Armaments and food were packed in with him and the soldiers. Very few townspeople saw the soldiers off. Once out on the land Red sensed several thoughts. A few, he noticed, were

from the town, but the others were strange. Red looked north to several dust clouds. He strained his eyes and made out a few hover vehicles.

“Marauders to the North. They’re going to cut us off at this rate. I don’t want to be slowed at the same time so keep northwest,” Red shouted into his microphone. “Sara and Max, I need you to pinpoint the person watching us. I know Neila left at least one person to watch for us. Even if we win against the marauders we can’t let the scout take pictures of us.”

The radios went silent as Sara, Max and Red concentrated on locating the scout. The marauders closed in on the group bringing the gap distance to under a mile.

“I got someone about twelve hundred meters out there.” Sara pointed with half her body out of the lead car.

“Eight hundred meters from there.” Max pointed approximately the same direction.

Red loaded a single-shot grenade launcher with a glowing blue shell. A soldier next to him glanced at the case Red pulled the shell from.

“Are you crazy? Those are micro fission shells. If they shoot us, we’re all dead. The other shells will blow up and kill us.” The soldier reached for Red. Two other Bauxite soldiers held him back.

“Then pray they don’t hit us,” Red said.

Red took aim in the direction he composed of their guesses. He fired the shot and watched it arc. The area was consumed in a flash of blue light. Red saw a man dressed in desert colored clothing escape the blast range.

“I wondered how long you waited in the Mojave desert like that. You’ve got to be hot,” Red spouted. Red picked up three of the shells in his left hand. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Red fired the next shot. The scout was faster than Red expected. Red looked at the marauders who swerved away after the second shell. Neither side fired because of Red and the distance between them. Red loaded the third shell. He waited for the scout to make a long jumping stride before he pulled the trigger. The scout vanished in the light. Red was satisfied with this conclusion. He turned to the marauders. They had entered firing range. Gun fire caused Red to duck into the bed of the truck. He heard the passenger in the cab yell. The truck lurched upward and side to side. Those in the bed of the truck knew the engine had been shot. The truck tilted with its front end pointing the ground. It rose at this angle for ten, fifteen, twenty feet before the engine stopped. Red saw everyone prepared to jump to the second car. The driver pushed the door open to move into position. The truck started to nosedive.

Chapter Four – Acquaintances

James blew smoke as Henry Scafin's long fingers plucked a piece of glass from the ground. The action sent chills down to James' toes and made his arms numb. After a full month he was not used the skeletal figures and how they interacted with the world. James increased his smoking with hope that it would relax him. Henry examined the piece of glass. After a short time he rubbed the glass' edge. He offered something to James, who frowned at the offering.

“Receive my gift so that you can gain knowledge,” Henry said.

James slowly outstretched his hand as if Henry thought of slapping it. A small black scraping fell into his palm. James held it close as if it contained some sort of magic he had to discover.

“Rubber. Someone used a heavy object with a rubber handle or rubber coated handle to destroy the glass. Once the glass was broken their desires were open to them.”

“Someone? Henry, I'm the only one in this city. There can't be anyone else. The other hospitals didn't report anyone being unfrozen. One of the robots reported this because there is no more glass to fix the window. I doubt it would have popped up otherwise,” James said. He took a final puff on his cigarette.

“Incorrect,” Henry said. He vanished from James' sight. “Consider the disarray of the store and the fact this was not reported earlier in your awakening. The robots report every issue immediately and this did not appear until this morning.” Henry reappeared inside the store.

“You know this to be true James,” Marie said. James turned to her. She pushed her curly, blonde hair back with her hand. James had a surge of nausea. It troubled him to

see a skeleton with no skin push back hair. “Nothing else makes sense,” Marie said. “You assumed that all people in the universe were dead. It was foolish to make a judgment based on a single city. Why wouldn’t there be others who survived.”

“She was being polite by using foolish,” Henry said. “It was pure ignorance. You made no attempt to contact other people. Your assumptions had no base.”

“Enough!” James said and rolled his head. “It’s evening time and I don’t want to keep worrying about this. I’ll deal with it tomorrow. I won’t do anything, but focus on this. Agreed?”

The Scafins disappeared without a second word. James hoped they would remain silent the rest of the evening. It took him seven minutes to walk from the outskirts of town to his apartment. He tried to keep his thoughts minimal to avoid the Scafins. Each step made him dizzy as his mind flashed images of broken glass. When he reached the front of the apartment complex his muscles loosened. The Scafins had yet to show themselves. James would rest easy that night.

James dreamed he was getting pricked in his foot. The pain grew and grew until he woke up. Henry Scafin pinched his foot continuously harder.

“It’s daylight. How did you not wake up?” He folded his arms. “The power goes out and you cannot even wake up without an alarm clock. This is inexcusable. Your body should be tuned like the machines you love. Your biological clock should be set at six. You are a military dog so rise when you are commanded. Lift yourself and take hold of the ground.”

“Henry, shut up.”

Henry launched into a speech as James pulled a shirt over his head. He found a pair of socks with the buzz of Henry's words in his head. Henry followed his every step and made James' heart feel weak with each cutting remark. James slammed a skillet onto the stove. Henry remained quiet for a minute. James looked up from the stove at Henry. Henry glared back with a deep rage that caused him shake and rattle his bones.

"Don't slam my skillets. The power is out anyway. Did you expect the stove to work if the gas sensors are off through the magnitude of your will?"

James groaned, "You can't be serious. Why can't you..."

James thought he had a pinch sensation in his head. It was brief but he was sure it happened. He turned towards the direction he experienced the feeling. As he focused he noticed a tug towards that direction. Marie appeared next to James.

"Someone's in the city," the three said in unison.

"I can sense them," James continued. "I haven't felt anyone's psyche in a long time, but there are people here."

James exchanged the skillet for the pistol on the coffee table. He checked the chamber and magazine before holstering it. James went to the balcony of the apartment. He did not see anyone in the streets. James looked at the far roof twenty feet away. He climbed onto the railing and glanced down at the ground. James sprang from the railing and landed on the rooftop with little effort. He jumped from each building based on his psyche detection. As he neared the location he sensed a group of minds. He heard no voices, but knew there were at least eight people. The final building he reached gave him a great vantage point. He saw two women and five men armed with assault rifles. A closer scan of their armaments showed James short swords and a few combat knives.

