

Conspiracy of Cyrus: The Invisible War

DJ Azul

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Chapter 1

Revealing light

Midnight must've struck, and the boy could tell by the stroke of ethereal light that emanated from the heavens above. Subtly, it rained upon the suburban street like the sparkle of a gem, as cryptic as it was graceful, drawing the shadows back beneath the trees and the decks beneath the porches, each identical as the next, like the sweeping of a curtain behind a window. The Revealing Light glowed almost faintly, receiving a call of welcome from the owls, who waited for its guidance before setting off for the hunt. The moon was large, full, and distant, seemingly set aglow by the scene below.

The signs along the corner post came to life; the first one reading: 5th Street, while the latter bearing the legend: By order of Conclave, The Temple of Cyrus has imposed a long-withstanding curfew to be upheld from 9:00 PM to 5:00 AM Azalea Standard Time.

The moon drifted, as if superimposed by its own shadow, and the next moment the Revealing Light receded as gracefully as it had arrived.

The boy was left in darkness once more. Something shifted and his head tore over his shoulder. All he could see was the faint outline of rustling leaves. He beckoned forward. He thought he had heard voices.

The exploration of the night had been forbidden to him by his peers and professors. Tales of stalkers, cretins, and demons of the night had wandered through his ears since his earliest of memories. He hardly believed the fairy tales, yet he didn't feel quite set on testing their reliability.

He crossed onto the sidewalk, stopping short of an emerald green two-story. The porch light was off and the curtains were drawn, as was every other house on the block. What was once a garden was now a treacherous front yard strewn with unshaven grass and deranged weeds. He had been here once before. Wondering whether he would receive as good of a welcome as the last, he walked before the front door and rang the bell.

Half a minute had passed before the porch light flickered on. The curtain to his left shuffled briefly. Next moment the door swung open, and he found himself under the gaze of a towering old man. His nose was crooked, the skin beneath his eyes was baggily laden with shadows—he did not look like he'd slept in days.

"Max!" he gasped. He poked his head outside, scanning the neighborhood with his crow black eyes, doing a double take on the boy. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I came to see you, Professor," the boy said calmly, unperturbed by the strength of the old man's scrutiny.

The Professor gaped his mouth and grew cross. "The orphanage had better be on fire or you had better have just escaped near death to come see me, boy, otherwise I'd beat you senseless—"

"You've never beaten a child in all the years I've known you, Professor, though you have threatened to do so on sev-

eral occasions, and most often when you are in the company of Herv.”

The old man grimaced. He held his chin high. “Well you’d have done right in taking a leaf out of Herv’s book. He would never have pulled such a foolish stunt like this. In light of the recent events, and all the publicity the Banshees have received, I’m surprised that even you would dare wander the streets at this hour.”

“I’m not as superstitious as Herv, and I would’ve thought, having been in your class all these years, that you wouldn’t have believed in such fairy tales either.”

The two stood framed before one another, the old man’s gaze grim and towering, the young boy’s calm and forbearing.

“You don’t look well, Professor. You haven’t been at school one day last week. People are starting to worry,” said the boy. “What’s wrong?”

The old man didn’t answer. He kept his demeanor rigid while the boy remained firm, yet relaxed. The moon flared outside, and the street was swept in a ray of Revealing Light once more.

“Er—perhaps we should discuss this inside before the neighborhood gets an eyeful,” the boy suggested. “I’m not sure if you knew this, but it’s illegal to be outside at this time,” he added, not daring to smile.

The Professor observed him carefully for a moment. With what appeared to be great reluctance, he nodded almost to himself and took a step backward. Max nodded swiftly and stepped in. The porch light extinguished and the door came to a shut. He walked forward, admiring the many bookshelves that came into view at first sight.

The television blared from the sitting room beyond the doorway ahead. It was a news broadcast that wasn’t live, having already been replayed at least twice over the evening.

A young man in white robes was addressing the viewer rather childlike, pointing to an illustrative screen behind him depicting the sun, who grinned smugly with a mouth full of teeth and lifted his eyebrows in a come hither. The screen changed to a depressed looking cloud, who watched the sun readjust his sunglasses with his tongue, frowning.

"We are already halfway through spring," said the man, bouncing with enthusiasm, "and still no sign of rain," he emphasized the word with a low note and a comical, sadly drawn out face. He smiled and winked as the screen changed to depict the sun and the cloud, now joined by what looked like the wind and the moon, holding hands and bowing their heads forward with their eyes closed.

"With that said, remember to pray tonight for showery skies to fill your backyard pool. Remember, your prayers can make a difference! Back to you Bob!"

The screen split, depicting the weatherman on the right, and a man behind a news desk on the left.

"Thank you, Brother Leslie," the news anchor nodded. "Before we wrap up our broadcast I'd like to remind you all that the midnight curfew is still in effect and is not to be broken under any circumstances. This is, again, for your own safety and convenience, as the Banshees that prowl the night are extremely dangerous and should be taken seriously."

"Yes, they should be taken very seriously!" said the weatherman, smiling nonetheless as if taking the news in the very opposite manner.

"Do not go looking for these demons. Do not leave your houses at night. If you encounter a Banshee, do not attempt to fight it!"

The weatherman jabbed into the air a few times before shaking his head as well as his forefinger comically.

"Simply get on your hands and knees and recite the

prayer of strength three times and your soul will be saved should, in the very unlikely event, but a possibility nonetheless, you be violently attacked and killed.”

The weatherman opened his mouth as if he were about to say something funny but stopped short, gaping open stupidly. He laughed weakly, shifting his eyes from left to right.

“Now here is an important address from the Temple of Cyrus.”

A squat man in white robes stood behind a podium on a closed stage, his jaw clenched with the air of authority. He adjusted his overly large bifocals, which just barely looked over the podium, and spoke in a most condescending voice.

“Good evening. I—as you undoubtedly already know—am Lord Raztar, and I am here speaking on behalf of the Temple’s concern towards social problems taking place in several areas this very instance on Cyrus.” He fixed the camera a firm look. “Tonight I would like to address the standards of intimacy set forth by the Temple for your own safety, convenience, and, of course, happiness.” He smiled unpleasantly. “It has come to my attention that, thanks largely to an already deteriorating generation, our youth has no respect for the morals concerning premarital relations,” he raised his fingers to form quotation marks. “As you know, it is illegal for unmarried couples to have such relations due to the sanctity of family values, which, we here at the Temple, believe is our duty and responsibility to protect above all else.”

He nodded sternly.

“Again, such activity is illegal and isn’t recommended by the Temple until after two people—of the opposite gender, might I add—have been married for at least a year. These conditions are to first, insure that family values are upheld and second, to protect our generation’s youth from

experiencing unwanted pregnancies which, I may need to remind you all, has plagued our nation for the past two decades.

“I shall also remind you that those who have born children out of wedlock will suffer the full consequences of the law, and we will have no choice but to place your children into administratively-managed group homes to insure that they do not follow in your faults by being raised with values unsuited to the Temple. I cannot stress strongly enough how traumatic it is for a child to know that he was born of sin—and ultimately rejected, might I add, since his or her parents brought him into this world knowing full well that he or she would be put into an orphanage. So although perpetrators will serve their time in reforming facilities, in the end it is the child who suffers the most, having to live in the shame of your mistake.

“Of course, the Temple does not punish the innocent like those unfit parents amongst us have. We here at our nation’s capital have taken the liberty to accommodate living conditions for those most unfortunate children of sin. However, the orphaned population is rising at an unprecedented rate, and the members of conclave have unanimously agreed that more drastic measures must be taken in order to ensure the preservation of a perfect and peaceable society. So, effective immediately, by order of the mandate of the Temple of Cyrus with the approval of Conclave, I am hereby compelled to inform you that from this point on those caught engaging in premarital relations will be drafted to serve another tour of duty in the Excavades. Yes, even if you have already fulfilled your first draft, you will be required to satisfy another tour should you violate the law of Cyrus.”

He cleared his throat and adjusted the little brown hair he had left, which was sleeked in a greasy comb over, and

smiled. "That is all for now. Thank you for tuning in to this week's address from the Temple of Cyrus. Until next time, my dears."

The screen returned to the anchor behind the news desk. "We now conclude this broadcast to bring you the prayer of the day..."

* * *

The Professor reached for the remote and shut the television off, wondering what had brought him downstairs to waste his time on such nonsense in the first place. Then he remembered the boy. He wheeled around to see where he'd gone off to.

Max was examining some of the many books that plagued the walls of the house. He stopped and withdrew one from its shelf, flipping through the pages quickly, as if fanning himself. The old man's face tightened. He took the book from the boy before shoeing him aside and replacing it.

"Sit!" he said, ushering him onto the sofa. He thrust the remote into the boy's hands. "There, now go watch some TV while I take care of a few things."

The boy looked up at him in mild surprise. "And what things would you be doing at this hour?"

"Never you mind! I'll be done in a minute."

He strode from the sitting room and made for the stairs facing the front door.

"Stupid child, no consideration for an old man's sleep!" he muttered to himself. But in fact, the old man hadn't been sleeping. Instead, he was up all night, just like every other night that week doing his research. He looked a lot

skinnier than he did the week before, and he sported shadows under his crow black eyes. His lack of sleep and proper nutrition was due to the fact that he paid more attention to solving a mystery than to his own well being.

But none of that mattered anymore. All that mattered was the truth, for without it he was nothing more than a common lunatic—old, paranoid, and confused—his addled brain a prisoner to the madness that had come from staring into the cryptic night sky. He was so close now that nothing could delay him any further—not the ironically convenient Temple decrees made over the past week that had increased the punishment to those who were caught doing what he was doing, not his teaching post at the community school, not even the boy downstairs who had come looking for him in the middle of the night out of good faith.

He crossed into his bedroom on the second floor, where a computer lay open; his research files were scattered in tabs across the bottom of the screen. On top of a long table propped against the window sat three tanks, which each looked like modified aquariums without the water. A long tube rested alongside them lengthwise, as if it were a ruler to measure their combined size. Several wires ran out of its base, connecting to larger devices stored below the table, some of which were the size of vacuum cleaners.

He reached a hand under the table and flipped a switch. The tube began to glow a faint white, like a fluorescent light too weak to fill a room. The moon flared outside, illuminated the cross lines etched in his face. Something in his finger sparkled cleverly in reaction before dying with the passing of the light.

He removed the golden ring, upon which a bluish jewel in the shape of a perfect circle was embedded, locked into place by a screw-like mechanism on the underside of the ring so minute that the wearer couldn't feel it. He worked

to unlock it with a fine instrument. A minute later the jewel came free, landing into his palm. It was smaller than his fingernail. He took it carefully and brought it before a hollow chamber of the tube, where it fit perfectly into place.

Immediately the light came together in a single, long, concentrated beam which ran from one end of the tube to the other. The man flipped a second switch and the instruments beneath the table began to hum.

He watched the clock hungrily. It was already past midnight. The next flare of Revealing Light emitted and before he knew it, the tube had flashed brilliantly. Red, green, blue, brown, yellow, orange, gold, and silver, it was filled with an entire spectrum. But it wasn't the color display which concerned the man, but rather the activity inside of the tanks.

The light died outside. He switched his instruments off and took a careful look, finding himself unsatisfied by the first two tanks. His nose hovered over the third, eyes narrowed.

"My God..."

He emptied the hollow within the tube quickly and replaced the jewel upon the ring, then reached for the phone and dialed a seven digit number. With the receiver held to his ear, he squinted outside the window. The pitch black air was filled once again with Revealing Light.

Two years ago this would've been unusual behavior on Cyrus. However, now was a different time. The moon was known to flare randomly for an hour past midnight. Although Professor Argus had produced a groundbreaking caliber of research, the revealing light enigma remained a question mark. Did the moon really have unexpected mood swings like the Temple preached?

"Nonsense..." he croaked.

“It’s kind of late Argus. What do you need this time?” a middle aged man’s voice muttered on the other end of the receiver. It was calm and warmly tuned.

“Wh—how did you know it was me?”

“Because you’re the only one who’s ever called me at this time. Now what’s the matter? You sound worried.”

“Rauley, I need to see you immediately. I’ve discovered something very important,” the old man said as he continued to gaze out the window.

“Now? But it’s past midnight! Why can’t you just tell me over the phone?”

“Because I think someone might be listening to us. It’s too dangerous to discuss over the—“

“Argus, listen to yourself, that’s the paranoia speaking. Look, you’ve been under a lot of stress lately. With all the late nights that you’ve put into your presentation, I’m surprised it took you three months to finally crack.”

“I wasn’t working on my presentation and I most certainly haven’t cracked!” the old man snapped. “I told you already, the Temple decommissioned me from my research post.”

“Decommissioned? But your presentation—the one you’ve been telling me about for ages—“

“It’s a long story—some other time maybe! Listen, I’ve been continuing my research at home for the past month now, and I’ve discovered something really big—groundbreaking if you will!”

“You found another wart under your arm pit? Look Argus, I’ve already seen the first three, not to mention the functional one. You already let the good nurse check it out and she said it wasn’t damaging to your health. So there’s really no need for me to—“

“This is no time for jokes Rauley, this is important! I need your help. I found something using an Alumnic

Vacuum that could change the way we see things on Cyrus.”

“An Alumnric Vacuum? Good lord man, you know better than that, they’re supposed to be illegal. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that you could create an environment hazardous to your health. Besides, where did you get one?”

“I built it myself, from the spare parts I was able to smuggle out of the Temple during my research windows—well never mind that now! I need you to—“

“But the laser? What did you use as a filter? Nothing short of a diamond could work, and diamonds have been a rare commodity after they had been banned. Dear me, I daresay that the temple has been unable to confiscate only a very small number of them, making one impossible to find, let alone a smoothly cut one to work with the light concentrations required for the device to operate. It was quite strange of them to have banned it only last week as well. Do you think something happ—“

“That’s not important now!” the old man said quickly, sweating down his brow. “I need you to see what I found out about the passing of Revealing Light.”

“Oh another space theory? To be quite honest, Argus, I don’t think I have the energy to sit through another one of these. Dear me, I fell asleep during the last. You know, when you tried to convince me that the little moon above Azalea was man-made—“

“Will you please stop making jokes out of this? I’m being serious here!”

“Alright,” the younger man sighed, though he chuckled under his breath. “I apologize. You have my fully, cooperate, and undivided attention now.”

“Well like I was saying, the Revealing Light, it—it’s like, well, its like,” he stammered. “Oh it’s too difficult to explain over the phone! But I assure you it is a very

sensitive manner”— at this he lowered his voice, as if not wanting to be heard from downstairs —“There are people, Rauley, people who say that there is a cover up stemming from the Temple and—and, well I believe them!

There was a pause on the other end.

“What are you trying to say Argus?”

“It’s too much to discuss over the phone. It has to do with several things—some of which include the time I spent at the Temple. And—and other things—things I just realized, which have been under my nose the entire time.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the control the Temple has over us—over nearly every aspect of our lives. These people, the ones I mentioned, they’ve been plotting several things now, and they’ve asked for my help, which I agreed to—“

“Stop,” Rauley said simply, and, for the first time that night, he sounded serious. “We shouldn’t be talking about this. You know the law. If they knew...if they found out...somehow...its capital treason, my friend.”

“Well I know that, I—hang on! You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. And I know of the people you are referring to as well. And regardless of how farfetched some of the things the Temple have been preaching to us, I find it hard to believe that some great conspiracy has been under our noses this entire time. Understand this: these people who you speak of are dangerous, as is the Temple. Nothing good can come of your involvement with them. They are fools to defy the Temple and their revelations are slanted at best.”

“I know how you feel. I felt exactly the same way. It seemed like a ridiculous concept to me as well. But now, after what I’ve just seen, I realize that I was wrong. Please I must see you immediately.”

Rauley paused, his soft breathing being carried through

the receiver. "I don't know, Argus, this doesn't sound good."

The old man hung his hand against the refrigerator, his eyebrows furrowed. "I need you to trust me. It's important and I would never ask of it if it were anything otherwise."

Again, Rauley hesitated.

"John?"

Either out of trust, or out of the old man addressing him by his first name for the first time in two years, the man on the other end responded, "Alright, if it's that important I'll head over to your house first thing in the morning."

"Can't you come over now?"

"I'm afraid not. My car isn't working," Rauley responded. "There's no way I can make it over there."

"Can't you just walk over here? You could make it here within the next hour."

"W-walk? But it's nighttime. . . I don't know Argus, I'm not in the shape I used to be. . . and the Banshees—"

The old man exhaled impatiently. "If a child could make it here from the orphanage at this hour I'm sure you can too!"

"What do you mean?"

"Max came to check up on me. He's downstairs watching TV, unmolested by the 'Banshees,'" Argus said coyly. He took another look outside the window. The street had turned pitch black once again. "You're a much older man than that boy and very young compared to me, I'm quite certain you're in good enough condition to take a brisk walk over here. Now will you come?"

"Fine, I'll be there within the hour, if I can."

"And er—will you bring Max home with you?"

"You're asking a lot of me."

"Will you do it?"

“Of course I will. The boy lives with me, what else would you have expected?”

“Thank you, Rauley. See you soon.”

“That is to say, if the Banshees don’t violently murder me on the way over.”

The old man chuckled weakly. “Surely you don’t believe in that nonsense?”

“Of course I do,” said Rauley, though he sounded sarcastic.

If there was a person to count on around Cyrus, it was Professor Rauley. Ever since he had met the bright scholar two years ago at the school where he taught, he had finally grasped the rewards of teaching.

“If I were you Rauley, I’d put that brilliant mind to good use in the Excavades as an engineer, or a researcher for the Temple, instead of wasting away at this school. There are millions who would kill to have your education. No good reward will come of this,” Argus had said the week he was acquainted with the eager teacher. The rookie’s optimism and energy created the strangest presence he had ever encountered in a teacher.

“My boy,” Rauley chuckled over his coffee break. “I’ve always wanted to teach children. The way I see it: you never know when you might produce a child who is absolutely brilliant. To me, that’s all the reward I need on Cyrus.”

From that point on the old man had been amazed with his colleague. Never before had he met such a humble scholar who had a choice and sought out teaching over research or engineering. If Argus had gotten that choice, teaching would be the last profession on his mind.

However, it was the Temple who chose for him—at least in his mind. They were the ones who had denied his application to become a scholar a long time ago when a much

younger Argus existed. Teachers were in higher demand than scientists in the world so heavily run by religion.

His life had been dull and meaningless until that fateful day he met the young scholar. Rauley's spirit and modesty gave a much needed morale boost to the old man. In fact, it was Rauley who had inspired him to appeal to the Temple for a part time research post. And despite his lack of qualifications needed to pursue research, he was granted a time slot within the Temple of Cyrus, the temple of all temples, residing within the capital city of the world.

He had been given full cooperation from the people who he had been intimidated by his whole life. He got to interact with scholars, and hold his own in a conversation as if he were one of them. And not only had the old man been blessed with a research window, he had also discovered that the higher ups had taken an interest into his studies as well. Never before had he been happier in his life, which had seen so many years.

But then things changed. What he originally thought was supposed to be small advances in biology, more so to fulfill his own personal satisfaction in research than to increase the education of others, would turn sinister. He was now demanded deadlines, and had been watched by an "assistant" like a parent overlooking a child at play. At first he went along with it, meeting their needs, no matter how confusing or outrageous they seemed. Then, before he knew it, he was given an entire staff and even shorter deadlines to produce results. Suddenly he was reassigned to take his experiments in another direction, making him grow all the more stressed and suspicious.

Why had they taken such an interest in him? What did he, a biologist with far less education than the average Temple scholar, have to do with researching mystery waves, which they had refused to confide upon him, referring to

them only as paranormal substances. He wasn't told what it was he was dealing with, only that he was to do it. It wasn't long before his frustration had driven him to refuse to continue with his research until after he was given an explanation into what he was doing. Expecting that he was too valuable to lose, it came as quite a shock to him when the Temple had decommissioned him. He had always told himself that it was a blessing to have been released, giving him a much needed rest from the stress of the labs. However, deep down, he regretted it.

His curiosity into exactly what it was he discovered that had been of great importance to the Temple—the religion, the government, and the authority on Cyrus—leading him to continue his research at home. It wasn't long until they had contacted him.

This mystery group, who had somehow known of his research window and of his dismissal, had claimed that Cyrus was in a state of deceit, and that they could give him the answers which the Temple wouldn't. Of course he had thought them crazy, refusing to respond to their emails arranging for a meeting. Then he had no choice, as they had done so anyways.

He had to admit some of their “revelations” were somewhat interesting. But none were as interesting as the conspiracy plot which, like it or not, concerned him in some unexplainable way.

“You are in danger,” one of them had said. “They’re watching you.”

“I find that hard to believe seeing as how I’m talking to you face-to-face,” he replied dully.

“I’m an exception, I have a cover. But you are in danger. Whatever it is that you were working on needs to stop. It’s for your own safety.”

“Uh-huh. . . And I suppose you’re just trying to con me

into continuing my work with reverse psychology, eh? Well I'm not falling for that one!"

"What? No! You don't understand! I'm not trying to con you into anything—I don't care about your work—I'm honestly trying to help you—"

"Okay, smokey," he added uninterestingly before walking away.

Weeks passed since the incident, weeks in which he noticed the strangest of things, which, like any true scientist, he had merely shrugged off as logically coincidental. When he went to make a withdrawal from the bank, he was certain that a tall man in a tweed suit had been watching him. After the teller had given him his creds he made eye contact with the man, who had begun to fill a bank statement at random.

Then the following weekend he was sure he had spotted the same man standing in line behind him at the checkout counter. His stalker only had a carton of eggs in his hands, yet he opted to wait in the regular line even though nobody was at the Under Fifteen Items lane.

The next day he had noticed a white unmarked van stationed across the street from where he lived. They left before nightfall, but returned the following day. When he finally worked up the nerve to approach them, they sped off.

And then on his drive home from the school where he taught at a week later, the white van had been parked in his neighborhood yet again, this time from the farthest distance possible without losing sight of his house. It was known that the Temple's staff had all used white unmarked vans, and that due to their massive employment status, they weren't uncommon to spot in the city. However, he had never seen one in his neighborhood before now.

Convinced that he was indeed being watched, he agreed

to another meeting with the group, finally replying to their emails.

“Now do you believe me?”

“No, not entirely. But I can’t deny that I’m being watched.” He hesitated a moment, struggling with himself internally. “What exactly is it that you’d like me to do?”

“I’d like to know what it is that you were experimenting with at the Temple.”

“You don’t know?”

“Would I want to know if I already knew?”

“But you knew that I had had a research window there for six months and that I had been decommissioned after refusing to cooperate. If you knew that, how could you not know the details of my involvement?”

“Because even you don’t know the details of your involvement.”

The Professor didn’t have to answer that one. His expression gave him away. And the man was right: he didn’t know what it was that he was doing, not entirely. His face hardened instantly.

“But you just asked me what it is I was doing at the Temple, and yet you just stated that I didn’t know myself. Forgive me for having old man logic, but if you knew I didn’t know, then why would you ask me what I knew?”

“I thought you were cleverer than that,” said the man disappointedly. “I never asked you what you knew, I simply said I wanted to know what you were experimenting with at the Temple. I know you don’t know yourself, I gathered that much from the look you had on your face when I first told you that the Temple wasn’t being honest with you.”

The Professor paused to make sure he understood this all. A moment later, he spoke, “So you want me to continue my research, and find out what it is that I was about to

achieve?"

"Clearly."

"Even though you told me before that you didn't care about my work and how you were only concerned for my own safety?"

"I lied."

"Then, you are using me, just like them," he said slowly. "You're no different from the Temple." And he made to leave.

"Wait."

Argus stopped, his mind not clearly made up.

The latter rose and stepped ahead of him. He dropped the cigarette he was smoking and smeared it, exhaling the last of the smoke. And he told him everything he knew, or so he said. But it didn't matter either way, for what the Professor had heard, no matter how bold or grand it seemed, made sense, as if the pieces of a puzzle were falling into place, connecting the fragments he knew from one side to the other.

He had continued with his research from that point on, making the best that he could with the tools available to him. Regardless of what he had handy from his days at the Temple, it was still short in comparison to the equipment needed to simulate his experiments. The Alumnric Vacuum itself seemed impossible to build without proper materials, let alone a pipe sized version compared to the ones used at the Temple, which took up entire rooms' worth of space.

He found help from this mystery man, of course, who had made sure that certain equipment found their way to his doorstep. It took the Professor the better part of four months to finally achieve what he had witnessed tonight.

He regained his senses, shaking his head wearily, and made his way downstairs. The television was on again, highlighting a baseball game. It too was a rerun of an

earlier broadcast, as was made evident by the day-lit sky. Max looked around as he stepped off of the final landing.

“Professor Rauley is coming over to take you home.”

“Oh? Have the Banshees been cast back into hell? I don’t know, Professor, I’m afraid I may get, er—violently attacked on my way out. Perhaps I should crash on your couch until morning.”

“Oh very funny, haha,” said the old man snidely. “Well as you can see, I am alive and well, so you can tell your little friends with perfect honesty that I am, in fact, alive and well.” He stared at the boy, who stared back blankly, calculatingly. Something in his gaze made him choke on his own saliva.

“Are you okay?”

“Wha—me?” choked Argus. He cleared his throat roughly. “I’m fine. Er—perhaps I should get myself a drink of water. Would you like one as well?”

“Alright, Professor.”

The old man nodded and disappeared through the darkened kitchen. He returned a moment later with two glasses, handing one to the boy.

“Cheers.”

Something cracked. The Professor lowered the glass from his mouth, his eyes darting from Max to the front door. The boy, unalarmed, made to get up. The old man held a hand out.

“Isn’t that Professor Rauley?”

“He wouldn’t have gotten here yet. He said he was going to walk.”

“Walk?”

Argus rested his drink upon the sitting table, snapped his fingers and beckoned the boy. “Quick, get over here.”

“Where—?”

He pushed the boy into the nearest closet and shut the door. "Don't move."

He shut the television off, leaving him in almost complete darkness, and made for the front entryway. As his vision adjusted, he could tell that the curtains were swinging. He closed in on the nearest window and peeled the drapes back a fraction. It wasn't any easier to see outside than it was in. He held his breath.

Come on!

On cue, the street began to glow faintly, just enough to see past the garden and the curb. There was no one in sight. Was he hearing things?

Whether it was his state of apprehension or his lack of a coat, it felt oddly chillier than it did a minute ago. He brushed his arms, causing the curtain to fall back into place. He made for the sitting room but stopped short and turned. The door seduced his thoughts.

His eyes shifted from left to right as he rested his hand upon the knob, twisted, and pulled. The breeze swept his perspiration instantly, hardening the lines across his forehead. With a slide of his hand the porch light came to life.

There was no one in sight.

He poked his head out to get a better glimpse.

There was no one in sight.

He made to close the door, and as he did so the cracking noise that had jolted his senses earlier resonated once more. The porch light exploded like a firecracker, showering the front step with daggers. Horrorstruck, he slammed the door shut and made for the stairs. He reached the top and scurried into the bedroom. The computer was still on, casting a mild source of light from its screen. He ran his fingers over the keyboard furiously.

The front door opened rather forcefully, its dreaded

clang carried from downstairs.

The old man began closing text tabs. He brought up his email. His username and password were confirmed in a little over a second. Something was rising the steps.

The keys snapped rapidly upon his fingers' touch. He began compiling as many files as he could gather. The footsteps grew nearer and nearer.

Louder...

They reached the top landing and became silent. He froze, his finger hovering over the "H" key. As quietly as he could've helped, he opened his desk drawer and removed two pieces, one of which was a pistol. He slid the ammunition clip into its hollow chamber, cocked it back and pointed it at the closed door ahead.

He held his breath. His eyes narrowed like they had never done. His heart rattled as if attempting to disconnect from his ribcage, outdone only by the trembling of his hands. He bit his lip and waited.

Louder...

He pulled the trigger and a shot rang out into the night. For all he knew the gun could've been loaded with blanks; it was too dark to tell if the door had been hit. He fired again, and again, and waited for the unmistakable sound of a falling body.

It never came. He felt his hand lower just a fraction.

The door burst open. Something tall, dark, and hungry stood before him. The shadow observed him through a pair of electric blue eyes, dull and lifeless like a doll, which pierced the air around like identical lighthouses, the only source of illumination aside from the computer.

Another shot fired, followed by a charge and the sound of metal smashing glass. The next moment the Professor was pinned to the wall, a hand choking him by the neck. The monitor had extinguished like the porch light. The

old man watched the creature wide-eyed, leveled a head below the artificial electric blues. Something encompassed his wrist and squeezed. The gun slipped to the hardwood.

!Click!

The creature's other hand tightened, and the gurgling noise that the old man had been making ceased. Shadows began seeping around his vision, like loose ink through a page. They grew larger, and larger, until the only things he could see were those electric blue eyes. Finally his vision failed and he was enshrouded by darkness forever.

* * *

Max could do nothing but wait in baited breath as the footsteps shuffled through the house. They were mere feet from him. He prayed they wouldn't notice the two glasses on the sitting table.

A gunshot roared from the floor above. He held his breath. Two more echoed, followed by a pause, and then a final shot. Whatever lurked on the other side of the closet door picked up speed, drifting away from the sitting room and up the stairs.

Quickly, the boy pushed open the door and crept into the kitchen, his ears confirming that the steps had reached the second floor. He dodged the stove but knocked over the trash bin in his haste. It clattered to the floor noisily.

Louder...

He sprang the backdoor open and raced through the backyard. There was hardly any grass, yet the sprinklers were on full blaze, drenching him from head to foot. He jumped over the low fence and fell over on the other side.

He recovered, spotting a pair of electric blue eyes like he had never seen staring from out of the house. A jet of blue light shot out of the creature's hand and set the fence on fire. He shielded his face, feeling his arm singe acidly, before wheeling around and sprinting into the night as streaks of blue light flew past him.

* * *

On the other side of the capital city Azalea, a man paced back and forth. He sank into his chair in a throne-like fashion and folded his hands together. The room was large and dark, with a few marble steps leading down to a glass wall which overlooked the night sky. The moon flared briefly, cutting the shadow cloak up to the man's neckline, unveiling everything except his face. He was wearing dark robes with a plush collar and sported a jewel emblazoned ring on his left hand which bore the letter "M." Something rang, catching his attention. Automatically, he raised a finger and pressed one of the numerous buttons on his desk.

"My lord," piped a grainy voice on the other end of the receiver. "Professor Argus has been killed."

The man remained motionless in his chair. "I see."

"There was another with him, a boy. He escaped before the Banshees could reach him."

The man straightened up in his chair. "Find him. Bring him into custody. And if you can't do that, kill him."

"As you wish." The receiver clicked dead.

The man sat still for several moments, contemplating the decision he had been forced to make. He had not originally intended to kill Argus, for the old man was brilliant

beyond measure and had shown quite a bit of promise in the scientific community. Had his curiosity not uncovered a dark shadow, his death wouldn't have been necessary. Nevertheless, he knew it had had to be done.

He got up and crossed over the room, going down the brief set of steps before making his way to the window view and observing the night sky. As the Revealing Light faded away, his intuition gave him an uncertain feeling about the following day.

* * *

Max was only a block away, maybe two. He had been running full sprint for a few miles, refusing to stop, neither for the stitch at his side, nor the burn at his forearm. Any moment now, just around the corner, it would come into view: the boarding house, the home he had grown up in, where his surrogate family had lived.

He crossed the bend and came to a halt in the middle of the intersection. He dropped his hands to his knees and panted, pouring sweat down his front. The house stood in the distance, its windows glittering upon the touch of Revealing Light, calling to him from out of the darkness like a search beacon. He exhaled sharply and made forward again when it happened.

A pair of headlights cut ahead of him as a white van pelted around the corner. He was forced to stop, lest he break his neck running into the vehicle. Its cargo door slid open, and before he could move a jet of blue light hit him square in the chest, taking the last of his breath. He stumbled forward before sprawling onto the concrete. Some-

one stepped out and lifted his body, hoisting it into the cargo hold. The door slid shut and the van took off as the light receded and the neighborhood was enshrouded into still darkness once more.

Chapter 2

Projects and Prunies

Onward and onward, she raced through the golden corridor. The deed felt tedious to the point of annoyance, reminding the girl of the countless times she had rounded the bases to home plate. But this time was different. She wasn't running towards the end of a diamond, circle or square, but along a line without a limit, constructed by none other than her curiosity and adolescent instinct.

The corridor was cave-dwelling dark—and yet it was brilliantly pierced by a light in the distance—a light which neither grew nor brightened, no matter how close she came or how far she had left.

