



THEIR WORLD ENDED
DESTINY BEGINS

OGRE

S H A N N A T E R E S E

Ogre

The Ogre Trilogy

Book 1

by

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Ogre

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CHAPTER 1

GUESS,” MYLEE SAID.

Sean looked up at his twin without moving a single slouched muscle off of the couch. In his hands lay a co-pad, or computer-pad, used for reading, writing, homework, real work, games, and everything besides or between. The title page of *Star Wars: A New Hope*, his Old Earth Literature assignment, glared up from the screen. It was either the first or the fourth book in its series. He was a little confused about that.

“Oh, come on!” Mylee shoved her brother’s shoulder as if she could push the answer out of him. “Guess!”

“Why do you always do this?” Sean asked.

Mylee rolled her eyes, spun all the way around on one heel, then dropped onto the cushion beside her brother with a loud huff.

“I’m really wondering,” Sean said. “Mom and Dad won’t make it home for dinner—big surprise. Why do you care if I know *why* they won’t make it home?”

“Would you just answer the stupid question?” Mylee said.

"Miles, we do this every night!" Sean's hands gestured in wild, choppy motions, with the co-pad threatening to tumble off his knees. "They call to say they're stuck at the lab. You ask me to guess why. We get into a fight over it..."

Mylee's face scrunched up, jaw set in a rigid line, eyes staring straight ahead. "Everyone needs routines."

"Yeah, well this is a dumb one!"

Mylee threw her head back into the couch, muttering under her breath. She was mature for fourteen—physically mature, that was. Strangers usually guessed she was around sixteen or seventeen, which meant they usually assumed she was Sean's older sister. She thought it was funny.

The twins didn't look alike, either. Sean had darker hair and skin than Mylee, with almond-shaped, dark brown eyes. Next to him, his twin seemed downright pale, with blond-brown hair and freckles and eyes that appeared sometimes grey, sometimes green, depending on the light.

The differences didn't mean much to Sean, because he looked like his mother's side of the family, while Mylee took after their father. Still, people made stupid comments, and in response, Mylee liked to joke that they were adopted, or switched at birth, or came from two separate sperm donations. Again, *she* thought it was funny.

On the couch, Mylee slouched into the cushions, head back, eyes on the ceiling. "Sidi, sense connect and show The Stream," she said.

"Oh come on! Miles..."

But Sidi, the universal, galaxy-wide A.I. had already responded to Mylee's command. A live news broadcast opened on the screen most directly in Mylee's line of sight, in this case, the ceiling above the couch. The sound from that broadcast went into the buds behind her ears. Sean would have to scream at her to be heard now. Left to himself, Sean sighed and went back to his reading.

Sean was three pages into *A New Hope*, confused about how 'the rebels' somehow seemed to be the good guys, when Mylee sat up, grabbing his arm and shaking it so that the co-pad almost fell.

"Sidi, open sound!" she said. As her eyes moved, so did The Stream, leaving the ceiling to fix on the blank wall across from the couch.

"Ow! What?" Sean asked as chattering voices and traffic noise blasted out from their living room speakers.

"Sidi, back The Stream about half a minute." Mylee's voice was tight, like someone had wrapped rubber bands around her throat, the way she had sounded right before they took their last biology exam. Sean sat up, co-pad forgotten on his lap.

The images rewound in a blur of sound and light and color. Sean thought he glimpsed a red flash of something, and then two elegant women stood over the kind of over-the-top flower arrangements their dad got their mom after a fight.

"Now these lilies..." one woman said, scooping the delicate petals up into her hand.

"Why do you watch this stuff?" Sean asked.

"Shut up! It's..."

Before Mylee could finish speaking, the second woman—the reporter—grabbed the flower enthusiast's wrist, sending a cascade of petals onto the floor at their feet. "Sorry, everyone, but we have a breaking report from Acar..." The reporter's voice was shaking.

Since when did reporters' voices shake?

The screen changed, transporting them from the colorful nursery to a pallet of blacks and greys and reds in the blink of an eye. Sean wasn't great at geography, or astronomy, or—well—school, but he knew an aerial view of the capital city on the planet Acar when he saw it. The volcanic landscape stretched out on all sides, a world of ash and fire and smoke where the native people had learned to build their cities from a composite of iron and black diamond. Homes and skyscrapers rose between the mountains like shards of polished, obsidian glass, fireproof and so much stronger than steel.

In the center of the city stood an enormous building, octagonal, and flying the flags of every planet in the galaxy. The *Be'shon*—not a government, exactly, but the body that kept peace, between everyone. For over seven hundred years, it had watched over the galaxy, keeping trade fair, governments talking, cultures tolerant, people understanding. It was the glue that held everyone together.

And as Sean watched, it exploded.

Sean could have sworn he felt that shock wave, crossing the hundreds of light-years between him and Acar, slamming into

his guts. Fire erupted from inside the building, blowing the roof first, then the walls. The flames devoured at least five cars unlucky enough to be flying over at the time. Others swerved to avoid the explosion, crashing into other buildings, or down into the streets, sending ground traffic screeching to a halt.

A buzzing, humming din pressed itself like cotton over Sean's ears. He couldn't hear the reporter, or read the words at the bottom of the screen, or even feel the passage of time. Eventually, he noticed Mylee's hand in his, their fingers wrapped together, squeezing hard enough to cut off blood flow. Sean swallowed, cleared the buzzing, and realized that The Stream had switched from his language to *BelDom*, the language of the Be'Shon. Their reporters weren't even making their own comments anymore, professional talkers lost for words, co-opting the feed from another planet in their dazed stupor.

"What are they saying?" he asked Mylee.

She sent him a look that was half-glare, half-eye roll. "I failed my last *BelDom* test too, you know."

"Yeah, but you're pretty good at holding a conversation in it!"

"Sidi, mute volume!" Mylee jumped up, crossed her arms, and started pacing back and forth across the living room. The screen continued to follow her eyes, bouncing from wall to wall as she paced, making Sean nauseous.

"Sidi, fix image to main screen!" Sean said, glaring at his sister.

Mylee didn't notice, arms folded and still pacing back and forth. "So what do we do? What's going on? What do we do?"

"What do you mean, what do we do?" Sean asked. "Acar's something like a billion miles from here."

"Miles? Really?"

"Obviously, I meant light-years... Sidi, call Mom and Dad."

Mylee's shaking head and rolling eyes almost interrupted her desperate pacing across the living room. "It won't work..."

The vaguely female voice, that always sounded like it was trying to sing but couldn't find its starting pitch, spoke out through the living room speaker. "I'm sorry, Sean, your parents are not answering. Should I leave a message?"

"No, keep calling them," Sean said.

"Please define the parameters for this order," the singsong voice chirped.

Sean rolled his eyes. "Call Mom and Dad every fifteen minutes until they answer or they come home."

"Or we tell you to stop," Mylee said. "Why aren't they answering?"

"Hmm... I don't know, Mylee," the computer said.

"Shut up! I was asking Sean!"

"This is a reminder that your mother programmed me not to honor the command to 'shut up,' because it is rude," the computer said.

"Oh freakin' gatch!" Mylee banged both fists against her skull. "I do not have the energy for artificial intelligence right now!"

"Sidi, call Aunt Linda," Sean said.

"Okay, Sean." The computer beeped, then shoved The Stream over to one side to make room for the image of their aunt's tidy kitchen.

Through the screen, they saw a short, dark-haired woman dropped three linen grocery bags onto the kitchen counter, then pulled off her jacket. "Hey parqies," she said. "Tokah'sa?"

"Have you seen the news from Acar?" Sean asked.

"No..." Aunt Linda reached into one of the grocery bags, stacking canned goods on the counter in front of her. "What did those politicians do now?"

"Nothing. They blew up!"

Aunt Linda looked straight into the kitchen screen and its attached camera, carrots suspended in her left hand. "What?"

"The Be'shon building, on Acar, blew up," Mylee said.

Aunt Linda dropped the carrots back in the bag, knocked a can of sauced tomatoes over, and charged at the kitchen screen. "Sidi, show me Stream highlights."

A moment passed for her to learn everything her niece and nephew knew already and order The Stream off. Another moment passed in silence before she asked, "Are your parents still at the lab?"

Mylee nodded, and Sean said, "Yeah. We can't reach them."

"They won't learn about this for hours then." Aunt Linda ran a hand back through her hair and took a deep, shaking breath. "You know, it's been a while since you've been over for dinner, so... Sidi, send a car to my sister's house—two passengers—bring them here."

"I'm afraid it's rush hour, Linda," a familiar, computerized voice spoke from miles away in Aunt Linda's bright kitchen. "The expected wait for an unscheduled vehicle at this time of day is at least thirty minutes. Would you like to continue?"

"Yes, thank you. You hear that, parquies?"

Sean nodded. "Yeah," Mylee said.

"You know... Since you have time anyway... why don't you pack an overnight bag, stay here tonight. Sound good?"

"Yeah," Mylee said, as Sean agreed, "It does."

"Great. I'll leave a message for your parents. Message me when the car gets there?"

The twins nodded but did not hang up. For a moment, it seemed like Aunt Linda wouldn't end the call either. Then something beeped, a timer on her oven, and she turned to address it. No one had spoken in over a minute, and Aunt Linda didn't look at the screen again, so Sidi got the hint, and hung up for them. Sean glanced over at his sister, Mylee glanced over at him, and then, with a simultaneous, deep breath, they went upstairs to pack.

"I say, it's about time."

Aereal, Linda's sixteen-year-old daughter, had been "going through a phase" for about four years. A phase where she died everything she could white, painted her skin white, dressed all in white, refused to cut her hair for some reason, and openly declared that any person or group of people in any way involved with rulemaking were absolutely evil. This included her teachers, her parents, and, of course, all governments.

"Aereal, enough!" Aunt Linda dropped a pan of baked carrots on the table with a thud that rattled every other dish. "People are dead. Do you understand this? This isn't some hypothetical thought exercise. Actual people are dead."

Aereal rolled her eyes. "Sidi, exactly how many people die every hour in this galaxy?"

"Sidi, cancel that inquiry!" Aunt Linda said. "If you really can't be decent, darling, then eat in silence. This is not the day to test me."

Seated across from her, Linda's husband, Bret, scooped stew meat onto his plate, then handed the serving dish to Mylee without a word.

"It is about time that we declared our liberation from our oppressive oligarchy," Aereal said.

"The Be'shon is not an oligarchy," Mylee said, handing the meat off to Sean while Aunt Linda's face turned purple.

"And how would you know?" Aereal asked. "Didn't you fail Intro to Politics last year?"

"I did not!" Mylee said. "I just... had to take it twice..."

"Exactly," Aereal said.

"Eery, eat your meal." Aunt Linda turned to her husband. "Have you heard anything?"

Sean stopped chewing to hear the answer as clearly as possible, and he was pretty sure Mylee did too. Uncle Bret was a police officer, so if anyone had more information right then, it would be him.

But to everyone's disappointment, Uncle Bret shook his head. "Nothing The Stream hasn't said. Honestly, though, I don't think more will come of it. These things happen, sadly. The Be'shon took a hit, but the organization is huge. Their military is spread out across this galaxy..."

"Rapists," Aereal said, not quite under her breath.

"That is a horridly inaccurate and disgusting thing to say, young lady!" Aunt Linda said.

"It's true."

"It is not!"

Uncle Bret took a beat, looked from mother to daughter, made sure they were done snapping at each other, and continued. "The Be'shon will regroup. They'll figure it out. We shouldn't worry."

"Was it Viris?" Aereal asked. Sean raised his eyebrow at the hopeful note in her voice.

"You do realize, darling, that Viris is a terrorist organization dedicated to the idea that certain forms of life are worth less than others, right?" Aunt Linda said.

"That's your take on it," Aereal said.

"No, it is not 'my take.' They state as much in their manifestos."

"That's not what they mean!"

"Do I need to show you the pictures again?"

Aereal let out an over-the-top huff, calculated for dramatic effect, Sean was sure. "Oh, you mean the propaganda pictures the Be'shon planted to make us hate anyone who disagrees with them? Sure, let's see those again! And even if those pictures had anything to do with reality, it's the Be'shon's own fault for outlawing tech-clone creation. Viris are scientists. If they were allowed to pursue their science without all these oppressive Be'shon regulations..."

"Regulations are not oppressive," Aunt Linda said, her face still several shades redder than usual. They keep people safe. Viris is selfish, pure and simple, and if I've managed to impart any decency into you, you'll see that someday!"

Sean and Mylee gave each other simultaneous and identical eye rolls of commiseration. Aereal's whole rebellion against law-abiding parents by siding with a terrorist organization thing was getting old. The white hair, and long white skirts, and general elitist attitude were all getting old, too.

"We have no reason to believe Viris was responsible," Uncle Bret said, as if the air were not still murky from the glares between mother and daughter.

"What are tech-clones, again?" Sean asked, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah... Are they those mutilated robot things that have skin and hair and stuff?" Mylee asked.

Aereal fixed them with a blank stare that lasted several seconds too long. "How are you two the children of geniuses, again?"

"Aereal, you're not smarter than us, you just have more opinions!" Mylee said.

That wasn't exactly true, Sean knew. He and Mylee both struggled through each school day and then forgot anything they had learned by the next morning. Meanwhile, Aereal got top grades, despite her stated belief that the grading system was propaganda used to brainwash the masses and keep children docile.

"All smart people have opinions," Aereal said. "You have no opinions on anything, which is why I'm smarter than you."

"I have opinions!" Mylee said.

Before the old argument could escalate, Uncle Bret interrupted. "Tech-clones are technically cyborgs, but, instead of giv-

ing artificial limbs, or such, to living things, their biological parts are grown in pieces in labs from animal DNA."

"Like we grow replacement organs?" Sean asked.

"Wow, you know what replacement organs are!" Aereal said.

Aunt Linda jabbed her fork at Aereal's plate. "I'm serious. Eat, silence, now!"

"Yes," Uncle Bret said, "like replacement organs. But, with tech-clones, they're growing an entire animal, just in pieces."

"Why in pieces?" Mylee asked.

"Well, so they can mix and match those pieces, create something with the ears of a bat and the body of a lion, say." Uncle Bret grimaced down at the mash of stew and carrots on his plate. "The pieces are assembled and grafted onto a skeleton that's either completely robotic, or some kind of artificial, carbon hybrid. Most of them also have computerized brains instead of biological brains, which makes them as programmable as..." He waved his hand at the ceiling. "...Sidi. But a lot of them have biological digestive systems, because that's actually more efficient than other types of fuel conversion."

"Wait, stomachs are better than engines?" Sean asked, with a glance at his almost empty plate.

"Stomachs are engines, idiots," Aereal said.

Sean was about to throw an undercooked carrot at her, but Uncle Bret spoke first.

"Yes, stomachs are engines. Not terribly efficient engines. They produce a great deal of waste material. Anyway, no, they're not better than other engines. I meant they were more cost-effective."

"How so?" Sean asked.

"Well, stomachs work by breaking matter apart at an atomic level and then repurposing that matter. Some of it is turned into energy — like in other engines. Some of it is used to build the cells of our bodies. The point is, our stomachs can only break apart certain types of matter. That's what we call food. But theoretically, a stomach should be able to digest anything, so you can make tech-clones that eat all kinds of things. And, again, stomachs don't just produce energy. They also build and repair our bodies along the way."

"Okay, so then what do they eat?" Mylee asked.

Uncle Bret shrugged. "Whatever they're programmed to eat."

Grass. Small animals. Some can even consume dirt and metals. Most tech-clones are weapons, so they feed on dead soldiers. That sounds really disgusting, and it is, but from a technical standpoint, it makes a lot of sense."

"It's also one of the many reasons they're illegal," Aunt Linda said.

"Are they alive?" Mylee asked.

Uncle Bret shrugged again. "Depends on who you ask. They're classified as *non-living*, but that has more to do with how they're created than with what they are."

"But why not just use robots?" Sean asked.

"Because tech-clones are cheaper, both to create and to repair," Aunt Linda said.

"That's not the reason," Aereal said in a tone almost as sing-song as Sidi's.

"Yes, sweetheart, it is," Linda said. "They're biological, so they can repair themselves. They last a long time. They have biological brain stems, which makes the robotic brain much cheaper to produce. And, believe it or not, growing biological matter is cheaper than a state-of-the-art robotic body. Viris is just trying to overthrow the Be'shon in the most cost-effective way possible."

Aereal rolled her eyes, and Sean could see her mouthing, *propaganda, propaganda, propaganda* from behind the shield of her unkempt hair.

"Has anyone ever made a Human tech-clone?" Mylee asked.

Uncle Bret's eyebrows scrunched together. "Honestly, I don't know what that means. I'm sure they've grafted in certain Human features. But the point of tech-cloning is to combine the most useful features from several different animals. So, no, I don't think there would be any point to it. I mean, you may as well just clone an actual Human."

"All Humans should be cloned," Aereal said. "This ancient obsession with two Humans combining their own genetic material, without any consideration for genetic health, is absurd in this day and age."

"I'm sorry, aren't you all about individual liberties?" Sean asked.

"Oh, I see you actually bothered to study your vocabulary builders this term," Aereal said.

Aunt Linda had her head in her hand, face half-covered. "Everyone... can we eat the rest of this meal in peace, please?"

Sean lay on the top bunk in the guest room, reading in the glow from his co-pad. On the bottom bunk, Mylee watched *The Stream* play across the underside of Sean's mattress. Sean couldn't hear it, but he could see the light flashing off the walls.

Something about that light, constantly moving, reminded him of the passage of time, minutes that he stole now from sleep. He checked the clock on his co-pad and found only five hours left before they had to wake up for school. On the other hand, he was doing his homework, so...

At four hours and fifty minutes before they needed to be up, Sean saw the light beneath his bed shut off. A second later, Mylee's legs slipped over the edge of her mattress, and then she stood. Her head appeared about half an inch below the top bunk, and Sean turned to look down at her.

"You all right?" he asked.

Mylee crossed her arms, paced over to the other side of the room, and leaned against the wall, facing Sean. "It's weird, all the stuff today, and the thing I can't get out of my head are tech-clones."

Sean sat up, legs dangling over the bed with the back of his head pressed against the ceiling. "Well, they are creepy."

"Just the idea of growing skin and then assembling it..." Mylee shuddered. "You don't think Mom and Dad do things like that, do you?"

"No. It's illegal. Remember?"

"Right." Mylee pushed a strand of stray hair behind her ear. "You remember that clone baby they brought home—what was it—two years ago?"

"Yeah, but that was just a baby. I remember we had dinner with at least four different couples before Mom and Dad found someone they thought was good enough to adopt him."

"It was six couples," Mylee said. "But I think you had soccer practice on one of those nights. Anyway, I wonder what happened

to him."

"He was adopted," Sean said with a shrug.

"Right, but I guess, I wonder what *will* happen to him. Are his parents going to tell him he's a clone? And should they? I mean, it's something I think I would want to know, but... How do you adjust to that? Knowing you were grown in a lab, from a copy of someone else's DNA?"

"But being a clone doesn't mean you're actually the same person as the person they took the DNA from, right? All identical twins are clones."

"Yeah, I know."

"And technically, any baby that comes from artificial insemination is grown in a lab, so..."

"Okay, sure, but it... feels different." Mylee thought for a moment, her skin looking grey in the shadows cast by Sean's co-pad. "I guess, what feels different is that Mom and Dad made him as part of an experiment, and sure, now he's a perfectly normal person, but... he will always have started as an experiment. I can't decide if I'd want to know that, or not."

Sean wasn't sure either, now he thought of it.

"You think Mom and Dad still keep tabs on him?" Mylee asked.

"Probably. He was their experiment. They'd want to know if his DNA unravels, or something."

"Could that happen?"

"I don't know, Miles. I only passed biology last term because Mr. Garder allowed us an unlimited amount of super easy extra credit."

"Yeah, I miss Mr. Garder. Ever wish we were geniuses like our parents?"

"Only every single school day of my entire life."

Mylee gave him a weak little smile loaded with sympathy. "Ever wonder how it is we're *not* geniuses like our parents?"

"Because our parents decided to have us the natural way, so our genetics are *not* an exact science."

"So, maybe we should wish we were one of their experiments."

"Yeah." Sean shrugged, because he didn't really want to think about these things anymore. "Maybe..."

Other voices interrupted them, coming in under the door from

somewhere nearby. Mylee's face scrunched up. "Someone's in the kitchen?"

Sean nodded. The kitchen was right across the hall from the guest room. He dropped silently off the top bunk, while Mylee cracked the door open.

"No, don't wake them. It's a school night." It was their mother's voice, hurried, like a runner out of breath. "We just wanted to check-in."

"You could have called if that were it," Aunt Linda said.

"I needed to get out of the lab."

"Coffee?"

"Definitely."

"Decaf?"

There was a pause, and the twins knew exactly what look their mother gave her sister during that pause. A moment later they heard the crunching noise of water running through a coffee maker.

"Do you know anything about all this?" Aunt Linda asked.

There was another pause, with the dull clink of spoons inside ceramic mugs, muffled through liquid.

"I know it wasn't just the Be'shon building," their mother said, slowly, as if the words were difficult to pronounce. Mylee and Sean looked at each other, eyes wide open.

"What do you mean?" Uncle Bret's voice this time.

"Look..." Their mother spoke deliberately and with precision, like someone forming words in a foreign language. "Something is happening, starting, across the galaxy... That's all I can say."

Silence filled the kitchen once again, but this time it didn't feel like a pause. This time it felt like dread, people standing on the edge of a precipice and staring into an oncoming hurricane.

"Look," their mother said, "promise me that, if... Promise me that you will come to the lab. You won't try to run. You won't try to fight. You two, and Aereal... Just come to the lab. Straight to the lab. Okay?"

"April, what do you know?" Aunt Linda asked.

Ceramic clicked against the marble countertop, sharp and cold. "I have to get back," their mother said. "Thank you for bringing the kids here. They were probably scared."

Chair legs screeched across the floor in response, dragging

Aunt Linda's voice with them. "April, *I'm* scared. And I'm your sister. Tell me what you know."

"I love you," their mother said. "Come to the lab." The kitchen door—the back door to the house—whooshed open, then shut again.

"Linda," Uncle Bret said.

"Don't," Aunt Linda said.

"I've never asked, because I did not want to know, but..."

"Don't!" Aunt Linda's voice was sharp. "Bret, you still don't want to know. Neither of us does."

Mylee shut the door, silently, and stepped back as if it might bite her. "All the lights are off, right?"

"There's no way they know we overheard that," Sean said. "We don't even know what we overheard." He reached for his sister's arms, some instinct to comfort and keep safe, only for Mylee to pull away and back into the bottom bunk.

"We have to get up in three hours," she said. "I'm going to sleep."

CHAPTER 2

ABOUT HALF THE STUDENTS SHOWED UP FOR school that day, and every third teacher was missing too. “What did you do in Politics?” Sean asked when he passed Mylee in the hall between first and second periods.

“Watched The Stream,” Mylee said. “Science?”

Sean nodded. “We watched The Stream.”

Those words became the day’s refrain, echoed in the halls and in the classrooms, trapping all their minds in the same endless loop. In Math, they handed homework over in silence and watched The Stream. In Choir they sat in clumps, sheet music stored away in cabinets, talking about anything that came to mind, most of which went back to The Stream. In Literature, they watched The Stream. In History, their red-faced teacher loudly proclaimed that the terrorists didn’t know what they’d gotten themselves into. “We have the entire galaxy on our side,” he declared. “Acar, Earth, Mars, Senta – These are the homes of warriors. If the Be’shon fights, we all fight. They don’t stand a chance!”

In Psychology, they watched the Stream.

All day long, they listened to the same lack of news repeated over and over again. The same image of the black-glass planet and the Be'shon building blew up in their faces over and over again, until, eight hours later, the bell released them all from class.

Sean met his sister on the sidewalk right outside school. Streams of students passed them, most headed toward the cars that waited in the circle drive in front of the school building. A few waved to the twins and received waves back from Sean. But Mylee's hands constricted around her backpack straps, pulling them down tight against her shoulders. "So, they canceled swim," she said.

"Figured," Sean said.

Mylee fidgeted, hands opening and closing around her backpack straps. "So, home... or...?"

Sean glanced off down the road at the cars lined up to ferry students away. Most students took block cars, ordered by the school, dropping large groups off in a certain spot near all of their houses. It was almost impossible to get private cars at that time of day.

"Well," he said, "if we go back to Aunt Linda's now, we'd have to ride with Aereal."

"True... Let's walk home. I need clothes anyway."

"Yeah, me too. We'll still head over there for dinner, right?"

"Unless Mom and Dad decide to come home for some reason."

They turned up the street, past the school and the circle drive, slow steps, one foot at a time, dragging beneath the weight of their backpacks.

"Did you hear anything new on The Stream today?" Sean asked. They were still in front of the school building, not even half a block from where they started.

Mylee shook her head. "Just a lot of the same. Mr. Blyth's rant was kind of fun, though."

"The home-of-warriors terrorists-will-pay rant? Yeah, kind of fun..."

"Hey, idiots!"

Mylee rolled her eyes, hands squeezing into her backpack straps, feet stopping on the sidewalk. Sean turned to see Aereal detach herself from a group of artificially white students just like her. "What?" he yelled back at her.

Aereal stopped on the pavement in front of them, her grey backpack very dark against the white hair and dress. "I missed my car."

"You missed your block car, and we're the idiots?" Sean asked.

Aereal rolled her white-painted eyelids. "Are you calling one? You're coming to my place, right?"

"We were going to walk home and get clothes and stuff first, actually," Mylee said.

"Well, can I come with you?" It was not a question. It was a command playing dress-up in question clothes that did not fit.

"Well, are you going to keep talking to us in that tone?" Sean asked.

Aereal sent him a scathing look, huffed, then spun on her heels and marched off down the sidewalk. "Try to keep up, idiots. I need your hands to unlock the door!"

"Great!" Mylee stamped her foot in the gap between pavement and school lawn, sending a clump of dirt into the air. "Now we have to put up with that all night."

"Come on." Sean threw his arm around her shoulders, leaning about half his weight into her while dragging her along down the street. "Let's just get home and sense connect to The Stream so we can't hear her anymore."

"I like this plan," Mylee said.

"So..." Aereal pushed Sean aside as soon as the door recognized his handprint, barreling into the dark house. "I called for a car on the walk here, since I'm sure you two idiots hadn't thought of that yet."

Mylee slammed the front door behind the three of them. "You're the one who missed your own stupid car today."

Aereal dropped her backpack with a thud inside the entry hall. "For your information, I missed it because it's not my usual car, because I usually stay for Student Council on Tuesdays."

"Well, Council wasn't canceled," Mylee said. "Why didn't you..."

"Just shut up already, Mylee! Anyway, the car will take about

an hour. You have any food in this place?" She didn't wait for an answer, just turned on her heels and headed straight through the entry hall to the kitchen door.

Mylee went in the opposite direction, following Sean into the living room. "Can I strangle her? I'm serious. If the Be'shon gets destroyed, and law and order break down, that means I can strangle her, right? Sean? What's wrong?"

Sean stood at the main computer interface, a small table just inside the living room, frowning down at the screen. Mylee reached out a finger, jabbing him in the arm. "Planet watch to Sean?" she said. "Tokah'sa?"

"Um..." Sean blinked, feeling a shiver run up his spine, reminding him that he was awake and that the computer screen beneath his hands really was blank and unresponsive. No matter how hard he tapped at it, it stayed blank. He hadn't forgotten to tap it, or fallen into one of those awful dreams where nothing worked right. The computer screen was just dead, and it made no sense. "I don't... Sidi, start The Stream, any screen," he said.

"I'm sorry, that feature is unavailable," the sing-song voice chirped back at him.

"What do you mean it's unavailable?" Sean asked. Beside him, Mylee crossed her arms, teeth biting down into her bottom lip.

"I'm sorry, Sean, that feature is unavailable," the computer chirped.

"Sidi, we have been watching The Stream all day. How can it be unavailable?" Mylee asked.

"I'm sorry, children, that feature is unavailable."

"Yeah, yeah! We get that it's unavailable. We're asking *why*!" Mylee said.

"I am sorry, Mylee. That feature is unavailable."

"Oh my gatch! Why is A.I. so stupid?" Mylee asked.

"I'm sorry, I do not have an answer for that."

"Okay, Sidi," Sean said, "display text news."

"I am sorry, that feature is unavailable."

"Well, open a web browser, here, on the main interface."

"I'm sorry, Sean, that feature is unavailable."

"No! Sidi, the internet cannot be unavailable, it's the internet!" Mylee said. Her eyes were wide open as if she had no lids at all, fingers biting hard into her crossed arms.

"I am sorry, children, that feature is unavailable."

Mylee started to say something, but Sean cut her off: "Sidi, what features are available?"

"I'm sorry, that feature is unavailable."

"The feature that tells us what's available is unavailable? Is that even a feature?" Sean asked.

"Yes, Sean. It is called the oversight feature, an integral part of my main operating system, and it is not currently available."

Sean turned to Mylee to find her staring at him, eyes wide, breath coming in short, rapid bursts. "What is happening?" she asked.

"Um, idiots..." Aereal came around another doorway, between the living and dining rooms.

"Stop calling us that!" Mylee said. "I swear, Aereal, if you call us that one more time, I will grab you by that stupid dyed hair of yours and throw you out the front door. I can. You know I can. And I will. So don't test me!"

Aereal stopped in the doorway and crossed her arms. "Guys, then. There's something weird up with Sidi."

"Yeah, we noticed," Sean said. He hit the blank screen again, then asked, "Did you have trouble ordering the car?"

Aereal hesitated.

"Gatchin, it's a yes or no question, genius!" Mylee said.

Aereal's eyes darted to the living room window, as if the quiet roadway held some kind of answer. "Well..." she said. "There was static. And, the call may have cut off prematurely, but... I thought... I mean, the CarCall system is usually on overload this time of day. Right? I've had it cut out on me before... I think."

"Sidi, call Mom and Dad," Sean said.

"I'm sorry, Sean, that feature is unavailable."

Mylee dropped into a chair, head in her hands.

"Check on CarCall," Sean told Aereal.

She shook her head. "That's how I realized something was up. It wouldn't give me an update."

A low moan came out of Mylee, rising in pitch until it had metamorphosed into a squeal. "This can't be happening. What is happening?"

"Yeah, you're way smarter than us, after all," Sean said. "You tell us what's going on!"

"How should I know, you id – person who's my cousin!" Aereal threw her hands up in the air on her way over to the front window.

"You could just say *cousin*!" Mylee said.

"Do you know something though?" Sean asked, because something about Aereal's response felt disingenuous to him.

Outside, lights blinked on in the houses across the street as cars whizzed by overhead. Aereal stood like a white shadow against the evening gloom, half-hidden by the curtains. "It's just... something we talked about once, in Comp-Tech class, the first things that would happen if..." She took a deep breath, shoulders rising almost all the way up to her ears. "What would happen if... if someone set up to invade from orbit..."

"Invade, from... as in spaceships setting up a blockade around the planet?" Mylee said.

"I don't know, okay. It came up in class one day. And Mr. Cowler, he said that, if that happened, if someone did ever try to invade, then the first thing they would probably do – and I don't even know how they could do it, but... They would shut down the Sidi satellites."

"Take out Sidi?" Sean asked.

"That would shut down the planet's entire internet," Mylee said.

"It would shut down our connection to the galactic internet," Sean said.

Aereal rolled her eyes. "Oh, so you *were* paying attention in your Comp-Sci classes!"

"Aereal, I swear..." Mylee's fingers twisted up in the air like a cat sinking its claws into a ball of yarn.

"Oh shut up. We both know you're not gonna drag me out by my hair!"

"No, we both know that I *could* drag you out by your hair," Mylee said.

"So, you think someone's up there, in orbit, right now, trying to invade this planet?" Sean asked.

Said aloud, it sounded outright ridiculous, the stuff of their Old Earth Literature classes. So why did the air freeze so cold when he said it? Why didn't laughter rise to beat away the shadows cast by a fading sun? Aereal stood in the grey window, between him

and the falling, evening light, in a bulky, white dress with her eyes focused on the thing behind him, the black void that had replaced the house's main computer interface.

"Okay, come on!" Mylee said after the silence had dragged on for quite some time. "No. Come on. We're being stupid. One building blew up—*one*—on Acar, thousands of light-years away. No one is invading this planet. Why would someone invade this planet? This isn't even Earth! Not even Earth's solar system! I mean, if they were going after a Human planet, they'd go after the homeworld first, right?"

"And who is *they*, anyway?" Sean added. "We don't even know who *they* is. We don't even know that *they* exists."

"Would you both just shut up!" Aereal said.

"No, I will not just shut up!" Mylee said.

"Aereal, why did you come home with us?" Sean just meant to attack her, but the question turned into something else halfway through. Something occurred to him, even as he said the words. Why had she come home with them?

Aereal shrugged, her eyes on the broad street and manicured lawns lined up along her cousins' familiar neighborhood. "Do your neighbors ever come home? Most of the lights are still off."

"*Our* lights are off," Mylee said.

"Why did you come with us?" Sean asked.

Aereal shrugged again, and this time it was less convincing. "My house is too far away to walk. I figured you'd be calling a car, and they're hard to get this time of day..."

"Yeah, except you intentionally skipped Council, too?"

"I skipped because I didn't feel like going!" Aereal said.

"Are you scared?" Sean asked.

"No!" She turned from the window, only to have her face obliterated by the shadows inside the room. The curtain seemed to swallow her from behind. "No, what happened yesterday doesn't scare me, Sean, because I can think for myself, because I'm not a mindless Be'shon drone. Because I know it's about time someone showed them they can't force everyone to line up and march because they say go..."

"Freakin' gatch, Aereal! Do you believe even half of the crap you say?" Mylee asked.

"I don't know!" Aereal hunched her shoulders together arma-

dillo-style, as if she too had a shell she could fold into for safety. "I don't know what's happening, okay? I don't know who, or why. I want to go home. Okay? That's all. I just wanna go home!"

For the first time, Sean thought he might have something in common with his cousin after all. For one moment, with the world crumbling around them, he glimpsed some version of the future where he and Aereal might actually get along.

Maybe Mylee saw the same thing, the same glimpse of a half-way relatable cousin. In any case, she didn't attack again. After a moment, paused in the dark, she turned to Sean, and said, "Mrs. Larkin might know."

Aereal took in a sharp and rousing breath. "Mrs. Larkin?"

"Our neighbor," Sean said. "Across the street. She used to give us piano lessons. And she's awesome, too, so we still go over there sometimes..."

"And she has this never-ending supply of cookies," Mylee said.

"Right, so, bonus... But, the point is, she's an adult, so she might know more..."

"Something that's not wild conspiracy theories, anyway..."

"So..." Aereal pushed her shoulders back, straightening her spine. "We should just go wait for the car over there?"

"Right," Sean said.

Mylee nodded. "Right."

They paused to look at each other, wondering if this idea really made sense, daring each other to admit this was all just some childish fear they should have outgrown. But before anyone could admit any of that, they all made the same leaping, jumping dash toward the door, then out onto the lawn, up to the sidewalk, looking both ways before crossing the street.

"The house with the lights on?" Aereal asked.

"No, this one." Sean skipped past two houses to reach the third. It was made of dark grey brick set back from the road by a landscaped grove of bushes and trees.

Aereal stopped short at the gate beside Sean, her hand grazing the picket fence as she gazed up at the dark house shrouded in trees. "The lights are out."

"She must be in the back." Sean pushed the gate open, not giving himself time to think.

"Yeah, this is when all her students start showing up," Mylee said. "She has to be home."

Sean hopped the porch steps two at a time, just like he used to on his way to lessons. He was a horrid piano player, and the lessons themselves were torture. But Mrs. Larkin was nice, and, as Mylee said, she always had cookies.

"This feels weird," Aereal said.

"You're the one who was scared," Mylee said.

"Oh shut up, I was not!"

Sean rolled his eyes, opened the outer storm door, and knocked on the wooden, inner door. "Mrs. Larkin?"

"Hey, the See-face," Aereal said, pointing to a blank screen next to the front door, the Sidi interface.

"No..." Mylee tapped at it, getting nothing. "They're not connected either."

"Is that why they haven't turned the lights on, maybe?" Aereal asked.

"They should have manual switches," Mylee said. "Everyone does."

"Mrs. Larkin?" Sean pounded against the wooden door, making its hinges rattle. "Mrs. Larkin? Mr. Craig?"

"Sean, open the door," Mylee said.

"What?"

"The door. Open the door! We need to get inside!" Mylee shoved him over, stumbling and falling into the doorframe.

"What are you talking about?" Aereal asked.

"Miles!" Sean said.

The house was unlocked, and Mylee shoved past her brother to get inside, stumbling over a rug and into a dark but familiar entry hall. She reached back, grabbed Sean, then Aereal, pulling them in after her.

"What are you doing!" Aereal asked.

"You can't just break into our neighbor's house!" Sean said.

"Oh, shut up, it's Mrs. Larkin!" Mylee slammed the door, pressing her full weight against it and taking several deep breaths. "It's... Aereal was right... It's weird out there."

Sean raised his eyebrows at her. "*Aereal was right?*"

"Guys..." Aereal's voice called them to a doorway three feet away. Wooden floorboards creaked under her feet as her weight

shifted, her face pointed into the open front room. "The piano's here. Is this her studio?"

"Uh, yeah," Mylee said, disinterested.

"But I thought she had lessons right now."

"Gatch..." Sean almost said the same terrible words Mylee had just said: *Aereal's right*. And she was right. Mrs. Larkin usually had students here now, playing cheerful music in a brightly lit room that had not been left to grow darker and darker in the setting sun.

Mylee shrugged. "Her students must have canceled. It's been a weird day, if you haven't noticed. What's that smell, though?"

"The cookies?" Aereal asked. "You said she always had them."

"No..." Mylee's face scrunched up. "Something else..."

"I just smell cookies," Aereal said.

"No, I smell it too," Sean said. "It's like... meat, right?"

Mylee nodded, holding her hand in front of her nose.

"So, she's making dinner," Aereal said.

"No, it's raw, not cooking," Mylee said.

Aereal rolled her eyes. "So she got meat out to thaw for dinner. But... Why would you smell that? Where's the kitchen?"

"Mrs. Larkin? Are you in the kitchen?" Mylee moved past Sean, past the looming, dark, and empty staircase that led up to the second level. Beyond the staircase was a door they had passed through frequently, every lesson day, and many days thereafter.

"Mr. Craig?" Sean called, following his sister.

"Mrs. Larkin, it's Mylee and Sean," Mylee said. "We're sorry to barge in, but... Sidi's not working, and, honestly, we got a little freaked out."

Nice of her to admit that, Sean thought. Somehow, his own terror felt less childish coming from her.

"Mrs. Larkin?" Mylee pushed the kitchen door open. Sean had to catch it as it swung back on its hinges, into his face. Light assaulted them from the other side, along with the unmistakable smell of sugar, butter, and flour all baking together.

"Finally, the light's on! So where's she?" Aereal asked.

The door swung shut behind them, leaving them in a warm little room with a table, nine chairs, and two trays of sugar cookies cooling on the counter. Nothing else.

"Seriously, what is that smell?" Mylee asked, wrinkling her nose up again, then exclaimed, "Sean!"

"What?" Sean froze with a sugar cookie halfway inside his mouth, speaking around it as best he could. "It's Mrs. Larkin! Besides, you're the one who broke into her house."

"All I smell are cookies baking," Aereal said.

"No!" Sean dropped the cookie. "No, you smell cookies burning!" He sprang around the counter to the other side of the kitchen and ripped open the oven. A plume of smoke blasted itself straight into his face, sending him choking and staggering backward.

"Sidi, fire suppression!" Mylee said.

"I'm sorry, that feature is unavailable," the computer chirped back at them.

Sean waved smoke out of his face, coughing. "Sidi, turn the oven off!"

"I'm sorry, that feature is unavailable."

"There's a manual shutoff," Aereal said from somewhere beyond the assaulting torrents of black and poisoned air.

Sean choked and sputtered and forced words out. "Yeah, where's the panel on this model?"

"Side!" He saw Aereal moving through the smoke, and then she was slamming the oven shut again.

"You should leave that open!" Mylee said. "If fire suppression isn't working..."

"The oven's off. It should cool quick enough." Aereal coughed as she and Sean backed out of the smoke. "This woman obviously bakes a lot of cookies. Why would she leave them to burn?"

The twins didn't answer. They didn't need to. There was no answer.

"Well," Aereal took a few deep, smoke-free breaths with her back resting against the refrigerator. "At least we know what other thing you were smelling."

"No, that wasn't it," Mylee said. "It's meat. It's raw meat. But, there's nothing thawing, there's nothing else cooking..." She looked at Sean, desperation in her face. "You do smell it, right?"

"Yeah." Sean nodded. "I smell it. But..."

"Guys..." Aereal's eyes had fixed onto the tray on the counter, the one with Sean's half-eaten cookie lying beside it. And then they were all reaching for each other's hands, backing away from the counter as they stared at it.

"Sean. Sean? How much of that cookie did you eat?" Mylee

asked.

"No, there wasn't any on it. There wasn't. I'm sure."

"That's blood," Aereal said. "I'm not seeing things, right? That is blood, right?"

"Seriously, how much did you eat?" Mylee asked.

"There was no blood on the cookie. I would have tasted it!" Sean said.

"Okay. Okay okay okay." Aereal tried to gesture at the counter. Her hands were still attached to her cousins' hands, so she ended up pushing the two of them out in front of her. "No, this is good. Okay? Because it makes sense now. She was cooking. She cut herself, badly enough to go to the hospital. I mean, there's a lot of blood on that tray. So... she was in shock. She forgot to turn the oven off. Sidi should have turned it off for her, anyway... It all makes sense."

"Yeah..." Sean nodded. "Yeah, it does. It makes sense. Except... You don't use a knife to mix cookies..."

Like mice sensing a cat, all three of them scurried back through the kitchen door and into the dark hall, through the dark hall, and into the front room. There was enough light outside still to see through the large front window and they spread out before it, inside the pools of setting sunlight, and away from the shadows.

"No," Aereal said. "No, I'm right about this. She cut herself, forgot to turn the oven off, and went to the hospital. That's what makes sense. So... this is what makes sense!"

"Yes, you're right." Sean nodded and looked at Mylee. "We should try one of the other neighbors."

"No!" Mylee retreated deep into the shadows on one side of the window, away from the hall and the front door. "No. We can't go outside. We're not going outside!"

"Miles, what are you talking about?" Sean asked.

"Crap, I think she might be right. Oh gatch. Crap. Gatch!" Aereal stood with her arms frozen at her sides, staring out the front window.

"What?" Sean asked.

Aereal shook her head. The ends of her fingers were trembling, and the tremor drifted, inch by inch, up her arms, until her entire body was shaking. "The shadows, moving outside, between the buildings. You see them?"

Sean glanced out, shrugged. "Yeah."

"I saw them from your window too. I thought it was just cars moving overhead."

"Right?" Sean said.

"Except there are no cars overhead right now." Aereal's eyes remained fixed straight ahead on shadows that bounced from wall to wall, building to building, and also up the walls, across the windows. Passing cars cast such shadows all the time. And yet, as he looked, Sean noticed that they moved oddly, slower, and less steady, and more like...

Like an animal.

Against his own will, Sean glanced up and saw what Aereal had already seen. The sky above them was clear, empty reds and golds and blues reaching up into the atmosphere, to touch the half shadows of two moons and five pinprick stars. There were no cars.

Just that in itself was odd during rush hour on a workday.

Was that what Mylee had noticed? Was that why she had pushed them inside the house?

And then they were all backing up again, away from the window this time, until Mylee bumped into the piano, with a deep rumbling of strings inside the grand, hollow box, and they all stopped short.

"No," Mylee said. "No, this isn't real. This is our brains playing tricks. This is Sean and me getting three hours of sleep last night, and the fact that we've talked about nothing but explosions and terrorists for an entire day straight now, and us being freaked out. Because I'll admit it if no one else will – we are all freaked by that explosion yesterday. We are. That's all this is. We're making it up!"

"Yeah, and it's all crazy, anyway," Sean said.

"It is, it's crazy," Aereal agreed.

"I mean, the web going down, and weird shadows, and bloody cookies, and... what is it all even supposed to add up to?" Sean asked.