He scanned the other rooftops for the eighth person. James smiled as he sensed a person a few feet behind him. He leapt backwards from his crouched position. The man fired his shotgun. James arched his back and turned his jump into a flip. This put James beside the man. The man abandoned the shotgun and went hand to hand with James. From the corner of his eye, James saw Henry Scafin with folded arms. James took a strong punch to the chest. He slid backwards toward the edge. James wavered as his heel smacked the raised edge of the roof. The stop in momentum forced James to sit down. The man picked up the shotgun.

“That’s enough,” he said and aimed at James’ chest.

“It’s never enough,” James smirked.

James pushed his heels off the roof top and rolled over the edge. The man did not fire until it was too late. The ground was seven stories below James. He struggled to grab a small device from his pocket. It was silver and oval shaped with a small barbed point on its end. James fired the barb into the adjacent building. He held on tight as he began to swing. The other people fired at James as he ran across the windows supported by a tiny wire. James released the wire as he started to go upward. He glided through the air three stories from the ground. He heard the thoughts of the people around him.

Idiot. He’ll break a leg on the impact.

Bold and stupid, I’ll give him that.

James laughed at them. When his feet touched the ground he rolled and spread the force of the impact. He heard curses of his pursuers as his feet met the ground again and he began a sprint. James ducked into a store as they fired. Even in daylight the toy store was dark. It was made creepy by the outlines of clowns and large teddy bears. In the dark

the dolls were ghostly. In hiding, James scanned the dolls and saw Henry's head. He nearly yelled. Henry tilted his head to give the appearance of a smile before he faded away. The people entered the store after Henry disappeared.

"Shit, I can't sense him," a man said.

"Neither can I. Is there a back door?" a woman approached the counter.

"I don't think so," a second man said.

James chose the second man as a target. The man tried to react, but James' pistol was at his ear. James said, "I think we can come to an agreement about this situation." James saw panic in the invaders' faces. In twenty seconds James heard the increased pulses of the eight people in his ear. Their squat assault rifles and pistols were pointed at James. They wore civilian clothes similar to what James saw on desert planets. The colors were in variations of dirt and sand with cloth wrapped around their necks. "Who are you people?"

"We are residents of Morgan Hill next to Anderson Lake," a man said. He was the oldest of the eight. A scraggly graying beard jutted downward similar to the bowsprit of a large sailing ship. His face showed years of stress and weather. He, James figured, was the leader from how he took charge.

"Where's that?" James relaxed with his question.

"You can't be serious," a woman eased her aim. James saw long pieces of brown hair pulled back into her hood. Her face was smooth, but her eyes bore the same strife the old man had on his face.

"I am. I've never left this city. It was empty when I awoke."

“Awoke from what? You couldn’t have slept through everything,” the man James held began to chuckle. His short grayish white hair stiff as nails moved with his head.

“I was frozen, as far as I can tell, fifty two years ago. I don’t know what’s happened other than people died from some virus,” James tightened his grip on the man.

“Ne2H1 flu,” the leader said, “wiped out most of the human population.” He lowered his gun and took a deep breath. “I don’t think you are a threat to us. You don’t really have any idea do you? The virus took our numbers from the quintillion mark to the low billions. Once a cure was found the remaining governments called for us to fall back to the solar system. They even moved people in cryogenic sleep, which is why you’re here on Earth. The problem is the idiots failed to set up a system so that people who were unfrozen would enter into the remaining human population. I’m Richard Payton, by the way. How about you return back to the population?” Richard extended his hand.

“Wouldn’t that be great James?” Henry’s voice struck James numb. “Are you surprised we still exist despite that you have obtained human contact?” Henry said. James looked around nervously as he shook Richard’s hand. “I’m here!” Henry appeared right behind Richard.

James released Richard’s hand and backed up. Everyone looked at him as he stepped back.

“Is everything okay?” Richard asked.

“You haven’t figured it out, they cannot hear us,” Henry walked between the people.

“James, remain calm. Answer the man’s question,” Marie said. Her bony fingers dug into his muscles as she pushed him forward.

“No. Nothing is wrong. I’m just a little overwhelmed.”

“Nearly perfect word choice,” Henry laughed.

Outside the store James gained a better look at the people. Most of them appeared to be within ten years of him, or rather his appearance. They had the look of a makeshift army, with true alertness that came from experience. James watched their smooth movements and knew this new world kept them on their toes.

Richard looked around the streets. All the roadways, due to James’ work on the machines, had been wiped clean. Richard said, “How did you do all of this?”

“I’m familiar with most machines. I used to be a mechanic for the military, before I got pulled into their program.”

“Really? That’s amazing. You got all the machines working that well?” A woman looked at the streets. “You even fixed the city’s energy cores.”

“It wasn’t hard at all. I’m just the best at what I do, whatever it may be,” blood rushed to James’ cheeks.

As a woman turned James noticed a rubber handled axe on her back.

“Did you break the window on one of the stores?”

“Yes,” she said.

“I unlocked all the doors in the city,” James smiled.

“Oh well, the robots will clean it up.”

James followed the people to the edge of the city. He stopped as they walked into what looked like grasslands. His eyes followed the grasslands as they rolled upward to become hilly forests, and the hilly forest become large mountains. James felt if he took a step out of the city he was going to spontaneously combust. The outside world appeared

wilder than he was ready for. He had lived on ships and colonies most his life. He knew he could survive in the wild. It was standard military training for him to survive in any wilderness. At this moment nausea grew in his gut and told him if he stepped any further he contended with different forces. He raised his foot to the new world, but it was Henry who pushed him forward.

Chapter Five – The Likes of...