Almost...just a little further...

Her feet echoed and resonated, silencing the moment her thoughts became wary of them. The light in the distance teased her like a diamond out of reach. It was beautiful and distinct—a flower atop a thorned stem. Its radiance captivated her, and its mystery excited her from the ankles

up—she had to see what lay beyond it.

But, as always, the negative region of her intuition spoke as if through a voice outside her own—one which was separate, yet connected. How long should she run? Was there really a point to this? What would Herv say?

Her pale skin reddened as she envisioned the smirk on his face. Of course, he would roar with laughter upon hearing that she had wasted her time and effort on such a futile chase.

Just another one of Jola's pointless adventures. . .

Her complexion flushed deeper as the intensity behind her green eyes began to boil, fueling the momentum at her heels to go only faster. They carried her at the speed of sound now. Faster, and faster, and faster than that, until the corridor lit up like the relief of an eclipse and buried her in the light she had longed for so many nights.

On instinct she threw up her arms to shield her face. She couldn't see, though she could feel the light—feel its pressing rays so vividly that it might as well have been a person's touch. It was a warmth that she had never felt—one that, despite the cost of her vision and the subtle discomfort that accompanied it, thrilled the wavering within her bones and the wonder at her fingertips so well that when the feeling passed the girl was left breathless, pleading for the light's return only to find herself savoring its memory.

She opened her eyes. A grown woman stood before her, far enough that the girl could not touch her, yet close enough for her to receive the flowery scent of her hair. She was smiling curiously. Her skin was as pale as the girl's, and her eyes matched as well. The girl opened her mouth to speak, but before she knew it the room began to spin. Faster, and faster, and faster than that, until. . .

"Max. . . Max. . . ?" called a weak voice.

Something prodded the sleeping girl, and the next mo-

ment a hand pulled back the sheets. Someone exhaled in urgent disappointment.

“What...Max...Who...?” Jola muttered, confused.

“Never mind,” said the voice hastily. Jola heard the door shut.

She began to stir, kicking the sheets aside. She straightened up, rubbing her face upon the first sting of the sun. Its radiance glimmered through the drawn curtains, catching the digital clock on the nightstand. 7:24 AM confirmed that she was going to be late for school as usual. She took a deep yawn, crossed over to her closet and began to change absentmindedly, trying to remember the contents of her dream.

It was not the first time she had dreamt about the mother she never knew. Her heritage was just as much of a mystery to her as the next child, for she had grown up in an orphanage—or boarding house as some had called it—from as far as she could remember.

Jola was a fourteen year old girl with fair skin and a flushed face. She had shoulder length dark brown hair which she would usually tuck behind a set of ears that weren't pierced. Her eyes, never dull and always expressive, were embellished with an arbitrary shade of green. She was athletic to a tall degree, despite her small frame and slender figure which was often misinterpreted to be frail—a delicate stem supporting a proud chin.

She shuffled through her simple closet, reaching for a collared white shirt. Her hands drifted meticulously over a dark skirt before resting on a set of khaki slacks on second thought—she didn't feel very set on showing off the freshly scabbed wound that graced her leg. It singed acidly at the thought.

After putting on her school clothes, she made to the bathroom and brushed her teeth. She would not have time

to shower today. She rinsed her mouth out quickly and tidied her hair in the mirror's reflection. Something was missing.

She turned on her heel and beckoned to her nightstand, searching for her most prized of possessions: a ring comprised of a single, circular jewel. It was the only thing she had inherited from her anonymous mother. After a half-minute of poking around, she remembered that she had lent it to one of her teachers a few weeks earlier. The reasons for why he had wanted it were still unclear.

Giving up on her search she strolled out the door and into the hall. It was long and wide, with five doors on the left and five on the right. Her room was at the end, on the opposite side of the 12th room. That was where the orphanage's supervisor, Professor Rauley, had lived—or at least where he claimed to have lived, for it was no secret that the man had spent half of his nights elsewhere. Although she was a very curious girl at times, this mystery didn't bother Jola very much, for she had trusted the man who was almost a father to her. She had always, along with the other children in the boarding house, assumed that he had spent his time in the company of another woman, which she could understand had to be kept secret, naturally, since the law had forbidden premarital relations, and she could not think of another thing the man would've been sneaking off into the middle of the night to perform.

Jola made for the stairs, and as she did so the door to her left shot open. A whirl of dark hair brushed past her, storming into the next room before slamming it shut. As Jola descended, she heard the door pop open again followed by another enter and slam.

She stepped off of the final landing and ended up in a sunshine filled kitchen. A boy her age was seated at the counter, eating something out of a bowl. He was approxi-

mately the same height as Jola, with blue eyes and fluffy, light brown hair. He had plump features—a slightly chubby build supporting a round face.

“Morning, Herv. You spilled milk on your shirt again,” she said, suppressing the urge to giggle. She got a bowl and joined him at the counter, preparing a cereal meal.

“Oh. . . right, I knew that!” Herv said quickly, wiping his shirt with a paper towel. He had a soft, innocent voice. He raised the spoon to his lips again, watching the television in the adjacent sitting room.

“Well don’t eat like that,” Jola said distastefully, furring her brow at the boy. “Keep your chin up straight, don’t slouch—and how many times do I have to tell you to get your elbows off of the counter?”

“Wha—ouch—okay!” he stammered as she swatted his shoulder pester-like with the back of her fingers. He withdrew his elbows, looking annoyed. “Thanks, mom.”

She ignored the comment and turned her attention to the television across the room. A dirt course was displayed upon which several masked men on motorbikes were racing through the turns, jumping ramps and speed bumps. The three in the lead were almost neck and neck with each other. Then after a sharp turn in the course, the rider in the center broke the ranks and crossed the finish line.

Raising a hand into the air, he rode a victory lap around the outer track, much to the cheers from the crowd. He stopped at the climax of one of the ramps, dismounted, and removed his masked helmet. A rush of long, light blonde hair fell past the man’s shoulders—only it wasn’t a man.

The rider’s timing appeared at the bottom of the screen, under the title Sarah Rivenwilo.

“Rivenwilo. . . Rivenwilo. . .” Jola repeated to herself. “Where do I know that name?”

“I might’ve mentioned it in my sleep,” Herv muttered,

unable to lift his gaze from the rider. “Hard to imagine she’s only sixteen. Not a bad looker either, especially on the eyes.”

“I could do that. If only I was of age...” said Jola, as if disappointed with herself. “Why would they let her race competitively if she’s only sixteen?”

“Dunno, don’t care really. Might be her looks, if you ask me. Not that I mind, of course. A pretty girl like that pro’lly gets more guys to watch her races than half of the girls in baseball combined. And with biceps like Arianna Jones, who could blame them?”

Jola shot him a dirty look and changed the channel—causing Herv to scowl—first landing upon a program on cooking, then one which concerned something about reading, before finally catching the news, in which an eccentric weatherman began addressing the audience in front of an animated screen depicting nature. She raised the volume so that it could be heard from across the room.

“...still no sign of showers over Azalea. Are you sure you’re letting your prayers be heard? Remember you can always call the prayer hotline by dialing 1-400-4prayer, if you have any questions concerning communication with the man upstairs! Again that number is one-four-hundred, four-p-r-a-y-e-r! Good luck, and don’t forget to keep ’em coming!” He smiled toothily with a wink. “That’s all for now, back to you Brother Bob!”

The screen changed to the news anchor seated behind a desk. He shuffled his papers, looking somber. “We now bring you the latest updates on the Banshees.

“Three Azalea children from the Projects were confirmed as casualties this morning, two of which were reported missing over a week ago. The third was found dead last night in an undisclosed street, after, evidently, wandering the night past curfew. Their identities have not been disclosed, and

will remain anonymous until further notice.

“As always, we would like to remind you all that the streets at night are not to be navigated past Nine PM for any reason. The Temple has taken appropriate measures in dealing with these demons of the night, including an armed patrol by the Marines. But as we cannot cover every corner of the planet, it is advised that you remain home well before nightfall in order to prevent suffering a most terrible fate. We will keep you updated on further events concerning the reign of terror imposed by the Banshees as always on First Priority News.”

He cleared his throat. “We now bring you our morning service of the day, live from the Temple of Cyrus. . .”

Jola shut the television off and swung up her backpack, which had been lying on the couch as usual. Herv shouldered his bag as well and followed her out the door, wiping his mouth.

They walked through their backyard, letting themselves out of a tall wooden fence which led into the neighborhood. There were large houses on either side of the street. It was hard to say that they came in variety, for almost every house looked the same as the next, save a few details like a larger deck or a chimney. The atmosphere around each home was darker than it had been the previous week. What had once been a community of green grass, of gardens, of old people sitting on the porch swing and children biking circles in the driveway, was now a confine of empty streets and unkept, weed infested lawns; houses with either boarded up or heavily curtained windows.

Ever since the Banshees had taken presence recently, children went missing and homeowners became isolated, setting off to perform their errands in the safety of the daylight and returning well before an hour to curfew. The neighborhood was never the same.

Jola never believed in the Banshees. After hearing of their attacks for the first time she had spent night after night gazing out her window during the period in which Revealing Light had taken effect, and not once had she seen anything out of the ordinary. As far as she was concerned the children who had gone missing had suffered something so terrible that the Temple had to use the Banshees simply as an excuse to cover up the reality as well as keep children confined to their houses at night. However, just because she showed little faith in the demons didn't mean that nobody else did. She had no other choice than to grow accustomed to the superstitions of the world, which tried its best to move as one.

The suburbs were her world entire. She lived, played, and got educated within the borders of the community, and she knew no life outside of it.

Of course, she had heard of the big cities, and the landscape outside of them, as well as the lives that adults lived when they weren't confined to teaching or raising children, either their own or the orphaned placed into their care.

She had heard of the Excavades: a network of facilities that worked the productive arm of Cyrus which included mines and factories for mass producing food and goods, run by every citizen at one point in their lives, for they were drafted into a two year service the after they had come of age and left primary school.

She also had a decent idea of what lay in store for her after her tour in the Excavades. As a girl she had been setback professionally: women weren't allowed to become scholars, except for a very small number who had skipped the system every now and then, leaving their means of post-primary education to be very limited, usually nursing or teaching. And as an orphan she had been setback socially, for the planet Cyrus looked down upon those born of sin.

She didn't need to leave the suburbs to know the geography of the world. Cyrus was categorized into two hemispheres: the East and the West. They had lived in the West, which was a cluster of three large landmasses surrounded by oceans: the Midlands (the largest of the states, which she belonged to), the Northlands, and the Southlands. Not much was known about the East, only that it mirrored the West geographically, positioned a long ways across the ocean, and had once been inhabited by humans. This was before the Two Worlds Conflict, of course, a war which had taken place long before she was born and had resulted in the West demolishing the East by means of nuclear bombardment. The West didn't seem to have suffered any nuclear casualties—there weren't any known locations of wasted, irradiated land, though the Temple had declared that there was indeed an exchange on both sides, and the West was simply defending itself. It was said that the reason none of the attacks from the East had caused any lasting damage was because, simply put, God was on their side.

The West was no longer referred to as the West from that point on, but simply Cyrus, for it was what had remained of civilization.

And, of course, Jola knew how Cyrus was run. The Temple—the law, the religion, and the authority—decided everything from how the politics of the world was run to the very standards of society. The Temple, as a religion, asked only of the service to God, whose will had set forth the structure of morals as well as the Excavades as the plan to ensure that everyone contributed to the well-being of their neighbor. As a law, the Temple ended hunger and homelessness by almost equalizing its citizens, taxing the upper class and giving to the lower, ensuring that there were comforts in every home as well as the near impossibility to become rich. The authority of the Temple came from the

House of Conclave, which was a pool of chosen high priests appointed by God to enforce his will.

Located on the northeastern side of the Midlands, the capital city of Cyrus, Azalea, where Jola lived not far from and which her suburbs were claimed as a part of, was the hotspot of the world for it held not only the House of Conclave but also the Temple of Cyrus, the temple of all temples. Each temple of the Temple was a local headquarters of law more so than religion, and each temple was scattered across every major city of the world. It was said that God's will was presented through the Temple, and that their word was that of him.

Jola and Herv stepped off of the sidewalk and into the street to avoid the overgrown and undercut bushes that smelled terribly of dog urine. Herv removed a peppermint, still tightly wrapped in clear plastic, from within his pocket and began shuffling it through his fingers like a coin.

"I guess we're late for school again," he sighed, looking up into the sky melodramatically. "Beautiful day for detention, really."

"And yet, I prayed for rain. . ."

"I figured you'd say that."

"Well its good baseball conditions. Great for the grass, not to mention the mud, which I don't mind all too much."

Herv shot her a snarl, sighing once again. "Sometimes I feel like I'm walking with a dude—ouch—what the hell?"

Jola wheeled around just as another rock came their way, striking her thigh and exploding into a cloud of dirt. She looked up, her skin flushing. Four boys, each wearing casual clothes as opposed to the uniforms that she and Herv had been wearing, were watching them from the street corner, laughing amongst themselves. They were taller than the both of them by far, and Jola recognized them as boys from an older class of another school.

“Oh I think one of it is looking at you, Peter,” said a particularly gangly looking boy with sunglasses and a large amount of zits. “Better watch yourself mate, don’t want it to get the wrong idea about you, I hear they’re illegal to breed with.”

Three of them roared with laughter, while the one in the front smiled toothily. He ran his hand through his red hair and made forward, followed by the others.

“Jola...” Herv tugged at her sleeve. “Come on...”

She stood still as they approached. The one with the red hair nodded at her, his teeth chattering down frequently as if he were chewing gum. “You Project kids ought to smile some more, you know? It’s no wonder your parents abandoned you.”

The others snickered. Herv looked indecisively from one to the other. Jola scowled but made no signs to move, her eyes locked on the center one.

“You’re not bad looking, though, Princess,” he said. He reached out a hand and pushed a loose strand of her bangs back behind her ear. She pulled away quickly. “Tut-tut, you should lose that Project attitude. It’s bad enough that you have to live in the shame of bastardization. How on Cyrus do you expect to land a guy?”

“Looks like she’s already got one. Ah Peter, you have no chance. Can’t you see she prefers the fatties?”

They roared again, and Jola felt her knuckles tighten.

“Come on, Jola, ignore it—”

“Hey why is that?” said Peter, shifting his eyes from her to Herv. They became narrow. “Every time I see one of you the other is right there alongside.” He raised his eyebrows. “Dear me, I thought they would at least raise you like a family. What kind of crazy incest morals are they teaching you at that home, eh?”

“Well they do teach me to shower daily, maybe you

should come stay with us for a while and learn how to?"

They laughed again. Someone wolf whistled. Peter didn't seem offended, but rather intrigued. "Cute," he said. "You should be careful who you invite to your house, you know. They might go through with it."

"Can't you just leave us alone?" said Herv. "What did we ever do to—hey give that back!"

The one with the sunglasses had grabbed the peppermint from him. Herv made to snatch it back but was blocked by another. The boy smiled and passed it to Peter, who examined it under his eye.

"Fretting a little too hard over a piece of candy, aren't we? Dear me, you should really consider losing some weight."

"It's not for eating you idiot—it's a keepsake of mine, and I'll have it back if you don't mind."

The boy considered it for a moment, then shook his head. "Nah, I think I'll have it for myself instead." He made to remove the plastic encasing.

Jola chose this as the right moment to act. She dropped her bag and reached for it, but he had already foreseen it. He withdrew his hand quickly, balling his fist. She took hold of it with both of her hands and tried to pry it open. He smiled and pulled her in by the wrists.

"Let—me—go!"

"Jola!"

Herv made forward but was knocked back. Peter had her close now, growing more and more amused at her attempts to break free. "Oh don't fight. I'm not going to hurt you. Here, let me prove how much of a gentleman I am."

He leaned in. She withdrew and swung her foot up. He yelped a high note and released her at once, clutching himself.

"Bitch!"

He stood up, glowering. And how far he would've gone next, Jola would never know, for at that moment more rocks came pelting out of nowhere—and this time they weren't balled up chunks of dirt.

"Who the hell—?"

!Smack!

Peter took a particularly good shot (bad in his case) to the nose. Blood splurged. He covered his face with his hands, stumbling.

"Come on!"

The four boys withdrew, heading in the opposite direction. Jola looked around for the source. The next moment a group of kids wearing the same uniformed white shirts as Jola and Herv began walking their way.

Jola picked up the peppermint from the floor. Its plastic casing was still intact, just as good as it always was. She handed it to Herv, who took it with an apprehensive expression which made her feel slightly sorry for him.

"Well don't look at me like that!" she hissed. "Next time keep it to yourself and you won't be such a target!"

He opened his mouth to shoot back but closed it just as quickly, scowling. She felt slightly ashamed of herself for saying it, but she knew it had to be done. The children stopped before them. Three of them were girls, all familiar faces.

"Jola, Herv," the only boy amongst them nodded. He looked to be about the same age as the two of them, only taller. "Thought you could use a little help, eh."

"Well we're lucky you did," said Jola.

"Yea, nice shot Ron," said Herv. "Hope you broke his nose."

"We helped too!" piped one of the girls who, evidently, was an identical twin of another, judging by the facial features and blonde hair of the two. "But it was Fillis who

got the twat in the nose.”

Jola looked to the only girl with jet black hair amongst the blonde twins. She recognized her, of course, as one of her fellow housemates. She was the same age as Jola, and the twin sister of another boy in their house. The other three lived in another orphanage, or Project Home, which rivaled Jola’s occasionally in sports, though they were on good terms with one another, as was common with most Project Homes.

“Have you seen my brother Max?” spoke Fillis rather urgently.

Jola looked quickly to Herv, who shrugged. “No, we haven’t seen him. Why, what’s the matter?”

The girl opened her mouth and bit her lip, frowning. “He hasn’t come home all night.”

Something stirred in Jola’s brain. “I take it you were the one who was checking all of the rooms this morning?”

Fillis bit her lip guiltily. “I thought, well, maybe, he was...”

“With a girl?” said Herv, eyebrows raised slightly. Jola elbowed him quickly.

“Well obviously. Not that I would care, of course. It’s just that he told me he was off to check up on Professor Argus in the middle of the night, you know, because the old man hasn’t come to school in ages, a-and he hasn’t come home.” She looked like she was fighting back tears. “And with all these talks of increased laws against you know what, a-and Banshees—”

“They’re not real, Fillis,” Ron interjected. “It’s just something they tell us to make sure we don’t prowl the nights in our pajamas slipping into each others beds and creating more bastards for them to deal with. It’s like how Nanna Clause is used to teach us not to be greedy.”

“How do you know Nanna Clause isn’t real?” said one

of the twins quickly.

"Because she's not."

"Okay, Mr. Expert. Then who was it that slipped me the white cashmere sweater last Starry Night, a week after I had mailed my wish list to the Temple stating specifically that I wanted a white cashmere sweater, hmm?"

"Well if you must know it was me, you silly twat."

"Was not! You mean to tell me you could've afforded that?"

"Heavens, no. It was a gift from your sister—"

"Was not!" said the other twin. "I certainly didn't have the money to give her that—"

"Oh you simple minded little girls! It was one of your other sisters—the one with the fame and the money."

The twins looked scandalized. "It...it really wasn't from Nanna Clause?"

Ron looked as if he were going to say something to soften the blow but changed his mind. "No."

The other twin gasped. "And my scarf...?"

Again he paused, but nodded as if suppressing the urge to burst out laughing.

"Oh no!"

"It's not true!"

"It can't be!"

"Oh, quit your bitching Cecil—you too Fan, it was only a joke, come on," he said quickly, grinning to Herv, who returned the gesture.

Jola seemed to be the only one to have noticed that none of this was helping Fillis, who it seemed had already wiped her eyes twice during the course of the banter.

"We used to roast marshmallows d-during Starry N-night," she sniffed, "Before our m-mother..."

"Oh Fillis—don't cry! We're sorry," said Cecil, wrapping her in her arms.

“We didn’t mean to make you feel bad,” said Fan, brushing the girl’s hair back.

Jola and Herv exchanged looks. They rounded on Ron, who said carefully, so that only the two of them could hear, “We found her on our walk, crying on your porch a few minutes ago. We took her with us. That was when, well, we came to save you two.” He paused. “Did—did you watch the news this morning? About the deaths?”

“Yea, we saw,” said Herv. “I thought you don’t believe in the Banshees?”

“Well no, I don’t. But I do believe something’s up because children are going missing just like the reports say,” Ron admitted almost to himself. “She didn’t happen to watch the news, did she?”

“No,” said Jola. “She was upstairs checking the rooms over and over. Woke me up expecting Max to be under my sheets.”

“Poor girl,” said Ron.

Jola reached out a hand, breaking the middle girl away from the twins gently. “Come on, Fillis. I’m sure he’s probably just at school. You don’t want to have worried for nothing, now do you?”

She began walking up the street, an arm around Fillis while the others followed closely behind. Fillis sobbed and wiped her eye. “He n-never leaves school without me. We a-always w-walk together.”

Jola feared that she would say that. She frowned and began stroking her hair absentmindedly. After they had rounded the block, the girl pulled away, nodding her thanks to Jola.

“Are you alright, Jola?”

Jola looked to Fan in surprise.

“Wha—?”

She looked down to where the girl was indicating. “Oh

it's nothing. Just a little dirt, wasn't a real rock, not like the ones you guys were throwing."

The girl giggled sinisterly. "Those Prunies think they're so much better than us, just because 'their parents never committed a first class sin!'" she added in a high pitched voice. "Speaking of dirt, did you see our sister on TV?" she said quickly, and it sounded as if she had been dying to say this, just waiting for the right time in light of Fillis's crying.

"Huh? Who's your sis—" something stirred inside of Jola's head, like trying to remember the contents of a dream. "Rivenwilo—I thought that name sounded familiar."

"That was your sister?" said Herv, astonished.

Fan nodded proudly. "That's our Sarah. Number eight in the Dirt Motor Cross league, the only girl in the top twenty! I can get you guys seats to her track meets if you want. Now that she's famous we've got friends in high places—hey!" she said urgently, rounding on Ron. "Was it Sarah who gave us the presents?"

The boy sighed. "Well honestly, woman, you're ruining the whole point of Secret Nanna."

The six children arrived at the front entrance of the Azalea Mercy Academy, a school made specifically for children of Project Homes, in order to separate their shameful lives from the only other school in the capital city, Azalea Primary Academy, which only those born and raised in a traditional home attended, known as Prunies. The Prunies and the Projects were at a constant war on the planet Cyrus. The Prunies were the primary aggressors, starting fights and banter with the Projects, stating their sinful bloodline as a reason to pick on them, which, although denied immediately by any Professor who was asked, seemed almost encouraged by the Temple.

The Projects had it worse. They were the ones who had

to wear uniforms, making it no secret who they were. They were the ones who had to arrive at school an hour earlier, giving the Prunies an extra hour to hunt them during the morning. They were the ones without parents, often melding themselves into pairs to compensate, a small advantage which Projects were known to exploit in order to survive in a world which seemed so lonely at times.

Jola's lifelong partner had been Herv. He was the strongest part of her surrogate family. She had known him from her earliest of memories at the orphanage, having been told that her mother and father had died. Whether or not they were married never mattered to her, but it was always a question asked by a Prunie, often to clarify whether she was a bastard of sin or simply a victim of circumstance. The first answer would sometimes merit sympathy, even a free passage from harassment by a Prunie, but the latter would mean instant disassociation. Despite knowing full well what was expected from a Prunie, Jola had always judged the ones she had come across individually, or at least she had tried. There had, she admitted, been some who had shown compassion towards her, even a willingness to make a forbidden friendship. But in the end, they would always come around to the question—and in the end, Jola would proudly claim that she was a bastard of sin.

"Well here's me," said Ron, as the children made their way through the halls, indicating a closed classroom. The clock read 7:54 AM. "Ah, first late in a month." He nodded to them and disappeared through the door.

The five remaining children turned into another hall, descending a small flight of steps.

"See you later," said Cecil, as the two twins, who were a year younger than Jola, departed into another classroom, leaving the remaining three to continue towards the end of the hall. They stopped before the last classroom and

entered.

At once Fillis stepped forward, looking hopeful. She scanned the room twice before collapsing into a fit of sobs. Jola caught her quickly and settled her into a seat in the front of the room. She remained standing over the girl, applying comfort.

Aside from Fillis, Herv and herself, there were six other children present, all from the same orphanage, and all watching the two girls in the front apprehensively. She noticed that one of their number was missing.

The man at the blackboard came before the two girls. He was tall, middle-aged, and looked rather intimidating, judging by his firm, towering posture and his intense gaze. He had short, auburn hair, dark green eyes, and sported a five o'clock shadow.

"I'm sorry we're late, Professor Rauley," Jola said.

The man considered her for a moment, but nodded all the same.

"I take it you heard the news," he spoke in a harsh voice mixed in with a cool, calculating indulgence.

Fillis looked up quickly. "News?"

"Fillis, I need you to calm down. There's something you need to hear."

The girl's lip quivered terribly. "About Max?"

The man nodded. "But first, the three of you need to learn what I've just told the rest of the class. Professor Argus will not be returning."

"Why?" Jola said just under her breath.

"Because he's dead."

"D-dead?" Fillis repeated, her panic rising. "But Max went to see if he was all right last night. The old man can't be dead! Or—or else...?"

Rauley watched her for a moment then continued. "I arrived at Professor Argus's house after... after it happened.

His front door was broken through, his room was trashed, his body was..." he paused, his jaw grim. "I called the authorities immediately. They confirmed that a Banshee had broken into the house."

The room began to fill with swift looks and brief mutterings.

"But—but the Banshees aren't able to break into houses!" said Herv horrified. "They said that they can't break in—on the news! They said that we'll be safe as long as we stay inside our houses at night!"

A girl gasped. "What does this mean?"

Another spoke before the man could answer, "Will we be safe at night?"

"Professor Argus didn't live far—only a mile away—"

"Are those damn Marines going to come protect us now like they always say?"

A roar of approval towards the comment issued, as worried faces exchanged. Professor Rauley fixed a stern, calculating look and the room fell silent.

"The Temple has assured me that the incident last night was a fluke, and that the Banshees will not break into houses, as they are afraid of artificial light and do not want to risk entering an electric wired house. You will all be able to go about your lives as usual, just with extra measures of safe—"

"I don't care about the damn Banshees—what about my brother?" cried Fillis impatiently, brushing the hair out of her face.

The man met her eyes. "We don't know what happened to him. He wasn't at the house when I arrived. All we know at this point is that he's missing. They haven't confirmed the identities of the last boys found. For all we know he could just be lost or maybe he ran away—"

"Ran away? Ran away? Max would never run away!"

He has no reason to!"

Rauley looked at her indecisively, and Jola knew what he was going to say next.

"Consider it, Fillis. Why would he visit Professor Argus in the middle of the night, with all the reports of Banshees roaming the streets? It just doesn't make sense. For all we know he could've gone to the Professor to get money for the road—"

"He was worried about his teacher!" shrieked Fillis. "And if it weren't for you telling us next—next to nothing—about him other than 'he's just taking a break,' then maybe my brother wouldn't have had to find out whether or not he's all right himself! But he most certainly didn't run away!"

Rauley sighed, a defeated sigh. "Maybe...maybe it's better to think of it that way, for now, Fillis...He could come back. We need to take all things into consideration before—"

"STOP LYING TO ME!" she cried. "You people and your lies! Telling us its okay when its not! I've lived my whole life around it with—with the Temple telling us its okay if we die violently just as long as we go to heaven—or telling us they're trying to put a stop to these missing children when they haven't done a damn thing! Or—or what happened to my mother! Well I'm sick of it!"

And she rose from her desk and stormed out of the room. Jola was certain she had heard a sob before the door came shut. She met Rauley's eyes. He looked cross, but not angry.

"Go," he muttered hoarsely. "Go, you're excused for the rest of the day."

Nobody moved.

"Go on—scram out of here!"

Jola spent the rest of the day tucked away in her room

at the boarding house, running through the memories she had of Professor Argus over and over. Everyone had stayed home. Each had tried their best to comfort Fillis, but it was no use. She had remained in her bed, no longer crying but rather staring absentmindedly at the ceiling on her back. The atmosphere within the house was at an all time low. Even Herv couldn't think of something funny to say.

"I'm going to the park before it gets dark," he had told her at around noon, his round face flushed and grim. "No point in trying to work on her. I think it's best if we all just give her some space—"

"Fine," Jola dismissed. The boy left scowling.

Another hour had passed before she had risen from her bed. She was at the door when it opened.

"Jola!" gasped a small girl framed in the doorway, clutching her heart.

"What is it Libby?"

"You gave me a fright" — Jola doubted that somehow — "I came in to tell you that we're all going to catch a movie at Madam Clara's house. Do you want to come?"

"No thanks, not really in the mood to be honest."

The girl frowned slightly. "Well neither are we, but we thought it would be best to leave Fillis alone."

"Yea, I can see how you would've thought that," Jola said rather rudely, making no effort to conceal her tone.

Libby smiled weakly before descending the stairs.

Jola remained standing in the doorway for a minute to make sure that Libby had enough time to leave the house before heading for the kitchen. Ten minutes later she was before one of the bedrooms, a tray in hand.

"Fillis, I fixed you something to eat," she said after opening the door. Fillis was still staring at the ceiling, transfixed.

"Go away..."

“Oh come now, you have to eat something!”

“Leave me alone, Jola.”

Jola lowered the tray below her waist, feeling slightly flustered. “I know this is difficult for you—”

“No, you don’t. Nobody here knows how I feel—nobody has been through what I’ve been through!” And she sat up straight.

Jola expected her to cry again. But the girl was out of tears. Her face was cross, her eyebrows tight and furred. “How would you feel if you had lost the only person who you had left? The only person who was still part of your family?”

“Well I’d feel damn pissy alright—but I wouldn’t go starting fights with everybody else!”

Fillis snickered unpleasantly. “Oh is that so? Perfect Jola is going to tell me how I should act about losing a twin brother, hmm? I wonder how you would feel if you lost that fatass friend of yours!”

!Crack!

The glass of juice tipped off of the tray and smashed onto the floor. Jola thrust the tray over the dresser, refusing to take her eyes off of the girl. She stormed out, her face reddening, and headed for her room.

She changed into her jogging sweats quickly and left the house. She passed Herv on her way out, who was returning from the park, an aluminum bat swung over his shoulder.

“Hey—where you—”

She didn’t answer. She jogged for fifteen minutes through the suburban streets before she came across a familiar emerald green two-story framed in the distance. The garden was untidy, the porch light had been smashed and scattered in shards across the front step, and there was a hole in the window as if a pebble had smashed through it.

She tried the knob. It was locked. She slipped around

the side towards the backyard. She could see the back entrance from where she was standing. Only a small picket fence separated her from the door. She made to climb over, and as she did so, something told her to stop.

Jola wheeled around, one leg over the fence. A woman was staring at her from across the street. She had a hose in one hand which had drifted away from her garden patch and was now spewing water over her front windows. Jola swung her leg back onto the sidewalk, smiling to the woman. She nodded back unexpectedly, her lower lip hanging, non-plussed.

A moment later a group of children in regular clothes came around the corner, bags slung over their backs. The woman dropped her hose and ushered them inside quickly, still looking at Jola. The family disappeared and Jola turned to look at the house again. A car drove by.

She waited for it to pass before swinging her foot up.

“Look Peter, it’s that girl!”

Jola stopped dead, one foot over the fence again. Surely enough, the Prunies she had encountered earlier that day were watching her in the distance, framed against another large boarding house. Exhaling disappointedly, she dropped safely onto the sidewalk again, smiling tentatively.

She sighed, raising her hand nervously into the air. The red-headed boy waved back, his mouth open, dumbfounded. She turned on her heel and ran in the other direction.

“Hey! Come back here!”

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After watching his watch strike 5:14 PM, the man glanced

over at his partner. "Anything?" he asked.

The woman reached for the binoculars sitting idly on her lap. She lifted them to her eyes and peered through. "No, nobody yet."

The two were sitting in a white van parked on the side of a curb in a residential neighborhood. What they were doing there, they didn't know for sure. But in their line of duty, orders were orders.

"Keep a steady watch on the house," their commander had said when they first pulled up to the curb before the first sign of light. "Do not enter the house, and keep out of sight. If anyone enters the house or hangs around suspiciously, report back to me immediately."

The man reared his seat back, making himself more comfortable. He removed his sunglasses from his nose and closed his eyes.

The woman next to him took another look through her binoculars. From her tucked away view several lots away, cloaked by the shade of a fruit bearing tree, she was able to spot the house with the bright red door and the neglected garden.