"Right, we are not thinking rationally," Aereal said. "Mylee's right. We're making it up. We're taking some weird things, that can be explained, and pretending they're all related, and freaking ourselves out."

"We just have to wait for the car, and get to your house," Mylee

said.

"Yeah," Aereal said.

"Yeah," Sean said.

And then the ceiling, directly above their heads, let out a loud, grinding squeak. All three faces shot up, all three expecting to see the plaster cracking open and the sky falling on their heads.

Instead, there was another creak, about a foot away from the first. Then another, and another. The three teenagers came together, holding each other's hands in a tight circle as they stared up at the ceiling.

"It's the wind?" Sean said. He hadn't meant for those words to come out as a question, but they did.

"It's not the wind," Mylee said.

"Is Mrs. Larkin home after all?" Aereal asked.

"Or her husband," Sean said.

"Then why wouldn't they have heard us by now? We weren't exactly quiet?"

"Miles, what are you..." Before Sean could stop it, Mylee's hand had detached from his. She took a step toward the doorway, the darkness, with an empty staircase looming at the edge of sight. "Miles!"

Mylee stopped a few inches from the doorway, her eyes fixed on the stairs. Above her head, the creaking seemed to follow her, from the center of the front room, toward the top of the stairs.

"Mylee, really, you don't go *toward* the weird noise!" Sean said.

"Oh, come on. It's just one of the Larkins!" Aereal said. But she said it in a whisper.

"It's not." Mylee stepped backward, still watching the staircase where the creaking had stopped. "It's not a person. It doesn't smell right."

"What do you mean it doesn't *smell* right?" Aereal's voice rose to an almost normal volume, and Sean shushed her. He could smell it, too, a stench from the staircase, stronger and stronger as the moments passed, like the smell of the blood from earlier, but different, too.

"I mean it doesn't smell like a person!" Mylee choked over the last word with another, quicker step backward, almost into Sean's arm.

"That's absurd!" Aereal said. "Now I know we're making

things up! People don't smell people! Not from across the room!"

Sean couldn't tell if Aereal was confused, or delusional, or just being a brat again. "Since when?" he asked.

"Um... Since the beginning of the Human race," Aereal said. "Do you idiots really think you can smell people now?"

A creak came from the top of the stairs, bringing all their eyes back, all their attention to it, and to the shadow that moved, step by step, coming down. Mylee grabbed Sean's arm, cutting off the blood flow in his wrist. "We need to go. We need to go. Now. Sean!"

"Go where? It's between us and the door!" Aereal said.

The shadow stopped. A man's shadow, and then a man's shape, not quite solid, as if all the shadows above the staircase had gathered together into a physical form. Its face, if it was a face, turned toward the sound of Aereal's voice.

"Sean. Sean. Sean!" Mylee shook his arm.

"Mr. Craig?" Sean asked, one last grasp for sanity, one moment left, before the world as he knew it collapsed forever.

On the staircase, the solid shadow turned its entire body toward the music room. Its hands gripped onto the rail, and then both legs snapped straight up, knees to its chest, feet balanced with perfect, bone-chilling ease on the wooden staircase railing. It perched there with a snarl like that of a caged dog breaking from its throat, and that smell, Human but somehow... Bloody.

Sean finally found the word in that half-second it stayed perched on the rail. Bloody. It smelled Human, but bloody.

And then it sprang straight into the doorway, on all fours, circling around between the piano and the back wall. Aereal screamed. Sean screamed.

"Out, out, out!" Mylee shoved her brother toward the hall and the thing that looked like a man but moved like an animal and smelled like blood.

"Are you insane!" Aereal's words blew away into the creaking of floorboards beneath their feet as she and Sean skidding backward, away from the shadow, toward the front window, more and more trapped by the second.

The thing rose to a crouch, still only a solid shadow in the darkness, but huge, and far taller than any normal, Human man. Sean and Aereal tripped against each other, staggering to keep

their feet beneath them. In front of them, Mylee stood frozen there in the center of the room when the shadow dropped to all fours again, legs tensed to spring.

And then Mylee took two steps across the room and screamed with every ounce of strength inside her, "Stop it!"

The shadow froze, legs still poised to spring, arms to the ground. Its head tilted, pinpricks of light where eyes should have been pointed straight at Mylee. The snarl became a hiss, the kind one predator uses to warn off another. And then it rose to its full height, looming feet above the teenagers with its chest pushed out and its shoulders back.

"Door," Mylee said, hands shaking and closed into fists at her sides. "Get to the door, now."

Aereal moved first, out of the light from the window, through the shadows, and into the hall.

"What are you doing?" Sean asked.

"Go," Mylee said.

"What is going on?" Sean asked.

"I don't know, just go!" Mylee shoved him harder than anyone ever had before in his life, as Aereal flung the door wide open. The shadow's hiss twisted into a snarl as it dropped onto all fours, knuckles digging into the floor. Sean kept ahold of Mylee's wrist, grabbed the door handle with his other hand, tossing Mylee out ahead of him as he turned the lock in the handle. Mylee dragged him out with her, and the door slammed behind them just in time for something huge and heavy to smash into it from the other side.

Outside, with the shadows still moving between houses, the three of them leaped off the porch and made a mad dash through the garden, onto the sidewalk, then into the street, directionless and frantic in this sprint to nowhere.

"This isn't happening!" Aereal said between ragged and gasping breaths of air. "This isn't real. This isn't happening. What is happening?"

"Where are we going?" Mylee asked. But as Sean turned back to tell her that he had no idea, he slammed straight into something coming just as fast from the other direction.

Mylee and Aereal both screamed. Sean staggered and would have fallen if a hand had not reached down to keep him up.

"Mr. Hannen?" Mylee said, gasping for breath as she and Aer-

eal stumbled over their own feet in the center of the road.

"Hey, you're the scientists' kids, right?" He was a middle-aged man, holding Sean's arm to keep him from falling, who lived three houses down from the twins.

"And our cousin," Sean said, clutching at his chest in an attempt to get his breath back.

"Great." Mr. Hannen nodded, releasing Sean's arm. "That's good, yeah, um... Your parents home?"

Mylee shook her head, "No."

"Okay. So, um..." Mr. Hannen's eyes went to the shadows, moving between every house, on both sides of the street, with the sky empty above their heads. He smelled like smoke, and that other smell, too, the one that Sean could only describe as *bloody*. And that wasn't all. His shirt was a mess, with one pant leg ripped open up to his knee. "I don't know if you've noticed, but there's some weird stuff going on..."

"Uh, yeah," Mylee said.

"There are things," Aereal said. "Live things, in the shadows."

"Yeah, so..." Mr. Hannen pointed, up the street and behind the teenagers. "That car's been sitting idle for a few minutes. I say we run for it."

"Yeah."

"Yup."

"Go!"

It might have been Sean's imagination, but he felt the shadows following them, leaping between buildings, across walls, and over roofs. They had to go back past the Larkins' house, and he couldn't stop himself from glancing over, seeing through the trees and up the porch. A black hole gaped wide open where the door had been, empty and dead.

Where was the thing, the shadow, apparently not so trapped behind a closed door?

But then they had reached the car and Mr. Hannen was holding the door open for them all to slide inside. It was a standard six-person order-car, a curved bench seat with four safety belts in the back, two free, swiveling bucket seats in the front. The bucket seats could face the car's front dashboard if desired, but most people turned them to face other four seats in the back.

Aereal tumbled into one of the front seats. Mylee and Sean fell

onto the back bench. Sean found the manual lock as Mr. Hannen came in behind them. "Excuse me, young lady," he said, moving over Aereal to get to a front control dashboard that was as dark as the main interface in Sean's living room.

A horrifying thought suddenly occurred to Sean, making him blurt out, "Gatch! Do cars even work without Sidi?"

"Yes." Mr. Hannen pressed his hand down hard onto the dashboard until all the tiny lights flashed on, such a normal but somehow now magical sight. "Sidi manages CarCall, but every car has an independent operating system, for security reasons. I just need to shut the interface down... and..."

Sean let out a deep breath as the engines hummed to life, lifting off from the ground, leaving their street and whatever was going on in those dark houses behind them. From above, the world looked right again, though perhaps a little less air traffic than usual for rush hour. Still, the cars whizzed by, between skyscrapers and over residential neighborhoods. Aereal sat back in her seat, taking several rapid, shallow breaths. Sean reached for Mylee's hand, and instead, she wrapped both her arms around his arm, her head to his shoulder.

"So..." Mr. Hannen took a deep breath and turned from the dashboard. "How'd you end up in the street?"

Mylee raised her head off of Sean's shoulder. "We got freaked when Sidi shut down, went over to see if Mrs. Larkin knew anything."

Mr. Hannen nodded. "Good call. She's always home in the evenings."

"Except she wasn't," Sean said. "No one was home. The door was open, there was blood. There was just blood..."

"And that thing," Aereal said.

"So you saw one too?" Mr. Hannen ran both hands back through his short, grey hair. "I thought I might be seeing things."

"What happened to your leg?" Mylee asked.

"Right..." Mr. Hannen flexed his left leg, the one with the torn fabric, and blood, too, Sean noticed. "I was in the backyard. With Sidi down, I didn't want to risk the oven, so I went to start dinner on the grill. And this... thing..." He looked at Sean. "You know the Astric-Ferrins, house between ours?"

Sean nodded while the girls just sat there staring at Mr. Han-

nen.

"I heard them scream. Not a lot. More like something surprised them... Anyway, someone screamed, I think, and then something jumped from their yard into mine, right over my fence."

"Isn't your fence nine feet tall?" Mylee asked.

"Nine and a half, yeah." Mr. Hannen shivered, facing the window. "Anyway, I didn't get a good look at it. I just bolted. Freaked, as you put it. Fell, at some point. Weird," he flexed his leg again, hand on his knee. "It almost felt like it took a bite out of me."

"A bite?" Mylee asked. "Like a... zombie?"

Mr. Hannen laughed, a forced noise that sounded a lot like his shiver had looked. "No. I'm sure I just snagged it on something. But... Weird stuff."

They were quiet for a moment, watching the city move beneath them. Then Mylee asked, "Where are your kids?"

Mr. Hannen shook himself out of a trance. "Um... Sports. That's where I'm going. Back to your school, to get them. Then I'll get my wife from work. You can come with me, or I can drop you wherever you want... What?"

At the same moment, the teenagers realized they were staring at Mr. Hannen with three identical expressions. They were not good expressions.

Mylee, Sean thought. Mylee, please say it. I can't.

"Mr. Hannen," Mylee said, "all sports practices were canceled today. I should be in swim, myself."

Mr. Hannen's eyes narrowed. "No. What... What do you mean?"

Mylee leaned forward, her hands were shaking, and she wrapped them together on her knees. "I'm not sure about Peter. But I saw Donna. I'm sure I did. She was maybe half a block behind us on the walk home."

"You're mistaken," Mr. Hannan said.

Sean sat all the way back in his chair, arms pressed tight against his sides, gripping the seat cushion and feeling his hands going slowly numb. "I saw her too."

"You're mistaken. She would already have been home when I got in, then." Mr. Hannen leaned back, eyes fixed to the glass above Mylee's head. "You're mistaken."

Sean found his sister's eyes, pale, green-grey eyes, so unlike

his own brown ones, but mirroring his own thoughts back at him. Neither of them spoke, and in her seat against the window, Aereal might not even have been breathing.

They didn't have long to wait, anyway. In less than a minute, the school lay beneath them, the long, dark building they had left only an hour earlier. Sean leaned toward his window as the car settled to the same sidewalk where he and Mylee had met only sixty minutes ago, wondering over their plans for the evening, thinking that Aereal coming home with them was the worst thing that could happen.

The sun was almost gone when the car sank and the building cut them off from what sunlight remained. Their familiar school loomed in the darkness, a still shadow with arms spread wide, beckoning them inside. The car stopped directly in front of the main walk, at a large slab of pavement connecting the school's circle drive to the front doors. Two street lamps hung suspended above the walk, glaring hot yellow light against the white cement, but every window was dark, and none of the security lights on the building had come on.

Mr. Hannen reached for the doorhandle.

"Wait!" Aereal's hand snapped out, grabbing his wrist. "Why are all the lights out?"

"Street lights are on," Mylee said.

"Don't worry," Mr. Hannen said. "Stay here. I'm just getting my kids. Be right back."

"Street lights come on earlier than security lights. Sidi would still have been working," Aereal said. "But they should have turned the security lights on manually..."

"And what about inside the building?" Sean asked. He thought he saw something move, off in the corner near the race track. But it was just a bush.

"I'll be right back. Just hang on," Mr. Hannen said.

"You're not hearing me!" Aereal said, still holding tight to his wrist. "Academic clubs were still meeting. The lights should be on."

Mr. Hannen twisted his wrist free as he pulled the door handle. "I'll be right back."

Had opening doors always made so much noise? Sean wondered.

"No! Listen to me!" Aereal grabbed at the exit, trying to keep it closed. "Mr. — what's his name? Listen. Your kids are not there. Stop! Listen to me!" Her fingernails scraped across glass, clawing like a bird at a closed window. The door slammed, almost crushing her hand between metal and plexiglass, and then Mr. Hannen was up the main walk, almost directly under the two glaring streetlights.

Aereal scooted back on the seat, all the way into Mylee, breathing in audible, ragged gasps — the only noise left in the entire dark world. Above them, cars flew, one or two a minute, in defiance of the fact that it should have been rush hour.

"This is wrong," Aereal said, knees against her chest. "This is really, really, really wrong."

"Sean!" Mylee grabbed her brother's arm and pointed, through the windows, toward the school. One shadow darted over the others, along the wall of the school, faster than seemed possible.

Sean lurched forward and threw the car door open, shouting, "Mr. Hannen!"

But then the shadow was on the light post, flying up. They caught one glimpse, a hand with what looked like grey and peeling skin. And then the light shattered, raining glass on the walkway above Mr. Hannen's head. Mylee screamed, and Aereal threw herself at the car's front dashboard.

A man's shout fell with the darkness, a single note bounced back off the walls of the school, answered by a snarl. Then a howl. Shadows descended from the roof, others spilling across the school lawn. Sean was still hanging out of the car when it made a sudden, uncontrolled lurch into the air. Mylee grabbed the back of his pants, pulling him inside. At the same moment, something slammed against the car, knocking them several yards over in the air. Mylee screamed as another thud landed against them. For one second, Sean knew they would be pulled back down into the swarm of shadows.

But the car rose, whatever clung to it fell away, and a moment later, they were safe in the sky again.

Mylee and Sean were on the floor, between seats, gasping for breath as Aereal fell back from the front dash.

"What have you done?" Sean asked. "Mr. Hannen... we can't just leave him!"

Ogre

“He’s dead, Sean!” Aereal said. “Don’t you get it yet? They’re all dead!”

CHAPTER 3

A RAY OF LIGHT, ONE OF THE LAST FROM THE dying sunset, sliced through the windows, as if trying to hide the shadows, the dark buildings, the lack of traffic, and all the lights that should have been on. Aereal collapsed beneath her seat, head between her knees, sobbing. Mylee put her head on Sean's shoulder, curled up to his side as he strung his arms around her. For a moment the three of them just sat, on the floor between the seats, listening to the air blow against the windows. At some point, the truth sank down into their bones, that they could not stay in the air forever, that they might have nothing to come back down for, that they might be dead too, dead already, and only suspended in life, like the last rays of the dying sun.

Eventually, Mylee cleared her throat. "Where are we going?"

Aereal sniffed, raising her head. "My house. It's ten miles away. Maybe..."

No one wanted her to finish that sentence. They got back up onto the seats, looking through windows at the familiar city below.

The dark, dark city.

But as the miles passed, they saw a few lights, then more lights, homes glowing bright and warm, then the buildings of a shopping district, all lit up as it should be at night. Mylee leaned forward against the window, her face relaxing in the brightness below them. Maybe Aereal was right. Sean shook his head. He'd had that horrifying thought far too many times in the last hour.

Before long, a familiar street appeared beneath them, all aglow under intact streetlights.

"It's still here." Aereal trembled as she spoke, hands pressed up hard against the glass. "It's still here."

The car descended, between lit-up buildings, onto the sidewalk directly in front of Aunt Linda's house. Safely arrived now, the three teenagers waited, frozen inside the sealed car, watching for shadows.

The front door of the house ripped open, and then Aunt Linda charged through it, down the porch and onto the lawn, waving both arms in the air.

"Mom!" Aereal sprang out of the car, across the sidewalk, and over the lawn, straight into her mother's arms. The twins followed her. Aunt Linda grabbed them all, pushing them ahead of her, and a second later they were inside the warm, well-lit house that smelled of cooking dinner and laundry soap.

"Bret!" Linda said. "Bret. I have them. They're here!"

Uncle Bret came down the stairs, a large, black duffle bag in each of his hands. "They have a car? Did you bring a car?"

"Yes. Parquies, come get a bag. We have to go." Aunt Linda was already halfway down the front hall, headed for the kitchen.

Mylee followed her aunt, asking, "Have you heard from our parents?"

"No, just grab a bag. Grab the bags!" Aunt Linda said.

"Eery..." Uncle Bret reached for his daughter.

"Where are we going?" Aereal asked. Every part of her was trembling, from white hair to the fingers that reach out for one of the black duffle bags. "Do you know what's out there?"

"Yes," Uncle Bret said.

The twins knew their uncle carried a gun for work, but they had never seen it in the house before. Sean had always assumed he left it at the police station. But it was there now, on his hip, under

his jacket. A second later, it vanished again under the jacket, but it was still there, and it was real, like the rest of that horrid, confusing, impossible night.

"Aunt Linda..." Mylee came from the kitchen a step behind her aunt. She took the bag when Linda shoved it into her hand, but didn't seem to notice it was there. "Aunt Linda, stop! Look, we heard what our mother said to you last night. Sean and I, we were listening. She said to come to the lab..."

"I know what your mother said. There's no time for this." Aunt Linda plowed straight past Sean, grabbing her co-pad from the staircase rail on her way.

"The car is still on the curb, three yards from the house," Uncle Bret said. "You go first. Parquies, follow her. I have the rear."

Aunt Linda nodded to her husband who reached for the door and pulled it open with a swoosh, waiting for her to step first over the threshold, raising his other arm to wave the twins out after her.

Before they could move, however, Aunt Linda stepped straight back through the doorway, back several more steps, past the beginning of the staircase, as if someone had pulled on a cord attached to her hips. The door opened wider, pushing Uncle Bret and Aereal aside.

Outside, massed all over the front lawn, two dozen soldiers had appeared out of nowhere, wearing body armor, helmets, and heavy artillery, with gun drones hovering back and forth across the sky over their heads. And through the front door, dressed in black armor with a gun on his hip, came the twins' father.

"Linda." He took the co-pad from her hand and tapped the screen. Sean glimpsed a trip itinerary and what looked like shuttle tickets. "April will be disappointed," his father said.

"You aren't," Aunt Linda said, with her eyes fixed to his.

The twin's father sighed, shoving the co-pad back at Aunt Linda's hands. "What disappoints her disappoints me. But you're right. I came for my children, not you three."

Uncle Bret's arm constricted around Aereal's shoulders, holding her close to him, like the gun.

Aunt Linda glanced back at the twins. "Let them come with us. They're just kids. You and April have to stay, I get that. But they don't. You know we will take care of them."

"You won't make it, Linda," the twin's father said. "If the things on the ground don't get you, the ships in orbit will. No one is leaving this planet."

Aunt Linda's lip trembled, and it showed in her voice. "Please, William, just let us go."

What was she afraid of? Sean wondered. The shadows? The ships? The blackout? Or his father?

The twins' father looked over Linda's head, straight at his children. "Not with them."

Aunt Linda opened her mouth to speak. Uncle Bret's hand, the one not holding Aereal, on the same side as his gun, twitched.

"Okay, so where are we going?" Mylee asked. She held onto Sean's arm just a little too tightly, and the pressure did not match her pleasant, normal tone of voice. "The lab, right Dad?"

He looked at her, smiling the smile of someone playing a role. "Right. Go through. The soldiers will get you to the car."

"Great." Mylee pulled on Sean's arm, uprooting his feet from the floor, taking him with her.

"Parquies..." Aunt Linda's voice followed them, hollow and dark.

Mylee turned on the threshold, her hand sweating in Sean's, fingers shaking so that she could barely keep ahold of him. In the warm light that still spilled from the kitchen door, she gave her aunt a broad smile. "See you soon."

On the lawn, soldiers swarmed them, and before they knew it, they were in the dark interior of a four-seat car. Their father followed, and the door whooshed shut. Sean sat up, craning his neck to see the house where he has spent so much of his life, windows still lit, curtains drawn closed for the night, all exactly as he had always known it. Except for the armed men pacing up and down, with their drones flying overhead.

The soldiers scattered, into other cars or on foot down the streets, Sean didn't see. Instead, he watched his aunt and uncle and cousin making a mad dash across the lawn and into the car they had taken from his own street. They tumbled inside, then flew off in the other direction through the air. Their front door stood open behind them, the last image Sean ever got from the world he had known.

And then they were in the air. The view pulled back, sending

them into yet another part of the city where a shopping center sprawled, engulfed in flames. Mylee saw it, too, a new horror in that blacked-out night, that made her reach for Sean's hand. Then it was gone, just a memory like the piano teacher's bloody cookies and their aunt's wide-open door.

It was not the last.

Sirens blared from a few neighborhoods as they flew over, but most of the trip, even over fires, was painfully silent. They were too high to hear the crackle of the flames, or the screams. For the first time in his entire life, Sean saw the streets empty, most windows dark, with only blazing buildings to illuminate the path beneath them. And then, like a trick of the light, a Human shadow scurried up a wall with inhuman agility. Sean snapped his head back toward the interior of the car.

He found Mylee staring at their father, who was typing something on his co-pad.

"What are those things?" Mylee asked. "How did they get here?"

"In good time," their father said.

"Now seems good," Sean said.

But that was the last thing their father said before they reached the lab.

The vaulted, stone and concrete underground buzzed, literally. There was a hum from the machines and a never-ending thud from feet passing over marble. Sean glanced back up the way they had come, down through cellar doors beneath the main hospital skyscraper, deep underneath the hospital complex. The doors thudded closed over their heads, ringing down the empty, concrete stairwell, sealing them inside.

The noise came from ahead of them. They turned a corner out of the stairwell and entered a giant atrium that was usually peaceful, austere but beautiful, with comfortable seating and a large fountain babbling in the center of the room. They couldn't hear the fountain now, though. At least a hundred people crowded the atrium. The intake desk at one end of the room vibrated with

activity as there and everywhere else, doctors and staff moved back and forth, scrolled through files, and talked through tels and co-pads.

Mylee and Sean had come many times to visit this technically secret research facility that everyone seemed to know about. But it had never been like this, with so many people, moving so quickly.

"Dad, what is going on?" Mylee had asked that question at least a dozen times now, and each time, her voice got sharper.

Still, their father said nothing.

Across the atrium and through a heavy, fireproof door, a hall led to a string of laboratories, each working on its own important set of research projects. There were seven hydraulically sealed doors, secured like vaults and protected by a hundred layers of digital encryption. Sean had only ever been behind one of them, the room where their parents worked. That door stood open, like the gaping mouth of a bank vault, waiting to seal them in with the treasure.

A doctor in a white lab coat met them just before the doorway. She held a co-pad out to their father, saying something in a language that doctors spoke when they didn't want anyone to overhear. Latin, Sean thought it was called. Their father nodded, saying something back that sent her away to the atrium.

Mylee took a breath. "Dad, what is..."

"Mylee enough!" Their father stood for a moment, framed in the white light from beyond the open door. His eyes gleamed, and Mylee bit her lip.

"It's not an unreasonable question," she said, quiet so that only Sean could hear, as they followed their father inside the lab.

The same cacophony of movement and voices greeted them here. Doctors in lab coats stood over screens, giving orders to each other and to the computers.

"William!"

It was their mother, beckoning their father over to her. Her eyes flicked at the twins, just the slightest of glances that might have been a trick of the light. Then she turned, so that her back was to them, speaking Latin in a low and worried voice.

"Are we invisible?" Mylee threw her arms out wide to both sides, almost but not quite hitting three different people. The crowd of lab coats moved around her, shifting their feet without

looking up, as if she were no more noticeable than a stone pillar.

Sean grabbed her arm. "Let's get snacks in the kitchen. If they're going to ignore us, we may as well be fed."

Ten minutes later, he sat with Mylee on a sofa, stuffed away in a corner by the room's little kitchen, eating chocolate bars for dinner because no one bothered to tell them not to.

Something wasn't quite right in the lab, more than the running and the whispering and the fact that the twins were apparently invisible to everyone except each other. Given the events of the day, none of that felt very odd. Annoying, sure, but fitting somehow too.

But something was odd, and Sean couldn't put his finger on it. He threw a candy wrapper at the wall with a sigh and reached for another.

"So, are we ever going to talk about this?" he asked.

Mylee snapped a candy bar clean in half, then jammed half of it into her mouth, chewing and swallowing before she spoke. "You mean the fact that all their computers are weirdly working, and they apparently still have internet access."

That was it, the odd thing he couldn't figure out! Sean almost dropped his chocolate bar, kicking himself for not noticing it earlier. "Well, it is a government lab, so..."

"Right." Mylee made a face, scrunching up her nose with chocolate melting between her fingers.

"You think more's going on here too, don't you?"

Mylee shook her head, wiping her fingers on a disposable towel. "Sean, I'm starting to get this feeling like our parents might be supervillains. And I don't like it."

"Yeah, me too. And me neither." Sean tossed another empty wrapper at the wall. "Anyway, that's not actually what I meant."

Mylee turned to squint at him with chocolate dripping from her fingers.

"I meant, are we going to talk about what happened back there, at the Larkins' house."

Mylee looked away. Of all the many things Sean could be

referring to, he knew Mylee knew exactly which one he meant. "No," she said.

"Miles, you shouted at that thing to stop, and it stopped."

Mylee picked up another towel, vigorously rubbing clean fingers against it. "I just startled it."

"Do you really think that?"

"What else?" She scrubbed her fingers a second time, eyes on her work, careful to clean under each nail. "What else could it be? And why do they still have internet? If there are ships in orbit, and they took out the Sidi satellites..."

"We don't know that happened."

"No, but there *are* ships in orbit. Dad said so, remember?"

Against his own will, Sean did remember. Against his will, he remembered every detail of that evening. Against his will, he had this terrible thought repeating in his head, that his aunt and uncle were already dead, somewhere out there in a blacked-out city. Against his will, he was even worried about Aereal.

And also against his will, Sean said nothing, because he couldn't figure out anything to say. The entire universe had changed forever inside Mrs. Larkin's familiar house. He had known it the moment he saw that thing balance so effortlessly and so inhumanly on the banister. Whatever happened next, he felt it was only fall out from that one, haunting image.

The hours dragged on, monotonous like the slow dripping of water down a cliff. Mylee fell asleep, followed by her brother a few minutes later.

Four hours after they arrived, Sean woke up on the couch beside the lab's kitchenette, his eyes fixed on the clock on the stove. It took him a while to figure out what those glaring numbers meant. He needed another second to realize Mylee was not on the couch beside him. In a fog, he sat up, taking deep breaths, trying to get his lungs working again.

Mylee stood several feet away, in a corner created by the kitchenette wall and the lab wall. Above sterile white workbenches, somehow still working computer stations, and ridiculously expen-

sive microscopes, she watched the main screen that hung from the ceiling in the center of the room.

Sean couldn't figure out what she was watching, though. That screen had displayed the same image since they came in, just a white background separated into uneven sections by jagged black lines. The sections were numbered, in what appeared to be random order, and some of them were colored in red.

Sean went over to his sister, leaning his back against the kitchenette wall.

"Do you know what that is?" Mylee asked, jabbing her chin toward the main screen. "It took me forever to figure it out."

Sean squinted, then took in a startled breath. "Oh, it's the city!"

"Sectioned into neighborhoods, yeah." Mylee shifted her weight, squaring her shoulders where they rested against the wall. Then she pointed. "Seventy-four, there. That's our neighborhood. It's been red since we got here. Eighty-eight, that's Aunt Linda's. It turned red about a minute after I woke up."

Now that Sean looked at the map carefully, he noticed a pattern. Toward the western edge of the city, about six labeled neighborhoods away from their home and school, was a neighborhood labeled 97. The red from that neighborhood spilled into all the neighborhoods around it, moving east, south, and north across the map. Solid red covered at least five neighborhoods in each direction. Then, to the east, the red climbed up, into neighborhood 74, out into the surrounding areas.

At the opposite end of the map, the eastern edge of the city, a similar pattern began in section 208. They weren't regular patterns, like something computer-generated. They looked organic, like the roots of a tree, spreading out from the trunk in their search for nutrients.

Something about that thought — *nutrients*, a plant reaching out to find what it needed to live — rang behind Sean's ears. *They're all dead!* Aereal had shouted back in the car, ages ago. Why did those two thoughts seem to connect? Sean shook his head, clearing the unwanted images away, and turned to Mylee.

"You think this is a map of those things, spreading?" he asked.

Mylee pressed her lips together until they turned white. Before that happened, she started shaking her head, then kept shaking her head, until the movement looked like a nervous tremor, and

the tremor looked like it would become permanent.

Just before he became concerned that Mylee's head would detach from her neck, Sean noticed something on the map and grabbed her arm. "Hey! Gatch! Two. Up there. Two. That's us, right?"

Neighborhood 2 was in almost the exact center of the map, one of the oldest parts of the city, that included the planetary capital building, the university, and the main hospital complex—the same hospital complex they were standing under right then. As they watched, the black lines around neighborhood 2 turned red. They blinked a few times between red and black, throbbing like a heartbeat as the twins held their breath.

They were not the only ones. A few of the white lab coats stopped in their tracks, staring up at the main screen. Then a few more, and a few more, until everyone in the room had frozen where they stood, co-pads in hand, conversations cut short mid-sentence, watching the throbbing heartbeat. The line blinked red one last time, then stayed red for several seconds, a bloody laceration against the white. Then the line turned black again, only because the red had moved inside it, spreading in from the edges of neighborhood 2, toward the center.

"*Bene. Nobis bene.* Get back to work!" It was the twin's mother, April, waving at the rest of the lab coats. "*A operis.* Transport will be here soon. Back to work, now!"

The room took a collective breath, and conversations started again, with lab coats darting back and forth.

Sean realized too late that Mylee had moved, too, shooting away from the wall and toward their mother with her hands hanging in fists by her sides. "What is going on?" she asked.

Their mother held a co-pad in front of her face, doing something with the screen. She did not look up at her daughter. "We're fine. There's a transport coming for us."

"What transport?" Mylee asked. "What are you talking about? Dad told Aunt Linda that no one was getting off this planet."

"We're not no one," their mother said.

"Mom!" Mylee grabbed the co-pad, ripping it from their mother's grasp in one smooth but violent motion. "Who are you?"

It was the same question burning in the back of Sean's mind, planted there last night by an overheard conversation in their

aunt's kitchen, set on fire by their father's appearance with an army on their aunt's front lawn, and now finally spoken aloud.

Their mother looked from Mylee to Sean, then away from both of them. Without a word, she took the co-pad back from Mylee, stepped around the twins, and vanished into the flood of lab coats.

"Miles?" Sean asked. He wasn't sure why, or what he meant to say beyond her name. Maybe the point was just to say her name.

She turned, looked straight at him, open hands now hanging at her sides. "Sean?" Did she have something to say after that, or was the point just to say his name?

And then they heard it, over the hum of generators, the buzz of the still somehow working computers, the din of six conversations all going at once. It was the creak on Mrs. Larkin's ceiling all over again, except louder. A creak, and then a bang.

And then another. And another.

A scream came next, one person or a hundred, a thousand maybe, all crying out at once in the atrium. Over the heads of that crowded lab, Sean somehow caught sight of his mother, standing frozen and white in the midst of chaos, her eyes huge like Mylee's had been back in Mrs. Larkin's music studio.

And then it was his father, coming from somewhere else and shouting at the top of his lungs, "Close the doors! Seal the doors, now!"

Maybe it was her husband's voice that snapped April back to life. She moved, a jagged, rushing motion over to a computer station as if life itself depended on that one screen. Meanwhile, the lab's security door, the one with an airtight seal held shut by thousands of pounds of hydraulic pressure and designed to stop an invading army, slammed shut, hissing as its edges locked them in.

"What about the transport?" a lab coat asked – asked the twins' father, who was suddenly somewhere near them. "If the atrium's gone, how do we get..."

"There's no time," the twins' father said. "Get them!"

The room swelled, bodies crashing and rushing and slamming back and forth. A hand closed over Sean's shoulder and, in desperation, he clutched for Mylee. All he knew in that moment was that he needed her with him, that whatever was happening, he would not survive it alone. But her arm slipped through his hand like water as, kicking, he was dragged away. There was a small door

at the side of the lab that, for all Sean could see went nowhere. But that didn't stop his father from dragging him through it.

The last words Sean caught from the lab were his mother's, frantic like a child lost in a crowd of strangers. "*Princeps*, we're still on the ground. What are you doing, we're still on the ground, you still have people on the ground!"

And then, a metallic screech, hydraulic doors being forced back, weapons fire, Human screams, and the roar of something... else...

The small door to the lab closed behind them, locking. They were in a tube-like hallway, dark with only emergency lighting from the ceiling. Sean heard his father swearing, in some strange language, right in Sean's ear. He twisted, trying to get free. "Let go! Where's Mylee? Miles!"

"Sean..." Her voice was a croak, but it sent a wave out to drown the panic invading his guts. Sean turned, just enough to see her, dragged along by a lab-coat two steps behind him and his father. Sean heard something slam into the door from the lab side, and then their father pressed his hand into a scanner beside yet another door. It whooshed open, and Mylee and Sean were flung inside.

It wasn't a room, a closet more like, but not even that big. Mylee fell into the back wall next to him, and Sean grabbed for her. He had no choice, really, but to pull her close to his side. The space was barely big enough for the two of them.

"You're putting them both in one?" the lab-coat asked.

"We don't have the energy to charge two," their father said.

"Dad, what's going on?" Mylee reached her hand for the open doorway, only to strike something solid between them and the hall. Clearsteel. A clearsteel barrier had descended in front of them. Mylee pounded the heel of her hand against it, crying out, "Dad!"

Their father worked at a screen on the wall, hidden from their sight, on the other side of the barrier. "I'm sorry kids," he said. "You have to survive this."

The walls of their little hole turned live, glowing blue, humming. "Is this an incubation chamber?" Sean asked.

"What? Dad?" Tears ran down Mylee's face as she choked on her own words.

"Can they survive in one together?" the lab-coat asked.

"They will be fine," their father said.

Sean felt the cold then, biting, eating through his skin from underneath. "Dad..." He choked, air freezing halfway down his throat, seeing Mylee's tears turn to glass on her cheeks.

"You're going to sleep now, kids," their father said, finally looking at them through the clearsteel. "I don't know what you'll wake up to. But for now, sleep."

A door closed in front of the clearsteel barrier. For a moment, the live blue burned across Sean's retinas. And then, reality switched off.

CHAPTER 4

SOMEONE WAS CRYING, WHIMPERING, OR GASPING. That noise alone existed in the darkness, rasping out against oblivion in a painful, sobbing rhythm, that refused to end.

And then, there was pain. The feeling of every nerve being set on fire all at once. It rushed through him like a wave, and in the midst of it, Sean realized he was alive, and that the whimpering was his own.

His head ran through images of the lab, his mother yelling into a computer, and the inhuman roar behind shattering hydraulic locks. He tried to force his eyes open and saw colors, lit from the same flame that ignited his nerves, stinging and burning all across his body. He wanted to scream, but the air would not leave his lungs. So instead, he just lay there in the agony of hellfire, amid the screams of an entire world dying, until the first wave passed, and he tried again to open his eyes.

He tried again, but his eyelids remained frozen in place.

He tried again.

And again.

And then, finally, it worked. The fireball of scorching colors melted into a cold, grey ceiling with rusted piping crisscrossed all over it. He could still hear himself whimpering. But it wasn't him alone.

Another minute passed inside fire's sting with colors bursting behind his optic nerves. And then he knew he was on his back, on a stone floor, under a very, very old and abandoned industrial ceiling. Another minute passed, in which the fire melted, and he found something lying on his shoulder. Another minute, to watch the searing lights dim, to find himself gasping instead of whimpering, and to realize that it was Mylee's head, directly beneath his chin.

And then, it was just time, seconds slipping through seconds in a rush of starlight through the cosmos until everything was burnt away, and only cold silence remained inside a metal hall.

Cold, and Mylee.

The next thing Sean knew was his sister sitting up, a jerking motion like an animatronic arm swiveling because it had no choice but to swivel on command. She doubled over on her knees, dry heaving with some kind of screeching, scraping, clicking noise like aluminum on sheet metal. It evolved into coughing, and then she threw up frozen chunks of partially digested food. Her breathing came in terrified gasps, and then the entire process began again, as Sean lay helpless and certain she would suffocate or tear her organs up through her esophagus.

She needed water.

Sean had to force every movement from every muscle, but, fiber by fiber, limb by limb and inch by inch, he turned himself onto his stomach, pushed himself up onto his forearms, crawled, crouched, crawled, clung onto the wall, and finally rose to teeter on his feet.

The floor dropped away from him, his body swayed, and his shoulder slammed against the wall five times before he found the lab door. But he did find it, wedged open to form a dark triangle just large enough to fit a Human body through. Sean stooped, tripped over his feet, and collapsed on all fours on the other side of the doorway.

Lights flashed on, blinding white after the hall, to reveal a

wreck of broken furniture and shattered equipment, void of life. No people. No animals. Even the consoles were dead. But the lights were working. There was power somewhere.

Sean pushed his shoulder into the wall and used it to carry his body weight across the room, to the kitchenette. Something had ripped the kitchenette door off its hinges and broken it into two pieces, one leaning against the doorframe, the other lying over the threshold. What was the point of that, breaking a door that did not even lock?

Sean held onto the doorway, gathering strength to walk over the broken piece of wood. It wobbled under his feet, sending his hip into the countertop. He caught himself with his elbow, his arm braced like a hook across the counter, trembling with the effort it took to anchor his body weight. Traces of the fire lingered inside him, and only as it faded did he realize how cold he was. He thought of the frozen food Mylee was coughing up, and memories came back, slowly.

They were frozen, he remembered. Frozen solid. He grabbed the counter and pulled himself along to the sink.

A spittle of dust came from the faucet. Nothing else.

Sean fell into the sink, choking, trying to breathe through the ice as pain surged from all over his body. Mylee was dead. He was going to die. The entire world was dead now, for all he knew. His parents, his aunt, and uncle, and Aereal...

He was even crying for Aereal now.

Sobbing, Sean sank to the floor, back against the sink as the frozen pain screamed through his limbs and spine and neck and head. He should never have left Mylee. He should have stayed in the hall. Dying with her seemed so much better than dying alone in the dead, white lab. Abandoned, he could only sob, until he heard himself screaming. It was a terrifying, brutal, alien sound that kept coming and coming until the cold had peeled his skin away, and heat burned up the cold, and he found himself sitting there, under the sink, in a new skin, with both freeze and fire gone.

Sean reached up with one hand, wrapped it over the top of the counter, and heaved himself onto his feet. His legs did not want to move, but they would, all the way to the cold-cabinet. His arm resisted, but he made it grab ahold of the plexiglass handle, heave the cabinet open, and reach inside.

The cabinet was dead, no lights, no cold. But the canisters were there, sterile water for experiments, insulated, vacuum-sealed, and resistant to everything, including time.

They were also ten pounds each. Sean dragged one out, immediately dropped it, but somehow, through a combination of pulling and pushing, got it to the hall.

Mylee was there, collapsed in a heap on the floor, but breathing. Her legs were still inside the incubator, and Sean pulled her away from it as if rescuing her from the mouth of a sleeping monster. It took him three minutes to remember how to open the canister, but he did, and they both reached in with cupped hands.

Mylee doubled over and threw up all the water she had just taken, along with more frozen food. She didn't want to, but Sean made her keep drinking, until, finally, they were both sitting up against the wall, and breathing. That was all they could do while their blood remembered how to be blood, lungs remembered how to be lungs, and hearts relearned how to beat.

"How long?" Mylee asked. They were the first words either twin had spoken since waking, and they came out in the horse croak of someone who had shoved fire straight down her throat.

Sean shook his head. He had to work his tongue around inside his mouth before the words would form.

"The lab is abandoned. Trashed too. The lights work, but there's no running water, and I have no clue what any of that means, anyway." He coughed, throat burning with the effort it took to speak. He did not understand how Mylee could form words after ten minutes of throwing up ice water and bile.

"Mom and Dad?"

"There's no one."

"There has to be *someone*." Mylee's eyes fixed on the open chamber in front of them—the incubator which apparently doubled as a cryostasis pod. She coughed, and drew her legs up to her chest, away from the gaping doorway. "Someone woke us."

"Maybe not. Maybe it was on a timer."

"A timer to when?" Mylee choked, and it wasn't just her

burned, raw throat this time. "How long has it been? Months? Years?"

Sean grabbed her hand before she started hyperventilating. "Let's get out of here," he said. "There're aren't any answers here, so let's just get out."

Mylee's fingers squeezed around his, like they had when they watched the Be'shon center explode, so long ago, it seemed. Holding hands, they got up and made their way to the lab.

Inside, the lights flashed on, and this time, Sean noticed the blinking luminant panels and the burnt-out ones. It had seemed so bright before, but was really quite a bit dimmer than he remembered. The twins stepped carefully over glass shattered from the computer consoles. Mylee hesitated for a moment as they drew near to the communications console where they had last seen their mother, screaming for a ship that was supposed to take them away. But there was no mother now, no body, no blood. Nothing but emptiness and ruin.

In the kitchenette, they dragged one of the ten-pound bottles out of the cold-cabinet, then hunted for smaller containers. Most of the dishes were smashed or gone, but they found a sealable coffee mug and a water bottle. Filling these, they set out between abandoned workbenches and lifeless computers.

At the exit, Mylee paused. She tapped the computer panel as if she feared the glass might shatter and called out: "Sidi?"

No response. She shrugged, as if to admit she knew it wouldn't work, then followed Sean out through a banged-up hole where the security door had been.

On the other side, hydraulic hinges lunged out into the hall, twisted like a child's plaything, and frozen in a new, distorted shape. The wall was smashed up, huge chunks of steel-infused concrete gouged out and stained copper green. Fluid residue from the hinges, Sean thought. But the fluid was long gone, and such stains did not form overnight. Months, at least. They had been asleep for months.

But more than just the ominous passage of time stopped Sean and Mylee in their tracks, staring at the mangled wall. Something had punched straight through concrete. Something had torn apart a locking mechanism designed to withstand military assault vehicles. It wasn't a theory or a nightmare. Something real had done

this.

And where was it now?

It was not the first time since waking that the question had occurred to Sean. In the back of his mind, he could still see shadows darting from wall to wall, the blood in Mrs. Larkin's cookie tray, the creature on her staircase. He could still hear Mr. Han-
nen's shout, as another shadow smashed the light above him, and the roar of whatever had broken into his parents' research facility. How many of them had there been, and where had they gone? Had they died off, or were they still up there, waiting on the streets? Or maybe waiting somewhere in the rooms and halls all around them?

Sean exchanged a glance with his sister, saw the same questions pass through her mind, and saw her reach the same conclusion. It didn't matter. They couldn't stay here, and there was only one way out. Fear or no fear, monsters and broken doors aside, they had to go up.

They had to force the next door open. It was broken like the others, wedged into its frame, and it took all their combined strength to push it down with a deafening crash.

As the door fell, lights in the vaulted atrium switched on. So the motion sensors still worked here, as they had in the lab. Did that mean something? Sean wondered. Or did he just want it to mean something? He paused with Mylee inside the doorway, searching, waiting for the ground to move, terrified to discover what the light and the noise might awaken. But a minute passed. Then another. Nothing moved.

With deep breaths, the twins stepped over the door, into the atrium. The fountain in the center of the room was smashed and dust-dry, the chairs in the waiting area, smashed, the computers at the reception desk, smashed. They couldn't see the marble floor, only dirt. And on top of the dirt, crumbling leaves.

"Is it fall?" Mylee asked.

Sean reached down, picked up a moldering leaf, and crumbled it between his fingers. "More like winter."

"And what did they do to the floor?" Mylee asked. "The marble... did they tear it up? Where'd the dirt come from?"