Neila watched a red-brown haired man walk toward Dan's office. He whistled down the hallways and waved to guards. He never missed a step as he fixed his gray suit. The man did not observe his surroundings or the architecture famous in the twenty-eighth century. He was focused on Dan's office. He came to the large doors and Neila felt sweat on her palms. She stopped her walk and her heart picked up pace as her breaths shortened. Her body swelled with pain followed by numbness down to the toes. The man opened the door. He showed astonishment in the form of a long whistle that echoed off the walls of Dan's immense office.

"You dress nicely to be from a small town," Dan said. "Most of the small towns in here don't bother to send representatives clean and cut like you."

"Ah, don't give me such compliments. Someone gave me this suit," the man said. He examined the marble ceiling and walls. Neila had not moved from her spot. She heard the man and Dan talk. She checked the halls, but it was only the three of them. Something seemed out of place.

"You—" Dan started. His eyesight plagued him over fifty feet. The man seemed familiar. "What's your name?"

"Oh, I guess you don't recognize me. Maybe it's the air," the man said.

At recognition of the phrase, Dan flipped over his desk. Office supplies clattered to the floor while papers rustled against each other. Dan threw the desk in a low arc at the man. The man smiled and kicked the desk, sending it flying over his head. It landed and cracked the marble floor. The two men stared at each other while Neila covered her mouth in shock of Dan's action.

“Second Nexus,” Dan said.

“I guess it would be silly to say, ‘the one and only,’ huh? But I go by Donovan now,” his smile widened.

Neila launched into action. She pulled up her short black skirt to grab the small knife from the sheath on her thigh. She charged Donovan with the blade and tried for a wounding shot to his lungs. Donovan leapt into the air to dodge her. She jumped back as he glided to the ground, relaxed and ready for the next attack.

“You’ve improved your telekinesis, but wasn’t it a waste of energy to land like that?” Neila smirked.

“I do that so naturally now it’s like breathing,” Donovan huffed. Neila felt a gust of wind around her. “It’s a shame Dan,” Donovan lowered his head, “I wanted to kill you today. Make you suffer a little without the help of someone else.”

“What makes you think you could do that?” Dan drew a boot knife strapped to his leg.

“Because of the will of many,” Donovan said.

“Bauxite,” Dan and Neila said in unison.

“Correct,” Donovan said. “They’re coming for you. They know, just like I do, what your goals are. I knew what kind of person you were since the day I was created. I could sense that power quietly seething, wanting control, and desiring more with each beat of your heart. I thought you would take over Arcturus one day. Now that is impossible and it seems you want to control the human race, amassing all the power your fingers can touch into your territory. Always thought you had grubby li’l fingers. Bauxite, my brother, and I are going to stop you. I won’t let you gain control over these people

like you exerted over me. No, I can't allow it. I've wanted to kill you for so long and wipe out so many of the Nexus Project worms that aided your rise. I'm here to do that."

Neila charged Donovan. Donovan took off towards Dan. With a deeper stance Dan readied himself for an attack. Donovan dropped and slid under him. Dan jumped in the air from fear of an assault on his feet. Neila swerved around Dan as Donovan stood up. She hooked her hand around Dan's elbow with a mighty spin she flung him toward Donovan. He attempted to kick Donovan midair. Donovan side stepped it. Neila charged right after her toss. Donovan went head to head with her for a few attacks. He sprang backwards as Dan bolted towards him. Donovan bounded off the ground. He rose to the ceiling doing a half back flip. He landed and ran upside down. Neila drew another knife and threw it. Donovan huffed and knocked it from the air. He glided to the ground and created a gap between himself and the couple. He had proved he could dodge the two.

"I didn't say I was going to continue trying to kill you today. You two have really fallen. I've gotten a good grasp telekinesis, particularly aerokinesis. You can't even keep up. I think I'll let you wallow in your failure, at least until next time."

"Are you so sure they'll be a next time?" Neila asked.

"I just wanted to be the messenger of your doom and the likes of you. It's time for me to go now. I can hear the guards you called for." Donovan watched Dan and Neila's eyes widen. "What? You didn't know I could sense that now. I told you, I've gotten better. You better show me more skill than that next time, because I won't hold back," Donovan released a smoke bomb and masked his thoughts. Guards ran in seconds later.

"The likes of us? What about the likes of him? AWOL soldiers make me sick," Dan said. "Are you okay?" Dan watched Neila nod. "I'm surprised to see you."

“I was hunting for Red, but got side tracked when I felt someone with a lot of power. Red has teamed up with Bauxite as well. They are growing in strength. If we don’t stop them they will bring chaos.”

“I know,” Dan said. Dan’s grip tightened on the knife until it snapped. “This is frustrating. Red and Donovan together are a problem. I know Red hasn’t gotten stronger, but he’s probably at least become better with his powers. Donovan is a threat. His raw power combined with his new strength might be a little much at once. We need someone who fights like him. That wildness we couldn’t control.”

“What about James? He’s the only one who could keep up with him years ago. Has the team arrived with him?”

“They haven’t reported in and it’s been over a month. The marauders agreed to leave all government vehicles alone and pay a percentage of what they make off the goods they sell. Forget about being covert this time, go there as fast as you can. If Red is looking for James he won’t get there easily. I’ve got marauders and soldiers patrolling the area. If you go personally James will come with you. With a little training I’m sure he can take on either of those two. Of all the Nexus Project soldiers, he has the greatest potential.”

Chapter Six – Under Pressure

Sweat rolled into James' eyes. He shot upward and wiped the sweat from his face with a mud covered arm. His eyes surveyed the work he had done. He was twenty full rows and seventy feet ahead of everyone else. James' trench digging skills improved every hour and left everyone to trail. Richard Payton approached to James.

“You don't have to work yourself to death with every job,” he said.

“I'm not trying to at all. I'm just—”

“‘Trying to be the best.’ Just take it easy. If these rows don't get finished today it doesn't matter. The crop we plant won't be ready until fall—”

“No, it'll be finished today. I'll make sure of it.” James said. Richard shrugged and left him.

James returned to carving the ground when he felt another presence. He looked at the woman who splattered with oil. Kayla had a temper infinitely shorter than her brunette hair. The way she held herself made James nervous. He sensed a rage from her more oppressive than the sun.