Just when she thought it was safe to lower her spectacles, something caught her attention. A girl entered the front yard and strode quickly to the front door. Unable to get in, she strolled around to the side, examining the house. A moment later she attempted to climb over the fence, but stopped short. She repeated this action a minute later, but stopped short again. The next second she spun on her heel and sprinted off down the street.

The woman prodded her partner, her eyes still on her specs.

"What?"

"There was a child—a girl. She tried to get into the house."

“And?”

“Well it was hard to tell what was going on, but it looked like someone spotted her. She ran off just a moment ago.”

“I’ll call it in,” the man said, rubbing his eyes. He raised a transceiver to his lips.

Chapter 3

The Banshees

“Herv, wake up.”

Jola prodded the sleeping boy repeatedly. He rolled from side to side under the sheets, moaning.

“Come on Herv, wake up!”

“Ouch! Jola—what the hell are you doing in here? I’m in my drawers.” He rose slightly.

“Oh I didn’t look! Now come on and get out of bed.”

The boy blinked and rubbed his eyes. He looked at the clock and became instantly awake, rounding on her with narrowed eyes. “Wha—it’s 10:30 at night!”

“Shh! Keep your voice down!”

And she thrust the sheets from him completely.

“God damnet Jola—turn around!”

She obeyed, facing the window with a smirk. She peeled the drapes aside. The streets were barely visible. They were empty nonetheless. The lights were off in every house along the adjacent block, and all of the windows were either boarded up or drawn heavily with curtains.

“Now what’s this about?”

Jola turned. She looked him up and down. "Perfect—because we're going jogging."

Herv spluttered, looking down at his sweats. He fixed her a grimace and said, "Well you could've told me in the morning, I wouldn't have objected. I've been thinking and maybe I do need to lose a few—"

"Not in the morning, silly. We're going jogging now."

His face remained still as if he hadn't heard anything. He blinked twice then crawled back into bed, pulling the sheets over him.

Jola sighed. She reached for the sheets and thrust them off of him again.

"Wha—oh you're not serious now are you?"

"Of course I am."

"We can go in the morning."

"Well we're not really going jogging, no, no. We're going to visit Professor Argus's house."

Herv spluttered again. He fixed her a firm look. "Are you out of your mind? Didn't you hear what happened to Max—about the Banshees and all?"

"I don't believe in that nonsense."

"Well I do, so you'll just have to go without me." He slumped back onto his pillow.

"I thought you'd say that," said Jola, nodding to herself wisely. "Well then, I guess there's nothing I can do to change your mind. I'll see you in the morning, if I come back, that is..."

He sat up at once. "You're not still thinking of going?"

"Well I have to. Something fishy is going on here and I think our answers will be at Professor Argus's house. Don't you at least want to know what's going on?"

"No, I honestly don't."

"Well unfortunately for you, I do."

"Oh give it a rest, Jola! The Temple has all sorts of people to investigate this stuff—they're probably at his house right now taking pictures and collecting evidence like those shows on TV!"

"I've already looked at his house, there's no one there, and nobody's watching it. As far as the Temple is concerned, there's nothing suspicious going on."

"Then why do you care?"

"Because something is going on around here and no one's doing anything to stop it! Not our teachers—not the Temple. And in case you haven't noticed, the boy across the hall is gone and that could've just as easily been one of us!"

Herv sat up straighter. "I did notice, Jola—I noticed that he went out and tried to be a hero in the middle of the night and probably ended up as some demon's dinner course—just like what will happen to you if you don't stop trying to be noble. Don't you see? They warned us—they actually told us not to go out at night for our own safety—and as long as we listen to them we'll have two arms and two legs apiece! If you ask me, those kids who refused to take the best advice of their lives deserved what came to them."

Jola returned to the window. "I've been watching the streets since Six O'clock and there's nothing out there, just like every other night that I've stayed up watching."

"If there's nothing out there then why has everyone gone missing then?"

"I don't know. But that's what we're going to find out." She withdrew from the window. "Well, if you're not going to help me, then, I guess I'll have to just do it myself." And with a weak smile she turned and crossed the hall.

Herv cursed to himself then climbed out of bed quickly. "God damnet Jola—wait!"

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Jola kept her eyes sharp ahead as they adjusted to the darkness. The moon hadn't given them much to work with, and it wouldn't until another hour or so. The more time went by, the sharper the outlines of trees and fences became, like whenever she shut the bathroom light off at night and returned to bed in almost complete darkness, guided by the faint outlines of objects in her room as her nocturnal senses kicked in. They rounded the corner now, keeping close to the sidewalk.

"This is ridiculous!" hissed Herv close by. His hands were pulling down on the lace around the neck of his sweater, keeping his hood tightly over his head. "I don't know where you get these ideas all the time. Like when you wanted to go Unicorn hunting in that forest two years ago."

"That was different!" Jola assured. "We didn't know what we were doing then. We have flashlights this time—look!"

She brandished the beam before her. At once Herv wrestled the device from her, switching it off.

"Are you out of your mind?" he hissed. "Yes, let's give away our position some more while we're at it!" He looked over his shoulder hastily.

Jola took the flashlight back from him and pocketed it, smirking.

"I think I saw something following us back there!"

"That's just your imagination," Jola said quickly. "Oh Herv, you're too superstitious, really you are. I bet there's really nothing out here at night. You know what? I think what Ron said was right—about how they just don't want us to go out at night. Who knows, maybe Max and the Professor are still alive. After all, they never show us the

bodies—they just tell us that so-and-so died and move on. Maybe that's just an excuse of theirs to get more people to work the Excavades! When Torre Wilkins came back from her draft, she told me that they hardly had anyone in the production facilities and they had to remove people from the mines to fill in for the factories."

Herv seemed to have only heard one word of this. "Oh I'm superstitious? Hark whose talking? Aren't you the one who wanted to go looking for Unicorns?"

"Oh never mind!" she said hastily. "Besides, it's a girl thing, really. You wouldn't understand."

"And I don't want to, either."

"Hey, let's turn here," she suggested, cutting across the street to the other sidewalk. Herv trotted behind her quickly.

"Don't move too fast! You'll wake them up!" He stopped short. "Oh you certainly don't expect me to come with you through there?"

The sidewalk they had crossed into wasn't encircling a cluster of houses like the latter, but rather a mesh of open grass and trees. Herv furrowed his brow. "I don't know, Jola. I heard they live in the park at night."

"Don't be silly. It'll take us longer to go around than to cut across."

She grabbed his arm and pulled him with her. They descended slightly, trotting down a hill that arched in a tangent. The grass at their feet leveled and she released him.

He muttered something under his breath. The ground was moist, freshly watered by the sprinklers mere hours ago. Herv became more agitated, darting his head from side to side, over one shoulder to the other.

"I always knew you'd get me killed."

"Oh stop being so melodramatic! Nothing is going to happen to us. That's all in your head!"

“Something is going to happen to us alright, you wait and—“

!Crack!

The two of them froze. They exchanged looks under their hoods. Herv had grabbed her arm, and by the tremble of his fingers she knew he was worried, and she couldn't blame him, for she was worried too.

She reached into her pocket, breathing so quietly that she could hear her own heartbeat. Slowly, she withdrew her flashlight and wheeled around.

“Put that away, I'm no Banshee.”

Jola lowered the beam a fraction, and then raised it again. The figure shielded its face.

“You can let go of my arm now Herv, it's only Fillis,” Jola said slowly. She felt the tension at her side release as the boy withdrew his fingers.

“Fillis?”

“Yes Fillis! Now will you lower that thing already?”

“Sorry.” Jola lowered her flashlight to waist-level.

Fillis stepped forward, her breath rising from her mouth like smoke. She was still wearing her school blouse and the same skirt she had on earlier that day.

“Fillis. . .” Herv repeated, half-astonished. “You're alive.”

“Well what did you expect was going to happen to me? Melt?”

Herv didn't answer.

“What are you doing here?” asked Jola.

“The same thing you're doing. I'm going to find out what happened to my brother,” Fillis replied, looking Jola in the eye. Her face was stern. The tears had vanished but the anger hadn't. She raised her arm and dangled something before their eyes. “After you stormed out of my room I went back to school and nicked these from Rauley's desk. He didn't come home tonight and he always leaves his keys

at school whenever, you know, he's away at night. I'm sure him and Argus swapped keys at some point because the old man can get into our house."

Herv snickered loudly. "Oh great! Just what we needed, Jola, another hero!"

Fillis turned her head in his direction, glowering as if he were something unpleasant beneath the heel of her shoe. Jola's eyes wandered to the girl's bare arms and legs. "Aren't you cold?"

Fillis paused, her posture unwavering. "No."

Jola doubted that somehow. She smiled weakly, exhaling through her nose just barely and stepped forward, unzipping her hoodie. She wrapped it around the girl's shoulders.

"Thank you," said Fillis, looking down at her feet.

"Come on," Jola muttered.

The ground began to rise a minute later. With Jola in the lead, the three crossed over to the adjacent sidewalk, returning to the presence of houses which seemed to mirror those on the other side of the park. It wasn't long before they reached the emerald green two-story, set apart from the others in the darkness by the unkept front yard.

"Watch your step," Jola said, crossing the path leading into the porch. "There's broken glass."

Fillis and Herv exchanged faces. Surely enough, something cracked under Jola's weight. She pulled out her flashlight and switched it on. "Hold that," she added, handing it to Herv. "Keep it on the knob."

Fillis handed her the keys. Jola took it. There had to be at least twenty to choose from. She singled out one of them and tried.

No luck.

She flipped through the next key, and the next, and the next.

“Hurry up!” Herv whispered, the beam going astray a few times.

Jola got to her fifteenth key when it happened. It slid into place perfectly, and when she twisted it obeyed her touch.

!Click!

Smiling, she handed the set back to Fillis, turned the knob and pushed through. The door creaked as she shut it. She took the flashlight from Herv and scanned around.

It was as if the house had been ransacked. Books had fallen from the many shelves that graced the walls. The picture frames weren’t leveled. Scattered stacks of paper were strewn across the hardwood. A couch was overturned.

“Well what are we supposed to do now?” whispered Herv.

Jola didn’t answer. She was all set on finding answers by coming to the house. And now that she was here, she didn’t have a clue what to do next. She sighed foolishly. Had she been expecting the solution to have presented itself the moment she got past the front door?

“Well if a Banshee had attacked the old man,” said Fillis slowly, “why would it care to see what he had been reading?”

Jola considered her suggestion. It sounded logical, all right, but it still didn’t give them anything they could put into action.

“Er, let’s look around, shall we? Here,” she reached into the pocket of her sweat pants and withdrew another small flashlight, handing it to Herv, “you two look around here, I’ll head upstairs.”

“What exactly are we supposed to be looking for?” said the boy skeptically.

“Anything,” she answered, and she ascended the steps before he could argue back.

The hall at the top was considerably smaller than the one at the boarding house. There were only four doors to choose from, and it only looked wide enough to admit two people through side-by-side at a time. She tried the first door which led into a bathroom. Nothing looked out of the ordinary.

Her beam came upon the mirror over the sink. A girl with long, dark brown hair and fair skin smiled back, wearing dark sweat pants and a thin black sweater which was over a white blouse, evident from the collar that poked out from the neckline. Her green eyes winced as the reflected light rose at a higher angle.

She withdrew quickly and tried another room, finding herself in a second-bedroom which had been used as a storage space, judging by the boxes that were piled across the vicinity, stacked one over the other. The next door she had tried led into a small study, which housed more bookshelves. Again, some of the volumes were littered across the floor. She exited and headed for the last.

It was the old man's bedroom. Something violent had indeed taken place. A computer monitor was smashed. There were dents in the walls, and the picture frames lay on the floor cracked, as if discarded. It seemed as if the only thing left untouched was a table placed before the window, assorted with three aquarium-like tanks and a variety of devices stored below.

Jola bent down and picked up one of the cracked picture frames. A tall old man wearing sunglasses smiled wide, depicted in the center of a standing group of children lined up on either side of him. She spotted Herv and herself. She smiled at the sight of the boy's two fingers over her head.

An indoor draft swept through her hair. The door behind her came shut. She wheeled around, her beam catching the door. It lowered for a fraction of a second, then

doubled-up like it had done upon Fillis in the park.

Three holes poked out of the frame, each only large enough to admit the gaze of an eye. She stepped forward and pulled the door open, noticing the holes in the wall on the other end for the first time.

She made to turn for the bedroom again but someone screamed below. Her light drifted towards the head of the stairs.

“Herv? Fillis?” she called out uncertainly.

Nobody answered.

She repeated herself, slightly louder.

Again, no one responded.

She swallowed her breath and switched her flashlight off. She made forward and began descending the stairs. It creaked halfway down. She stepped off of the final landing.

No one was in sight from where she was standing. The room was too dark to make anything out other than the faint outlines of some of the shelves and furniture. She took a few steps into the room.

Something swished past her ear and crashed into the wall behind her. She switched her flashlight on quickly as another pelted out of the darkness and hit her face. It barely hurt, but in her alarm she dropped her flashlight. It rolled across the room and came to a stop, its beam cast onto a limp figure on the floor.

She shrieked and put her hands to her mouth: Herv’s face came into view, slumped on its side against the floor, eyes closed.

Someone laughed a high pitched cackle from across the room. Another flashlight switched on, pointing at her face. She squinted but kept her eyes open.

“Here,” said a voice.

Her flashlight rolled back to her. She scooped it up, brandishing it like a sword into the darkness. Peter the

Prunie smiled from across the room. He was holding a book in one hand and the flashlight in the other. Next to him stood the Prunie with the sunglasses, holding—to her horror—a restrained Fillis, one hand around her mouth. She looked back at Jola, her eyes gleaming a mixture of terror and infuriation.

Peter snickered. He chucked another book at Jola, and then bent to pick up what looked like a baseball bat.

Her face hardened instantly. “What did you do to Herv?”

“Oh fatty over there?” he spoke as if confused. Then he smiled again. “Oh nothing really, he just got a little overexcited and walked into the wall. Dear me, I think he needs glasses.”

The other boy grinned. Peter continued, looking up and around, “I had a feeling you’d come back to this place after we stopped you.”

A flashback raced through Jola’s mind, as she remembered the four who had spotted her earlier that day. She spun on her heel quickly, expecting to find the other two Prunies behind her.

“Oh don’t worry about them,” said Peter confidently, as if reading her mind. “Nah, they were too scared to come with us tonight. Something about Banshees.” He sighed in disbelief. “Their parents are deeply religious, like most of the world. Anyways we didn’t really need four people to follow you. Jensen and I managed to do so. Heh, we even thought you’d spotted us on the street back there. But I guess you didn’t expect to see us tonight, did you?”

He moved toward her, stepping over Herv’s body. The top of his bat slid across the hardwood like a limp cane. He stopped short of her, lowering his flashlight and taking in her beam.

“So what is this place?” he said, looking around curiously. “Some kind of quiet zone for you and your boyfriend

over there?"

Jola's eyes drifted from the bat in his hand to the smile on his face. He had to be a head taller than her. He fixed her an odd stare, nodding wisely. "You know I figured you'd bring him with you—but the other girl? Come on, isn't that a little kinky, even for Project standards?"

She bit her lip. She had been in far worse situations before, she had to admit—but this was bad. He raised the bat, causing her to jump slightly, and brought it level with her head, brushing her hair back with the other end.

"So how 'bout it, Princess? Can I be a part of your club?"

She gulped. Her eyes darted to Fillis and back.

"Oh don't worry about your friend over there; I think we can include her. Why do you think I brought Jensen with me?" And he smiled wickedly.

He switched the flashlight off and dropped it to the floor. His fingers ran through her cheeks, and she felt the hairs behind her neck stand on end. He took another step toward her, and now he was in danger of trotting on her feet. He was so close to her that she could count the freckles on his nose. His smile grew wider and he leaned in.

Someone choked. Peter turned on his heel. Herv's barely visible outline began to stir.

"Jola..." she heard him mutter.

Peter lowered his hand from her face and took hold of the bat with both. Jola pulled him by the arm and struck him in the jaw with her flashlight. He swayed to one side but regained, glowering. He backhanded her, knocking her off her feet.

Herv rose and took a kick to the face, slumping to the ground again, this time on his back. Jola recovered, found her flashlight, and made to swing it again but the boy caught her wrist and twisted. She cried out in pain and

dropped it.

Peter flung her from him and rose, and this time his face didn't carry the snickering confidence that it bore a moment ago. There was a mad glint in his eye as he watched her, breathing heavily. He raised the bat again with both hands.

"Peter," said Jensen, fear in his voice. "Peter what the hell are you doing—you could kill someone with that—"

But whether or not a two-handed swing from a wooden bat could kill someone, Jola wouldn't know, for at that moment the front door was forced open. All eyes switched to the cloaked figure framed in the doorway. A pair of electric blue eyes pierced the children eerily, as if simultaneously connected with each of them.

Peter's mouth was gaped open, lost for words. His eyes were wide. The bat remained high in mid-swing.

"What—what the hell is that?" he stammered.

The Banshee turned its head in his direction. Its hand rose swiftly and the next second a jet of resilient blue light shot out of its tip. The bat clattered to the floor as Peter fell forward, eyes staring out unfocused.

!Click!

Fillis screamed. Jensen released her and ran. Jola was brought back to her senses, finding her hands clutching air. Something told her to run and she didn't bother to ask why. She bolted into the sitting room.

Jets of blue light streaked past her, colliding with the walls and the furniture. Books fell from their shelves as if a cyclone had been cast into the house. She raced through the kitchen, disregarding the toppled bin and its scattered contents, smearing mush waste at her heels. The backdoor was already wide open. She brushed through it and stumbled over the deck on the other end.

Her hands didn't catch her in time—she face-planted onto sodden dirt. Choking, she stirred on her limbs, her

fingertips cutting into the soil, propelling her forward. She regained and ran ungracefully, as if she were five years old again playing hide-and-seek amongst the Project clans that gathered in the late hours of the night, several years before the alleged Banshee presence had forbade it.

There was no grass in the backyard—but the sprinklers were on, soaking her to the bone. Her face dripped mud. She ran a hand through it hastily only to clear the mass that clung to her eyebrows and fogged her vision. She leapt over the fence as if she had done it a hundred times previously, her feet flying clear of the post but planting improperly on the other side, scraping her forearm. She recovered, aching and bruised, only to find herself almost collide with a dark outline which she could not make out.

“Jola!”

A pair of arms caught her. Someone was panting heavily into her ear. A sharp set of fingernails dug pincer-like into either of her shoulders. Jola choked.

“Fillis!”

The girl was well out of breath. She clung to Jola, bearing her weight upon her for support, sobbing uncontrollably.

Something stirred inside Jola’s head. Her memory overcame her adrenaline, bringing her back to her senses. She felt her heart drop like a stone cast into a lake.

“Oh my God—Herv—I have to go back!”

“Wait no!”

A hand held her back with little force, but she did a double-take nonetheless.

“Herv is back there—that thing will kill him! I need to go back!”

“No please!”

“He needs me!”

“Jola don’t!”

The tension in her arm strengthened.

"He's gone Jola—it's over for him—I'm sorry!"

"What? I—I . . ."

She lost her breath again. The thought seemed almost unbearable. Her insides churned horribly. She no longer felt the chill of the breeze coupled with her drenched clothes.

"I can't just leave him—"

"There's nothing you can do for him—"

"M-maybe it's not there anymore—maybe it left the house!"

"No Jola! It's still there—it's coming for us! We have to hurry!"

"No I—I think it left—yes it's gone for the other boy!" She took another step for the house but the hand pulled her back again.

"No Jola—don't go—don't go!" she shrieked. "Please don't leave me!"

"I . . ."

And she stared Fillis full in the face. Tears swam in her eyes as she sobbed even worse than she had done in the morning.

"I . . ." she repeated, less than a whisper. Blood flushed through her neck. Dots began seeping around her eyes rapidly. She was going to collapse. It was bad enough that Fillis was scared—how much more her? The boy was her last lifeline. She took in shallow gasps of air, unable to quench her thirst, yet unable to gulp it down in mass. "Okay," she said at long last, her face white as if she'd seen a ghost. "Let's . . . let's go . . ."

With a numb hand she pulled Fillis with her through the alley. Horror pushed aside her grief as the last thing she had seen before turning her head was a glint of electric blue. It wasn't long before she had reached the other end. Her panicked state hadn't given her enough to recover. She bent over and wheezed.

“We...we need to get into a house...they always say that they never...never follow suit...if you’re...if you’re in a house...”

This was not true, she realized, as they had just been inside a house when the creature attacked, contrary to the reports on the news. There was no point to consider this now, she thought. They could straighten the facts later.

Taking heavy deep breaths, she spoke, “Let’s try that Fillis...Fillis?”

She spun around wildly. She couldn’t see anyone in her immediate vicinity. It was too dark to make out what lay behind her.

“Fillis?”

No one answered.

Cursing to herself, she doubled back. Outlines of trees, fences, bushes, and trash bins flew past her on either side. It was difficult to see them until they were absolutely close. She stopped short—the Banshee was on the other end of the alley, and she could only tell because its two eyes glared from out of the shadows around it. Her gasp was interrupted as a hand caught her around the mouth and pulled her into a gap in the bushes.

Breathing through her nose, she calmed herself and the hand released its pressure.

“Fillis?”

“Quiet!” hissed a voice which wasn’t familiar to her.

She took a peak. The Banshee had remained where it was standing. Then something strange happened. Its eyes disappeared for a few seconds then reappeared in an odd fashion which didn’t suit blinking. It took her a moment before she realized what it was doing. The Banshee was turning its gaze from left to right, deciding which side to choose from.

Jola shrunk back, feeling a person’s presence behind her.

She looked over her shoulder. It was too dark to make out, but she guessed there were two people other than herself.

"Fillis? Is that you?"

"I'm fine," spoke Fillis's voice, though she still sounded scared.

Jola looked up to the figure she was brushing against.

"Is... is it gone?" said Jensen.

"No, its still there, keeping a watch on both sides."

The boy swore under his breath. Jola squeezed forward for another look. Surely enough, the electric blue eyes had not moved from their spot.

"We can't stay here," Jola said. "We need to find a house to get inside."

"What?" sneered Jensen in disbelief. "You're crazy—that thing will kill us if we move. I'm not going anywhere."

"It can't see any better than we can."

"How do you know?"

And, as if he had read her mind a split-second too late, he reached a hand wildly for her, gripping only leaves as she squeezed through the bushes once more. "Idiot girl!" she heard him mutter as she stepped into the open. The creature saw her, and she was sure of it. Its eyes didn't turn to look the other way, but remained still, watching its challenger hungrily. Jola's insides swelled up instantly, but to her relief the Banshee turned once more.

"Come on!" she said carefully. Fillis followed her immediately but Jensen hesitated.

"God damnet!" he spat before slipping through the bushes as well. They crept through the alley as if trying to make as little noise as possible. Jola was at the end when it happened. The shadows split in the center of the street ahead, withdrawing beneath the shade of the trees. The blackness that had prevented her from seeing her hands swept from her like the removal of a cloak, as the Revealing

Light set target signs upon each of their backs—midnight had struck.

“Run!”

They darted into the street, refusing to look back. Jets of light didn’t catch up to them, but something told Jola that it was highly unlikely that the creature hadn’t spotted them. They raced into the porch of the first house they found. Jola slammed her hands onto the front door.

“Help! Somebody help us! Banshees! Please—open this door!”

Fillis doubled her efforts.

“Help us—”

“Open the door—”

“Please somebody—”

“FOR GOD’S SAKE! OPEN THIS DOOR!”

The strength of the moon faded, their shadows returned—but only for a few seconds as the porch light flickered on. The curtains of the adjacent window were swept aside by a hand. A middle-aged woman poked her nose out. Jola pressed her face to the window, throwing her hands wide.

“Please! We’ve been attacked by Banshees! Let us in! Let us in!”

The woman looked at each of the teenagers in turn, her face cross. She looked somewhere past Jola and her eyes grew wide. The curtain swept her from sight and the porch light extinguished.

“Don’t go away! Help us—please open this door—oh you old crone!”

Jola thrust herself from the house but stopped short of the street: another Banshee was striding towards them, almost as if gliding, its concealed outline visible only by its eyes.

“This way!”

They raced around the side of the house into another alley. They emerged on the other side running full sprint.

"Jola. . . I don't think I can go. . . much longer. . ." panted Fillis.

"Don't stop. . . keep moving. . ." she replied just barely. "There—those bushes. And with a heavy effort she trotted onto the sidewalk before collapsing into a hollow behind a set of hedges. Someone dropped next to her, breathing audibly.

"What. . . what now?" said the voice hoarsely.

Jola straightened up quickly. Jensen was on all fours, saliva spewing down his front.

"Where's Fillis?"

Jensen didn't answer. Jola poked her head over the hedge. There was no sign of her.

"I have to go back!"

"You'll get killed!"

"I can't leave her behind—I can find her!"

"You're the stupidest girl I've ever met!"

Jola ignored the comment and straightened up. She made to take off again but the moon flared, causing her to jump. There—almost a football field away—was Fillis, barely jogging along the street. Something was enclosing around her fast. Jets of blue light flew past her and her scream carried all the way to Jola's ears. She fell facedown in the distance and didn't get up.

The air left Jola's throat before she could call out to her as she watched her limp body remain still. She blinked and her senses came back to her. She looked down, finding her fingers strangling the topmost leaves of the hedge. Something stirred out of the corner of her eye and she looked up: the curtains in the house across the street brushed aside and a face poked out. She was sure that it had caught sight of her and after looking to where the figure in the dis-

tance was enclosing, the curtains fell back once more and Jola was left to stare at them blankly as the light faded. Something had told her that the action had repeated itself for the dozen or so houses down the block.

She shook herself, anger boiling. She tried to move forward once more but was caught around the waist this time.

“Let—go—of—me!”

“You want to get yourself killed too?”

She flailed her arms around wildly. “I can save her—I have to save her—let me go!”

“She’s already dead!”

“Shut up! Let me go! You stupid twat! If it weren’t for you and your friend we wouldn’t have gotten into this mess—“

“Quiet!”

She fell still, not because he had said so, but because the Banshee had cast its eyes in their direction. She shrunk into the shadows as the moon flared again. They were well hidden in the shrubs but it didn’t conceal their voices. It took her a minute to calm herself.

Deep down, in a corner of her mind where she never liked to look, she knew that Jensen was right. As much as she hated to admit it, it was too late for Fillis. She was still alive. She was a survivor.

She peered through the gaps in the leaves. The Banshee was heading in their direction.

“I don’t...I don’t think it saw us,” Jola said breathlessly, trying to push the thought from her mind. “There—look, it stopped. Thank God!”

The light faded.

“Maybe we can make a run for it,” she added, her voice hoarse from the running and the yelling. “These people are ruthless! I don’t think any of them will let us in. Where do you live Jen—?”

She stopped short, looking around wildly. "Jensen—Jensen?"

"Let me in—let me in damnet! There's a God damn Banshee on the loose!"

He was pounding his fists against the house just as Jola had done earlier. Either the people who lived there weren't home, or they were doing a good job of ignoring him, for nobody answered his pleas, not even the porch light.

"No you idiot!"

"Let me in—come on damnet! Its going to kill—"

He froze, wide-eyed. Jola peered through the shrubs again. It was too dark to gather its distance. The moon flared, answering her prayer. The small portion of the street visible to her was empty. She rose carefully, just enough to see over the bush. The girl's body was still there—but the Banshee was not. She looked frantically to either side of her.

What the hell...?

She turned and almost fell backwards against the shrub. The Banshee was already at the porch. It had missed her and made for the other instead. Jensen was already unconscious, his limp body dangling in the creature's clutches like a ragdoll, his sunglasses askew. She let out a shrill gasp and the creature turned, eyes glinting malevolently.

The body fell to the floor as the creature moved for her. It was over, and she knew it. She barely had enough energy to run. She would not get far. Herv and Fillis had already been lost, and she would join them.

Its eyes locked on hers in a peculiar way, as if talking. It might've been telling her that there was no point in running, for she had wanted to do so but remained obedient. It wasn't far, just a few more steps. The light died once more, allowing the shadows to seep in around her like loose ink through a page.

The Banshee raised its arm as it had done so to Peter. She closed her eyes and waited for the light and the release. Despite her blinded state something flashed through her lids. A screech sounded followed by what she thought was a mattress smacking the ground from a second floor drop. She opened her eyes.

A white, unmarked van stood before her, its four wheels digging into the yard. The engine was running, the headlights were on, the cargo door slid open, and the last thing Jola expected to see met her eyes.

A grown woman, about a head taller than her and maybe a decade older stepped out onto the grass. She looked from the Banshee's body ten paces away to the girl.

"Well don't just stand there—there are more of them! Come on!"

Chapter 4

The Beast and the Wounded Doe

Jola stared at the woman in bewildered disbelief.

“Well don’t just stand there like a garden gnome—get in quick!”

Before she could reply the woman had tackled her. They rolled through the dirt behind the bushes. Something blue streaked over head. Jola came to, spitting hair.

“Who are you?”

“I’ll explain later! Here—keep your head down!”

Three loud pops made Jola spring her hands to her ears on reflex. The woman dropped beneath the bushes. She met her eyes but before she could speak, the bush caught fire.

“Come on!”

She pulled her by the arm and thrust her into the van before climbing in herself. The door slid shut and the van reversed into the street. Jola saw another Banshee beyond the windshield. Revealing Light flashed and a fraction of

its face illuminated—gray, heavily lined skin stared back.

“Three shots and it still didn’t go down,” said the woman, sliding herself properly into the seat behind the front passenger side. A gun was held in her hand. She tucked it behind her back.

The driver changed gears and accelerated. The creature’s eyes grew larger. More jets of light flew into the windshield; each shot exploding into a shower of electric sparks which wormed their way across the glass in all directions, leaving it unharmed. The bumper connected with the Banshee. Jola heard it roll across the roof as the van sped forward. She tore her head over to the window to her right.

“No—we have to stop—Fillis!”

“I’m not stopping!” the man driving roared without looking back at her. “We shouldn’t have picked her up Madison—we could’ve ruined the mission! When the commander finds out he’s going to—shit!”

He slammed on the brakes and Jola’s face almost smacked the back of the driver’s seat. The woman had caught her in time, unaffected by the stop thanks to her seatbelt. “Put it on!” she declared. Jola didn’t argue. She snapped the buckle into place and looked ahead.

Two—three—four pairs of electric blue eyes stared at them from out of the darkness, lined up in no particular formation from the street and the sidewalks.

“God damnet!” spat the driver. He switched gears and brought the car into reverse. The woman looked over her shoulder as the van sped backwards. Jola craned her head over her shoulder as well. Something flashed—a pair of headlights.

“Stop!” cried the woman. “Another van—behind us!”

“The man double checked and swore again, switching the gears up once more. The tires squealed and the car

shot forward. "Let's hope they don't have pistols—hold on!"

The Banshees were growing larger, their eyes searching through the van's windows like vultures on the hunt. The moon flared and the creatures came into view. They were hooded, wearing black cloaks which resembled something out of a nightmare. As if one body and mind, they raised their arms in unison—and this time Jola could see that they were holding what looked like handguns. Waves of blue bubbles were cast across the suburban street from four directions. The van took several hits, mostly to the windshield. It sustained for the first two seconds but then several cracks split across the glass as if carved in by daggers.

The van sped past them. Jola looked back through the rear windows to see if they were taking damage behind them. The eyes were still watching. They grew distant before disappearing altogether, but no more bubbles of light issued.

Jola opened her mouth to speak, but as if the woman had read her mind, she said, "They only have eight shots apiece before they have to reload."

"Those were guns?"

The woman nodded. "Taserguns, to be exact. I think they only meant to stun you."

"Stun me?" Jola shrieked in disbelief. "Those things killed my friend back there!" she exclaimed, glaring.

The woman remained unperturbed, watching the girl closely, as if deducing her identity through unbroken observation.

"Did your friend get hit by a blue bubble of light like the ones that were shooting at us back there?"

"Yes—she fell forward and didn't get up!"

"Then she's not dead, just stunned—"

“Stunned?”

“Yes, stunned.”

“But—but the shrub! It exploded into fire! You saw it!”

The woman kept her expression patient, not making any signs of annoyance or frustration. She spoke in a calm manner, “Tasergun rounds were designed for skin and clothing. But sometimes they can super-surge through something like a plant or a moist block of wood, causing it to catch fire. And if there are enough volleys, they can crack or even melt glass. But the people who made them designed the weapons specifically for knocking a human unconscious.”

“The people who made them?” said the girl confused. “They were made by people?”