"Where'd the leaves come from?" Sean shook his head. "Let's keep going."

The leaves got deeper as they went until they had to wade through piles as high as their knees. Sean was certain he felt wiry hands grabbing at his ankles and jumped back shrieking once. But there was nothing real, just the ghosts their minds created. Even imaginary ghosts slowed them down, though, taking forever to make it to the base of the stairs.

Two stories up, a set of bunker doors stood wide open as if there had never been doors in that gaping hole at all. Through the hole, a blue sky glared down on them, as if daring them to believe they were safe.

"Why can we see the sky?" Mylee asked. "Isn't there a skyscraper there?"

"There used to be," Sean said. They hesitated there for a while, divers on the edge of a cliff, waiting for the tide to come in, for the waves to move the water deep enough, second-guessing this crazy choice to jump. A cool breeze blew down to brush their hair, throwing leaves and dust around on the stairs. There was no perfect moment to do this, Sean realized. They just had to start, move, one foot in front of the other, one step at a time.

They rested three times on the way up, legs still aching from the freeze, ears buzzing but straining to pick up even the slightest noise. But only the sound of wind came to greet them, blowing more leaves down the steps.

"This many leaves..." Mylee leaned her head back against the rail on their second stop. "This is more than one fall. It's been years, hasn't it?"

Sean didn't answer. He didn't have to. The truth was too obvious, a tightening knot in his stomach that he feared would never come loose again. He couldn't bring himself to mention it to Mylee, but the same packed dirt from the atrium covered the top of each step, too. No one had torn the marble up. There were layers upon layers of dirt covering stone. Layers and layers on layers. She had probably noticed it herself. She probably couldn't bring herself to say it, either.

At last, blinking in the sunlight, Sean and Mylee emerged from the underground. In front of them lay a pile of rocks, huge rocks, that included door frames, wire support rods, and half walls of brick still cemented together.

"Well," Sean said, "that's what happened to the skyscraper, I

guess. Did they finally fire on us from orbit?"

"Sean..." Mylee's fingers constricted around his wrist, turning him to face with her toward the hospital complex. They knew it well, had explored every corner of it at some point during their childhood. There should have been a landscaped lawn, trimmed to perfection, around six glass research buildings. The central skyscraper, the actual hospital, should have risen almost directly over the bunker entrance to their parents' underground facility.

Instead, the research buildings lay in tatters, like tissue paper doused under water. The lawn was an overgrown tangle of weeds between shattered pieces of brick and concrete. And the skyscraper...

For what could have been an hour, the twins stood looking up, not breathing, not thinking, just looking at a thing their minds refused to comprehend. At long last, Mylee cleared her throat, and finally spoke the words that had been coming since they saw the atrium and its dirt-packed floor.

"It's been more than a few years, hasn't it?"

Sean nodded, blinking to see past the water in his eyes. There, over their heads, a two-hundred-foot tree grew straight through the one standing wall of the hospital skyscraper.

CHAPTER 5

IT WASN'T JUST THAT ONE TREE. WHEN THEY DARED to look further, the twins found more evidence everywhere. More trees wrapped through the remains of other buildings. Streets overgrown to the point where they couldn't tell there had been a street at all. A car, enveloped inside a bush.

"How long?" Mylee asked.

"Just... take a breath..." Sean had seen this look on his sister's face before, usually in school, when she was failing with no hope of sliding in a passing grade at the last minute. Sometimes when she got angry, or scared, she would lose control, like she wasn't even herself anymore, and things would escalate quickly. The worst had been third-year math when they were ten, and Mylee had thrown her desk at their teacher. It had been an impressive throw for such a heavy object and such a little girl, but only Sean seemed to notice that.

"How long? Sean. How long? Sean. Sean!"

"Breathe! Miles!" Sean took her by the shoulders and shook.

"Breathe!"

"How? They're dead! Everyone's dead! Everything's gone. Everyone's dead!"

"We don't know that!" Sean said, shaking her. He knew from experience that he had about forty seconds to derail her before blunt objects started flying.

"Yes, we do know it! Look around!" Mylee said, and Sean could hear her voice tearing up the burned skin in her throat. "Everything's still here, and still broken. No one's cleaned anything, or fixed anything. We're alone! We're going to die here alone. This place is dead and we're going to die!"

"We are not alone!" Sean shook her. "I have you and you have me. So don't you dare hyperventilate yourself to death right now, because I need you!"

Her breath caught in her throat. For a moment she struggled to swallow, and then she started breathing again, too quickly at first, then steadier and steadier, until she was calm enough to say the word, "Sorry."

"Believe me, I get it." Sean glanced up. Was it his imagination, or was the sun setting? "We should find somewhere to spend the night."

"You don't think there are... animals, or something?" Mylee asked.

"Probably." Maybe it was her question that made him pick up a large stick. He snapped the fragile top off with one, sharp stomp of his foot then dragged it over the grass as they hiked the overgrown street.

After about a mile, the twins stopped. They had no idea where they were going and knew they would soon run out of familiar ground. The city was almost nine hundred square miles, almost sixty miles across, and they had never visited half of it. But, Sean thought, that was probably good. Even if the center of the city was dead, a lot of city remained to be seen. Maybe there were still people, somewhere. With every passing minute, however, every new ache that came to his legs, that possibility seemed less and less likely.

Half a mile ago, Sean thought they should keep walking until they found someone, or something more than overgrown trees. Now his legs ached, and his feet throbbed, and the unfamiliar

ground ahead of them rose like a giant desiring to swallow them whole and get back to its sleep. With no sign of any Human, alien, or animal, he and Mylee collapsed on what had once been the side of the road.

They still had a curb to sit on, sort of. The road had swallowed most of it, before grass and weeds swallowed the road. But in this one spot, a chunk of concrete protruded from the encroaching weeds. Here they sat, drank their water, and remembered that they had eaten nothing but chocolate in a hundred years.

"Humans can't eat grass, right?" Mylee asked.

"We could try," Sean said.

But they didn't. They got up and put one foot ahead of another, yard by yard through the silent city.

Half a mile later, they saw their first sign of moving life: A B-squirrel—a tiny, skittering creature transplanted from a planet called Senta, so named because it resembled some animal from long ago on Earth. It made an acrobatic leap between two cars that had rusted into the pavement, back when there was still pavement for them to rust into. The B-squirrel leaped with its six arms spread wide, flying without wings, landing with a tiny rustle in the branches that broke through a car window.

Mylee stopped, watching the frail plant shiver as the B-squirrel shimmied down, through the shattered window. Something about the inside of that car suddenly felt warm and safe, like the spare bedroom at their aunt's house. Sean waited until the last quivers faded from the invading bush, then took Mylee's hand, and pulled her along.

B-squirrels were predators, technically, but they were tiny, and would never think of attacking Humans. But if they had survived, then other animals must have survived too. And there were worse things out there, beyond the city limits. Things that hunted B-squirrels, and things that hunted those things, too.

High over their heads, the sun moved down. It had dipped dangerously low on the western horizon before one of them said it.

"We need a place to sleep," Mylee said.

"I know." Sean had been seeing shadows for a while now, like the shadows moving from wall to wall, building to building. The grey hand that smashed a light above their school. With a shiver,

he glanced at the half-standing buildings at the side of the road. Mylee nodded, and they turned into an overgrown patch of flowering grass, then through a gaping doorway.

It had been a house once. Broken and overtaken by trees, it resembled a house still, but in a twisted way, a mockery of the Human need to find safety and rest. At one side, a gaping chasm separated the upper and lower halves of the staircase, with the shattered remnants of a railing lying all across the weed-speckled floor. Leaves had blown in through the front door, pressed into a mound of dirt at the entrance.

They didn't go to the back of the house. It looked like the roof had caved in, anyway. So they justified their lack of curiosity, with bloody cookies in their minds, and hunkered down in the front room, behind a tree that twisted and twined its way through the bay windows.

There was no piano, only the skeleton of a couch, crumbled except for its wire springs and backboard. But in some ways, it resembled Mrs. Larkin's music room, and the longer Sean took to fall asleep, the stronger that resemblance grew. Eventually, Sean saw Mylee standing in the center of the room. A shadow leaped from the stairs, bulky shoulders bristled up against its ears as it crouched, ready to spring.

Then Mylee screamed a word, "Stop!" stretched out across the night like a single, fragile string about to snap. The shadow rose to its full height, shoulders back, chin down, looming over Mylee as it grew taller, and taller, and taller...

Then Sean's body twitched, he rolled onto his stomach, trying to scream, or move, or do something, anything. The shadow melted out of his blinking eyes and the dream ended. For a moment, he thought he was in his bed, that all of it was just that a dream. A nightmare.

Then He saw Mylee, standing in front of a cracked window, looking out at the silent, overgrown street.

Sean shook his head, rubbed his eyes, then ran both hands back through his hair. Mylee heard him moving and glanced his way, then turn her face toward the window again. It was night, but two of the moons were almost full, and a third was half full. Together, they lit the street in silver light almost as bright as the man-made lamps had once been.

It must have been near the end of March, Sean realized. The seven moons above his planet arranged themselves into predictable patterns, and children grew up learning which patterns fit which month, and even which parts of which months. Strange, to think that up in the night sky, time was still passing the way it always had.

"What do you see?" Sean asked.

Mylee shook her head. "I thought I saw a shadow. But... there's nothing there." She folded herself down between the roots of the tree, her face pointed out the window. Before she looked away, Sean fell back asleep.

The next morning was better, maybe because it had to be. They searched the house, then the next one, then the next. But there was no food, just furniture skeletons and large appliances, broken and rusted apart.

"What is it?" Sean asked, when Mylee stood frowning down at a toppled refrigerator for more than a minute.

"The power unit," Mylee said. "It's missing."

"You know where a refrigerator's power unit is?"

Mylee rolled her eyes at him. "You might remember that I passed home appliances on my first try."

She had. Sean hadn't, but mainly because he found it boring and didn't pay attention. Or so he told himself.

"It's just, power units have been missing from a few other things, too," Mylee said. "That I've noticed, anyway."

"So, what does that mean? People took them?"

"What else?"

It was the first hint they had found that someone might have survived the night of shadows. But how long ago had that been? And had anyone survived the nights that came after? As they hiked the roads, starving and running low on water, they saw no other signs, just more of the same—overgrown houses, rusted cars, B-squirrels making their homes in the wreckage. Overgrown houses. Rusted cars. B-squirrels. Overgrown houses...

"Sean!" They hadn't spoken in hours, so Mylee's voice felt as

violent as the hand that crushed his wrist. He stopped short, eyes going wide as his mouth dropped open.

"I'm not imagining things, right?" Mylee asked. "I mean... that's real. I'm not imagining it, right?"

Sean took a few steps forward, pulling her with him because she was still holding onto his wrist. He reached his hand up toward the nearest in a grove of trees and pulled down an apple.

It looked like an apple, it smelled like an apple, and it felt like an apple. A few thoughts passed through Sean's mind, about poisons and mutations and that one bad tree in a garden called Eden and even trickster gods intentionally deceiving him. Neither the rational nor the irrational thoughts stopped him for long. He bit into the apple a split second before Mylee bit into her own.

It tasted like an apple.

The next five tasted like apples too.

They ate until aching stomachs made them stop. Then they collapsed in the center of the apple grove. Hours later, a B-squirrel woke Sean, jumping between two branches directly over his head. He saw the speckled white underbelly between its six spread legs and then noticed how hard it was to see anything. How dark it was.

He shook Mylee until she woke, then started the work of stuffing apples into anything that could be made to resemble a pocket.

"Someplace close," Mylee said, somehow tying seven apples into her shirt. Sean nodded. They crawled into a tunnel formed by three fallen walls, ate a few more apples, and went back to sleep.

And on the other edge of the apple grove, all but invisible, a shadow skidded through the moonlight, from the roots of one tree to the next, to the next. It came to a place where three walls had fallen together and stopped, listening to the sound of sleeping children breathing in the dark. It crouched. And then, on all fours, it slunk away.

They sat in the grove of apple trees for a long time the next morning, watching leaves moving in the breeze above their heads. Without speaking it aloud, they wondered together: *What if we just stay here?* Without speaking it aloud, they worried together: *What if we never find food again?* And without saying any of it, as the sun tipped past noon, they got up, turned their jackets into apple bags, and set out again.

If forced to, Sean would swear he had never been in this part of the city before. But he couldn't be certain of that, and it became more and more impossible to tell. The city looked less and less like a city the further they walked.

The more miles passed, the more Sean thought that something beyond time had destroyed the landscape around them. They woke in what resembled a ghost town from the old stories, abandoned and left to rot, picked over a bit by survivors, but with its shell and skeleton still intact. Cars decayed where they stood, houses crumbled in their places. It was like dinner forgotten on the table, untouched.

As they hiked through this third day, they saw pieces of cars in the streets, a door rusted to the remaining pavement, a stripped undercarriage held down with vines. They found more and more walls tipped and pulled down, bricks and boulders piled in the roads until the piles of rubble grew so large that the buildings disappeared. Then the debris flattened out, and the buildings did disappear.

A wide, gravel plain stretched out before their eyes, buildings and cars and everything else reduced to pebble-sized rock and bleached white by years upon years of sunlight. Every few hundred feet, a green plant poked itself out of the gravel. Every few hundred more feet, a tree grew. And every many more hundreds of feet, something that might once have been a wall dared to rise a foot or two above the ground.

"Well this looks ominous," Mylee said, then bit into an apple.

"There's nowhere to hide in that," Sean said.

"Nope." The apple crunched between Mylee's teeth. "Wonder how big it is."

"I wonder."

Mylee threw her apple core into the nearby weeds. "Shall we?"

"After you."

About a mile of gravel crunching underfoot later, they heard another sound, a sound that sent them running, past two spindly trees and the B-squirrel that sat eying them from the branches. They ran until Mylee tripped, and Sean reached back to grab her, but neither of them really noticed, because all they cared about was the water.

A river cut through the gravel. It wasn't very wide, five feet from shore to shore, but ran on, gurgling, in the other two directions as far as they could see. A few feet away they stopped and just stared at it, daring to hope, and wondering if they should.

"Is it safe to drink?" Mylee asked.

"Uh... probably not," Sean said.

They looked at each other, then sprinted the remaining few feet to the riverbank, falling onto their knees, almost, but not quite touching the water.

"Look, though." Mylee pointed at the land across the river. The gravel plain continued on the other side, but only for a dozen or so yards. Then, collapsed buildings rose again, shattered walls pulled down, but still half standing. Was it another ghost town? Sean wondered. Or was this where the people had gone?

Mylee was staring at the water. "I think we should drink it," she said.

"I think we should cross it," Sean said.

"We're almost out of water from the lab."

"Yes. And we can always come back here. But if there are people on the other side..."

"All right, all right!" Mylee stood up, her toes almost in the lapping water, her eyes on the ruined landscape ahead of them. "I wanted to get wet today anyway."

Sean stood up beside her and took her hand. "On three?"

"One," Mylee said.

"Two."

They said "Three" together and stepped into the water.

The stream caught them, faster than expected, tearing Sean's feet out from under him. He stumbled, and Mylee stumbled, and even as they held each other up and took another step, Mylee shrieked.

The water soaked through Sean's pants, biting into his skin. Mylee screamed again, stumbling back the way they had come

only to trip down into the stream. Sean reached for her, tumbling over in the process. Tongues of fire closed around him as he flailed, and the stream tried its best to hold him down into its murky depths. He got his head above water by digging his hands into the riverbed, only to see the skin on those hands turn blood red. Apples bobbed around him, carried off by the current.

In the corner of his left eye, he saw Mylee, clawing her way out onto the same side of the riverbank they had started on, dark red splotches spreading across every patch of exposed skin. Sean tried to follow, but lost his footing. The stream pulled him head-over-heels and underwater, dragging him down and down and down and ever deeper into the fire.

And then there were arms under his arms, and Mylee's voice screaming his name, as inch by inch she dragged his limp body from the water.

Sean was holding Mylee's hand when he came to. For a while, he just lay there on the shore with stones poking him all over. Then Mylee's hand contracted, squeezing his, and a moment later she sat up.

In front of them, the stream gurgled, pleasant and playful. It made him thirsty again, and he pushed himself away from the bank.

"What was that?" Mylee asked, knees against her chest.

"Some sort of acid or something?" It was all Sean could think of.

"But there are fish." She pointed to a school of little grey minnows streaking by between submerged rocks.

"Yeah, I don't know." Sean kicked at the stones and a few went flying, ending with plunks in the water. "You okay?"

Mylee held both arms out in front of her face. "The burns are just gone. You saw it, right? Our skin was so red... But... How long were we out?"

"Couldn't have been that long," Sean said.

Mylee stood, a little too close to the water for Sean's liking. "So, is this natural, somehow, or bomb runoff, or..."

Or did someone put it here? Sean had been wondering the same thing. "Either way, I think we need to get across, somehow."

Mylee shuttered. "After you."

"Funny."

They hiked a mile in each direction finding no end to the river, or any place to forge across. It was annoying because, at its deepest, the water wouldn't even have reached their waists. Sean put a toe in, far upstream, just to make sure. His skin seared bright red, and he leaped back, shrieking.

"Don't do that again," Mylee said.

"Yeah, it was pretty dumb," he admitted.

They walked on.

Eventually, the sun went down. They curled up at the base of a tree and nibbled the apparently not poisonous berries from some bushes a mile away.

"How's the toe?" Mylee asked.

"Fine." Sean slipped his shoe off and wiggled it. "Why do you think the burns heal so fast?"

"Maybe someone did make the river, and didn't want to kill anyone, just keep people out."

"Maybe." There were toxins used by the Be'shon military, Sean knew, designed to burn but heal quickly. Or, there had been. By all appearances, that had been quite a long time ago now. Sean shivered, pulled his legs up to his chest, and went to sleep.

Two things woke Sean the next morning, the sun, glaring straight down into his eyes, and a noise.

For a while, it was just the rushing of the water, gurgling over itself like the normal stream that it pretended to be.

Then the gurgling grew louder, and louder, and louder.

Fish? Fish jumping?

Sean blinked against the sunlight, turned his head to see Mylee, curled up on the other side of the tree trunk.

Had a B-squirrel fallen in? Was it thrashing for its life, burning to death?

Sean crawled up onto his elbows, stretching stiff shoulders. As

a kid, he'd always enjoyed camping. But sleeping on the ground every night was proving awful.

A shadow moved on the other side of the stream. Sean blinked. The sun had scorched his eyes, and maybe he was seeing things.

But no, it was there. A shadow, about as high as a Human man, against the collapsed wall of some building across the stream. When Sean blinked, it vanished, leaving one wall, appearing on another.

"Miles..." Sean shook her shoulder. She woke immediately, and he pointed. "I think it's a person."

Mylee leaned forward on her hands, and as she did, more shadows appeared in the ruin across from them. They moved across the shattered walls, walking, upright. Sean rose to his feet.

"Wait," Mylee said. Her hand wrapped around his ankle.

"Look at them. It's people!" Sean said.

"Sean..." Her hand clasped around his ankle like a vice. "Sean... Sean..."

One of the shadows crouched, suddenly, as if it had collapsed in on itself. There was a gurgled from the river, as if some giant fish had tried to break free.

"Sean those aren't people!" Mylee's scream tore through his skin as she sprang to her feet. More shadows collapsed down onto all fours, and then they weren't just shadows anymore, somehow solid and not solid at the same time, people on all fours, springing off the walls and over the debris like insects.

"Sean!" Mylee grabbed his wrist, pulled him backward, almost straight into the tree, at the same moment that eyes came up over the surface of the water. Bright, yellow eyes inside grey faces made of smoke and shadow. They rose from the stream, joined by the moving shadows behind them. Mylee turned to run, and Sean turned with her.

They hadn't taken two steps before something dropped from the tree, straight into their path. It was a man's shape, an outline of smoke like the faces in the stream, crouched, then rising to its full height, towering over the twins. Mylee screamed, and Sean grabbed her around the shoulders and pushed her to the left. They stumbled into a flat-out run while the shadow stood there, watching them with glowing, yellow eyes.

Feet crashed through the water behind them, then over the

stones and sand, solid feet that didn't seem to belong to shadows at all. Mylee tripped. Sean grabbed her elbow, and they both nearly stopped moving. It took a split second for them to regain their balance, enough time for a glance over his shoulder, enough time to see the creatures behind them. He could see the smokey outlines of men, running on all fours like gorillas, propelled forward by their arms with insane speed. They sprang over the rocks, clung to and climbed fallen walls, leaped from one tree to the next.

And then they were in front of the twins. Twenty of them, at least, rising onto two legs. They snarled like dogs, with flashes of white teeth and yellow eyes glaring through the smoke.

"Sean? What do we do? Sean?" Mylee clung to his arm with both of hers. But he had no way to comfort her. No instructions to give. A dozen more shadows closed in behind them, and a war cry, a yelping, canine roar, rose from their throats, deafening against the ruined city. Sean pressed his hands into his ears. He didn't mean to shake Mylee off, but he did.

Maybe it was panic. As she lost hold of her brother, Mylee darted to her left, away from Sean and toward the only remaining gap in that circle of monsters. The war cry vanished into a throbbing cacophony of individual yelps. Five of the shadows before them dropped onto all fours, knuckles to the dirt, propelling themselves straight at Mylee. Sean yelled and sprang at his sister, only to feel a hand close around his own neck from behind. Cold fingers crushed his windpipe as that one impossibly strong arm tossed him backward. His shoulder crashed into the stones, with two sets of yellow eyes closing in over his head.

Then Mylee screamed, a blood-curdling noise that no one ever made by choice. It was the sound of absolute terror, and it brought Sean back to his feet. He threw every ounce of his weight forward, into one of the shadows. It felt like crashing into a boulder, but it gave, just enough for Sean to stumbled blindly past it.

Before he even saw Mylee, there was an arm around his waist. His feet left the ground, and he landed flat on his back on the uneven rocks. His ears rang as pain ricocheted out from his spine into every nerve in his body, leaving numbness behind. Ears still ringing, he caught sight of Mylee, half-collapsed on the ground three feet away. A shadow held her, smoke wrapped up under her left armpit. There was a flash of yellow-white teeth, and then

the sound of something ripping, and blood, running down from Mylee's shoulder to her fingers.

And then there was another shriek, different from the cacophony around them. The yelping vanished into whimpers, then silence. Something sprang over the shadows, landing near the twins, crouched on all fours, rising to its feet. For a second, Sean thought it was a man, solid and tangible like himself, with grey skin and glowing, yellow eyes. But then the smoke rose around it, and shadow consumed whatever solid form might have existed.

The circle of shadows scuttled back, most dropping down to half their height, as if onto hands and knees. The shadow in their center roared, looming four feet above the others now, what might have been arms spread out wide to either side. Its yellow eyes fixed for a moment on Sean. Then it went to Mylee, lifted her off the ground by her uninjured arm like a child dragging a rag doll.

Feeling was returning to Sean's body. He rolled onto his shoulder, then crawled up to his feet. The shadows watched him with a few hushed whines and snarls. But they didn't stop him. The great shadow in the center looked Mylee up and down, then tossed her straight into Sean's chest.

Sean caught his sister, found her shaking as badly as she had while freezing in the incubation chamber. While Sean held her up, the shadow advanced on them. Its smoke engulfed her injured arm and before either of the twins could move, it pressed something into the bleeding hole. The smoke pulled her deeper in, winding a sheet of something thin and grey around her arm, then released her.

It didn't look or feel like a bandage, more like skin, grey skin, like the hand, all that time ago, shattering the light above their school. Sean shuttered, but didn't have time to dwell on the memory. Two other shadows closed in and pushed them off, back toward the stream, and whatever lay beyond it.

CHAPTER 6

ABOVE THEIR HEADS, A SET OF HEAVY, STEEL GATES opened inside a steel wall. The wall was covered in spikes and barbed wire, with dead things hanging from it.

Sean had his arm around Mylee's waist, holding her tightly as the door screeched and groaned and finally cracked open. He glanced from side to side, trying again to get a look at the creatures around them. They crouched, half hiding behind their own arms and legs, slinking between boulders and bushes. Hours they had walked from the river, and in all that time, Sean had never caught more than a passing glimpse of them. They were solid, but somehow shadow, huge, but always just out of sight, weaving in and out like ghosts in water.

They also crossed through the river without being burned.

The twins had been taken down what looked like a road. Not the old roads, but a new one, smashed through the remnants of the city they knew. The environment around their parents' lab had consisted of crumbled buildings in an overgrown, but still recog-

nizable world. Here, debris and nothing else stretched on, mile after mile of half walls standing unattached to anything, stones piled and shoved aside, far away from their original places. There were no rusted cars, no overgrown streets, just this road, on and on through the rubble.

And then, the wall.

It rose forty feet above their heads, steel pieces mashed into and held together by concrete in an endless, lumbering curve that smashed its way through the ruins like a dinosaur trudging over anthills. Both the metal and the concrete were unfinished, no effort made to smooth the rough surface. Sean thought parts of it might slice his hands open if he touched it.

And then there were the spikes—huge, steel spikes, some as long and as thick as a man's leg, others much smaller but no less intimidating, scattered at random over the surface of the wall. They stuck straight out, ready to impale anyone who got close. They had impaled a few people, it would seem, skeletons swinging here and there along the top of the wall, more bones gathered at its base.

The road gave them plenty of time to take in every aspect of this horrid barrier, before finally winding round to the gate. It was the same as the wall, except on hinges, with a crack running down the middle.

As the gate opened, a series of high-pitched shrieks came from the group around them. Another set of shrieks answered, from the other side of the wall, or on top of the wall, Sean couldn't tell. For a moment, the noise was deafening, and then a hundred hands, it seemed, grabbed him all at once, shoving him through those huge gates.

"Miles..." Sean struggled to keep his hold on her as he fell, straight down into mud. Mylee's arms reached around under his shoulders, mud squishing between her sneakers as she helped to pull him up again. Behind them, the doors shut with a metallic bang even more deafening than the shrieking of those creatures. Sean's ears rang, clinging to Mylee as she clung to him, waiting for the world to end at last and set them free.

Instead, the ringing faded. They found themselves inside a metal well, the gates on one side, solid steel all around them. It was empty, nothing but the mud sucking their feet down and

threatening to hold them there forever.

"What's happening?" Mylee asked. "Sean? What's happening? Sean?"

Then a screech stung their ears, with a crack forming in the center of the steel across from the gate. A second gate opened, and as its screech died away, the sound of feet, sloshing and sucking in mud, and voices, broke in on them.

Human voices.

A town lay in front of them, little wooden lean-tos melded into stone ruins with a road between them. People came in and out, up and down, leaving their boot prints in the torn-up, mud road. They leaned out doors and windows, pointing and whispering as the steel wall opened to reveal the twins.

Mylee took a breath. "Those are..."

"People," Sean said.

"Do we go in?"

"Can you think of anything else?"

They exchanged a horrified, excited, relieved, dreadful look, then ripped their feet up out of the mud, nearly losing at least two shoes in the process, and stepped through the gate.

The people stared. They were all muddy and all wearing the same oversized brown coat, so that even the clean parts looked like more mud. Walking mud. Pointing and whispering mud.

"Uh, so, what do we do?" Mylee asked. "Sean, what do we do?"

How was he supposed to know? Why did she always do this, ask him things he couldn't possibly know the answer to? At a loss, Sean raised his hand in a pathetic kind of half-hearted wave. "Um... hi?"

Faces stared at him, with more pointing and whispering. Two children stopped short in the road, their game of chase forgotten under wide, staring eyes. A minute later, someone called for them, and they turned around, running back the other way, sloshing mud. Mud that smelled wrong.

"Do you smell blood?" Sean asked Mylee.

"Yeah, it's so weird," she said, wrinkling her nose.

What is this place? Sean wondered.

Before he could ask that question aloud, a stranger's voice interrupted them. "Wait, so this isn't a prank?"

A woman stood ankle-deep in a patch of mud, about ten feet away from them. Her arms were crossed, head cocked to one side, eyebrows raised, like a teacher catching her student stealing extra candy. On either side of her stood a large man with broad shoulders and a shaved head. There was a third man, a step behind them, shorter, plump, and wearing glasses.

They were the type of glasses Sean had seen in old movies, worn to correct vision before vision correction became an everyday procedure. As they watched, he removed the glasses from his face, pulled a muddy shirt from beneath his muddy jacket, and wiped at the lenses with a corner of it. Something about the action felt calculated, like an animal stretching just to show off its muscles.

"Okay, okay, that's enough looking already!" the woman said, waving her hand at the gawking crowd. "Really, go. Go, go."

And they went, eyes still on Sean and Mylee, back into the buildings and down the street, until the woman and her entourage were the only ones left.

"Well..." The woman clapped her hands together, smiling at the twins as she glided toward them over the mud. "Sorry about that. We're not used to... Anyway!" She fixed dull grey eyes on Sean, then Mylee. "Who are you? I mean, where did you... I mean, are you two together, or..."

"Acrah, this is hardly important," the man with the glasses said.

"We're brother and sister," Sean said, because it was the only question he thought he could answer.

"Really?" The woman raised one eyebrow. "Different fathers?"

Mylee wound both hands around Sean's left arm. "We're twins, actually."

Both eyebrows went up this time. "You do know you don't look anything alike, right?"

"We're fraternal," Mylee said.

The woman snorted. "Whatever. Twins, lovers, siblings, all of the above. I really don't care. Where are you from?"

"Where are you from?" Sean asked, a knee-jerk, defensive reaction that he knew made no sense even as the words left his mouth.

"Here," she said. "Farmgirl, born and raised. Most of us are.

But you two have the look of wild to you."

Mylee's hands squeezed Sean's arm, cutting off blood flow to his fingers. Was she asking him to say something, or not say something? It didn't matter. He had nothing to say.

The woman looked from one twin to the other, eyes narrow, like someone trying to work out equations in a math book. "This farm hasn't gone into the Outlands for months. Why would you come into the city?"

Sean still had nothing to say. It was like the language center of his brain had gotten disconnected from his mouth. His heart pounded, and he could swear he heard Mylee's pounding beside him.

"Have the Seetzs really gotten that bad?" the woman asked.

"Yeah," Sean said, circuits reconnecting in his mind. He had no idea what she was talking about, but he was pretty sure she would just keep asking if he didn't say something. "I'm afraid they have."

The woman nodded, then turned around, waving at the twins to follow her. Sean glanced at Mylee, took a deep breath in, and followed.

Inside this little town, Sean could see outlines of the city he had known, half walls, brick and mortar, patched together with badly cemented stones, gnarled boards, and ripped fabric. Two children ran across their path, chasing each other from patched building to patched building, splashing mud. Their mothers, maybe, sat watching from a doorway, with others sitting in the mud, talking, widdling at sticks, or scratching in the sides of buildings. They were all dressed in the same dark colors, wet in the misting rain, boots caked in mud and clay, hair cut short or shaved completely, no difference between men, women, and children.

And they were all wearing the same bright red patches on their left arms. Sean noticed them first on an old man crouched inside some broken-down doorway, and then wasn't sure how he had missed them before. They had images on them, crude pictographs, and two numbers separated by a slash mark. The children's numbers were low, between one and fifty. But every adult they passed bore numbers in the thousands.

"Alright, step on up!" the woman, Acrah, removed her boots from the mug with a squishing, sucking sound, and stepped up

onto a wooden platform. Above them loomed splintery pillars holding up a leaking, canvas roof. There was a back wall to this structure, where metal shelving rusted slowly away under a variety of objects.

The large men stopped next to the platform, and the little man with glasses took a seat on the steps, looking out into the village behind them. Only then did Sean notice the crowd that had gathered, people oozing out from decaying buildings, still watching the twins.

"Don't mind them," Acrah said. "It's been a while since they've seen wild ones come through."

"That's the second time you've called us that," Sean said.

"You're from the Outlands, right? It's what you are. Take these, children. And follow..." She tossed brown coats at them, fabric already wet from the leaking roof, making Sean shiver.

Acrah led them along the storage structure, through a low doorway that she and Mylee had to duck under, and into a chamber of pasted together stone. It was dry.

It was miraculously and gloriously dry.

Sean could smell mold eating through cracks in the cement all around them, but it hadn't gotten in yet. A fire smoldered in one corner, beside a rack of drying fabric. Blankets lay piled in another space. And in the center of the room was a desk.

"Is this where you *live*?" Mylee asked.

Acrah mistook the tone in her voice. "Don't get your hopes up. It took me a long time to earn this place. Chances are you won't survive that long." She sat behind the desk, drawing a ledger, a real, paper and cardboard bound book, from inside it. The glasses... paper... What time period were they in? Sean wondered.

"So..." Acrah got a writing instrument from another drawer. "Let's start with names."

The twins glanced at each other. It was such an easy question, but they both felt the same weird reluctance to share anything about themselves.

Then Acrah was snapping her fingers at them, and Sean blurted out, "I'm Sean, this is Mylee."

"Okay... And how old are you?" Acrah squinted at them. "I'm guessing...sixteen for you, girl. And, fourteen, maybe..."

"We're both fourteen!" Sean said. Even post-apocalypse, they

were still mistaking him for Mylee's little brother. For some reason, despite every worse thing they had just gone through, that was infuriating. "We're twins, remember?"

"Oh, so you're sticking to that, then." Acrah sighed, tapping the book with her pen before writing the numbers 14-17 in the lines beside each of their names. Sean rolled his eyes, helplessly.

"Ever been in a farm before?" she asked next.

"A..."

"What?"

"And, that's going to be a no, there." Acrah put 0s in the next line. "Pre-existing medical conditions you're aware of?"

"Um..." The twins just looked at each other with their mouths hanging open.

"It's in your best interest to answer these questions honestly," Acrah said.

"We don't have any medical conditions," Mylee said.

"Surgical procedures or long-term hospitalizations for any reason?" Acrah asked.

"No," Mylee said.

"Excellent, excellent." Acrah scribbled notes in more boxes. "And for the girl, when was your last period?"

"Excuse me!" Mylee said.

"You're obviously old enough," Acrah said.

"I..." Mylee had turned bright red. "...am not telling you that!"

Acrah banged her pen on the desktop, rolling her eyes. "I'm not asking for my own entertainment, kid. If they mistakenly bleed you during your period, it will be bad. So, when?"

"Mylee, please!" Sean whispered.

"I don't know! Two weeks ago, maybe..."

"Fine. We'll start fourteen days in and hope it's right. Things will even out eventually." From a different drawer, Acrah got a tiny, clear plastic tube, just large enough to hold twenty-eight little white pills all stacked in a row. She tipped the first fourteen of those pills into another tube, wrote the numbers 1 - 14 on the side of it, and dropped it in the drawer, then threw the first tube at Mylee. "Take one every day at the same time of day. Do not forget a day. Do not take more than one at once."

Mylee held the tube between her thumb and forefinger like the tail of a wiggling scorpion. "Birth control. Are you kidding me?"

I'm fourteen!"

"No." Acrah's pen slapped down on the desk as she fixed a stern and menacing glare on Mylee. "Look, I get that you two don't understand farms, yet, but hear me on this. The Ogers will settle for nothing less than absolute control over our population. And then female hormone fluctuations make us taste bad... or something. If you do not take that, they will be able to smell that you're not taking it. If they smell that you're not taking it, bad things happen to you. Do you hear me?"

"Yeah." Sean grabbed the tube before Mylee could drop it—or, as seemed more likely, break it between her fingers. "She hears you. We both do."

"Good. Way to take responsibility, lover boy," Acrah said.

"She's my *sister*!"

"So, final question..." Acrah bent her head back to the ledger. "How many times have you two been bled in the past?"

"Been what?" Sean asked.

Acrah sighed, definitely in annoyance this time, then used the pen to point at Mylee's bandaged arm. "One of them took a bite out of you, right?"

She said it in such a straightforward way, like it didn't even matter, or happened every day, or something.

Mylee was glaring at her, openly, with a set jaw and crossed arms. There was no way she was going to answer, so Sean said, "Yes."

Acrah nodded and wrote two numbers in the last line beside each of their names, 0/0 for Sean, 0/1 for Mylee. Then she closed the ledger and stood.

"So," she said, "you need four things to survive in this place. The first, are your patches." She opened a chest and pulled out two of the red patches Sean had noticed on everyone's coats. "You must wear these on your left arm at all times."

She removed another pen from the chest, one the twins recognized this time, called a stat-paper stylus. With it, on each patch, she drew a pictograph, a face with two dots for eyes and a straight line for a mouth, and then those numbers again, 0/0 and 1/0. On one of the patches, she drew an open circle beneath the face, then tossed it to Mylee. She threw the other at Sean.

"Arms, now," she said, when they just stood there looking at

the patches.

It was static-cling paper, known as stat-paper, writable, re-writable, extremely durable, and designed to stick to any surface. Slowly, Sean pressed it onto his wet shirtsleeve, watching to make sure Mylee did the same.

"Again," Acrah said, "left arm, visible, at all times. Great. Follow me."

They left Acrah's room, then the lean-to platform next to it. Without a word, the large men and the man with glasses stood and followed them.

As they went, Acrah talked. "The other three things you need, food, shelter, and, of course, the way you get those things, work."

She stopped short, splashing mud between her boots. Before them, a solid, metal wall, with barbs and mangled wire protruding from it, rose at least fifty feet over their heads. Something paced across the top of that wall, sometimes upright, sometimes crawling, always shadow. The sight of it made Sean reach for Mylee's hand. Their group, he noticed, were the only people who had come within a hundred feet of this place.

Acrah pointed to the base of the wall where a long wooden table sat in front of several dark, narrow slots that went back into the wall itself. "Food distribution takes place here. You pick up one day's ration every morning. It's also your medical check-in. Any medications will be refilled here. That includes, girl, your pills. Also, when your period starts, you be sure to tell them, so they can take you out of rotation and change this symbol." She pointed to the open circle beneath the face on Mylee's badge.

Mylee turned a very dark shade of red. "There's a symbol that tells everyone I have my period?"

"Yes. So?" Acrah looked genuinely surprised by the idea that Mylee would have a problem with this.

"So?" Mylee said, her voice dangerous enough that Sean thought it prudent to grab her arm.

Acrah kept talking. "After the medical check-in, assuming your work and bleeding credits are all in line, you will get your food. Moving on."

They turned from the menacing wall, back into the shantytown.

"For work," Acrah was saying, "you get randomly assigned.

Then you hope that first assignment sticks, because second ones are harder. Any screw-ups get recorded, and that record is reviewed at check-in every morning. Sixty days incident free will erase your record, but more than five incidents in thirty days become permanent. Those five incidents will not erase after the sixty-day period. Got that?"

"Um... Maybe..." Sean said, struggling to remember what had been thirty days, what had been sixty days, and where the number five came into it.

They had stepped into a wooden building, another fire burning in a corner, another desk with another ledger. The man behind the desk looked up and grabbed for a pen. Behind him, five rows of filing cabinets, eight feet tall, ran the entire length of that very long room. It was dark, and smoky, and smelled like mold. But at least it was warm.

"This is check-in data storage," Acrah said, with a nod to cabinets and boxes on the other side of the desk. "There shouldn't be a reason for you to ever come in here again. But everyone needs to know where it is. Bastis, good day."

"Acrah," the grey-bearded man behind the desk said. "Took you a while to get here." There were flecks of mud in that beard, caked around his shoes and pant legs, under his fingernails...

Where did all this mud come from?

"Yeah, well, they're from the Outlands. The whining slowed things down." Acrah rolled her eyes as the man, Bastis, opened his ledger with a knowing smirk. "The boy's Sean. Girl's Mylee. They're somewhere between fourteen and sixteen years old."

"We're fourteen!" Sean said.

"Got it. I'll get the assignment tin." Bastis shut his ledger, stuffed it in one of the file cabinets, then got a rusted metal can from on top of another one. Mud was smudged across all of these things, too. "Okay, who's drawing first?"

Sean and Mylee glanced at each other, simultaneously blurt-ing out, "Who's what now?"

"Like I said, you need jobs," Acrah said, as Bastis shoved the tin at Sean. "So pick one."

Bastis shook the tin at Sean. "There are papers inside. Just pull one out."

"This is how you decide people's careers?" Sean asked.

"Would you pick already?" Bastis said, shaking the tin.

Not knowing what else to do, Sean stuck his fingers into the rusty tin and pulled out the first scrap of paper that met his skin. *FOOD-PREP* it proclaimed in large, black letters.

"Oh, excellent. They lost two people in the last barr." Bastis returned the tin to the top of the cabinet and got another ledger down from beside it. "So, if both of you wanted to go there..."

"Yes!" Sean and Mylee said at the same time.

Bastis nodded, pulled the tin back down from where he had just put it, and dumped half a dozen scraps of paper out on the desk. "Do you see it?" he asked Acrah as he flicked the pieces aside one by one.

"Oh, there," Acrah said. Sean managed to make out a word ending in *-ood* before Bastis tossed it into the fire along with the piece Sean had drawn earlier. Then he swept the remaining papers back into the tin and returned it to its place.

"Set them up in the same shelter, too," Acrah said. "They're together."

"Brother and sister," Sean said.

"Because we all know it's normal for siblings to look nothing alike," Acrah said, nodding.

"Oh, naturally," Bastis said, filling out yet another ledger. "B-block." He had out a stat-pen, drew a triangle under the face on both their badges, and scribbled a *B* inside it. "We'll have bleeding schedules for you at check-in tomorrow."

Sean's head was throbbing. He had woken up in an apocalyptic wasteland, hiked who-knew-how far while starving half to death, been burned by some mutant river, kidnaped by creatures he couldn't even see properly, and then tossed into shanty-town where everyone, apparently, thought they had a right to know his most private business. He had no idea what was going on, or why, or who these people were, or what they were talking about. And everything smelled like blood.

Why on all planets and moons everywhere did everything smell like blood?

"What is this bleeding thing you keep talking about?" Mylee asked.

Bastis rolled his eyes at Acrah. "You weren't kidding."

"Yeah, and that's enough," Acrah said. "The pills and the

Ogre

questions I can understand. But obviously you know what bleeding is, so enough already!"

She took each twin by a shoulder and steered them out the door, into the cold, muddy street.

CHAPTER 7

SEAN LIKED COOKING. HE HAD EVEN SIGNED UP TO help with lunch prep at school two years running, mainly because it meant he could take one fewer class, but also because he liked cooking.

Food-prep at the farm was not cooking, just like the food they prepared wasn't actually food.

It was some kind of plant protein substance. Sean wasn't sure what, exactly, just that wilted vegetables went into one end of the machine, and something brown and even less edible came out the other end.

He ended up scooping the substance into an endless stream of 12-by-3-by-3 inch molds. Next to him, Mylee shoved the molds into a furnace where they stayed for twenty minutes before heading on down the line. On the other side of the furnace, a wrinkled man who never spoke, and a spindly, grey-haired woman who never stopped speaking dumped 12-by-3-by-3 inch bars out of the scorching molds. And then the belt took them on, to be wrapped

in... paper, maybe?

Sean couldn't tell what the fibrous, white sheath around his daily rations was, exactly. He guessed that it would not keep the baked plant matter safe for very long, a guess which proved correct. It rained on their second day in the farm, a downpour that brought the mud up to their knees instead of their ankles, and the paper around their rations melted on contact with the water. Turned out, soggy vegetable substance was even worse than regular vegetable substance.

Aside from Sean and Mylee, the silent man and the ever talking woman, and the four people further down who wrapped the bars but never said anything to the twins, there were three other food preparers. One was in charge of the whole operation. On their first morning, he dumped Sean and Mylee at their places in the line, said "figure it out," and retreated to a walled-off space behind the grinding machine. Sean had not seen him since.

The second was a pale, thin woman who stood across from Sean and filled her molds in silence. Her hands shook, Sean noticed, and she seemed to have to concentrate on the task more than he thought necessary.

The third was a boy, not much older than Sean and Mylee, who dumped crates of vegetables into the grinder, and also fixed the machine when it stopped working at least six times a day. He only had three fingers on his right hand. The second time Sean saw him stick his arm between the teeth of the grinder, he decided not to ask how the boy had lost those fingers, or where they had ended up afterward.

Sean probably wouldn't have had the chance to ask, anyway. The grinder boy talked and talked, all day long, asking a lot of questions. What were the Outlands like? How big was their tribe? Did the Seetz kill their family? Were they alone in the city? Why had they come to the city?