“Why did you switch the filter types in the red tractor?” Kayla asked. “The old one worked fine before and now it's exploded oil everywhere. Did you think before doing that? No, you didn't, did you?”

“I switched filters because the other type makes the engine run hot,” James replied. “Those older fission models would burn the filter after three months in any vehicle. The bigger filters work better as long as you repressure the engine's oil to be lower.”

“What? Why would I do that? The engine is supposed to work at a higher pressure,” Kayla said as she waved her wrench around.

“I can fix it easily. The engine will run for eight years longer and only need an oil change ever two,” James said.

“Fine, whatever,” Kayla turned away.

Henry Scafin appeared as James followed Kayla. He walked behind James and crept closer with each step until he was at James’ ear.

“A hero’s work is never done. You’re a real star around here. Without your immaculate skills and perfect grace this town would plunge into chaos. Doom would pour in like Biblical flood waters and erase this miserable dust stain. But you, oh you, you save them.”

“Shut up!” James grunted.

“What was that?” Kayla stopped in her tracks.

“Nothing,” James said. Chills fell down his back when he could not control his responses to the Scafins.

Kayla’s thoughts crowded James’ mind.

Why does he do that? He talks to himself all the time. He’s a freak, no two ways about it. I wish he didn’t know so much about mechanics. I wouldn’t have to be around him. He still can’t even control his powers. Breaking things unnecessarily. He’s damn near useless at times. And that smell. No one smokes cigarettes like he does. There’s what, two other people? All there is around you is the smell of smoke.

James did his best to focus on other things, but her thoughts continued to leak in. He questioned whether it was his lack of control that allowed people’s thoughts to flow

into him. Everyone around him had over twenty years to master their powers. James had gained the powers and used them for two years and was frozen. People born with the powers or given it years ago thought of him like a child.

They came to a large brown barn constructed from thin pieces of metal for siding. Inside the barn waited the red tractor along with sand worn faces. They greeted James with curses. He checked the engine for other leaks. Next, he inspected several hoses and a few wires. When all things seemed well, he replaced the filter and an oil plug along with a pressure gauge and they filled the tractor with fresh oil. The tractor started up and James adjusted a knob until the pressure was ideal. There was a soft knock inside the engine followed by the groans of mechanics.

“What the hell is that? We tried to get rid of it all day last week,” one said.

“That happens after eight hundred miles on this model,” James said. “It’s nothing bad. When I said it was good yesterday I meant you could use it. I was wondering what was going on when we had to dig the trenches today.”

Mechanic’s face lit up with surprise. James had fixed many of the problems that plagued them for months in a single day. The whole power end of the engine had been redone, hoses and wires replaced and general maintenance completed. They thought James had fooled them with claims of finishing the engine alone. They cheered and thanked him for his work. The tractor took off toward the fields.

“The people praise the hero and lift them above their shoulders,” Henry said.

James shot a glance at him. Henry laughed. “Mad are we? Do you wish to lay hands on me? Maybe, what was it that man said to you, ‘wring’ my neck? I would be elated if you

dared such an act on a specter like myself.” Henry became quiet. James felt a sharp needle pain in his skull.

“James, focus your mind. Don’t be too quick.” Marie Scafin appeared. “You can feel it, can’t you?”

“They come,” Henry and Marie said in unison.

Kayla’s radio crackled. Everyone stopped their given tasks.

“This is Zero-Five. I repeat this is Zero-Five calling Morgan Hill. We are under heavy attack from marauders. They are coming hot. We require assistance. South end of the lake. I repeat, we need—” the woman cut out.

“Zero-Five we are on our way with units now. Kayla, Roger, Nihan, and Yegor intercept them.” Richard’s voice showed no emergency.

“You were a soldier right?” Kayla asked. She tossed a rifle to James. “You can use that I hope.”

They ran out to a hover car where several others had gathered. Kayla pointed to three people. The five got into the convertible with Kayla as the driver. They zipped off towards the lake, later joined by Roger, Nihan and Yegor. The four cars drove over the water at high speeds. They saw the convoy and the trailing marauders. Kayla took the lead.

“Shoot the engines,” she said. “We’re not looking for parts or weapons. Be sure to get down when the cars explode.”

They met the convoy going the opposite direction. The marauders saw this and peeled off to avoid close range shots. Kayla spun the car around and trailed a marauder. They shot at Kayla, but the bullets glanced off the windshield. James fought the wind to

stand up. He fired several shots, but they flew wide. The others in his car followed suit only to land small shots.

“James.” Marie touched James’ shoulder. “Relax your breathing. Focus your eyes. Calm your raging heart and remember the task. Slowly now. Aim. Breathe. Fire.”

The slump of a passenger confirmed James’ shots hit the mark. The others around him began to get closer, but failed to land death blows. James fired again and the driver dropped forward. The car rose upward with its nose pointing down.

“Slow down!” James said as he aimed. He fired at the underside of the car and the resulting explosion shocked everyone.

Before James had time to celebrate a car pulled up next to them. They had followed the entire time, but failed to get within firing range. The two sides exchanged gunfire with neither landing a killing blow. James’ legs were hit several times and sent a sensation through them as if they melted.

“Jump fool,” Henry said while he supported James.

James leapt into the other car. Everyone, enemy and friend, gawked in surprise. James began to fight hand to hand as he saw fit. The marauders were like drunken fighters to a pro-boxer. James managed to grab a handgun during the struggle. He put it against one man’s chin. Once he was dispatched, the woman in the front tried to kill James. James took two shots before pulling the other passenger as a shield. The woman hesitated. She fired through the man in an attempt to kill James. James had no choice, but to fire into the back of the seat until he scored a killing shot. The man he used as a shield had slow regeneration. James recovered and tossed him out the car. The driver saw James approach. He swerved and dipped the car. James rolled around the back seat until he

grabbed onto the upholstery. The driver took the car up at an incredible speed. James nearly had a shot when the driver turned the car upside down. James managed to wrap his arm in a seat belt. He aimed at the driver.

“Focus idiot,” Henry said sitting in the back seat.

“Shut up Henry,” James yelled as he fired.