“Yes.”

Jola shrunk back in her seat. “So—so those weren’t. . . those weren’t Banshees?”

The woman’s eyes wandered around the girl’s face, taking in all of her features. “No,” she said, and Jola didn’t feel any trace of a lie in her tone. “They’re called Banshees,” the woman continued, “but they’re not the ones that you’re thinking of. At least not the spirits, demons or whatever evil things they’re being publicized as nowadays.”

Again, Jola felt no instinct urging her to distrust this woman’s word. “If they’re not real then what are they doing here?”

“They’re being used by the Temple to control Cyrus.”

“The Temple is using them?”

“Yes.”

“But they’re the ones warning us about them—“

“And did you notice that they’re doing next to nothing to stop them?”

Jola opened her mouth and fell short. The woman continued with a slight smile, “It’s they’re method of policing

the nights. The more people that go missing—the more people that catch sight of their unnatural eyes, the less likely curfew will be broken. It sounds brilliant on paper, but I still see kids like you disobeying.”

The girl’s mind raced into overdrive. “So my friends?”

“All children?”

“Yes.”

“Same age as you?”

“Yes—what’s going to happen to them?”

The woman paused. She balled her lip slightly. “They won’t kill them. They need them—”

“Need them for what?”

“I don’t know.”

“So what are they going to do with them?”

“I honestly don’t know. All I can tell you is that they have been abducting children who break curfew and report their absences as deaths on the news broadcasts. They bring the children to a facility in the heart of Azalea, not far from the Temple itself. That’s all I know.”

Again, Jola opened her mouth, almost as if aimed to argue on instinct. She closed it just as quickly and bit her lip, furring her brow. The van turned sharply. The moon flared and cast the fields on either side of the two-lane road into view like the reflection of lightning. Trees and tall grass grazed the outskirts. They had left the suburbs that had been the world entire to Jola.

Images of a once-thought-forever childhood came to mind, sparking memories which she could not have forgotten. Memories of joy and laughter, of hardships and fears, of days spent playing baseball with the rival clans, and nights long-ing for another. Faces of long lost people came into mind—of those who had grown of age and had started their lives elsewhere. She remembered the Projects who had gone missing, some of which had played in the park with her the

week before their abductions. The old man stared out at her through the looking glass, a smile on his face which he had not shown for months before his strange behavior had aroused, leading her to suspect madness. She saw Fillis, and Herv...

She blinked twice and the faces vanished, to be replaced by open fields. Anxiety kicked into her gut along with fear and despair. The light faded slowly this time, and as it did so she spied the color drain from her face in the brief reflection that had passed quickly.

"We have to go back!" she said urgently. "Please—you must turn back! I can't leave my friends behind!"

"There's nothing we can do about them now! Can't you see that?" said the driver. "They outnumbered us back there. We've risked more than enough picking you up alone."

She looked from him to the woman, pleadingly. "Herv—Fillis! Why did you save me if you're not going to save them?"

The woman's face drifted as if disappointed with herself. For the first time she broke eye contact with the girl, which only lasted a fraction of a second. The Revealing Light returned sooner than it had done before. Their green eyes connected again and Jola felt suddenly intimidated by her.

She was taller than her, Jola could tell, even though they were both sitting. She had perfectly straight, shoulder length auburn hair which glowed faintly—not so much to promote promiscuity, but just barely as if out of natural accord. Her skin was fair, her features soft, but not delicate. Her eyes matched the girl's, and Jola only just noticed that she was a woman who must not have had difficulty in keeping a man's attention. However, whatever presumption her physical attributes may have cast, her facial disposition contrasted greatly. She held a presence which did not

demand attention but, on the contrary, almost seemed to dispel it. A kind of sad, calculating beauty which neither seemed proud, nor disappointed.

She smiled weakly—matching her demeanor metaphorically. “I’m sorry,” she said, “There’s nothing we can do about your friends now. I don’t. . . I don’t know why I chose to save you, it just sort of happened. Something told me to. I couldn’t see you get shot and taken. It just happened, really, I don’t know why. . .”

Jola bit her lip and remained silent. Miles away from her fluctuating position Herv and Fillis were taking their share of the nightmare unconsciously. They would meet their horror, of course, whenever it was that they would awaken. So the Banshees weren’t real, did that mean that they didn’t happen to eat humans?

“No,” said the woman.

“No what?”

“No, they don’t eat humans, I know that much.”

Jola’s lips faltered. “What? How did you—?”

Something flashed, forcing them to break their gaze from one another. A sparkle of light like that of a twinkling star grew in the distance behind them. It eventually broke into two beams which shaped closer and closer into a pair of circles.

The woman kept her head over her shoulder and spoke urgently, “Andy—”

“I know! I’m doing the best I can!” he half-shouted. “We’ve been losing speed for the last few miles—we must’ve taken damage back there.” He looked back at her. “You have to do something!”

Jola looked from him to the approaching van. Do what?

The woman didn’t acknowledge him. She removed her seatbelt and withdrew the gun tucked behind her. She met Jola’s eyes. “Keep your head down.”

Jola ducked below the seat, but once the woman had climbed into the back row she looked up. She squinted slightly; the headlights weren't particularly damaging, as the tint of the back windows dispelled most of its radiance, however the van was particularly close. She watched as the woman approached one of the rear windows, which were split into two squares since the back door opened in two halves. What happened next, Jola couldn't tell, for suddenly the lights flashed blindingly, forcing her to look away.

* * *

The creature was almost at banking distance with the target van. It noticed that its opponent was running at a particularly modest speed, which it could tell since both vans were almost identical, and the creature hadn't peaked the accelerator yet. So the van was damaged—a wounded prey, like a doe running on three legs.

The Banshee made to ram the van but stopped short. Its electric blue eyes flashed daringly. Someone had climbed into the back, and it could just barely notice it even through the tint of the glass. It reached a hand for the lever on the opposite side of the gear shifter. The fog lights flickered on.

* * *

Madison cast her head to the side, caught off guard, her eyes tightly shut. She made to recover but the next

moment she was thrown back. The Banshee had collided with them. Their van twisted from side to side. The man up front worked his hands furiously to regain control of the vehicle.

“God damnet Madison—hurry!” she heard him say.

Her eyes squinted open only a hairline. She looked into the eye of the beast and fired. On her third shot the glass broke and the beam was cut in half. It was the beast’s turn to lose control. It swerved from side to side, one eye blinded.

The beast regained quickly, mounting speed and drawing up alongside their right. Madison clambered across the cargo hold, resting her elbows upon the backseat row, her head staring out the window. The front of the beast was zooming past, and for a fraction of a second she made eye contact with the creature driving. Something jolted her senses, like a spark of electricity. She felt the blood rush through her neck and her eyes widened.

“Get down!”

The girl to her left obeyed. Something flashed repeatedly like the blinking of an eye and the windows along the van shattered. The windshield, cracked and bullet ridden, survived for only a couple more seconds before it came through completely. Crystal-like shards rained horizontally as the wind swept through the vehicle. The van lost speed and swerved. They were now behind the beast.

“Don’t let it swoop and stop!”

“I know!” cried the driver impatiently, and he swerved the van to the right as the beast in front stopped short. It regained speed and rammed its target again.

The wounded doe rattled from side to side but steadied itself. Madison rolled into the movements and found herself at the back doors. She rose and fired repeatedly. The other rear window shattered along with the beast’s windshield.

It roared and rammed them again.

The woman landed on her back, her gun empty. She cast the hollow clip aside, reached for a new one and reloaded. She recovered and fired again, knocking the second headlight out. A rush of warm blood surged abnormally up her spine again and she dropped at once. The next second a volley of blue light flew through the rear hollows, momentarily illuminating their marks in a splash of electric. She inclined herself on her back slightly, her head not daring to peak. Her hand poked out the back and more shots were unleashed.

!Click!

Her arm retreated. The gun was empty once more. She patted herself down and came up empty, swearing under her breath.

"My bag," she called. "Toss me my bag, Andy—quick!"

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Jola lowered her hands from her head to see if it was safe to look again. She watched as the man upfront reached his hand wildly around, patting down the passenger seat blindly. He took a quick glance to his right, and the next second he pulled something dark out of the front with one arm and made to throw it behind him. Jets of blue light soared through the rear and out the front, zipping inches away from the man's right ear. He cursed and dropped the bag clumsily as his other hand sprung for the wheel, bringing the doe swiftly into the other lane.

"You!" he cried from the front, and Jola knew he was addressing her. "Get the bag!"

It was not far from her. She took it in her arms quickly and swung it behind her. The interior illuminated briefly. She shrieked and cast her weight to her left, her arms over her head, as the stunner rounds flew in one end and out the other.

The girl looked up a second later, brushing an impatient hand across her windswept hair. The woman had risen again. More flashes burst out of the muzzle of her weapon before she was forced to take cover again. She rose at the wrong moment and was knocked back in a blaze of blue light, her weapon slipping from her hand and vanishing into the road behind.

* * *

“Intuition,” the woman said in a strangely high pitched voice. She stood in the center of a domelike auditorium with high ceilings, rotating around the center platform on her heel to address the young women gathered in every direction of her. She smiled, eyes wide open and optimistic, and continued, “Is your greatest asset.”

Her students met her eyes in turn as she walked in circles around the center stage. They were seated in rows which encircled the dome, making rings upon rings of seats that stretched all the way to the back of the building.

A seventeen year old girl with short auburn hair cut to her ears looked around almost gloomily, catching unfamiliar faces in all directions. She felt alone in the crowd—a new student eager to prove her worth. Everyone was dressed differently, some clothed in the elegant, others in the casual. She looked down at her black sweater over a white

blouse and dark miniskirt, wondering whether it would suffice. Then she realized that she had dressed nicely after all, and began to question whether she had outdone herself. Should she have taken her father's advice?

"Just be yourself," he had told her. "Don't fight for competition and don't wane for sympathy, and I'm sure you'll do fine."

"But I don't... I don't know what they expect of me," she had told him. "What if they made a mistake and I'm not what they're looking for? What if I disappoint them and they send me back?"

"Then it'll be their loss, not yours. But they won't do that. You're much more special than you give yourself credit for."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am." He laughed. "You sound like you're looking for reasons not to go."

"Well I'm still a little confused. I mean, well, this has all happened so quickly and it still doesn't make sense to me. What did they see in me that was so special? I've asked all the other girls—the Thompsons and the Smiths, and Emily Kilbourne. And none of them had even heard of this 'Requiem.' It all sounds too good to be true. What if I get my hopes up and it's not what I expect? What if I'm making a bad decision by going?"

He watched her closely. After a moment he smiled. "It's a chance for you to get an education. Dear me, I haven't even heard of a woman in this part of town who got a chance to continue her education past primary school. And if that doesn't satisfy you, you will also get to wave your draft to the Excavades. Now doesn't that sound reasonable to you?"

"Well they didn't say what kind of an education it was—and I doubt it'll be real education, dad. It will proba-

bly be something like nursing or teaching—you know how the Temple is about women studying. And I thought you enjoyed the Excavades? You always told me good stories about you and the guys—“

“That was just to soften the blow, sweetheart. The truth is I never liked my service in the Excavades. It was two years of rigorous labor which I didn’t want you to fear, else you would’ve dreaded growing up, and then I wouldn’t have gotten the confident young woman that I’m looking at. But thankfully these people have arranged so that you won’t have to go through all of that—if you accept their offer, of course.”

“But do you want me to accept it?”

“Well I’ve been trying to convince you for the past ten minutes now—“

“No but, do you really want me to go? I mean not just for me?”

He sighed. “I only want what’s best for you. If an opportunity presents itself, you should take it and not ask so many questions!” He smiled nonetheless. “Dear me, you’re so much like your mother.” They watched each other for another moment. “Now go,” he said. “Get the rest of your bags ready before you change your mind.”

His voice faded away and the helium-filled voice of the woman speaking returned, jolting the girl to the present.

“You have all been brought here because you share this one quality which separates you from the rest of the girls—from the rest of the world!” said the woman. “Intuition is what you have, that they do not.” She put her hands together. “Now my dears, I’m sure you’re all wondering what exactly it is that I am talking about, and some of you are even thinking that I might be some cracked up woman who might have wasted your time in bringing you here. Isn’t that right, my dear?”

Heads turned swiftly in unison as if a breeze had swept their jaws. Madison blinked, her eyes glancing to either side of her. They were all watching her now, and it took another split-second for her to realize that the woman had been addressing her.

She was watching her now, with wide, optimistic eyes like a child, as if the girl before her was a particularly interesting creature at the zoo. Madison straightened up slowly, well aware of the hundreds of eyes trained on her. "I . . . I'm sorry?" she said uncertainly.

The woman continued to watch her with that penetrating, curious stare. Nevertheless, she smiled. "Don't worry, my dear. I am not angry with you. On the contrary, I'm glad that you had the willingness to question my authority, even if it was within your very own conscience."

The girls began exchanging faces with one another, all equally confused as her. "My . . . my conscience?" she replied.

The woman considered the thought for a moment, then nodded, smiling, "Of course my dear—well you were thinking that I'm not making any sense, even though I've only been talking to you for a few minutes. Weren't you thinking that, my dear?"

"I don't—I don't follow—"

"Do not be worrisome!" the woman waved impatiently. "For all the time you will spend here, you must never be worrisome! It's perfectly alright for you to have thought that—in fact, you've just sparked everyone in this auditorium to give a second thought as to why they allowed themselves to waste their time listening to a crazy woman whose telling them that they're different—maybe even special, in comparison to the world."

Madison frowned, uneasy. "I'm sorry, I don't understand what you're getting at, Madam."

"You were just thinking about your father a moment

ago—before I called upon you, that is.”

The girl opened her mouth and closed it. “How—?”

“You thought about what he told you the day before you left, and then you started to think that I was crazy for saying that you’ve got this ‘gifted ability’ and that you’re not like the rest of the world.” She paused. “Weren’t you just thinking that, Madison Hergrants?”

Madison gaped slightly. “Yes, I was. But how did you know?”

The woman smiled again. “Because intuition allows me to understand better, sometimes even more clearly than if I were to talk to you, as if I were reading your mind.”

“You. . . you can read my mind?”

The rest of the girls exchanged skeptical laughs with one another. Madison could understand how this was rather a stupid thing to say, but she was beginning to suspect that the woman could read her thoughts.

“And what are you laughing at, Ms. Vetford?” said the woman crossly. Silence fell in the auditorium as if the air had been suddenly stripped of oxygen. Another girl in her late teens seated in the front row across the other end of the circular seating arrangements looked from left to right quickly.

The woman turned from Madison and strode to the other. She stopped before the girl, her short figure suddenly towering. The girl didn’t reply, her face sinking slightly.

“Your name is Connie Vetford,” said the woman. “You came to Requiem solely because you believed that you really were special—and this you have believed since you were five years old, when you discovered that you were the brightest child in kindergarten. However, you assumed that when the Temple employees who scouted you told you that you would be partaking in something special, it would involve some kind of higher level of education which didn’t

involve a squat, fluffy haired blonde talking like an eccentric lunatic, making claims of reading other people's minds."

The girl opened her mouth to speak but the woman continued, "But I know you, Connie. Perhaps better than you know yourself. If you've forgotten, need I remind you? Your mother's name is Matilda, you have two older brothers, Bill and Fred, both of whom you have out-excelled in sports achievements at your primary school, Willington Primary Academy, where you also made valedictorian and met two of your boyfriends, Ted Marshal, and Frank Berringer. You feel saddened that you had achieved so well academically—even feel as if you were cursed because you know that women in this world aren't given the same opportunities as men, no matter how bright they may be. When you were twelve your dog got run over by a Project Boy and you returned the favor by burning his boarding house down. When you were fourteen you had your first kiss—to Ted Marshal, might I add. He went too far and so you knocked his front teeth out. And despite all this information that I am relaying to you, you still do not believe that I can not only read your mind, but delve slightly into your memory as well."

Connie paused, mouth gaping. Her nostrils flared and she readjusted her jaw, staring out with an air of confidence. "You don't need to be a mind reader to know all that stuff. You could've just read it out of a file which the Temple has on me. And the rest of it is guesswork."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, my dear. But I most certainly didn't read it out of a file. Dear me, I don't believe you are that interesting to the Temple to have compelled them to keep such a record."

The girls all around laughed. Connie's face flushed red. She stood up slowly. "It still doesn't prove that you can read minds. Come on, what kind of nonsense is that?"

"Oh it's not nonsense, my dear," said the woman. She turned her back on the girl and moved forward a few steps, her hands tucked behind her back and her head bowed gracefully. "Raise your right hand."

"I'm sorry, what—?"

"I said raise your right hand!" repeated the woman carefully.

Connie's eyes shifted for a moment. She raised her hand all the same.

"No, no, that's barely above your head," said the woman, her back still to the girl. A few girls exchanged faces. "Raise it higher, so that everyone in the room can see."

Connie obeyed, stretching her arm out as high as her body would allow. She pressed her tongue to her cheek.

"Now, my dear, I want you to hold up a number using your fingers. If that is, er—too difficult for you to understand, you hold up one finger if you want to show the number one, and two fingers if you want to show the number two. Can you do that?"

"Of course I can—"

"Then when I tell you to start, I want you to put up a different number after I've guessed the previous. Sound all right? Go!"

The girl put up four fingers.

"Four," said the woman.

The girl lowered her pinky.

"Three."

She lowered all but one.

"One. Five. Two. Four. Five. Four. Three. One. Two. Two. Two. Two—didn't I tell you to put up a different number after I've guessed the previous?"

The girls began muttering amongst themselves. Some of them gasped, others watched closely. Connie's face was boiling now. She remained on two, her face grim as if she

were being humiliated.

“What’s the matter? Care to go on?”

The girl scowled and continued.

“Five. Five. Three. Four. Two. Four. One. Eight—now you’re using two hands. Well it’s going to be a challenge, I will admit, but if you insist—Six. Nine. Seven. Five. Two. Three. Eight. Ten. Four. Two. And one.”

Silence fell. All eyes were on the woman, staring with a mixture of fear and incredulity. She turned to face the girl, smiling. “Do not be disappointed. You are right to be skeptical. However, now you know that what I am telling you is true. You all have a special quality that sets you apart from the rest. And in due time you will be able to achieve what I have just demonstrated. However, this is just the crumbs of the pie. There is much, much more that you will be able to do if you are willing to learn. And I have absolute confidence in you. Why else would I have requested that the Temple allow me to pull you away from the draft conscription in order to teach you?”

“The Temple knows about this?” said one of the girls, astonished. Excited chatter stirred.

“Why certainly. I have been given full support by the Temple to establish this facility. It will be your new home for the next four years, during which you will learn how to control your abilities, as well as become scholars in whichever field you wish to study.”

The chatter grew louder. “We’ll get to become scholars? Actual scholars?” said another girl.

“Yes. I know this seems unbelievable; I don’t need to be a mind reader to know what you’re thinking. But what I tell you is true.”

A girl in a middle row stood up. “But more than ninety-nine percent of scholars are men. It’s no secret that the Temple has made strong efforts to deny us the same privi-

leges as them.”

“Times are changing,” said the woman. The chatter rose to the point that the woman had to raise her hands for silence, nodding her head and smiling all the same. “Yes, yes, it’s wonderful, believe me I know. But shall I continue?”

An almost unanimous round of agreement swept the auditorium. It became quiet in only a few seconds. The woman began pacing around the stage in a circle again, her voice heard even without amplification.

“Now then, the first thing you will learn is what exactly intuition is. It most definitely isn’t merely mind reading—although I don’t like to use that term, for you aren’t reading a person’s thoughts but rather feeling it as if it were your own. But you see, intuition is sort of a third eye, not behind the back of your head—as you might be thinking from my demonstration with Ms. Vetford (a few laughed). But rather an eye which is capable of seeing all which your other two cannot.

“It is what you will use to guide you throughout your lives, both practically and metaphorically. You can use it to tell where people are standing in a darkened room, or simply as a gut instinct on whether or not you should go out with that one cousin who always gives you the stare at your family reunions on Starry Night (a few girls laughed again). You will be able to use it to tell when a person is hiding something from you, or even, determine one’s thoughts from time to time...” She stopped pacing.

“Now then,” she said, her voice slightly magnified. “While you are here you will also receive special training needed to defend yourself. It is similar to that of the Temple Marines.”

“Er—like soldier training?” one of the girls called out.

“Yes, like soldier training. Part of your intuitive de-

velopment will require you to become a more well-rounded individual. So you will not only learn the 'practical' things, but also some out of the box education to open your minds like art, literature, or even soldier training. Do not worry," she added as a majority of the girls exchanged looks of uncertainty. "You will not need to shave your head or eat fried worms (again, this was met by laughter). However, you will need to learn how to use a gun properly as well as how to defend yourself if you are cornered in an alley and the only weapon you've got on your side is a four foot broom—which, you can all take my word for, isn't the most pleasant thing in the world to do." She dropped from the stage and walked, stopping short of an auburn haired girl in the front row. They met eyes and the woman smiled kindly. "But one thing you must know before all else is that there is no weapon greater than your own intuition."

Get up. . .

Madison began to stir. Her upper body was numb, as if drained of blood, particularly around her right shoulder. Her head felt as light as a feather, and yet she could not manage the strength to lift it. Her fingers flexed, catching themselves repeatedly as if attempting to capture a pocket of air.

"Madison!" called the driver.

Come on! Get up!

She obeyed, pushing herself up with the weight of her left. Her gun was missing. With a heavy effort she inclined herself steadily and reached for her bag. Her hand worked furiously until it caught hold of something useful: a gray canister with a mug-like handle joined only at the head. A small silver ring like that of a keychain poked out the top. She held it in her left hand—her right was terribly numb—and used the latter to pull the pin. The timer would not go off until after the handle had been released.

She made for the doors but stumbled on her front, almost fumbling the canister. The numbing sensation made it seem almost impossible to straighten herself properly. She tried to rise against her left weight but was unable to look over the windows.

She supposed she could just throw the canister blindly, but that would run the risk of it missing the van and slipping into the road after her pistol, where it would detonate uselessly. She made to get up again. It was slightly easier this time. The feeling in her arm was regaining. Another few moments and she would've straightened up properly, but the beast had struck again.

Madison fell on her front and tumbled forward. Her face smashed into the backdoors ungracefully, the canister slamming hard. She was able to swing her right hand over the hollow window pane but withdrew it quickly, blood dripping from her palm. Her fingers drifted down the back, smearing crimson across its surface. Then she caught hold of something she could use.

Of course! Why hadn't she thought of it before? She didn't have time to curse her stupidity as the van rattled violently once more, causing her to drift away from the doors. She crawled back to them on her elbows. Her arm readied itself for the throw as she used the other to release the door handle. The breeze whistled, dragging one of the doors with it. The beast was closing in for another attack.

Her arm swung up and the canister was released into the air. It bounced off of the beast's hood and soared in through the hollow where a windshield should've been. Madison shielded her face as the blinding blast ensued.

!Bang!

Revealing Light flashed. She looked up. The beast was undamaged, but it was clear that the driver had lost control. The creature's eyes were shut. The van swerved violently

from side to side before casting off of the two-lane road completely.

Chapter 5

Blackout

Jola watched as the object flew from one van to the other. A slight, yet sharp, explosion ensued, sounding off a cross between a firecracker detonation and fingernails screeching down a blackboard. The girl would've liked to have covered her ears, but her eyes had taken the damage first. She shrieked and cast her arms over her face as a powerful blinding sensation took over.

Her ears were ringing even though the blast had not been very loud. Her head felt as if it were being filled with helium. Images of twirling wisps of smoke came to mind, as if she were spinning rapidly on a merry-go-round. She felt nauseous. Surely she would pass out from this pain. She keeled over and vomited, unable to tell if she had projected it up or down.

A pair of arms found her. A set of lips caught her ear. A woman's voice echoed off in the distance somewhere, muttering something she could not understand.

Temperature, it was saying. The temperature would not last long.

“What...?” she said just barely, unable to hear herself.

“Calm down,” said the voice much clearer than before. “It’s only temporary. Your vision should return in a minute.”

Jola opened her eyes. She was in a white room, unable to see even her own hands before her. It became dirtier and dirtier until the interior of the van began to form. Something pleasant like the smell of honey and flowers met her nostrils. Hair which was not her own brushed through her eyes along with the breeze that swept the van from front to back. The arms loosened slightly.

“Are you okay?”

She blinked quickly. “I...I think so. What happened?”

“You were stunned momentarily by looking into the light. I told you to keep your head down, didn’t I?”

Jola couldn’t see the face pressed against the side of her head, but she was sure that the woman was grinning. Someone swore loudly from the front.

“What?”

“We’re losing speed. The engine’s taken too much. It must’ve been the stunner rounds.” The man cursed again and looked over his shoulder. “We’re not going to make it.”

Madison climbed out of the cargo hold and settled herself in her seat. She looked out across Jola’s lap.

“Pull off the road,” she said. “We’re going to need to hide the van or else there will be search parties here by morning.”

“They’re going to send patrols either way!” said the man impatiently.

“But if we hide the van they might think we’re still on the road. They might assume that we headed into the city. Now pull off!”

The driver muttered something under his breath but turned the wheel all the same. The van pulled off to the

left, sinking into the fields, cutting through the tall grass.

“Bring us into the trees—quickly!”

It was already losing speed. The axels were creaking as if heavily rusted. They were traveling no faster than the average bike now. They closed in on the forest slowly, and just barely made it into the trees when the wheels slowed to a complete stop.

“Let’s go,” said Madison, ushering Jola out of the van. The girl stepped out and lost her balance, falling to her knees. Madison landed after her, swinging a backpack over her shoulder. She helped the girl to her feet.

“Thanks.”

Jola looked around quickly. The road was far out in the distance, framed above the tall grass. They were at the edge of a scattered forest.

The crickets greeted them in song. There was something peculiar about the way the moonlight streamed through the trees. The grass at the bottom didn’t catch much of the light from above, only receiving brittle rays, which survived through the tiny cracks the forest would permit, giving off just enough energy for the plant life to flourish. The mist glowed strangely, as if another force was illuminating the environment. Even more beautiful was the on-and-off activity of the moon, which showered the setting with thin rays in random intervals, as if the light was actually rain drizzling from beyond the heavens.

“We’re not going to spend the night here, are we?” Jola said quickly as she and Madison walked ahead, her eyes slightly narrowed.

“No.”

“Where are we going then?”

“Somewhere safe.”

“Damnet!”

The girls looked back at the man who had only just got-

ten out of the van, slamming his bag onto the moist soil, defeated. "We don't have flashlights. I knew I should've packed some!" His face changed as he looked at Madison. "Those binoculars of yours don't happen to have night vision on them, do they?"

"No."

He fixed her a tense look as if being stranded in the forest was entirely her fault.

"Er, sorry," she added, rubbing her neck, "I was raised to discriminate against night vision specs, strict upbringing, really."

"Very funny."

"It's not that dark, what's the problem?"

He swung up his bag and stopped short of the two girls. "It's 12:52."

"What happens at 12:52?" Jola asked quickly.

The man looked at her but didn't answer. Madison considered this for a moment, her tongue pressed against her cheek. "We'll be fine," she said. "Do you have our bearings?"

"Yea, but—"

"Then call the commander. Have him pick us up three miles north of here."

"Three miles? Why can't—"

"Because we're too close to the road," she finished. "I'm not risking them following us back. Now call him in, and hurry. We have a long walk from here."

The creature's cloak swept from the tall grass as it stepped onto the pavement. It had left the beast, face smashed and crumpled like paper, before a large tree in the distance. It followed the road ahead, arms hanging unmoved at its sides, its neck tall and towering like a vulture, its shaded demeanor seemingly unaffected by the flashes of light from the heavens. Its cloak swished behind it, float-

ing birdlike through the air, bullet holes strewn across its black flesh.

Something rattled in its chest, like the shiver of a cornered prey. The creature reached a gray, deadened hand, with long, overly stretched fingers and sharp, black nails as dark as its cloak. Its head remained unmoved, staring ahead.

“What is it, my lord?” it spoke at long last, in a high, harsh, monotonous voice.

“1—0—4—1,” said the man on the other end, his voice deep and powerful. “Where are you?”

“An access road, heading north into the city.”

“Did you apprehend them?”

“No,” said the creature. “I’m on foot.”

There was a pause on the other end, and the Banshee knew that the man had gathered what had happened, but it remained unperturbed, all emotion lost.

“You disappoint me,” said the man. “How many were there?”

“Three,” said the creature, remembering the faces that had brushed past the beast as it strafed the doe with its pistol. “A man. A woman. And a child.”

“The child who got away?”

“She will not get far. I shall find her.”

“She?” said the voice, mildly surprised. “A girl?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Again the man paused. “What did she look like?”

“Small. Teenager like the rest. Brown hair and green eyes like the woman.”

The creature remembered the face it had seen with the flashing of the light, and it would not forget it. It had next to no emotions. All that mattered was the power it held over the humans. It was superior, by far. The woman had violated its nature. It would find her. She was marked.

"I see," said the man. "I'll have a patrol pick you up. They must be in the city, perhaps a roadblock will suffice... I'll need to question the children you've taken myself when they are properly right. I doubt the old man had given them a task to fulfill should he die, but I cannot dismiss it. If she brought something to them, something we overlooked, then we may have a bigger problem than we anticipated."

The line clicked dead and the creature stopped. The sky was already aglow. The light faded slowly against the stars. It drifted for what seemed like a minute, unique from the other times it had extinguished during the night. The last of the sky's color drained, and the night reached its darkest, and it would remain that way until the first sign of the sun.

* * *

Jola watched as the Revealing Light left for the last time that night, and she knew why the man had been worried about the time. The three were left in next to complete darkness, even heavier than it had been before the flaring of the moon. Jola grew anxious quickly: she could not see where the other two were.

"Blackout," said the woman slowly from somewhere ahead of her.

"What are we going to do?" said Jola, her hand stretched forward like a blind man. "I can't see you."

"Here."

She fidgeted uneasily as a hand caught hers perfectly.

"Don't worry, we'll be fine."

Jola stumbled as the hand pulled her forward. Her feet shook uncertainly with each step, wondering whether she would trip on the next.

“Madison? Madison where are you? I can’t see.”

“Hold on, Andy. I’m coming.”

She pulled the girl through the darkness. They stopped and Jola heard a sharp intake of breath from the man.

“Stay close to me, both of you,” said Madison, and they moved forward again.

Jola realized that they were going deeper into the forest, judging by the pleasant sinking sensation of the ground at her feet. Her shoulders tensed up. “M-maybe we should head for the fields,” she said uncertainly, almost tripping on herself. “I know its dark—but I’ve played hide-and-seek in the Blackout before. You know, before the Banshees and all. Its bad now but your eyes will get used to it. It’s completely black here because the forest drowns out the stars. And if we head back for the fields it will still be too dark for anyone to see us from the road, so we won’t be spotted.”

“Relax, we’ll be fine.”

“B-but we can’t see anything. How do you know we won’t walk into a tree or a bear’s house? Can you see in the dark?”

“Not really, no.”

“Wha—what?” croaked the girl, and she took a misstep and tripped. The soil and the leaves were cold and lifeless. “Wait!” she cried getting to her feet, but the woman had caught hold of her again.

“It’s okay. I’m not going to leave you. Just stay close to me, and try to take big steps so you don’t stumble on a log.”

Jola obeyed, but she still didn’t feel completely assured. It was cold. She was starting to regret giving Fillis her

hoodie. What did an unconscious girl need to feel warm for? Even though she had a sweater over her blouse, it still didn't suffice, and she was still damp from the sprinklers.

The hand pulled her to the side.

"What is it?" Jola said quickly, casting her head over her shoulder despite her blinded state. She couldn't hear anything but their sinking footsteps, and she noticed that she was the only one stumbling every now and then as if walking off balance. "Did you hear a bear?" she added in an undertone.

"No. You almost walked into a tree. You can relax, really. There aren't any bears in these woods."

"How did you know there was a tree?"

"I had a feeling," the woman shrugged.

Jola furrowed her brow, confused. She grew suddenly conscious of the woman's warm hand—and she remembered that the woman had been wearing less than her.

"Are you—?"

"A witch?" said the woman pleasantly.

"H-how did you know I was going to ask that?" And Jola felt suddenly stupid that all of the excitement of the night had caused her to forget that she was in fact in the company of strangers. She gulped and balled her lip.

"I had a feeling. But no, I'm not a witch. The Temple seems to be good at selling superstitions. By the way, my name is Madison, if I haven't introduced myself properly before. You're going to need to move again, there's a shrub."

Jola was pulled to the side again. She felt insecure. Had the woman been invading her thoughts?