Sean and Mylee made up answers, forgetting things they had already said and contradicting themselves, but the jumpy boy didn't seem to notice. He had usually asked another question before they finished answering. Meanwhile, the woman across from Sean scooped in silence. The grinder stalled, then ground again. The woman on the other side of the furnace prattled away about how stuck this one ration bar was, but not as stuck as that

one last week, remember, George?

The silent man on the other side of the furnace was named George, which Sean knew because the woman across from him said so at least ten times an hour. Aside from that, Sean couldn't remember any of their names.

The bars rolled on.

"Why do we make so many?" Sean asked halfway through his second day. He had been counting, for no reason except that he was very, very bored. There were five 12-by-3-by-3 inch bars in each mold, and he counted around a hundred and thirty molds going through the furnace every hour. The line ran for six hours each day, so they made around four thousand bars every day, but Sean had seen the population numbers at check-in. Two thousand, five hundred and sixteen people lived in the farm, and they all got exactly one bar each day.

The boy shrugged and dumped a crate of what looked like it had once been broccoli into the grinder. "I don't know."

"And what about all this?" Sean asked, waving at the splinter-crusted crates stacked up against the wall behind the grinder. The vegetables obviously weren't fresh. "Where's the garden?"

"What's a garden?" the grinder boy asked, dumping... carrots, maybe? Something orange, anyway.

"Where do the crates come from?" Sean asked.

The boy shrugged with the box twirling around in his hand. "I empty them. I come back in the morning and they're full again."

"And you've never wondered about that?" Mylee asked.

"Why would I? It's not my job."

But these questions lingered with Sean, as he could feel them lingering in Mylee as well. In his free time, he poked around the farm, always with his sister by his side, and staying far away from the wall. But there was nothing green to be found, just mud, and caked mud, and the ruins of his own city badly pasted back together, and the wall, where they went every morning for check-in.

The wall, covered in barbed wire, with things moving at the top. No one looked at the top of the wall, or into those holes the bars came through each morning. They kept their eyes on the check-in tables and dashed away as soon as they had their food in hand. There were other walls, on all four sides of the farm, making

escape impossible. But this wall – this wall was different.

“And you’re up for bleeding today,” he said.

He was Bastis, the man from the record-keeping building, sitting behind the table at morning check-in. Mylee stood beside Sean, getting her name crossed off the list by a sour woman who didn’t seem to know that there was mud in her hair. Mylee’s head snapped toward Sean, eyes going wide, as he blurted out, “What?”

Over four days, somehow, these check-ins had become routine. The twins went, had their names crossed off a list, got their food, and went to work.

“Three days is needed to remove anything from outside. On the fourth, you go. It’s standard,” Bastis said.

“Well, you might have warned me!” Sean said.

“That is not my job,” Bastis said. “Eat half your ration bar and report to bleeding. Everyone already knows you’re supposed to be there, so don’t try to skip.”

“If he’s going I’m going!” Mylee said.

“No,” Bastis said.

“Why not?” Mylee asked.

“Stop holding up the line!” someone behind the twins shouted.

“Why not?” Mylee asked, even more forcefully than the first time.

“You two really don’t know anything,” Bastis looked over Sean’s head and waved at the next person in line.

“Wait! Where do I even go?” Sean asked, grabbing his ration bar as a woman shoved him out of line.

Bastis rolled his eyes. “Sarah?” he called to a woman two lines over. “Bleeding, right? Take the idiot, would you?”

Idiot? Sean grabbed Mylee’s arm as the line shoved them out, stomping mud up in all directions. Even post-apocalypse he was still *idiot*.

“I’m going with you,” Mylee said.

“No, you’re not,” Sean said.

“Yes, I am.”

“No!”

"Yes!"

"Miles!"

"Stop it! We don't even know what bleeding is. Freaking gatch! You're going to die. You're gonna die. I'm never seeing you again..."

"Mylee! Whatever bleeding is, these people do not die from it."

"These people!" Mylee waved her arms around, with mud squishing and squeaking beneath her feet. "These aren't people, Sean. They're automatons on robot tracks!"

"What are robot tracks?"

"I don't know! Shut up!"

"Kid, let's go." It was the woman, Sarah, from the line, stomping over with an expression to match the overcast sky.

"I'm going with you!" Mylee said.

"No," the woman said.

"Hey, Miles, stop! I'll be fine. Just... I'll see you at work."

"Don't call it that!" Mylee said. "Don't talk about it like it's normal! None of this is normal! What is wrong with you people?"

"Mylee!" Sean gave her shoulders a shake, with the memory of crashing desk chairs and smashed classroom view boards haunting the back of his mind. "You're doing that thing again."

"Yeah, I know!" Mylee's fingers dug into his arms, relentless in their need to hold him there. Sean had always been able to calm Mylee down. He was usually the only one who could.

"Gatchin! Some of us have places to be!" The woman, Sarah, stomped her foot in the mud.

"Just hold it together, and I'll see you at work," Sean said, giving his sister's shoulders a squeeze.

"Now!" Sarah said.

It was hard to leave Mylee there alone in the muddy street. They had not been more than a few feet apart since waking in this upside-down world, something he hadn't realized until he turned to follow Sarah. Now, the distance felt like a cord, straining and straining as it stretched between them until he turned a corner, she was out of sight, and the cord snapped.

Sean felt the snap inside his body as if the cord were real. Its bloody end coiled up inside his stomach, and the world around him turned a hazy shade of red, oozing blood up through the nev-

er-ending mud.

What was bleeding?

Sean had given up on asking that question, but not on the question itself. True, bleeding clearly didn't kill, or wasn't meant to kill. But what was it? What was he walking into? Because nothing called by that word could be good.

"You need to eat," Sarah said in an annoyed voice.

Sean took a breath in through the red haze inside his brain. "What?"

Sarah rolled her eyes. "Eat. This will suck if you don't."

Sean noticed his ration bar in his hand then and tore the paper wrapper open without thinking... Like a... like an automaton on robot tracks. He had to smile again at Mylee's ridiculous comparison, despite its implications. Despite how true it was about these people, and about his own actions at that moment. Still without thinking, he bit off a chunk of the bar. It hit the coiled up cord in his stomach and made him choke so badly that he put the rest of it away.

Sarah went up to a building, all stone and concrete unlike most of the pasted together shantytown, and pounded at the wooden door. A slat opened, a pair of brown eyes, and nothing more.

"Sarah," she said. "One thousand one hundred twenty-four by sixteen."

Those were the numbers on her badge, Sean noticed.

The door opened. Sarah went in without so much as a glance at Sean, and for a moment, he thought about turning around, walking away, going back to sleep maybe. But from what he could tell, these people kept perfect records, despite the antiquated equipment they had to work with. They would know if he didn't show up, and he was sure he wouldn't like what happened next.

So he knocked on the door, and the slat opened, bringing the pair of brown eyes back.

"Sean," he said. "Um... zero by zero, I guess..."

The door opened.

The cold inside sucked Sean's breath away into the empty darkness inside. He rubbed his hands together, squinting to see until a gruff hand seized his arm. The eyes and the hand belonged to a man, hardly visible in the dark. He checked the numbers on Sean's badge without a word, then pointed him off down the hall.

There was a stat-sheet attached to the wall beside the door, a list of names with their numbers. Looking back over his shoulder, Sean saw the man cross his name off the list. It seemed so final, somehow, like the noise a prison gate makes when it shuts, or the school bell, forcing you off to class. Sean breathed out, watched the air turn to vapor in front of his face. It was getting colder.

There was a hum, like the generators that had switched on once at school during a nasty storm. It burned Sean's ears, but the cold burned worse, nipping at the fingertips that he tried to bury inside his elbows.

In front of him, Sarah vanished into a blue glow. Sean blinked, then saw a blue-glowing lamp hanging straight down from the center of a narrow doorway, stinging his eyes as he drew near. On the other side of that doorway, the hum of the generator and nip of refrigeration found him only a moment before the sight and smell of blood.

At first, that was all he could see, standing frozen in the doorway inside a giant refrigerator, with blood, row after row after row, hanging in transparent bags from the ceiling. Row after row after row, like curtains stacked on top of each other.

Sean had seen something like this before, in the blood cultivation lab in the hospital above his parents' underground facility. There, they grew blood in hanging IV bags, ready for patient use. He and Mylee liked to go there sometimes when waiting for their parents. They never went into the room, but they would sit outside, watching the bags slowly fill, the yellow growth culture turning redder and redder...

But this wasn't grown blood. No yellow culture fluid filled the bottom of these bags, and they were too big for IVs, too. And they smelled different, like meat, thawing on the counter for cooking. It was the smell he found worked beneath the air and the mud and the stone of the entire farm, no longer covered, but fresh and raw and real.

To his right, Sarah moved up into the air. Sean's head snapped toward her, heart fluttering before he realized she was just climbing a staircase. There were two of them, one on either side of the door, leading up in opposite directions. The blood wasn't hanging from the ceiling, but from a grate, a metal walkway, that ran along each wall and met in the back of the room. Plastic tubing,

all stained various shades of red and pink, crisscrossed down through the grate and into the blood bags. Sean swallowed, took a deep breath, and turned to the staircase on his left.

On the walkway above, two rows of chairs sitting side-by-side and facing the opposite wall. Men, women, and one child with red tubes inserted into their arms occupied about half of the chairs. Some chatted together. A woman sketched on a piece of paper with her unattached hand. A few appeared to be asleep.

As Sean came up, a man moved toward him between the chairs. He wore heavy clothing, gloves, a thick hat, all clean with no trace of the mud that covered everything else. He took Sean's arm and seated him. The chair was cold, like everything else, wooden, with a thin blanket large enough for Sean to wrap himself in. Without a word, the clean man ripped Sean's badge from his coat, and attached it to the top of his chair, above his head.

"What are you..." Sean started to ask, remembering Acrah's repeated warnings about always wearing the badge on his left arm. But the clean man did not seem inclined to answer questions, and everyone else had their badges on the backs of their chairs too, he noticed.

A buzzer went off with a green light blinking above a woman's chair, and the clean man went off to her, leaving Sean to wonder if he was supposed to put the needles in his own arm.

"Hey."

It was the first voice he'd heard since his own at the door, and he turned, startled. A girl sat on his left, dark skin and darker hair, with her head back and the blanket falling gently around her shoulders. She looked about as old as Mylee did, so, sixteen.

"Wow, hey..." Sean said.

The girl smiled wide and genuine. "Let me guess, not many people start conversations with you."

"Well..." Sean couldn't think of anything else to say.

She turned to look straight at him, one eyebrow raised. "You're the wild, right?"

"You know, I really don't like that term," Sean said.

She laughed. "Yeah, that makes sense. I'm Annabeth."

"Sean."

The clean man returned. Sean only noticed him because he started tugging at Sean's coat, and kept tugging until Sean guessed

what he might want, and pulled one arm out of his coat sleeve. The cold air bit into his exposed skin, and the frozen wood bit harder as the clean man pressed his arm down, palm up, onto the arm of the chair. The clean man grabbed a plastic tube with a very large needle that was connected to the side of Sean's chair, wiped that huge needle with something, and stuck it straight into the largest blue line on the inside of Sean's right elbow.

"Ow!" Sean said.

On his left, Annabeth laughed. "So this is your first bleeding... ever?"

Sean nodded. He felt light-headed and forced himself to look away from whatever was being done to his arm. Fortunately, this girl who finally seemed interested in having a normal conversation was not an unpleasant place to look. "And it's your..." He squinted at the badge above her head. "Three hundred and seventh?" He was beginning to get the hang of this system, even though he was still in denial about what the second number meant.

Annabeth's eyes flicked up, toward her badge. "Yeah... I can't imagine not doing this every few days. It would be so weird. How do you even keep track of time in the Outlands?"

"A calendar," Sean said.

"Yeah, but what's the calendar based on?"

"What's your calendar based on?"

"Bleeding schedule."

"Right. I should have guessed that."

She laughed again. She was normal. Finally, one normal person in all this madness. "Seriously, though, how do you tell time?"

"We have this seven-day system. It's called a week, and it starts over every seven days."

"Why?"

Sean shrugged. "It's some religious thing. My aunt told me once. I don't remember. Anyway, we mainly just do it now because we just do." He realized that all of this came from a time long ago, and that he had no idea how actual outlanders told time, or even what actual outlanders were. He probably shouldn't say so much about his own time. But his arm felt like it was on fire, and he had to say something.

"I guess twenty-eight divides into seven, so that makes sense, a little—for girls, anyway. Did girls write your calendar?"

"Why? What's twenty-eight matter?"

Annabeth raised her eyebrows at him. "It's a woman thing..."

"Oh..." Sean's head snapped straight forward, toward the other side of the room, and another walkway with another two rows of chairs. "Right... that..." Right, there had originally been twenty-eight pills in that little bottle Mylee was forced to take.

Annabeth laughed again, but a scream, from the deep shadows at the back of the room, sliced off that pleasant sound. Sean sat bolt upright as the scream ricocheted around them again.

"It's just a marrow extraction," Annabeth said. "Don't mind it."

"They take bone marrow here too?" Sean asked.

"Bone marrow. Plasma. Skin shavings. Whole fingers and toes if you're desperate. You get extra ration or work points for it, and as long as that's worth it to enough people, it won't be mandatory."

"And what about when it's not worth it to enough people?"

"It's not my job to worry about that," Annabeth said, flexing her hand open and closed on the chair arm.

The scream came again, twisting up in Sean's stomach along with that cord that had snapped away from Mylee. He looked at his arm, saw the needle and tube sticking out of it, and looked away, dizzy. "What is your job?"

"Here actually," Annabeth said. "When I'm not bleeding, I do the bleeding. And you're..."

"Food-prep..." The screaming had stopped, leaving nausea in its wake. "It's super boring..."

"Yeah, this gets boring too. But it's work, so what can we do?"

He considered telling her of another time, when people spent their childhood figuring out what they liked to do and then chose jobs based on that. But he'd already pushed the line with calendar talk. Besides, what would be the point? This was her world, and the thought of another one seemed... cruel.

Maybe that was why the nausea wouldn't go away. Bad as this world was, knowing something else had existed was worse.

"Hey!" Annabeth leaned toward him in her chair, unconcerned about the needle in her elbow. "Hey, you're getting pale pretty fast."

She reached as far as she could with her untethered arm and

snapped her fingers in his face. "Sean? Hey, Sean, did you eat?"

Her face was... fuzzy. Her fingers bled together as she snapped them in front of his eyes. Sean shook his head, blinking. "Did I what?"

"Denis!" Annabeth called, reaching for Sean's coat. "Where's your ration bar? Denis get over here!"

"Where's my what?"

Annabeth was out of her chair. She kept her tethered arm at the same angle, bent sharply the wrong way against her body as her other hand dug through the pockets in Sean's coat. "Your rations... Seriously, one bite? Are you totally stupid?"

Sean knew that word, *stupid*, should feel worse than it did. Maybe he'd just been called stupid too many times in the last few days. Or maybe he just wasn't feeling anything right then. There was a hum behind his ears, and nausea evaporated into the sensation of floating.

"No, don't you dare pass out! Eat this now!" Annabeth's voice twanged through the hum in Sean's ears as she shoved his ration bar into his free hand. "Denis, would you get over here?"

"What?" The clean man appeared, glaring over Sean's head at Annabeth. "Seriously, are you trying to tear your needles out? You know what they do when we spill blood."

"I'm fine," Annabeth said. "He didn't eat, and he needs water."

The man rolled his eyes. "Gatch. Acrah's right. These two are nothing but trouble."

"Just get him water!" Annabeth said. "Sean, I'm serious, eat this!"

It felt like he imagined shoving hot coals down his throat might feel, but Annabeth didn't give him a choice. She made him eat until the bar was half gone, then yelled at him to not throw up enough times for him to actually, somehow, keep it down. So Sean choked his food down, choked on the water that Denis brought, almost threw up, and finally started to feel alive again.

A few minutes later, Sean sat with his head against the back of the chair, blanket wrapped around him, breathing steadily in and out just as Annabeth commanded. At some point, the haziness had melted out of his vision, and out of his mind too. But all that seemed to do was free him to feel more nauseous.

Eventually, Sean turned his head, saw Annabeth smiling at

him from the other chair. "So..." she said, drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair, "when they tell you to be sure and eat half your ration bar before bleeding..."

"Yeah, I will next time," Sean said. *Next time?* What was he saying? The dizziness returned in a surge of nausea and Mylee's frantic cry: Don't talk about this like it's normal.

Freakin' gatch! Was this already becoming normal?

Sean took a deep breath, trying to clear the thoughts away. This wasn't normal. He had to keep remembering that this wasn't normal.

"What happens when you spill blood?" Sean asked. Somehow, he had a feeling the answer would take all sense of normalcy away.

Annabeth shrugged. "Depends how much. Basically, there are quotas we have to meet, just like, I'm sure, there are ration quotas every day. If we don't meet them... Sometimes nothing, but... it can trigger a barr."

Someone had said that word before, Sean remembered, but he couldn't remember where or when. It didn't sound normal, even as Annabeth said it. Even her voice, so used to all of this, said there was something wrong with that word. Sean felt a shudder run through him, and took another bite from his ration bar, hoping the shudder would pass with the nausea.

"Thanks for putting up with my stupidity," he said.

Annabeth laughed. "Honestly, it's kind of fun having to explain this stuff. I've never thought about it before."

Normal. It was all just normal. Sean shrugged that thought away too with another bite of his rations. "Another stupid question?"

"Sure."

"Mylee, the girl I came in with, why isn't she here too? That guy – Bastis – said it took four days to get... I don't know... anyway... If it takes four days, then shouldn't we both be here?"

Annabeth nodded. "No. So... Everyone over thirteen bleeds once every four days, supposedly. But there are a ton of exceptions. That time for women, pregnancy, if you get sick or hurt... And if you get bitten."

That image came back to him, the shadow ripping skin and muscle out of Mylee's arm. Sean shook off another shutter with a

bite of rations. He wasn't going to have anything left for dinner at this rate.

"That is why she has the bandage on her arm, right?" Annabeth asked.

"So you've, what, seen us around or something?"

"Everyone's seen you around."

An alarm beeped above Annabeth's chair. She glanced up, then did something to the needle in her elbow. There was a valve, Sean noticed, where the tube connected to the needle. The flow of blood stopped, red quickly draining from the clear tube, as Annabeth pulled the needle out of her arm. "I got it, Denis," she called over her shoulder.

"Figured," the tired voice spoke from somewhere in the shadows.

"Here, I'll pull you too," Annabeth said, swinging herself around to the other side of Sean's chair. "You came in a minute after me, anyway."

"If I don't make quota, I'm blaming you," Denis the clean man said from somewhere behind them.

"You'll make quota!" Annabeth ripped the needle from Sean's arm in one swift motion, then gave him a hand up out of the chair.

"Thanks," Sean said.

"Yeah. Badge."

"Right." He pulled the red stat-paper off the back of his chair, reattached it to his left arm, then followed Annabeth down the stairs and through to the dark, empty hall. At the door, the same man who let them in changed the numbers on their badges, 1/0 for Sean now.

And then they were back out in the mud, with the door cutting off most of the blood smell, but not all of it. Blood lingered everywhere in this place. It didn't make sense, given how clean and sterile that room had been, but Sean could still smell it, even outside.

"Wait, don't you need to stay for work?" Sean asked after about five steps.

"Oh, no, you don't go to work on bleeding days." Annabeth looked at him with the tip of her tongue between her teeth. "No one told you that?"

Sean sighed. "No."

"So, you wanna hang out?"

What? Yes! Definitely! Sean thought. "Um..." was all he managed to say.

"I mean, I'm guessing you don't know what to do with yourself right now?" Annabeth said.

"I um... I have to go to work, actually," Sean said.

"Right... Your girl. Of course."

"She's my *sister*! And, yeah, I told her I'd meet her at work, because no one bothered to tell me I have the day off... Anyway, she'll be worried."

Annabeth nodded, walking, backward, toward the housing sections. "Okay. I'll look for you at check-in tomorrow, then."

"Okay," Sean said.

Sean watched her go, trudging through the mud toward what he had learned at some point was Housing Block A. For once, the mud did not seem horrible, and the overhanging clouds did not look like a personal attack. Even the wall seemed far away. The farm was really quite big, now he thought of it.

Hands in his pockets, Sean trudged toward the food processing building, thinking and a little disturbed by his thoughts. Was one normal person really all it took to make this place seem livable? He shook his head, reached out warm fingers for the door, hoping to see Annabeth again, and hoping it was okay to hope that.

CHAPTER 8

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" THE WOMAN across the belt asked, one eyebrow raised as she continued to fill vegetable molds.

"Well, to start with, no one told me to skip work today!" Sean sent the woman across the belt a glare, but his hand went to Mylee's arm. He couldn't have left her alone for too much longer, even if she had expected him to stay away.

Two trays went into the furnace, and then she looked at him, whispering, "So?"

"So nothing, really." Sean shrugged and grabbed a tray, thinking he may as well do something while standing there. "It's just a blood donation. You know, like what the hospital did after that earthquake, when they couldn't grow blood fast enough."

Across the belt, the woman's eyebrow twitched, the only sign she might be listening.

Mylee took a filled tray from her brother. "That's it? Really?"

"If you work today, you'll mess up our quota forever," the

woman across the belt said, still without looking up.

"Fine, sorry!" Sean backed away from the belt, hands raised. Mylee sent him an apologetic smile.

A door, six feet behind the end of the belt, opened, and two men came in. They said nothing, went to the crates of cooked ration bars stacked against the back wall, hoisted those crates onto their shoulders, and disappeared through the door again. A sudden thought struck Sean. If he didn't have to work...

"I'll... see you tonight," he told Mylee.

She rolled her eyes. "Lucky." Then a second later, she frowned. "Wait, where are you going? Sean, what are you doing?"

"That's not your job," the woman on the other side of the furnace said. But she didn't sound too interested.

A second later, Sean pushed through the door at the back of the room. It swung open, unlocked. They couldn't be too worried about him going through, then, right?

Inside was a long hallway, lit only by a single point of light coming through the ceiling. Sean saw no sign of the men he had just followed, and the prickle of hair standing up on the back of his neck told him to avoid them. He hurried down the hall, to another door, cracked it open, and slipped through.

On the other side were wooden crates, the same ones stacked behind the grinder and filled with vegetables. Most of these crates were empty, though, and thrown about haphazardly.

Sean crept further into the room. He felt wind, then found an entire wall standing open with large, gaping doorways on the other side. No, not doorways. Trucks. Sean's eyes went wide, staring into the back ends of five half-loaded trucks standing outside in the open.

The sudden rumble of voices, men calling out to each other, men laughing, sent a shock through him. Sean jumped behind a stack of empty crates, knees to his chest, trying to breathe as little as possible, as a group of men climbed across ramps that led from the back of the trucks back into whatever this crate area was. Some of them carried crates with vegetables spilling between their slats, which they stacked on top of others against the east wall.

Another stack of crates sat against the west wall, with those white, paper-ish sheaths visible through the slats. For a while, Sean watched another group of men carry these crates out into the

trucks.

They were moving rations out and bringing supplies in.

The vast emptiness that he and Mylee had wandered through before their capture had led Sean to believe that this dreadful world was empty, just a broken fragment, a memory of the great city he had known. For days, it had seemed there was nothing left in the world except rubble and decay.

The farm had proven that people indeed survived, along with... something else. There were also the Outlands, where apparently people lived some kind of life. But still, the memory of devastation remained. The farm became the only island in a dead world, a single speck of life, buried in mud, and clawing its way out.

But maybe that entire image was wrong.

Maybe there was more beyond the farm, more life, more people. Maybe the dead city was the dead city, and the burning river was a barrier between it and a living city. Maybe there was no garden in the farm because there was another farm altogether. Maybe they made more ration bars than the farm needed because another farm needed them too.

And maybe the two farms traded food for food.

This idea occurred to Sean for the first time and suddenly seemed like the most obvious thing in the world. More than one farm existed. Even the way these people talked, he now realized, suggested that. There were at least two farms, trading with each other, which meant some kind of government, and commerce, transportation, and infrastructure...

And what did all that mean about the creatures on the wall?

Because something else had always been obvious. Humans ran everything that happened inside the walls of the farm, but they were not in charge. Something else controlled the walls, kept the walls, and the Humans inside them. Humans pulled the strings, but something else held them. Something that collected their blood, and also bone marrow, and plasma, and whole fingers and toes. Something that had literally taken a bite out of Mylee.

They were trapped inside the farm. That much was obvious from moment one. So where, exactly, did this open wall in this warehouse lead? Where, exactly, where those trucks going, and who was driving them? Everyone he saw was Human, but

Humans were not in charge.

All these thoughts rambled through his head as he sat with wilted carrots poking through wooden crate slats on one side, wilted broccoli on the other. He almost followed those thoughts to their conclusion, almost inched toward that wall, snuck into a truck, rode it out to... Where? Where could it go except to a place just like this one? Still, maybe he could jump off it, or stay hidden somehow, or...

But he couldn't leave Mylee. Of course, he would intend to return for her, but chances were that would be impossible. And he couldn't take that chance. In his entire life, his twin was the one thing that had always been there, always gone with him, always made sense to him. The deeper they went into this new world, the truer that became. If they left, they left together. That was not a selfless decision on Sean's part. It wasn't even a decision. It was just the way it was.

So Sean turned back, sneaking behind crates, checking the hall was clear, then tip-toeing along toward the food-prep room. The door appeared, the noise of the grinder buzzing on the other side. Sean pushed it open, blinking in the light of the room he knew far too well after only four days, and stopped short. "Gatch," he said.

The foreman, who had shown Mylee and Sean to their places on the conveyer belt, and hadn't shown his face since, stood on the other side of the door, arms crossed, staring straight at Sean.

"That's not your job," he said.

Twenty feet away, Mylee's white face peered around the furnace, filled ration trays piling up at her left hand. Sean met her eyes and gave her the tiniest shake of his head. He wasn't sure what, exactly, he was telling her not to do, but he knew that she absolutely could not do it.

"I was... looking for the bathroom?" Sean tried.

The foreman muttered something, then grabbed Sean by the arm. He had a stat-paper stylus in his other hand, and without a word erased the straight mouth line of the face on Sean's badge. In its place, he drew an X.

"Strike one," he said, then walked away.

"That's... it?" Sean asked. Acrah had said something about this on their first day. What was it? Something about sixty days... Some number of strikes didn't erase...

But what did a strike do?

Nothing, it seemed.

In a jerking motion, Mylee returned to the ration trays, sticking two into the furnace at a time. She glanced nervously at Sean as he passed her, and he squeezed her shoulder in response in a dumb attempt to reassure her.

"Would you get out of here already?" the woman across the belt said.

"Hey, first strike, good going kid!" the boy who fed the grinder said, over the din of broccoli being murdered between vicious blades.

"Shut up!" Mylee said.

Sean shook his head at her, then pointed at his badge. "So, what does this mean?" he asked the grinder boy. "What happens to me now?"

The boy raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"What are the strikes? What do they do?"

"They are strikes... They..." The boy appeared to run out of words, ending his answer with a weak and uncertain shrug.

"Do they do something bad to you?" Mylee asked. "Like you get half a ration bar instead of a whole one, or..."

"No..." The boy frowned, leaning against a full crate as it leaned against the grinder. "Um... You just... hope you don't get four more of them. And hope there isn't a barr while you have one."

What the fuckin' gatch is a barr? Sean almost screamed that question, but something stopped it in his throat. For a moment he thought, hoped or feared, that Mylee would ask for him. Instead, she shrugged while shoving another tray into the furnace.

"Whatever," Sean said. "I'm going to go back home I guess, then." *Home?* What had just come out of his mouth?

"Good," the woman across the belt said.

Mylee nodded. "See you." She didn't look at him, and it felt weird, like the cord that had snapped between them that morning was still broken. Sean lingered, but in the end, he could only pat her shoulder, and move on.

Late that night, Sean woke suddenly and unexpectedly. He was in his bed. Well, what passed for a bed. Well, two blankets on a plastic cushion on a plastic sheet on top of the muddy ground. The mud was softer than the cushion, or maybe just thicker than the cushion. Anyway, it was what it was, placed into a square space inside a large, Human warehouse.

Housing Block B reminded Sean of the beef farms he'd seen in history classes, where Humans had warehoused meat animals before they started to grow pure animal muscle for consumption. Oddly enough, the old beef farms looked a lot like the animal protein growth factories of Sean's time. The stalls where they used to keep living cows were about the same size as the muscle incubation chambers.

The rooms inside Housing Block B were all different sizes. Some could only fit one person. Some held entire families. But they were all arranged in lines along the outer walls, just like the old beef stalls. The outer walls were wooden, but the inner walls separating rooms from rooms were some kind of heavy canvas, stretched between metal poles that looked like they could be moved and rearranged. Sean and Mylee shared a room, large enough for what passed as two beds and not much else.

Sean woke in the middle of the night because he heard crying. It wasn't the worst thing he'd overheard in Housing Block B over the last few nights, but somehow, it felt worse. For a moment, he was in his parents' lab, thawing back to life after the cryo-chamber shut off. Maybe he had imagined everything since that moment. Maybe coming out of the freeze was killing him, or killing Mylee, or both of them, and his mind had created a world to escape into while they died.

A moment helped him to focus, to hear correctly, and worst of all, feel the absolute truth of where he was, on that excuse for a bed, in that excuse for a home, given to them by this excuse for a life. They were not in the lab. They had thawed. They had traveled through an abandoned city, across a burning river, and into this place.

And now Mylee was crying.

"Miles?" Sean asked.

"Sorry. Go back to sleep," she choked through her tears.

Sean took a breath and sat up. "Mylee? What's up?"

"What's up?" Mylee laughed into her arms, her back to Sean as she lay on her own excuse for a bed. The laugh devolved into sobbing, and several seconds passed before she spoke again. "I told you not to make this place seem normal, this morning, remember?"

"I remember."

"But it is though. Isn't it? This is normal now. Gatchin, Sean, is this normal now? Is this it? Is this just what life is now, all life is now? Is it? Sean..."

There might have been more words after that, swallowed into the choking din of Mylee's distress. Sean sat with his head against the stone wall behind him, unable to speak because even the words he wanted to say — *I don't know* — felt somehow dishonest. Maybe he really did know. Maybe he had known for days now.

So why wasn't he crying too?

"How are you so calm?" Mylee asked, as if she were reading his thoughts.

"I'm not! I just..." Sean took a breath. There was a space between the boards directly above his head, and he could see a single star through it, shining out against the dark as if to proclaim that hope was not some passing dream. "You remember last Christmas?" he asked.

"What?"

"Last Christmas," he said. "The way the kitchen smelled, hot chocolate and coffee, and Aunt Linda, and Sidi reading that story — the Christmas story. Luke's version, right?"

"Aunt Linda's favorite version."

"Because it was about the women, not the men."

"Yeah." For a moment, Mylee almost sounded calm. Then she took another sobbing breath, asking, "So?"

"So I go back there, sometimes," Sean said. "I started doing it a long time ago, building these places inside my brain, memories... It helped keep me calm when teachers would yell about homework and stuff."

"Yeah, I think you told me that," Mylee said with a sniff. "Why last Christmas?"

"Because it was perfect."

"Aunt Linda and Aereal got into a giant fight at breakfast!"

"It wasn't a giant fight. It was a normal Aereal fight."

"Like I said, giant."

Sean smiled, watching the star above him. "But do you remember what she said to Aereal, during the fight, about life?"

"Not really." Mylee rolled over onto her other side, facing Sean. "What did she say?"

The star burned itself into Sean's retinas, like the star in a different version of that old story, the version where a group of magicians traveled across the world, because a star told them God had come to earth. Because a star gave them hope.

"She said that the point of her religion was that all life is sacred because all life has the same source, the same God. And that everything we do is just life trying to get back to its source."

"And what does that mean?" Mylee asked.

"I don't know," Sean said, blinking when the starlight grew too bright against the black of space. "But right now, I think it means we're going to be okay."

Those words felt weak, but he couldn't think of another way to say them, or how to put into words how he really felt. He didn't even understand what he felt, or why, exactly, that Christmas haunted him. But it did haunt him, and it had, since long before he woke up in this dreadful place. A lot of his memories of his aunt and her church haunted him.

Sean had found his aunt's faith beautiful. He had never given much thought to whether or not he believed any part of it himself. He still didn't, even as his mind fixated on that warm Christmas morning, as an escape from the cold and muddy farm. That was exactly what one of his teachers had called religion, Sean remembered, an escape from harsh realities.

Except, that argument had never made sense to Sean, because Aunt Linda's faith did not deny the harshness of reality. That was part of its beauty. Instead of denial, they took the harshness and carved it into this idea of a journey, a crawling, scraping, clawing journey through death and destruction, back to their ultimate source. Reality was harsh because overcoming hardship made people better, and becoming better brought people closer to God.

That image captivated Sean, even though he had no idea whether he believed it true or not. Something about it made him want to be better. Something about it gave him hope—inexplicable, but undeniable hope, like the single point of light that just hap-

pened to shine through a hole above his head in Housing Block B.

So Sean fixated on the memory of that Christmas morning because it meant there was hope in the harshness, an escape from the mud and from his own inability to prevent Mylee from crying. He still didn't give much thought to whether or not he believed anything Aunt Linda had believed. That didn't really seem to be the point. It was beautiful, and it helped. In the darkness, in denial of his new reality, that was all that seemed to matter.

"I think we're going to be okay, Mylee," he said. "I really do."

Days later, and out miles beyond the farm, across the burning river, between two broken skyscrapers and an overgrown road, the sun was setting. A single shadow moved between one fallen wall and the next. It stopped, turned, then started again, searching for something in the rubble.

And then another shadow fell against the first, like a bird of prey descending without warning from the sky. There was a shriek, and then a snarl, the feral roar of a beast, cut off by a woman's shout. Against the setting sun, a single blade slashed out, ringing through the air as the first shadow fell into the center of what was once a road. It scuttled backward, shadow becoming flesh held up by bone. Grey flesh stretched over a Human face with a gorilla's teeth and yellow eyes. A man's body dressed in ragged men's clothes dropped onto all fours, poised to spring, like an enraged primate defending its land.

A moment later, a woman emerged from the shadows, pink skin and black hair pulled back from a wholly Human face. The blade—a long, heavy sword soldered together from scrap metal—came with her, tip dragging in the weeds by her feet. With a snarl, the grey-skinned shadow sprang at her, and with one twist of her wrist, she sent the soldered blade straight through its abdomen. With another twist, she drew the blade back, covered now in black blood, as the creature roared and twisted on the ground. It held its ripped stomach and snarled, slithering back, away from her feet.

"Do I have your attention?" the woman asked.

"Forsaken!" The shadow hissed, its gorilla's fangs exposed to

the red light of sunset.

"*Alino*." Black blood dripped from the blade held ready at the woman's side. "So don't bite me."

The shadow crouched, fingers dripping the same way the woman's blade did. "There are other ways to kill you."

"You won't."

"Won't I? I am not some fragile *Demens*."

"No." Her blade slashed through the air, coming to rest against the shadow's throat. "You still have your mind. So I would prefer not to end your existence."

"You're so sure you'd win?"

"Of course I'd win. Even if you killed me, I would win." As she spoke, the woman moved her wrist, not the one that held the sword, but the other, her left hand, twisted so her palm was toward the shadow. The motion exposed the veins of her wrist to his sight, and the mark, tattooed there in red ink.

The shadow hissed, sliding further back, under the overhang of a broken wall. "What do you want?"

"A few days ago," the woman said, "you were tracking two young people through the Abandon. Humans, a boy and a girl. Don't bother denying it."

"You were tracking them too?"

"I was days behind them, lost their trail before you did, I think."

"I did not *lose* them." The creature rose to his full seven and a half feet, three hundred and eighty pounds, towering over the woman's head.

"Where did you last see them?" she asked, sword hanging at her side.

The shadow looked at her with cold, yellow eyes.

"You know who sent me," the woman said as her left wrist rose ever so slightly higher into the air. "Tell me, or tell him."

The shadow hissed, lips drawing back to expose the gorilla teeth once more.

"Where did you last see them?"

"I followed them to the river."

"And you didn't attack?"

"They didn't smell right. *Kibi mal exap*. Food that has gone bad should be left untouched."

She did not react to that statement, which annoyed him greatly. "But you still followed them?"

"Curiosity."

"They crossed the river?"

"They were taken across. *Alino*, I could not follow into the farms' territory. I wouldn't want to, anyway."

"*Alino*." The woman took a rag from her pocket and wiped it down the length of the blade.

"Could you, Forsaken?" the shadow asked. "I have often wondered. Can you cross that river? Are you still Human enough to burn?"

She looked up at him, black stained rag thrown to the ground, sword returned to its sheath on her left hip. "Don't worry about me. Worry about yourself. This isn't your territory, either."

And then the shadows parted ways, one creeping wall to wall back into the twisted wreck of fallen skyscrapers. The other, a single sword strapped to her waist, went the other way, toward a burning river, and the Human farms that lay beyond.

CHAPTER 9

AFTER FOUR DAYS, SEAN HAD ANOTHER DAY OFF, because of the bleeding. This time, Mylee was with him. She complained about the smell, complained that the seats were cold, complained when they stuck the needle in her arm, complained that it all made her feel sick, complained when they took the needles out again.

Annabeth was there too, and that made sense, Sean realized, since this happened every four days. The girls had met at check-in a few times, but it took being strapped to a chair by needles with blood coming out of her arm to make Mylee open up to the possibility of making friends in this place. Now, before long, she and Annabeth chatted much like Sean and Annabeth had four days earlier.

After bleeding, they had the day off together and spent it wandering around the farm and talking. They learned that Annabeth had two older brothers, that her father was gone, and her mother worked in record keeping. It was all so normal, this hanging out,

this getting to know each other. The usualness of it felt like a fog over their heads, the thing that Mylee feared, that just kept creeping nearer and nearer with each passing day.

At work the next day, Sean found himself looking forward to the next bleeding. Another unbearably normal thing about this new world. The day after that, he realized that the girls' schedule would change after a while, while his remained the same. That thought was unbearable, and he pushed it out of his mind.

Another day passed, and then it was the fourth day again. In the cold chairs, Sean counted backward, *four, eight, twelve...* almost two weeks they had been in this farm. More than two weeks since he and Mylee woke up in the lab. And how many years before that was the night of the shadows?

That was only one of the many things they still didn't know.

After the bleeding room, they went to wander the farm again. "How big is this place?" Mylee asked. "Can we walk all the way around it?"

Annabeth shrugged. "Sure."

So they skirted the wall, hopping through the mud and talking. Above the concrete and steel barrier hung an empty sky, dark and grey and cold. Mylee asked if anyone had pets in the farm, and Annabeth wondered what a pet was.

They came to the gate where the twins had come through two weeks earlier. Sean hurried past it, then waited for the girls on the other side. He noticed that Annabeth glanced at that gate, just a glance, like a wish thrown into a wishing fountain. She didn't pause, didn't stop to think, just glanced.

And then they arrived at a section of the wall that felt different. The same grey sky hung overhead, but the feeling of emptiness had gone. Sean sensed something waiting on the other side, shadows, now here, now there, always moving.

"You've really never eaten anything else?" Mylee asked.

"How could I eat anything that's not food?" Annabeth was confused, but not annoyed, laughing as they sloshed mud between their boots.

"No. It's still food. There are other kinds of food."

"What are you talking about?"

"What do you think people ate before they invented fires to cook those bars?"

"I don't understand."

"And what about the vegetables that go in the bars?"

"What are vegetables? And I don't know what the bars are made of."

"How do you not know? You've been eating them all your life!"

"It's not my job!"

"Well, what do you think we eat in the Outlands?"

Annabeth shrugged. "Ration bars?"

"Are you serious right now?"

"Annabeth," Sean asked, "what's on the other side of the wall?" He reached out to brush his fingers along the surface, like a living thing that he did not want to wake.

Annabeth froze. The mud sucked her boots in and held her in place. "That's not any of our jobs."

Sean looked at her, the pretty, normal face in the middle of all this craziness. "You take blood and bones and body parts for them every day. How can it not be your job to know?"

With a sharp sucking sound, Annabeth pulled her boots out of the mud and walked away. Mylee shrugged, and said, "Well, one of us had to ask, I guess."

They were in the middle of another conversation when Sean noticed a series of boarded-up holes in the wall behind Housing Block J that looked a lot like the holes behind the check-in tables. "Hey!" He stopped, tapping on one of the boards. "What's this?"

"Oh..." Annabeth said. "Yeah, this used to be the check-in area. Back when I was little, I don't really remember. But there was a storm that washed out Housing Block H. And I don't know why, but this was the only place to build Block J, so, they moved everything. So, what do you eat in the Outlands?"

Sean tore himself away from the wall, from the holes, and tried to carry on a conversation even though he could now think of only one thing. That part of the wall was secluded, tucked behind a large building with barely enough room for one person to walk. And there were holes. Holes that led directly somewhere.

They parted ways with Annabeth well before the sun set, and immediately, Sean turned back the way they had come.

"What are you doing?" Mylee asked, trudging after him.

Instead of answering, Sean slipped behind Housing Block J

and skirted the wall back to those boarded holes.

"Um, Sean, maybe we should think about this," Mylee said as he dug his fingertips into the cemented gap between board and wall.

"Find me something to pry this," he said.

"Do we even know that's possible?" Mylee asked. When he didn't answer, she sighed as loudly as she could and trudged off. A few minutes later she returned with a board — that didn't work. Then a rock — that didn't work. Then nails. They used the rock to drive the nails in between the board and the wall. Sean was amazed they managed to do it without drawing attention. But then, perhaps everyone who did overhear their racket just figured it *wasn't their job*.

In any case, quite a while later, they pried a board loose from one of the holes and bent their heads in to see.

The holes were about the size of a Human head. A small child might even be able to crawl through one, though the interior was so rough that Sean shuttered at the idea of what it might do to bear skin. It went straight through the wall, forming a tunnel at least three feet long, perfectly square.

Boxes of ration bars had once come through these holes, so Sean knew all they might get from their efforts was a hazy view of some old storage room. Instead, they found themselves looking into an open space. Smooth grey stones of various sizes locked together over the ground like some kind of tapestry, no sign of mud. And there was a chair, raised just slightly higher than the rest of the paved floor. A concrete block formed the chair's seat, with a back and two arms made of what looked like metal piping twisted together into an elaborate design that resembled art.

"Is that a throne?" Mylee asked.

Something moved. A shadow, darting across the hole. Another jumped over the back of the throne. Mylee and Sean jerked away, ending up with their backs against the wall on either side of the open hole.

"Did they hear me?" Mylee asked.

"This might have been a bad idea," Sean said.

Mylee grabbed the board they had spent so much time and energy prying loose. "How do we get this back on?"

"Um... no clue."

"Gatch! Sean!"

"I know. I know."

Off inside Housing Block J, someone let out a roaring laugh, followed by loud voices and applause. Mylee dropped the board, then scooped up a handful of mud and tossed it into the hole. She stacked mud on mud until the opening filled, drooping and threatening to come loose.

"Will that work?" Sean asked.

"How should I know?" Mylee said. "Come on!"

They sprinted away, tripping as they tried to run all the way back to Housing Block B.

On their way back to their rooms the next day, Sean and Mylee heard a voice call to them in the alley between two reconstructed buildings. "Hey, Outlands kids?"

They'd seen the man before, standing in the shadows and watching them, Sean sometimes thought, while twirling a gold coin between his fingers. It was hard to be stealthy in this place, with the mud making a racket every time you lifted your boots.

"No, don't go *toward* him!" Sean said. But Mylee was already halfway there, stomping through the mud with determination.

"What do you want already?" she asked. With a roll of his eyes, Sean followed her.

The coin flashed up in the air, then disappeared into the man's hand as he beckoned them between two buildings.

"Oh, this looks safe," Sean said. He watched the shadows, certain something would jump onto his back. Now... or maybe now...

"Five seconds," Mylee said. A randomly chosen number, Sean was sure. "Tell us what you want, or we're out. And stop following us!"

The little man stared at her from narrowed eyes. "If I could get you kids back to the Outlands, would you go?"

This is some kind of trick, Sean thought.

Mylee crossed her arms. "Well, of course. But can you?"

Sean had to smile at the tone of incredulous disbelief in Mylee's

ee's voice.

"I would be skeptical, too," the little man said.