The driver went limp and the car stopped its climb. As it plummeted, it pitched and yawed. James struggled to pull himself into the driver seat. Henry sat in the front passenger seat already strapped in. James buckled in and turned the car upright. The sensors ceased their wails. James’ breaths and pulse slowed while his hands ceased trembling.

“What did Jordanna say to you once?” Henry said. “Ah, yes I remember. ‘Get your head out of your ass.’”

James remembered he was in the middle of a gun fight and that there were others. He sped up towards the marauders behind Kayla and Nihan. James looked at the digital readout on the pistol. Twenty rounds left. He caught the marauders with the least amount of people. He picked them off without any problem. The second car saw the other decrease in speed. They swerved away from James and his allies. James began to pursue when Yegor joined. This was the last car. In seconds they ended the fight. The last car tumbled before it exploded in a flash of blue light.

Richard walked up to James and punched him. James bobbed his head back in surprise.

“What the hell were you thinking jumping into a car like that?” He asked.

“I didn’t know what else to do. I just acted on instinct.”

“I’m instinct now?” Henry said. “Interesting. I’m your natural response in dire situations to save your hide. A most needed tool of survival ready to amble forward on the shaky legs of uncertainty.”

“Whatever. Did we loose anyone?” Richard said and turned to Kayla.

“Roger was shot in the base of skull near the spine. Gogan was pulled out a car. Mimi caught several shots to the chest,” Kayla reported.

“I’m sorry for your losses,” a young tan woman said. “I’d like to thank you for your help.”

“Amita, it’s not a problem like that,” Kayla said. “We need you as much as you need us. Those marauders may have attacked us in a few days anyway. I hate that both of us lost people because of this.”

“I’d like to thank you, Mister?” Amita extended her hand.

“James Anderson.” He took her hand gently. He grinned at Amita who returned a smile.

“Thank you. Thank you all,” Amita said. “Most of the people from my town aren’t fighters. We’re better as farmers and occasionally mechanics.”

“Well I’ve never been to another town,” James said, “but I bet we’re the best fighters. No one’s even worth comparing.”

“You’re pretty confident,” Amita said.

“That’s a word for it,” a man said.

“Well, at this rate we need repairs and supplies. I suppose in that time I can show you how to use the tractors we brought. There’s just the two.”

“We are glad to do anything we can for you,” Richard said.

With three working tractors the townspeople were freed from their normal chores in the fields. Work began on the shabbier houses and the brown barn. Amita’s workers aided the people of Morgan Hill as their vehicles were repaired. James was surprised they survived the fight. One car’s engine had been damaged badly enough the radiation shield had been activated. Only one radiation suit was at hand and the town had no radiation bunker. The car had to be transported miles from the town to be worked on and by a lone person. Other cars were hit in vital areas and leaked the more expensive oil for performance vehicles. The town barely had enough oil for their vehicles and Amita’s. James made a few trips to Twin San, the metropolitan area James woke up in, and restocked their supplies.

After his first trip it was decided to bring more things from the cities. On the San Francisco side they found more building materials, power cells and chargers, computer parts and other living comforts. The San Jose side had farm equipment though much smaller than their tractors. James showed them the fields and livestock maintained by the machines that stretched for miles.

The people had been given their livestock by the government. They were taught how to care for and breed them. They built a large housing area for the animals and the machines. James showed them how to maintain the machines and make sure all of them worked properly. He reset the machines to report to Morgan Hill and maintain the livestock in town. The activity of the town exploded in two weeks with a multitude of

new devices. Without him, they would have never explored the city and found its hidden resources. James enjoyed himself, but there was never complete peace.

The Scafins, particularly Henry, plagued him with chatter. They never changed their bodies from skeletons but their clothes varied. Marie often wore a long dress. Henry appeared in slacks and a pressed, long-sleeved shirt with a matching tie. James thought it odd that these ghosts changed their appearances. As the days moved forward he became tired. He dragged himself out of bed most mornings with a grunt. Henry started the day with a complaint. He complained how James never thanked Gogan for dying so he could have a house. He complained that James enjoyed Gogan's things too much. He complained that James shouldn't have given away Gogan's things. He complained that James didn't train his powers. He existed to complain.

James had not slept well. He sat at a rickety table he traded Richard for and poured a bowl of cereal. Henry sat across from James. James looked at Henry as he poured the milk. Henry wore beige slacks with a light blue shirt and a dark blue tie. Frustrated he rose from his seat and looked out the window. James began to eat when Henry whirled around and looked at him.

"I've decided," Henry said. James stared at him as if he became alien. He pointed with his skinless hand at James. His index finger was as sharp as a dagger. "I don't like your face one bit."

James leapt from the chair with no time for Henry to react. Henry jerked when James was inches from his skull. He glared at Henry for a whole minute. Henry cleared his throat.

“I’ve never seen you move that fast. If you focus your strength and movements you could break the sound barrier. With enough training you could expand—”

“Shut up Henry. I’m tired of you talking these days. I don’t need your advice, commentary or complaints. We’re not in fighting or doing anything dangerous. These are things I know how to do because I learned them on my own. Stay out of it.”

Henry leaned into James. James got the sensation of cold metal on his skin. He shivered as Henry pushed his forehead into his. James had to take a step back to hold his ground. He looked into Henry’s empty eye sockets. There was nothing, but darkness. It was as if in Henry’s skeletal frame all light ceased.

“You’re too bold. An ant can’t hope to crush a lion,” Henry said. “What strength will you force me back with? The one given to you or the beast we trained you to be? ‘Bite the hand that feeds’ will you? Does enough courage exist in that frame you call your body? A body that thrives on the benefits of luck and prosperity.”

There was a loud knock at the door. James and Henry turned toward it and then back to each other. James mouthed “I hate you” before he answered the door. Amita stood with a handful of groceries.

“There was extra from the harvest in the city. They tried to take what they needed yesterday, but it was actually too much. I’ve been giving stuff out since five this morning. You’re the last one. I’ve got all sorts of things.”

James stared back at her with red eyes. He no longer had the energy to smile or respond to someone so energetic. Marie materialized behind her. Her blond hair glistened brighter than her fleshless skull.