"Can you read my mind?"

"I don't like that term, really. But yes, I can sort of read your mind, if you want to call it that."

Jola opened her mouth and closed it. A mixture of

excitement, intrigue, and a hint of fear raced through her. "Should—should I tell you my name? Or do you already know it?"

"I might, but you should probably tell me anyways."

"Jola," she whispered strangely. "Jola Truehase."

"Pleased to meet you Jola. This is Andy. Why don't you properly introduce yourself, Andy?"

Jola heard someone snicker unpleasantly across from her.

"Don't worry, it's not you," said Madison. "He just gets a little cranky. See he doesn't like it when I pull him through the darkness. Women issues, really."

"Oh, very funny," said the man harshly.

"He's doing better than I am," said Jola, well aware of her audible stumbling.

"Well this isn't the first time I had to pull him through the darkness," said Madison. "He was worse than you back then. But he's figured out how to go along with it smoothly and not talk, even though he hates taking a woman's physical lead. Like I said: women issues."

"Well with incompetent women like you, who could blame me?"

Something crunched, like the sound of a person walking into a bush. The man swore loudly. "You did that on purpose!"

"Sorry," she said dully, "must be my incompetence."

Jola laughed under her breath. They walked on, and she forgot all about the forest around them. Her feet stumbled no more.

The man stepped off of the elevator and into the golden corridor, his black robes concealing his feet from behind him. His tall frame cast a towering shadow on the wall opposite the burning torches. His strides were that of a boxer, swift and firm, each step calculated like the movements on a chess board. He turned the corner. The sound of voices grew louder.

He came to the mouth of the corridor and found himself before a large lobby suited to fit hundreds, with walls painted gold and floors made of marble. It was next to empty at this hour. He ignored the three men circled together in the center talking loudly, their voices magnified slightly by an echo, and passed reception desks left and right. The few employees on the night shift looked up as he passed, but lost interest all too quickly.

They did not know that he was a powerful man, but that did not matter. He preferred it this way, and so did the people who had appointed him. He was the man who they had chosen to lead them through their darkest hour. His authority, second only to dictatorship, was tall, black, and faceless, like the shadow of a boulder. It did not matter who he was, only what he was capable of.

The glass barrier that marked the grand entrance, which was as long and as high as the walls, grew closer to him, staring out into a beautiful display of a large amount of stone steps leading down into the darkness below. He turned on his foot and walked alongside them, heading into another corridor instead. He emerged through a door and began descending the stone floors, his steps echoing off of the brick-laden walls and the pipes that ran overhead.

The ramp led out into a subterranean parking structure, where hundreds of white, unmarked vans came into first sight alone. He singled out one of them, unlocked it and climbed in, sliding his key into the ignition before bringing

the beast to life.

He was driving through the streets now, leaving behind a large, golden palace which seemed to set the stone steps at its base aglow. The streets were darkest at this hour, as well as empty. The traffic lights were stuck on flashing red, but he ignored them. After leaving parks scattered with trees on either side, tall buildings began to whirl past.

He reached into his robes and withdrew a phone, initiating a speed dial before bringing it to his ear.

"Yes, my lord," said a grainy voice on the other end.

"Did you receive the Banshees' prisoners?"

"No, not yet. It's a long drive from the south suburbs. But we shall have them ready soon. What is it that you wish?"

"I'm heading for the SEA right now," he said, his voice harsh and confident.

"Here? What for?"

"I'd like to interrogate the prisoners."

"With all due respect, my lord, we have people here who can see to that—"

"You're forgetting your place, Mr. Shaffer."

"Forgive me. I was merely suggesting," said the voice respectfully. "May I ask why?"

"You need not fear, Mr. Shaffer. I am not disappointed with you or your staff. But this is a sensitive matter that I must see to personally."

"Of course, my lord. But your identity? Should I alert the staff?"

"No, that won't be necessary," the man dismissed swiftly. "I don't need the respect. There's no point in me revealing myself to a faculty ridden with spies. That was the whole point of Conclave's appointment."

"I see," said Shaffer. "I shall leave the prisoners in separate interrogation chambers and see to it that my personnel

have vacated the Logistics Wing so that you may work discreetly.”

“That isn’t necessary,” said the man. “We need all of our efforts running full course during these times. I doubt these children’s capture will make the spies amongst us suspect that I will question them myself. There’s no need to delay our schedule.”

“As you wish. I’ll see to it that an all access pass will await you at the entrance lobby. Tell the guards your confirmation name is Eliot Whistler. I will retire myself to my quarters while you are here to give you privacy.”

“That isn’t necessary either. I need you by my side.”

“My lord?”

“Again, do not forget your place, Mr. Shaffer. I will work faster if you are available to me. I cannot waste any time.”

“Thank you, my lord. I will be honored to know your company,” spoke Shaffer earnestly. “How shall I know you?”

“Meet me at the entrance lobby. I shall be wearing black robes and I will introduce myself to you as Eliot Whistler.”

“As you wish.”

* * *

“Er—I feel stupid for asking this now, but where exactly are we going?” said Jola. They had been walking for what seemed like close to half an hour. The air around her was still pitch black. Every now and then she would see a small spec of a star above from which she gathered was a gap in the forest trees, but it would vanish as quickly as she had

spotted it.

"To our headquarters just outside of Azalea," said Madison, her hand still leading the girl through the darkness.

"Headquarters?" the girl repeated. She continued before the woman could reply, "Who are you people?"

"We—me and Andy, that is—are part of an organization that is undermining the Temple through a series of efforts made both politically and," she paused slightly, "with force."

"Like—like a rebellion party?"

"Yes," said the woman, and Jola could tell from the sound of her voice that she had turned to look at her. "Like a rebellion party."

Another minute passed before Madison continued, "There are things that the Temple has been covering up—things like the children who have gone missing in the night."

"But they say that the Banshees are the one's responsible. And they are!"

"Yes, but they never said that they were the one's who were ordering the Banshees to stalk the nights in the first place."

"They're ordering them?"

"I told you in the van that the Temple has been using the Banshees to enforce curfew. They just act as if their presence happens independently, even though the creatures load the captured children into white, unmarked vans when nobody is looking, the standard mass-produced vehicle of the Temple."

"Should we really be telling her this?" spoke the man suddenly from out of the darkness.

"Why shouldn't we? She's going to find out in a day or so anyways."

"You don't know that for sure," stipulated the man. "We don't need to be telling her anything that she doesn't

need to know. If she learns too much she may need to be silenced."

Jola swallowed her breath. Surely the people who came to her rescue weren't going to kill her?

"Relax, Jola, we don't do that sort of thing," the woman answered her thoughts. "And what do you mean 'you don't know that for sure?' Are you having doubts in our plan, Agent Rivenwilo?"

For the third time that day, or rather the first, since technically it was tomorrow, Jola's mind stirred upon the name. "Rivenwilo?" she breathed. "You don't happen to have a sister named Sarah, do you?"

The man chuckled. "I take it you've seen her on TV?"

"Well yea—but also your brother Ron, and your twin sisters Cecil and Fan. I know them—they live in my neighborhood."

"Small world."

"Yeah, it is," said Jola, excitement swelling in her chest. The apprehension and uncertainty had swept away. She was in the company of a Rivenwilo—of a person who was connected to people she felt safe with. She made to say something but changed course mid-thought.

"How old are you?"

"I have a feeling she's asking you, not me, Andy," said the mind reader.

"Twenty-four," said the man. "Why?"

"Well," she began, "it's just that... it's just that... well your brother and your sisters are Project children who have to live in a boarding house. And if you're of age, then shouldn't you have taken care of them?" She said all this very carefully, without a hint of accusation.

There was a long pause and Jola felt her face flush. But then the man spoke, and this time he didn't sound harsh, but slow and sincere.

“Believe me, I’ve wanted to. It’s just. . . well the Temple hasn’t allowed me to. You see, my mother and my father were married. They had three children: me, my older brother Fred, and my younger sister Amy. We lived in the mountains, in central Midlands. But then our mom died, and it was just us four.

“Five years later my father met another woman, and they had five children together out of wedlock, all born in secret. My father didn’t want to remarry, out of respect for my mother, and my stepmom respected that. Technically she wouldn’t be our stepmom, but we still called her that. We kept to ourselves, mostly. My stepmom lived with us, but she didn’t make it public. Eventually the Temple found out, and they took the five born out of wedlock and placed them into boarding houses. My father and my stepmother were heartbroken. They had just had the twins. Me, Fred, and Amy got to stay with our father, of course, but the social workers were even considering taking us out as well.

“Eventually my stepmom was driven mad, and she killed herself, and my father died of cancer the same year. I was twelve at the time. We all went into separate boarding houses, see, they don’t make an effort to sympathize with sibling placement, they just send us to wherever has an immediate opening. Andy and I were scattered to a city on the west coast, different boarding houses but not far apart. Amy got sent up northeast. The other five came to Azalea. Abbi and Sarah lived together in the suburbs to the east of the city while Ron, Cecil, and Fan got to live south, the same house, thank God.

“After Fred returned from the Excavades he tried to get custody of them, but the Temple wouldn’t allow it. Eventually me and Amy came of age, and we found each other. We promised we would wait for each of the others to leave the boarding houses and take them in, that’s one of

the reasons why I came here to Azalea, to stay close to the others until their time was up. Amy went up north again while Fred and I lived together. We both worked as paper-pushers in an office within the Temple of Cyrus. That was where we met the commander and joined his people—" he stopped short, as if realizing that he had said too much.

Jola knew that she had heard more than she should have. She decided not to press on.

"I'm sorry that all of that happened to you. It sounds terrible," she said.

The man didn't respond.

Jola bowed her head. She made to say something but trotted on something and stumbled off balance.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine," she replied, holding her hand out for the woman. It never came. "Er—Madison?"

A light broke through the darkness. Jola squinted as her eyes adjusted. A flashlight beam had taken in Madison's body. It remained on the woman for a few seconds before turning for the girl and back.

"Madison," spoke another woman's voice. It was young, and slightly higher pitched than the latter. "I thought I felt your presence." She snapped her fingers and a pair of flares flickered on either side of her. Two men were holding the light rods which looked as if they were exploding at the head in a shower of lemon flavored sparks.

The woman stepped closer, her face illuminated by the flares. She was dressed in a blue uniform camouflaged with black spots, matching those of the men on either side of her. Her hair was long, blonde, and wavy. Her face was pretty. She was an inch or so shorter than Madison.

"I'm glad to see you, Blair," said Madison.

"Come on," said the other woman. "The van is a little ways from here."

Chapter 6

The Cave

“The girl?”

“We rescued her from the Banshees,” said Madison. “She and her friends snuck into the Professor’s house over an hour ago.”

The blonde woman made a curious gesture. “Did the Professor send for her? Does she have what he was planning to have come our way before he died?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t asked her yet, and she hasn’t revealed anything important,” Madison replied.

The blonde woman looked back at the young, teenage girl trotting along next to one of the flare bearers. “But you think she does, right? You believed she had been given instruction by the Professor to retrieve something should he die? Otherwise you wouldn’t have picked her up, I assume?”

Madison made a calculating grimace. “I don’t know what happened. We saw a Banshee enter the house after them from our surveillance nest. It was obvious what was going on inside. I made Andy bring us around the block.

That's where we spotted her in trouble. I can't say that I acted because I thought she had what the old man wanted us to find. But something told me to stop it and so I did."

She paused a moment, then added, "I know the commander will be furious with me. Andy was right; I shouldn't have picked her up. We could've been captured ourselves. I put the mission at risk."

"Don't think too much of it," the other woman assured. "You followed your instinct like we've been told to, and knowing you, your mind is stronger than the rest of us. Hell, I can't walk through the forest in a Blackout without a flashlight. Maybe there was a reason you did what you did that will turn out later. Besides, knowing my fa—the commander, I'm sure he'll trust your judgment in the end. He always does. And I don't blame him either, because I trust you."

Madison remained silent, her thoughts still on her recent judgment. They followed the second flare bearer ahead of them until a white, unmarked van came into the clearing. Blair opened the back doors and climbed in, followed by Andy and Madison. Madison reached a hand out for Jola and pulled her in as well.

The van didn't have the traditional seating of most vehicles. The driver's seat and the shotgun position were still rooted in the front as usual. However the backseat was removed and replaced with two long benches that ran lengthwise on either side of the van. Andy distanced himself from the women by taking up the bench opposite them. Jola sat limp on Madison's left, her head leaned back against the pane, her neck sinking. The engine roared to life and the vehicle picked up speed.

It wasn't long until Jola had fallen asleep, her weary head curled up on Madison's shoulder. The woman held an arm over her and stroked her hair absentmindedly. After a

minute she looked to the woman on her right.

"Is the commander still going through with our strike tomorrow?"

"He was until just recently," Blair said bluntly. "Our inside man at the Security Enforcement Agency contacted us not long ago, while the two of you were on surveillance."

"I thought he went dark?"

"We thought so too. It turns out he was just being cautious."

"What did he say?"

"Apparently the Temple has been housing an army in secret."

"An army?" Madison repeated. "Like more Marines?"

"I wish," said the woman, slightly apprehensive. "Right now the Temple is distrustful of any person who can think for himself or have an opinion, which means everybody under their staff, basically. They're cutting back on human personnel. And you can't blame them because it's our spies who have made them think twice. The way the commander sees it, they're in bad shape. They'll have a serious breach in their chain of command should one of them turn out to be working for us all along. We've forced them to take drastic measures to keep their plans secret. Their high priests are following a new protocol known as Monotone to keep their agendas to themselves, even if it means denying information to their superiors. All of their plans have been broken up into separate parts assigned to different high priests. Even if the plan is contingent to the success of another part undertaken by another high priest, they cannot reveal it."

"So basically they're taking pure orders without asking questions."

"Something like that. What we know is that Conclave has appointed a head to their entire operations. We don't

know how long he's been involved, but he has the entire Temple under his control at the moment."

"The master puppeteer..." Madison said under her breath. "Do we know who he is? Or would that have been too easy?"

Blair shook her head. "I don't think anybody knows but Conclave, and unfortunately we don't have any spies within their pool. But whoever he is, he's done a good job in keeping the army a secret from us until now."

Madison's eyes shifted slightly to the side. An army which didn't rely on humans who could defect at any moment...

At first she thought of large numbers of robots, shooting lasers from their eyes, unaffected by bullets thanks to their impenetrable metal bodies, only answering to the call of the man pulling their strings, no emotion or pity for the people they were killing—no reason to defect. And then an unexplored thought came into mind which seemed as if it should've been brought to her attention sooner.

"The Banshees?"

Blair nodded.

"Of course," Madison continued, balling her lip. "That could be the reason why they're sending them out at night—they're testing them! Marines are people—people have consciences, that's why half of them have defected to our side. The Banshees haven't pulled their punches on the children they've taken. They've found a way to develop the perfect soldier: mindless and obedient. That's why they've been sending them into the streets, isn't it? To test their efficiency?"

"That, and the fact that they need the children to create more Banshees."

"You're kidding?"

"I wish I were. Our insider has informed us that one of

the projects kept secret within the SEA is the development of the creatures. I don't know the exact science involved, but apparently they need children who haven't completely finished puberty. They're injected with high amounts of steroids and have to undergo difficult procedures until they are fully functional as a Banshee. Farther from human than the dead."

"My God..."

Madison fell silent. She was horrified, of course, at the pure thought of the transformation from child to Banshee. Then a new horror surfaced as she remembered the three shots one of the creatures had taken without flinching.

"How many Banshees are we talking about here?" she asked quickly.

"He didn't specify, he just said it was an army. But he revealed that the first batch of them is close to maturity and will be ready for deployment within the week. With all the reports of missing children that we've heard over the past six months, I'd say there are plenty of them, and that's only taking into account the ones abducted from Azalea alone."

They did not speak for a moment. Someone chuckled and they looked to the man seated across from them who had remained silent, though listening intently.

"Just another reason to overthrow the Temple," he said.

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The man's black robes carried like a curtain as he paced through the corridor, his feet unseen, as if gliding through the tiled floors. Two Marines halted him at a counter just short of the double doors. They were dressed in whitish-

gray camouflage with black patterns like polka dots, armed with submachine guns strapped around their backs. One of them crossed the counter and made to speak, but the double doors swung open.

A tall, thin man wearing a black suit with white robes instead of a jacket, which hung loose like a lab coat, revealing his dark vest and pants, emerged, waving off the guard. He stopped before the man and held a hand out.

"Mr. Whistler," said the man in white robes. "It's good to see you."

"Thank you, Mr. Shaffer," said the man in black.

"This way, please," said Shaffer, leading him forward. They crossed the double doors and entered a long corridor, draped in purest of white. Their feet echoed off of the walls as they made for the double doors in the distance.

"The last time I was here there weren't any checkpoints at the doors," said the man in black, staring straight ahead.

"We have different security measures on the nightshift and different checkpoints depending on which entrance you take. Since you'd have to get past the front gate in order to take the main entrance, there's no point in putting a checkpoint at the front doors. The route you took is less known, so we've stationed a checkpoint as a precaution.

"Very clever of you. Do you have the children?"

"Yes, my lord. They arrived ten minutes ago."

"Did you identify them?"

"Not yet. We're working on it. Our results will return within the day, I expect."

"Are they conscious?"

"No. We placed them in separate dormitories in the basement levels. I'll lead you to them."

"And the progress of the Banshees?"

"I'd rather not say. It is Lord Raztar's duty, not mine. I've already crossed the thresh in personally acquiring the

prisoners' rooms. I have no place in the lower levels of this facility—“

“You are the director of the SEA, are you not?”

“It matters not, my lord. I have a separate duty and I have respected Lord Raztar's distance. I am only following the protocol which you have laid down. Forgive me if I have misunderstood your intentions.”

“That's quite alright, Mr. Shaffer. The fault is on my end for asking you to breach my own protocol. There's a reason I put Monotone into effect. This is a serious matter, however, that I must get to the bottom of.”

The two walked for several minutes through the corridors until they entered a large, carpeted office, with cubicles and workstations which housed several men wearing white robes over dark suits like Shaffer. One man looked up from his desk and strode quickly to Shaffer's side.

“Mr. Director,” he said, nodding respectfully.

“What is it, Mr. Lennox?”

“Sir, a power plant in Mercury Cross has ignited. The entire city has been under blackout for the past hour. We believe that it was caused by the hostiles. The Temple of Cyrus has just contacted us, requesting a story to put on the airwaves.”

“Mr. Lennox, I am not part of damage control. We are tasked with surveillance and intel. Media slant is tasked solely to Lord Raztar, and you know how the old man gets if somebody dips into his shoes.”

“I understand that, sir. But Lord Raztar is indisposed at the moment. As the Director of the Security Enforcement Agency, you are the next ranking officer to decide what gets sent through the airwaves during an emergency. As there are no members of Conclave reachable after Judicor Rosswell's assassination, there is no one with better author—“

“Alright, Mr. Lennox. Have Brother Bob send an emergency broadcast through First Priority News stating that the blackout was caused by a terrorist faction whose primary intentions are to desecrate the holy shrines in Mercury Cross. Tell its citizens to stay in their houses and pray for... for—oh whatever the usual thing that one should pray for in a time of crisis, I don’t know.”

“Yes, sir. But Bob Braderick is missing.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No, sir. He wasn’t available to host the mid-morning and evening news casts. He hasn’t been found since.”

“Well what does it matter who hosts the news? Get someone else to do the job!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Has a response been made by the northern barracks?”

“No, sir. Under the new protocols they cannot move until authorized directly by a member of the—“

“Yes, yes, I know,” said Shaffer swiftly. “Have the barracks in the north lift Marines into the city through hovercrafts to restore order should riots breakout. The citizens of Mercury Cross are honest, God-abiding people. I doubt they’ll resort to such conduct, but it has happened before. Make sure that whatever is sent through the airwaves clearly affirms that neither God nor his Temple will abandon them during these times of crisis. Also hold a prayer service for those who have died in the power plant and be sure to condemn those who have taken part in this, this massacre. Report back to me if there are any further developments should, I hate to say this, Lord Raztar be indisposed any further.”

“Yes, sir,” the man replied with a curt bow before sweeping aside.

“You’re doing quite well,” said the man in black. “Perhaps you should partake in media slant?”

Shaffer chuckled. "Lord Raztar will be furious once he finds out that I acted for him. I don't understand why he's not available. He's supposed to be supervising the activity in the lower levels of this facility when he's not sending public addresses through the evening news."

"Lord Raztar is currently undertaking a task which I have assigned him," said the man in black.

"Good. Then you can tell him that I had no choice but to act for him."

The two men left the office. They traveled for a good five minutes through the corridors, which were almost impossible to tell from one another. They stepped into a stairwell and descended the stairs, coming out into a different set of halls.

The atmosphere in the lower levels was much moodier. The lighting was dim, the walls were now made of concrete, and the floor was made of black marble. There was a break in the bend and they turned right, stopping before another pair of Marines stationed before a steel blast door.

"Director," said one of them, surprised. "Back so soon? I thought you weren't returning?"

"Something has come up," replied Shaffer, standing tall.

The Marine looked from him to the man in black robes. "I'll need to see some identification from him—"

"That won't be necessary," Shaffer cutoff.

The guard frowned. "I'm sorry, sir. Strict orders from Lord Raztar. Even if you have a keycard no one is allowed through this door without proper—"

"Here," said the man in black at last, reaching into the inner pocket of his robes. He pulled out a little, black, leather-back book. The guard took it and examined it under the light. He furrowed his brow slightly, looking up at the man with his head still bowed as if reading. After a moment he folded the book and handed it back to him.

“Go right ahead.”

Shaffer withdrew a keycard from within his robes and fed it into the slot as the Marines watched. Something buzzed and the steel door slid aside. The two men stepped through and entered a dark lobby, lit almost entirely by computer monitors. Several men looked up, their eyes drifting from Shaffer to the man accompanying him, and then looked away as if losing interest. They crossed the lobby.

A dark corridor with a dozen or so barred doors on either side stood before them. A squat man in white robes carrying a tray of food stopped short upon their sight. He sighed, face tightening.

“You can’t be in here,” he said, strolling up to them. “This is a restricted area. . .”

“Good evening, Doctor Vance.”

“Oh Mr. Director! I didn’t recognize you until I—”

“That’s quite alright. This is Mr. Whistler. He’s here on official business from Conclave. We’d like to see the prisoners.”

“Why certainly—certainly!”

The man lowered the tray to a counter along the wall. He turned and made to walk forward but wheeled around, scratching his brow. “Er, which prisoners?”

“The ones that we just received.”

“Oh! Yes of course—this way please, gentlemen.”

He led them through one of the barred doors which slid aside upon his command. They entered a narrower corridor, with countless doors on either side of them, each spaced an equal distance apart from each other, and each fitted with an extra bolt above the knob which unlocked from the outside.

“I assume you want to see one of the boys first?”

Shaffer looked to the man in black.

“Yes,” he said, his eyes taking in the surroundings as

if only mildly entertained. "There are three of them, are there not?"

"Yes—of course. We received three—er, I'll just lead you to them."

They stopped before a door. The doctor slid a keycard through a device alongside of it.

"I'll wait here," said Shaffer, standing aside.

A green light issued and the bolt swung open.

!Click!

It was a small room with only a bed, a light hanging overhead, and a nightstand. A teenage boy lay across the bed on his side, his eyes closed and his mouth gaping.

"How long until they awaken?" asked the man in black, taking in the boy's features.

"Maybe six more hours. We put them to sleep through an injection the moment they come in."

"And you keep them all in these rooms?"

"No. These are just where they stay until they become cooperate. Then we move them into group dorms to lighten their atmosphere."

"Were you feeding them?"

"Yes, I was just on my rounds."

"But it's just after midnight."

"Their circadian rhythms have been disturbed living down here. Most don't even know what time of day it is. So we have to feed them around the clock."

The man in black looked him up and down.

"You don't carry a tasergun? What if one of them tried to escape?"

"Oh they don't tend to do that," replied the doctor, and he smiled strangely.

"Why is that?"

"Well they don't know what it is that they're really here for. You see, the moment they awaken we tell them that

they've just been attacked by a Banshee, and that they were rescued before they were killed. We tell them that although they survived, they have been infected with the creature's curse, and they will need to remain isolated here until they are safe to return home. Naturally, they ask to see their parents or their boarding house supervisors. We assure them that they have been notified and that they will return home as soon as the problem is solved."

"And how do you, solve, the problem?"

"Simple. We tell them that they're in need of an exorcism by a Temple priest. They oblige a good majority of the time." And he smiled strangely again. "It appears the Temple of Cyrus has done a good job in keeping people obedient through the media."

The man in black watched the boy closely, taking in his dark hair and pimply face. It was not who he was expecting. Good, he thought.

"Take me to the next boy," he said.

The doctor led him to a room not far. The boy within was roughly the same age as the previous, sporting red hair and freckles. Again, the man was dissatisfied by his sight. Sensing this, the doctor said, "Shall I take you to the next boy?"

"Do please," said the man.

The third boy was smaller than the other two, and younger. He had a round face, like that of an innocent child, and fluffy brown hair. The man swallowed his breath, playing finger over thumb, finger over thumb.

"Take me to the girl," he said after a minute.

"As you wish."

Once again, the doctor led him into another room. He unlocked it and stepped aside, allowing the man in black to step in. He stopped short of the bed, his head bowed. She looked younger than the first two, and he knew that

she was roughly the same age as the third. She had long black hair, light skin, and a delicate face. He put a hand to her forehead and knelt before her.

His shoulders tensed. He felt like he had already known the answer to a question he did not need to ask, yet he had asked it anyway.

So, he had been right. What he had spent over a decade to protect had now come into danger. What worried him most now was how it would conflict with his position. He envisioned the sacrifices he would go through in the following day, and his jaw clenched up. He rose, casting his shadow over the girl, and turned. He met Shaffer on the other end.

“Well?”

“They’re not who I thought they were. I know it’s not your territory, but I’m giving you my permission to break Monotone this once. Lead me to the Banshees. I’ve wasted enough time here.”

* * *

Jola stirred, the voices in her ear growing louder. They were barely whispering, and by the time she had shaken her head they ceased at once. She opened her eyes and blinked. She had fallen asleep on Madison’s shoulder.

“Er—sorry,” she said quickly, steering herself away and straightening up. She remembered that she used to fall asleep on Herv’s shoulder during movies, and he did not enjoy the feeling.

“It’s okay,” said Madison, withdrawing her arm.

“What were you talking about?”

“Don’t worry, it’s not important. We’re here.”

The headlights came upon a cave in the distance. It drew nearer and nearer until the van was swallowed by its mouth. They traveled for almost a minute into it before the van came to a stop.

“We’ll get off here,” said Blair, climbing across Jola to the rear doors. “They can park the car.”

The four in the cargo hold stepped out. Jola’s feet found surprisingly leveled ground. The lights of the van broke away from them and disappeared into the darkness. A flare flickered on, illuminating the cave.

“Come on,” said Blair, leading them forward.

The walls were cracked and colored a drifty blue, like the last minute of twilight. The ceiling was high, adorned with hardened minerals which formed spikes hanging down. Their feet echoed with a splash, as if they were traveling through an inch high flood. The path, which had been smooth and leveled, became like the walls, and began to twist in a spiral-like pattern.

They came to a dead end. Jola was just about to ask what they were doing here when something rumbled like an engine. She felt the ground shake slightly, or maybe it was just the vibrations within her ear. Either way what was once a cavern wall was now a hollow entrance filled with light.

They stepped through and ended up in a corridor with perpendicular walls. Two armed guards dressed in the same blue uniform as Blair greeted them. The women nodded as they walked past. The lighting, though brighter than the cave and the night by far, was still dim. They stopped before a set of double doors.

Madison put a hand to Jola. “Don’t be alarmed,” she said. “I doubt you’ve seen anything like it before.”

The girl looked quickly from her to the door, and back.

“What?”

The woman smiled. She nodded to Blair, who pushed the doors open and stepped through.

Jola’s feet met dark marble as she walked forward. She stopped short of a railing which looked out into the view below.

It was a community of offices, staffed with hundreds of men either seated behind desks or shifting around the lobby. It could’ve been the size of a football field, for all Jola could tell. There were monitors larger than her television, depicting either maps or text files, which men were huddled before, conversing amongst themselves and pointing to certain areas on the screen. The walls and the ceiling had returned to the primal cavern setting but the floors were leveled as if the cave had been renovated. It was dark, with a strange bluish hue that floated around the air like a transparent fog.

Jola’s eyes drifted from person to person, all dressed in uniform. She felt surreal. The past three hours had traveled so quickly and yet she had seen so much. It was unbelievable. Had it all just been a dream?

Before she could answer herself, a hand caught her around the back.

“Right, shall we go down for a closer look?” said Madison, beaming slightly.

“Okay...” muttered Jola, her lips still parted. She took the woman’s lead and went down the spiral steps to the floor below. Their feet met marble again, and they cut through the lobby, passing people left and right.

If it hadn’t been for the woman’s touch Jola was sure she would’ve been frightened. She was in the company of strangers—and what more, strangers who all seemed to have lived in a sort of secret society—a cult tucked away in the forest inside of a cave, plotting something on a large

scale.

“What is this place?”

“Well, it never really had a name when we arrived. But we like to call it the Cave.”

“Did you build it? I mean—the floors and the stairs?”

“No, those were here when we arrived. See this used to be a research facility for the Temple long ago. It has been abandoned and forgotten, however, which is good for us though, because it’s become our base of operations in Azalea.”

Jola’s eyes found one of the large screens, this one depicting an aerial of the city. “What are you planning to do?” she said apprehensively.

“You’ll find out soon,” said Madison, not so much of a dismissal but more of a polite excuse.

“Where are we going?” Jola asked, as if just noticing that her feet were moving.

“To a meeting. You’ll get to find out everything, or at least close to everything. But it doesn’t matter either way because in a few days this will all be over.”

“What will?”

“The war, Jola.”

Chapter 7

The Invisible War

Madison turned the corner, and Jola tried her best to keep up. They crossed the corridor and ended up before a tinted office. They stepped through the door and entered a conference room, with a large, round staff table marked with numerals like a clock and seated for twelve.

There were already six people seated, only one of which was a woman. Their heads turned quickly to the four that had entered, and immediately all eyes drifted upon the teenage girl. The man at the Twelve o'clock position stood up slowly, smearing a cigarette against an ashtray.

"Commander," said the woman, shaking hands.

"Madison," he acknowledged in a harsh voice—a smoker's voice. His gaze turned on the girl, and Jola grew apprehensive, though she tried her best not to show it.

She met his face, and immediately she thought of a calculating eagle. He was a short, older man, built firmly nonetheless. His hair was dark, though his age looked as if it should've been silver and lacking in some places. He had sharp, hardened features, with a single eye, pierced by the

sun. A black patch was slung around the latter.

But instead of asking who the girl was, he turned back to Madison, as if expecting her to convey her information out of her own accord.

"This is Jola Truehase," said the woman. "We picked her up outside of the Professor's house before the Banshees could take her."

The man gave a gruff nod, not so much of an approval but more so of an acknowledgement.

"I see," he said. Then, as if knowing something that he would've inevitably been asked, he added, "She can stay, if you think it will help her settle. But we must move swiftly, because we have a new development which poses a threat to us."

"Thank you," said Madison.

The man frowned slightly, rubbing his thumb against his palm. He reached for Madison's wrist and turned her hand over.

"It's nothing," she explained. "Just a cut from some glass."

Andy quickly looked down at his own palm and groaned. "I thought you were just sweating," he said regretfully, rubbing the stains off of his own palm from where he had taken Madison's lead in the forest.

"What happened to your van?" asked the commander.

"I'll explain," said Madison. "There's so much to discuss."

"Then let's waste no more time." The commander looked to Jola. He raised his hand out for her as well, and she took it uncertainly. His grip was firm and direct. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Truehase. I'm Charles Felix. You can remain in the meeting if you'd like, but you'll have to save most of your questions for another time. I don't need to be told that you're probably very confused, not to mention

afraid.”

Jola wondered whether he too was a mind-reader and she looked away from his eye patch quickly. He held out a hand for her and the others to sit, and they obeyed. The commander returned to his position at the top of the round table and folded his hands before him.

“First I need to know what happened on your end.”

All eyes went to Madison. She explained everything, from her and Andy’s surveillance on the house to the children they had seen enter it. She narrated the decision to rescue the girl, and her voice trailed slightly. After she concluded at the point where they were forced to ditch the van, she looked at the commander, her posture straight and elegant, but with a face crossed slightly with self-disappointment.