"I'm not skeptical," Mylee said. "I'm quite certain you can't do it."

Sean put a hand on her arm. "How *would* you do it?"

The man's eyes darted to the X mark on Sean's arm. "You've seen the trucks. It's actually not that hard to get out of here."

"Then why doesn't everyone leave?" Mylee asked. "You're not making any sense. We're going."

"Find me when you're ready," the little man said as they re-emerged into daylight.

"That was weird," Sean said.

"Yeah." Mylee shuttered. "Let's not do it again."

CHAPTER 10

DAYS PASSED. ONE, THEN TWO. WORK AND SLEEP and work.

On the third day, a rainstorm swept in, bad enough to evacuate all the Housing Blocks into sturdier buildings with solid floors. They strung hammocks across the ceilings because even the solid floors flooded, crowded together into tiny spaces to wait out the rain. Sean and Mylee had been with Annabeth when the evacuation order came and followed her to the records warehouse, where her mother worked. It was a long, windowless rectangular building, filing cabinets standing in rows from wall to wall, now with hammocks hanging above them.

Mylee, Sean, and Annabeth hung in three hammocks strung in a row, staring at the ceiling. "Settle in everyone," Bastis called out from one of the four barrels they were attempting to light fires in at the four corners of the room. "This looks to be a few-day one."

"A few days?" Sean turned to Annabeth. "A few days until what?"

"Until we go anywhere."

Mylee tried to raise herself onto her elbows, which she couldn't quite do on the loose surface beneath her. Instead, she sank and wobbled, all while saying, "Wait, we're going to be in this building for days?"

"They'll send someone every morning to get the ration bars," Annabeth said. "Otherwise, yeah. Last time we all missed two bleeding rounds."

Eight days? Sean shuttered. They could be trapped in here for eight days? The farm was already small enough.

"Does this happen often?" he asked.

"No. Once a year, or so."

There was something in Annabeth's voice. Sean couldn't figure out what it meant, but it was there, an edge to her normal tone, a pause before words that didn't feel quite right. As they went through the day, climbing hammock to hammock and passing the time as best they could, he noticed it in other voices too. The pause, the edge. He wondered if Mylee noticed, but was afraid to ask.

At first, he thought they were afraid of the storm. At times, it did seem like the walls of even this warehouse would collapse, drowning them under a torrent of water.

During his seventh or eighth game of cards with a third group of people, Sean started to think that they feared something more than just the storm. But what else could it be?

As he went to sleep that night, curled up under heavy blankets and staring at the ceiling, he imagined raindrops breaking through. They crushed the ceiling, pounding his hammock down into the floor. He flailed around, trying to get loose, but the water made those heavy blankets heavier, wrapped him up so tightly that he couldn't move. High above his head, Mylee hung over the edge of her hammock, wet hair in strings all around her frightened face, one hand reaching down as she screamed his name. And then the rain wrapped wet fabric over his mouth and nose, suffocating him...

Sean woke gasping with the violent creek of his hammock against the metal rings that held it to the ceiling. For a second, he thought those rings really would snap. Shadows moved, crouched, and ready to spring. But it was only the flickering light from the fires, and in the ceiling, his hammock held fast. Safe and dry, Sean

relaxed into the fabric beneath him, listening to wind and water storming only two feet above his head and trying not to read anything into the shadows.

On storm day two, Sean played more card games, and Mylee took to walking across the filing cabinets, back and forth, over and around. She started jumping from one line of cabinets to another, which made Sean cringe with every attempt. He stopped counting the number of times she fell onto the water-logged floor. Still, he noticed the falls becoming few and far between. By the end of the day, she was pretty good at this game and made almost every jump. Meanwhile, Sean played cards.

On day three, Sean overheard Bastis talking with Annabeth's mother. "Well, almost everyone's missed a bleeding by now," he said.

"There are reserves," Annabeth's mother said. "We don't know that it will trigger a barr."

"Don't we?" Bastis asked.

Was that the reason they all sounded strange?

"Hey!" Mylee hung her legs over the edge of the filing cabinet next to Sean's hammock. She was wet from jumping and drying off before she got in her own hammock.

"I'm surprised you haven't broken anything yet," Sean said, trying to make his disapproval of her chosen past time as obvious as possible.

Mylee shrugged. "What are you so deep in thought about?"

"That word came up again. *Barr*. I don't know what it means, but people here are afraid of it."

"You don't know what it means?" Mylee sounded surprised.

"Why? Do you?"

"Well..." Mylee hesitated. "I guess it might not be, but... I assumed..."

"What?"

"Well, it's a BelDom word, right? *Barr*. When we write it in our alphabet, we put two Rs at the end."

"Oh, oh!" Sean nodded. "Right. This was on a vocabulary test

at some point... um..."

"It means 'hunt,' Sean," Mylee said.

And there it was, the fear, suddenly encapsulated into a single word, one that made Sean feel sick before he even bothered to wonder why he felt that way. But what did it mean? The storm pounded that question into his head as he lay awake that night. What, in this place, was a 'hunt'?

On day four, people started placing bets about how many jumps Mylee could make in a row. She made it to a hundred toward the end of the day, to the riotous applause of every person in the warehouse. We are all really, very bored, Sean concluded.

As part of the war against his own boredom, Sean volunteered to get the ration bars on day five.

"You really don't want to do this," Annabeth said. They stood at the open doorway, ankle-deep in water, with a solid sheet of water streaming down on the other side. Sean shrugged. Everyone else had made it back. How hard could it be?

"You're insane," Annabeth said.

"I'm insane? My sister's the one jumping off filing cabinets!"

"Yeah, you're right. It must be an Outlands thing."

"Ha-ha." Sean took a deep breath, then a step to the edge of the doorway, then another deep breath.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Annabeth said.

"Don't drown!" Mylee called from somewhere in the warehouse.

Great advice, Sean thought. He pulled the rancid raincoat tighter around him, still somewhat amazed that these people even had raincoats, hesitating to put the hood up. It had never been washed, that much was clear. But with no other protection, the hood went up over his head. He stuck his foot outside and took the plunge.

The wind hit his side like a solid wall as the rain hit from above. His feet sank deep into the mud and he collapsed onto his knees.

"Coming back yet?" Annabeth's voice sounded like it might have come from another planet.

"Shut up!" Sean said, inhaling a mouth full of water for his trouble. Coughing, he pulled himself forward, hands sinking deep into mud before he finally found something solid to push up against. He crawled a few inches, getting his feet loose from the

mud and almost losing one of his boots in the process. With his feet at last under him again, he struggled up, grabbing at a nearby wall for support.

"Stay close to the buildings," Bastis had said, back inside the warehouse when this had seemed like a halfway decent idea. "The mud washes away from them. And whatever you do, keep the raincoat on."

"Why would I take the raincoat off?" Sean had asked.

"Just keep it on," Bastis said, as if the fate of the universe hung on that command.

"Yeah, I'll keep the raincoat on, obviously!" Sean said.

"Make sure you get fifty-nine bars. Fifty-nine. Count them. Twice. That's fifty-nine."

"Make sure there's enough food for everyone. Got it. What else?"

"Don't drown."

"Yeah. Helpful."

"And ignore the shadows," Bastis said quickly, as if he didn't really want Sean to hear.

"Wait, the what?" Mylee said from her perch on top of the nearest filing cabinet.

"Everyone's hungry. Go!" Bastis said.

About five minutes later, outside and realizing this might not have been the greatest idea after all, Sean rested against the building, moving his feet around to keep from getting stuck. He should have been able to see the check-in wall from here. And he thought that, maybe, he could. Maybe there was a darker grey blur out there against the grey blur the rain made of everything. Anyway, it was straight ahead. If he kept walking straight, he'd run into it eventually. With another deep breath, Sean staggered forward, hand against the wall for support. Eventually, that building ended. He tried to sprint to the safety of the next one and ended up falling flat onto his face in the open space between them. For a moment, face down in the mud, he couldn't breathe and realized that drowning was a more likely possibility than he had thought.

And where did this storm even come from? It had never rained like this before. Between Sean's time and now, even the weather had changed. How had that happened?

Sean got his face out of the mud and crawled, hand over hand,

all the way to the next building. The water fell like a giant's fist on his back, holding him down, pushing, until he was sure the mud would close over him entirely. If it did, and he drowned, Mylee would be alone. He couldn't let that happen. He would not let that happen. With a final, straining effort, Sean dragged himself into the shallower mud beside the next building. He got his back against the wall, pulled his legs up to his chest, and focused all his energy on breathing in, out, in, out, in, out...

"Not far kid! Keep on!"

At first, he thought he imagined the voice. But blinking against the pummeling water, he saw there really was another person, creeping along the wall of a building across the street. He wore a raincoat like Sean's, bright red, enough to stand out even through the rain. He waved as Sean looked up, but didn't stop, continuing his own mission over the mud and through the horrid wind.

There was something comforting in the sight of that other person, even though he didn't wait, or help, or do anything but speak those few words. The words and the wave did more for Sean than it seemed like they should have. He pushed himself up against the wall and started off again.

Fighting his way to the next corner, he saw a shadow flash through the corner of one eye. It was a particularly heavy streak of rain, or a cloud passing across all the other clouds. Sean took a breath, braced himself, and this time walked across the no-man's-land between buildings.

The other red raincoat stood across from him again. They waved to each other, a blur of red motion through sheeting rain. A patch of black smoke drifted across the roof above the other raincoat's head. Sean almost screamed in warning, but the smoke vanished before he could.

Ignore the shadows, Bastis had said. What had that meant? Did it mean they weren't real, an optical illusion caused by pelting rain and overactive nerves? Yes, that was probably it. The shadows weren't really there, just something people tended to see through sheets of falling water, something that made them lose their heads, fall, and drown. That was probably what Bastis meant.

Unless...

Sean reached the end of the building, and now there was no doubt about the great wall that loomed ahead. It was a huge, grey

spot standing firm against the pelting rain and in defiance of the wind. There were no more buildings now, just a straight run to the wall, across fifty feet of swimming mud. Sean glanced across the street at the other raincoat, saw him nod, an exaggerated motion visible through the rain. Sean returned the nod, choking inside. It was some kind of agreement, and he felt honor-bound to keep it. The other raincoat stepped out, and Sean followed, away from the buildings, and into the full force of the wind.

The wind ripped the hood off Sean's head. He grabbed at the straps, struggling to re-tie them with muddy, frozen hands. The other raincoat waded through the mud, hands stretched out on either side for balance. Unstick foot from mud, step forward, shift weight to that foot, unstick other foot from mud, step forward, shift weight – foot, by foot, by foot.

Sean got his hood back in place, but not before the wind hit his eardrum with a howl that ripped through his body. He stepped out the way he saw the other raincoat step, foot by foot, careful. *Don't fall. Don't drown. Don't leave Mylee alone.*

Don't leave Mylee alone.

Eyes down, watching his feet and where he stepped, he saw a shadow cross over his. Again, a heavier sheet of rain. A cloud across the others. Or...

Or...

He hesitated, felt his feet sinking, and forced himself forward. *Get to the wall. Get to the wall. Get to the wall.* That was all that mattered. Ignore the shadows and get to the wall.

It could have taken an hour, but he got there. His frozen hands sank against concrete and steel, gasping in relief.

"Hey!" Something hit his arm, and he jerked around, ready to – what? Run? A second later he realized how bad an idea that would be.

Fortunately, he didn't have to do anything. It was the other raincoat, standing at his shoulder now, and smiling under his own tightly fastened hood. "Cheer up, kid," he said. "Your name's out of the lottery now, at least."

"I volunteered, actually," Sean said.

"Are you insane?"

"So the evidence suggests."

The other raincoat laughed, then turned to the nearest hole in

the wall and shouted through it, "I need ninety-four!"

Right, he was here for food. Sean turned to another hole, peering in and seeing nothing but blackness on the other side. "Um... I need fifty-nine... um... thank you..."

A scraping noise followed, the noise of talons scratching through the pages of a book. Something moved. And then the hole closed up as a box shoved through.

Sean pulled it out on his end. *Count it, twice*, Bastis had said. Sean had a feeling he would be the one going without if he got this wrong and found himself counting the bars for a third time. Fifty-nine every time.

"Good luck getting back, kid," the other raincoat said, gripping his own box in front of him.

Sean nodded. "You too." Gripping onto the box like life itself, Sean started back across the muddy field. He crossed paths with a third raincoat on his way and noticed a fourth between some buildings further off.

Then, by some miracle, he had reached a building. He pressed his back against the wall, lowering himself gently onto the ground to rest his legs. His muscles ached as if he had spent the last hour climbing up an endless staircase. Just a minute, he thought, closing his eyes. They can all last without food for an extra minute.

He didn't know how long he sat there, only that a shriek forced his eyes open again. It was the wind, he told himself, whipping around the buildings.

Except it happened again.

Two bright red raincoats stood out in the empty land between the buildings and the wall. They both froze in place, allowing their feet to sink deep into the mud, exchanging a glance through the sheeting rain. A shadow moved between two buildings, not carefully like the raincoats did, but quickly, as if the mud and the rain and the wind were not there at all. There was another shriek, and then a roar.

Sean lurched up to his feet, almost falling, almost dropping the box as he set off again through the mud, leaning against the wall. Directly in front of him, the wind roared once more.

Except it might not be the wind.

A shadow darted over the roof next to him. And then it was on the roof above him. Sean clutched the box tight and stopped short

at the end of the building. Suddenly, the overhanging roof above his head offered protection from more than just water and mud. He paused there, box pressed into his chest so tightly that it hurt, legs aching and lungs burning, unable to move.

Then another shriek came on a gust of wind from behind him. It pushed him forward, tripping into the no-man's-land between buildings. A roar followed the shriek, then another, and another. Shadows moved across the roofs. Sean stepped too quickly and tripped. He dropped the box, catching himself before his face went into the mud as ration bars went flying. He scrambled onto his knees, reaching first for the box, then the fallen bars, while every voice inside his head screamed at him to run. *Run. Run. Run.*

A shadow fell over his hand before it closed around a third ration bar. Through the pelting rain on his right side, the silhouette of a man crouched. A huge man with the shoulders of a gorilla, and hands knuckles down in the mud. It looked like smoke, vibrating against the raindrops, grey and white through the grey and white of the rain. Sean froze, arm outstretched and hand almost on the ration bar.

The creature rose, from a crouch to a hunch, to its full height, towering over Sean with immense shoulders blocking what little light managed to get through the clouds and rain. Was it even there? It quivered, and its outline faded in and out like the smoky edges of a fire. Looking at it hurt, but Sean could not look away. He could have reached through the rain and touched it, but he wasn't sure it would be there if he did. It stood there for some time, and then, it was gone. A shadow landed against the wall across the street and bounced from there up onto the roof behind him.

Sean gasped. The arm he rested all his weight on gave out, and his shoulder crashed deep into the mud. At some point, his frozen hands managed to retrieve all the ration bars, stuff them muddy back into the box, and drag both himself and it over to the next building, then the next, until, somehow, he had reached the records warehouse, pounding at the door to be let inside.

"Sean!" He heard Mylee's feet slosh through water, and then her arms were around his neck.

"Wow, how many times did you fall?" Annabeth asked from somewhere around his left shoulder.

"Get in. Get dry. You don't want to freeze to death," Bastis said in a tired voice. A moment later, Sean was by one of the fires that burned non-stop in metal tubs in all four corners of the building.

"Great, you dropped it. There are still fifty-nine in here, right?" It was Annabeth's mother, passing ration bars up to the hands above her. Those hands passed the bars along from cot to cot, all above Sean's head.

"Your fingers are blue," Mylee said. "Sean, your fingers are blue. Blue is bad, right?"

Sean didn't care. Blue or not, he used those fingers to pull at the strings on his hood until, somehow, they came loose, then started just as inelegantly on the zipper. "Those things are out there!" he said, accusing. "In the rain. Those things are out there in the rain!"

Both of Mylee's hands closed around his left arm. "What?"

Annabeth stepped up onto a chair, then pulled herself onto the filing cabinets, and then over into the hammocks. Her mother kept handing up ration bars, while Bastis looked into the fire.

Sean ripped the zipper open. "What is wrong with all you people? You know what's out there. You have to know what's out there. Why don't you say anything?"

"It's not our job," Bastis said.

"Oh, don't you give me that!" Sean said. "Don't you freakin', gatching give me that!"

"Sean," Mylee said, her hands still around his arm.

Sean threw the raincoat with a violent splash into the water at his feet. "Why are those things on this side of the wall?"

Annabeth's mother paused with her hands in the ration bar box. "There's no bleeding during the storms," she said. "And some people can't handle being confined. Some people go crazy enough to run out into the storm."

A horrible theory was occurring to Sean, sinking in bit by bit. Meanwhile, Bastis snapped his fingers at Sean. "Raincoat," he said.

Annabeth's mother handed another ration bar up to the hammocks, saying, "You were perfectly safe the entire time."

"Raincoat," Bastis said, with more urgency.

Sean shuttered, grabbed the soaking mess out of the water, and handed it over.

It was a bright, red coat, visible even through the storm, that

always went back into a locked box after the rations came. *Don't take off the raincoat*, Bastis had said — said twice, actually.

"What would have happened to me without that coat?" Sean asked.

Annabeth's mother handed two more bars up over her head. Mylee held onto Sean's arm. No one answered him.

Eventually, Sean was dry again, though not exactly warm yet. He settled into his hammock, under the heavy blankets, and tried not to think about the shadows. Sometime later, rain broke through the ceiling above his head, just a crack, but enough to pelt water down on him. Two grey hands pushed their way down through the crack, broken fingernails on top of peeling skin, that forced the sides of the crack open wide. Water poured in, pressing him down into his hammock, as a grey face thrust itself down through the ceiling toward him, gorilla fangs bared with a loud and echoing roar.

Then Sean woke up, tossing blankets aside and gasping for breath. He slammed the heel of his hand against the solid ceiling above his head, forcing himself to trust that it was really there, as his body shook, and ached from shaking.

"I'm having nightmares too," Mylee said from the hammock next to his.

Sean lay back, breathing deeply. "I just wish someone would tell us what's actually going on."

"The problem is, I don't think they know. Not really. I tried looking at some of the records in these cabinets, you know."

"You did?"

"Yeah. But it's all just the same stuff. When people were born. When they were bled. When they died. Over and over again. Nothing about how any of this started." She paused, then added. "Those things, they are the same as that thing in Mrs. Larkin's house, right?"

Mrs. Larkin, their sweet piano teacher with never-ending cookies for the neighborhood kids. Her name felt like a hot dagger in the middle of the storm. "Yeah," Sean said. "They must be."

"And they survived," Mylee said. "All this time, however long it's been, they're what survived. They won. Where did they come from?"

Sean shook his head, even though she couldn't see him through the hammocks. "I think I might not want to know."

"Yeah." Mylee reached her hand out, over her hammock and toward his. He met her halfway, holding hands over the flooded floor, with the storm raging above their heads.

Is this life now? Sean wondered. They had slept through a war, it seemed. So was that it? The shadows had won, and it was just over? This was just life now, all they had left, day in, day out, year after year, until they grew old and died all here in this muddy, tiny world? For a moment, there was almost something comforting in that thought, a sense of rest in giving up.

Maybe it wasn't all that bad, not caring anymore. Maybe the only thing that had ever made it bad was that they could remember something else. Maybe if they just forgot the old world, everything would be fine. Maybe then they could rest now, together.

Because at least they were still together. Which meant, it could be worse.

Altogether, the storm lasted six days. A blue sky greeted them upon release, beautiful enough to make them ignore the mud caked in places up to their knees. All the Housing Blocks had to dry out, so they would sleep several more nights in their buildings of refuge. But otherwise, life resumed as normal.

And there was that word again. *Normal*. The farm was now normal.

"He's back again," Mylee said on their way to work.

Sean glanced over his shoulder to find the little man with his golden coin crouching between two buildings, watching them. "Just ignore him."

"Yeah, because that's always been a safe way to deal with stalkers," Mylee said.

Still, what else could they do? There was no one to complain to, and Sean wasn't sure what they would even complain about.

At food-prep, the vegetables were even more wilted than usual, but the silence concerned Sean more. It had fallen like a blanket over everyone on the line, and it struck him as particularly odd because it was exactly the opposite of what he had expected.

They had spent six days locked up in tiny spaces with pretty much nothing to do but play cards and bet on how many times a teenage girl could jump around without killing herself. So why did no one seem excited about freedom?

He glanced at Mylee and could feel her having the same thoughts. She even tried to start a conversation with the boy who filled the grinder. The boy who had never stopped talking before looked straight at her, shrugged his shoulders, and dumped wilted asparagus—or something like it—into the grinder without a single word.

“I think something bad is going to happen,” Mylee said as they left work that night. Sean grabbed her hand. It was all he could think to do. In silence, they walked back to the record warehouse, climbed into their hammocks, and tried to fall asleep.

Miles out beyond the farm, a black-haired woman stood, alone and fully exposed under the light of three full moons. She stood with her toes at the edge of a river, little more than a stream, really, but a barrier nonetheless. A barrier that she chose to respect.

Crossing into the farms was complicated. They had to agree to her presence there, and securing that agreement had required more conversations, more days than she would have liked. And even now, the Guardians in the river could still choose to stop her.

Then, when she finally got permission to set out, the storm swept in, forcing her to take shelter in one of the abandoned skyscrapers for days on end. When it passed, she moved quickly, traveling the five miles of abandoned, flattened land between the collapsed city and the river in less than two hours. For hours more, she waited on the river bank. It might be days before the Guardian appeared. But impatient as she was, she would wait. Some things were worth waiting for.

So she stood on the river bank, while the sun set and the moons

rose and the hours ticked by. Silently, meditating, with her hand on her sword, until, near midnight, he appeared.

The Guardian rose from the river, pebbles and mud falling from his skin along with the water. He left a hole in the river-bed beneath him, an imprint far larger than a Human man's body, where he had slept for days perhaps, in his own relentless waiting. Ankle deep in the water, he appeared like smoke, his grey skin the same color as the moonlight, both there and not there at once.

"Stop doing that," the woman said, crossing her arms. "It's a waste of energy with me."

Slowly, little by little, the grey creature came into focus, smoky outlines condensing into a solid mass, a grey head with its protruding gorilla teeth, massive shoulders, arms almost as thick as the woman's waist. Finally exposed in the moonlight, it stood there with its feet still in the river, and its yellow eyes fixed on the Human woman before it.

"Forsaken," it growled, exposing the big teeth. "I should tear you limb from limb for even thinking of standing at my border..."

The woman rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes, *alino*. I'm an abomination and shouldn't even be allowed to stand in your presence. You've been watching me for hours. I know you've seen the mark on my wrist. So can we just skip past the name-calling, please? It's in everyone's best interest, really."

The creature hissed, large hands balled into fists at his sides.

"As I'm sure you've guessed," the woman said. "I would like your permission to cross the river."

The creature hissed again. "And if I deny you?"

The woman raised one arm, only to push a few stray hairs behind her left ear. Doing so, however, turned her wrist toward his face, exposing the red mark. Another growl rumbled up from deep within the creature's chest. "You're crossing no matter what, aren't you?"

"I don't expect you to understand the importance of my mission," the woman said. "But believe me, *he* is willing to start a war over it. Are you?"

The solid lines of the creature's body blurred, like smoke rising toward the moons. He sank down, arms stretched out behind him as he folded himself into the embrace of the river. "The Forsaken can cross without burning," he said, leaning back onto his elbows.

Ogre

“We will not stop you.” Water rose over his face as the silt and stones of the river bed covered him once more.

“Thank you,” the woman said, knowing he could still hear her. She stepped through the water, careful to avoid the space where the Guardian lay, and sprinted away into her journey on the other side.

CHAPTER 11

THE SCREAMS WOKE SEAN. THE SCREAMS WOKE everyone.

Sean tried to sit up in his hammock, collapsed twice back into it. Meanwhile, Mylee had already fallen out of hers, on her hands and knees on the filing cabinets. Shadows filled the warehouse, moving this way and that, as two fires in opposite corners competed for attention.

Screams came from outside, ghosts dancing on the cold wind. Sean pulled against the cord hanging from the ceiling to raise himself, searching the shadows for anything that might be alive. Mylee crouched on the cabinets.

"Stay down!" Annabeth said, swallowed and invisible inside her hammock. There was something in her voice worse than the screams.

"We're just supposed to wait?" Mylee asked.

"Would you shut up and lay down again?" Annabeth said. "Sean is struck. But that doesn't count if they don't see him. So

yes, shut up and wait!"

Then the shadows went crazy. One of the fires flew into the air, metal container, burning coals, and all. The coals hit several of the nearest hammocks, which burst into flame, sending their occupants screaming onto the floor. Sean twisted himself out of his hammock. Mylee helped him onto the nearest filing cabinet as more and more hammocks caught fire. They saw Annabeth, feet hitting the floor with a splash, and followed her down.

There was a roar, then shadows on the walls, moving of their own accord.

"Doesn't paper burn?" Sean asked, feet sloshing in the half-inch of water that still covered every surface in the farm.

"The cabinets are fireproof," Annabeth said. "But everything else will burn. Come on!"

They ran for the door, the only option now, only three of the fifty-nine bodies headed in the same direction. Directly above their heads, a shadow leaped, pitch-black against the darkness of the night and the other shadows cast by a world in flames above them. It landed inside the mass of people behind them, roaring, amid Human whimpers and shrieks. Bodies were thrown aside, shoving over all the people stampeding around them too. Sean held Mylee up as two bodies from two directions crashed into her. Then Annabeth was pulling both of them out the door.

In the streets, people ran, ducking between buildings, grabbing and carrying children. Theirs was not the only building on fire. And the shadows... Maybe it was Sean's imagination, but every single one of them looked alive, moving on their own, with no regard for the flames or the laws of physics.

"What about your mother?" Mylee asked.

"She's not struck. She'll be fine," Annabeth said. "So will we. Sean, you have to hide."

"Why?" Mylee asked.

Sean's hand moved to touch the patch on his left sleeve, the X, drawn there weeks ago when he did what *was not his job*.

So many things suddenly made sense, because if Sean had learned nothing else over the last few weeks, it was that the farm was the very opposite of chaotic. It ran by a system of clear rules. clear to everyone born there, that was, even if they were never made clear to him and Mylee. Rules that everyone followed and

took for granted, even the things on the wall. Rules like bleeding. Rules like don't go near the check-in wall. Rules like mind your own business. Rules like don't take off the raincoat. And rules like the strikes, and the Barr.

A crashing noise assaulted their ears as fifty feet away, part of a roof was ripped open. Shadows descended into the hole, over the rooftop and down, like the shadows that had come over the school roof, toward Mr. Hannan, all that time ago.

"Sean, hide!" Annabeth said.

Where? Sean wondered. *And from what, exactly?* What were those things doing? But before he could ask any of those questions, or even figure out he didn't have time to ask those questions, something grabbed him. An arm around his waist pulled him off the ground and threw him back into the mud.

Mylee screamed. From the corner of his eye, he saw Annabeth grab her, holding her back. Then he hit the mud and could see nothing except bursting stars.

The stars coalesced into an image, a huge, black shadow, hovering over him. It crouched down toward his chest, and Sean wiggled away. He got onto his stomach and tried to crawl, only to feel a huge hand around his ankle. The hand dragged him face down through the mud, then tossed him into the air with a jerk that should have popped his hip joint out of its socket.

He landed coughing on his back, unable to see anything but the darkness and buildings on fire. Something razor-sharp bit into his arm. Skin and muscle tore loose from bone, as his arm went numb, and every other part of his body was set on fire. He kicked and screamed and hit with the arm that still worked, blinking until his eyes focused, on the shadow that would not come into focus. It rose to a crouch and tossed him again, then reached for his legs.

A girl's body slammed into the shadow's side. It wobbled, barely, turned, and swatted her away with the back of one hand.

"Miles, don't..." Sean said. Or, he tried to say it. His voice croaked and he wasn't sure the words actually came out. Either way, Mylee ran at the shadow again. This time, it caught her, one hand around the base of her neck. She clawed at its wrist before it tossed her down again and turned to Sean.

"Stop it, stop it. Stop!" Mylee slammed her shoulder into the shadow again. It caught her and this time threw her down beside

Sean.

"Get out of here!" Sean said.

Mylee rose onto her elbows, looked straight into the shadow's smoky face, and screamed, "Stop it!"

It straightened up, looming over the twins, with its head cocked to one side. The lines of its body solidified, coming ever so slightly into focus, until Sean could almost see grey skin, and the yellow eyes, watching him with a curious and curiously Human expression. Then, without warning, in a Human voice, clear and articulate as anything, it spoke:

"What are you?"

High above all their heads, a siren rang out across the air. A single note, answered by a cacophony of howls and yelps. The shadow blurred again, dropping onto all fours and joining the answering call. It sprang away, joining the black cloud that streamed over the wall, back where they belonged.

Mylee got up. Sean followed, reaching for his arm and trying to ignore the fact that blood gushed from a hole there. He wasn't even sure such a thing *could* heal. His jacket was gone too, and he didn't know when that had happened.

All around them, people came out from between buildings and under muddy crevices. Some just stood there. Others set to work with buckets, stopping the fires.

Mylee stood like a ghost in the middle of the street, staring after the retreating shadows. "They can speak?" she said.

"They can speak," Sean said.

Eventually, the fires went out. Black smoke rose into a black sky, and Sean sat on a crate, watching the smoke while Mylee paced back and forth in the street. Little by little, he felt the pain in his arm. At first, it was numb. Then it ached. Then it burned. No one said anything about where they were supposed to sleep now, and Sean couldn't have slept, anyway.

"What are you doing?" Annabeth appeared in the street in front of them and grabbed Sean's good arm.

"What are *you* doing?" Mylee ran after them as Annabeth

dragged Sean off down the street.

"Get in line. What is your problem?" Annabeth pushed Sean into a huddle of people gathered by the check-in wall. The mass whimpered, groaning, holding body parts, some people holding others up, some lying in the mud.

"What's my *problem*?" Sean asked. "I didn't know we were supposed to come here!"

"It's common sense!" Annabeth said, throwing her hands up and stomping in the mud. "You get hurt, you go get fixed. Just like it's common sense that you don't attack an Ogre!" She turned on Mylee, wild gestures with both hands. "What is wrong with you? How are you so stupid? You're both so stupid sometimes. You can't do things like that! What is wrong with you? Why would you do that?"

Mylee stood there, calm, with crossed arms and a hard face. "Because this isn't normal for us, Annabeth. Because this will never be normal for us."

Annabeth looked from Mylee to Sean, seeking something from him. What was it? An agreement, maybe? Surrender? Then she shook her head and walked away.

The next day, Sean stood at the old check-in wall, staring at the hole that he and Mylee had uncovered and then filled with mud. It was uncovered again, the unstuck metal washed away by the storms, traces of mud still caked inside the hole. Sean stood with his back against Housing Block J, not close enough to see anything through the hole, just staring at it.

Under his new but somehow even smellier jacket, they had applied some strange bandage, the same kind the Ogre had put on Mylee weeks ago, the bandage that looked like skin, and smelled like skin, and even felt like skin. Just the thought of it made Sean nauseous, but it numbed the pain and stopped the blood and maybe, just maybe, it would repair his arm, like it had repaired Mylee's.

Even so, he hated the bandage, just like he hated this day. Apparently, people bitten in the barr did not go to work the day

after, probably because most of them couldn't move anyway. The farm didn't like inconsistency, so if some people couldn't work on a particular day, then everyone who fell into that category did not work on that particular day. So Mylee was at work, and Sean was not. And Sean hated it. Hated the solitude, the silence, the time to think, and keep thinking, and think again.

The events of the night before replayed in his mind, a loop that randomly mixed other events into it. Mrs. Larkin's bloody cookies, and the creature on the stairs, Mr. Hannan's scream under the smashing light, all accompanied by the sound of hydraulic doors being forced open. It was a sound that Sean could never forget, burned into his memory, like the sound of Mylee choking as her lungs slowly thawed in the darkness. It was all one long nightmare, the same nightmare, projected in a loop across time. The city died, and the nightmare took its place, and the people...

The people did nothing and continued to do nothing.

Sean lashed out and kicked the wall. His foot stung, sending him hopping and then down into the mud. He got up and kicked the wall again, picked up a handful of mud and threw it at the open hole, then slammed the heel of his good hand into the cement. The impact burned all down his arm, nerves screaming out against these self-attacks. Still, he kicked again.

Is this just life now? Mylee had asked. Sean stomped in the mud, threw more mud at the wall, and screamed. How long the scream lasted, he didn't know, just that it went on until his lungs burned and folded in on themselves. On his knees and gasping for breath, he begged himself not to cry, then did cry, then made himself stop crying, only to cry again.

Was this just life now? This twisted place where no one seemed to care that they weren't really people anymore? Was this just the way they lived now?

It's all just life, Aunt Linda had said, on Christmas morning as she argued with her daughter. The kitchen smelled like hot chocolate and eggs, and Sidi was reading a story about a baby that magicians crossed an entire world to find with nothing more than starlight to tell them he existed.

Except Sidi was reading a different version of the story, in which angels ripped open the sky and sang to shepherds. Rich people and poor people, all called to this baby's crib, across worlds,

and even now across time. *Because it's all just life*, Aunt Linda had said, *trying to get back to God*.

But this farm wasn't life. Not for him. Maybe it was for Annabeth, for Acrah, and Bastis, and all the others. Maybe they really were content here. But in both versions of that story, shepherds or magicians, set out on a journey because they learned something, knew something, others did not. And knowing what they knew, they couldn't stay where they were.

And Sean couldn't either.

Wiping water from his eyes, Sean left the narrow space behind Housing Block J. He went building to building, muddy street to muddy street, searching, determined, because he had made a decision.

This was not just life now.

Between the records warehouse and Housing Block A, he found the little man lurking. He looked up from his gold coin with one raised eyebrow, eyeing Sean up and down as he approached. The coin was too large to be a coin, actually, Sean noticed. What was it? Some sort of... metal?

"Well, hello," the man said, twirling the golden metal between his fingers.

"How would you get us to the Outlands?" Sean asked.

The little man nodded. "You've seen the trucks."

"Where do they go?"

"Other farms, as I think you've guessed. But I have friends. Friends who might be persuaded to drive a little closer to the Outlands than necessary. Friends who might stop driving for a minute or two."

"If it's so easy, then why doesn't everyone leave?" Sean asked.

The little man laughed. "Take a look at these people, boy. Don't tell me you can't answer that question for yourself."

"Why don't *you* go?"

He shrugged. "I'm too old for the Outlands. I wasn't born in this farm, though. Ask anyone, they will tell you that."

"Why should I trust you?"

"I really don't care if you trust me. That's not the question."

"Why would you help us, then?"

He shrugged again. "The Ogres have taken everything that I ever cared for from me. Removing people from their feeding pool

hurts them. Why wouldn't I do it? Sean, there's no rush here. Trucks move in and out all the time and will until the end of time. You can think about this for as long as you want."

"I have to talk to Mylee," Sean said.

"Of course. Find me whenever you decide."

But Sean had already decided. He would not admit that to himself, not even years afterward, but before the conversation even began, his course was set.

CHAPTER 12

OUTSIDE THE WALL THE TWINS KNEW, THERE WAS another one, encircling another town. The two walls joined at several points, but the towns never touched.

Only yards away from the gate where the twins had entered the farm, there was another gate in this other wall, leading into the other town. It was higher than the surrounding wall, with great spikes protruding over the top edge, and skeletons hung from the spikes. The rain, either the recent storm or rains from years long past, had washed many of the bones away, to be caught on other spikes and projections further down on the rough wall, or collected at its base. And across the top of the gate, blurred shadows moved, back and forth.

As the sun began to sink past the midday point, a woman appeared before this gruesome gate. She walked straight up to it, until she came within arm's reach, then stopped. There was no bell, no knocker, no handle. It opened only from the other side, and there was no way to call for the attention of those inside. So

she stopped, feet sinking into the muddy road, watching the silent gate.

Then her hand went for her sword. She pulled the blade loose, and without turning thrust it backward, straight into the living shadow that sprang up from nowhere behind her.

The shadow squealed. Its smoky shape grew solid as it toppled into the muddy path, clutching its stomach. Half growling, half whimpering, it scuttled away, with black blood gushing from the wound.

Two more came, one from each side, a blur of speed against the woman who moved just as quickly. She swung the sword in an arc, turning her entire body with it, the strength of every muscle inside her behind this motion. The first shadow caught her blade across its chest. The second felt it go through his shoulder. They fell back, snarling and regrouping, as the woman dropped to one knee, raised the sword, and sent it through the shadow that had just fallen on her from the top of the wall. In two clean motions, she pulled the sword free again and tossed the wounded creature away, to snarl and regrouped with the others.

They had lost their shadow forms, solid, grey-skinned creatures crouched on their knuckles and toes, yellow eyes fixed on the woman. They growled, but did not attack again. The woman took a strip of cloth from her pocket and wiped the black liquid from her blade.

"Waylo, show of force acknowledged." She kept hold of the hilt, but let the tip of the sword rest in the mud, turning her face, again, to the top of the wall. "Now that we have that over with... Can I come in, please?"

"Because it's not safe, Sean. We can't trust him!"

"I'm not saying we trust him!"

"That's *exactly* what you're saying! When some random person comes up to you in the street and offers you something that you want, you do not take it. That's basic survival skills!"

"So what, we just stay here?"

"I don't..." Mylee took a breath, as if that act of breathing

broke her train of thought.

"I'm just saying, let's talk to him and figure out if we can trust him," Sean said.

Mylee shook her head, lowering her voice. "What do we even know about these Outlands? You do remember we're not actually from there, right? He probably assumes we have people to go back to. We don't!"

"I know. But can it really be worse than here?"

"Yeah, probably."

She was right. At least here there were rules, and if you followed the rules, you were safe, mostly. Over the weeks, Sean had come to understand why the people in the farm avoided questions and change. Life here was only half what he remembered life could be, but it was also safe.

"Mylee..." He took her hand. "I just... I can't do this anymore. Can you?"

She shook her head, looking at their joined hands and not at his face. "No, I can't."

The gate opened, swinging its skeletons through the air, bones rattling against steel and concrete. There were no tendons or ligaments left in the skeletons, only bones, boiled, sewn back together, and then tossed over the wall. Some were mismatched, a femur that was too short for the rest of the bones, a female pelvis in an otherwise male skeleton. The woman took all of this in with a single glance, a flick of her eyes, that was hardly noticeable. She kept her eyes forward, as the shadows closed in behind her, and the gate banged shut.

The gate opened into a paved courtyard, the outer wall behind her, the wall shared with the Human farm on the other side to her left. Ahead and to her right rose a series of stone buildings, not ruins, but constructed from scratch. Together, they formed yet another wall, a barrier she would have to cross if she wanted to get any deeper into this town. Yellow eyes peeked from behind the dark doorways, watching, the females and children lurking to see if their help might be needed.

In the center of the paved courtyard stood a chair. The seat was a block of concrete and the back an intricate, lacing pattern woven from what had once been the steel support rods inside concrete structures. A woven rug sat on top of the seat, vibrant colors arranged in beautiful, repeating patterns that mimicked those of the rod weaving above it. And into the concrete block, they had carved names, one on top of another. The woman took a moment to find the most recent of those names, the eighth from the bottom: *Kepret*.

A shadow sprang from behind the chair. She saw the attack before it fell but did not resist it. A hand seized her throat, twisted her off balance, and sent her down onto the pavement.

The male shadows tightened their half-circle behind her, females watching from the doorways. Above her, a solid shadow loomed eight feet tall with shoulders as broad as her legs were long. This was *Kepret*, defender of his people, the last name carved upon the chair. He roared, a sound that carried over the wall and into the farm where the Humans stopped short on the paths, then walked more quickly away.

In the courtyard, the woman rolled in one smooth motion onto her shoulder, then to her knees where she stayed, shoulders and arms relaxed, even when he grabbed her throat again and shoved his grey face with its huge, overhanging fangs down to hers.

"Tell me why I should not tear your heart from your chest, Forsaken?" he asked.

"*Wayleeno*, because you do not want to start a war," she said.

The creature snarled, released her throat, and stepped back, still snarling.

After a moment, the woman rose to her feet. "*Kepret, Promiter, desimay nay*. I do not mean to intrude or to offend. I am here only because I must be here, and I come with nothing but honorable intent toward you and your people."

Kepret, the *Promiter*—*defender*—of his people, growled. The polite response would have been *decitay no*, but instead, he said, "State your business here!"

"Two young people, a boy and a girl. You found them several weeks ago in the Barren, across the river."

"What are they to you?"

"Important," the woman said, making the word last as long as

possible.

Kepret backed up, yellow eyes intent in their focus on her face. "You mean to take them from us?"

"Fair trade, *alino*," the woman said.

Kepret eyed her, moving in a circle toward her right side. "*Alino*, you say? But what makes it *obvious* that you would be fair to us? What does the Arterian even consider fair these days?"

The woman took a breath, careful to stay relaxed even as Kepret Promiter left her line of sight, letting him circle behind her, no matter how uncomfortable that was. "We are prepared to offer three years' supply of blood for each."

"Three years?" Kepret laughed, not exactly a Human laugh, but close. He was behind her, and still, she was careful not to turn. "That's nothing to the lifetime we would draw from them. No. *Pro corporay corpus*. That is the only fair trade."

The woman shook her head. "*Non corpor*. We trade in tissue, not in people. You know this. Do not attempt to negotiate that point. Besides, any number of things could happen in the farm. You might get fifty years from them. You might only get one. We're only talking about two bodies, so six years guaranteed with no need for *kibi ettal* is a good exchange, and you know it."

He was on her left side now, re-entering her peripheral vision. "Ten years each."

"Five."

"Seven."

She turned her head and looked him straight in the eye. "Seven. Agreed."

"That's seven years each, fourteen total, all counted at the grown male standard amount. No reduction for the female."

"Yes, *alino*. That's common courtesy. What do you take us for, a pack of *Demens*?"

"*Weylo*, it's refreshing to know the Arterian still understands courtesy."

She did not respond to that, which annoyed him, yellow eyes twitching inside grey skin. He stepped in closer, asking, "Why do you want these two bodies so badly?"

"I don't, the Arterian does."

"Same question."

"Do you really care?"

"I have a healthy curiosity. But no, *non alino*." He took a breath, straightening his spine and raising his head to its full eight feet above the ground. "Give us four days to consider this proposal."

Four days, one more bleeding session from the children. Though annoying, the woman had expected it, and nodded. "I will return at this time four days from now, to hear your final decision."

They nodded to each other, not an up and down nod, but a ritual where their eyes stayed forward, chins tucked down, and faces turned ever so slightly toward their right shoulders. During the nod, they each raised their left arm, hands spread open with palms facing toward the other. On the inside of each wrist was a tattooed mark. Hers was red, his silver, and though about the same size, the two symbols looked as different from each other as the woman and the creature did. And yet, the purpose of each mark was the same.

With that nod, sealing their agreement, the woman turned. Her arm dropped again to her side as the heavy gate opened, skeletons rattling from above, singing her out onto the muddy road.

"Oh, of course. It's Exter," the little man said in response to Mylee's accusation that they didn't even know his name.

"Oh..." Mylee deflated, losing her grip on the accusation. "Um... okay."

"Great," Sean said. "But, to be clear, we haven't decided anything."

"Really, kids, I'm not sure what's needing so much thought here," Exter said. The large coin flashed between his fingers, back and forth, catching what light managed to pass between the walls of two almost joined buildings. It was too big to be a coin, a medalion more like. "You want to stay in the farm, or you don't want to stay in the farm. You say you don't, so..."

"If there's a way out, then why aren't people leaving all the time?" Mylee asked.

"First of all," Exter said, "most of these people are perfectly content to go unthinking about their jobs. But also, for your infor-

mation young lady, people do leave the farms. They just disappear. The higher-ups fill in the gaps and make it look like nothing's happened, and life goes on. You just haven't been here long enough to notice."

Sean and Mylee exchanged a look. It was plausible, of course, and also impossible to verify. They knew by now exactly what response they would get if they asked about people disappearing: *That is not my job.*

"So, how does this work, exactly?" Sean asked, breaking eye contact with Mylee.

"It's easy enough to get into the loading bay," Exter said. "I think you noticed that already."

Sean's hand went to his wounded arm, the bandage that looked and felt and smelled like skin, covering a wound he received because he had done what *was not his job*. Mylee glanced his way.