“Ask her in,” Marie said.

“Sorry, would you like to come in? Have you eaten yet? I can cook something with the things you brought,” James had no energy behind his words. He took the groceries from Amita. She entered the small house and examined her surroundings.

“The inside of this house is amazing!” She touched the engraved beams. “Did you do this?”

“No, Gogan was an expert carpenter. Richard Payton has the table set he made. Gogan’s the one who taught everyone to build houses. You can find his initials in many of the houses if you look hard enough.”

“So, he helped everyone build these houses?” Amita said as she ran her thin fingers over the carved leaves. “They’re much better than the ones in Overton. The government showed us how to build, but they’re nearly shacks,” Amita walked over to stove.

“Can you—” he stopped and looked at Amita.

“Sorry, I just want to know what you’re cooking. Did I invade your space?”

“No, I’m just a little...it doesn’t matter,” he said.

“You’re much different from everyone else,” Amita said. James shoulders slumped. “I can tell something is bothering you. You haven’t told anyone about any of your problems, but they see it. You’ve slowed down and respond less. It’s my ability I guess. I can sense things in people as much as I can their presence. I can see that with you there’s a split.”

“A split?” James took the eggs off the stove.

“Like there’s two souls attached to your own. They say some people can see ghosts and interact with them. With the powers we’ve got stranger things have happened.

I've always been able to sense something attached to these people. Do you have ghosts attached to you?"

James could not answer. Fear grew inside of him of the others knowing. He also wanted to scream "yes" at someone who could at least feel them. He wanted to hug Amita for acknowledging him beyond face value. His thoughts raced about what to say and how he could explain the Scafins. How it could be secret from everyone else. He was overwhelmed.

"Something is bothering you," Amita said. James realized that he embraced her and apologized. "It's okay. That's a rare thing if you have them attached to you. I've seen a couple of people like that. Don't let them use you, use them. I've seen people whose souls had weakened by ghosts. One man had six attached to him. Don't let that happen. You can send weaker ones away."

Amita stared at James. Her face had a softness to it that could not be found in Morgan Hill. She had been raised different from the people here. James sensed a strong presence within her. Her will pushed him every time she spoke.

"Amita, thanks," James said.

Henry sneered behind Amita. He looked to James as he shook. Marie appeared and grabbed Henry. She pulled Henry away from the two.

"I won't let him plague you," Marie said. The Scafins vanished. James felt at ease even though he knew the skeletal Scafins were not completely gone.

The two ate breakfast together. James explained his origins to her. Amita was shocked to know that he had abilities before the outbreak, but had very little training with specific activities. His home system, Arcturus, was a wild place filled with pirates and

thugs. He was tasked like many other soldiers with protecting various ships and stations. Amita's parents still lived on the Jupiter moons and refused to come to Earth. She was a child when the virus struck and grew used to her powers over the last twenty years. Her telekinesis was weak in weight, but precise. She levitated her plate with ease. It did not shake or jerk like James' did. He could easily lift the plate and several other things at the same time, but had little control over their balance.

Once breakfast was complete they left to see how work on the vehicles progressed. Kayla and the others had not improved much since the other day. Several of the damaged components could not be replaced. They had two working cars which included the one James snagged. James tried to help them while Amita watched. She often times was right at James' side. He whipped around to see her small frame and a smiling face. He had to remind himself that her presence was not Marie's. The mechanics worked to their limits. Many of the parts needed to be manufactured or machined. Kayla chatted about the plans for a new machine shop from the city capable of producing what they needed. Before Amita and James knew it they spent the day in the shop. James gave up on the vehicles and decided nothing more could be done. As he and Amita left the barn the ground shook. At first James thought he imagined it.

“Did you feel that?” Amita laughed. “That was an earth quake. I've never felt one before.”

James had heard of earthquakes, but never experienced them. The closest he came was a bomb that exploded next to him underground. Twin San had the latest developments in nullifying the tremors.

“That’s bad right? I mean can’t they knock buildings down?” James held on to Amita.

“Yes, but the San Andreas fault has done most of its moving. The recording system hasn’t record anything over 4.0 in a hundred years.”

“What’s that mean? That’s good right? What’s the scale like? Nothing’s going to come crashing down?” James eyebrows were nearly pinched together. Amita choked back a laugh.

“No. It’ll rattle a few things but nothing major. Do you want to see it?” she said.

“See it? Like an earthquake? Can you see them?”

“No, silly. I meant the fault line that causes the earthquakes,” Amita laughed.

James had never seen anything like the fault. In the sunset it looked strange and otherworldly. James saw a water source going through the deep fault line. He stood at the edge and peered down. The height was dizzying and caused him to back up. His nervous fingers pinched the last bit of a cigarette.

“You okay?” Amita said as she grabbed onto his shoulder.

“I never saw this from the city,” James said.

“It would be hard to see I guess,” Amita said. She pointed to the other side of the fault. “The land to the west of the city used to be south of it. Over hundreds of years it made its way up because of the fault. The San Francisco Bay used to be open to the Pacific, but once the land moved up it cut the bay off. Eventually water flowed into fault creating a saltwater lake. People changed the lake to be freshwater to benefit them. It was a mega million project.”

“You seem to know a lot,” James said.

“I read a lot of old hologram articles and old books,” Amita said.

James walked back over to the edge and sat down. His feet dangled over the fault-made lake. The setting sun warmed James’ skin in a different way than if he had been in the fields. Amita sat next to James and leaned against him. James quelled his excitement and jumpy nature.

“You smell different from everyone else. Like tobacco, not bad or anything. My dad sold tobacco in our colony. He rarely smoked, but I could smell it wherever I went. I can tell you go for the pricey cigarettes. It’s a nice smell.”

“Thank you,” James replied. He looked at Amita’s small frame. She had a strange power about her. “Amita,” James watched her arc her neck back to look at him, “Do you mind if I call you Ami?”

“Like a nickname? Like for short?” Amita became excited and pulled at his arm.

“Yes, is that a problem?”

“No.” Amita said and held James hand tight. “That would be perfect.”