She seemed to be reading the man’s mind, Jola thought, because she added, “I know it isn’t much, but that’s all that happened.”

The commander considered it for a moment, his single eye always in contact with another. “I see,” he said, and although his voice was distorted heavily with a deep pitch, Jola knew he was disappointed. “I take it, then, that the Professor has confided in her what he was planning to reveal to us?”

Jola racked her brain. She looked quickly to Madison, her brows contracting.

“I don’t know,” said the woman. “I was waiting until after we got here to ask.”

The commander didn’t waste time waiting for the woman to ask the girl herself. He looked Jola straight in the eye and said, “Did you go to the house to extract something that the Professor had meant to come your way should he die? Something like a disk? Or a file?”

Again, Jola’s face sunk in confusion. “Ex—extract?”

“Yes,” said the commander, looking at her as if she held

the key to a lock he couldn't open. "That is why you went there, is it not?"

Jola's skin flushed slightly, well aware of all the faces cast in her direction. She didn't like being put on the spot, and she had been put on the spot several times in her youth, having taken the responsibility of her adolescent troubles. Usually she would be able to hold her own in an interrogation or a scolding, even be able to talk back passionately. However now she was at a complete loss for understanding.

"I . . . what?"

"He gave you an order, didn't he? That you were to retrieve an item from his house in the event that he died?"

Jola looked down at his collar, frowning. "Well, no, not really. I didn't hear anything of that sort."

The man exchanged faces with his staff. "But why did you risk traveling to his house in the middle of the night—breaking curfew, with all the Banshees prowling the streets?"

His words echoed into the girl's mind several times. The thought had only just sunk in—as if she had heard it a million times without realizing it. Why had she traveled to the old man's house despite all of the dangers involved?

She racked her brain again. Then she told them what she had thought had been the reason she had gone in the first place. After a moment the commander observed her in silence, as confused at her actions as she was.

"You went there because you wanted to find out what happened to your teacher? That's why you went through all that trouble?"

Jola swallowed quickly.

Well it sounds silly if you put it like that. . . .

"Well, yeah. That and I wanted to find out what happened to my boarding mate as well. You see, he's lived with me for ages and I never got to know him, so I figured

it was the least I could do.” She paused, noticing that everyone was looking at her as if expecting another reason—a more life-threatening, disease-curing, planet-saving reason to break into the old man’s house despite all of the signs pointing against it. “It—it wasn’t my first time breaking curfew! Me, Herv, and the old clan from Madam Clara’s orphanage used to go around egging Prunie houses—that was before the Banshees, of course. But I only stopped because the others had. I mean, I’ve never really believed in the Banshees myself. Until tonight, that is...”

She lowered her chin and began playing with her cuticles, finding them suddenly fascinating. After what seemed like a lifetime, the commander spoke.

“Very well,” he said, his voice unwavering but slightly baffled. “That was very noble of you, I suppose... If you were older we could’ve used a brave girl like you here.”

A dark haired, pale-faced man seated on the commander’s left chuckled snidely. Madison cast him a look and he sighed, looking away.

“What exactly is it that you do here?” said Jola, feeling that it was high time that she got to the bottom of something that should’ve been addressed ages ago.

The commander looked to Madison, as if non-verbally communicating to her whether it was absolutely necessary to enlighten the girl. Clearly, it was, for the commander made to explain, though noticeably reluctant.

“We are planning a large scale assault on the Temple, consisting of several physical strikes across what’s left of the world.” He made somewhat of an emphasis on ‘what’s left of the world,’ though Jola barely noticed it. “We are in the final stages of our plan. Some of our scattered factions have already climaxed. The rest are simply waiting for our lead, since Azalea is the center of Cyrus. We are scheduled to strike the Temple of Cyrus within the next few days,

preferably tomorrow,” he added almost sarcastically, as if the matter of war was something that should be taken with a grain of salt. “We have already attacked several key areas over the past year critical to the fall of the Temple, but none will compare to our main strike here within Azalea.”

“But why are you attacking the Temple?”

“Well, you might say that we are at war.”

“War?” Jola repeated. She had heard the term, of course. But rarely was it mentioned in her history classes, for wars were known as a thing of the past, before God’s Temple had cleansed the world entirely of it. But certainly the known wars had been brutal and chaotic. If what the man said was true, then how could a war have been fought without anyone noticing it?

“What do you mean a war? I’ve never heard of anything like that. Surely it would’ve appeared on the news by now. And you said that you’ve been attacking places for over a year. How come I haven’t heard of it?”

“Because it isn’t the kind of war you are thinking of. Not grassy battlefields full of bullet ridden bodies, or rockets launching overseas, or hovercrafts shooting each other out of the sky. But rather a war taking place in cities and residential neighborhoods, with spies in place of nuclear weapons, and a battle consisting of whether or not that spy can maintain his cover. There have been physical marks, of course, one of which has just taken place recently in a city in northern Midlands, but you may not hear about those often at times because the Temple is covering them up as they occur, sometimes citing unusual incidents such as a building’s destruction or dead bodies in the street as accidents or malfunctions. It is because of this, along with several other factors, that the war has become so underground that it may be known as the Invisible War.”

Jola furrowed her brow. The woman had told her in the

van that she was part of a rebellion party, but this the girl was not expecting. She had envisioned a small group of no more than a dozen or so saving children like herself from Banshee attacks and killing a few creatures in the process.

“Well why are you fighting the Temple? Surely you must realize that they’re the ones driving Cyrus. If it weren’t for the law and order that they provide we would’ve all starved to death long ago.”

“Because the Temple is nothing more than a network used to enslave us for ‘the greater good of the world.’”

“I’m sorry?”

“The Temple, Ms. Truehase,” the man addressed, “has been using propaganda, both religious and political, to control everything from how much money an individual could make to how one must live according to God’s law. For year’s it has claimed the word of God as its own. And for years its citizens have obeyed, most because of the religious aspects, some, who do not share such a strong belief as I’m sure you must not have yourself seeing as how you didn’t believe in Banshees, because of the stability that the Temple gives us all.

“But whatever credibility it has for stability falls far short of justifying the crimes it has committed over the past century. You are aware of the strict social standards that have run through Cyrus, I’m sure, since you are a Project child. The Temple has condemned thievery, murder, and of course, being mean to any of God’s children. And yet they have made efforts to make it seem like—almost to encourage that those ‘born of sin’ should be looked down upon. Sounds very hypocritical to ‘love your neighbor as you would your son,’ does it not?”

This Jola took into account personally, for she was a Project child, and she had endured a different, more callous attitude from most of the world than if she were simply to

have been born of a traditionally married mother and father. However she could still not see why the Temple, even though its religious influence on her had so far only gotten to the point of her establishing a basic sense of morality, would do such a thing.

As if the man had read her thoughts, he added, "They do it because the Temple fears overpopulation greatly. There would be far fewer children being born if you were required to be married in order to engage in intimate affairs than there would be if no law existed. The less sloppy children get brought into this world, the less people there will be, they figure, and so they have passed not only laws, but taboos within society in order to enforce this control."

"I find that hard to believe," she said, her apprehension forgotten. "If the Temple really feared overpopulation, why would they have outlawed abortion?"

"Because they believe that if they allowed abortion it would seriously flaw their standard morals of preserving all aspects of life. This is the illusion they are carrying, you see, because the Temple operates solely on illusion, and if they lose that, they have nothing. Right now they are using their religious backing, as I'm sure you are aware, to maintain the production levels of the Excavades in order to ensure that nobody in this world is left hungry or without a home, and they've done a good job of it. Social equality is one of their fundamental principles which they cannot lose at any cost. They believe that the system is working perfectly now, and a factor like overpopulation could destabilize it. That's why they fear overpopulation so much that they have blinded themselves to the moralities that they themselves have laid down for their citizens. Like I said, hypocritical."

"It sounds to me like this is a pure attack on religion," said Jola tactfully. "If you don't believe in God, that's your own personal choice. In all honesty I don't know if I believe

in him myself, despite what everyone's been telling me. But I doubt that some massive conspiracy has been under our noses this whole time just for the sole purpose of keeping fewer mouths than we can feed."

"This is not an attack against religion, Jola, nor is it an attack against God. This is an attack against a controlled society, if anything. The Temple has strayed so far from religion and God that they are no more than a government. A ruthless, unquestionable, dictating government whose only aim is to keep the control it has. If you want to believe in God, that's your own personal choice, I agree. But the Temple is not God's messenger, I assure you."

"And you would know?"

"Why certainly," said the commander, as if he knew everything. Jola made a dismissive noise but he ignored it, and said, "I used to be a high priest of the Temple. I still am, as a matter of fact."

"You were—you're a high priest?"

"Any computer in the world would tell you that I am if you ran my name through a search. Whether you want to believe that at this moment is neither here nor there, but you can always find out later. But I've been in the Temple—been part of it. And I've even agreed with them. So have almost everybody who knew that they were using their power for the greater good of man. Like I said if there's one thing that the Temple should be credited for, it's that they've given us stability all this time."

He paused, as if allowing the girl the freedom to talk back. And she did.

"So if you were part of the Temple all this time and had even agreed with them at one point, why would you be against them now all of a sudden?"

"Because as time passed I came to witness several injustices committed by them. Naturally, I tried my best to

push them out of my mind and concentrate on the better parts of their power—of the stability. But eventually the flaws outweighed the good, and I wasn't the only one who had taken notice." He cleared his throat and spoke in a more presentational voice. "There was a world that used to exist. One which had religion similar to ours, but not enforced, and a foundation of government separate from God. You would not have known much about this, because the Temple has kept it hidden, of course. But that did not matter anyways, because the world that I am speaking of kept its distance. Despite this, however, they were still a threat. The Temple had run society all this time through its control, and it couldn't allow knowledge of another world—of a free world, to get out.

"It is still unclear to most of us exactly what took place, and there are only few of us alive today who know what really happened, but eventually our side of the world had annihilated theirs. I am speaking, of course, of the Two Worlds Conflict, which may be something you have learned about in your history class, but under a much vaguer understanding."

Jola knew this, of course. And no matter how far-fetched this all sounded, it was possible, she considered, though doubtful. She was still skeptical, and she felt tired, though she tried her best not to show it. Indeed, the night had passed so quickly, and yet she had seen so much. She could think about this all later. Right now she had to learn the immediate.

"I'm not saying I believe you," she said respectfully. "But supposing I did, how does Professor Argus fit into this all?"

"Professor Argus had undertaken research within the Temple of Cyrus in the past. They cut him off from his research, however, because he had stumbled upon some-

thing important, something that they were willing to kill to keep secret. I don't know what it is myself, but whatever it is that he discovered they most certainly didn't want to tuck away in a locked vault, but rather use it themselves. So they decommissioned his project and directed it themselves. That's where the Professor comes into play. See, he had always regretted not knowing exactly what it was that was so important to the Temple. And we knew, of course, because we have spies in almost every room of the Temple of Cyrus. However we didn't know what it was that we were dealing with because the Temple has made new methods to ensure that their information cannot leak back to us—at least not in full. So we contacted him and requested that he continued his research. He was reluctant to comply, you see, as invisible as we are to most of society, we are not completely unheard of, for there are times that the Temple cannot cover everything up so simply, leading them to refer to us as a terrorist faction. But eventually he joined our side.

“He opted to continue his research within his house. The Temple was watching him closely, though they had done everything short of breaking down his door. I offered to protect him, bring him underground with us, but he refused. He was a proud man, I take it. He wanted his independency and we had no choice but to allow it, which I am regretting now that he's dead. The last time we spoke he conveyed that he was in his final stages of what had taken several months to produce, and that he would have results shortly. But he was killed and we never found out. That is where you come into play. We assumed that he had left some emergency instruction to pass on the information should he die. I didn't believe that anybody would dare be foolish enough to break into his house and retrieve it, but I couldn't dismiss it because we've come so far in our

plan and we couldn't allow whatever it was that the Temple discovered to have hampered us. So I had two people keep an eye on the house.

"But now we know that you have not been following his orders, and so we are, yet again, left in the dark, on the eve of an invasion which will change the fate of the world."

Jola bit her lip. The old man had been acting strange for the past few months. He was known to snap at his students, leave class as soon as the bell rang, and didn't come to school altogether for the previous week. Could his stress have been caused by this research? She didn't believe what these people were claiming, but she couldn't deny that their story about the Professor did fit in on some level.

"So what happens now?" she said. This she felt was not specific enough, so she added, "What are you going to do with me?"

Now that she knew that the reason she had been rescued was not out of the goodness of their hearts, but rather because they assumed she had something that they needed, she was more insecure in their presence than ever before. The commander looked to the man on his left and back, his face hard boiled.

"What do you think we're going to do with you?"

She swallowed. "W-well, you don't need me anymore. The only reason you saved me was because you thought I—"

"That's not why I picked you up," cut Madison swiftly, and the girl felt a rush of warmth when their eyes met. "I made up my mind to pick you up regardless of whether or not you could have been of any use to us."

Jola's lips parted slightly and then closed. She returned the gesture with little more than a weak smile, though she felt humbled.

"You'll have to stay here for now," said the commander. "There's nothing else I can do. I daresay the Temple will be looking for you if you return. They'll trace your friends back to your boarding house, and eventually to you. You've seen this place. You know where we are. So I have no choice but to keep you here for now."

"How long is 'for now?'"

The commander fixed her a firm look which she could not return. Of course, she already knew the answer to that. Why had she even bothered to ask in the first place?

"For a day or so."

"A—a day?"

"Maybe two," said the man, waving off her surprise. He must've caught on that she was thinking there was some kind of twist or loophole for he added, "I told you we are close to our main strike. Win or lose we won't return here. If we win, well you can live however you'd like. If we lose, we'll all be dead, so you're going to have to find your own way. Who knows, maybe they'll forget about you if that happens?" He said this all casually as if they were merely discussing plans for her future education. "Do you think you handle staying here that long?"

"I...I guess..."

"Good. Then let's move on." He cleared his throat again. "Our first order of business is the Security Enforcement Agency. While the two of you were gone our insider at the SEA contacted us with some new intelligence. He hasn't reported for over a month, but he has made good use of the time."

"As it turns out the SEA is being used to produce the Banshees. They're created by a process which involves a child, hence the reason they have been abducting large amounts of children from the Midlands."

"They're what?" gasped Jola before she could control

herself.

The commander shot her only a glance before continuing, "In accordance with the Temple's new protocol, Monotone, their agendas have been scattered into fragments, each of which are assigned to a high priest or a person of a high position. Recently we've learned that Lord Raztar has been tasked with the mass development of these creatures. Naturally, we made a move to kidnap him. As you know, we've placed a mole close to Lord Raztar after suspecting him of being one of the essential high priests, and in the events earlier today, or I shall say the day before since technically it's past midnight, we had our man make a move for him."

Andy Rivenwilo chuckled. "You wouldn't, of course, be talking about my brother, would you?"

"Yes, Fred is closer to him than anyone else. He hijacked Raztar's ride to the Temple this morning, which he takes regularly to film the news."

"I thought Lord Raztar only appears at nighttime?" said Madison. "His addresses are always after dark."

"He does. But as it turns out they tape his addresses in the morning."

"So he's here?" said the woman, slightly surprised. "You've captured him? You've actually brought Lord Raztar to the Cave?"

The commander didn't reply. He put a hand to the speaker phone before him. "Bring him in."

Jola played with her thumbs. These people had already established that they would not harm her. And they already had a large amount of credibility in her mind for saving her. But they had also claimed that they were at war with the Temple. And in war there are no rules—at least according to the movies she had seen.

She remembered the films which showcased mountain

society as it was several hundred years ago, when men brandishing the ancient six-shooter pistols fought the Inuits, natural warriors who fought with bows and stole women and children from society. A particularly brutal scene from one of the movies came to mind, where an Inuit was captured and tortured for the whereabouts of his clan.

Jola crossed her arms as if she were cold. It was kind of exciting, she had to admit, to be in the know, to be in on something that others were not. But at the same time it was frightening, anticipating what horror lay behind the next door.

Two people entered the room. A somehow familiar looking middle-aged, gray haired man walked in followed by a guard. The first was in handcuffs, and he was wearing a dark, old fashioned suit with a bowtie. His eyes were bagged and fearful. He tried to pass off a friendly smile to each of the people seated around him.

"Lord Raztar was not with his usual escort party," said the commander, nodding his head to the guard, who sat the prisoner across from him at the Six o'clock position of the table. "Rivenwilo made an empty grab. Which means that Lord Raztar is located elsewhere, probably overseeing his project at the SEA, because the man has never missed a taping of the evening addresses, isn't that right?"

The prisoner looked around timidly. He looked unharmed, but shaken nonetheless. His face was white and his forehead reflected moisture. It was impossible to miss the repeated scratches he made at his wrists.

"I told you already," he said, and Jola finally recognized him as the man who had cast the news: Brother Bob. "He never misses his addresses. He's always on time!"

The commander considered this, looking to Madison. "What do you think?" he asked.

"I think either he knew about the mole and decided to

dodge his capture or he's moved onto bigger plans," she said.

"Exactly what I thought at first. But it isn't the first option because Fred returned to the Temple immediately after the extraction, so Lord Raztar couldn't have caught on, because Fred has not been apprehended."

"You let him go back to the Temple?" said Andy Rivenwilo, his face staring with disbelief. "After he risked his cover you let him go back?"

"Fred agreed to go on his own terms. I never ordered him—"

"Don't give me that bullshit! He risked his life to bring you your man—and you've repaid him by putting him in danger again. What if they had known that he was responsible for the grab?"

"It was a necessary risk," said the commander, his gaze unperturbed by the hostility of the man.

Andy opened his mouth and fell short. He leaned back and snickered, staring out absentmindedly.

The dark haired, pale faced man seated next to the commander spoke in a cold voice, "We agreed to our assignments, if you've forgotten. Your brother's job was to be a spy. Not a very good one, if you ask me. Brought us the wrong man."

"You're one to talk, Ross," said Andy without raising his voice. The other man sneered but didn't return.

"When the two of you remember your age, we can move on," said the commander. The two men did not object, though they watched each other, not showing blatant anger, but rather subtle discomfort that the other was in the same room. "Good. Now Brother Bob Braderick."

The prisoner looked up. His cheeks were moving as if he were chewing on his tongue. "Yes?"

"Do you know where Lord Raztar is?"

He licked his lips. "I told you this already! I don't—I honestly don't!"

"Well tell us again. Some of our guests haven't heard it." And Jola felt an odd sense that the commander was making the man do this solely for her own benefit. The commander had indeed met her eyes, but for less than a glance. He continued, "What have the last week's broadcasts consisted of?"

Brother Bob's eyes darted around the room. Jola caught his and she felt ashamed for the excitement she had received, albeit how small it was.

"W-well," he faltered as Jola had done earlier, "we've mainly done weather a-and the usual stuff. You know—the addresses and all."

"What about the incident last Wednesday?"

"The—the incident?"

"Yes, the one where you reported that the deaths of two unidentified men found north of Azalea had been caused by a freak explosion from a gas leak?"

The man's eyes shot quickly around the table again. "I don't know—they told me it really was an accident! If it wasn't—I'm sorry! You have to understand they don't tell me everything that's going on—I just say what they put on paper before me! I report the news for God's sake!"

"Relax, Brother Bob. We're not going to hurt you. Unless you answer wrong, that is."

The prisoner laughed as the weatherman had laughed a night earlier when the anchor had addressed the viewer on the threat of the Banshees, his eyes weak and shifty. Noticing that nobody else was laughing, he fell silent and began scratching his wrist very audibly. The commander's tone had remained casual, yet there was no denying that he looked as if he were good on his word.

"What I'm trying to get from you is whether or not you

know that the reports you broadcast are sometimes, how do you say this? Incorrect?”

The man's eyes shifted. “Well yeah.”

“Define incorrect.”

“Well some—sometimes the reports are contrived a-and what I read to the viewers isn't technically true. What—what I mean is that the Temple has, from time to time, you know, covered things up!”

The commander met Jola's face. “What things have you covered up, Brother Bob?”

“I don't know them all! Really I don't! I'm just a smile on the camera—I have no creative say on the subject whatsoever! But some are obvious—of course!”

“Name the ones that you do know.”

“Well... the collapse of the dam earlier this year. I know that there's no way it would've just collapsed overnight due to devil worshipper's or witchcraft—or whatever I said it was from the city of Engwood. Nonsense, of course.” And he laughed weakly again, his scratching growing louder. “Also the deaths and the Banshees. I know those are hushed up, of course. Nobody in their right mind would take those explanations seriously—for the ones who are in the know, that is.”

His emphasis on the words struck a chord with Jola. Of course she had seen why the commander had subjected this poor man to a post-midnight interrogation. But she never foresaw that she would actually begin to see reason in the commander's story. Sitting not far from her was a man who she had known (at least through her television set) her entire life. He had a firm, trustworthy voice, and a posture that allowed even the class clowns to take him seriously.

Now he was stammering before them like a condemned man, gushing out knowledge for whatever mercy he could

grab. He was a symbol of the Temple in her mind—a man who represented its word. And if his word had been untrue the entire time, then so had the Temple's, had it not?

She scratched her head at her tangled logic, once again reminding herself that she had seen and heard so much in such little time.

"...and Judicor Rosswell's death..." he muttered just barely, though everyone in the room heard. "I know that he didn't pass away from natural causes at the age of forty-seven. He was assassinated, I'm sure of it, because of his position in Conclave... But we couldn't report that, of course, because then we'd lose—"

"The people's security?" broke in the commander, eyebrows raised.

"Y-yes—of course! The people's security. Why else would we cover everything up?"

The commander had remained silent, and so had Jola. Nobody spoke for the longest period of time yet. After Brother Bob's scratching became the only thing that could be heard, the commander dismissed him.

"Bring him back to his quarters—and be generous about it, will you?"

The guard nodded. He stepped out of his corner and brought the man to his feet, who began spluttering his gratitude, sweeping a bow before he was ushered out.

"Well I guess I've settled that," said the commander to nobody in particular, but Jola had an inkling that it was meant for her. "Now we need to make a response to the Banshees in the SEA."

His voice became blunt, no longer casual. "Our contact is indisposed at the moment. He will not report back for some time. And he has every reason not to. I don't need to remind you all that deep cover is no easy task to conceal, and that those who have taken the responsibility need not

make excuses for not keeping in touch regularly. Therefore we cannot use him to solve our problem, not for now, that is.” He looked at Madison, and immediately everyone in the room knew the nature of what he was intending. “I’d like you to take a team to the SEA in the morning. Our agent has arranged a vehicle pass to get you through the gate, but the rest you will have to do on your own.”

Nobody spoke for a moment.

“Alright, commander,” Madison said slowly, but without a hint of objection. “What is it that you’d like me to do?”

“The Banshees are kept within an isolated area in the lower levels of the facility. After the children have undergone the procedures induced upon them, they are left in comatose—a sort of sick bastard’s version of hibernation. As you’ve noticed, they’re tall and their physical features are distorted. We believe that they achieve these qualities during this period.”

“Do I need to know this? Or are you leading up to something important?”

“The importance is that they are unconscious, and rely on life support to survive until they awaken. You are to make your way to their hibernating chamber. There you will find a mainframe which will allow you to shut off their life support systems. You will only need to do this for the ones who are in their prime—the ones who are expected to awaken this week. Those are the ones who pose a danger to us.”

“And if I find the others—the ones who aren’t ripe?”

“They are secondary objectives: only if you can kill two birds with one stone. I don’t want you to stay any longer than you should. Our priority is the batch that are due any day now, not so much the ones who have to hibernate another six months or—“

“You misunderstand me,” said Madison. “I mean—what about the children?”

The commander readjusted himself, as if he had already foreseen this snag. “You’ll have to pass them.”

“You can’t be serious?” Jola said suddenly. “There must be hundreds of children in there—Herv and Fillis—my friends! You’re not honestly going to leave them there to rot and become leftovers for the batch that you’ve killed?”

“Young woman, I am fully aware that they are there, and I wish I had something in my power that could save them. But unfortunately, I don’t. The most we can hope for is that our main strike goes well. Then we can pick up the pieces from there and save them.”

“But what if you don’t succeed? You said yourself that you may not—and that I would be on my own if that happened. What about them? You could at least make an effort should you not succeed.”

“I think you’ve overstayed your time in this meeting,” said the man carefully, though he did not seem pissed. He looked to Madison like he had before, as if non-verbally asking if enough had been said. Evidently it had, for after a moment the man looked back to Jola. “I’ve allowed you to stay so that you would settle properly during the short time that you are here. But there is no reason for you to remain anymore.”

Jola’s ears rung. That was it. She was no longer special to them. She didn’t merit special treatment anymore.

“Blair, would you escort the young woman to her quarters?”

The blonde woman startled slightly, contracting her brows. “Me?”

“Yes, would you do that for me?”

“I suppose. . .”

Blair stood up, her face motionless and unable to meet

the others' eyes. "Come on, Ms. Truehase, if you'd please. . ."

Jola looked to Madison quickly for support. The woman remained silent, but she could tell from her eyes that she had agreed it was time for her to go. She rose and followed the woman out, looking back once.

They traveled through the lobby again. The staff outside was noticeably cut in half, leaving behind several empty desks. Jola followed the woman through a corridor with rooms on either side. Blair was moving fast, and the girl wondered whether she was trying to lose her for costing her a trip out of the meeting.

"Relax, I'm not mad at you," the woman spoke.

"You can read minds too?"

"A little bit. Not as much as Madison, though. She's much stronger than me. . ."

Jola had a feeling that she was slightly jealous of the other woman. Then she remembered that she had just pried into her conscience only seconds ago, and she pushed the thought from her mind quickly.

"Can the commander read minds too?"

"No, only women can."

"All women?"

"No, just a few."

They turned the corner. There were doors only on the right side, while the latter was made up of the bluish cave wall, which lingered all the way to the dead end in the distance.

"This is where I leave you," said the woman politely, stopping before a door in the middle. She twisted the knob and pushed, holding it out for the girl to enter.

Jola stared out in surprise. The dormitory was not what she had expected. It was by far larger than her boarding room. It must've been intended for two, judging by the bunk beds in the corner. She walked in and looked around.

It was lightly furnished, emanating a bluish hue like the cave itself.

"You'll find clean clothes in the bathroom and the closet," said Blair with a smile. "I'm not sure they'll fit you. But a little bagginess can't hurt!"

"Thank you," Jola said softly.

The woman nodded and disappeared, closing the door behind her. Jola watched the spot where she had stood for a while.

She blinked quickly and turned. Her first thoughts were to freshen up. She made to the bathroom and faced the mirror, inhaling sharply. There were stains on her forehead from when she had face-planted into the mud in the old man's yard. She ran the tap and splashed cool water across her face, savoring its touch for a moment before repeating.

When she had finished she looked up. Her cheek was still marked from where Fred had backhanded her. She rubbed it gently. After a moment she began exploring the cabinets. There were several items that she could use later like soap, shampoo, and tooth products. Right now she needed fresh clothes. She found some in the lower drawers. They were folded and placed neatly with a mother's touch. There were only undergarments for women.

She didn't mind using other girls' attire, of course. She had swapped makeup with the girls at the boarding house and didn't see how this was any different. As long as they were clean, she wouldn't distrust them. Boy's things, however, were a different story.

She changed and made to the closet for a pair of pants and a top. What she found didn't necessarily disappoint her, but rather bewildered. Several pairs of button down, dark blue shirts hung from one end of the rack to the other. Matching pants were folded across a row. She shifted through one shirt to the other, looking for any differences

in size.

Eventually she found the smallest pair and threw it over herself. It was still slightly large for her, though not discomforting. She grabbed a pair of pants and made for the bed, tossing it onto the nightstand. She rarely slept with pants or pajamas on. Frankly, she thought it was rather silly to dress up before going to sleep.

After shutting the light atop the nightstand off she climbed into the lower bunk. She beat her pillow until she was satisfied, sunk her head and pulled the sheets over herself. Where were Herv and Fillis now? Were they sleeping in a bed like she was?

The thought frightened her. She turned on her side and tried to picture the round face that made her smile. Somehow her thoughts strayed to her mother, and then she fell asleep.

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“Fillis... Fillis is that you?” said a familiar voice.

Someone prodded the sleeping girl. She turned over, stirring.

“What...? Fillis...?” she mumbled.

Her eyes opened. A figure stood over her who she could not make out. Her hands fumbled for the nightstand, and the next moment the light caught his face. She inhaled sharply.

“Max?”

Chapter 8

The Alicorn

Max Heimine stood before her, in the flesh. His brown eyes found hers, and there was subtle bewilderment behind them, a sort of controlled calm which didn't waver upon even the strangest of sights. He was taller than her, with dark hair and a firm posture, though it seemed as if he didn't put any effort into maintaining it. He was related to Fillis, there was no doubt, but it was hard to see how they were twins. Whereas Fillis was short-tempered, hasty, and frequently on the point of a nervous breakdown, Max was patient and humbled, in control of his emotions at all times.

Jola felt stupid for saying that she hadn't gotten to know him. He had, after all, lived with her for almost a decade. She met the boy when she was five, during which he and Fillis had filled the last spots of their boarding house. Not much was known of their family, only that their mother had died in a freak accident as one of the few female engineers in the Excavades. The two kept mostly to themselves early on, but eventually they became more social.

Fillis wasn't athletic. She rarely played sports, and only did so if she was inclined to out of fury from being taunted. She wasn't ditsy or promiscuous. She didn't play with dolls when she was younger, nor did she experiment with makeup until recently. She had been an occasional drawer, able to sketch detailed portraits without slant or prejudice. And she never missed a chance to dispute women's role in society during class, often turning a healthy explanation into a heated debate which ended in the usual phrases "sexist bastard" or "close-minded egotistical pig."

Max, on the other hand, was by far less outspoken than his sister. He was considerate and self-effacing, though sarcastic at times. He was taller than Fillis, he had the stamina that sports required, and he had the discipline to observe the scene before rushing in. He had lost interest in playing all too soon, however, and Jola didn't remember him playing with the clans during his teenage years. He was quieter then, more isolated, only speaking when he was spoken too, in which case he would still maintain his polite disposition. It was rumored that he had been seeing a girl from a Prunie family, and had been keeping his Project stature a secret from her. Jola didn't believe this was true. Not the fact that he had found a girl, for Libby had once admitted to having a crush on him, but rather she didn't find Max being ashamed of his living conditions convincing, for she had known him to be humble and unabashed of his upbringing—a boy who had once egged an entire cross-section of Prunie homes with her and the old clan, despite knowing full well that he would receive a beating from his sister once the word had spread.

Jola pushed the sheets off and sat up. It looked like him, she thought, but how could this be? Was it a dream?

"Max?" she repeated.

"Jola?" he breathed in disbelief. He made to speak

again but stopped short and turned around quickly, facing the wall.

Jola gaped, confused. She looked down and noticed that her legs were bare. She swung her feet onto the ground and pulled her pants on, straightening up. They were a notch too wide for her, hanging loose like a punk Prunie. "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" he said, glancing over his shoulder to see if she was decent before wheeling around. "I thought you were Fillis."

"Fillis...?" Her face swept with urgency. "Max—they have Fillis!"

"They what?"

"They have Fillis—they took her! And—and they have Herv too! They've gotten hold of them both!"

"What? Who has? Wait, Jola, slow down. What's going on? Who has Herv and Fillis?"

She looked at him as if she had never seen him before. He didn't seem worried or distressed, though strangely confused. She shrank back onto the bed, arms over her face. After a moment he sat next to her.

"Tell me everything, Jola."

"I... I don't know if I can. A lot of it happened so fast."

"Try, please."

She met his eyes, her hand running through her scalp. She told him everything, starting from the news they had gotten at school about the Professor's death and his disappearance, about how she and Herv had set off for Argus's house, meeting Fillis along the way. She strayed slightly from the incident with the Prunies, but mentioned the Ban-shees and the chase through the road all the same. He didn't interrupt her or make any expression out of the ordinary, and when she finished she found him looking at her through plain, unperturbed eyes, as if the act of his sister

being kidnapped had happened on a regular basis.

"Well aren't you going to say anything?" she said impatiently. His cold stare was making her nervous, even slightly furious. How could he be so calm about a missing relative whereas she was in hysterics over a friend?

"I don't know what to say," he said after what seemed like a long while.

She opened her mouth to comment but fell short. He was just as worried about the two as she was, he just didn't have it in him to show it. She bit her lip, slightly ashamed.

"Er—tell me about you. How did you get here?"