"Okay, and then what?" she asked.

The medallion paused between Exter's first and second fingers. There was an image pressed into it — of what? Sean squinted, but only a second later, the gold circle began moving again.

"Every truck has a driver and a loader," Exter said. "An old friend of mine is one of the drivers. I work the loading dock, so I'll get you into his truck. He drives close along the Outlands, drops you off. You make your way home from there."

Again, the twins exchanged a look. They had no home to make their way to, and they both knew this could be a serious problem. They couldn't even ask what the Outlands looked like, or how to navigate them, or who, exactly, lived there, since these were all things they should already know.

It occurred to Sean that maybe they should explain the truth at this point. But every time that thought entered his head, his throat tightened around the words, holding them inside. He didn't know what he would say, anyway. How did one go about explaining that one had been born hundreds of years ago? Somehow, it didn't feel as straightforward as just saying, *I was born hundreds of years ago.*

"Look you two," Exter said. "I told you there was plenty of time, and there is, but know that my friend will be here the day after tomorrow. And he won't be back again for twenty days after that."

Twenty days. Another twenty days in the farm with needles and blood and shadows chewing holes out of people. It felt like an eternity to Sean. Now that he had made up his mind, he just wanted it over with, wanted to leave that place and its rules and monsters and blood bags behind. He turned to Mylee, desperation leaking out of his face.

"You've done this before, right?" she asked.

Exter nodded. "We have, many times."

"And I suppose there's no one I could ask about that?"

"Everyone who knows is gone."

"And who goes?"

"You must know you're not the first people from the Outlands to be captured. But have you ever met another wild here?" Exter asked.

No, and why hadn't he noticed that before? All of Sean's remaining misgivings fled away because, if there were still people from the Outlands in the farm, they would have appeared by now, to explain things, or commiserate, or something with the twins. In fact, now he thought of it, Sean had been afraid of exactly that in the beginning, that other "wild" would appear, and realize he and Mylee were not from the Outlands. But they hadn't, because all Outlanders had already returned home.

"But why don't those things stop you?" Mylee asked. "They must realize that people are disappearing."

Exter shrugged. "Maybe they do. Maybe the Humans who run this place really do cover it up that well. Maybe the Ogres just don't care enough about one or two people to bother with it. They aren't exactly desperate for Humans here. All I know for sure is that we've never been caught, and there's no reason to believe we will be this time. So, day after tomorrow. Twenty days from then. Twenty days after that. Or spend the rest of your lives here. Whatever you decide, you know how to find me."

Exter tossed the medallion into the air, catching it in the palm of his hand, turned, and walked away.

"We should go," Mylee said.

Sean sat on his somewhat padded mat that passed for a bed. Housing Block B wasn't dry yet, but, apparently, it was dry enough, according to someone. Work had ended ten minutes ago, he had been back in the Housing Block for about thirty seconds, and already he was missing his dry hammock in the records building.

"Wait, you think... Wh... Why?" Sean sat up straight too quickly, lost his balance when his mat slipped in the mud, and barely managed to avoid falling on his face.

Mylee let out a long, annoyed groan. "Annabeth did my bleeding today. She stuck needles in my arms and took them out, all without saying one word. Apparently, she's still mad at me for trying to save you from a monster."

"Yeah, thanks for that, by the way. But, in Annabeth's defense, I mean, it kind of was..."

"Totally a stupid thing to do. Yeah, I know. It still had to be done."

"Agreed. So – why do you want to leave, now?"

"Sean..." Mylee shook her head, swallowing, then swallowing again. She cleared her throat, swallowed again, then continued in a clear, firm voice. "Sean, this place is stupid. I don't care what's in the Outlands anymore, I don't, I just... I don't want to be here anymore."

Sean nodded, stood, and put a hand down to help her up too. "Let's go find Exter then."

The truck rocked beneath them, swinging crates back and forth. With each bump, Sean was sure the towers of crates would collapse, and the ropes holding them would snap and bury them under a mountain of those stupid ration bars.

With each bump, the towers swayed, the ropes held, and the bars stayed safely away.

Mylee hugged her knees, head on one crate, staring at another. Sean knew what she was thinking, that this had all been too easy, and that sneaking away from a place surrounded by a barbed, steel and concrete wall should have felt more like sneaking than like

stepping into a car they ordered from Sidi. From getting through the loading bay door, to meeting Exter, to sitting down between smelly crates of baked vegetables, it had all felt too easy. But it was done, and there was no going back.

They hadn't talked much about what they would do when they reached these Outlands. Start walking again, he supposed, just like they had after leaving the lab. At least this time they knew there were people, somewhere. They would walk until they found someone, and hopefully, it would be the kind of someone willing to take in wandering children.

Oddly though, the ease of their escape from the farm, and the fact that they had no idea what they were doing when they finished escaping, were not the things on Sean's mind right then. He was thinking about work, the boy with missing fingers dumping vegetables into the grinder, the man who never talked, and the woman who never stopped talking. How many trays should he have filled by now? Three dozen? Passing them off to Mylee. It was warm on the food-prep line, with the oven there, keeping his hands at the perfect temperature as he worked.

Then what would they have done after work? Meet up with Annabeth, walk around, talking while they ate. Sure, she was mad at them, but fights between friends never seemed to last. And the bars weren't really all that bad. They kept you full, and came every day, dependable as the rising and setting sun. Had they really left all of that behind, the farm and food and safety? They had left Annabeth behind. Gatch! They hadn't even said goodbye.

"We should've said goodbye to Annabeth," Mylee said as if Sean's thoughts had transferred into her brain.

Sean shook his head. "She wasn't talking to us."

"Doesn't mean she never would have again." Mylee put her head on his shoulder, knees still hugged to her chest. "Did we just make a really, awful mistake?"

"Maybe." The truck rattled and the crates swayed, threatening once more to bury them alive.

High overhead, the skeletons swung, bone clinking against con-

crete, issuing the woman with black hair and a homemade sword into the paved courtyard again. Shadows surged in behind her, yellow eyes watching from the doors and windows of stone buildings. But the gate did not close. That was the first sign. They did not expect this meeting to last long.

It was a bad sign.

In the center of the courtyard, a huge creature with grey skin and gorilla fangs rose from the ornate chair. The woman stopped, and let him come to her, let him speak first.

"I must apologize to the Arterian," Kepret Promiter said.

The woman felt her blood turn cold. Her lips parted, a symptom of shock that she should have kept hidden as all politeness drained from her voice. "Why?"

Kepret sighed. "Believe me, I would have preferred our deal. But, apparently, events were already set in motion which we had no knowledge of."

"Where are they?"

"They have been loosed."

The woman turned away. Her hands went up into her hair, pressing into her skull. "Where?"

"We don't know where the trucks take them," Kepret said.

"No, of course, no reason you would." She shook her head, fingers gripped onto the back of her skull now. "When?"

"Dee horee, credo."

Two hours. The woman tried to hold onto her thoughts, forced herself to keep panic in its place. Two hours on a truck that had to take the winding way between ruins and hills. The storm would have washed out at least one of the roads, which added more time. And she could cut over it all, a straight route through the ruined city. It was possible. It had to be possible.

"You'll try to catch them, won't you?" Kepret said, squinting at her with an amused face. "Have you forsaken your brain along with your blood?"

"You have no idea what..." The woman spun around, a darkness in her face almost as deep as her hair. For one moment, she reached toward the creature as if she might strike. Around her, the quivering shadows surged, and she stopped short, hand slowly retreating back to her side. "Those children," she said, "could change everything."

"Then I am glad we were not in time to stop the loosing," Kepret said. "What use do I have for change?"

The woman looked away, she turned her head down and to the right, raising her left hand. "I'll go now."

"*Alino.*" Kepret raised his own hand, returning the salute. Then she turned back to the open gate and its swinging skeletons.

"And Forsaken," Kepret called, a laugh in his voice, forcing her to stop. She froze, every ounce of willpower needed to hold herself in place. "Tell the Arterian I look forward to doing business again. You know, after nothing changes."

The woman clenched her jaw to force the words to stay inside her throat, leaving the farm behind.

By their second hour in the windowless, airless, baked vegetable infected truck, Sean started picking at his bandage. Mylee's had fallen away flake by flake, like dead skin, until one day it was just gone, and Sean's had already started to do the same. But with nothing else to do, except obsess over what might happen at work when they realized the twins weren't coming, Sean picked at the flaking pieces from the bandage. It was like picking at the peeling edges of a sunburn, except he never hit that painful moment when he picked too far and ran into living skin.

When the last flake fell away, Sean examined the wound on his arm. He hadn't really looked at it before, because he could feel the missing muscle, bone exposed to air, and just thinking about it was enough to make him sick.

But it had served its purpose. Tissue had filled in the hole again, skin had grown over it, and he could move his arm without any difficulty or pain. A red line about an inch long remained, but otherwise, it was like nothing had happened.

Mylee's eyes were closed, her head resting against one of the crates, when she said, "That's how it was with mine, too. It just healed, way too quickly, and... isn't muscle not supposed to grow back, or something?"

Sean picked a single large flack of the bandage up off the floor. Holding it made skin prickle all up his arm and he wanted to

throw it away. Instead, he forced himself to take a close look.

"It's the bandages that have to do it," Mylee said.

When he looked, Sean could see the same tiny lines that ran across his own hands, near-invisible patterns formed by living cells knitting themselves together. "It's their skin, isn't it?"

"Yeah." The crates rattled as Mylee shifted her shoulders. "That's what I thought."

The truck stopped.

Mylee sat up and looked at her brother with wide, alert eyes. For a moment, they sat frozen in the eye of a storm, waiting to lurch forward again, over another pothole or around another corner.

Inside that moment, the back of the truck opened. Sunlight burst in, scorching their eyes, and blinking, they saw Exter's friend, the driver, Manning, waving them out.

Sean could feel himself shaking as he hopped out into daylight. His feet hit deep, piled sand. Mylee jumped down beside him, wrapping both her arms around his right arm and shoulder. Behind them, the truck slammed shut with a bang that sent a horrid shock straight down Sean's spine.

Mylee's grip tightened around his arm. "Do you remember a desert outside the city?"

Sean shook his head, blinking in the heat of sunlight glaring off bright, white sand, and sand, and more sand.

There was nothing but sand, stretching forever across the world in front of them.

CHAPTER 13

WELL, GOOD LUCK KIDS,” EXTER’S FRIEND, Manning, said. He threw a glance out at the desert, then moved toward the driver’s door in the truck.

Behind them was the ruined city. Sean could still see a skyscraper or two in the very great distance, but for the most part, it was a twisted, grey mass of broken concrete and bent steel. Exter had said his friend would drive *near* the Outlands and drop them off, but really, as far as Sean could tell, they were quite far into this desert, maybe as much as a mile from where the dead city lay, laughing at them.

Ahead of them was nothing but sand. It should have been farmland. Or, it had been farmland, crops fields, protein growth barns, trees, and several parks. There was also a national woodland preserve, although Sean couldn’t remember which side of the city that was on. How could all of that just be gone, replaced by sand as far as the eye could see? Even a few hundred years did not seem like enough time to do that.

"Wait!" Mylee blocked Manning's path before he reached the driver's door. "Where are we supposed to go, exactly?"

"Wherever home is," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder to push her away.

Behind the truck, two deep gashes chronicled their journey across the sand. The truck's tires were designed to drive over sand. That meant something. Sean wasn't sure what yet, but he knew that it meant something. They were also too far from the city now to walk back easily, and that meant something too.

"Miles..." he said.

Mylee dug her feet in. "But we don't even know where we are. What direction is north?"

"It doesn't matter." This time Manning shoved her, but as she fell, Sean took her place in front of him.

"Why not?" Sean asked.

"Barry, a little help!" Manning called. A door in the truck's cabin opened, bringing the second man, the loader, out into the sand.

"Why did you bring us out here?" Sean asked. Mylee righted herself, slapping at the loader's hands when he approached.

"You wanted to go home," Manning said.

"So you take us out and drop us in the middle of a desert?" Mylee asked. "Just tell us which direction to go!"

"We don't have time for this." The other man, Barry, reached for Mylee's hand with a sharp flash, something gold against the sunlight, and then the stinging smell of blood as Mylee yelped.

"Get your hands off her!" Sean grabbed for Mylee, letting Manning get past him and into the truck.

Mylee held her hand out in front of her, a red ribbon running across her palm, dripping into the sand as she watched, frozen in shock. The driver's door closed behind Manning, and Barry was close behind him, raising a medallion, gold stained red, and flicking it out across the desert. The truck roared to life, then rattled away.

Mylee stood there watching plumes of sand waft up behind the retreating vehicle. Sean went for the medallion. It lay a few feet away, a golden disk stained with Mylee's blood, and an image, the image he had not quite managed to make out between Exter's moving fingers. It was a Human skull with gorilla fangs.

"What just happened? Sean?" Mylee's voice trembled, as if she had been cut far worse than a slice across her palm.

"I don't know." He reached down for the medallion. About half the circumference was sharp, but the other half was not. And there was a groove, between the skull's eyes, into which his thumb and forefinger sank as if by design. "I think we've made a mistake," he said, turning to face his sister.

The sand moved, off in the distance, rising and breaking apart as something stirred in a world below their feet. A mound appeared, sand falling in a shower to all sides. And then another, further back. Mylee grabbed for Sean's hand as he said the only thing there was to say: "Run!"

They took off, fast as they could with their feet sinking again with each step, following the tire tracks back toward the ruined city. In less than thirty seconds, Sean's lungs were burning. His legs ached as he thrashed them in and out of the sand, staggering and tripping, with the medallion still in one hand, and Mylee's hand in the other. He heard her wheezing beside him, struggling to breathe the same way he did.

A grey blur shot over their heads, not a shadow, but a solid, massive body. It landed in their path, spewing sand into their faces, turned, and roared. Yellow eyes, sunken deep into its face, seemed almost not to see them even as its manic gaze focused in exactly their direction. Its skin was grey, almost black, like charcoal, stretched paper-thin over the jagged bones beneath. It roared again, a wild, desperate sound, rising from bare-boned knuckles onto its feet, huge, naked, every bone visible beneath the skin, with cracking fingernails, and one fang chipped half away. Sean and Mylee staggered back.

And then another shape charged from another direction. A second bony creature crashed into the first, two skeletons barely covered by skin, rolling and thrashing in the sand.

"Run. Keep running," Sean said as the skeletons shrieked and howled, slashing at each other with broken fingers, black liquid dripping from the gouged out marks. The twins started for the city once again, sand flying up all around them and eyes stinging from the brightness of the sun. Then Mylee fell, and Sean grabbed for her and felt her hand slide away from his as she flew backward into a cloud of sand.

"No no no!" Sean dived into the sand after his sister. She screamed, and Sean heard a crunch like branches snapping and another wild, screeching roar.

The dust cloud cleared to reveal Mylee kicking again and again at one of the emaciated creatures. It dropped on top of her, a bony hand on either side of her shoulders, broken fangs snapping for her throat. Sean lashed out, grabbed her shoulders, and pulled her out from under the horrid thing.

Rancid breath, like infected, bleeding, rotting meat, slashed across his face as the creature lunged for its escaping prey. Sean fell against his left shoulder, hard, and thought he heard a pop, with the creature's face and its yellow, glaring, sightless eyes on top of his. Sean struck with his right hand, the sharp medallion that he still held. The creature's cheek split open with shocking ease, sending out a spurt of black liquid that stank worse than its breath.

Then a bony hand seized the creature around its neck and threw it back. The second creature roared its victory out across the desert, only to have its feet taken out from under it by the first one. Sean twisted and turned until, somehow, he was on his feet again. He heard Mylee scream his name, turned, and felt something hard and jagged collide with his skull. In the sand, with his eyes covered in water, he barely saw the creature standing over him.

And then, beyond the ringing in his own head, he heard a shout, not Mylee, not the creatures, but a shrill, confident, Human cry of challenge. The skeleton above Sean turned its head, and then its head was gone.

Just gone.

The body crumpled, landing beside Sean with that rancid, black liquid oozing from the open neck. Even in that moment, Sean wondered why there was so little of it, why it did not gush and spirt like he had always seen in the movies. But before he could think too hard about it, the smell made him gag. He dug his fingers into the sand, crawling away.

In the distance, miles away it seemed, the second creature roared, then whimpered, then fell chillingly silent.

"Mylee? Miles!" Dust stung Sean's eyes as the sun filled them with water, and all he could see were blurring shapes, and blood. Black blood. "Miles!"

"Sean..." Her voice croaked like a corrupted audio file, but it was hers still. And then her hands, clasping his from the ground a foot away. A moment later they were in each other's arms, clinging for life itself to the only thing in this mad world that still made any kind of sense.

The seconds passed. The sun cleared from Sean's eyes. Assaulting flares hardened into shapes, then one moving shape. Then fire.

The smell of their horrid blood erupted around him. Its stench raged with the flames in an all-consuming roar and pulled Sean up to his feet. He took several steps back, away from the flames, with Mylee clinging to his arm.

Eventually, the flames receded. It was a tiny fire, really, smoldering more than burning. Two fires, safely surrounded by sand, with the smell of blood fizzling away between the receding flames.

"I'm sorry to startle you."

A woman stood between them and the fires, her back to them, black hair laced with grey and tied into one long string at the base of her neck.

"You can't bury Ogres in the Outlands," she said. "And you can't leave them, either. Demens find them. And bad things happen when they try to eat their own kind."

She turned, brown eyes inside a narrow face that held them both in the same gaze. "Are you two all right?"

Mylee's hands tightened on Sean's arm, her eyes fixed on the woman. "Where did you come from?"

The woman looked at her, then at Sean, steady and calm. Too calm, Sean thought, for someone who had just beheaded and then set fire to monsters. But then, he supposed, whoever she was, this was her world.

"I've been following you since the Abandon—the old city beyond the farms, but I was too far behind you to keep up. I'm sorry about that. I'm sorry it took so long to catch up with you."

"Why?" Mylee asked, her voice sharp, as if they could somehow intimidate this woman. "Why are you following us?"

"Because I know where you come from, Mylee," the woman said.

"You know our names?" Sean felt that this information should frighten him more than it did. But then, not many fears could compare to nearly being eaten by skeletons in a desert that was not

supposed to exist.

"No." The woman shook her head. "No, Sean, I don't just know your names. I know that you are Sean and Mylee Primtar-Assain, fourteen-year-old twin son and daughter of Dr. William Primtar, bio-geneticist, and Dr. April Assain, genetic pathologist. I know they worked together in a not exactly advertised laboratory under the main hospital in that city. I know they put the two of you into suspended animation on the very day that these creatures—" she gestured at the burning corpses, the Ogres— "arrived on this planet. What I know, children, is exactly who and what you are."

Sean met Mylee's eyes and saw there the same thought that rose inside his chest. Was it wrong to feel excitement at this moment? Was it wrong to be relieved? He was standing here in a desert wasteland outside a dead city with a woman who killed two monsters and then lit them on fire. And it seemed to take her very little effort to do these things, too. He knew he should fear her. But he also knew she had saved their lives. And she knew who they were.

Was it wrong to be excited by that?

The woman glanced over her shoulder, into the wasteland behind her, eyes lingering on the position of the sun in the sky. "Look, I can't even imagine how many questions you must have right now. But Ogres are drawn to the smell of blood, and the fires won't hide it all. *Nidificara debemus*—we need to nest—um, camp... When we're safe, I promise I'll tell you what I can. Now you, Mylee, give me your hand. And Sean, check yourself for cuts, scrapes, anything that breaks the skin, even if you wouldn't normally care about it."

Sand had shredded the skin on Sean's hands. They stung, terribly, which he only noticed after the woman made him look. While he checked himself for other cuts, the woman poured some clear liquid that smelled like the juice from a cooking roast across the cut on Mylee's hand, then wrapped it in a strip of cloth. She did the same to several scrapes on Mylee's legs, then to Sean's scraped up hands. The pain to ignited with a blinding fury for several seconds, and then melt away into numbness.

"What is that?" Sean asked.

"You really don't want to know," the woman said. "But it will heal the wounds, and more importantly right now, neutralize the

smell of your blood.”

It was some part of those creatures, Sean guessed, like the skin bandages. He almost guessed this aloud, but then realized the woman was right. He really didn’t want any more details on the matter.

They followed their rescuer into the setting sun, with desert on one side, and the city on the other. The tangled wreck of his former home, a corpse rotting in the heat of the day, turned Sean’s stomach every time he looked at it. But the endless, impossible desert was no better. So he kept his eyes forward, focused on the woman’s back to ward off the glare of the sun.

She resembled the wasteland itself, hardened, her arms and back knotted by the kind of muscles that took a lifetime to develop. She walked upright and straight with a determination of purpose that made Sean certain she would always reach her destination, no matter what. And he couldn’t help but notice a red mark on her left wrist, a tattoo that looked a little like an S and a little like an X and not quite like either.

But there were other marks on her skin, all down her bare arms, and across her neck and shoulders. At first, he thought they were scabs, or patches of dry skin peeling from the sunlight. But they were scars, scraped and gashed through her skin. There were so many that it almost looked ritualistic, but there was no pattern to them, at least not that Sean could see. He glanced at Mylee and knew that she saw it too, and that she wondered, too.

With the sun almost gone, a dark spot rose against the horizon. As they approached, the spot grew into a sprawling, broken line, then two distinct cylinders with mangled openings gaping for them in the darkness. It looked metal, Sean thought as they approached. Some kind of giant, metal tube, broken in half and then half-buried in the sand.

Without pausing, the woman grabbed onto the shards of metal that, like teeth, ringed one of the openings, the place where the tube had been pulled in half. She swung in one clean motion up onto the lip of the opening, about three feet off the sand, then turned back, balanced on her toes and reaching for the twins.

“Ogres can’t stand the smell of this place,” she said. “It’s safe.”

Mylee glanced back at Sean, then took the woman’s hand, jumping up into the toothed hole. Sean followed her.

Inside, the woman struck a match. Light flared out into a black, confined space, becoming a steady flame suspended inside a green lantern.

"What's wrong with the smell?" Mylee asked. She had gone a few feet into the darkness, then turned back, her arm resting on... It looked like a chair.

The woman shrugged. "It's something about the spilled fuel and metal casing... I think it reminds them of the ships that brought them here, but that's my own personal theory. The point is, they won't come in unless they have to. If they find us in here, sure. But they'd have to find us first. And the metal blocks our smell."

Sean had taken a few steps himself, down an aisle, between groups of seats. Groups of four seats, facing each other, next to windows. It was all plastic inside a light metal shell. "This is an interstellar passenger ship," he said with a glance at Mylee.

Her eyes widened. "You're right!"

"That would make sense." The woman walked past them, lantern held out in front of her. More of the interior came into focus as she went. There were the clusters of seats, but other objects between them, and packed around them. Clothing, bedding, food. A hook hung from the ceiling several yards further in, and the woman hung the lantern from it.

"My name's Sedek, by the way," she said.

"Is this some kind of... waystation?" Sean asked.

The woman shrugged. "I suppose. Everyone who wanders in the Outlands knows of it. There's an agreement, stop if you need to, take what you need, leave what you can."

"Wait, you said that made sense..." Mylee shook her head as if she were chasing a bug out of her hair. "You know what *interstellar* means?"

The woman, Sedek, laughed, a pleasant sound that echoed off the surrounding metal. "I know that people once traveled between hundreds of different planets, yes. Is that really more impressive than knowing who your parents were?"

"Once traveled?" A sinking darkness opened inside Sean's chest, pulling his heart down into his stomach. "As in, don't anymore?"

"How long ago was that?" Mylee said the words quickly, as if

they might run away from her, or bite her.

Sedek had taken a seat on a chair wrenched slightly out of its original position, bent now toward the aisle as well as the chairs opposite it. She looked at the twins for a long moment, then waved at the chairs across from her. "Sit, kids. This will take a while."

"How long ago?" Mylee repeated taking the inside seat while Sean lowered himself into the aisle-side seat, right across from Sedek.

Sedek had taken something from a crate at her feet. Crackers. Not baked vegetable bars, but actual crackers, inside sealed tins. She tossed one package to each of the twins as she answered Mylee's question. "Since you went to sleep? Since the city fell apart and my world began? Three hundred and eighteen years."

Mylee sank back into her chair, and Sean reached for her hand, almost dropping his cracker tin in the process. He had suspected as much, hundreds of years, and not decades. But still, hearing it spoken aloud came like a knife in his gut. They had been asleep for over three hundred years.

"I'm sorry," Sedek said. Her cracker tin opened with a pop. "I can't imagine the shock of waking up in this."

"Did you wake us?" Mylee asked.

Sedek shook her head. "No. We've tried—or, not me specifically, but others have tried to wake you in the past, many times. And they should have been able to, but the system was frozen somehow. It probably happened when the Ogres first attacked that lab."

"So it was them," Sean said. "Those things, running the farms—those were the things that attacked that day."

"Their ancestors, yes. They're not exactly the same now, but basically, yes."

"And you call them Ogres because they eat people?"

Sedek shrugged. "I understand it's a very old Human legend. And it seemed appropriate, I guess."

"And what are they, exactly," Mylee asked. She could not have hidden the tone of disgust in her voice, and Sean suspected she didn't want to, anyway.

Sedek took a moment to chew and swallow a cracker before answering. "Would you believe me if I told you they were mostly Human?"

Sean laughed, not by choice. It just came out.

"Those things are not Human," Mylee said.

"I said *mostly* Human. Creatures grown in laboratories by geneticists, like your parents, from a combination of Human DNA and... other things."

"Why? Why would anyone ever make those things?" Mylee demanded.

"*Wayleeno*, they were weapons," Sedek said. "Made to annihilate the population of this planet. Look, um..." She set her tin on the floor, leaning toward them across her legs. "I can tell you what we know. But keep in mind, it's legend, stories and rumors, some testimony from a few surviving refugees who managed to crash land on this planet. What we know for sure is that there was a war. A devastating war, with more than two sides. Refugees said that every planet, every species, every faction within every planet and every species, all turned on each other all at once. You might remember how it began?"

"The bombing on Acar?" Mylee asked, glancing at Sean. "That was the day before we went to sleep."

Sedek shrugged. "If you say so. We remember the *Ockiseeday* better. It's..."

"*Ockisee*... You mean *occisio*-day?" Mylee asked.

Sean looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "What?"

"*Occisio*, it's Latin. It means..." Mylee bit into her bottom lip. "Massacre..."

"If you say so. We also call it *Wenaprim*, or *Wenatoo Preem*..."

"*Venatus Primus*, first hunt?" Mylee said.

"How do you know this?" Sean asked.

"Again, if you say so," Sedek said.

"Could you understand our parents when they spoke Latin?" Sean asked.

"No! It's just context, or common sense, I guess!" Mylee said. "Anyway, so... What's this 'first hunt massacre day'?"

Sedek nodded, took a breath, all while watching the two of them carefully. "It's the day the Ogres came and ripped every city on this planet apart. That's *Ockiseeday*. Then that along with everything that happened in the next year or so is *Wenaprim*. They killed half the people here in the first week. Half of what remained in the next month. And then the numbers kept going down, and down."

"Nine billion people lived on this planet," Sean said.

After a pause, Sedek said, "Anyway, that was the end for us. We only know what happened to the rest of the galaxy because any Human refugees who couldn't get back to Earth tried to get here. The Ogres killed most of them. Some survived long enough to pass on some stories. But all of those stories come to the same thing: The galaxy you knew does not exist anymore."

"And no one's come here since?" Sean asked.

"No." Sedek shook her head. "The last refugees landed ten years after you went to sleep. No one has come since."

"But what about the rest of the planet?" Mylee asked.

"Gone," Sedek said. "This city is all that remains."

"Wait... That's not... No." Sean shook his head. "No, that's not possible."

"There are five continents," Mylee said. "Each with a hundred cities, just as big as ours..."

"Nine billion people," Sean said.

"And some very smart people who knew exactly how to destroy all of it. Again, I just have stories..."

"Well they're wrong!" Mylee said.

Sedek held up her hands. "All I know are stories. And in the stories, the government, what was left of it... The Ogres were so devastating that the government thought they had no other choice. They consolidated all Human survivors in this city and then—I don't know how, I don't—but the story is that they sank all the other continents. The water level rose, sank most of this continent too. I have been to the ocean. Pick a direction, it's less than twenty miles away from the edge of the city. And I'm guessing that's not the way it was before you went to sleep. Maybe the stories are wrong. Maybe someone else survived somewhere. But I have seen evidence otherwise. I'm sorry."

Silence descended in a shadow over the lamplight, clawing its broken fingers into their flesh, and out through the scars on Sedek's neck. In that shadow, the ghosts of nine billion people screamed and passed away, as if they had never been at all.

"What are the Ogres?" Mylee asked, her voice a whisper that the shadows almost blew away.

"They're Human," Sedek said. "Tissue grown from Human DNA spliced to I don't know what else with a hybrid carbon-steel

skeleton.”

Tech-clones.

The word sliced across three hundred years, hitting Sean’s ears as if someone had spoken it aloud. Three hundred and eighteen years. But for Mylee and him it had been weeks. Only a few weeks ago, they had been sitting in their aunt’s dining room, talking about tech-clones. Of course they were tech-clones. That was why they looked part one thing and part another, why they were so strong, moved so fast, and why they ate...

Why they ate what they were programmed to eat. Living weapons, programmed to feed on the dead of the battlefield.

“Or...” Sedek shrugged. “That’s what the people smarter than me say.”

“But tech-clones are machines,” Mylee said. It took Sean a second to realize no one had said the word tech-clone aloud before that moment. She’d come to the same conclusion he had all on her own.

Sedek’s eyes narrowed. “Tech-clone?”

“It’s what we called things like that,” Sean said.

“The point is, they can’t do things on their own. They don’t build farms, and trade networks, or figure out a way to drain blood out of people without killing them. They just do what they’re programmed to do and that’s it,” Mylee said.

“Well I don’t know anything about that,” Sedek said. “I do know that, in the stories, the original Ogres were more like what you describe. But after the other continents sank, they changed. Some survival instinct kicked in, or something...”

“But that’s just it,” Mylee said. “Tech-clones don’t have survival instincts!”

“Miles, it obviously happened, so, does it really matter?” Sean asked.

“Yes!” Mylee smashed her cracker tin down on the arm of her seat. “Yes, it matters. Because this stupid world we woke up in is ridiculous and makes no sense, and so yes, forgive me for wanting this one stupid little thing to make some kind of stupid sense!” She smashed her tin again, cracker fragments spewing into the air.

Sean just raised his eyebrows at her.

“Yeah, I know, shut up!” she said.

“Anyway...” Sedek said. “Yeah... They changed tactics,

stopped just exterminating Humans, and..."

"Started farming us?" Sean said.

"Yeah, and what's up with that?" Mylee said. "Freakin' freaks! I mean, obviously they can even grow vegetables, so why can't they just eat their vegetables and stop handing around bags of our blood? I mean, seriously, if they're smart enough to build farms, there have got to be easier ways for them to get food. What is wrong with them?"

"Miles, I..." Sean glanced at Sedek, found her sitting all the way back in her chair, arms outstretched on the armrests, and eyes pure black now in the darkness. "I don't think they have a choice, do they?"

Sedek shook her head, a tiny motion he could easily have mistaken for a flicker in the lamplight. "No, they don't have a choice."

"What are you talking about?" Mylee asked.

Sedek took a deep breath. "The Ogres were designed to wipe out all Human life on this planet. To be honest, it was really quite brilliant."

"What?" Mylee asked.

Sean grabbed her hand, because she was already close to the edge, and he feared this would push her over. "Miles, tech-clones eat what they're programmed to eat. And only what they're programmed to eat..."

Mylee locked eyes with him. Her hand went limp in his as her eyes grew wider and wider and wider...

And then her cracker tin went flying across the broken ship. She lurched onto her feet, screaming, "That is disgusting, so disgusting. Gross. No, no. Just no!"

"Quiet!" Sedek said.

Sean reached out to catch her, but Mylee got past him, into the aisle, hands waving in the air as if she were trying to detach them from her arms. "No, no, no no no!"

Sedek looked at Sean, perched on the edge of her seat like an owl watching mice scurry below its tree. "She needs to calm down, now."

"Miles, she's right. Those things have really good hearing..."

"Those things? Those things?" Mylee tripped over a fallen crate of blankets, stumbled, but stayed upright by grabbing onto one of the seats. "Those things? You're telling me someone designed

those things to eat people? To eat *only* people?"

"Yes. Mylee, calm down." Sean reached for her, but she snapped herself back, another crate falling between them as she moved. Did she do that on purpose? Sean wondered.

"It wasn't something they just started doing? They weren't just killing us in the beginning? They were eating us, from the beginning?"

"Miles!"

A shadow moved on Sean's left, and then Sedek was there, perched on the back of a chair like a cat watching birds from the windowsill.

"Nine billion people, Sean!" Mylee said. And then she was sobbing, tears coming from nowhere to drench her face. "Those things ate nine billion people. And someone meant from them to do that. Someone designed them to do that. Someone intended for them to do that. Are you kidding me?"

The last word vanished inside Mylee's throat. She doubled over a seat and threw up. Sean just stood there, helpless to comfort her, helpless even to speak. Because there was nothing to be said, no comfort against such a horrid reality. Humans, programmed and sent to eat Humans. Humans designed to eat nothing else, so that their choice was to kill and consume the entire population of a planet, or die of starvation.

Sedek was right. It was brilliant. And Mylee was right to throw up.

CHAPTER 14

THE ROOM SMELLED OF CHOCOLATE, COCOA AND milk, with just a hint of sugar, against the scent of the adults' coffee. At the table, with sunlight framing her from behind, Aereal stabbed a knife into the jelly jar to spread over her pancakes. "Why do you keep reading that thing?" she asked her mother. "You know it's all made up."

"Sidi, pause," Uncle Bret said, ending the Christmas story reading as he placed the hot chocolate on the table. "Time to eat, anyway."

"Every historian out there says the stories about Jesus Christ are more or less historically accurate," Aunt Linda said from where she stood at the kitchen counter, scooping eggs into a large serving bowl.

"Can we listen to the one about the magicians?" Sean asked.

Aereal gave the combined kitchen-dining area an exaggerated eye roll. "He means the *magi*."

"It's the same word!"

"Says the kid who's failed every vocabulary builder since the beginning of time!"

"I have not!"

"Okay, kids, it's Christmas," Uncle Bret said. "It's bad enough the rest of the family had to work. Do those of us who are here have to spend the morning fighting?"

"They didn't *have to* work," Aereal said. "They just know better than to celebrate bogus religious holidays."

"I think Christmas is a lot of fun," Mylee said, scooping eggs onto her plate.

"Aereal, please." For a moment, fuzzy robe and slippers aside, Uncle Bret looked very much like a police officer.

But Aereal didn't seem to notice. "I just don't understand. How much of the outdated book am I supposed to believe in, anyway?"

"Oh, you don't understand, do you?" Aunt Linda asked, eyebrows raised at her daughter. "Feigning ignorance to attack your opponent—that's an ancient rhetorical tactic, Aereal. So glad you've mastered it!"

"Asking questions to avoid answering them, also an ancient rhetorical tactic," Aereal said.

"You know full well that we don't believe in a book," Aunt Linda said. "We believe in God."

"So was God joking when he said he made Earth in six days and finally got around to the rest of the universe and all the alien species as a side note on day four?"

"I thought it was seven days," Mylee said. "Isn't that where the whole *week* thing comes from?"

"A seventh day to rest, six days to create, idiot," Aereal said.

"Hey, no one's an idiot on Christmas," Uncle Bret said.

"That's one version of the story, anyway," Aereal said. "There are actually two of them. Oh, and then the three BelDom ones."

"Humans wrote those stories," Aereal, Aunt Linda said, "back when they thought the Earth was all that existed, back when they thought that stars were living creatures or gods or angels. God wrote the point behind the story."

"Yes, the great excuse of those clinging to madness," Aereal said.

"Eat your eggs," Aunt Linda told her.

"What do you mean?" Mylee asked

Aereal sighed loudly. "Don't get her started, idiot!"

"Anyone need a refill on hot chocolate? I can make more," Uncle Bret said.

Aereal ignored her father and cut her mother off before she could speak. "She means the point about how Humans are the most important things in this universe because we're all genetically related to the first Human, Adam, whom God gave 'dominion' over everything else that exists. And then Jesus was genetically related to Adam, too, so he could save everyone else who's genetically related to Adam by dying... Which — I mean, everyone knows that doesn't make any sense, honestly, but it's still the point in the bible. Oh, but aliens can't be saved, because they're not genetically related to Adam, and neither can animals. And then clones, and A.I.s, and anything grown in a lab isn't technically alive, or real, either..."

Uncle Bret set his coffee mug down on the table with a sharp click. "Have you been reading Viris recruitment materials again? That's banned literature, Aereal!" He looked at his wife. "Where does she keep getting these things?"

Aereal rolled her eyes. "These aren't Viris's arguments. It's what the Be'shon says Viris argues, because the Be'shon's in denial of the fact that its own religion says it."

"That's just... not true, sweetheart," Aunt Linda said.

"Aereal, you just got your co-pad restrictions lifted. Do not make me put them back on again," Uncle Bret said. "Not on Christmas!"

"Viris has scientific and historical evidence for Humans being the, as of yet, most evolved form of life in this universe. It has nothing to do with a mythological Adam!" Aereal said.

Aunt Linda dropped her head into her hand, rattling silverware all down the table. "No, but Viris does use the myth of Adam as evidence that even early Humans somehow instinctively knew they were the most evolved form of life! I just don't know how to get through to you anymore."

"Wait, so..." Mylee stabbed her fork into her few remaining egg bits. "Does the bible say only those genetically related to Adam can be saved?"

"And any form of life not created during those first six days isn't really alive," Aereal said, nodding. "Which rules out clones,

sentient artificial intelligence, and probably anything genetically enhanced or modified—oh, and definitely alien-Human hybrid children...”

Aunt Linda raised her head with a tired sigh. “No, Mylee. Or, okay, it’s one way to interpret certain things written in the bible, yes. But that’s because people back then thought of sin as, essentially, a genetically transmitted disease.”

“They also thought the Earth was flat, and definitely didn’t know anything about aliens, or genetic engineering, or artificial intelligence,” Uncle Bret said. His eyes were still on Aereal, as if he could break into her mind and figure out how the Viris materials appeared on her co-pad.

Aunt Linda nodded. “Right. We’ve learned a thing or two in the last few thousand years. It really is that simple. Anyway, the bible also says that all of creation is waiting for its Creator to save it, so...”

“So God was just joking about the whole six-day thing,” Aereal said.

“So that’s the point of the creation stories, of the salvation story, of our entire religion,” Aunt Linda said. “The point of our religion is that all life comes from God. God is the source of everything that exists in this universe, and therefore no form of life can be called unholy, or better than anything else, because everything that exists is sacred, because it all comes from the sacred, the one Creator, God. It doesn’t matter how it comes into existence, or why, because it’s all just life, trying to get back to its source.”

She looked straight at the twins when she said this, straight at Sean, who looked back, thinking, wondering, because her eyes and her faith made it safe to wonder, giving him time to turn into a person brave enough to bring up that one all-important question.

“Are the Ogres alive?” he asked.

But he hadn’t known about Ogres back then.

The burnt scent of coffee vanished, taking milk and cocoa with it, mutating into the stench of dirt and petroleum. Sean blinked, found himself face-down with half his forehead on the padded sleeping bag and half his forehead on the plastic floor. Sunlight burned against his retinas, and sand stuck to his skin as he raised his face toward the fanged hole that led from a broken space ship into a desert that should not exist.

In the morning sunlight, he looked for a while through the mouth of the monster that had swallowed and now protected him, convinced all the while that this was the real dream, that he would wake soon on that Christmas morning, to hot chocolate and stories of salvation. Eventually, the moment passed. Sean wiped the sand from his forehead, rose onto his elbows, silently so as not to wake Mylee, and crawled to the edge.

Outside, the other half of the ship lay broken and half-buried, another monstrous worm sleeping in the sand. Beyond that, the wasteland stretched out on one side, the broken city on the other, two imposing giants that offered nothing but death to the twins from days long past.

A few feet away, Sedek sat cross-legged in the sand reading from an actual bound paper book. Sean wasn't sure why these things still surprised him. She looked up when she heard Sean moving. He hopped down into the sand, and she rose, setting the book aside.

It was different seeing Sedek in the rising sun instead of a setting one. Or maybe it was the broken ship looming over her head. She looked smaller somehow, and the scars stood out all the more against her skin.

"They're from being bitten," Sedek said, snapping Sean's eyes away from her bare arms and up to her face.

"By..."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... or... to stare..."

"I'm not offended," Sedek said. "Everyone around me has always known, and it occurred to me that you didn't. *Waylo*, I was born in a farm, but not like the farm that you were in. Where I was born, *legays suntno* — um... there were no rules."

No rules. The farm without rules. Sean couldn't even imagine it. "Is that how you learned to fight them?"

"That was the start of it," Sedek said with a nod.

"And you escaped?"

"In a way. About forty years ago there was a massive... Let's call it, upheaval. Something called the Arterian swept in and took over about half the livable territory in the city, including my farm. I still live where I grew up, more or less, just... free. I know you have more questions, Sean. Why don't we have a seat?"

Sean folded himself down, cross-legged on the ground with the mound of sand that held up the broken ship behind his back. Sedek sat opposite, shoulders back and spine straight even with nothing behind her for support.

"I was wondering," Sean said, then he shook his head. "There are so many things."

"Why I followed you, how I found you, why no one was at the lab when you woke, why the Ogres that attacked you yesterday were different..."

"Yes, that," Sean said as a shiver ran up his spine. "They looked..."

Sedek finished the thought for him. "They looked more than half dead, because they were. Simply put, they're starving." She leaned forward, fingers playing with the sand between her crossed knees. "Starvation is a physical process, not a feeling. Your body goes through a series of steps on its way toward shutting down.

"In Humans, it's hunger, then self-cannibalization—the body begins to break down its own cells in order to get the energy that it needs to function. It begins with fat cells, which are actually the body's built-in defense mechanism against starvation. But if the process continues, the body will consume its own muscle, and then other tissues. Meanwhile, cells are not getting the energy they need, so parts of you start to shut down. Your body is so busy keeping your heart beating and your lungs working that it forgets to take care of everything else. Bones become brittle. Skin and hair and nails all grow thin and easily broken. You stop producing hormones that you need to function. Your brain—it's usually described as a mental haze. Complete inability to think clearly or make rational decisions. Eventually, your organs just stop working. The body shuts down, and you die.

"In Ogres, the process is basically the same, except Ogres were designed to be unkillable. They can go without food for a lot longer than Humans can, but once they begin to self-cannibalize..."

"In Humans, the starvation process can be reversed almost up to the point of death. In them, it can't. Their bodies keep going for decades, but at a certain point... Their brains don't just stop working properly. Their brain tissue liquifies, literally. All sense of self, all higher reasoning is destroyed, and it is irreversible. At that point, they become what we call *Demens*. Or, Ogres call them

Demens. Humans call them Seetz."

"But they're still alive?" Sean pressed his shoulders back into the sand to stop a near-constant shiver in his spine.

Sedek grimaced, flicking sand between her fingers. "The Ogre's brain is a hybrid of organic and technological parts. In particular, their brain stem, the part of the body that keeps essential functions running in the background... I'm told it's made up of microscopic machines that respond to DNA the same way living cells do, and can build themselves."

Sean nodded. "Nanites, sure. So, the organic part of the brain is destroyed, but the tech part keeps going."

"Exactly."

"That's..."

"It's horrific," Sedek said. "And it's certainly not life."

So were the Ogres alive to start with, then? Sean saw himself asking that question, back in the warm Christmas kitchen. Were the Ogres alive?

The sun had come above the horizon now, glowing huge and yellow and warm. Sean breathed in, taking the sunlight and the oxygen deep inside his body. He found himself acutely aware in that moment of every cell inside him, the lungs that expanded and the blood that rushed through them, passing that oxygen on, cell by cell. A thousand tiny things that had to go just right. A thousand tiny machines inside his body working together to create his life. All of it depended on things outside his body.

He had never thought of that before. His body had always seemed so self-contained and self-sufficient. But it wasn't. His existence depended on the environment around him, on oxygen, on heat, on pressure, on food. He was not self-sustaining, and he never would be. There was terror in that thought, but also beauty. The same terror and the same beauty that Aunt Linda had spoken of when she said that life had a source, and was meant to return to that source.