The next couple of days moved too quickly for James. Amita was the only person who seemed to accept him. Even after all the work he had done, he was a strange man to Morgan Hill. The Scafins had calmed down and never showed themselves around Amita. He tried to stay with her as much as possible, but with the addition of technology from the city he was pulled in every direction. The time Amita would leave neared as the machine shop was fully operational. They completed the basic designs for parts in a day, made them the second, and finished the details the third. James had little time with Amita

during the day and night was complicated by minor problems. James made the decision to leave with Amita. It had been a full month since the group from Overton arrived and they were finally ready to leave. As they packed things into cars a dust cloud rose over the horizon. Richard had his binoculars with him.

“Marauders?” Amita asked.

“No, worse. The government,” Richard spat.

The gray vehicles bore the Allied Territories blue, white, and green seal. There were eight cars packed full with soldiers, except the last car. It was bigger than the others and only two soldiers stepped out. One opened the door for their passenger. Neila stepped out of the car in her military attire: black armor, black clothing, black weapons and a black heart.

“How in the world did you survive? I didn’t think anyone I knew was alive. Do you know anyone else who is alive?” James questioned Neila.

“James you know her?” Amita shrank from James.

“She was in a different unit, but part of the same program. She’s a tough enough fighter,” James started forward, but was cut off by Richard.

“What is it now?” Richard said. “We thought we had free range to do what we want. We can provide for ourselves these days.”

“That’s not the issue,” Neila said. “He is,” She pointed to James.

“I didn’t do anything. I got frozen years ago by you and Dan. In fact, now that I remember, I’m a little pissed about that.”

“It had to be done at that time. That’s in the past now. I need you to come with us to Haven to see Dan,” Neila said. James never saw her so serious. Something was wrong.

“You are right to not trust her,” Henry said. “If there was grass she would be a snake. I can feel her anger and rage. It’s not directed towards you, but flows in chaotic paths consuming everything in all directions. Do not go with her.”

“I’m staying here or rather I’m leaving with Ami. I don’t have any desire to go with you or see Dan. Especially not to see Dan,” James finished and Neila sucked her teeth.

“Who the hell is Ami?” Neila noticed James held Amita’s hand. “Amita? Why are you here?”

“They wanted two harvest machines so we transported them,” Amita said as she began to sweat.

“And you survived marauders from Overton?” Neila folded her arms.

“I didn’t say it was easy,” Amita struggled to say.

“Whatever. I didn’t say it was a choice James. I said ‘I need’ which means you follow suit. It’s an order.”

“This ain’t the military,” Richard stepped in. Neila dropped him with one punch. The soldiers around her aimed at him.

“This is non-negotiable,” Neila ignored Richard.

“Since when?” James said. Neila was suddenly inches from James’ face. He had to fight back his surprise. There was a rush of air and dust rose from her movements. James felt what she did, but did not understand how she could. She had pushed the air away from her to create a vacuum. She moved freely within the vacuum. If she had moved at high speed without the vacuum she would have broken the sound barrier.

“She is experienced with telekinesis,” Marie said. “If you focus hard you can see her tricks and avoid them.”

“It’s been non-negotiable since the beginning, you just never knew it,” Neila was nearly as tall as James. She was smaller in build, but her display of power made him question whether he could take her.

“What was it that Dan used to say?” James said. He took a cigarette from his pocket. He lit the cigarette close enough to Neila’s face she felt its warmth. “‘Option B is an option when there is no option A.’ Was that it? I’m starting to remember so much right now from those days. Red, Second Nexus, Dan, you and all the soldiers from Arcturus.”

“Don’t be stupid. I’ll just beat you and take you down,” Neila said.

“It can’t be helped. Here’s another quote, maybe you’ll remember it well. ‘Maybe it’s the air.’” James said.

“I’ll kill everyone here,” Neila said. James hesitated. He could not protect everyone. Eventually people would die and he would be outnumbered.

“Richard,” James sighed, “In Gogan’s cabinet is a memory card on maintenance for the machines. You can repair everything with those notes. I suppose this is the game you play now. My life for the lives of everyone else. That’s the deal.” James watched Neila nod.

“James,” Amita started, but was held back. When she turned around there was nothing there. She was sure she felt the thin fingers of someone.

“Sorry Ami,” James walked toward the vehicles. Neila snatched the cigarette from his mouth as she led him.

Chapter Seven – My Face on Your Body

Red watched Neila lead James into the rear car. James did not appear to struggle and looked as though a smile curled at the corners of his mouth. He looked from the sidecar with disgust. He tossed Max the binoculars. Max released Sara's waist. He stood up from the motorcycle and examined the scene. Neila pushed James into the car before she climbed in. They were off in seconds headed east towards Haven.

"We could've gotten here if we left Amita," Max said.

"I can't do that to her. She's risked a lot for us. With the kindness she has she could easily find more allies. We lost everyone else, but she will bring in hundreds maybe thousands," Red put his goggles back on.

"Do you still want to go into town?" Sara said.

"There are still things we can do," Red said as they drove forward.

In town feelings were mixed. Some people appreciated James for standing up. Others hated him for his exhibition of arrogance that led him to be captured. They all remarked on his mechanic skills, but thought he was strange. Red worried James had lost his mind over time. When he saw Amita she was in Gogan's house sitting by the window. In her hand was a memory card. Amita looked at Red with a small frown.

"Neila took him to Dan. I don't know what past they have, but he seemed opposed to it. He would've fought, except we held him back."

"She is a forceful person. We have to get him back. My power hasn't stabilized, but when it does," Red tighten his fists. "We can get him back and crush her and Dan."

“Have you tried sleeping?” Amita asked. “I know you’re resistant to it, but it’s worth a try.”

“I haven’t truly slept in years,” Red said.

“Gogan had some sleeping pills in his cabinet. You’d probably need to take three or four since most medicines don’t work on you. I bet if you got a good night of sleep everything would be fine.”

“I can give it a try. We all should rest now,” Red said and Amita nodded.