He watched her carefully and leaned back slightly. "Well," he began, not looking at her, "I went to Professor Argus's house two nights ago, because I was worried that something might have happened to him, and that the school didn't want us to think too much of it. I got there safely. I didn't think anything would happen to me. He let me in, though reluctantly—"

"He was still alive when you got there?" Jola said quickly, shocked by any bit that concerned the last moments of her teacher's life.

"Yea, he didn't look very well. I reckon he didn't have any sleep for a few days or so. I asked him why he didn't come to school but he didn't want to tell me. He made me wait in the sitting room while he went upstairs to do something."

"Do what?"

"I never found out. He was pretty dodgy. When he came down he told me he had just talked to Professor Rauley, and that I was to go home with him. The next part happened so fast. Something spooked him. It might have been a noise, I didn't notice. He made me hide in the closet. It was hard to understand what was going on. A minute later I heard him dashing up the stairs. Then more footsteps

followed. I heard them creaking on the steps. Some were in the sitting room, walking around. Then I heard a gun go off. A few more shots fired and whoever was in the sitting room bolted upstairs, that's when I made my break out the back. I saw eyes like a light bulb and didn't look back. I can't remember most of what happened next. I got to the boarding house and passed out or something. The next thing I remember, I was here, with these people. They told me that they were watching the house and that they had rescued me and knocked me out as a precaution. I wanted to go home, of course, but they wouldn't let me. They said I was in danger now that I had escaped from the Banshees, and that if I went back to the boarding house I would've been caught. They didn't say that I had to stay long, just a few days, so I agreed to go along with whatever, eating in my room and exploring the place. They didn't mind me really, just as long as I didn't get in their way."

Jola's jaw was clenched. He had explained everything as plain as a passage from an encyclopedia. She didn't know why she was tense. She tried to shrug it off by saying, "What happened next? What made you think I was Fillis?"

"I heard that they had found a girl from my boarding house. You see, we're not the only ones they've rescued. There are a few others, sleeping right in this corridor. I'm in the room next to yours. I've talked to a few of the other kids. They're not all Projects, some are Prunies. One has been here for over a month." He paused. "Did they tell you? About the war and the Temple?"

"Yea," said Jola.

"Did you believe them?"

"Not at first. The pieces fell into place here and there, but then, well—did you know that they have Brother Bob from the news here?"

"What? You're kidding."

"They captured him," she nodded. "He's confirmed what they've said. Max, they said they're going to invade the Azalea Temple soon, maybe even today!"

She watched him for any sign of shock in his face. He didn't look surprised, making her grind her teeth unconsciously, but said simply, "So that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"They have a couple hundred vans stored away here. Exactly like the ones the Temple uses."

"Really? Where?"

"I can show you later."

He looked at the clock. 6:43 AM. Jola frowned slightly: it didn't feel like morning, and there was no way to tell because they were underground, and they had no windows. The door opened, making them both stir. The other woman who had been inside the meeting besides Madison and Blair stepped in, carrying a tray.

"I didn't realize you had company," she said neutrally, laying the tray on the counter. "Your breakfast. I'll bring yours in next," she indicated the boy.

When she made to leave, Max said suddenly, "Can you read my mind?"

The woman turned, her face frowning slightly. "No."

This came as a surprise to Jola. She made to speak but the boy continued, "Really? Why not?"

The woman looked as if she had been insulted. "Because I am not like Madison or Blair. I do not share the signs."

"Signs?"

"I don't understand it all. It's not my territory, really. . . Agent Hergrants is due to leave in an hour, she isn't busy at the moment. Would you like me to have her explain it to you? I'm sure she wouldn't object."

Max was watching her curiously. He smiled faintly, his eyes unmoved. "No, that's quite alright. Thanks though."

The woman acknowledged him. Jola looked from Max to the woman quickly. "I'd like to know," she said. "If Madison wouldn't mind explaining it to me, that is."

"I don't think she would," said the woman. "She finds it relaxing to talk to people before she sets out for an assignment. It calms her nerves. Do you wish me to summon her to you instead?"

"Oh would you?"

"Certainly."

And with a curt bow the woman swept from the room. Jola rounded on Max immediately. "Well that went well!"

He met her eyes, his face bearing the expression he had wore upon first seeing her. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you see the way she looked at you when you asked that? It was as if you had asked a barren woman whether she thought she couldn't have kids because God was punishing her!"

The boy didn't look taken aback. On the contrary, he seemed mildly amused. "Weren't you the one who wanted to have it explained to you?"

"Well that was after you had been tactless. I did it out of politeness more than curiosity," she assured, though she knew it was a lie.

Something told her the boy had seen through this, but either out of sheer politeness (for which Max was known for) or not wanting to argue (which he was also known for), the boy said, "You're right, that was tactless of me. I'm going to take a shower. I'll see you later." He rose from the bunk and crossed the room, closing the door so graciously that it made Jola feel even more ashamed of herself.

After a moment she retrieved her tray and brought it to her nightstand. She didn't like ham and eggs, but a stomach empty from the night over couldn't object. She ate quickly and drained her juice, rinsing out the taste with

the accompanying water bottle. She went to the bathroom and brushed her teeth, running the tap in the shower. She was just about to slip off her clothes and climb in when someone knocked on the door. She switched the tap off, crossed over to the door and opened it.

"You wanted to see me, Jola?"

"Yes, do you have time to talk?"

The woman smiled. "A little."

Jola stepped aside to let her in. They sat on the lower bunk. The girl couldn't help but notice that she looked rather lovely. Madison's attire didn't seem promiscuous or overly professional, but rather content, as if she had dressed up like this just to walk around the house on an empty Saturday afternoon. She wasn't wearing any makeup, but she still looked alluring. Every feature on her face was docile, except for her eyes, of course, which carried such a calculating calmness that the girl was suddenly reminded of Max.

"What is it that you'd like to know?"

Jola's mind stirred. It just occurred to her that she didn't know how to approach this situation. How was she supposed to go about asking a person how they can read another's mind? It seemed silly, of course. How many people had been in her situation? Perhaps the woman had known what she was thinking, for she smiled, a fresh smile which she had not shown before.

"Did—did you catch that?" Jola said uncertainly, finding herself self-conscious of her thoughts.

"A little," said the woman. "Do you really want to know this?"

Jola made a curious start. "Of—of course I do! Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, it will take a long time. I have a place to go in an hour. I might be able to give you the details, but it might

bore you, and, well, you might find it hard to believe.”

“It won’t bore me—and I’ll believe it if it comes from your lips,” the girl assured. The woman smiled again, but weakly this time.

“Very well,” she said. Her eyes caught the room, and after a moment she said, “I’m what they would call an Alicorn.” She met Jola’s eyes, and the girl didn’t show any objection in them. “You see, there’s this place in the north called Requiem. This woman founded it as a special school for girls—young women, to be more precise. The woman had been a scientist, one of the few females privileged with this title, as the Temple has oppressed our gender for God knows how long. Nobody took her seriously, for scientist or not, she was still a woman. But eventually they overcame that because she had discovered that she had been gifted with what, ironically, seeing as how she was a woman, we call Intuition.

“This gift allowed her to become attuned with her environment in a way that no one else could. She could tell who was behind her, or where objects lay in a darkened room. Eventually she learned that she could even read minds—or rather she could sense what a person was feeling so well that it was as if she were reading their thoughts. She and her husband, a scientist as well, brought this to the attention of the Temple. They became so intrigued by her abilities that they studied her, and she did not object, for she had plans of her own. She learned to master her Intuition as well as her influence on the Temple. Never before had a woman been of so much value to them. All of this happened long before our Invisible War began, of course. But it was a time when women were in even worse shape than now—you might be aware that they only just recently allowed women to employ themselves to the Temple. However she was important, and with her worth came demands, hefty

demands made on her end that would've been laughable had anyone else made them.

"She stated that if she could summon these abilities, then there must be others out there who could prove the same. Naturally, the Temple was fascinated with the idea of having people under their command with the ability to read minds. It would be the ultimate proof that they are, in fact, sacred. Their priests could read the thoughts of the liberal authors, painters, artists—anyone of that sort who had been skeptical of the Temple's reign and had gathered somewhat of a cult following throughout the internet. The Temple could employ their mind readers to these liberals as the ultimate proof that they were God's word and authority and then no rebellion would've broken out, for you see, even though this was miles behind the Invisible War, they had foreseen a rebellion long ago. Personally I think there would've been a rebellion either way, because our forces consist of people within the Temple itself who would've known that the mind readers were just another ploy by the Temple to control, and they would've spoken out either way. But that's all beside the point.

"So this woman began searching for more, for others who shared her abilities. What she discovered was that there were several others—a small number compared to the rest of the world, but still, there were others like her. But the ironic part about all of this was that they were all women. Now you can imagine the Temple's surprise at this, for they had been oppressing female society since the beginning of time, and yet women held what they could not reach.

"It was here that the woman—the mother of the Alicorn—had suggested that the Temple allow her to make a facility north of the Midlands, outside of a city called Mercury Cross, for the purpose of researching these women.

The Temple agreed and she was allowed to oversee the project. She began experimenting with these girls—these young women, reporting back to the Temple every now and then. They weren't as strong as her, she noticed, but they were able to replicate some of the abilities she had demonstrated to others. Somewhere along the way her husband left her. There are a lot of personal details that I won't concern you with. But she continued her efforts in Requiem and a few years later she requested that the Temple dismiss all of their personnel from the facility and allow her to run it herself with her own handpicked staff, which consisted of women she had trained herself.

“Now you would probably think that the Temple would finally say no to her, for studying women for the greater good was one thing, but allowing them to have complete control, that was another. However the Temple had green-lighted her request, overcome with greed, they had no choice. She had promised to discover why only women had acquired these abilities, and they wanted her to do so because then it would lead to the reason that men couldn't acquire them, and then they could fix that.

“Now that she was in charge, she had continued her research, producing results constantly to meet the Temple's demands. But in the process she had been secretly training the women for other things. Eventually her true intentions came through to those of us, I myself included, who had passed through Requiem. She was raising an army—an army of women. She had first told us that we would receive 'unorthodox training' because it would make us more well rounded. But it was obvious that she had wanted to make soldiers out of us, and none of us objected because we trusted her above all. She was a woman who stood for something that we had never had in all the years of this world: control.

“The Temple had turned a blind eye to this. What did they care if she was teaching the girls to play with guns? As long as they got results they didn’t mind. Then the events leading up to the Invisible War took place. The liberal parts of the Temple wanted to loosen up its hold on Cyrus, stating that they had evolved so well that they didn’t need the religious hold to maintain order. There were several issues: social, political, too many to discuss with you. But anyways that was how the rebellion started. Conclave was in a rut. One thing led to another and suddenly Judicor Lemming had been killed. You see, he was the only member of Conclave who had taken sides with the liberals, who had openly voiced his approval of Cyrus’s advancement in civilization as a reason why the Temple’s control wasn’t as much of a concern as back then, before the crime levels lowered due to the social movements spread by the Temple. But now he had said that we are doing more harm by controlling than good. The Temple and the rest of Conclave didn’t buy that, of course, and that’s probably why they had him killed. They denied it, naturally, but everyone knew it was true.

“One thing led to another and the next thing you know the rebellion rose to concealed warfare, marking the start of the Invisible War about two years ago. But that time is coming to an end, I daresay, since we will surface soon enough and then it will be just plain old, dull, open combat, you know—fields of bullet ridden men, rockets launching across the land, hovercrafts shooting hovercrafts, that sort of thing!” She stopped, a fresh smile on her face again. “I think I might have—um—strayed from the point, a little, I daresay,” she added, nodding wisely to herself.

Jola felt as if she hadn’t had quite enough sleep to have taken all of this in. Her stomach stirred and she had to remind herself that she had already eaten.

“Well no, I don’t think you’ve had enough sleep either,” said the woman. “It’s 7:21 now, that couldn’t have been more than a few hours, right? I mean you did come after midnight.”

“But that!” said Jola suddenly.

“I’m sorry?”

“There—just a second ago you found out that I didn’t get much sleep. How did you do that? I mean—how did you just read my mind? Does it just come to you as naturally as reading a book? Do you have to access something like a nerve to do it—sort of like curling your toes?”

The woman sighed. “Well no, it is nothing like reading a book. In fact, we don’t like calling it ‘mind-reading.’ The actual term we like to use is Extraction. You see, when I do it, it’s not actually as if I were reading or hearing your thoughts word for word, but rather feeling through my own interpretations. It’s difficult to put into words. But, well, you know how sometimes you can tell what a person is about to say before they say it?”

“I think.”

“Well it’s kind of like that. See, if you were to think of a number between one and a million I would never get it, because it doesn’t work that way. Physical characters like letters or numbers don’t get translated from you to me—it doesn’t work that way. Some women can, but not guess between one and a million, probably closer to one and fifteen or guess a name that you’re thinking. But the way it works is that I get a glimmer, just a spec of what you’re thinking. I get enough so that I can tell what you are feeling. Are you hurt? Angry? Lost? Confused? Suspicious? I can tell in a heartbeat.

“The hard part is the specific things. Like a minute ago, I knew that you felt unsatisfied somehow, and then the feeling of sleep just popped into my mind so naturally I

put them together and deduced that you hadn't had enough sleep. Sometimes I can pull out more complex things which seem closer to 'guess a number between one and a million,' but those rarely come, and I was trained never to rely on that. Sometimes I can even delve into your past as if it were my own, and the odd thing about that is I see the memories more clearly than I see your current thoughts, as if I were reenacting that time you had pulled your friend into the forest with you to look for unicorns." She smiled at this, startling Jola slightly. "I got that specifically when we were driving through the forest. It didn't feel like you were thinking about that memory, because I felt your mind was elsewhere, but I got that memory at random. That's another thing we're not expected to rely on: memories. Alicorns are never to concentrate on extracting memories from others, because they always come at random.

"We can, however, learn about a certain memory if we force our subject to think about it consciously, and then we can Extract it purely as a present thought. For example, if I wanted to know who was the first boy you've ever had a crush on, I can just start talking about it like I am right now until it sparks into your mind and—aha!" She laughed at the girl's expression. "Don't worry," she added in an undertone. "I won't tell him."

Jola smiled weakly, not altogether reassured. "Did you get his name, that time?"

"No, I didn't actually. However I saw a little bit of his face, his features, and how you remember him, so naturally I can put this and that together. Sometimes I can get a name, but like I said, that's closer to 'guess a number between one and a million' than feeling your thoughts through somewhat of a hazy fog. It's different for each person to describe. Some use the hazy fog term. Others have described it as 'watching a person through a looking glass.' That one

probably makes more sense, so I guess I should use that one for now on.”

They didn’t talk for a long moment. The woman looked at the clock and back, her eyes calm and unperturbed again.

“Is there something else you’d like to ask me before I go? Something that would help you sleep better?”

Jola took a few seconds to gather her thoughts. Her mind racked as if she had read several books in little than an hour. “Can you just read anyone’s thoughts? Is there a way to block it out?”

“No and yes. I can’t read everyone’s thoughts, and yes, there is a method to block it out. If you weren’t standing in front of me, and I was just watching you from a window of another room, it would be harder for me to extract your thoughts than it would be if I were having a conversation with you, or if you were walking with me. Also you can train yourself to block me out. If you were aware of me, like self-conscious of my presence, you could master a level of self-control that would prevent me from Extracting—not completely though, I would always be able to get just a little crumb, but it would be like putting a blotch of ink in my eyes and I had to see through it to understand. The block gets stronger if you are aware of me, and it takes a bit of energy to perform. But if you are able to do it, the link between you and I will be greatly weakened, and I will be left to resort to the most boring thing in the world and ask you ‘how was your day’ or ‘what are you thinking,’ when you would be free to tell your very own version of events rather than an honest one. But as this connection gets weaker if you use this method of blocking me out, it can get stronger if I hold eye contact with you.

“Remember how I said earlier that it was rare to get exact translations of thoughts? Well as rare as those Extractions are, they occur most often when an Alicorn holds

eye contact with her subject. Also, by holding eye contact an Alicorn will find it generally easier to understand the person she is talking to—or not talking to, if she would just prefer to pry from afar. However if you are close enough to hold eye contact, you might as well start a conversation or that could get very awkward, especially if you're staring at a guy!" She smiled again. "Simply put, distance plays a role in Extraction. The closer you are, the easier it is for me to understand. But it's not just physical distance, but distance from your mind as well, which can be acquired through training. If you want to block me out, you sort of have to confuse yourself for it to work, it's hard to explain. But also what I mean by 'distance from your mind' could be explained by, say—if you were drunk on spirits and your mind had been loosened. I find it harder to Extract when I'm trying to connect with someone who is impaired. Or if you were absentmindedly depressed, and your thoughts went astray, it would be just as hard for me to connect with you as it would be for me to connect with a drunk. It is because of this 'distance' that Alicorns have been trained to get closer to their subject to understand, either physically or emotionally. I tend to find that the physical distance problem is easiest to solve, since all I need to do is stand closer to you. The emotional problem—or mental problem, whatever you want to call it doesn't matter as long as you recognize what I'm talking about—is harder to work through than the physical problem. There aren't many methods of closing the 'emotional' distance between you and I if one became so strong that I couldn't tell what you were thinking, and they're the hardest things in the world to explain. But anyways I've strayed from the point again. Simply put, as I would say: no, I cannot read everybody's mind, and yes, there are ways to block me out."

Jola had but one more question to ask. She didn't know

whether or not she should verbally do so, however, because she was certain the woman had already seen it coming.

"Go ahead," Madison said. "You are already distanced from me a little more now because you are aware of my presence and are showing a bit more restraint compared to the looseness you had earlier."

"But I knew you were a mind reader earlier too," said the girl.

"True, but you weren't aware that you could block me out. Now that you are, you are showing somewhat of a hostility to my senses, however still not strong enough to stop me if I put effort. But you should ask anyways."

"In the meeting you had to ask the commander what he wanted. Why couldn't you just read his mind?"

"Because that would be downright rude."

The girl frowned and the woman smiled at her expression.

"The reason I've read your mind over and over was simply because I could not do so otherwise. Don't take this the wrong way, but your mind was so loose that it felt like I was feeling what you were feeling regardless of whether or not I wanted to, it was sort of forced upon me. After this conversation I'm sure you won't be so loose, and then I won't be able to understand you unless I put actual effort into it. Not all people are like this. Your friend Max, for instance, doesn't send out signals as easily as you did, and neither does the commander. I can still Extract from either of them, of course. I would just have to try to do so. But I don't want to do that because it would be wrong, especially with the commander. He might know something that I wasn't meant to know and so I respect that.

"Another thing, as I said the link is weakened if you are blocking me out, it is also strengthened if you are doing the opposite. If you wanted me to know what you were thinking

I could catch it much, much easier. So easy, in fact, that it would be just like the way you were before, about how I didn't really have a choice in the matter. This isn't always reliable, however, because if you were the enemy, and you were aware of my presence, you could just be sending me the wrong signals on purpose. I can tell the difference if what I am Extracting is being sent on purpose or if it just the usual. So I can trust if my friends are sending me a signal on purpose, but if it is someone that I am surveying, I tend not to rely on their messages."

The woman looked at the clock. 7:28 AM. Jola didn't need to be a mind reader to know that she was close to leaving.

"Is there anything else, Jola?"

"Yea, you said sometimes it feels as if thoughts are forced upon you, and that you have no choice but to hear them."

"I did mention that."

"Well don't you get annoyed by it? I mean, surely you must get overrun from time to time?"

"Yes, I do get annoyed. But the links don't get weakened just one way—they don't weaken only because the subject wants to block me out. I have just as much power to sever the connections as they do. Therefore, I am rarely annoyed by these things because I can block them out myself, if I wish."

"Well how come you didn't block me out?"

At this the woman smiled weakly again, though Jola felt as if it were a fresh one. "Because, Jola Truehase, I find you somehow fascinating."

And with this, she rose from the bunk and withdrew from the room, leaving the girl to stare after her, her ears pink.

Chapter 9

The SEA

Jola rose from the bunk. Instantly her pants sagged down. She pulled them past her waist and made to the closet for a belt. Then she left the room and made for the one next door. She didn't bother knocking before entering.

The room was identical to the one she had left. She found Max lying on the bottom bunk, spread on his back, his arms behind his head, staring out into nothingness. He didn't notice her until her shadow cast over his face, at which point he shifted aside and sat up straight. He was wearing the same clothes as she was.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"They're leaving for that place where they keep the children."

"I see," he muttered. He shrank back lazily. He must've noticed her screwed up face, for he added, "Well what's wrong now?"

"Well aren't you going to do anything? Aren't you at all concerned about your sister and your friends?"

"Of course I am. What else would I be?"

"Well you certainly don't make an effort in showing it!"

He sighed under his breath. "Jola, what do you want me to do? It's out of our hands. These people know what they're doing. Why can't you just let them bring them back without putting your two creds into—"

"They're not bringing them back, Max! They're going to the place to kill the Banshees, and that's all that they're doing!"

The boy sat up again. "What do you mean 'they're not bringing them back?' I thought you said they were?"

"No, I didn't."

They watched each other for a moment. The boy's subtleness of the situation made her skin flush.

"Well?"

"Well what?" he said. "Am I supposed to do or say something? Because unless you have a plan, I might as well say nothing at all."

"Do you know where they keep the vans?"

"Yes, I told you I did—"

"Then take me to them."

He frowned slightly. "What are you going—"

"Never mind that!" she said hastily, grabbing his hand and pulling him with her into the corridor. She brought him around the corner, checked both sides and then turned to face him. "Well don't just look at me—lead the way!"

He didn't open his mouth to object, though his expression was mildly concerned. He stepped forward nonetheless. It wasn't long until they were in the lobby with the computer screens. People shuffled past them as if they were invisible. Perfect, Jola thought, their presence wasn't a problem. Max led her through a break in the lobby until they fell upon another set of corridors. They stopped before a bend and Max halted her. When she gave him a curious stare he said, "It's down here. But there are guards."

“So?”

“Well, er, they sort of have, well you know—guns.”

She gave him another curious stare. Surely he wasn’t expecting them to shoot two children who were already in the building?

“They’re big too. I don’t really see how we’re going—”
She already stepped forward.

“Hang on, Jola! They’re going to—oh hello!” He stopped short on sight of the two guards stationed outside of a walkway which looked as if it led out into the cavern. Jola couldn’t help but feel nervous: one of them was a woman. She looked from one child to the other while the man merely stared straight ahead in what Jola was sure to be a guard technique used to intimidate. The woman’s eyes met Jola’s and her brows rose.

“Yes?”

“We were just, uh, well, we were just wondering—”

“Max said he saw the vans earlier and I just wanted to see them for myself,” Jola said quickly. She couldn’t help but notice the woman’s eyes narrow slightly, so she added, “Oh I know he was probably shown by one of you—but really, I’ve never seen a hundred cars lined up before. I’m from the Projects, you see, so I’ve never really gotten out of the suburbs before, and I just thought I’d take a look because it’s a rare thing, isn’t it? A fleet of cars in a cave?”

The woman seemed to have doubted that. She looked cleverly from the boy, who Jola was sure had given them away, to Jola, who was playing the wide-eyed girl at the zoo.

Please don’t be a mind reader...

“Dawlish, what do you think?” said the woman. The man next to her blinked suddenly.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” he said, looking at her in confusion. He looked to the two kids before him and seemed

to only just have noticed their presence.

"Never mind. . ." said the woman to herself. "You can go in. But don't be too long and don't touch anything."

"Don't worry, we won't," said Jola, stepping forward so quickly that Max had to mouth a "thank you" to ease the woman's suspicions.

He caught up to her. "A little hasty there, aren't we Jola?"

She ignored him and kept up her pace. They were descending a spiral ramp in the cave, well-lit by stage lights strung from the walls. The vans were lined up in the clearing below. The ramp ended and they found themselves too short to see over the vehicles, which were parked just perfectly apart from one another, slanted to the left. Jola turned her head for either direction. The row ended a far ways into the darkness on either side.

"I told you there were hundreds of them," said the boy wisely, making her skin flush again and urging her forward. It seemed like the top of the hour had passed before they made it to the end of the row. They crossed over the side. Jola glanced to her left after each row, spotting no one and hearing nothing. She got to her sixth when she spotted two figures. She pulled Max quickly behind the van at the end of the line and peaked around its nose.

They weren't far, maybe half a dozen vans away on the row opposite Jola. The van's rear doors were open, and the two were loading black bags into it.

It didn't take long before Jola realized that they were Blair and Andy. The woman swung up her backpack and made to leave.

"Where you going?" called Andy.

"With Ross."

"He's taking Madison. She said you were supposed to come with me."

The woman considered this for a moment, frowning slightly. "I thought—"

"Does it really matter who goes with whom?"

"No, I guess not." She made for the van again. The man exhaled hoarsely. He checked his watch.

"Listen, I have to take a piss. We have five minutes. You can ask her for a switch if you want, frankly I don't really give a damn, as long as I get to drive."

He closed the doors and made in their direction.

"He's coming this way—get under the van—quick!"

His footsteps grew closer, then distant. Jola slid out into the open, dusting herself off. She glanced around the bend. Blair had disappeared.

"Come on!"

Now that the doors were closed, it was hard to tell one apart from the other, but Jola had burned its position into her memory. She reached the van and opened the rear doors. Her shoulders loosened. She had feared that the interior would've consisted of the two long benches running lengthwise. But since the seating arrangements were ordinary, they could hide in the rear just as long as nobody checked. She climbed in and sank over one of the bags.

"Well?" she hissed, shooting Max a face.

He grimaced but climbed in nonetheless, pulling the doors shut behind him. She shifted aside to give him room to lie so that he couldn't be seen from the front. There were no windows in the cargo hold. Jola's hand ran down the leather of one of the bags. A funny feeling told her they weren't loaded with things children should be laying over.

"What exactly is the thinking here?" said the boy.

"I don't know," Jola admitted aloud. "Usually I just work things out as I go along."

He opened his mouth to protest but one of the doors in the front opened. At once the two children pressed

their heads down, their necks stretched so tensely that they might have been petrified. Another door opened.

“Well?” said a man’s voice.

“It doesn’t matter,” said the woman, “just drive.”

The engine roared to life. The van reversed and shot forward, maneuvering left and right a moment later. Max met her eyes, and something told her that he was thinking the same thing. It felt as if there was another vehicle following them. A minute passed and they were cruising straight through an open road, making no turns and no stops.

Something that Jola cursed herself for not realizing sooner struck a chord: there was a mind-reader amongst them. She tried to nonverbally relay this to the boy. Madison could tell what she was thinking off the bat, and she had mentioned something about sensing people around her. Could the woman perform the same?

She tried to block out her thoughts like Madison had said. She kept picturing that there was a mind reader in her midst, and that she certainly didn’t want her to catch on to her presence. Was she learning how to block out an Alicorn like Madison had explained? It certainly seemed that way, for they had been traveling for well over ten minutes without incident.

“Am I supposed to hide in the back when we get to the gate?” said Blair. Jola’s eyes flared, and Max stared unfocused past her left ear. “A woman entering Temple zone would be awfully suspicious, even if I am dressed for the occasion.”

“No, we have a cover,” said Andy. “I thought women were good at remembering these things?”

“I missed a portion of the briefing last night when I escorted the girl to her room.”

The man chuckled harshly. “Then why are you coming along? Isn’t it obvious that the commander doesn’t want

you to be here?"

"We were trained to work in two's at Requiem. I'm supposed to work with Madison. The commander knows that. He shouldn't have split us up when he ordered the surveillance of Argus. It's not like you had to drive because you're a man and I'm a woman. Sometimes I feel like the commander doesn't even want our help in the first—"

"You're really thick, you know that? Always jumping to conclusions about gender. Did it ever occur to you that the commander had separated the two of you so that we wouldn't risk losing both of you at the same time? Huh? It's not that he doesn't want your help—he's the one who contacted Requiem in the first place. Last night wasn't a walk in the park, Blair—we got shot at and almost knocked off the road. If you had been her escort in place of me you wouldn't have returned. And no, it's not because you're a woman—it's because I've had experience in aggressive driving, which is why the commander picked me to go and not you. So don't give me that anti-feminist crap again because frankly I'm tired of it. And for your information, a large portion of what we're doing is on behalf of oppression towards women."

There was a long pause between them. Then the woman said, "Still, he shouldn't have shunned me from the briefing. I needed to know every detail of our assignment."

"Like I said, he didn't want you to be here."

"But I am. So you're going to have to fill in the gaps for me."

The man chuckled harshly again. "What do you want to know?"

"Just run through it again, so I get a good picture."

"We're going to the Security Enforcement Agency to kill the Banshees," he said dully. He drove with his knees and lit a cigarette. "We have a gate pass that the man

inside left for us, under the cover that we're technicians. Yes, you're a woman, but they have women working in the Temple, just not that many and very few in high places." He snickered. "But I guess you kind of are going to be a nuisance—suspicious-wise, seeing as how even the lowest of technicians can be the highest of positions for a woman."

She ignored the comment. The man exhaled smoke and continued, his wrist over the wheel, "We're nothing more than a cover to get in. It's Madison whose important here. She's going to do her thing and deal with the critters on her own."

The woman frowned. "You mean we're not going to provide tactical support? I thought we were going to do something like hack into the system and guide her through their cameras? That's why we're bringing Ross with us, isn't it?"

Andy shook his head and lowered the cigarette from his lips. "There are no cameras in the SEA, just like the Temple of Cyrus. The facility was built long ago for other purposes. It's only recently that they've used it as their command post for intelligence."

"So we're going to sit in the van and wait for her to get back? Is that why the commander didn't object to my request to come along?"

"Request? It was more like a tantrum from a grown woman if you ask me. No, we're going to see if we can plant more bugs into their system. You know that at this moment the entire Temple's intelligence—people and machines—is split into several different systems as a failsafe. Just like their higher ups aren't in the know with each other, their mainframes aren't networked to one another, and each is accessed by a different person from different locations so that if one has fallen the others won't be susceptible to the same kind of scrutiny. You, me, and Ross have only a sec-

ondary objective, not of prime importance at the moment but a target of opportunity nonetheless. We're simply going to tap another mainframe, which, if you ask me, won't really matter seeing as how the commander figures we're going to take over Azalea this week anyways. So it's more so a contingency plan incase something comes up and we're stalled from raising the surface code—such as if the Banshees are still kicking after this and we have to go back to the drawing board.”

“Why can't the insider just bug the system for us? Surely he can do a simple thing like that if he's able to get us a pass into the facility?”

“Good point. Apparently he's 'too important to risk his life any further.' Pisses me off thinking about it seeing as how my brother has done more than his fair share of spy work, and the commander doesn't seem to mind asking him simple things like abducting a high priest and still returning to the Temple the next day. But when it comes to our man within the SEA, the commander suddenly has a conscience.”

Jola and Max watched each other, their brows furrowed. It was entirely clear to both of them now that these people had no intention to save the captured children. Jola wanted to say “I told you so” but the clandestine of the situation had prevented it. She gave him the look nonetheless.

“So that's why we're bringing Ross,” said Blair, more so a statement of understanding than a question.”

“Yes.”

There was another long pause between the two. Then the man spoke in what sounded to Jola like a completely different voice, like the one he had used when he told her about his family the night earlier.

“Blair, why did you come here?”

“I'm sorry?”

“Why did you come here, to Azalea, to the Cave?”

The woman looked slightly taken aback. She answered without hesitation nonetheless. “Because there was a war which should’ve been fought a long time ago. And if I can do something to help the side I want to win, then I should.”

The man snickered. “That’s an answer that any of us within our faction can say. What I want to know is why you came here?”

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

“It’s because of him, isn’t it?”

“Him?”

“I’m sorry—them. Him and him, you came here for them, didn’t you?”

The woman didn’t answer. She was watching the man plainly. After a long while she said, “Yes.”

The man snickered again, exhaling smoke through his nostrils. “The things girls do for guys. It’s silly really.”

“I thought you didn’t like bringing up the gender war?”

“I don’t, but sometimes I don’t have a choice. It certainly seems that way to me.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you’re a woman, and I’m a man.”

“So?”

“You don’t see me relocating myself for anyone, do you?”

“Really? I was led to believe that you moved to Azalea to stay close to your siblings in Project homes?”

“Yes, I did come to Azalea for that. But I wasn’t part of this faction until after I had moved here. You, on the other hand, came here recently out of, since you have just admitted it, no coincidence to them.”

“I told you already though. I’m Madison’s partner.”

“But you were aching for any excuse to come here anyways, weren’t you? You know what I think? I think it was the other way around. Maybe neither of you was assigned

to the commander. He requested help from the Alicorns, but he wouldn't have known who was who amongst your kind except for yourself, so he couldn't have requested anyone in particular. Maybe you suggested coming here, and Madison followed you because she's your partner, and not you following her."