But Were the Ogres alive? Could such things possibly be what his aunt claimed all life was? And why did that question seem so very, very important right then?

Sean wasn't ready to ask that question, and chose another one, hesitated, but asked, "Why did they take us out there?"

Sedek nodded. She glanced at the new-risen sun, then asked

him, "You kept that medallion, why?"

Sean reached into his pocket for the half-sharp circle, cleaned now of Mylee's blood and the creatures'. "I don't know," he said, looking into the eyes of the fanged skull. "I guess I thought... I don't know."

"You thought, correctly, that it was a weapon. Small, almost useless, but still a weapon. All life fights to stay alive, Sean. We can't feel guilty about this. But we also can't mistake the instinct of self-preservation for righteousness. Anyway, can I see it?"

Sean handed it over, and Sedek flipped it between her fingers, almost like Exter had.

"What does it mean?" Sean asked.

"They're given to certain people tasked with the *loosing*. No one except those people know what they mean, so it's a way for them to identify each other without being identified."

"Like a badge?"

"I guess. Anyway, their purpose is exactly what they did to Mylee. Not wound, just draw blood."

"But why? I mean, I get the whole drawing blood thing, but..."

"There's this agreement. Well, the Ogre's in the farms think of it as an agreement. The Seetz don't think at all, so they don't, but... The idea is to keep the Seetz fed enough that they're not tempted to go into the city."

"And that works?"

"It might. There's no way to be sure the losing is what keeps the Seetz out. But it might be."

"Are there even any people who live in the Outlands?" Sean asked.

"Oh yes," Sedek said, the first welcome thing he had heard in what felt like a very long time. At least they hadn't fallen for a complete lie. "They live behind fortified walls and leave only when they must. There are nine such colonies that I know of. The only Ogres in the Outlands are Seetz. The Ogres control the city."

"But your people, you said, this Ar — um..."

"Arterian," Sedek said.

"Right. You said they took over half the city?"

"Half the livable territory in the city. The farms still have more people. And then there's a lot of city that's just abandoned."

"And, is anyone in charge of it all, like a... I don't know..."

"A government?" Sedek shook her head. "No. Not the way you remember. The farms work together through a series of agreements and rules. They call it *Seenee Consensee Kibbeeno* — um... no food without consensus. If someone breaks a rule, then the others have the right to retaliate. That threat is the only thing that keeps the farms in line."

"And it works?" It was Mylee's voice, from the broken hole in the ship. Sean turned to find her seated in the opening between two jagged teeth.

Sedek shrugged. "It doesn't not work. The whole system is built on respect. If you know where the line is, you can navigate things pretty well."

"Respect?" Mylee scoffed. "How do those things know about respect?"

"They're not animals, Mylee," Sedek said.

"No, they just treat Humans like animals," Mylee said.

Sedek rose, and the shifting of light against her body brought Sean's attention again to the scars. From being bitten, she said. There were dozens of them, and those were only the ones he could see.

"It's good you're awake," Sedek said. "We should eat and then go." She jumped up into the ship, then reached a hand back for Sean.

"Where are we going?" Mylee asked. They had left the broken ship behind, and the wind erased their footprints as if they had never been in the desert at all.

Sedek walked ahead of them, bare shoulders and arms with all their hairline scars glaring under the sunlight, and the sword she had cleaned while the twins ate swinging on her hip. When he looked, Sean could see different colors in the metal, raised lines where scraps were soldered together, then sharpened on the edges. It occupied his mind for a while, wondering where the metals had come from and why this had been done to them. But as the heat rose, his eyes were drawn again and again away from the patchwork blade, to Sedek's bare arms.

Wasn't she afraid of burning? Already, Mylee's cheeks were turning red, and Sean could feel the same happening to his own face. They walked with their backs to the sun, but its reflection off the sand was blinding in itself.

"Are we going back to the city?" Mylee asked.

"Yes," Sedek said. "At this point, though, it's easier to walk around than to go through the city itself. And... As long as we're here, there is a place I want to stop first."

"Where?" Sean asked. He had thought his legs were getting used to the sand, the constant struggle to put one foot in front of the other, but just saying that one word messed up his rhythm and threw him off balance. He tipped on the foot that held most of his weight, and Mylee reached out a hand to steady him.

In front of them, Sedek took a breath. Maybe she sensed the twins stop moving, because she stopped too, and turned to face them.

"Your parents had another lab," she said.

"They did?" Mylee asked.

Sedek nodded. "Outside the city. It was a production facility, really. There are documents there that the Arterian might want."

"Producing what?" Sean asked.

Sedek glanced out at the desert. "We should really keep moving. I know it's hard, but we should try to make good time."

"Sedek," Sean said. "Why did you come after us?"

Sedek sighed, the same resigned sigh Sean always had to hold back when a teacher asked him to read aloud in front of the class. "You come from another time. We're hoping that you can help us understand some of your parents' research."

Mylee snorted. "Yeah, not likely."

A part of Sean wanted to tell her to shut up, to wait until they were safely somewhere before dashing this woman's hopes. Instead, he heard another part of himself saying, "We can barely understand school biology."

Sedek nodded. "Let's just get to the facility. We can talk more about all of this later, when there aren't Seetz to overhear."

Oh, right, the insane monsters that nested under the sand and could rise at any moment to attack them again. He had actually forgotten about them for a moment. Sean shuttered, stomped his feet to get them free of the sand, and resumed his march behind

"Okay, so, I need maybe an hour," Sedek said, holding open the heavy, metal door. "You two should take the opportunity to rest. Lock this door behind me. Don't open it unless you hear my voice."

Sean nodded. Mylee had already gone to the other side of the room, looking at a series of dead computer screens.

Sedek sent him a reassuring smile. "I'll be as quick as I can. And if you're still too tired, we can stay for a while. Let me know when I get back." She shut the door, quiet as a cat.

Why wasn't she tired? Sean wondered. Walking over sand, it turned out, felt like walking up a never-ending flight of uneven stairs. He collapsed onto an old couch, so tired that he didn't even notice the peeled upholstery and the fact that there was no stuffing to speak of anymore.

A few feet away, Mylee turned in place, her eyes sweeping over the walls. They were in a little room, a couch in one corner, four bare grey concrete walls, one with a door that led into the hall, one with several blank and broken computer screens. There was a little stand in another corner, surmounted by a pot with dirt in it. But all traces of the plant's remains had vanished into the oblivion of time. There was nothing else, no decorations, no other furniture, no windows. They were deep underground anyway.

Above them, about half a mile outside the old city limits, a yard with several dozen freestanding storage buildings lay half-buried under the sand. Sean had been aware, on some level, that these storage yards existed outside the city, warehouses for overflow possessions. The world fell apart, and the overflow remained, to be buried away and finally declared useless.

Sedek took them to the heart of the yard, then into a building where, instead of halls lined by doors to individual lockers, they found a single staircase, leading down. There had once been hanger doors, set in the ground, hiding the entrance, just like the storm doors that hid the lab under the hospital. But something had long ago torn these doors open.

In his mind, Sean still said *something*, even though he knew

exactly what had done it.

Inside, they encountered a maze of empty halls, doors on either side. Sedek led them straight down one of the halls, and straight into this room. She had been in this place before, that much was clear, and Sean wasn't sure how to feel about it.

He wasn't sure how to feel about Sedek at all.

"Hey, Miles," he said, as he sank into what remained of the couch cushion. "Come on, sit down. Get some rest."

Mylee looked at him, looked at the couch, raised her eyebrows, and said, "Yeah... I'm not sitting on that." She stuck her finger into the once-planted pot, flicked a spray of dirt into the air, then went to the door.

"What are you doing?" Sean asked, more tired than anything else. "Sedek said to wait here."

"Oh right. And you honestly trust Sedek, do you?" Mylee asked.

Honestly? Sean sighed. Honestly, he just wanted his sister to sit down and rest so that he could rest. "I trust that she's probably the only thing protecting us from those things hunting us," he said.

"Except she was hunting us first," Mylee said. "Don't tell me you didn't catch that."

Mylee had cracked the door open already. With her hand on the handle, she turned, back pressed against the wall, facing her twin. "Look, it's not really about trusting or not trusting Sedek. Our somehow-involved-in-all-of-this parents had a second secret lab. Don't tell me you're not dying to know what's down here too."

She was right, of course. Tired as he was, Sean heaved himself back onto his feet and followed Mylee out into the hall.

Most of the doors were already broken in, and those that weren't opened easily, no keys or i.d. scans. For a secret lab, there didn't seem to be much security.

"Remember, we have to find our way back to hall nine," Sean said, the first time they turned a corner. Every junction appeared to be numbered, large steel signs embedded into the concrete walls.

"Yeah, yeah," Mylee said. She used to do this in the city, too, wander with no fear at all of getting lost. It drove Sean insane, but she always seemed to find her way back.

A few turns later, encountering nothing but empty rooms and

a few broken pieces of lab equipment, they turned into a hall that ended in a set of promising looking double doors, the type that swung open to make it easier to wheel carts and other large objects through. They opened into a row of hanging plastic sheets, still in pristine condition, meant to keep out dust and other large contaminants. The twins pushed through, into a cavernous, white room.

"*Haysha*," Mylee said. It was a swear word, one of the bad ones, that as far as Sean knew, neither of them had ever said out loud before. But it was so appropriate at that moment that he barely even heard it, let alone felt the shock it would normally have inspired. They stood for a while with that forbidden word hanging in silence and the plastic sheets swinging behind them, staring.

Just staring.

"Sedek did call this a production facility," Sean said.

"Yeah, and she never answered when you asked what it produced," Mylee said.

"Our parents did this," Sean said.

Mylee swallowed. "Our parents did this."

In front of them stood a line of incubation chambers, four rows, stretching all the way to the back wall of this large, white room. They were not built into the walls like Sean and Mylee's chamber. Instead, they were freestanding, clearsteel cylinders, resembling pillars, attached to both the ceiling and the floor. Some were empty, but most were not.

Inside most of the cylinders were bodies at various stages of development, and also various stages of decay. Some were fetuses, others in childhood, a few adults. Some of the chambers were sealed, full of yellow-tinted growth fluid, with bodies floating inside, bloated, rotting, consumed ever so slowly by the very formula meant to keep them alive. On other cylinders, the seals had been broken at some point. The liquid evaporated partially, or entirely. Some of these chambers held only bones. Some held mummified remains, skin and organs still partially intact, dehydrated onto the skeleton.

Directly in front of the twins, a corpse sat in its chamber, legs folded to its chest. The remaining growth fluid covered about half of it, and discolored, bloated skin, melting into the surrounding liquid, still covered that bottom half. Exposed to air, the creature's

top half stared at the twins from two empty eye sockets inside a dry husk of brittle skin shrunken against bone.

Mylee staggered backward, into the plastic strips, then away from them again. She struggled for a moment as if the plastic were attacking her. "Sean, what is... Sean!"

"Okay, Mylee..." Sean had to keep her calm. If Mylee ever had a reason to freak out and lose control, it was now, and that could not happen here.

Mylee slapped at the plastic strips as if they were a flock of crows trying to nest in her hair. "Only fetuses and replacement organs are supposed to be in incu-chambers, Sean!"

"Yes," Sean said, reaching for her arms. "I know."

"Things that can think and breathe on their own are not supposed to be in incu-chambers!"

"I know. Miles! Mile... Mylee!" He managed to grab her, and she thrashed against him instead of the plastic, her face an even brighter red underneath the sunburns, like some wild creature caught in a trap and aware of its impending doom. Sean pulled her against him, trapping her arms and limiting her movement. It took every ounce of his strength to hold her, but the last time this had happened, she had broken two desks and gone on a screaming rampage down the halls of the school. That couldn't happen here inside an unknown maze of hallways with who-knew-what within earshot.

"Mylee, breathe, please, just breathe, please!" Sean said, desperate to hold her still. For ten terrifying seconds, he was sure that she would not snap out of it, that he would lose his grip and lose her. In the other half of that minute, he felt her struggling weaken. And for a few minutes after that, they held onto each other in the white lab, relearning how to breathe.

Mylee was shaking when Sean finally let her go, all the unspent energy leaving her body. "These are Human bodies, Sean," she said.

"Are they though?" Sean went up to the nearest cylinder. "This skull, the size of it... it looks more like..."

"The Ogres," Mylee said. "But not exactly."

"No, not exactly." Sean took a step into the forest of incubation chambers, like stepping through cobwebs in a cemetery at midnight. Still, he did it, despite the gag reflex, the prickling all over

his skin, the feeling of his own organs rotting as time compressed his flesh into his bones. He had to see. The room and everything in it felt vitally important, as if he had somehow always known this place was here, and that he would end up here too.

Behind him, he heard Mylee sniff. He turned, expecting to see tears, and instead found her squinting into the air.

"Why can't I smell anything?" she asked.

Right, decaying corpses surrounded them. The stench should be overwhelming. Sean glanced up at the ceiling, the opaque metal casings that anchored the incu-chambers. "Because the seals aren't broken in here," he said, pointing up. "They're broken above us, in the ceiling."

"So even Ogres can't get through clearsteel."

"Which explains why we were safe in that chamber for three hundred years."

Mylee shook her head. She followed Sean, reaching out, and touched one of the still-full chambers. The corpse floating there had fangs. Ogre fangs. "Sean, this isn't right. I mean, there's a lot of reasons this isn't right, but... I thought tech-clones were grown in pieces and then assembled."

"Tech-clones are," Sean said. "Maybe the Ogres aren't..."

"But that's what Sedek said they were."

"She could be wrong."

"Or she could be lying."

"Why? That just doesn't seem like a useful thing to lie about."

"No, it doesn't."

They moved down the row, surrounded by dead creatures that had never even breathed. Had they ever woken up? Sean wondered. Were they aware, and of how much? He knew that fetuses were supposed to be aware of certain things even inside the womb—as aware as any infant was, anyway. And at least half of these creatures were adults. Had they known anything of the world around them? Had they woken when the seals broke, and the liquid drained from their chambers? That thought made his stomach turn in knots, and he crouched down, staring at the floor and trying to take his own advice to Mylee. Trying to just breathe.

When he managed to look up again, Sean saw his sister standing behind a computer console, near the back wall. She saw him look up and beckoned him over, her face eager.

"What?" Sean asked.

"Come here. This computer's still working!"

"What?" Sean joined her behind the console. It made a certain amount of sense, he realized. The lights turned on, so there had to be an independent generator somewhere, like back in the other lab. And unlike that other lab, this room appeared mostly untouched.

Beneath Mylee's hands, a screen glowed with fuzzy, streaky images. She had opened the main document folder, the backend version that showed the streaming computer code. "Can you read this?"

Despite having failed computer sciences, twice, Sean was pretty good at reading code. The problem was that the tests always asked him to name sections of code out of context. It was the same reason that Mylee failed her BelDom tests, then walked out the classroom door and carried on a five-minute conversation with the exchange student from Acar.

Sean squinted at the blurry screen, trying to connect lines of streaked code. "Yeah, sort of... Whoa, stop!" he tapped the screen to stop it scrolling, isolated a section of the code, a file name, and tapped it.

"What is it?" Mylee asked.

"It's titled *Mission Statement*."

A text document opened, blurry, but readable. Or, it should have been readable. "Um... This isn't code," Sean said, squinting at what appeared to be random assortments of letters.

"No, it's Latin," Mylee said.

"Latin, great! I suppose it makes sense that a super-secret lab would write its super-secret mission statement in a dead language that no one can read."

"I read Latin," Mylee said, as if it were an obvious statement to make.

"Wait, you what?" Some vague memory from the night before, of Mylee being able to understand some of the odd words Sedek said, leaked over the edges of Sean's brain. Those were Latin words too. Or sort of Latin, anyway. When had she learned Latin?

"Yeah. I didn't tell you?" Mylee said. "A few years ago when we were reading that annoyingly long Roman poem about the whiny guy who escaped from a wooden horse, then broke some

lady's heart, and, I think he was attacked by giant birds at some point..."

"The Aeneid?" Sean asked.

"Maybe. Anyway, the copy I got was a side-by-side English-Latin translation."

"So you taught yourself Latin?"

"Well, it wasn't hard. It's a really straightforward language, and basically every word sounds like at least one of our words. Now shush!"

It took Mylee a good ten minutes to read the three paragraphs in that text document. As she went, her face got darker and darker, until Sean began to worry that she might start freaking out again. Instead, she grew stiff, shoulders hunching in, eyes glued to the screen. At a certain point, he knew she had finished reading, but couldn't bring himself to call her attention for almost a minute. Finally, carefully, he asked, "Miles?"

"These things *are* tech-clones," Mylee said. "They're just a different kind of tech-clone."

"Meaning?"

"The growth fluid in these isn't just growth fluid. It's some kind of nanite mixture. Those nanites built these things inside the chambers, starting at an atomic level—or I think that's what this means. The word *atom* wasn't in that dumb poem..."

"Mylee, focus!"

"I can't really understand most of it—okay? But, from what I can gather, they qualify as tech-clones because they were constructed instead of traditionally grown through cell division. Eventually, the cells do start to divide and parts of them do grow like normal life-forms. But parts of them are always built, not grown."

"Why bother?" Sean wondered aloud.

"Because they have robotic parts," Mylee said. "And steel doesn't grow. I think—if I'm reading this right—they were trying to fix tech-clones, or something."

"Fix... What?"

"I don't know! There's a bunch of weird stuff in here. Honestly, it kind of sounds like stuff from Aunt Linda's church. I mean, it's not saying what they said at her church, it's saying it in the same way... Does that make any sense?"

"It sounds religious," Sean said, nodding.

"Yes! *Religious*. That's the word."

"But what do you mean? What does it say?"

"Just, I don't know. Weird stuff, about making life better—I think. And a duty to improve on nature and... I think this word must mean evolution..."

"Wait, improve on evolution. Are you sure?"

"No!" Mylee said, then rolled her eyes. "But, yes."

"That's Viris," Sean said.

"What?"

"Okay, so, I maybe may have kinda read some of Aereal's Viris propaganda recruitment things..."

"What the freakin' gatch, Sean!"

"I don't know! I was bored. Her co-pad was there... It's not important. It's just that... that line, duty to improve on evolution, was in there. Something about as the most evolved creatures in the universe our one and only duty is to create even more evolved creatures... It creeped me out, and I stopped reading."

"This is not a Viris lab, Sean!" Mylee said.

"Do we know that?" Sean asked.

Mylee laid her hands out flat on the computer, her eyes fixed to Sean's in a battle that neither of them would start. Because they both knew. They had known as soon as their father showed up on their aunt's front lawn. And they were still not ready to have that conversation.

At long last, Sean took a breath. "So, what were they trying to do here, exactly? Create machines that could grow just like living organisms?"

Mylee looked down at the screen between her hands. "I guess."

"Did they succeed? Is that what the Ogres are?"

"Well, it would explain..." Mylee took a deep breath. "That thing I freaked out about last night—the first time I freaked out last night, remember? About how tech-clones can't do what Ogres do. This might explain that. But, Sean... This can't be where the Ogres were grown. They must have released thousands onto this planet, and..."

"There's no way this place is big enough," Sean agreed. "Besides, these things aren't Ogres. They're, like, somewhere between Humans and Ogres. And they're all different, like they were testing different types... I think this was a separate exper-

iment, and whoever decided to make the Ogres just used this research.”

Mylee flicked her hand over the screen, wiping away the Mission Statement, and going back to the streaming code of file names. “Maybe there’s something else here,” she said. “Can you...”

“Yeah, stop, stop!” Sean froze the screen, then scrolled back up a few lines of code. Under the *Mission Statement* file, there was subgroup, designated *Subject_Title_Female*. Sean tapped *A_Female*, the first entry. A folder came up, complete with images, a female face inside an incu-chamber, Human, but with translucent skin that showed all the crossing nerves and veins beneath. Images of her spanned from fetal stages into mid-adulthood.

“How long were they running this experiment?” Mylee asked.

“Our parents can’t have started this,” Sean said. “Look, these images... She’s almost as old as they were when they...” He choked on the last word. Neither he nor Mylee had yet to acknowledge that their parents were dead. They had never discussed what they both knew to be true, that their parents had almost certainly died in that lab, mere yards away from their chamber, only minutes after they froze.

“Anyway...” Sean said, scrolling to the next file, *B_Female*. It showed much the same, a different face, skin the right color, but deformed arms.

Sean kept scrolling, giving colors and hair and faces to the corpses around them. *C_Female*. *D_Female*. *E_Female*. He was sure the chambers were labeled somehow and that, if he tried, he could find each of these people in this room, suspended in their own deaths without ever having taken a breath of real life. *F_Female*. *G_Female*. *H_Female*. *I_Female*... On and on through the faces. *J_Female*. *K_Female*. *L_Female*. *M_Female*...

It was the last file in the list. And there were only ten images, all fetal stages, until the last two. The second to last image showed him a Human baby girl, two or three months old, suspended inside growth fluid. In the last image, she was almost a year old. Sean felt the blood drain from his face as his heart almost stopped.

“Sean...” Mylee did not shout. She didn’t even raise her voice. Instead, the word came out quietly, suspended in the air on the fragile threads woven by a spider. “Sean? Sean?” Her voice shook, a torrent of rage and fear held back behind it, all contained by the

spider's web.

Sean should have been worried. He should have known what was coming and headed it off. But he couldn't. He couldn't move. He couldn't even breathe.

Because there, on the screen, staring straight at him, was Mylee's face.

CHAPTER 15

HIS SISTER'S FACE, THE YOUNG HER THAT HE HAD seen a thousand times in family pictures, with her dark hair floating around her as she hung in growth fluid, inside a clearsteel tube. Mylee's face, in this room, among the corpses that had never breathed. Sean's mind twisted the image, and he saw her as she was now, the fourteen-year-old girl, hanging in liquid, rotting in slow motion. It was Mylee's face. One-year-old Mylee's face.

Then the heel of real Mylee's hand came down on the console. The screen blinked, looking for a moment like it would never come on again, and this jerked Sean out of his daze. Mylee took off into the forest of incu-chambers, but Sean backed out of *M_Female's* folder, back to the code page, and into the next file group, the *Subject_Male* folders. He ignored all of them, scrolling down to the last in the group.

There were more male subjects than females—six more, to be exact. With nausea reaching up from his stomach to strangle him

from the inside, Sean pressed a trembling finger to the *S_Male* folder.

Again, there were only ten images, most fetal, one an infant, one about a year old. Sean stared down at his own face, through clearsteel and yellow-tinted liquid.

He felt himself drowning, fluid filling his lungs as he banged against a steel box with water rising at his feet. He gasped for air and fell backward, landing against the wall with a thud that he couldn't even feel through the ringing in his ears. The water crashed in around him, like the torrent of rain that had pressed him into the mud back at the farm. He crumpled beneath its weight, gasping as his ears rang and the world was sucked into oblivion and suffocation. He gasped, but didn't feel his lungs fill, looked but couldn't see, sure that if he cut himself in that moment, he would not bleed, because he was not real, and he was not alive.

A choking, suffocated scream cut through his own oblivion, roaring between clearsteel chambers, snapped off, and then started again. Mylee screaming like something had just ripped her guts open and showed them to her. Sean pulled himself up off the floor and ran toward the scream.

The chambers were labeled, letters and numbers stamped into the opaque steel that connected them to the ceiling. Mylee stood against the chamber marked *M_F*, her hands pressed into the clearsteel as if she were trying to pass through it, to get back inside. It was empty, no liquid, no corpse. Had she been hoping to find one there? Had Sean?

Mylee screamed again, and the scream became a wail, deteriorating into sobs that shook her from head to toe.

"Mylee?" Sean said. She continued to sob, hands trying to press through the clearsteel. Sob and gasp. Sob and gasp. Over and over again.

Sean cleared his throat. "Mylee, you should know, for whatever it's worth, I'm in there too. There's an *S Male*, and it's my face."

Gasp and sob, each one threatening to tear her chest open. Mylee collapsed against the incu-chamber. And then, all of a sudden, the hysterics stopped. She stood up straight and turned to face her brother, tears drying on her sunburnt face. "Sean? Sean, what does this mean? What does this mean, Sean?"

"Mylee, please don't do this," Sean said.

"Sean! Sean? What does this mean? What does it mean? Sean, what does it mean? Sean?"

"Stop it, please! Mylee stop!"

"What does this mean, Sean!" She was screaming again, and would have continued, except another voice broke in, accompanied by the sound of plastic strips being thrown aside on the other end of the lab, and then Sedek, running between the chambers.

"There you are! Thank God! We have to go, now!"

"Did you know?" Mylee spoke to Sedek, clear and precise as if someone had just reset the burnt fuses inside her brain.

Sedek stopped. She took in the twins and the chamber and the stamp on the top of it: *M_F*. Then she said one word: "Yes."

And just like that, Mylee snapped out again, screaming, collapsing against the chamber in another fit of sobs.

Sedek ignored her. "Sean, I need your help now. She listens to you, I'm guessing even when she's like this, so I need your help. *Waylo*, hey, listen to me. There are Demens—Seetz—in this lab. I can smell them, which means they can smell us. Probably hear us too. We have to go."

Sean could hear words coming out of Sedek's mouth. He knew those words meant something, but he couldn't think of anything but Mylee.

"Sean!" Sedek's hand slammed down on his shoulder. "Sean, look at me! I don't know how you found out, but I understand what this feels like. I actually, really do understand. Look at me! Right now, we have to go, or you will die. She will die. I need your help."

Sean blinked, forced air into his lungs, and grabbed Mylee's arm. "Miles, focus. We need to go." He dragged her up onto her feet and told Sedek, "Just go. We're behind you."

By the time they got back to the door, Mylee was walking on her own. She wrapped both her arms around Sean's as they brushed past the hanging sheets and through the swinging doors. In the hall, Sedek sent them immediately right, down two more halls, and that's when something he had heard finally caught up with Sean's brain.

"Wait... what do you mean you can smell them?" he asked Sedek.

"Now is not the time." She kicked open a set of doors and they found a stairway, a different entrance to the lab that led up into another of the storage warehouses. "Outside. They'll tear open the ceiling and fall on us from above. Get outside."

Sean's vision, and he had to blink against the assault of sunlight, unable to see anything. "Where are they?"

"Not straight ahead. Go!" Sedek's voice was tense, pretending terror away. Sean and Mylee sprinted over the sand as best they could, out of the cluster of warehouse buildings, toward the desert.

"We have to get out in the open," Sedek said. "Just keep running for the desert."

"No, wait, stop!" Sean threw a hand out to catch Mylee. He had just seen a shadow, springing from roof to roof on the half-buried buildings ahead of them. Only half a second after he stopped Mylee, Sedek shoved them both back into the building next to them.

"Crouch down, backs to the wall. Do not move unless you have to." The sword was out, and with her other hand, Sedek reached above her head, tearing a well-rusted nail, about the same length as her palm, from the roof above them.

"Can't you take them?" Sean asked. "You dealt with the first two easily enough."

"Yeah, two are easy," Sedek said. "Five, or ten even, easy. But this..." She shook her head, crouched down, eyes searching the surrounding rooftops. "This is more Seetz than I've ever known to be in one place at the same time."

"What does that mean?" Mylee asked.

Sedek's body went tense. "Grab something. A stick, a rock. Anything you can use as a weapon. Now!"

"Sedek!" Sean screamed.

She was already moving. A shadow fell from the roof in front of them, and before it made contact with the ground, its head went flying. Two more sprang from opposite directions. Sedek stabbed one of them clean through with her sword, spun in a full circle, taking off the second's head, then another head too. "Okay, next building, run!" she said.

The twins sprang forward, a mad dash from one warehouse to the next, to the next. Three more Seetz sprang over the roofs behind

them, snapping teeth in gums so sunken the teeth should have flung loose. Sedek slashed a Seetz clean across its stomach and it staggered away, entrails hanging from its body with a shower of reeking, black blood. Another grabbed Sedek's arm and tossed her against the nearest wall. She sprang up again as if nothing had happened, held her sword in one hand, and beheaded a Seetz, while simultaneously, driving the rusty nail straight through another Seetz's skull. Meanwhile, Sean and Mylee ran.

Sedek's voice followed them across the sand. "It's clear ahead. Just keep running. To the Outlands."

The din of Sedek's fight continued behind them, Seetz roaring and howling in pain, the slicing of the sword, and the crash of bodies against the wooden walls. Sean glanced back once, only to see a dozen naked, charcoal-black bodies falling over the roofs, closing in the way behind them.

Then they were in the desert. The bodies with their sunken eyes and barely covered skeletons dispersed across the roofs, and Sedek, skin, clothes, and hair all stained black, arrived gasping in the sand next to them.

"It's not over, is it," Sean said.

Sedek rolled the sword in her hand, the nail still clutched in her other hand, shaking her head. "Not even close."

They crawled from between the warehouses, on all fours, moving bones that seemed barely able to support their own weight. A dozen. Two dozen. Three... A mass of black skeletons, biting and slashing and fighting each other on their way forward with their wild and meaningless roars. They circled, a knot tightening, even as they battled together for these few scraps of food. Mylee clung to Sean's arm, and Sean met Sedek's gaze.

"What do we do?" he asked.

Nothing. Her eyes said what he already knew. They could do nothing.

How would it end? he wondered, being torn apart by these creatures. At what point would he actually die?

They should have stayed in the farm.

Three of the Seetz broke ranks, charging across the sand with the recklessness of insanity. Sedek took their heads, but by then there were others. Five fell on her at once, two thrown dead on top of the other corpses. A third sank its teeth into her arm.

And then the roars ended in a sputtering, wrenching, gagging noise. Sedek rose as the three broken creatures scuttled back, crouched between their own legs like dogs before their master, fear bringing some tiny spark of what it meant to be alive back into their sunken eyes.

The one that had bitten Sedek jerked and twitched backward, vomiting a putrid, black liquid that smelled worse than the blood as it dragged itself through the sand. It wailed and gagged, agony writing its body, until, with a final tremor, it fell still. Sedek stood, sword in one hand, nail in the other, and black blood winding in streams from the wound on her own arm.

"Yeah." She held out her wounded arm, black blood, her blood and not theirs, dripping from her fingertips into the sand. "Want some more?"

The creatures moved, circled, that tiny spark of life slowly fading again behind the blindness of hunger. But Mylee wasn't even looking at them anymore. "What are you?" she asked, her face pointed straight at Sedek.

"It's called Forsaken," Sedek said. "And like I said, now is not the time."

And then, just like that, Sedek collapsed. The sword fell from her hand as she dropped onto the corpses at her feet. Sean and Mylee looked at each other, mouths open. The creatures roared, lashing out at each other, and then springing toward the twins. Mylee dove for Sedek's sword, and Sean clutched the sharpened medallion in his hand, as a sound from long ago rang out above the roar of the monsters closing in.

Gunfire.

Rapid-fire machine guns, cutting the Seetz down *en masse*. Two minutes, and suddenly it was over. The skeletons were truly skeletons, dead where they lay in the sand.

Mylee stood with Sedek's sword clutched in one hand, turned to look at Sean, eyes huge and screaming their demand for answers. Sean just shook his head.

Out beyond the ring of corpses, four men appeared, covered in light clothing and wide-brimmed hats. One of them took a gun and shot a twitching corpse through the back of its skull. The others continued forward, over the bodies, toward the twins.

"Sean and Mylee Primtar-Assain?" one of them asked.

Sean's head was spinning. This was too much. Everything had just stopped making sense at this point. "I'm going to assume you already know that we are," he said. "So... Yeah."

The man removed his hat, revealing a Human face under a balding head of grey hair. "I'm Allidin," he said. "General Collin Allidin, of the Unified Outland Citadels. I know this might be hard to believe, but you are safe now, I promise you."

The longer this General Allidin spoke, the stiffer Mylee became, her hand turning whiter and whiter around Sedek's sword, until her fear and confusion all burst from her in the form of one question, screamed out for all sky and Seetz and sand to hear: "What in the freakin' gatch is going on?"

CHAPTER 16

THE TRUCK ROCKED BENEATH THEM, CRAWLING its inelegant way over the sand. It was sickening and uncomfortable even in padded seats, and still, somehow, Mylee was asleep. She had fallen asleep against Sean's shoulder hours ago. One of the two men on the bench seat across from them appeared to be asleep too. The other was reading. The other two were in the driver's cabin, cut off from the back of the truck.

Sean let them think he was asleep, his cheek resting on Mylee's head, his eyes closed. But for some reason, he wasn't tired, despite two attacks, two miraculous escapes, miles of hiking over sand, and the discovery of he still wasn't sure what in his parents' second secret lab. He wasn't tired. Or maybe he was too tired to be tired. Or maybe the truck was just too uncomfortable, and the people in it with him just too strange—or too normal.

As the hours went by, his mind wandered again and again to the desert, standing over the cut down bodies of nearly a hundred Seetz, wondering if they had done the right thing. Each choice

seemed to turn out for the worse these days. But what choice had they really had.

In the desert, hours earlier, men appeared and shot down the Seetz. Beside Sean, Mylee clutched Sedek's sword and demanded to know what was going on. Three of the strange men continued to shoot any Seetz that still moved, and Sedek, who for some reason bled black like the Ogres, lay senseless among the bodies.

"I am truly sorry," the man called Allidin said. "I know this attack must have been frightening..."

"*Frightening?*" Mylee said, loudly enough to break the sky. "*Frightening?* Are you kidding me? *Frightening?*" She moved in front of Sean, stabbing at the sand with the tip of Sedek's sword. Sean grabbed onto both her arms, holding her in place.

"Listen to me." Allidin came toward them with both hands raised. "No, actually, look there." He pointed, back the way they had come through the storage yard. For the first time, Sean noticed the bodies, Seetz, cut down, row after row, back as far as he could see between the buildings.

"How many do you think she killed, with a sword and a nail?" Allidin asked. "Fifty maybe? Perhaps more? And how much time did it take her? A few minutes? Sure, Seetz are wild and insane... But they also managed to get what, one bite in? One bite, for every fifty dead?"

Sean stared at the mass of bodies. When it was all happening, running in terror for his life, he hadn't noticed the flying heads or the death screams. Once, long ago, some biology teacher had explained how much strength it took to sever something's head from its body. Far more than the movies suggested, he said. And Sedek had done it again and again, with one arm.

Allidin took another step toward them. Sean continued to hold Mylee in place. "There are four of us," Allidin said. "All we could spare from the citadel. Even with guns, the four of us are no match for that woman if she sees us coming. Believe it or not, and I know you won't at first, but sending the Seetz after you was the safest way to take her out."

"You *sent* those things after us?" Mylee lurched forward at Allidin, and Sean dug his feet beneath layers of sand in order to hold her in place.

"Why would you want to take Sedek out?" he asked.

"Is she dead?" Mylee asked.

Allidin held his hands up again. "No, she is not dead. And you saw her blood. She's not Human. She serves the Ogres, and she was taking you back to them."

Sean shook his head. "She said she was part of a group called the... Ar-ter — something..."

"The Arterian, yes. And it's not a group, it's a person. Or, more correctly, a bloodline. Arterian is an Ogre bloodline that now controls about half the territory in that city. There's only one direct descendent of that bloodline left, Quem Arterian. Even the other Ogres are terrified of him. That is who she serves."

"Why?" Mylee asked.

"Because they raised her, and it's all she knows."

"And how did you know we were here?" Sean asked.

"Yeah, and while you're at it, who are you, exactly?" Mylee asked.

"We are the Unified Outland Citadels," Allidin said. "All Human, not brainwashed like the Humans in the farms. We've been here, waiting to take back our city since the beginning of this catastrophe. We were alerted as soon as you emerged from stasis, and we've been tracking you ever since. When you crossed the river, we lost you. But, we also monitor all the trucks that cross into the Outlands, so when you were loosed, we found you again. We regret that it took us this long to get to you."

"Too long then. We would have died if Sedek hadn't found us," Mylee said.

"Yes. And for that, we are very grateful. But it does not change what she is or where she was taking you."

"General." One of the men came up beside Allidin, leaning over his shoulder to say, "We need to get going if we want to make it home before sunset. Are we leaving her?"

Allidin shook his head. "No. She's valuable. And she'll just come after the twins anyway. Load her in the truck. But she cannot wake up."

"We have enough of the sedative to keep her down. I'll dose her again before we roll." He glanced at the twins, then moved over to Sedek's body, lifting her with the help of another man.

"Look, kids, I know it's hard to know who to trust," Allidin said.

"Yeah, why should we trust you?" Mylee asked.

"Because..." Allidin took a small knife from his pocket and ran the blade over the tip of his finger. Red blood oozed out, which he let them see before wrapping the finger in a strip of cloth, also from his pocket. "I'm Human, and I know who you are, and I am offering you a life away from the Ogres."

It was enough to get them in the truck, anyway. Odd, Sean thought all during their nauseating journey over the sand. Only yesterday they had set out to find exactly these people, Humans, living apart from the Ogres. Humans living free. It was as if that lab had shattered the entire world and put it back together with the edges just slightly misaligned. They finally found exactly what they had been looking for since waking up, and they didn't trust it.

Sean had questions. Mylee had anger that would probably come out in the form of angry questions. But instead of asking, Mylee fell asleep, and Sean kept quiet, feeling sick, and hot, and not up for anyone knowing that he was awake. He opened his eyes just enough to take in his surroundings, the men asleep on the bench seat across from him and Mylee, Allidin reading next to the sleeping man, Sedek unconscious and laid on another bench seat across the divider between the back of the truck and the driver's cabin. Apparently, cars no longer drove themselves. But then, without the Sidi satellites to direct them, how would they? Sean closed his eyes, rested his head on top of Mylee's, and tried not to think of fanged faces with sunken eyes.

Maybe another hour passed. It was dark when Sean opened his eyes again. The sound of gears and metal grinding together made him sit up, as the sound of Human voices flooded up all around them, and the truck rolled to a stop.

Allidin stood with the backdoor wide open. He smiled at Sean, which was the last thing that Sean remembered seeing. He was aware of someone taking Sedek from the bench seat, and a hand reaching for Mylee, then for him, and then there was nothing, for a long time.

"Anyone need a refill on hot chocolate? I can make more," Uncle Bret said.

"She means what the bible says about how Humans are the most important things in this universe, because we're all genetically related to the first Human, Adam," Aereal said, totally ignoring the important issue of liquified chocolate. Did she not understand how important chocolate was, how just the smell of it cooking in that warm, bright kitchen kept her cousin going through monsters and evil laboratories? "And Jesus only came to save everyone who's genetically related to Adam so aliens can't be saved, or animals. And clones, and A.I.s, and anything grown in a lab isn't even alive, or real, either..."

Uncle Bret set his coffee mug down on the table with a sharp click. "Have you been reading Viris recruitment materials again?"

Sean turned to his sister, whispering, "This is Viris. Improving on evolution, that's Viris."

"Stop it!" Mylee said.

"No," Aunt Linda said. "All life comes from God. God is the source of everything that exists in this universe, so all is sacred, because it's all just life, trying to get back to its source."

She looked straight at the twins when she said this, straight at Sean, who looked back, trying to turn into a person brave enough to bring up that one all-important question.

"So am I alive?" he asked.

Yellow growth culture filled the space between them, a clearsteel door descending in front of a freezing incubation chamber. Mylee stood on the other side, distorted in the yellow liquid with her hair floating around her head, and Sean banged against the clearsteel, trying to call her name. A gurgle came out instead, bubbles floating up in front of his face as liquid filled his lungs.

And then the yellow liquid evaporated into yellow steam, then dust particles caught inside yellow light that glowed against the white sheets beneath his head. Sean's body sank into heavenly softness, suspended as if in clouds, wrapped up in the sunlight and laughter.

It was a mattress, clean sheets, a pillow, and a blanket.

It was heaven.

For a while, he lay there, unable to move, or think, or even dream. He had forgotten what it felt like to be warm, and dry, and

comfortable, no overheating from the sun or chill from the rain, no sand in his face or mud clumped into odd little mounds beneath him. His eyes blinked shut beneath a blanket that wasn't even a little bit wet.

And then, just like that, he was drowning, locked inside a steel box as water rose at his feet, a grey-skinned face bared its giant teeth at him, and Mylee choked for air at his side. Sean's eyes flew open, and he sat up, gasping.

He was in a little, private space, separated, it would seem, from a larger space by three white curtains. The wall behind his head had a window, opaque glass that let in light, but no view. As he sat up, the bed creaked loudly, and soon the curtains opened.

A woman stood at the curtain, a clean white dress, sensible shoes, and hair braided neatly around her head, about Aunt Linda's age, and smiling warmly.

"You all right, dear? Bad dream?"

"Where's my sister?" Sean asked.

The woman nodded, still smiling. She came into the little space and pulled the curtain on Sean's right open less than an inch. Mylee lay on the bed on the other side, still asleep, head buried in the pillow and sheets tangled up around her. Sean took a deep breath, forcing his shoulders to relax.

"I know you've been through a lot recently," the woman said, letting the curtain drop closed again. "You're safe now, I promise you."

"And where are we?" Sean asked. "I mean, what is this room?"

"Well, it's the infirmary. I'm the head nurse. You can call me Marta. Please, don't read anything into the fact that you woke up in a hospital. We really just don't have anywhere else to put you yet."

Sean nodded, settling into the pillow behind his neck.

"Take your time, dear," Marta said, giving his arm a reassuring pat. "Allidin will see you for breakfast when the two of you are awake. But take your time."

Sean didn't really want to take his time. He wanted to wake Mylee then and there, rush out, and demand answers to questions he wasn't even sure how to ask yet. But the mattress was so soft, and the blankets were so warm, and everything was so dry, with no sand, and no mud...

Before Marta had even closed the curtain, he had slipped back down into the clouds, with sunlight singing him to sleep.

"Sean?" It was Mylee, shaking his shoulder. She stood at the head of his bed, a glass of water in her other hand. "Sean, wake up. They have real clothes here. Oh, and a shower."

Sean blinked and got up on his elbows. Mylee wore a green dress like Marta's, loose and flowy, and very comfortable looking.

Sean rubbed his heavy eyelids. "I'm not wearing a dress."

"Yeah, don't be stupid. And drink this. They say we're dehydrated."

Sean took the water glass and drained it in one gulp, then set it aside on a little stand next to his bed. The curtain between his section and Mylee's stood open, and she pulled herself up onto the bed with a creaking of springs. "We're supposed to go to breakfast, I guess."

"Yeah, I heard."

"So go ask for something to wear. I'm hungry."

But Sean heard what she did not say. Less than twenty-four hours ago, she had been sobbing against the empty incu-chamber where they had grown something labeled *M_Female*. For a second, Sean saw her inside that chamber, floating in greenish fluid, surrounded by the corpses of those who went before. It would be so easy, in this place with sunlight and sheets and real beds, to imagine that all of it was a dream. It already didn't feel real. Mylee was not some experiment grown in a tube. She was his sister. She was the only thing in the world that made sense.

Maybe nothing in the last few weeks had been real.

Sean took a step outside the curtain into an open space filled with gurneys and trays and carts and cabinets of colored bottles and bandages. There were a few nurses who smiled at him, and then Marta coming over from a desk. "You'll want some clothes," she said.

"I guess," Sean said.

She reached into a cabinet and drew out a pair of pants and a shirt, light fabric like Mylee's dress, soft like the sheets. "Try

these. If they don't fit, let me know. Here, have some more water. Showers are there."

Sean showered, changed, then opened the curtain into Mylee's section again. She was studying the back of her hand in a way that made him feel uncomfortable, like she was trying to peel the skin off with her eyes and look at what was underneath.

"Should we..." Sean hesitated, sitting at the end of her bed and lowering his voice. "Should we talk before breakfast?"

Mylee looked up. She knew what he meant, but she shook her head. "Talk about what?"

"Miles, don't do this," Sean said.

She shook her head again, curling her fingers into a fist. "I went psycho yesterday. Full-on psychotic in that lab. Twice, actually."

"You weren't psychotic," Sean said.

"I was something not right. It was like that time at school, remember?"

"Yeah."

"Do you get that, when that happens, I'm not in control of it."

"I know."

"Sean, what are we?"

He shook his head, stood up, and grabbed her arm. "Let's go find out."

"And if I freak out again?"

"I'll stop you. Obvi."