Red felt a strange presence in the house. He tried to ignore it, but it did not leave. He got out of the bed and walked into the kitchen. Amita was at the stove and a strange man sat at the table. He was dirty and wore desert clothing. He did not smell like the people who traversed the desert or forests often. The man scrapped eggs into his mouth with disregard for everyone else. Red sat at the table across from the man. The man looked up and then quickly down at the food.

“You’re face is peeling,” Red said.

“Ah, yeah. I forgot about this thing,” the man said. He ripped the mask off and tossed it into the trash. “Much better.”

“I didn’t recognize you. You’ve gotten better in the last two months at hiding yourself too. I couldn’t even read your mind or tell who you were through your psyche,” Red leaned on the table.

“That’s the idea,” Donovan said through his eggs. “I can do a lot more too. Remember I was messing around with wall and ceiling walking? I mastered it,” Donovan gulped and reached for the water. The water shot over to him without spilling a drop. He

tried to drink from the glass, but the water did not move. Red smiled. “Cut that out. I’ve been traveling non stop for days. I almost caught up with Neila, but those damn marauders are so annoying. I had to walk the last leg here.”

Amita sat down at the table and gave Red a plate with a smile. She looked better than she did yesterday. The three sat in silence and ate their food. After they finished, Amita washed the dishes.

“What’s your plan for getting James back?” Donovan said as he rocked on the back legs of his chair.

“They won’t make him a prisoner. He’ll have a lot of freedom once he’s there. But I know he won’t want to stay there. He’ll get dazed for a few days for sure, but pretty soon he’ll wanna leave,” Red said. “As I understand it he’s not the military type anymore.”

“Good, good. Maybe we can use him to infiltrate Haven,” Donovan burped.

“Maybe,” Red said as he stared at Donovan’s face.

“What’s wrong with you? You’re staring a lot today,” Donovan sat forward and slammed the legs of the chair down.

“Seeing my face across from me is weird,” Red said.

“It’s only natural. You’re like my dad,” Donovan said.

“Was that another ploy to get me to call you Junior? Besides you’re more like a brother, a half brother at that,” Red said.

“Hm, I guess so. A partial clone is equal to a half brother. But if I was a full clone without someone else’s DNA in me, then you would be my dad.”

“No, you’d be like my full brother, if there is such a thing. The guy who cloned you would be like your dad,” Red grunted. He envisioned fights to come.

“I can sense it, you know? What you’re thinking right this second. You wanna see what I got after five years of training huh?”

“Let’s step outside,” Red stood up.

“Can I watch?” Amita startled them.

Red and Donovan stood at the edge of the lake. The air was calm and thick with humidity. Donovan felt like he fought against an invisible force. Red felt the most natural in this type of weather. Donovan took a fighting stance while Red stood calmly.

“First,” Donovan leapt on the surface of the water, “Hydrokinesis.” He kicked and sent a wave of water toward Red. “Followed by thermokinesis.” Donovan’s hands controlled the water. The wave of water became shards of ice.

Red’s eyes widened as a mountain of ice approached. He used his command of air molecules to make a wall. The ice struck the barrier and broke, sending bits into the air. Donovan charged through the ice as it split. Red released his air shield to counter. Donovan moved into position with a telegraphing right punch.

“Third is aerokinesis,” he said.

Red saw Donovan’s fist exceed his expectations for speed. He was struck hard and felt his stomach twist as a shock of air pushed him off his feet. The force spun him several times before he struck the ground. Donovan had improved more than Red thought possible. His kinesis was not flawless, but transitioned smoothly. Red tried to determine

Donovan's next move as he said them. He felt a slight pressure when Donovan began his kinesis, but no other hints.

Red ran on top of the lake. Donovan followed toward the middle of the lake. Both began to create small vacuums to negate wind resistance. They had to maintain pressure around their bodies to resist being torn apart. Red slowed down and kicked water at Donovan. He failed to shield himself.

"I figured out how to control electricity a few years ago," Red said.

"Shit," Donovan replied.

Red focused on the precision of the kinesics. He stripped electrons off and created a path for them to follow. Next, he built a charge around him and shot electricity at Donovan. The soaked Donovan tried to avoid the bolts, but Red was in command. Donovan yelled as electricity surged through his body.

"The problem is it is very demanding. I had to train another three years to not fall to my knees each time." Red gasped for air. He then thrust his arms at Donovan. A solid piece of ice with an end flat like a sledge hammer appeared. Red struck Donovan in the chest. "It's easier for me to control the pressure of water than the temperature. Water has a really high specific heat and that takes a lot of focus to remove or add energy. But you can turn it into ice with high pressure."

The stunned Donovan attempted to look at Red. He charged forward. Donovan struck the water. Red started to part the splash when it became steam. Red started to look for Donovan in the haze. He felt a tug at his leg and Donovan pulled him underwater. Donovan exploded water molecules around him and forced Red deeper and deeper into the water.

Amita waited for several minutes for the men to surface. She walked to the edge of the water and could not sense either of them. Red leapt out of the water with Donovan in his arms. Donovan was unconscious. Red laid him in the sand on his back. His chest heaved unevenly and he shook. Red placed his hands on Donovan and he immediately calmed. Red sat down facing the lake.

“He has improved a lot. I think he could take Neila if he tried hard enough. The only problem is he gets overzealous with his attacks and leaves large openings. When it comes to power he’s stronger. But unlike him I have no endurance limit with my kinesis. It’s my body I have to watch for. If we train more we can change things. We can get James and train him too. Then we can—”

Red felt the presence of others and turned towards Morgan Hill. Several people approached with assault rifles. Max and Sara were between them. Red noticed they were Bauxite soldiers. Max and Sara looked at the ground. Their hands were handcuffed.

“Is there a problem?” Red asked.

“We need you to come with us. You and Second Nexus.” Their leader was an older woman in her fifties.

“Why is that?” Red looked back to the lake.

“Your plan has used up too many of our people. We can’t let you continue like this. You’re going to be taken to trial,” she said.

“Right,” Red said. He shook Donovan’s leg, “Wake up. We have to go now.” Donovan sprang up to a sitting position.

“Where are we going?” Donovan looked at the armed Bauxite soldiers.