The woman remained silent.

"I thought so," muttered Andy. "But now you feel like your plan is backfiring, don't you? Because Madison seems to be outshining you. And like it or not, you can't say anything because she's your partner. The commander's favorite...our preemptive hope against the Banshees."

"I was under the impression that I was the mind-reader, not the other way around?"

"I don't need to have Instinct—or whatever the hell you people call it—to know you. You broadcast your feelings like an aerial and you let them get the better of you. That's why the commander is reluctant to employ you, Blair. If you want to survive in this job, you can't let your personal feelings get in the way."

"You may be right, for the most part at least. But I don't have any ill feelings towards Madison. I'm glad she's my partner and I wouldn't have it any other way if I could. She was at the top of our class at Requiem and one of the strongest Alicorns I've ever met."

"Then why did you get fussy when you found out you weren't riding with Ross?"

"It's not because I don't trust her."

"You don't trust him?"

She bit her lip. "It's not that. You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"I don't know how to explain it properly myself. I guess when you care about someone you get strange feelings that

throw you off, make you suspicious.”

“Then I was right. It’s a girl thing.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t feel that way if you were me.”

“Give me a reason.”

Her eyes wandered out the window, watching the fields through unfocused eyes. “I’ve known Ross all my life. After my mother died he was all I really had. My sister and I were never close. And my father... Well it’s just that Ross has been really snappy with me lately, as if he didn’t want to see me. I can’t help but think...”

“We’re in the city now,” said Andy.

They traveled for five more minutes. Jola wanted to poke her head out the window to see what the city looked like. She thought once or twice about surfacing for a glance. The excitement in her stomach drained when she caught sight of Max’s closed eyes. Her face flushed. How could he be sleeping at a time like this?

“We’re here,” called the driver up front. “Let me do the talking.”

Jola tapped the boy. He didn’t respond. They were slowing down. She prodded him again and looked over the backseat row. A building so wide that her eyes couldn’t see the end of it came into view, framed behind a gate and a guarded checkpoint. She sank her head low. She reached her hand out and retracted her fingers, balling it into a fist.

“Ouch!”

“Shh!”

Max shot her a look which she returned with a clenched jaw. She looked up again. The adults hadn’t heard them. She leaned in close to him and spoke in a controlled whisper.

“I can’t believe you took a nap!”

“What was I supposed to do? Hold your hand? All that talk about feelings put me to sleep. Quite frankly, I think that guy would’ve done the same if he weren’t driving.”

“Still! You shouldn’t rest if your sister is in danger! It’s only decent manners for God’s sake!”

“Oh give it a rest, Jola!” He blinked quickly, shifting his head around. “Why have we stopped?”

Jola had half a mind not to answer him. She whispered, nonetheless, “We’re here—at the place where they’re keeping Herv and Fillis.”

Someone rapped on the window. The two children flattened themselves tensely again. Andy Rivenwilo lowered the window and met eyes with the Marine standing guard outside the checkpoint booth.

“Your pass card?”

“I don’t have one,” said Andy, removing the cigarette from his mouth. “We’re guest technicians due in Maintenance, the van behind us as well. We were told to claim a visitor pass at the gate.”

The guard looked from him to the woman seated next to him. His eyes wandered around her curiously.

“I’ll need a name for the visitor pass, and I’ll need to see personal ID’s from you, her, and whoever is in the van behind you.”

“Certainly.” Andy reached into his robes and withdrew a little black pocket book. Blair did the same, handing hers to him. Andy gave both of them to the guard, who looked through them thoroughly. He signaled for another to check the other van.

“And your clearance code for the pass?”

“Night Sky.”

The Marine looked to the man within the security booth. “Run a pass for Night Sky.”

After a moment the man within the booth called out, “Maintenance clearance for Jim Fields, Terry Crouch, and Kelly Higgins.”

The Marine who had greeted the other van returned,

holding out a single black book. "There was only one in the other van, a man by the name of Terry Crouch."

The first Marine nodded and checked the third ID. After a moment he doubled back to one of the two books that Andy had handed him. He looked across Andy to the blonde woman. "This says Mary Bennett. The pass clears for Kelly Higgins."

"She's ill, I'm her replacement," said Blair.

The guard watched the woman closely. Jola held her breath as she lay in wait, listening for the Marine's approval. Surely the story would hold up?

"Pull into the subterranean structure. Wheel in here and take a left when the sign tells you to. Staff parking will be full today so you're going to have to park in Section C. There are elevators that will lead you into the building. Maintenance is in the west wing."

"Thank you," said Andy.

The gate slid open and the two vans drove in slowly. Jola sighed, almost forgetting that they were hiding from the adults up front. She met Max's eyes and he smiled weakly. Then he blinked strangely and looked past her right ear. She frowned and turned her head slightly. Someone was running. The sound of footsteps carried all the way through the open front window.

Louder...

There was more than one of them, Jola could tell. Before she knew it the van had come to a stop again. The footsteps had caught up to them. Someone shouted from outside.

They were surrounded by Marines, guns drawn. The Marine who had greeted them at the checkpoint came before the window. Andy met his eyes and spoke with the cigarette between his teeth.

"What?"

“Mary Bennett is dead.”

Chapter 10

Revealed and Concealed

“Get out of the van. Do it slowly. Do it now.”

Andy Rivenwilo watched the guard as if he hadn't heard him properly. It didn't take long for the Marine to repeat himself.

“Get out of the van. I'm not going to ask again.”

Andy exhaled through his nostrils, his cigarette still between his teeth. He opened the door and stepped out, his hands held lazily over his shoulders. Blair had done the same. The two were frisked by the Marines, and Andy had lost his cell phone in the process.

“Listen, there must be some mistake,” said Andy, lined up next to Blair. “We're just technicians sent by the Temple. Maybe they got the names wrong. Mary isn't dead. She's standing right next to me.”

The guard in charge wasn't paying any attention to what he was saying. He directed another Marine to the other van and the next moment a man the same height as

Andy stepped out and joined the lineup. He wasn't built strong like Andy was. He was tall and slender, with jet black hair and a pale face accompanied by long bangs which almost covered one eye.

Andy dropped his hands and stepped toward the guard. "This is a mistake. We can fix this. Just let me—"

One of the Marines stepped forward and rammed the butt of his weapon into the man's gut. He choked, projecting his cigarette onto the ground. He recovered, glowering. "Alright! You don't have to hit me!"

"Check the vans."

Jola and Max exchanged faces. The girl listened as someone walked around them. The doors swung open and two men in white camouflaged uniforms stood before them, submachine guns aimed. They lowered their weapons and pulled them out. Jola met the concrete hard and she stumbled off her feet. One of the Marines pulled her up and thrust her forward into the lineup, followed by Max.

She met eyes with Blair and Andy. Their faces bore nothing but surprise. The other man, who she had taken as Ross, merely watched her with mild interest.

"They were hiding in the cargo hold along with several black bags, Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant grabbed the girl by the collar and brought her before Andy. "Who is she? Why are she and the boy with you?"

Jola's eyes met Andy's, and she could tell that he didn't know what to say in a situation like this.

"They're prisoners."

The Lieutenant wheeled around. "Prisoners?"

"We were ordered to transfer them from the Temple," Ross acknowledged. His voice was cold and sarcastic.

The Lieutenant looked the girl up and down. His eyes remained on her, and Jola could tell he was confused by

the blue uniform she was wearing. The Marines were now searching the bags. Several types of equipment in the form of wires, boards, and drives were strewn across the floor, the contents of all of the bags but one.

“Lieutenant!”

One of the men came up to him carrying Blair’s black backpack. The lead guard took it and buried his hand. He pulled out a tasergun and looked back to the three adults lined up.

“It’s for incase they woke up while we were transporting them,” said Ross.

The Lieutenant seemed to be considering this for a moment, meeting the eyes of a few of his men. He dropped the weapon back and reached for another, withdrawing a black pistol this time.

“Incase they try to escape,” said the pale faced man rather coldly. “The Temple doesn’t want any problems with runaways talking.”

Max looked to Jola, and she could tell his face held a “what?” She met Ross’s gaze, his dark eyes and his emotionless face. She noticed Blair and Andy’s quick glances at one another whenever they could’ve done so, and they too looked as dumbfounded as everybody else.

“Why didn’t you tell us you had prisoners?”

“Because we assumed the details would’ve come up on the visitor pass,” said Ross. “I daresay someone made a mistake up there in Logistics.”

The Lieutenant’s face tightened, as if staring at the sun. Everywhere he looked he made eye contact.

“Did you check the other van?”

“Yes, nothing but computer equipment.”

At this Jola blinked. Where was Madison?

“May we go now, Lieutenant?”

The Marine turned to face the man. Ross stood firm,

his eyes unperturbed and calculating. It was a long while before the Lieutenant spoke, and no one dared to break the silence.

“Who is she?” At this, the Marine was indicating Blair. She met Ross’s eyes. He watched her almost indifferently.

“A replacement technician. We met her this morning claiming to be Mary Bennett. If she isn’t who she says she is it’s not our fault.”

The woman didn’t look scandalized or furious, but rather hurt and confused. Jola recognized the distance in her eyes, and instantly visualized the moment Fillis dropped onto the sidewalk the night earlier.

“Lieutenant?”

It was not Ross who spoke this time, but rather another Marine. The lead guard looked from the bag in his hands to Ross, to Max, to Blair, to his men, to the man who had spoken.

“Shall we bring them all to the Director? He would want to interrogate them himself.”

The Lieutenant paused. “No. These two,” he indicated Ross and Andy, “may well be telling the truth. There’s no point in wasting his time if they’re innocent, we just need to clear them with Lieutenant Strathmore. But she,” he indicated Blair, “should be taken to see him. Put her in Holding. Take the other two to the security office until we can properly clear them. And these two,” he pointed to Jola and Max, “bring them to Dr. Vance.”

The Marines carried out their orders, separating them into two groups, and escorting each prisoner by the arm. Jola, Max, and Blair were brought towards the facility while the two men were taken somewhere within the parking lot. Jola watched as the sky became a ceiling and the concrete became tiled floors. The corridors were long, wide, and spotless. Men wearing white robes over dark suits shuffled

past them. They walked for several minutes through the corridors. Jola glanced offices, cafeterias, and theater-like auditoriums zoom past her on either side until they were brought into a large lobby made up of cubicles and workstations. They walked through the carpet in the middle towards the break in the distance. They left the lobby and emerged through a corridor lined with concrete and little light. Their footsteps echoed and their pupils grew large. They paused at a break, and Jola caught sight of Blair's face. There was subtle worry in them, and Jola gave a weak smile back before the woman was carried off in one direction and the girl in the other.

* * *

Madison Hergrants watched from the shaded pillars of the ramp leading down into the subterranean structure below, her binoculars over her eyes. The Marines had separated them into two groups. She cursed herself: she had thought they would bring the woman with the men. She watched as Blair was escorted towards the building along with the two children. Something rumbled and she shrank back into the shadows, her back pressed against the pillar. The van descended into the dark chasms below and she made for another look. They were gone. She lowered her binoculars and put them into her backpack. She hid the bag behind one of the pillars and burned its location into her memory. Then she heard footsteps.

She pulled herself out of sight and closed her eyes, her conscience lost in deep concentration. She had to maintain her focus.

It was a complex trick that had saved her from capture only moments earlier. After Blair had requested to go along she had agreed to swap ID's with the woman and hide herself, since they only had passes for three. If Blair hadn't come along she would've taken her place as a prisoner, and the trick wouldn't have helped her. In spite of the odd fortune of their circumstances, she couldn't help but feel guilty that Blair had to be sacrificed in order to conceal herself.

She took a deep breath and crossed the pillar into the open. Her hand was behind her back on her weapon. A man in white robes was walking towards her, his eyes on the contents of the folder within his hands. He looked up. Madison met his eyes and he startled. Instantly she swung up her tasergun and pointed it at his face. Then the strangest of things happened.

He blinked, not incredulously, but in confusion, as if he had seen a ghost for a fleeting moment. He shook his head and brought a hand to his face, massaging his brows as he continued to walk towards her. But his eyes were on his folder again even as he brushed shoulders with her. She watched as he descended the ramp and vanished from sight. She holstered her weapon and walked forward again.

The woman had employed a method of stealth known by the Alicorn as Shadowing. Like all abilities of the gifted women, it was a skill learned only through excessive practice. It had taken Madison herself the good part of four years to achieve effectively, yet it wasn't activated as easily as switching a light bulb on. The technique required strong elements of concentration and discipline which needed to be maintained in order to preserve the illusion. It was quite easier to maintain focus in a training scenario, but, judging by her experience, much, much harder to achieve during a live situation such as this.

Shadowing did not make an Alicorn invisible, or unheard. What it did was make the woman seem as if she weren't there to the eyes of those the charm was cast upon. It was nothing more than an illusion used to maintain stealth. There were several factors that attributed to this technique, one being appearance. Since the illusion simply made an Alicorn not stand out to the eye, it helped greatly if she wasn't dressed in bright orange and carrying a hiking backpack. Madison was dressed appropriately for the occasion in a black jumpsuit running from the neck down. Her long hair was knotted elegantly into a bun in order to not whiplash into someone's face as she walked past which, judging by her experience, had ruined the illusion before.

Just like the mind-reading technique Extraction was most effective if the subject wasn't wary of the Alicorn, so was Shadowing. If a group of men had been warned ahead of time that there was an invisible woman prowling the vicinity it would be a lot harder to maintain the illusion, not impossible, but difficult nonetheless. Also, if the subject had noticed the Alicorn, she would have to maintain her focus immediately or she would lose the charm completely. Since eye contact strengthened any technique employed by an Alicorn, it helped greatly to meet the gaze of those who had noticed her even if it was for only a moment.

Madison had already passed several rows of vans lined up in the outer lot. Men in white robes were stepping out of their vehicles and heading for the building framed against the horizon, paying no attention to the woman in black cutting across. She was making for a remote building in the distance. She reached it and walked through the entrance unnoticed by the guards. There was only a pair of Marines in the lobby, one asleep in a chair and the other behind the counter reading a book.

She crossed the counter and removed a clipboard resting

not far from the Marine's elbow. It was a check-in for detainees. She looked through the list, finding it empty aside from Jim Fields and Terry Crouch. Next to their names were scribbled notes. One read Lt. Strathmore. The other simply showed what rooms they were held in. She tore the top slip off, leaving a blank list behind, and disposed of the previous one. She looked back at the Marine to see if he had noticed the slight crumpling of paper. Finding his eyes still trained on his paperback she removed two keycards from a posted board and headed for the hall on the left.

It wasn't long until she found Andy's room. She fed the keycard into the slot and stepped in. She found him lying on a bunk with his arms behind his head. He turned his head quickly, his brows raised.

"Put your coat on," she said. He followed her out the door, pulling his white robes over himself. Madison stopped before another room, unlocked it and entered. Ross Crowihold was already standing, his back against the wall and his arms at his side, looking down his nose at them.

"What took you so long?" he muttered coldly.

The three walked through the halls, the men in the lead and the woman behind them.

"Don't look at me," she said slowly. "Pay no attention, and act casually."

They entered the lobby and made for the exit. Another Marine entered, a folder in his arms, his eyes staring straight ahead.

"Lieutenant Strathmore," said the man behind the desk. He glanced quickly at the clipboard then said, "No one today, sir."

"I'll be in my office," said the Lieutenant before disappearing.

The woman and the two men exited the building. The two Marines outside paid no attention to them. They made

for the main facility in the distance. After a few minutes Andy spoke without turning his head.

"What do you want us to do?"

"You need to find transports for us out of here," said Madison, walking not far behind the men. "I don't care how you do it. Just get us a van or two."

"I don't think our technician cover will hold up anymore," said Ross.

"It doesn't matter. You're men in white robes. You'll blend in perfectly. Here."

They stopped in the middle of a row of vans and faced each other. Madison withdrew a cell phone from the gear straps around her jumpsuit and handed it to Ross.

"So that's why you asked me for it," he said. "Did you figure this was going to happen?"

"Yes," she said simply. "As soon as we got to the checkpoint I knew something was wrong. I'll call you when it's done. Take this too."

She pulled out a black pistol and a cylinder. Andy took them and screwed the cylinder into the nose of the gun. He looked up.

"Won't you need this?"

"I'll be fine. Remember we need vans. Try to get two of them just in case."

The man nodded and she made to leave.

"And Blair?"

She met Ross's indifferent eyes. "I'll find her. Go now."

The two men turned and made for the building. She waited for a few minutes to pass after they had entered before walking in herself. The vastness of the facility from the outside was not an illusion. The Security Enforcement Agency was long and winding. She shuffled past several men in white robes. Once or twice she was sure someone had noticed her, in which case she would make swift eye

contact and continue walking.

She had to control her strides effectively. Mere brushing of shoulders wouldn't get her noticed, but knocking into someone completely was another thing. She was already several minutes into the building, guided by the signs at every bend. Her destination was the Logistics department. There she could find the answers she needed.

A particularly tall man in white robes caught sight of her. She stopped and met his eyes. He blinked quickly and walked past her. She watched to make sure he didn't double back another glance. When she turned she knocked into someone.

"God damnet!"

He was looking down at the state of his pants, his coffee in one hand, a bundle of folders in the other. "What the hell is wrong—?"

He looked up stupidly, wheeling around as men walked past. Madison had already hid behind a water cooler, her back pressed against the wall and her eyes closed, breathing sharply. Men were still walking past without taking notice of her, but that could change at any moment. She had to maintain confidence. She opened her eyes and watched the traffic shift left and right. Right now her biggest threat was the man who she had just bumped into. She had sharpened his senses knocking into him, and even now he was still looking around for the perpetrator.

Scenarios where one person noticed were very sensitive. She had been in situations where nobody saw her but one man. However, as soon as he had started shouting and pointing in her direction, the others had taken notice, blinking quickly and going from confused to alert in little more than a few seconds.

She glanced around the cooler and spotted him, his back turned. He walked onward. He took a glance to the left

and did a double-take. She shrank back slightly, but kept sight of him nonetheless. Her shoulders loosened—he had only spotted a bathroom. She watched as he disappeared through it before carefully timing her return into the traffic and continuing onward.

Five minutes later she was at Logistics. It was a large lobby with several cubicles along the outside and countless workstations in the inner ring. She stole herself aside from the crowd and hugged the nearest wall, closing her eyes again.

She could sense the energy of the room without even concentrating. There were hundreds—maybe thousands of people within the lobby, the largest amount she had ever had to Shadow through. The more people there were, the harder it was to perform, and the more likely it was that some randomly alert person would take notice.

The building was large, and the exits were far from her. All she had was a tasergun at her disposal. It was the ideal weapon for these situations compared to a pistol complete with a silencer. In comparison, the two weapons were roughly the same size and the same weight. The pistol was better for fights, of course, for it held more than twice the rounds and shots could be potentially lethal. Combined with a silencer it would be ideal for stealth kills as well. But the problem with using a pistol in these situations was that it was messy. After a victim was killed or knocked unconscious he would have to be dragged away and hidden in order to maintain stealth. If he was simply knocked out, he would wake up hours later and alert everyone, but his body could be dragged away and hidden without leaving a mark. If there were bullet holes in him, however, there was the chance of smeared blood giving the agent away, and thus breaking the illusion.

Tasergun rounds fired silently without the need of an

extra suppressor. They didn't shoot electricity, but rather highly charged pellets propelled by compressed air. The pellets could zero-in from a hundred yards, not as far as firearm bullets but effective nonetheless. They didn't have the force that bullets had, and were known to rebound upon walls or windows. They were designed specifically for hitting clothing or soft-carbon such as a human. A critical downside of the tasergun was that no matter what suppressor was attached to the weapon it was ultimately the pellets that lit up, making the shots extremely visible during the night and thus giving the firers position away.

Madison took a few deep breaths. She had time. There was no need to rush into the situation before she was confident. Confidence was ultimately the key to Shadowing. She needed to focus everything into believing that she was invisible, otherwise how could she convince others that she was invisible?

She leveled her head gracefully as if balancing a book over her hair. She took a last deep breath and stepped into Logistics. The noise level that greeted her was so high that she could probably talk to herself without being noticed. Phones rang, keyboards clicked, and people chatted here and there. She passed the cubicles and made for the workstations. Thoughts shifted through her head that weren't her own, but she had to block them out. She couldn't attempt Extraction just yet. She had to make sure that she was completely invisible. It was hard to Shadow by itself, how much more Shadow and Extract? She walked around the workstations several times, touching nothing but observing everything—an outsider looking in. She took into account that these were nothing more than technicians doing a job. The workplace was dominated by males, of course—she had only seen one female so far. Nobody noticed her. It was time.

She closed her eyes and focused. When they opened she could feel the man at the workstation in front of her. His mind was slightly fuzzy. His thoughts were on taking another drink from the bottle of spirits within his desk drawer without being noticed by the supervising technician. This Madison took greatly into account. She had already caught a hint of the supervisor. His computer would most likely have the most access in Logistics. If she could single him out she could use him.

She must not have been careful enough, or maybe the man's buzzed state was a factor, for the next moment he wheeled around in his chair, his eyes large and alert in her direction.

At once she met his eyes and focused. She had to regain what she had momentarily lost. It wasn't working. The man was making strange expressions. His hand rose. He was pointing at her strangely. He made to get up, his mouth wide open. A flick of her wrist and a pinch of her forefinger and he was down, collapsed against his chair with his head on his shoulder.

She closed her eyes and concentrated again. Someone had noticed that, surely someone must have. She was in trouble. People were probably staring at her right this moment, probably on the phone already—security was on the way! Any second now she would have to run, find the nearest exit and fight her way out if she had to. She took a deep breath, loosened her shoulders, and opened her eyes.

No one was paying any attention to her or the slumped man. She holstered her tasergun and spun the man's chair around so that he was facing the computer. Then she walked around the workstations again.

Supervising technician...supervising technician...

Her eyes caught sight of the only woman in the room apart from herself. She was young and attractive. Could it

be?

Madison stood over the woman's shoulder and watched her as curiously as a child watches a leaping frog. She was insecure, Madison could tell. Every now and then she would meet the stares of the men around her. She was just another woman—a pretty thing no doubt placed in Logistics just to give the men around something to look at every now and then. Did it matter that she had graduated the top of her class at primary school? No, she was simply another woman.

She was not the supervisor. Madison withdrew from her and made to make another round. She stopped suddenly. Someone was mad, furious—pissed off. She singled out the source not far from her: a fat man in his early thirties. He looked up from his desk, his face grim, sweaty, and calculating. His eyes found someone in the distance and the next moment he reached for his phone.

“Answer your phone, damnet!” he muttered after only a few seconds. He slammed the receiver down and called across the room.

“Rivers!”

A few people looked up then looked away. The man balled his fist and repeated himself. A second later he rose from his seat and stormed across the desks, Madison hot on his tail. He stopped short of a technician slumped in his chair, and for a moment Madison almost lost her concentration—apparently Rivers was the man she had knocked out!

“Rivers, God Damnet! What the...what the hell is wrong with you?”

He looked stupidly at the technician's unconscious state. He grimaced. “Wake up you stupid git!”

His eyes tore quickly to the drawers along the man's desk. He began pulling each of them open one by one.

When he got to the bottom one he exhaled roughly.

"Drinking on the job again, Rivers?" he muttered wisely to himself, his eyes glinting malice. "Well, I'll make sure this is the end of you. You there!"

The man in the next workstation looked up.

"M-me?"

"No the invisible man behind you—yes you! Bring this man to his quarters and find me another technician in Human Resources who has clearance to debug the east wing inlays!"

"Alright, but couldn't you just c-call Human Resources?"

The fat technician glared at him like a spider upon a fly. He picked up the phone along Rivers' desk nonetheless. Apparently he didn't have the patience to wait for someone to answer him for he slammed the receiver down and spat, "Never mind! I'll get another one myself!"

And with that, he walked out of sight. People watched him leave, shaking their heads and grinning to one another. Madison looked back across the room to his idle workstation. He was the supervising technician.

She made to his desk and looked at the men on either side of her. One was typing rapidly, his thoughts deep in concentration. The other was sipping his coffee and reading something onscreen. She sank into the workstation and brought her hands before the keyboard. The supervisor was too rash to remember to lock it before walking off. She began exploring the system, the snaps of her keyboard unheard and unnoticed by anyone other than herself. Indeed the man had been in charge of Logistics, and what was more, he had access to almost everything that she needed.

It wasn't long before she was zooming through the SEA's blueprints, remembering where the exits and the major corridors were. Her eyes did a double take on the women's bathroom not far from Logistics. She snickered and ex-

plored the east wing further. The children were held not far, just a few corridors beyond in the basement level. And right next door to Children's Holding was plain old Holding. She had found Blair sooner than she had expected. Another moment passed and there, in the basement level of the east wing as well, was the Hibernation Chamber.

She looked up. The fat technician was no where in sight. She worked the keyboard quickly to learn every detail she could access of the Hibernation Chamber. The room temperature, the lighting, the life support system—everything was managed by a mainframe within the chamber. She would have to get inside. She shrank slightly in disappointment. Had she really been expecting the task to be as simple as hijacking someone's computer?

She returned to the blueprints tab and another problem surfaced. She would need a clearance keycard from someone who had a high amount of access in order to get into the Hibernation Chamber as well as either of the Holding departments. Before she could do anything else something prickled behind her neck and she looked up. The supervising technician had returned with a man close at his side. He directed him into the unused workstation and made for his own. Madison closed the tabs she had used and brought up the one the man had left behind before climbing out of the seat and steering clear of the man's way.

He sank into his chair and went back to work as if nothing had happened. After a moment he paused, lines forming in his forehead. Madison reached for her weapon again, but to her relief the man had just looked up and across, checking up on the replacement technician.

The supervisor had enough access, Madison was sure. He probably had the keycard on him right this moment. She concentrated on Extracting from him, but couldn't find any solid evidence to support her suspicions. Why would

he be thinking about his keycard level at this very moment?

Nevertheless, she had to try him anyways. Frisking him now would be pretty foolish for it would no doubt raise a scene. And frisking him in any event would make him take notice of her. There was only one solution: she would have to get him alone where she could break her illusion and interrogate him one-on-one.

The man reached for the phone along his desk. At once the substitute technician across the room picked up. Madison felt a few thoughts cross the supervisor's mind.

Fast on the phone...he must be eager to please...I'll break this one in fast...

"Are you finding the system alright?" he barked. He listened for a response, then said, "Good, now get started on debugging the east wing inlays and don't take any breaks! Lord Raztar wants them done bef—what the hell are you doing?"

He slammed the receiver and stood up. Almost everyone was watching him now. His pants were soaked with dark stains. He rounded on the man next to him. His eyes found the mug of coffee along the technician's desk and his face grew grim.

"This some kind of joke?" he sneered.

"J-joke?" said the other man, looking genuinely confused. He looked from his supervisor's pants to his own mug of coffee. His jaw dropped in horror. "I didn't do anything! I swear—it was on my desk a minute ago!"

The supervisor didn't seem to buy this. He strolled off nonetheless, shaking his head in disbelief. Madison followed him. A lot of eyes were on him, and she wondered whether the incident would affect her illusion. The traffic in the corridors wasn't as busy as it was earlier. There were far less people shuffling through it, making it easier for Madison to stalk the man. It wasn't long until he had found the

men's bathroom. She followed him in, already swinging up her weapon. She stopped short: there were several men in the room as well. She could do nothing more but watch as he ran some soaked paper towels through his pants and dried himself up before returning into the corridors. She followed him on the way back, her spirits sinking.

Once or twice she thought about pulling him into one of the stairwells now that there were less people in the corridors, but every time she made to act she had noticed someone else behind her. It wasn't long before he was back in Logistics and she was brought back to square one. He sank into his workstation, ignoring the repeated apologies from the man next to him, and began clicking away at his keyboard.

Madison watched him from afar, taking in every little detail of his actions as if they held the answers to her questions. He was now her obsession. She would not move to the next level until she could solve this one. She noted the glances he made, the people he had shot down with a dirty face (which seemed to be almost all of them), and the ones he had smiled strangely at (which turned out to be only one).

The female technician not far met his eyes for only a glimpse before looking away nervously. A bizarre expression swept over the supervisor's face as his eyes returned to his screen, looking quite pleased with himself. Madison looked from him to the woman and back. She hated herself for even thinking about it, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

She made to the woman's workstation. Without even meaning to do so she had Extracted the woman's thoughts. She was even more insecure now than before. She hated this job now, hated the way she was looked at, the strange smiles and the fleeting glances—the way that fat ass supervisor

always gave her the come hither.

The woman shrieked. All eyes were on her now. Her mouth was wide up, scandalized. She rose from her chair, dripping liquid down her blouse. She looked quickly to the man next to her.

“Very funny, asshole.”

Someone wolf-whistled and the room exploded with laughter. The woman maintained her dignity, meeting none of their eyes as she walked off into the corridor. She found the ladies’ room empty, threw her robes onto the counter, and made for the sink. She tidied herself up indifferently, but when she had finished she sank onto the counter, face buried in her hands and elbows supporting her.

Madison’s tasergun was already aimed straight at the back of her neck. She felt her hand lower just slightly. The woman stopped sobbing and straightened up, taking a deep breath with her eyes closed. She exhaled and looked at herself in the mirror, blinking quickly.

“Who—?”

!Click!

Madison caught her before she hit the ground. She pulled her into one of the stalls and closed the door. She returned to Logistics and sank into the woman’s workstation. The supervisor was on the phone, his eyes away from his screen.

She brought up an instant messaging machine for the local network and paused. After a moment she typed: One-on-one? Ladies’ room. Come alone.

She sent the message and rose quickly. A minute later the man’s eyes found his screen. He paused, mouth open before the receiver. He muttered something quickly and hung up the phone. Then he looked over at the woman’s workstation. He smiled strangely again, his brows raised. The man who had allegedly spilled coffee on him was look-

ing at him curiously, perhaps wondering what he was so pleased about. The supervisor shot him a dirty look and the technician looked away. Then the man rose from his chair and made for the corridor, smoothing out his greasy hair with both of his hands. He paused before the ladies' room, rotated on his heel, his eyes missing Madison's, and stepped in.

He walked slowly through it, his face smug.

"Presley?" he called out. No one answered. Perhaps it was better that way, for the smile on his face cracked even wider. "I don't know what you have in mind," he continued, licking his lips and adjusting his collar. "I know you've always wanted a transfer out of Logistics. I'm not promising anything. Maybe you could be my personal assistant. What do you think?"

He stopped on his foot. "Presley? Where are...?"

His eyes found the robes she had left at the sink and he grinned broadly. He singled out the only stall with a closed door and bent over to catch sight of her feet below. Satisfied, he made for the stall, raising his arm for the handle.

"Come out of there," he said playfully. "There's nothing to be shy about. This happens all the time. You'll find that I'm a lot more generous than most guys—"

His eyes grew wide and bewildered upon sight of the unconscious girl in the stall. He dropped his hand from the door and wheeled around, his eyes growing only wider.

Madison had pressed her weapon against his forehead, and she had done so in such a way that she could still see his eyes.

"Who are you?"

"It's not important."

"What have you done to Presley?"

"I killed her. Lie to me once, and you'll join her."

The man gulped quickly, sweat sliding down his face.

"I don't know anything—honestly, I'm just a supervisor!"

"Do you have access to the Banshee chambers and the cells in Holding?"

"Y-yes—but I don't know who's in there—honestly I don't!"

She considered this, watching his eyes carefully. He was not lying.

"Is a keycard required to get into those places?"

"Yes."

"Do you have yours on you?"

"It's right here!" He reached into his robes quickly and produced a card similar to the one she had used to free Ross and Andy. She took it with her other hand.

"Are there codes to get in—like a keypad codes?"

"No, just the keycard. But there are guards."

She paused. It was a lot easier to Extract now that she didn't need to focus on Shadowing as well. Once again he was telling the truth.

"Get into the other stall."

"What?"

"I'm not going to molest you, I promise."

He looked as if he didn't believe her, and for a fleeting moment she had the urge to burst out laughing. He obeyed, nonetheless.

"Just don't ki—"

!Click!

He fell back. She didn't bother to fix him up properly like she had done so to Presley, but simply closed the door and made to the sink.

She splashed water on her face and took a moment to gather her thoughts. She met her own eyes in the mirror and smiled weakly. She watched herself through unfocused eyes. After several minutes had passed she felt confident

enough to continue onward. She retrieved the tasergun and the keycard from the counter and made for the door, holstering her weapon. She emerged through the other side, sliding the keycard into her pocket and making for Logistics once again.