She laughed, along with the creaking of the bed as they left the curtained off area. Marta waited for them, smiling. They followed her out into a hallway, made of white stone and cement with several closed doors on either side. A door with the word *CAUTION* written in red across it and a keypad above the doorknob caught Sean's attention.

Before he could think too much about it, they were outside in the sunlight. A broad street greeted their feed, paved, easy foot traffic between concrete buildings. Flower boxes lined the streets, gardens on the flat rooftops, with nicely dressed, well-groomed people passing back and forth from place to place. Children dug in the sand. A young man and woman walked down the street hand-in-hand. A mother balanced a baby on her hip while chatting with her neighbor.

Maybe he was still dreaming, because after everything, it

seemed impossible that such a normal, pleasant place could exist.

Marta led them down the street, several blocks to one of the single-story concrete buildings. On the roof, Sean could see shadows moving. He reached for Mylee, stopping short, as her hands wrapped around his arm. But a moment later, a woman's face leaned over the edge of the roof.

"Marta, at last!" she called down in a clear, sweet voice. "Door's open. Come up."

They went up several steps to the door, then through it. Inside was a single room, sectioned off by curtains, with the windows up high on the walls. A staircase stood in the center of the room, and they took this up to the roof.

The woman sat between a flower box and a trellis of tomato vines. She rose as they came up, went over to a table, and poured two glasses of water. "Sean and Mylee, right? Welcome."

"Kids, this is Elizabeth Allidin," Marta said. "You met her husband yesterday."

"Um, hi," Sean said, taking the offered glass by reflex.

"This is the general's house?" Mylee asked. It took her a second longer than Sean to take the water.

Mrs. Allidin smiled. "Marta, could you send him back here, actually? He stopped at Fred's."

"Of course." Marta tapped both the twins on the arms, telling them to get plenty to eat, then left.

Mrs. Allidin told them to have a seat at the table, to help themselves to the eggs, the fried tomatoes, the toasted bread, and honey. Real food, for the first time since they had woken up. Sean had to force himself not to eat the entire bowl of scrambled eggs. Beside him, Mylee sat stoic and seemingly unaffected with an empty plate in front of her.

"Is the general in charge of this place?" she asked.

"Of the military side of it," Mrs. Allidin said. She reached across the table, scooping eggs onto Mylee's plate for her, then tomatoes. "The citadel is governed by a panel of officials. The general is one of them. He'll be returning with Fred Millaing, the representative for the science division. I'm also on the panel, housing and public works. But we've all already eaten though, so please..."

From the roof, Sean could see everything that they called the citadel. It was a patchwork of one to three-story buildings with

gardens on almost every roof and sand patches between the criss-crossing, paved streets. It was colorful and lively. But around it all loomed another wall, steel and concrete rising far higher than three stories and cutting off any view beyond the citadel itself. Sedek had told him some Humans lived like this.

Where was Sedek?

By the time the men came, Sean and Mylee had each finished two plates of food. General Allidin looked exactly like he had the day before, in uniform, and somewhat imposing in the way military man always were, no matter what the century. Beside him was a shorter, heavy-set man, introduced to them as Fred Millaign, administrator of science and technology. They wasted a few minutes enquiring about the food and wondering if the twins had enough to eat before finally coming round to the relevant topic.

"I assume you have questions after the last few days," Allidin said. "So, why don't we have a seat, and..."

"What are we?" Mylee asked, stopping Allidin in his tracks. "Sean and I. What are we?"

Allidin looked from Mylee to Sean, then took a deep breath. "You found something in that lab, didn't you?"

Sean said nothing. Mylee crossed her arms, asking the same question in her head that Sean had in his. Could these people be trusted? Sean felt the answer depended on what happened in the next few minutes.

After a moment of reflection, Allidin nodded. "Okay. Let's do this. Come with me."

They went down the stairs, through the house, and into the street again. Fred Millaign and Elizabeth Allidin followed, while Mylee and Sean walked side-by-side, a step behind General Allidin.

"I promise that I am not avoiding your question," Allidin said. "But I think it better to show you the answer. Visuals always help, in my experience. And in the meantime, we may as well cover a few other things. Did the Forsaken tell you how much time has passed since your world ended?"

Forsaken. Sedek had used that word for herself, just before she collapsed. No, been shot. She said it just before they had shot her. Sean could not get that fact out of the back of his mind.

"Three hundred years," Mylee said. "She said that the Ogres

ate the entire world, and the government sank the other continents after bringing all the survivors here.”

“Yes. All true. That happened about a year after the Ogres invaded. The Outlands, the desert, is what the Ogres did in retaliation. We tried to take their food source, so they tried to take ours. Several labs in the city produced terraforming agents. The Ogres got ahold of them, reprogrammed them, set them loose on the forests and the farms. Within a year, sand was all that was left.”

“Why did the Ogres even come here?” Mylee asked. “What was the point in destroying this planet?”

Allidin nodded, returning a greeting from a group of three people passing them on the street. “We can’t be sure. We do know that the Ogre attack was unique to this world. None of the survivors who came from other worlds had experienced anything like it. We think it had something to do with the planet’s manufacturing potential.”

“What do you mean?” Sean asked.

“Well, maybe you don’t know this, but Eeteron began as a factory world. We grew to be the second-largest Human planet in the galaxy, but we remained a factory world. We shipped billions of tons of goods off-world every single day. A large part of that was weaponry and other military supplies that, apparently, we produced exclusively for the Be’Shon. Not only did we sell only to the Be’shon, but we think our shipyards had an exclusive contract with them. All Be’shon warships were built here, not to mention at least half of everything else they used. Whatever happened to this galaxy, it started as a rebellion against the Be’shon, so it makes sense that literally the next day, whoever started the rebellion would try to take out their supply world.

“Now, we can’t be sure of their intentions. Most of us find it difficult to believe they intended to destroy this world to the extent it was destroyed. In fact, most of us think that’s why they sent the Ogres in the first place, instead of just bombing us from orbit. They were trying to eliminate the planet while keeping the factories and shipyards intact. But... At some point, something went wrong. We think it started when the Ogres attacked your parents’ lab before they could evacuate. That’s what forced them to put you into stasis, right? None of that could have been their original plan.”

Sean remembered his mother's face, the look of total, pale shock when they heard the Ogres enter the lab. No, nothing that had happened after that had been according to plan.

"Which only brings us back to the point," Mylee said. "What are we?"

"Of course. Let's keep walking."

Allidin led them off down the street, saying, "Anyway, after the Ogres scorched our farmland there was, well, a war, I think you have to call it, for control of the city. Humans lost, as you may have guessed. Most were captured and contained in what became the farms. But the rest of us escaped out here. We built the citadels. There are sixteen of them. And the rest is history. Here, this is the hospital you woke up in. Also our meeting house. Follow me."

They turned off the main street, up several steps to a concrete porch, then through a set of double doors. They must have come out a side entrance earlier, because none of it looked familiar. Inside they found a large, open atrium, a wooden floor, and a wooden staircase at the back, with a single hall leading left and right out of their sight. Four glass cases were built into the walls of the atrium, lit from behind and filled with neatly arranged objects, images, and plaques.

"This room displays our history," Allidin said with a note of pride in his voice. "We start here, our exodus from the city, our first leaders you see there at the top of the case."

Sean glanced over the artifacts, a series of images showing the forests turning to desert, a full set of Ogre's teeth laid in formation but without the jawbone, more images of the sinking continents, and blueprints for the citadel itself. Above it all hung the images of several men and women. *Citadel Builders* the plaque said.

"Gatch, Sean!" Mylee seized his wrist, pointing into the case with her mouth hanging open. "That's Aereal."

Sean followed her finger to the face of a middle-aged woman: *Aereal Vitrain: Citadel 1*, the plaque read.

"Oh, so that's her real hair color." Sean felt it was the stupidest thing he could have said right then, but it was also the only thing that came out of his mouth.

"Ah yes, so you did know her," Allidin said.

"She was our cousin." Mylee pressed up against the glass. "Her name wasn't Vitrain, though."

"No, it was Assain-Lukan, right? She married a man named Vitorin, and by that time, people were combining names instead of hyphenating. No offense, but all the hyphenating in your day got a little bit crazy."

"Wait, Aereal got married?" Sean asked. "Like, to a person?"

"This is too weird," Mylee said.

Allidin nodded, looking into the case with nostalgia in his eyes. "She was a great leader."

"Yeah, that's not... Sean, what is happening right now?" Mylee asked.

"What about our aunt and uncle, her parents?" Sean asked.

"I'm sorry," Allidin said. "I don't know about them. But we can check the records later, see if they came here with her. Anyway, most of what we know about you came from her."

Sean squinted at the image, thinking. What might Aereal have told history about her two idiot cousins? It was a disturbing question, which brought up another disturbing question: How much had Aunt Linda known about who and what her niece and nephew were? Had she known when she said that thing about all life being sacred?

Had she always known?

"What did Aereal tell you about us?" Mylee asked.

"I suppose it wasn't exactly that she told us anything," Allidin said. "Because of her, and the others who first built this citadel, certain systems were set in place. We knew you would emerge from stasis eventually. We knew to wait for you. And we knew... Why. Which brings us back to your original question, Mylee, so if you would follow me..."

They went down the hall on the left, past several doors, open and closed. Sean caught a glimpse of the room they had woken up in, and then that door with the red word *CAUTION* written across it. Allidin led them past the *CAUTION* room, and into one further down the hall.

Inside were computers. Actual, working computers, a whole console of working screens with their blinking stand by lights. In that moment, Sean felt that he had come home.

In the center of the room stood a device, a raised platform, large enough for a person to stand in, with four plastic arms reaching toward the ceiling, and four plastic arms reaching down from

the ceiling. It looked similar enough to the incu-chambers to make Sean hesitate and focus on the computers instead.

"Do you know what this is?" Allidin asked.

"Of course. It's an endo-scan," Mylee said. "Doctors use them to look inside bodies and see what's wrong. Why do we care?"

Allidin tapped the waiting computer screens. "Like I said, I wanted to show you, not just tell you. Have you ever been in one of these, either of you?"

"No," Mylee said.

"We've never needed to," Sean said.

The screens snapped to life under Allidin's hands. "Let's take a look at a normal Human first. Elizabeth, my dear, would you be so kind?"

"Of course." She stepped up into the machine, and the arms hummed to life—like yellow liquid rising, filling a steel tube. But it was only light. A flash of bright, yellow light that faded into blue. The blue haze remained between the arms of the device, peeling back skin and clothing to reveal the tissue underneath.

"It would be most noticeable in the bones," Fred Millaigh said to Allidin.

"Yes. Setting for skeletal view..."

Inside the chamber, the blue haze peeled away muscle, blood cells, organs, until only the bones remained. Mrs. Allidin waved at them, carpals and metacarpals inside a black shadow that suggested the presence of a hand.

"There," Allidin said. "Healthy, Human bones. Note the color particularly. Not white, like people imagine, but an off-yellow. Here, let me show you the ligaments..."

White-ish wrappings appeared on parts of the skeleton, joining bones to other bones. It looked like gauze, tying the pieces together. Inside the machine, Mrs. Larkin's bones made a theatrical bow.

"And let's get a closer look," Allidin said. The blue haze inside the machine concentrated around a large bone, the femur in Mrs. Allidin's right leg. The machine copied the image, pulled it loose from the rest of the skeleton, and brought it forward, magnifying it, then slicing it open, revealing a porous center with moving, yellow liquid.

"The Human body is efficient with its space management,"

Fred Millaign spoke. "Inside of bones we have otherwise empty space that the body has turned into its blood manufacturing facility. Human anatomy has three types of blood cells, red, white, and platelets. Bone marrow, the yellow liquid you see, generates all three types of blood cells, because bone marrow is made of stem cells—or, blank cells. Cells capable of turning into whatever other kinds of cells they need to be. It's a very well-engineered system, the body's best, probably, efficient, convenient, and not prone to breakdown. Superimpose the circulatory system for a moment."

Allidin nodded. The magnified image vanished, and a web of purplish, bluish, pinkish lines appeared, crossing over and around the skeleton, as well as the heart, between the ribs.

"These are the major blood vessels," Allidin said. "Not all the blood vessels, because you wouldn't be able to see anything if we showed you all of them. Again, notice the color. Pay particular attention to all the colors."

"And notice this blood vessel here." Millaign moved his finger over one of the computer screens, and inside the machine, a concentration of blue haze turned into an almost black dot. The dot moved up and down along the two giant blood vessels leading from the lower body into the heart.

"The Human circulatory system is, again, quite efficient. There's really no way to improve on the pattern of blood vessels, where they go, how they get there, with one exception. This vessel, here. It's called the inferior vena cava, and it carries blood back from the lower body to the heart. It's the longest distance in the circulatory system, and gravity is against it, so the heart has to work extra hard here. In fact, the heart can't do it alone. When you move the muscles in your legs, it helps to pump blood, which is why you have to keep moving, or your blood stops moving, and you get that unpleasant, tingling sensation in your feet and legs."

"What sensation?" Sean asked.

"Right. You've probably never felt it. Just, for now, take note of this, the only part of the circulatory system that can be improved on. Thanks, Elizabeth. You can step out now."

"Oh, but I'm having so much fun," Mrs. Allidin said. She made another bow and stepped down, skin and clothing covering her again with dizzying speed. The machine shut off.

"All right, kids, so, if one of you..."

Before Sean could blink, Mylee was already in the machine. The lights flared on as she turned to face them.

"Right, Mylee, thank you," Allidin said. "And we'll..." His hand hesitated over the computer as his voice faltered. He cleared his throat. "So, we'll start with the skeleton, again..."

Clothes, skin, muscle, blood vessels, and organs all peeled away, leaving the bones behind.

And immediately, the image was wrong. Mylee's bones were grey. The same Human yellow-tinted over the top of them, but grey beneath, with black lines running through. She raised a hand in front of her face, and spoke from a fleshless skull. "Okay..."

"We don't have normal bones," Sean said.

"It's a carbon-steel hybrid," Allidin said. "Everything that works about organic bones, fused into an almost unbreakable metal compound. There are other stronger than organic compounds laced into your muscles and your organs, too. But it's easiest to see in the bones."

"Steel doesn't grow," Mylee said, her empty eye sockets turned to Sean. Even with her eyes hidden, he saw her thoughts, the words she had translated in that lab, about machines that grew like organic creatures.

"No," Allidin said, "which is where these come in."

Again, Millaigh zoomed in on the femur, pulled it out, and opened it. The porous, sponge-like interior was again filled with yellow liquid, but also something else, something dark, clumped together like dust attracted to itself.

"Each of the dark spots represents millions of nanite cells," Millaigh said. "They're capable of stripping the raw materials around them at an atomic level and rebuilding those atoms into... anything, as far as we can tell. Which means, believe it or not, they can actually take organic matter and turn it into steel. It's technology beyond even your time."

Sean's eyes locked with Mylee's empty eye sockets, thinking with her of the lab, the rotting corpses, the experiments that their parents could not have started, but were somehow involved in. Machines that grew themselves like living bodies.

"But the nanites can't survive outside a living body," Allidin said. "We think they were designed that way, as some kind of safety measure to—I don't know—prevent other scientists from

reproducing the technology. In any case, they break down the moment they're extracted."

Sean shook his head. "How can you possibly know... Oh, because you've extracted them from the Ogres?"

"We've tried to," Millaigh said. "It doesn't work."

"We're not Ogres," Mylee said.

"No, of course you're not," Elizabeth Allidin said, putting a gentle hand on Sean's arm.

"No, of course, there are just... similarities." Allidin's hand moved on the computer screen. "Now, the circulatory system. And, I'm sorry, this will be... I mean, if we're right, which we may not be... But if we are, then this will be... disturbing..."

Blood vessels crossed and laced themselves around Mylee's bones. Her heart appeared as expected at the top of her chest cavity, protected between ribs. All the colors were slightly off, darker, like metal. And there, below the rib cage and about where Sean would expect the stomach to be, was a second, beating heart. It was about half the size of the other one, but it was there.

"So they do," Millaigh said. "I really wasn't sure."

"We have two hearts?" Sean said.

Mylee's skull was pointed down, hands held up two inches away from her abdomen as if she were afraid to touch herself.

"The Ogres have two hearts," Millaigh said. "Basically they have two separate circulatory systems, an upper and a lower. It gives them several advantages."

"I don't have two hearts," Mylee said. Her fingers had begun to shake, and Sean almost took a step toward her.

Mylee shook her head and didn't stop shaking it. "This isn't real. This can't be real."

"Mylee..." Sean said.

"I don't have two hearts!" Mylee said. "How can I have two hearts and not know it?"

"How would you know it, exactly?" Millaigh asked.

"I do not have two hearts!" Mylee's voice sliced through the blue haze, to echo off the surrounding walls. Sean took a step toward her, but then she was out of the device, shoving into him with her shoulder, and then through the door.

He knew he should go after her, but he went the other way instead, up, into the device.

"Um... is she all right?" Mrs. Allidin asked as the door slammed behind Mylee.

Sean turned to face them from the endo-scan machine. "Show me," he said.

"Um... your sister..." Allidin said.

"Show me!"

Allidin nodded, and the lights flashed on, a blue haze melting Sean's skin, muscle, and organ, until he looked down and saw only bones, and the second heart, beating even as he watched.

Reality faded, and he felt water closed in around him, flooding his lungs as he floated inside a clearsteel tube. His parents appeared on the other side, if they could even be called that anymore, pointing and watching while he drowned and rotted inside their experiment. Or maybe he was freezing to death...

The worst part of it all was how much sense it made, how it filled in all the gaps in his life, starting with the fact that he and Mylee looked nothing alike.

A piercing, shrieking noise cut through Sean's fragmented nightmares, pulling him back into the blue haze, and the three people in the room with him. They all looked at each other in surprise as an alarm screamed out above their heads. "Gatch, Mylee!" Sean said, jumping down from the device.

He sprinted out the door, into the hall, imagining flying desks and screaming tears. Instead, she just stood, only a yard or two down from the endo-scan room, her hand on a doorknob. It was the door with the red *CAUTION* label on it.

Sean stopped short in the hall, the other three a step behind him. Mylee turned her head, no tears, no screaming, just a hostile look that melted Sean's bones. "Wow, an alarm for just touching the doorknob. What could possibly be in here?" she said.

"Miles, wait a second!" Sean said. But she had already turned the knob, pushed the door. It opened into something dark, and she stepped inside. Sean sprinted after her, the others at his heels.

"Why wasn't this door locked?" Allidin asked, to get some reply from someone about her getting some keycard. Sean swung into the dark doorway and stopped short again.

Inside was a table and nothing else. No drawers, no trays. Nothing but that single, metal table, and on the table, a woman. A woman with greying black hair and hairline scars all up and down

her arms.

Sedek.

Mylee stood on the other side of the table, across from the door as Allidin and Millaigh stumbled in behind Sean. She crossed her arms, that melting disdain still all over her face, and said, "Yeah, I thought so."

"Mylee," Allidin said in a tense, upset voice. "I have to imagine that in your day caution signs meant the same thing..."

"Apparently I'm not Human, so who cares what I do!"

"Miles!" Sean said.

"What is she?" Mylee asked. "Is she like us?"

"No." Allidin sighed and turned to the little group that had, apparently, gathered outside the *CAUTION* door. "She's still sedated, right?"

"For the next few hours, should be," a nurse said.

Allidin nodded and turned back to Mylee. "No. She is a hybrid. Part Human, part Ogre."

"But the Ogres are like us, right?" Mylee's voice set off the warning lights inside Sean's brain. It was so hostile and so calm. Both bad.

"The Ogres are..." Allidin scratched his eyebrow, buying time, Sean thought, before taking a deep breath and continuing. "They designed the Ogres for a specific task. There are many features in their biology that only exist to help or force them to complete that task. For example, their inability to derive nutrients from anything other than Human biological matter..."

"Talk normal!" Mylee snapped.

"The fact that they can't eat anything that isn't Human," Allidin said. "They have this — well, for lack of a better word, we call it a lock. Ogre biology was specifically designed to make them the perfect Human extermination tool, and a big part of that... Their digestive systems will not work unless they sense Human DNA."

"It's like I said in the lab, Miles," Sean said. "There was a larger experiment, and whoever created the Ogres just used that experiment."

"Are we Ogres or not?" Mylee asked. Good, at least she was raising her voice now. He knew how to help loud, angry Mylee.

"You are absolutely not," Allidin said. "The two of you are Human."

"I have two freakin' hearts. I am not Human!" Mylee said.

"No, your DNA is Human," Allidin said. "Modified, but Human. You are Human."

"And what is she?" Mylee brought both her hands down on the table, rattling its metal legs.

"Half Ogre, like I said. Mylee, please, we are just trying to help you..."

"That's a lie," Sean said. He had inched his way toward Mylee and ended up at the head of the table, looking down at Sedek, the scars all over her body, from being bitten, she had said. "Or..." he looked up, at the shocked faces of the men in the doorway. "What you're implying is a lie. She's not half Ogre, because she can't possibly have been born like this."

Allidin shifted on his feet. "Sean, could we, maybe, go to another room, to..."

"She was bitten," Sean said. "Hundreds of times. But when the Seetz bit her in the desert, her blood killed it. She can't have been born like that."

Allidin sighed. "Yes, okay, but we're not trying to keep anything from you, I promise. We just don't like thinking about it. And honestly, I don't see any reason you should have to think about it. But, you're right. The Forsaken are not born. They're made. The Ogres make them."

"How?" Sean asked, at the same moment that Mylee asked, "Why?"

"Please, I have every intention of answering all of your questions. Could we go somewhere a little more comfortable?" Allidin asked.

"Even locked up and unconscious, she still makes you nervous," Mylee said.

"Yes," Allidin said. "You saw what she can do."

"We also saw her save our lives," Sean said.

"Twice," Mylee said.

"That second time... We knew the Seetz would not harm you, because we knew what she could do, which is why—yes—even locked up and unconscious, she makes me nervous. But... fine..." Allidin shook his head, then took a step into the room. "You want to do it here, we'll do it here."

"Ogre DNA is unstable. When their cells divide, pieces of the

DNA strand have a habit of breaking away. It happens naturally in all living things, but in Ogres, it happens pretty much all the time. Another word for a broken strand of DNA is a virus. When Humans are bitten, we're also infected. It does absolutely nothing to us the first hundred or so times, but a hundred or so times more than that, and..." He waved his hands in the air, over Sedek's body.

"And what, Humans turn into Ogres?" Mylee asked.

"No," Allidin said. "But certain changes have been made. Most notably, her bone marrow has begun to produce sim-cells. It's what we call the nanites in you. At this point, she's as fast as the Ogres, as strong, heals just as quickly, and the most interesting change of all—not only can they no longer digest her body tissue, she's actually toxic to them now. A normal Ogre would not die as quickly as the Seetz did. In fact, one bite might not even kill a healthy Ogre. But it would hurt."

"That's why they kept track," Sean said. "In the farm, they kept track of how often we were bitten. They were very careful about it."

"Exactly."

"So she was born then, right?" Mylee said. That calm, hostile look returned to her eyes as she stepped around the table, toward Allidin. "She was born. She had parents. She wasn't grown in some tube."

"Mylee," Sean said.

"And even the Ogres," Mylee said. "Not their ancestors, but the ones alive today. They were born too, right?"

"Mylee!" Sean reached for her arm.

She jerked away from him. "I mean, let's not kid ourselves, okay? That is the real difference between them and us, right? They were all born, and we weren't!"

Sean grabbed both her arms from behind, leaning over her shoulder to whisper in her ear, "Please calm down."

"Forget it! I'm tired. I'm going to bed." She broke loose from Sean, stormed out the door, through the crowd of onlookers, and around the corner.

Sean started after her, but before he could take more than a step, a hand closed around his wrist. He was pulled against the table by something terribly strong, tripped, half falling on top of

Sedek's body as a rasping voice called his name. "Sean?"

"Nurse!" Allidin said.

Sedek gasped for air, one hand still cemented to Sean's wrist, her other clutching for the collar of his shirt. She rolled halfway onto her side, jerking movements that seemed to take a great deal of effort.

Allidin leaned around the doorframe, beckoning at something down the hall. "Nurse!" Running feet followed.

"Sean!" Sedek clutched for his face. "Are you okay? The two of you? Are you okay?"

Three men swarmed the table, grabbing Sedek's shoulders, her legs.

"Yeah. We're fine," Sean said. A needle went into Sedek's neck. Her grip tightened around Sean's wrist, as her eyes focused onto the air above his head.

"He will come for me," she said. Sean turned to find Allidin standing over his shoulder. "My people will come." Her hand loosened, then fell away with a bang against the metal table, followed by the rest of her body going limp.

"Her people?" Sean said, watching Allidin's face for clues. "That means Ogres, right? You said they were Ogres."

Allidin shook his head. "Don't worry about it."

"But..."

"She is not in her right mind. And you have nothing to fear in the citadel," General Allidin said, and said no more.

That night, as the moons rose over the broken city and the unnatural desert, a shadow, nimble and well-fed, scurried over the bodies of a hundred fallen Seetz. It followed their trail, through the half-buried warehouses, over the crater of sand around the storage yard, up into the desert.

The cause of death in the wretched creatures changed, from beheading and disemboweling, to bullets, which gave it pause, caused its eyes to shift over the scene with renewed caution. It stopped for a moment over a corpse that had vomited black blood before death, then followed the blood trail to the thickest pile of

corpses, sniffed at the footprints still stamped in the sand. On top of their starved, stinking blood, it knew the blood of another.

The shadow lost its shadow form, healthy grey skin and yellow eyes coming into focus, as it bent its toothed head to the blood that was neither Human nor Ogre, and certainly not Seetz. It let out a whimper, then a whining, high pitched bark, and scuttled over the bodies to an object that lay on the sand. With another whine, the shadow took this object in both hands, lifted it off the ground, and rose on two legs to its full height.

Behind the shadow, more appeared, streaming from between the sunken warehouses. Some walked upright, some scurried on all fours, all rising as they neared the first shadow, standing in the moonlight with the object glowing in his hands.

Between the shadows, a man came forward, a massive man with grey skin and the gorilla's fangs. The first shadow turned, solid now, and held out both hands toward the man. On his hands rested a long sword, different pieces of metal soldered together and glowing like the moons above. The man took it, raised the blade before his face, and roared.

Behind him, the shadows condensed into a solid mass, huge, fanged soldiers dressed for battle, sending up the war cry behind their leader. Their voices spilled out across the night, rising to the moons like an oath sworn before some ancient, vengeful god. Sword still in his hand, their leader marched out into the desert, following the nearly but not quite erased marks of tires pressed into the sand.

CHAPTER 17

 ONE DAY PASSED.
Then another.

Mylee did not leave her bed.

Sean alternated between trying to coax her out, yelling at her to get out, attempting to drag her out, and waiting in silence for her to get out on her own.

Another day passed.

The nurses whispered. Mrs. Allidin brought fruits and a delicious vegetable soup. General Allidin visited every few hours.

Mylee did not leave her bed.

Sean tried to sleep, thinking of his sister, and the lab, and Sedek unconscious in that empty room labeled *CAUTION*. He tossed and turned and woke at sunrise to an empty hospital.

Mylee wasn't in her bed.

Sean jumped out of bed, checked Sedek's door, found it closed, and left the hospital. On the dim streets, half a dozen people raised their heads to wave at him then go back about their early morning

business. It was still rather dark, and quite cold, two things that Sean hardly noticed as he turned down every side street, checked every corner, and every space between the concrete buildings.

Where was she? He couldn't lose her, not three hundred years ago when life still made sense, and certainly not now that it didn't. With the world unraveling around him, he looked up, found himself near the wall, and saw a spot looming on top of it. It was her. He knew it, somehow.

It wasn't hard to find the way up. There were steps built into the wall, forming a very long, steep incline. Every fifteen steps or so he encountered a door leading into the wall, so there must be an inside to it, some space big enough for people to walk. It piqued Sean's curiosity, wondering what might be inside, but not enough to stop or look. He climbed until his legs ached and at last reached the top.

Mylee sat facing into the desert, her legs hanging over the wall, face lit by the rising sun. There was no railing here, just a wide ledge of concrete, big enough to walk on, and then the drop.

"Have you figured it out yet?" she asked. "Why they all want us so badly?"

Sean took a seat beside her, feet dangling over the edge. "It doesn't mean they don't also want to help us."

"They want to study us. To use something inside of us against the Ogres. A bio-weapon maybe, I don't know. We're the prototype experiment, and something about that is useful to them."

"Like I said, they could still want to help us for us too." Sean leaned back on his hands, focusing on the horizon line to keep his eyes off the sand hundreds of feet directly below him.

"What I can't figure out is exactly why this Arterian also wants us," Mylee said. "If he just wanted to keep us away from the citadels, then Sedek should have killed us, right? Or, just let the Seetz do it."

"Mylee, maybe we don't have to think about this right now."

"And Aereal – what's up with all that?"

"I don't know. Mylee, please?"

She shook her head, face pointed out into the desert, an alien landscape so close to where they had been born.

Born. What a terrible word to find strange.

"Please what?" Mylee asked.

"Can we just talk?" Sean asked.

"No."

"Mylee..."

"No. Sean!" Mylee jumped up, teetering hundreds of feet above the desert floor. "We don't need to talk. We don't need to do anything, because it doesn't matter, because we're not even real! Don't you get it? Our parents weren't really our parents. Our lives weren't really our lives. We are not twins. You're not even really my brother!"

"Yes, I am!" Sean rose with a shout loud enough to turn heads on the streets far below them.

It was the image of his own face in the files from some secret experiment, the thought of living inside those incu-chambers, of the other bodies left to rot inside them, of being built by machines inside yellow liquid. It was the knowledge that his parents somehow had something to do with the release of monsters who devoured an entire world, and the farm, and what life had become there, and the pain of waking up still half frozen. All of this came pouring out of him on top of that wall with the sun rising over a desert that should not exist, while he screamed at the one thing in the world that still made sense.

"I am your brother," he said. "And you are my sister. And that is absolutely true, always! I love you Mylee. I have loved you my entire life. And maybe we're not real. Maybe we only seem to be alive. Maybe we're just machines built from atoms. I don't know. But I love you, and you love me, and that is real!"

Mylee stood frozen, one hand around her own throat as if she were trying to keep someone from choking her. It's all just life, Aunt Linda had said, trying to get back to its source. At that moment, Sean was certain his aunt had known the truth about her sister's children, or guessed it, or suspected it. At that moment, he believed she had said those words knowing what he was, hoping he would save them for this very moment, when he would learn the truth, and stand with Mylee on that wall.

She said them, so that one day, when he needed them, he would have a reason, not proof, just reason, to believe that whatever life he had was still connected to the source that she had worshiped. And he had to believe it. In that moment, he had to believe it completely and totally, so that he could persuade Mylee to believe it,

just a little bit.

"Maybe we're not real," he said. "But then, maybe no one is. Maybe you and I, here and now, make each other real. And Aunt Linda – our parents may not have really been our parents, but she was really our aunt. She makes us real too. So Mylee, please, if you can't hold on to yourself right now, then just hold onto me. Please."

Mylee's fingers constricted around her neck as she looked at him with huge, round eyes. She swallowed, then nodded. "Okay. I can do that."

A moment passed before Mylee took a deep breath and turned to look at the desert again. "So what do we do now, brother?"

Sean looked into the desert, endless sand, the sleeping ground of insane monsters, with the sun rising blood-red above it, but all outside, beyond the concrete wall. "Well, this place seems... nice. Better than the farm, anyway. I don't know, maybe we can have some kind of life, or something."

"If they don't dissect us or something," Mylee said.

"I don't think they're going to dissect us," Sean said.

"The last time we trusted someone..."

"The last person we trusted was Sedek, who did save our lives, even if it turns out she was working for the Ogres. And if you mean the time before that, then, well, yeah, getting on that truck was pretty dumb, but..."

"But..."

"I have no way to finish that sentence. It was just dumb."

"Right."

"Still," Sean said. "I think they would have dissected us by now if they were going to, so..."

"Yeah, probably." Mylee reached up, pulling her hair into a clump at the back of her head as a breeze swept through the desert, whipping the sand against the base of the wall. When the breeze passed, she asked, "Sedek's Ogres though... Why would they want us? It doesn't make sense."

"Maybe we should ask her."

"Yeah, maybe."

"You wouldn't still have that keycard you stole a few days ago?"

"Oh, no," Mylee shook her head. "Obviously they took that

from me, like, immediately." She reached into the pocket on the side of her dress and drew out a plastic card, all white with a single computer chip embedded in its center. "But I did manage to take this one last night, so..."

"Miles!" Sean burst out laughing.

"What? It's not my fault these people have crazy bad security."

"Yeah, they're clearly not concerned about anything happening inside the wall."

"Clearly." Mylee glanced at the dark citadel below. Even the red glowing sunrise had not reached inside those houses yet. "So?"

"It does seem like most everyone is still asleep," Sean said. "Let's go."

They waited for the one early morning nurse to pass by on her rounds, then went to the *CAUTION* door.

"Is this another bad idea?" Sean asked.

Mylee shrugged and swiped the card over the lock.

"Isn't there an alarm?" Sean asked.

"Oh, yeah..." Mylee paused. "No. I touched the handle first last time, so, no. No, I think it only goes off if you touch the handle before unlocking the door."

"You think?"

Mylee looked at him, shrugged, then turned the knob and pushed the door open in one smooth motion. Nothing. The hospital remained as silent as its stones.

A lot of questions occurred to Sean that he realized should have occurred to him before. Like, how were they going to wake Sedek up, and what if she was already awake and escaped, and what if they weren't going to dissect him and Mylee before, but were so upset by this that they decided to anyway? None of his wild speculations could change anything, though. Mylee was already inside the dark room, so with a breath, Sean followed.

The metal table had gone. Instead, there was a cot against one wall, nothing else, except the woman on the cot who rose onto her elbow when the door opened, and to her feet when the children came in.

"Okay, so she's awake," Sean said, pointing back at the open door. "Should we, um, be concerned about..."

Mylee narrowed her eyes at him. "What, you don't hear it?" She reached out a finger into the air, jerking it back a second later as a patch of electric blue lit the space between them and Sedek. "Nanite wall. She's trapped."

"Right."

Sedek took another step toward them. "Hey, kids. How are things?"

"They let you wake up?" Sean asked.

She laughed, shaking her head. "No. They ran out of different sedatives to try. They don't know you're here, do they?"

"You lied to us," Sean said.

"I had not yet told you certain things that I honestly wasn't sure how to tell you, true."

"I'm a mutant who's working for the Ogres and you were grown in tubes by the freaky mad scientists that you thought were your parents. How hard is that to say, exactly?" Mylee asked.

"Let's start with you working for the Ogres," Sean said.

"Yeah, we know Arterdon is an Ogre, not a group of people," Mylee said.

"It's both," Sedek said. "And it's *Arterian*. And as for working for the Ogres—Sure. I wouldn't put it that way, but sure."

"How would you put it?" Mylee asked. At the same time, Sean asked, "Why do the Ogres want us?"

"The same reason these people do," Sedek said.

"That doesn't make sense!" Mylee said.

Sedek looked from one of them to the other and crossed her arms. "Look, the two of you, the technical term for what you are is *functional generation zero of the prototype experiment*. Figure out how your biology works, and you can figure out how Ogre biology works by comparison."

"Why would the Ogres want to do that?" Mylee asked. "And anyway, why can't they just study themselves?"

"Because they're not the prototype experiment. Their biology was modified. Studying you might be the only way for them to figure out how those modifications were made, and how to undo them."

"Undo what?" Sean asked.

"Well, specifically the genetic lock," Sedek said, "in their digestive systems. The modification that keeps them from eating anything that doesn't come from one source."

"Wait, are you..." Mylee shook her head, disbelief coursing through her voice. "You're saying the Ogres want to use us to figure out how to *eat* different things?"

"To break their dependence on a single food supply, yes," Sedek said. "Some of them do."

"The Ogres are monsters!" Mylee said.

"Humans are monsters." Sedek's face turned dark, and her voice turned with it, like black blood, shed on the desert floor. "Humans built the Ogres. Humans made them what they are. All of us left behind here on this planet are just trying to survive what Humans did. And not to force the issue, Mylee, but remember that you're not technically Human either."

"And you're a weapon," Sean said. "Humans made the Ogres, but the Ogres made you. You're still willing to support them after what they did to you?"

Sedek's eyes narrowed at him, and as the silence went on, Sean suspected that it was not the result he had hoped for. At last, with a glance at Mylee, Sedek asked, "What did these people tell you about the Forsaken?"

"That the Ogres bit you like a thousand times... something about a virus..."

"Ogres infect the people they bite with a virus that changes you eventually," Mylee said.

"Right, until you get black blood, and become as strong as they are..."

Sedek watched them with narrowed eyes, denying nothing. "Did these people tell you the Ogres intentionally create the Forsaken to be their weapons, or did they just strongly imply it?"

The twins glanced at each other. "What?" Mylee asked.

Sedek pressed a finger to the bridge of her nose, shaking her head. "I'm not surprised, really. They might even believe it. Because it's what they want to believe, because it's the only thing that justifies their own hatred for the Forsaken. But I want you to think about this next question very, very carefully.

"The Ogres are designed to be perfect killers. Not only are they perfect killers, they are genetically predisposed to enjoy being kill-

ers. They do not need to create some hybrid weapon to do their killing for them. Yes, they bite us, and eventually, that turns us into Forsaken. But consider this: I am stronger than most of them. I am faster than all of them. I am literally poison to them. So tell me, in what universe, exactly, would it make sense for them to keep something like me alive, let alone intentionally create me?"

"If they don't create you then... Are you saying it's an accident?" Sean asked.

"I told you, Sean," Sedek said. "The farm where I was born had no rules."

"But you work for the Ogres!" Mylee said.

"I work for Quem Arterian! The Ogres have wanted to kill me for more than half my life, and this mark on my wrist, his mark, is the only thing that keeps them from doing it!"

"He is an Ogre!" Sean said.

"And life is not that simple!" Sedek said.

"Um, Sean..." Mylee touched his wrist, then pointed. In the doorway stood Marta, the nurse, hands on her hips.

"You could have asked," Allidin said, without managing to hide his smile.

The twins looked at each other. "Oh, yeah..." Sean said. "Why didn't we think of that?"

Allidin laughed, seating himself on the edge of his desk. He had taken them to his office, a room built into the wall, high up, with a single, barred window looking down on the desert far below. It turned out the inside of the wall was huge, and filled with offices and halls and storage rooms. And that was just what Sean had seen on the way in.

"Because you're fourteen," Allidin said. "Look, kids, we're not trying to keep anything from you. The Forsaken is locked up because she's dangerous, but if you want to talk to her..."

"What are you planning to do with her?" Mylee asked.

"Honestly, we're not sure. We couldn't leave her in the desert because she would have followed you back here. We don't really know what to do with her now."

"You're not going to... try to get information out of her, or..."

Allidin looked at Mylee with a knowing smile, then said, "No. She's immune to every truth serum ever created, and her loyalty to the Ogres is too strong. And if you're worried about torture, first, we don't do that, but secondly, the Forsaken's ability to tolerate pain is... absurd. We will get no information out of her. It's just not going to happen."

"She said her people were coming for her," Sean said.

"When did she say that?" Mylee asked.

"Oh, right. She woke up for a split second after you left the room, that first time," Sean said.

"Why didn't you tell me this?"

"Because you haven't been talking, Mylee!" Sean said.

"I assure you, we are all perfectly safe inside the citadel, whatever happens," Allidin said. "Far more important is the question of what you two plan to do with yourselves now that you're here. To start with, we need to find a more permanent place for you to live. A few of our families have expressed an interest. Would you like that?"

Again, Sean and Mylee looked at each other. "You mean, live with a family?" Mylee asked.

"Of course. It's got to be better than a hospital, right? We'd give you a place of your own, but you're both so young still, we think it might be better with a family. And then there's school. Most children your age have already started their vocational programs. But you do have a lot to get caught up on, and that's just history, so we might have to work something out. I'll make a note to talk to Edward tomorrow. He runs our education program. Any thoughts on what you might want to do, job-wise, just in case it comes up? Or am I going too fast here? Your faces kind of make it seem like I'm going too fast. No? Yes? I'm going to assume yes. Why don't I just write up a list of your options, and you can look it over tonight, okay? That's all for now. You can go. But, young lady, no more stealing key cards. There will have to be consequences next time, so just, stop."

"Right," Mylee said.

The office opened into a hall, also inside the wall, and barely large enough to fit a grown person. Sean and Mylee headed for a point of light, one of the staircases leading down the wall and back

into the citadel, sliding awkwardly past two soldiers stationed at a window on their way.

Out in the sunlight again, Mylee said, "I almost threw up when he mentioned school."

"Yeah, being dissected would be so much better than that," Sean said

Mylee's laugh was cut short. Another sound descended over the wall, like the wind before a storm, and then what sounded like an alarm from inside the wall. The twins exchanged a look, then turned as one and bolted up the stairs.

Back on the wide top of the wall again, they saw a black cloud, clinging low to the ground and rushing toward them.

"Sandstorm?" Sean asked.

"No," Mylee said. "It's people."

People—that was one word, anyway. People, on all fours, running and throwing the sand into the air all around them as they ran. A great cloud of people, vibrating and melting together like shadows on the sand beneath them.

"Ogres," Sean said.

"Lots of Ogres," Mylee said.

Other people were on top of the wall with them now, soldiers from the citadel, with huge guns balanced on their shoulders. They knelt, pointing the guns into the desert. Windows opened below them, too, more weapons, pointed toward the sand storm as it approached.

"What are you two doing here?" General Allidin asked, stomping toward them with a soldier a step behind him.

"Well, this is about us, isn't it?" Sean said.

Allidin's eyes narrowed at them. Then he turned toward the desert and, in an almost hopeful tone, asked the soldier next to him, "Seetz?"

The soldier's eyes darted between the co-pad in his hands and the living shadow speeding toward them. "No, they're in a marching formation. And they're blurred. Seetz can't do that anymore. This is an army."

"Of course it is," General Allidin said.

"Can they climb the wall?" Mylee asked.

"No," Allidin said. "They can't, not this wall."

The giant shadow stopped moving. Sand swept out from

it, moving several hundred feet across the desert and breaking against the wall, like a wave against a cliff. As the dust settled, hundreds of bodies blended into each other like smoke from different flames in a fire, visible but invisible at the same time. The front two rows stayed on their knees, knuckles in the sand. The rows behind stood to their feet, towering, huge creatures, even from where the twins stood so high up on the top of the wall.

"They're out of range, right?" Allidin said to the soldier next to him.

"Yeah." The soldier banged a finger on his co-pad. "They are exactly one inch beyond the range of our longest-range weapons."

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Allidin said.

"How do they know, sir? There hasn't been an army in the desert in twenty years."

"Somehow they always know."

"So, what are they doing?" Mylee asked.

Allidin looked down at the top of her head, not sure if he should answer, or not sure what the answer would be. Whatever he was trying to figure out, he didn't have time.

Down below, a single shadow separated from the others, a blur, moving without feet or legs over the sand. Every gun swiveled its direction, soldiers taking aim at the only thing they could as this shadow crossed the one inch out of range barrier. "Hold," General Allidin said.

The blur became a shape, the shape became a man, solid, grey-skinned, and seven feet tall, with gorilla fangs inside a Human face. Sword in hand, his yellow eyes passed over the crowd on the wall, and then he drove the sword straight down into the sand. When he spoke, it was with hands raised.

"My name," he said in a clear, deep, powerful voice, "is Quem Arterian. Your devices will confirm it. The First Citadel has a commander. I believe his name is Allidin. I ask him to speak to me now."

Beside Allidin, the soldier nodded, a look of dismay barely covering the look of horror on his face. "It's really *him*, sir."

Allidin took a deep breath, then called out from the wall, "Yes, I'm here."

From hundreds of feet below, the Arterian's eyes went straight to Allidin. He looked at the Human general for a moment with a

piercing gaze that erased all sense of space and made it seem that they were standing face to face. At last, he spoke again.

"I am here for two reasons. First, you are holding my general, and I want her returned, immediately and without condition." His voice ground into those last words, shaking the foundations of the wall like the sand wave that had hit it earlier.

"Second..." His eyes moved, so fast that Sean did not have time to flinch before that yellow gaze landed straight on him and Mylee. The Arterian looked at them for several breathtaking seconds before his eyes moved back to Allidin, and he said, "We need to have a conversation about the twins."